

# Argos

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2014-10-07

## **Argos**

Title: Argos

Author: 4mation

Type: Series

Rating: M

Genre: Romance, Family, Fluff

Warnings: Incest, fem!Slash, slight Mature Content

Pairing: Elsanna

Characters: Elsa, Anna, Olaf, Kristoff, Sven

Summary: No matter how deeply a secret is buried, there are always those who know

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A/N: This is just a series of drabbles/one-shots about how others view Elsa and Anna and how much they know about their relationship. The fic is named after Argos Panoptes, the thousand-eyed giant from Greek mythology, to represent how there are always more people aware of your secrets than you think. Don't worry though: I don't plan to make 1000 chapters for this :P Anyway, enjoy!

Oh, PS: it's confession time. I haven't watched Frozen until this morning. So all my previous works were written based only on what I'd read in other people's fics and from online summaries. Wait, what?

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## ***The Captain***

*"Protect. Serve. Obey."*

These are the words by which he lived. Halden had been the captain of the royal guard for over twenty years now, but this simple vow still guided his every action. It was his bitterest admission to know that he had failed the King and Queen when, instead of insisting on accompanying them on their voyage, he had instead acquiesced to remain in Arendelle and take care of the princesses. What use is a bodyguard who lets his charges drown in the stormy Atlantic? It had been the day of the royal funeral, where, clad in armour sombre black, Halden had stood in front of the graves and recited his vow, promising that he would not fail the royal family ever again.

*“Protect. Serve. Obey.”* The order of his commandments were important; he had forgotten this in relation to the King, but he would not do so again for Queen Elsa. His first duty was to protect, his second to serve. Only when those two requirements were met would he obey.

It was thanks to this vow and this reaffirmation of his duty that Halden now found himself lurking outside the Queen’s royal bedchambers like some common prowler. Queen Elsa had made her position clear: royal guards were not necessary within the castle’s walls, and she would not tolerate any man posted outside her chambers. Instead, she insisted that they protect the perimeters and, should all the castle posts be full, any spare guard should take the time to assist the city watch in maintaining peace in Arendelle. Halden had protested and had insisted on keeping armed men patrolling the castle, haunted by the consequences of his choice to obey his King before protecting him. Unfortunately, Queen Elsa was far more powerful than any to ever sit the throne before her, and after a straight week of Halden’s patrolling guards being barred from going within fifty metres of the Queen’s chambers by five-foot thick sheets of ice, the Captain had been forced to give into Her Majesty’s demands.

But just because he had withdrawn his guards, it didn’t mean that Halden had any intention of leaving the Queen undefended. If his needs to protect and serve conflicted with his need to obey, Halden had sworn to choose the former over the latter. Thus, he set about replacing various stewards and maids with his own men and even going so far as discreetly hiring the famed warrior women of the Fa Order from the East in order to maintain the deception. He still wasn’t comfortable (a dagger and several concealed throwing knives were hardly a replacement for good steel and sturdy armour), but Halden supposed that it would have to suffice.

Until it didn’t.

She tried to hide it, but Halden was no fool. He had won his place as Captain over two hundred other hopefuls not merely through his combat prowess, military background and steadfast devotion, but primarily thanks to his keen eye and constant surveillance. Nothing could slip by him, not repeatedly. And Halden was beginning to see a pattern. On nights when the Queen dismissed her guards and instructed her staff to not bother her in her chambers for the night, the following morning Her Majesty would always show up to court wearing long-

sleeved dresses with high collars, exposing not an inch of skin, even in summer. Of course, Queen Elsa was immune to climate, and could have easily worn a fur ballgown with a woollen hood in the middle of a heat wave as nonchalantly as she wear thin silk robes while standing in a blizzard. However, she was generally averse to flaunting her abilities and tended to respect those around her by mimicking their weather-appropriate fashion. So why would she go against norm on those particular mornings?

Halden got his answer when, from his spot to the Queen's right with his broadsword resting in his gauntleted hands, the sharp tip piercing a hole in the rich carpet, he noticed Her Majesty tugging at her high collar. The day had been long and she had sat through over thirty cases brought forward by peasants, merchants, ambassadors, envoys and nobles as they all demanded her royal attention, and it wasn't even mid-morning yet. Clearly, the Queen was becoming tense and irritated, and the restrictive clothing that cloaked her skin was doing little to help. Halden watched attentively as the Queen pulled at her collar irritably, fairly certain that it wasn't due to poison but paying close attention nonetheless. And then, as she stretched the collar out for some air, he saw it. A bright red mark in the shape of lips, shining cheerfully on Her Majesty's slim, pale neck.

The revelation stunned him. Queen Elsa was hardly the first monarch of Arendelle to take on a lover, but normally the royal guard's captain would be well aware of it. Halden had read the personal journals of every Captain to have served before him in the great leather-bound book in which the Captain would write the tale of service from beginning to end, and never to his knowledge had a Captain been duped by his charge in regards to illicit rendezvous with a special someone. The idea that, somehow, Queen Elsa had successfully managed to hide her amour's existence from him for so long shook Halden to his core and made him burn with shame. He could not let this continue.

Of course, the amour's existence was of little concern to Halden. His vows said nothing of questioning the morality of his monarch's decisions, only the risk they could pose. He cared little of the scandal that could be caused should anyone discover Queen Elsa's lover. Instead, he was far more concerned with the identity of this faceless man. To be able to so stealthily sneak into the Queen's bedchambers for so long without Halden noticing could only mean that this unknown paramour was not only a part of Her Majesty's court but lived or served within the castle itself. The notion was extremely troubling to Halden; any person who had unlimited access to not only Her Majesty's bed but also to the castle itself was a threat, a risk, a perfect inside man. He was a security risk that must be dealt with, and swiftly.

But who could it be? Halden spent most of his days standing firmly behind Queen Elsa, a mountain of a man who would easily dissuade anyone from getting too close to the Queen with his glare, his five-foot claymore, or just his presence alone. In all that time, he had never seen the Queen make any particular close contact with any man, regardless of station or class. She was always professional,

cool, collected. She might grace some with a slim smile and others with a withering glare, but that was all to be expected from a monarch who must encourage allies and silence dissenters. Halden ran through the list of any man capable of seducing his Queen.

He swiftly dismissed the Royal Ice Harvester from his list of potentials. The man might share a close bond with the Queen, but their friendship was strictly platonic, and the blonde man was far too fixated on the Princess and far too pure and noble to worm his way to Princess Anna through her royal sister.

After the debacle with Prince Hans, Halden was fairly certain that none of the visiting dignitaries could be the culprit. If anything, Queen Elsa seemed to treat all her interactions with her various suitors with distaste, a concealed exasperation and annoyance visible on her face only to Halden and others as familiar with Her Majesty whenever some prince would get to one knee and kiss her hand. Besides, none were here long enough to warrant such continuous secrecy, and Queen Elsa's habits stretched far back, starting just after the Endless Winter had been lifted. None of them could be the mysterious lover.

Could it be the comely new steward? Halden had seen him stare longingly at the Queen often enough when he brought Her Majesty the day's reports when he thought no one was looking. He was definitely handsome enough to qualify as a potential paramour, but Halden was not entirely convinced that Queen Elsa would ever stoop so low as to take a boy whose voice hadn't finished breaking as her lover. Having sexual interaction outside of wedlock was one thing, but somehow Halden was doubtful that Queen Elsa would go so far as to commit herself to a *boy*.

It was primarily due to this uselessly short list of potentials that Halden now found himself crouching by Her Majesty's bedchamber door like some mundane peeping tom on yet another night when the Queen had dismissed her staff from the keep. If he had managed to draft an effective shortlist of candidates, he could have instructed the spymaster to keep a close eye on them and he would've had his answer within the month. As it stood, though, Halden could just imagine the spymaster laughing the Captain out of her office when she looked at the names he had compiled. With no other option to turn to, Halden was forced to perform the honestly humiliating act of trying to see through a keyhole. It was a necessary embarrassment, though: the Queen's safety would always place higher than his pride.

Halden squinted into the darkness of Queen Elsa's quarters. He could barely make out any shapes, but the moonlight peeking through the curtains helped him identify the figure sitting upright on the bed as Her Majesty: no one else had hair that glowed such an ethereal gold-white in the moon's silver beams. Much to Halden's embarrassment, he realised with shock when the figure started rocking her hips back and forth that Queen Elsa had already begun to get intimate with her unknown paramour.

Halden instantly felt ashamed that he was intruding on his Queen's special

moment, but he forced himself to push aside his shame. He had a duty to uphold, and he would do so even if it meant that he had to witness his charge in the throes of intense passion. Luckily, he'd stumbled into their intimacies just as the duo were reaching their peak. The shadowy figure of the Queen was moving erratically, her speed increasing. A moan was torn from her throat which was quickly silenced by the mysterious figure lying on the bed, whose slim frame shot upwards to capture the Queen's lips in her own. Halden noted with surprise that the lover had a surprisingly thin build, and prayed to all the gods that it wasn't the steward boy.

The enforced silence didn't last long as the duo climaxed. The Queen wrenched her lips away from her lover's and let out a high-pitched whine as she came, shuddering. Then, to Halden's eternal shock, the anonymous amour didn't bother keeping the Queen silent and instead released a great cry of passion. A *high-pitched* cry of passion. A **woman's** cry.

Halden could feel the surprise bubbling up within him, threatening to boil over. Quickly, he clamped down on his own emotions. Control. He must control himself. Peace. He was a professional. He would act like it. His own judgements would not affect his service. He distracted himself by compiling a new list of possible **women** who could be this unknown figure.

Meanwhile, inside, the duo were coming down from their love-induced high. The Queen recovered first and angrily slapped the other figure's (the **woman's**) arm in admonishment.

"Damnit, why don't you be a little louder? I think that the trolls didn't quite hear you that time."

The other woman laughed in a light, melodic voice as she rolled the Queen onto her side, pulling her out of Halden's sight. The Captain could hear the smile in her voice as she teased Queen Elsa.

"Oh please. As if you were anything close to subtle. You moan louder than a gale in October."

"You brat." The Queen said indignantly, and the two wrestled playfully beneath atop the bed. "Why I keep letting you in my bed, I'll never understand."

The other woman's voice turned childish and Halden could imagine her pouting teasingly.

"Because you need and love me. And, more importantly, you need and love what I can do with my fingers when you're stressed out."

"That's not true!" Her Majesty proclaimed boldly, sitting upright. "I'll have you know that I have **plenty** of hobbies to let off steam besides-"

"Besides writhing on top of me and screaming your love to the heavens above?" the lover said, her voice amused. Her cheek got her a tussled head in response.

"Funny." The Queen grumbled. "I was talking about more **intellectual** pursuits, thank you very much. Like reading and darts and music and chess-"

"I remember chess!" the other girl said brightly. There was something oddly youthful and familiar in her voice, like this was someone Halden felt that he should know but couldn't quite identify. "More importantly, I remember exactly how many pieces we managed to stuff-"

"I think you've said enough," the Queen said sharply, cutting off the other woman (girl?). He could tell by the tone of Her Majesty's voice that she was blushing but was trying to cover it up with a mask of disapproval. Apparently though, this unknown woman knew Queen Elsa just as well as Halden did.

"Aw, come on! I don't remember you protesting at the time."

"I was protesting very much at the time, thank you very much!" the Queen declared, indignant.

"Yeah, at the beginning when you lost the bet, but somewhere around the knights you were making a **very** different sound."

"Shut up." The Queen grumbled, defeated, and she grumpily turned her back on her lover, who was laughing victoriously. The woman slid her hands over the Queen's bare shoulders as she snuggled up against her, her voice changing to an oddly familiar whine.

"Come **on**, Elsa! Don't be mad at me. I promise I'll stop teasing you about that chess match. I just thought that you enjoyed it as much as I did."

Halden was surprised by the familiarity of the woman's voice. This person was far more than just a random paramour, the Captain realised. This was someone who knew the Queen intimately as a **person**, not just a lover. Someone who was comfortable enough around the Queen to use her first name and relentlessly tease her, but was caring enough that she immediately tried to cheer up Her Majesty when she started sulking. But who could it be?

Inside the bedchambers, the duo continued, oblivious to their observer.

"I did enjoy it," the Queen admitted into her pillow. "It's just that it's a little embarrassing when you keep bringing it up. I'm not supposed to look like that in front of you. I'm supposed to be the responsible one, the mature one, the one who's in charge."

The woman laughed. "You can't be the Queen all the time, Elsa. Sometimes, you just have to accept the fact that someone else is in charge and that all **you** have to do is relax and enjoy yourself."

"How am I supposed to be able to withhold dessert from you when you keep mentioning how much I loved it when you ate dessert off me?" Queen Elsa complained, casually spouting one fetish after another as she rolled out of the bed, as naked as her birth day.

The other giggled, sitting up as she watched the Queen walk to the window. “I just say it as it is. It’s not my fault that I’m irresistible.”

“I just wish you could separate our life at the dinner table from our life in the bedchambers,” Her Majesty grumbled.

“It’s kind of hard to separate them when you keep licking your lips at breakfast,” the other woman complained. “Honestly, you’d think that Mom and Dad hadn’t ever taught you to use a napkin.”

*Wait. What? ‘Mom and Dad’?*

“Don’t pretend you don’t enjoy it when I do that, Anna.”

***Anna?***

The Queen threw open the curtains, letting moonlight stream into the bedchamber, illuminating the scene before Halden. She stood in the silver beams, naked, the light reflecting off her pale body. But Halden had eyes only for the woman lying on the bed. Her skin was darker than the Queen’s, a tanned peach, and her fiery red hair burned in the moonlight, contrasting against Her Majesty’s platinum blonde. Her freckled cheeks were stretched into a smile as she gazed lovingly at the Queen, and her emerald eyes were filled with deep longing and love.

Even with her hair tussled and sweat glistening on her skin as she basked in post-sex comfort, Princess Anna was completely, utterly recognisable.

Halden hadn’t even realised that he had lost his balance and was currently collapsed on his rear. He was so shocked, he didn’t even hear the exchange that passed between Queen Elsa and her lover, between Queen Elsa and **her sister**. Unable to continue watching his incestuous charges continue to commit blasphemy, Halden scrambled to his feet, his normal grace lost as he struggled to flee from the unbelievable sight before him. He managed to make it down the grand staircase despite his uncooperative feet before collapsing next to a suit of armour in the entrance hall.

***Princess Anna?!***

No matter how hard he thought about it, Halden just couldn’t get his head around the idea. Of all the potential lovers that Queen Elsa could have taken, of all the princes and stewards and knights and nobles from which she could have had any pick, Queen Elsa had chosen **her own sister?!** This was unbelievable! This was unnatural! This was an offence to every monarch who had ever sat on the Arendelle throne! This was... this was...

This was, Halden realised with dawning comprehension, ultimately irrelevant.

Queen Elsa’s lover was not a potential threat. She was not a potential risk. If anything, this made Halden’s job easier. Instead of having to monitor the Queen and the Princess separately and constantly have both their lovers watched, he could simply keep an eye on one and he would automatically be surveying the

other. Outside of that, outside of the security of the royal family, nothing else truly mattered.

Halden rose to his feet steadily, his grace returned and his gaze firm once more. Yes, in the long run, the fact that Queen Elsa had taken on Princess Anna as a lover did not matter. So long as both were safe, that was all that mattered. Silently, steadily, Halden walked out of the entrance hall to check on the guards posted at the main gates. It would not do to have them dozing on watch. The royal family must be protected. Already, Halden had forgotten the scene he had just witnessed and was busy organising the next day's schedules in his head.

*"Protect. Serve. Obey."*

Simple vows for a simple man. That was all that was required of him. He would protect, he would serve, he would obey. Beyond that, nothing else mattered.

**Fin**

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A/N: I intend on making this multi-part, with each chapter focusing on a different member of the royal court/household. Anyway, I hope you guys enjoyed this first instalment. I'll try to update this regularly, but no promises. Thanks for reading, and please leave a review! Until next time!

Rating: K+

Genre: Friendship, Fluff, Romance

Warnings: implied!Incest, fem!Slash

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A/N: I'll be alternating between updating this and "Café Liégeois", hopefully on a regular basis. I'm currently busy with work, so my work rate will probably slow down, but I'll definitely be back on form in January. Anyway, on to the next chapter! Hope you enjoy!

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### ***The Dancing Master***

Some people are born with the innate talent of swordsmanship. From a young age, they are the children who can batter their peers to the ground as they duel with sticks found under the trees in the woods. They instinctively know when to attack and when to retreat, when to sidestep and when to hold their ground, when to strike high or cut low. They are the ones who can slap every challenger silly on the practice field, and will probably have killed their sparring partner a



dozen times before their instructor decides that their poor foe has had enough for one day. They are the ones who grow up into great knight and warriors, and will become the heroes of songs sung from Berk to China, tales of their famous escapades forming the many bedtime stories for children everywhere. It is these breed of genetic swordsman who will grow up to become the Flynn Riders and the Mulans of their time.

Princess Anna of Arendelle, Roberto Cortez decided, is not one of those people.

Cortez had only recently joined the royal court of Arendelle, only a few months after their so-called Endless Winter (why call something 'endless' if it barely lasts a few weeks?). Having recently retired from his position at the court of Corona, he had been out of a job and greats such as he would never stoop so low to become a sellsword. Thus, when he'd heard talk of the famous Ice Queen looking for a swordsman to serve her court, Cortez had packed his things and got on the first ship to Arendelle.

The travellers at the Snuggly Duckling had said that the Ice Queen had been searching for a swordsman because she needed an experienced master willing to train others in his art. Naturally, Cortez had assumed that the 'others' referred to would be some upstart princeling whose head was full of a minstrel's songs or a gung-ho knight looking to show up his rival at the next tourney. He had **not** expected his new student to be the Princess who was currently Queen Elsa's heir. After she'd explained the situation, he'd agreed to train her, expecting someone who, though clumsy, would be essentially like a smaller version of the Queen. Once again, his expectations were shattered when the Princess turned out to be a skinny ginger girl who showed about ten minutes late to their first class with straw in her hair and a half-eaten carrot tucked behind her ear.

"I'm so sorry I'm late!" she'd cried as she burst in. "I **totally** forgot that I was supposed to have a dancing lesson today and-"

Her words cut off when she saw Cortez standing on the balcony, two wooden training swords in hand, enjoying the warm summer air. Hesitantly, Anna combed the straw out of her hair with her hands, wincing as she came across a knot.

"Am I in the right place?"

"**You** are late, child." Cortez said calmly, eyes still closed. Any surprise that he felt about his new student was carefully brushed aside. A swordsman was not flustered by anything. A water dancer did not let the waves buffer him. He was calm, always.

"So, you're my new dancing master?" Anna asked hesitantly.

Cortez smiled.

"Is that what the Queen told you? I am surprised that she is so learned of my native land's customs."

“So, are you one of those really strict dancing masters?” Anna asked, eyeing the wooden swords in his hands with a nervous expression. “Because if you are, I just wanted you to know that the Spring Festival is in two weeks and Elsa will decapitate me if I show up with a bruise on my face. . . .”

Cortez turned around, eyes opening. He regarded the girl in front of him with a stern look.

“A true dancer does not fear a bruise or a cut or a break. Every mark that is left on your body is a lesson. Do you fear lessons, child?”

“N-no,” Anna said, unnerved by this odd man.

“Do you want to become a dancer, child?”

“Well, kinda?” Anna twirled a strand of fiery-red hair in her finger, biting her lip.

“‘Kinda’”? Cortez repeated, eyebrow raised. “That is neither a ‘Yes’ nor a ‘No’. That is a ‘Maybe’. If you wish to become a dancer, there can be no ‘Maybes’. When your enemy rushes you, you cannot be undecided. You cannot stop and ask yourself ‘Should I dodge? Or should I block?’ Because when you are busy running back and forth, asking yourself ‘Dodge or block? Dodge or block? Dodge or block?’, **that**, child, is when you find yourself lying on the floor with cold steel kissing your heart. And then, you are not undecided: you are dead.”

Anna scowled at that.

“Master Pierre said that any dancer who is impatient is more likely to make mistakes. He said that if you don’t follow the beat or if you make a spin too early, then the whole dance is ruined.”

“Your Master Pierre is a wise man, then,” Cortez allowed. “The dancer who waits, the dancer who feels the music of the dance singing in his ears, the dancer who can follow the rhythm of the dance. . . . that is the dancer who will live. But if that dancer stops, if that dancer is confused by his choices, if that dancer cannot decide, then that dancer will not live. Then that dancer will die.”

Cortez spun the swords, one per hand, the wood blurring in the midday light.

“Always make a choice, child. Even if it is the wrong choice, even if that choice does not follow the music of the dance, it is better than doing nothing. It is better than being undecided.”

Cortez suddenly tossed one of the two swords at Anna. Startled, she flinched back, but her hand stretched out to catch the practice blade. Unfortunately, while her hand was outreached, her body was leaning back. Instead of the handle landing neatly in her grip, the tip clipped her pinkie and clattered to the ground.

“And now, before the dance has begun, you are short a finger. Luckily, that finger is not necessary for the dance. Unluckily, that finger will be hurting, which will distract you from the dance.” Cortez gave Anna a flat look. “Do you know why you are short a finger?”

"Because you threw a sword at me?" Anna complained, sucking her aching little finger. She was almost missing Master Pierre. He was harsh and stern, but at least he had made sense. This strange Spaniard was just confusing.

"You are short a finger, child, because you did not decide. Your mind wanted to dodge, but your hand wanted to catch. And so, you did neither, and you paid a finger for your indecision. No matter. Tomorrow, you will **catch** the sword. Now, pick it up."

Confused, unsure, and really wishing that Elsa was here so that the Queen could explain what the hell she'd been thinking when she'd assigned this man to be her dancing master, Anna bent and picked up the training sword. The wood was smooth, freshly polished, but it was surprisingly heavy.

"Something wrong, child?" Cortez asked, seeing the discomfort in Anna's face.

"It's too heavy," Anna admitted, letting the point drop to the ground. Already she could feel her wrist straining.

"The blade is not too heavy, child, your arm is too weak. The blade is as heavy as it can be. It does not choose to spite by tiring you. It does not try to hamper you and make you clumsy. It does not try to ruin the dance. It is all that it can be, and it is neither too much nor too little. The only one who can change in the dance is **you**, child." Cortez spun his own sword to demonstrate. "Is the blade too heavy for me, child?"

"Well... no. But we're kinda different, you know? Your arms are pretty big and mine are..." She gestured helplessly to her toothpick-like biceps.

"Your arms are skinny," Cortez said bluntly. "So are your legs, your shoulders, your stomach, your waist, your head. You are a skinny girl." Anna's shoulders slumped at the accusation. "Do not fret, child. That is good. That means that the target is small. It means that your enemy is more likely to overstep and swish only at air. It means that you will not be so easily touched. It means that you are more likely to be alive and your enemy to be dead."

"But I don't **want** anyone to be dead!" Anna cried, upset at the idea. She worried her lower lip. "I just want to learn how to dance!"

"Ah," Cortez said, satisfied. He grinned warmly. "So now you **do** want to learn to dance? You are learning, child."

"That's not what I meant!" Anna said, frustrated. "I don't want to fight with a sword! I don't want to hurt people! I just wanted to be able to dance gracefully like my sister!"

"And you shall." Cortez said patiently. "In time. Once you have learnt what I have to teach."

"I don't think that you telling me how I'm too skinny and weak is going to help me be better at the waltz," Anna said glumly.

"You may be surprised," Cortez said. "I am very well-versed in the waltz."

"Since when did anyone waltz with swords?" Anna said, gesturing wildly with her blade. Unfortunately, the polished wood slid from her grip, sending it flying out of her hand and speeding straight at Cortez. Anna gasped and was about to shout a warning when Cortez neatly dodged to the side. His hand flashed out and he caught the blade mid-flight, his hand gripping the handle. He gave her an amused look.

"People do not waltz with swords, at least not to my knowledge. They waltz with their feet and their hands and their partners. But people **do** dance with swords, child."

"What kind of dance needs swords?" Anna asked meekly, embarrassed that she had nearly skewered her teacher on the first day. That had to be a new record.

Cortez smiled. He turned sideways and placed his foot deliberately in front of him. His hands slid and turned as he **flowed**, the blades weaving around him as he took small, certain steps. He circled around Anna, one movement unfurling into the next, blades flashing around him.

"The dance of my homeland, child. The dance that I have learned since I was a boy in the streets of Madrid with nothing but my grandfather's cane to serve as my blade. The dance that is beautiful, swift, and deadly. The dance that will defend you when your men fail to do so. The dance that the Queen has requested I teach you."

Cortez came to a stop in front of Anna. As smoothly as he'd danced, he fluidly relaxed as he stood comfortably at attention.

"The water dance."

Anna's mouth, unsure of what to say, flapped as she tried to understand what was happening.

"You mean... Well, what I'm trying to say... Elsa asked you to?"

"The Queen has told me many things about you, Princess Anna. Most of it is amusing, some of it embarrassing, but nothing that is worrisome. But the point that she stressed to me was that you are not a woman who is graceful, and although you are certainly energetic and athletic, you lack the patience and the poise to dance as noble ladies do."

Anna hung her head in dejection. Elsa had said that about her? Cortez gently lifted Anna's chin so that he could look her in the eyes.

"However, although it is not my place to do so, I question the Queen's judgement. I heartily agree that you do not dance as other nobles do, but I do not think that makes you ungraceful. I think that instead, you are just uninterested in the tango and the waltz and their ilk. I think that although your mind wishes to learn those dances, your heart is not in that place. I think that someone as fiery and heroic as you deserves a dance fit for heroes."

Anna was startled at that. “Me? A hero? I’m sorry, sir, but I think you’ve got it all wrong. I, I’m no hero.”

“Tales of Queen Elsa’s coronation and the events thereafter travel far and wide, child. Among the many things I have heard, one thing that remained constant is that it was Princess Anna who sought out the Queen and brought her home, and that it was her sacrifice that ended the winter. If there was ever a hero to star in every minstrel’s songs, it would be you. And what better to suit a hero but a fine blade and the prowess to use it?”

Anna blushed at the compliment, but remained unsure.

“But, what if I don’t want to use it? I’ve never ever wanted to hurt people. I don’t want to kill anyone.”

“The water dance is not for killing, Princess. It can kill, true, but that is not all there is to it. It is a dance, and can be appreciated as such. Also,” and now, Cortez looked around to make sure that they would not be overheard, “the Queen is afraid for your safety, Princess. Although winter may have ended in Arendelle, all is not well. Strange things are stirring, and fear is thick in the air. And when people are frightened and afraid, they can do dangerous and dreadful things. The things that the Queen can do... some hail it as a sign of fortune, a sign that the gods smile down upon us and bless us with a miracle such as her. But there are others who see her as a harbinger, a catalyst that has unlocked unusual and mysterious things. I have seen and heard of many strange things, Princess Anna. In the north, there are tales of giant bears and dragons, enormous cursed beasts and scaled fire-breathing monsters. In the west, I have heard of men transforming into horned, terrible beasts, of mermaids rising from the seas to seduce princes and kings, of witches with poisoned apples and enchanted spindles and eternal youth. Across the sea in the new lands, there is tell of a shadowed man who uses dark spirits to steal the souls of unwary travellers. In the desert lands, there are stories of a hooded sorcerer, enormous snakes, flying carpets and magic lamps. These are dark and dangerous times we live in, Princess Anna, and the emergence of what fearful men have begun to call the Winter Witch is seen as a realisation of our deepest fears: a being so powerful that she can bring endless winter to the world and cover everything in frost and ice and snow.”

Anna’s breath caught in her throat. People were afraid, still afraid, of Elsa? After everything she had done? She had shown the beauty of her powers, and was working hard to bring Arendelle back to prosperity. Sure, she may have stumbled every now and then, but didn’t all rulers? A deep sense of despair filled Anna as she was struck by the thought that it could very well be possible that Elsa would never be fully trusted.

“Of course, no man would dare to try and harm the Queen when her reputation so thoroughly precedes her,” Cortez continued. “Instead, they will hope to turn her own people against by making her seem the monster people are afraid she is.

And they will do that by going after those dear to the Queen's heart. Her sister, for example."

Anna had never been good with panic. In fact, if there was one thing that guaranteed her losing composure it was when she found herself hyperventilating. Much like what she was doing now.

"Elsa... Elsa thinks that my life is in **danger**? But, but we have the guards, and the watch! And Captain Halden, he wouldn't let anyone hurt us!"

"In troubled times such as these, child, everyone could be in danger and no one would know it. The Queen is afraid for you, and her fear is well warranted. Do not let your blithe spirit and trust in the goodness of people's heart blind you, Princess. The true seeing is what lies at the heart of the water dance, the sight that separates true from false. To know when your foe intends to strike and when he intends to retreat, when he is committed to an attack and when he is feinting to distract you. Ruling a kingdom is much the same as the dance, Princess Anna. Always watch, always be prepared. Stand light on your feet, but be prepared to stand firm as well. Do not trust what your enemies say; trust only your own eyes, and the true nature of your opponent will be revealed. The Queen knows this. She places faith in a precious few and reluctantly relies on a select more, but she is always afraid for you. It would be best for all if you never had to dance against true foe, but should the time come it would be better for you to know the water dance and how to defend yourself than not. And that, is why I am here. That is why I am now your dancing master. Because while your Master Pierre knows his way about the tango and the waltz, he cannot teach you the water dance as I can."

"Calm yourself, Princess," Cortez chided, seeing the look of panic on Anna's face. "Fear is the enemy. Fear clouds the mind, disturbs the senses. When you are afraid, fear will blind you. When you are scared, fear will deafen your ears. When you are terrified, fear will make you indecisive. And when fear has you in its grasp, smothering and suffocating you, fear will make you die. The water dancer does not let fear drown him. The water dancer floats atop the fear, where his vision is clear and his hearing unimpaired. The water dancer dances. Can you do this?"

Anna took a few deep breaths in quick succession, each slightly slower than the last. The panic faded from her cheeks. When she opened her eyes, they were clear.

"Yes. I can do this. I can dance."

"Not yet, you cannot," Cortez corrected. He tossed a training blade at Anna, who, though startled, shot her hand out and caught the sword in mid-air. Cortez's grin widened and Anna smiled, surprised by herself but pleasantly so. "But you will. Once you have learnt the water dance, once you have mastered the steps and the music, then no untrained man shall ever defeat you. And now, we begin. Come!"

Cortez marched around Anna to stand opposite her. He stood sideways, profile small, one foot planted firmly behind him to keep his balance stable, the other resting lightly ahead of him to allow for easy turning. Anna enthusiastically copied him, and did not resist when he poked and prodded different parts of her stance with his sword to correct her posture.

“Good, a little to the left, good, lift your chin, there!”

Satisfied, Cortez stood back, gently bending his knees to keep them supple. Anna mimicked him, feeling her calves protest as they stretched. Wincing, she reminded herself to next time forgo her ballroom high heels for a comfortable pair of boots.

“Good, very good! And now,” Cortez flourished his sword in a complicated salute. He grinned at her dumbfounded expression as she tried to figure out how to replicate that little trick. “We dance!”

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And so they did. For the next month or so, Cortez and Anna met every second day to dance. Each lesson left Anna exhausted, nursing fresh bruises, and happier as she slowly improved.

It had not been easy for either of them at first. During their earlier lessons, Cortez had unfavourably compared Anna’s grip to either a limp noodle made from wet paper or a stone carving made by a blind monkey, her step to a reindeer stomping through three-foot-deep snow, her attention to a caffeinated goldfish with Alzheimer’s Disease and her intelligence to that of various species of farm animal.

“Are you going into battle with your sword or are you going on a date with it? Hold it firm, Princess!”

“You are not holding a battle axe, girl, you are holding a delicate instrument! Do you intend to cut your foe or do you intend to break your sword over his head?”

“Move your feet! Are they clasped in irons? I care not if you were never graceful, I care that you do not flail your limbs like a spastic spider! Move! Right over left, always! Or do you plan to defend from your foe’s blows with an empty hand? Move!”

“I care little that the Queen is making it hail outside. When you dance the water dance, you remain focused on the task at hand. Do you expect your dancing partner to patiently sit and wait for you to realise that he is a flick of the wrist away from killing you? No? Of course not! So stop looking at the ice falling from the sky and dance!”

“Are you certain that the reindeer is not some long-lost kin? Because that is the only reasonable conclusion I can draw to explain your inability to comprehend

that if this blade was true steel, you would currently be missing a few vital organs.”

At first, Anna hated it. Cortez could see it in her face. She attended her dancing lessons only reluctantly, her displeasure at the incoming two hours’ worth of insults showing plain in her scowl. But as time went by, Cortez could tell that Anna was beginning to learn and understand, that the endless stream of insults were nothing more than another aspect of his teachings. To dance the water dance, one must not let anything distract them from the true seeing. Insults, banter, humour: any of these could be distractions that an assassin would use to hide his motive or distract his target. As soon as Anna realised this, her face stopped reacting to Cortez’s unpleasant words, her brow became less creased as her scowl faded, her eyes did not glare at Cortez’s mouth but watched instead his body, flickering as she took in the little movements that signalled what he would do next. Cortez saw all of this and approved, and soon he replaced the insults with compliments and japes and witty comments. To his pleasure, Anna disregarded these as well. Gone was the girl who had lived for others’ approval; when she danced the water dance, the Princess was a different woman. She was focused, intense, powerful. She accepted every bruise as a lesson, even if that lesson was as basic as “Duck, stupid”. Afterwards, when both sat on the balcony sharing a skin of water, Anna would laugh and smile and tease, but when they danced, she let nothing distract her.

Until today.

It had been three months since their first meeting. In that time, Anna had changed. Whilst she remained as slim as ever, the Princess was no longer a skinny little girl. Instead, she had grown strong, wires of muscle gracing her arms and legs along with strong fibres of previously soft skin hardening along her abs and back. Their regular meetings built Anna’s strength and her confidence, and she had improved enough that Cortez did not call out his attacks as he had in the past. Instead, he would dance with her in focused silence, with only the occasional correction of the Princess’s form or step. The air was thick with sweat and concentration as they danced back and forth, wooden blades clacking against each other.

One their third bout, Anna had slipped on the edge of the rug when she sprang back from Cortez’s thrust, causing her to lose her balance and tumble to the floor. To Cortez’s disappointment, she hadn’t been able to recover and the match had ended far too early with an easy victory for Cortez. He won almost all of their dances, but normally Anna was not so careless. Still, he dismissed it as a moment of poor judgement on the Princess’s part, something she was not as prone to as she had been in the past.

However, Cortez’s worry and curiosity were piqued when, on their seventh match, Anna fell for a blatantly obvious feint and found herself lying on the hardwood floor with an oaken point pressed against her throat. Cortez became further interested when, as they saluted each other for the ninth time, he noticed that



Anna wasn't even watching him, instead gazing blankly out the window while her hand mechanically completed the twirls. Curious, Cortez looked out the window to see nothing but Queen Elsa outside, greeting an ambassador from Dunbroch. Interested to see just how invested Anna was in their fight, Cortez went on the defensive for the entire dance, letting Anna lunge clumsily over and over as he batted aside her blade leaving her wide open to attack but not taking the opportunity, wanting to see how long this would go on for. Oblivious and clearly thinking about something else, Anna struck blow after blow, never changing her pattern or strategy as she thrust repeatedly unthinkingly. Finally, bored with the Princess's monotonous attack, Cortez knocked aside another thoughtless stab and his hand flashed out, grabbing Princess Anna's wrist. He saw her eyes light up with surprise as she was brought back to earth, just in time to feel Cortez spin her to the side and whack her on the ribs with a one-two combo ending with a sharp smack to the shin. Anna, unbalanced by the blows, dropped ungracefully onto her butt. Rubbing her aching ribs, she glared up at her teacher.

"Wasn't that a little uncalled for? I thought the rule was to stop after a killing strike!"

Cortez replied by whacking her on the forehead with two fingers.

"Ow!"

"You," he said, snatching up Anna's fallen sword, "are not concentrating."

"Yes I was!"

Cortez gave Anna a flat look as he went to the sword rack propped up on the wall. After hanging both practice swords on their respective hooks, Cortez poured himself a glass of water.

"If you were concentrating, then I will be most disappointed, because that was an incredibly poor dance. In all honesty, the last time you danced this poorly was after the Spring Festival when you were half-drunk and suffering from a hangover."

Anna's face flushed, in embarrassment over the memory and at the sting of the insult.

"Actually, I was **winning** today. Four wins and two draws to your three. I would've won if you hadn't cheated."

"And now, you are dead," Cortez said calmly, sipping his water. "Also, if you think that you were getting the better of me, then you are more distracted today than I feared."

"What?"

"I was **letting** you win. I could tell that you weren't focusing at all, and I wanted to see how long it would take for you to realise. Obviously, you weren't

paying attention at all. Also, that move with the wrist-grab? It would never have happened if you had just been concentrating."

Anna hung her head, wincing as she gingerly poked at her ribs. There were definitely going to be marks there in the morning. Her shin was already forming a bright purple bruise from where Cortez had hit her. Cortez walked over to her and held out a hand. Anna accepted and let him pull her to her feet.

"Do you mind telling me where your mind was wondering today, Princess? One cannot dance when one's thoughts are elsewhere."

"It's nothing," Anna said, rubbing her side. She limped over to the small table and poured some water for herself. "I'm just... it's nothing."

"Princess," Cortez said patiently. "I was master-at-arms at the royal court in Corona for ten years. During that time, I tutored many highborn children and squires in the art of the sword. Not in the water dance, of course; that is a privilege I give only to a precious few. I taught them in the art of the knights, all hacking and hammering. But I digress: what I mean to tell you is that I have seen many young boys with a dreamy look in their eyes as they mooned over some lovely maiden. A look that I saw reflected in your eyes when we danced today."

Anna blushed.

"What? No, it's nothing like that! What would make you think I liked someone? There's no one I could possibly like! Not that I've considered it of course! Of course not! I'm the Princess, it's not even possible! I mean, what would people say if they ever knew? Not that there's anything to know! What makes you think-

"Anna, child," Cortez said, calm and collected with a hint of amusement. "I taught you everything you know about the art of the true seeing, of reading others. Even if every denial out of your mouth did not declare the truth, I can know just by looking at you to tell when you lie. So, who is this person, who must be truly special to dominate your mind so completely?"

Anna looked torn between continuing her ineffectual denial and a strong desire to just open up and talk to someone about her secret love. As Princess, Anna had few people with whom she could openly talk about love and secret romance, Cortez knew. Eventually, her shoulders slumped and she sat on the ground, dejected. Cortez sat next to her, sipping from his glass as he waited for Anna to open up.

After a few moments in silence with the sweat drying on both their skins, Anna started speaking.

"I can't tell you who it is. I'm sorry, but I think it'd be better if no one knew."

"Forbidden romance, is it? Nothing is more romantic to a Spaniard," Cortez said, smiling. Anna didn't return his grin.

"I'm serious. I can't tell anyone who it is. Not even you. I mean, I can barely admit it to myself."

"Of course," Cortez said. "I understand. But if you can't tell me who your secret amour is, can you at least tell me about this special someone?"

Anna laughed sadly.

"I wouldn't say that it's an amour; I haven't actually admitted that I love her yet."

"her'?" Cortez echoed.

Anna flushed.

"I meant 'him', of course! You know what I mean!" she grumbled, angrily taking a sip from her glass.

"Of course," Cortez said generously, choosing not to call out Anna on her lie. It amused him to see how desperately she tried to cover up feelings when to him, she was an open book. At any rate, he was beginning to understand why Anna didn't want anyone to know about her unknown love.

"So, I haven't actually admitted to **him** that I like **him**. God, I'd probably look like such a freak if I told him."

"Perhaps," Cortez allowed. "But what is it about him that you like?"

Anna blushed as she gazed out into the summer sky dreamily.

"Well, everything, actually. I love he- **his** hair. In the sunlight, it looks just like sparkling gold. I love it when he sings. I love his hips, and how they fit perfectly into my hands. I love his smile. It's really rare to see it because he's normally so busy working and so stressed out, and he never really smiles really widely or anything like you and I do, but when he does, the corner of his lips just curl up slightly and it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I love how diligent he is, and how hardworking he is. I love how pale his skin is, so that when there's a full moon he just **glows**, like he's made out of starlight. I love how long his legs are, and his fingers, they're so slim and delicate!"

"I see," Cortez said, but Anna ignored him. Now that she'd started talking, the Princess couldn't seem to keep it in; everything just tumbled out of her in a rush.

"Those are just the basic things! I love the little things as well. **Especially** the little things, because they remind me how I'm the person who knows he- **him** best! Like how he always puts his left shoe on first, and how he can never skate without doing that little twirl! Or how he keeps his gloves in the top drawer even though he doesn't need them anymore. And how everyone gives him sapphires as presents because they think that they suit him, when actually he loves emeralds. Oh, and he loves chocolate, just like me! I also like how he strokes my hair, and how he always pauses where with that strand of hair that

used to be white. I love how he chews his lip whenever he's reading, and I love how he doesn't tell anyone how much he loves geometry because he thinks that it's nerdy. Oh, and I think it's the cutest thing ever when he's working up the courage to tell me that he wants to build a snowman! I also like how he always lights the jasmine-scented candles at night when he reads, and how he thinks that I don't know because he doesn't want to hear me whining about how his eyes will go bad at breakfast. There's also that look he gets in his eyes when I ask him to play chess because he **loves** chess but he knows that it bores me, and he's always too scared to ask me first!"

Anna stopped talking to take a deep breath, chest heaving. Cortez took the opportunity to put in his own little comment, curious and wanting to how Anna would respond now that she was emotional and too riled-up to pick up on his little subconscious bait.

"She sounds like a really amazing person, Princess"

"Yeah," Anna said dreamily, unaware of Cortez's little trap. "She really is."

**Fin**

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A/N: So, this one was far less romantic than The Captain because I wanted to use this to help better establish the setting and the circumstances this particular fic is set in. Sorry about that, and also about how long it is. Still, if you managed to stick around to this last note, I hope that it was at least worth the read! Hope you enjoyed! :D

Rating: M

Genre: Romance, Thriller

Warnings: Incest, fem!Slash, Language, Mature Content, Character Death

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A/N: I know I said I'd be alternating between Argos and Café Liégeois, but I'm currently experiencing writer's block for the latter so you guys get another chapter of Argos. Fair warning: this one's going to be slightly darker than the other two. But only slightly!

This takes place after The Captain.

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***The Steward***

For as long as he could remember, Axel had wanted to serve at the royal palace. Ever since he'd been a young boy growing up on Fisherman's Wharf, Axel had stared longingly at the great closed gates of the castle, thinking about the stories his parents would tell him of the times when those doors had always been open to all, and how the King and Queen would be there to greet their smallfolk and smile and wave, and listen to grievances, and have the princesses come out and curtsy to the roaring crowds. Then, one day, this practice just... stopped.

Of course, the public still got to see their King and Queen often enough at different festivals and events, and forums were in place for the peasants to voice their complaints and ideas, but it just wasn't the same anymore. The princesses became even rarer sights, and over the years the people of Arendelle got no more than small glimpses of the heirs to the throne, watching as they grew from adorable toddlers to shy pre-teens to gorgeous teens to beautiful young women. But that's all they were: glimpses, small looks into the aging of the women that they must one day trust to rule them. Rumours spread that there wasn't something quite right with the older girl, Princess Elsa, although no one could quite agree on **what** it was about her that had caused the castle to be closed to the public.

"I've heard tell that she's a changeling," Flanders the fishmonger said as he took a large swig from his mug of ale. A regular at the Bloody Merry, Flanders always had some new gossip to share at the bar, though where he picked up all these tales Axel never knew. "That whenever the moon is full and the skies are clear, she transforms into a great she-wolf with fangs as long as me arm, a shaggy beast who'd like nothing more than to escape from the castle to sink her teeth in some human flesh."

"I've heard tell that there is a fishmonger who's more full of shite than any chamber pot in all of Arendelle that comes to the Bloody Merry to spread wild tales whenever he has a thirst," Geir, one of the burly fishermen off the *Lady Luck*, scoffed. In one hand he held a tankard of beer, and the other was cupped on the rump of the wild-haired drunk strumpet lounging in his lap. He chugged some beer back before slamming the tankard back on the table. Wiping the broth out of his impressive moustache, Geir gave Flanders an unimpressed look. "Go drown yourself, you old hag. Nobody's buying your fanciful tales."

"Oh really?" countered Flanders. "Then what's your take on our Queen-to-be, hmm? What reason could the King have to keep his precious daughter locked up in there?"

"Probably so that she'd never have to see your ugly mug!" Elof the blacksmith roared, and the crowd burst into laughter at that.

"All right, then, laugh, all of yah!" Flanders shouted over the din. "But mark my words when I say that something ain't right with that girl!"

"You shouldn't all laugh so loud," someone murmured. "Flanders the Fool is more right than you'd think, even if it's for the wrong reasons."

“Oh? And what do you know?” Geir said. The Bloody Merry bar buddies were well-established, and they were always suspicious of newcomers. Talk such as theirs could often be taken as treason, and the Vulture had men everywhere.

“More than you ever would,” the cloaked man said. Dressed all in black with his hood covering his face, it was hard to distinguish any identifying feature. He tapped a coin on the bar. “Give me an ale. Make it strong.”

Luis the bartender stared incredulously at the coin.

“That’s castle gold that is. Ain’t nobody round these parts that can afford proper imperial gold. Who are you?”

“Someone who’s paying good gold for bad beer, it would seem. Still, beggars can’t be choosers.” The man tilted his head back to let the brown froth pour down his throat. He slammed the mug back onto the table. “Another.”

“I’d like to see some coin before I give you another anything.”

The cloaked man looked at Luis incredulously.

“Are you serious? That coin is worth enough to buy this entire wreck of a bar three times over.”

“Which is why I ain’t taking it. I want some good old-fashioned silver. I don’t want no trouble with the watch. If I take this gold that came from gods-know-where, for all I know I could be hanged by morning for stealing from the King himself.”

“You’re all a lot of bloody ignorant fools you are.” The man grumbled. “As to be expected from a bunch of peasants.” He snatched up his coin again.

“You know what? I’ve got better things to do than drink with the likes of you. Here,” he tossed three silvers at Luis. “Take your silver. Dead men have no need for coin anyway.”

And with that, he pushed himself to his feet and shoved past the men, banging open the door. The Bloody Merry regulars glared hostilely at him all the way out. As soon as the door slammed shut behind him, they broke out into angry murmurs.

“Who was that bastard?” Geir growled.

Luis was polishing the coins, holding them up to the light to check the seal engraved on the side.

“No idea, but his coin is good. Proper silver this is.”

“How’d you know his gold was imperial, Lu?” Flanders asked.

Luis tucked the coins into his belt.

“I’ve seen a lot of queer folk here. There are people who come in for drinks sometimes besides you lot. One day, there was two men who walked in. One

was a right giant he was, huge, bigger than Geir and Elof combined. The other was a slight fellow, barely had more meat on him than a boy. They were looking for someone. They asked me if anyone had paid me with a golden coin like the ones the King used. Obviously, mate like me, I ain't never got anything from the King 'sides speeches, and I told 'em so. The skinny one holds up a coin to show me it looks like, and it looked exactly like the one that fella just threw down. Seems to me that that man who was just in here was some bloke who worked at the castle before he went rogue."

At that, Axel perked his head up. A man who'd worked at the castle? Then he must have seen the Princess! He might know someone willing to take in Axel!

Axel slipped off his stool, quickly finishing off his cider. He dashed outside, intent on chasing down the unknown man. As he stumbled through the nightlife of Fisherman's Wharf, Axel suddenly realised the hopelessness of his venture. The man was most likely long gone by now. The likelihood that he'd ever find him was pretty much zero. Gloomy that he'd lost his chance, his golden ticket to the castle, Axel grumbled all the way home, kicking sulkily at a pebble. Thinking about how angry his ma would be if he got home any later than he already was, Axel took a shortcut through the alleys.

And then he saw him.

The hooded man was lying in the alley, propped up against the wall. Axel had seen enough drunk and dead men to tell the difference. This man was clearly the latter, as clearly evidenced by the quarrel protruding from his throat.

Cautiously, Axel approached the corpse. He wasn't so stupid as to think that the corpse could hurt him, but whatever had made the corpse could. Also, he didn't want to be mistaken for a looter; the City Watch had little patience for thieves, and even less for those who would steal from the dead. Still, if this man had worked at the castle, he might have some valuables on him...

Quickly, checking around to make sure that no one was looking, Axel knelt by the dead man and urgently turned out his pockets. As he searched (uncovering various silver and bronze coins, two knives and a small pocket watch), Axel noticed that the man may have been killed by a crossbow bolt to the throat, but the dried blood at the corner of his eyes and lips as well as the sores covering his body told the boy that this man had been dying for a long time now, most likely from poison.

*"Serves you right,"* Axel thought as he gingerly pocketed the dead man's treasures. *"Stealing from the castle. The King and Queen are good people, better rulers than we've had in a long time, Ma always says so. Also, if you know a secret, then you keep it to yourself. Everyone knows that. It's blabbermouths like you who end up dead. Keep your head down and your mouth shut, like Pa always tells me. I'm still a boy and I know that. Why didn't you?"*

As Axel prepared to leave, he realised something strange: even though he'd gone through every pocket, every nook and cranny of the dead man's purpose, the

golden coin was missing.

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That had been eight years ago. Since then, Axel had used the coin lifted from the dead man to earn an apprenticeship at the castle, where he had served under the Head Steward Pontus Magnar, an elderly man who, despite looking frail, was severe, stern, strict, and above all professional. Under his tutelage, Axel joined the select few who served as permanent staff at the castle. Despite what he'd dreamed as a boy, Axel never saw Princess Elsa outside of a few chance encounters, such as when he walked past her room while the maids brought in fresh bedsheets. These moments, few and far in between, were treasured by the young boy. Contrary to the rumours, the Princess was gorgeous, possessing an ethereal beauty. Axel was convinced that even the full moon with its gloriously silver beauty paled in comparison to the unsmiling, nervous face of Princess Elsa. Even though Princess Anna was closer to his age and far more accessible (she'd even tried to get him to build a snowman with her, but he'd declined, remembering Magnar's lessons), Axel remained resolutely smitten with Princess Elsa. Though six years his senior, Axel never fully gave up on his crush, though he never nursed it beyond a faint longing. He was a young man now, and realistic about his chances. Whilst other royals had been known to marry commoners (most recently the Corona Princess who had taken a former convict on as her consort), Axel knew that Princess Elsa was far too mindful of her duty to even think of closing the gap between them, a gap made even wider upon her ascension to Queen.

On coronation day, Axel had not been present when the Queen had unleashed her powers. When the lots for that day's duties had been handed out by Magnar, the young apprentice had had the misfortune to be attending the pavilion erected on the other side of the castle. He hadn't even known that the Queen had fled until much later while shovelling snow off the bridge, his fellow stewards sharing the new-found gossip.

"I heard it from Erika that the Queen just flipped out at her sister during the ball, and she just made icicles spring out of the ground."

"I was actually there, outside, when the Queen froze the fountains. She didn't even have to say a spell or anything, she just touched the water and it **froze**."

"Yeah, you were there, you and half the kingdom. . ."

"Do you think that she's always been able to do this? That this is why the King locked her up?"

"Wouldn't you? I'd be terrified if my kid ever turned out to be a witch-"

"She's not a witch," Axel said firmly, driving the head of his shovel into a thick patch of snow. "She's just. . . different."



"What, you think that we're out here clearing out snow in the middle of summer because she's got an extra toe or something? Skule and his mismatched eyes are different, Axel. **Elin**, with that thing she does with her elbow, is different. **You're** different, you and your infatuation. The Queen isn't just **different**. She's something not entirely human at all."

"Don't say that!" Axel shouted. "We don't know what's really happening, so we shouldn't judge! This doesn't mean she's a witch! It could be a curse, or, or a spirit or something!"

"Geez, calm down Ax. You'd think I'd insulted your mother or something. I'm just saying that the Queen is definitely not who we thought she was. . ."

Just as he'd missed the winter's start, Axel also missed how it ended. Typical of his luck. He'd been busy trying to stoke a fireplace in the Entrance Hall when Queen Elsa had broken out of her cell and started freezing the entire palace. Axel had been terrified, to tell the truth of it. He'd been thrown out the window by a pillar of ice blasting through the walls and had hung from a washing line, frightened beyond measure, as the blizzard had buffeted him in every direction, his fingers freezing and straining to hold his weight. Then, as suddenly as the blizzard had begun, it had stopped. Axel was suddenly dangling from a pair of trousers in middle of an absolutely still blizzard. He could see every snowflake hanging in place, each unique as it floated in space. It was like time had stood still, and Axel had been so terrified and confused that he'd clutched tightly to the trousers, afraid that if he moved a muscle it would break the spell and cause the blizzard to start again.

But it didn't. Instead, all the snow and ice had begun to lift into the air, all of it floating upwards into a gigantic snowflake suspended above the kingdom. Axel had been sure at that point that he would die, that the snowflake would be brought down to crush Arendelle into nothingness. Instead, it was the snowflake that had burst into fine silvery dust, evaporating in the summer air. Only later, after his friend Davin had heard him crying for help and had rescued him from the washing line, did Axel learn of the entire story: of Queen Elsa's powers, of Princess Anna's failed rescue mission and the curse that had frozen her heart, of Prince Hans's deception, of some ice harvester who had somehow been caught up in the middle of all this drama, of Princess Anna's sacrifice, and how Queen Elsa had used the power of love to restore her sister to life and had ended the blizzard. It was all a marvellous tale, a fantastic story that would be repeated to children for generations to come no doubt. In fact, it was so like the stories of old that every minstrel would sing about while plucking his lute that even now, Axel wasn't entirely sure whether or not to believe it. He was sure that there were some parts of the story that had been omitted, some parts that weren't being shared.

Any doubts Axel had had were quickly swept away in the coming months, however. With Queen Elsa's powers under control, she had ordered the gates to be reopened and that they would **stay** open. In order to cope with the influx

of people, the Queen had also expanded the castle staff, and thus Axel found his apprenticeship at an end as a need for more stewards (more everything, really) led to Magnar, though grumbling about how their training had yet to be completed, cutting the boy loose and acknowledging his right to be his own man, a steward in truth free to offer his services to whomever he chose. And when it turned out that the Queen had need of an aide... well, what was Axel to do? The revelation of Her Majesty's powers had done little to dampen Axel's desire for her; if anything, it had only been strengthened. The Queen was everything that any teenage boy could ever dream of in a woman: beautiful, wise, kind, strong-willed, highborn, rich, and now more powerful than anyone could ever have imagined. Thus, Axel became a member of the Queen's personal support staff, a team of stewards, secretaries, counsellors, advisors, special agents and military officers. He was fairly low-ranking (really, the only people he got to boss around were the serving boys and the people managing the printing press), but it meant that Axel could see Queen Elsa multiple times a day and sometimes even **touch** her, when her fingers would inadvertently brush by his when he handed her another set of documents. Though the Queen never reacted (in truth, Axel was fairly certain that she didn't even recognise him as anything more than another servant in her retinue), Axel took care to comb his hair and brush out any wrinkles in his doublet all the same. He knew that he was at least comely (several of the younger maids often giggled when he walked past) and he wanted to look best for his Queen. He knew that he was being stupid. There was no actual chance that the Queen would reciprocate his affections. Still, when he knocked on the door of the Queen's study at two in the morning with a freshly printed stack of decrees requiring her stamp and signature, and when the Queen had looked up from the report on her desk with tired eyes and had thanked him for his hard work, even giving him a small smile, Axel had forgotten his exhaustion and weariness. The **Queen** had thanked him! Queen Elsa had **smiled** at him! For a boy born in Fisherman's Wharf, whose only encounter with royalty had been to stare longingly across the bridge to the closed castle gates, this had once seemed to be an unattainable dream. Axel had bowed respectfully, trying to hide his broad grin, and had taken his leave of his Queen, unable to entirely disguise the spring in his step as he'd left the study.

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Axel had been in the service of Queen Elsa for eleven months when his world was turned completely upside down.

Up until then, it had been simple. He would collect stacks of official documents from the printing press every morning, deliver them to the Queen, take any forms she had completed to either the rookery or to the heralds depending on whether it was an international or domestic affair, go down to the store room to fetch more ink to keep the Queen well-supplied, check in on the progress of the next batch of reports with the boys in the printing department, complete his own paperwork and documents, return to the Queen to deliver and collect more

documents, rinse and repeat. Every day was a full, busy day, but never was it too taxing. On the days when there was an event coming up, Axel often worked double-shifts and horrendous overtime hours, but whenever he felt like he was at the end of his strength, when he felt like collapsing or vomiting or both, he would conjure up the memory of Queen Elsa smiling at him encouragingly and thanking him for his dedication and diligence. The memory would warm him enough to give him the strength to push through his fatigue, until he collapsed in his bed and his brain shut down completely.

That was the way it had been for eleven months, and not once had Axel ever complained. Although it was a hard life at times, it was always satisfying. He had known exactly what he was getting into when he'd offered to serve as part of the Queen's personal staff, and he would not whine and whinge like a child when there tough times now and then. It was nothing more than he had expected, and he was glad to be of service to Queen Elsa. He prided himself on knowing Her Majesty better than any other steward, even old Magnar. He knew her timetable, he knew when she was most likely to be working in the study and when she'd retire to her little cubby room in the library, he could tell when she'd prefer to greet guests in the Throne Room and when she'd prefer to do so in the Entrance Hall. . . Axel was proud to say that few others had mastered understanding the Queen's work schedule as he had, especially with as little information he'd had to work with.

As it turned out, though, the Queen's professional work was the only thing he knew about her. As he discovered, there were many, **many** things about her private life that he'd never known, or had ever wanted to.

It hadn't been intentional. He'd never meant to see it unfold. He'd just meant to place an extra cushion on the throne for the Queen. The next day there was to be a particularly long meeting scheduled with ambassadors from all over the continent to discuss the tourney taking place in a few months' time. Knowing that the Queen would no doubt be seated on her throne for a very long time, and knowing that it was not the most comfortable of seats, Axel had merely hoped to ease Her Majesty's discomfort by adding a few more plump cushions to the throne. Everyone else had retired for the night, and the castle had been never been more silent. He'd never meant to intrude. It was just that he'd been kept up a little later than he'd thought by a few reports and had wanted to do a small service to his monarch before he went to bed!

Regardless of intentions, though, there was no changing what he had witnessed. Axel had been in the chambers behind the throne, struggling to open the door with three large, purple, and exceedingly soft cushions in his arms, when he'd realised that he was not alone. Footsteps were approaching. Startled, and strangely embarrassed, he'd ducked back into the shadows of the heavy curtains that ran alongside the back of the Throne Room, hiding the doors that led to the Queen's conference rooms. Glad that his similarly dark garb would camouflage him, Axel peeked through the deep violet fabrics to see who would come to the Throne Room at this time of night.

His breath caught in his throat when he saw the Queen sitting on her throne.

Axel felt like he was choking on his heart. Never had he seen his Queen dressed so... scantily. Her long platinum-blond hair was loose, unrestrained by braid or hairpin, and it flowed freely, tumbling down her shoulders like a golden waterfall. Although she normally garbed herself in conservative gowns as befitting a Queen as regal as she, today Queen Elsa wore an icy blue dress that sparkled in the moonlight. Axel struggled to hold back a gasp as his eyes roamed over all the milky white skin that this dress exposed. The Queen's neck and shoulders were tantalisingly bare, and her one leg, long and pale, slid out through a slit in the side. Her normally ramrod-straight back was curled inwards as Her Royal Highness reclined on the throne, her bare leg crossed over its covered twin with a wickedly seductive grace. Axel couldn't tear his eyes from her bare foot as it tapped in the air impatiently, a snow-white foot that seemed to glow in the silver beams of the moon.

The footsteps were growing louder. Axel tore his gaze away from the Queen and squirmed further into the curtains. He was no fool. There was only one reason for Queen Elsa to be dressed like this, only one reason she would be waiting this late at night in the throne room whilst everyone else slept, only one reason for her impatience: the Queen had arranged for a secret tryst with an unknown lover. And Axel knew, he **knew**, could feel old Magnar's words thrumming in his skull as his lessons echoed in his brain, that this was none of his business. As a steward, as a **servant**, it was no business of his as to what his mistress chose to do in her spare time, nor was he to care about who she chose to meet. But this was **Queen Elsa**. The woman that Axel had longed for his entire life. He simply **had** to know who it was that had commanded his Queen's affections so, who it was that had deserved her love, if only to know the man that Her Majesty had deemed to be better than he.

The footsteps drew closer. Queen Elsa's foot stopped tapping as she looked at the door. From his place behind the curtains, Axel could see a flash of excitement blur over her face before she quickly controlled it behind a cool mask of indifference he had seen a thousand times. She quickly smoothed her hair out of her face and adjusted the dress so that it revealed **just** enough of her long legs before, satisfied, slouching back into her throne with a bored look on her face. Axel felt like he'd forgotten how to breathe upon seeing those legs that just seemed to go on forever.

The footsteps came to a stop. Axel remembered to take in a breath before he froze. Queen Elsa's eyes bored into the grand doors opposite the throne, fire flashing behind the icy blue.

*Rap, rap, rap-rap, rap.*

The unknown lover knocked on the door, each sharp crack of knuckle on wood echoing through the Throne Room. The pattern, meaningless to Axel, obviously had special meaning to Her Majesty, who quickly wiped away a smile upon

hearing it. In the most regal voice she could muster whilst lounging like a predatory cat on her throne, Elsa spoke loudly and clearly.

“Enter!”

There was a pause as the word rang through the grand hall. Then, with a groan as the wood complained of its own weight, the unknown figure pushed open one of the grand doors just enough to slip inside. Axel’s eyes almost popped out of his head as Princess Anna, wearing nothing except for a light green shift that ended at her knees, squeezed into the Throne Room, closing the door behind her.

“Ah, it’s you,” Queen Elsa said in her dignified court voice, a sound completely at odds with how she was currently perched on the throne. “What brings you to my court, sweet sister?”

“Why, your invitation of course, my Queen,” Princess Anna said smoothly. She held up an envelope, the seal broken. “When I saw this awaiting me in my chambers, I came as fast as I could.”

“My invitation?” Her Majesty asked sharply, her voice like the crack of a whip. “I did not send you an invitation, sister. You must be mistaken.”

“I assure you, there is no mistake,” Princess Anna said confidently as she strode down the purple carpet. She came to a halt at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the throne, looking up at the Queen. “This letter is clearly marked with the royal seal. That is your seal, is it not?”

Queen Elsa’s eyes flashed.

“Yes, the royal seal is my seal, for I am Queen. And should even you, a Princess though you may be, bow before your Queen?”

“Apologies for my presumption, Your Grace,” Princess Anna said in a humble tone quite unlike her. She swept into a deep curtsy, and both Axel and the Queen’s eyes roamed over the vast expanse of tanned legs that the salute, normally done in a full ballgown, exposed when done in nothing but a slip meant for the bedchambers.

There was something about this set-up that greatly disturbed Axel. The tone of voice they used to address each other was too smooth, too perfect. It stank of unnatural perfection, a cohesion achievable only by prior rehearsal.

Of course, his disturbed feelings could just as easily be from the fact that, unless his eyes told him false, Queen Elsa seemed to be seducing her younger sister.

Oblivious to their hidden watcher, Queen Elsa watched as Princess Anna rose from her curtsy. Bowing her head, the Princess ascended the stairs to hand the letter to the Queen. Her Majesty gave the envelope the most casual of glances as if she was merely rushing through a required part of a script before tossing it over the back of the throne. It floated to the ground only three feet from Axel’s hiding spot.

“Do you presume to deceive me, sweet sister? Do you think I am amused by your japes? I have never seen this letter in my life, nor this envelope. I know not by what means my seal was attained, but I assure you that I did not press my stamp onto that wax.”

“But Your Grace,” Princess Anna pleaded in a far too desperate tone to be genuine. “I assure you that there must be some mistake! This letter was written in your hand, I am sure of it!”

“Oh? Are you calling me a liar? Do you dare speak blasphemy so boldly to your Queen?”

“No, of course not!” Princess Anna said, making a great show of backpedalling in fear as she flapped her hands in a panic. “I would never-”

“You would never?” Queen Elsa questioned in a deep, hammy voice that Axel had never heard her use before. “But you just did, sister! Which means that not only would you accuse your ruler of deceit, you would lie to her as well! Such sacrilege must be punished!”

“No, Your Grace!” Princess Anna wailed in a tone that might actually have been believable if it were not for her grin and her bright, joyful eyes. “Please, have mercy, I beg of you!”

“No.” Her Majesty replied, firm and resolute. She gazed upon her sister’s form with poorly concealed lust. “You have falsely accused me. Worse, you have lied to me. In doing so, you have committed sin. In committing sin, you are now corrupted. I will not have that corruption spread. Take off your clothes!”

“My, my Queen?” Princess Anna asked.

“Your clothes! Off!”

“Please, Your Grace, no! Do not shame me so!” The Princess cried out, a particularly unconvincing performance given that she was trying to stifle a giggle at the same time. To cover up her laughter, the younger girl threw herself at the Throne, clutching onto Queen Elsa’s ankles as she gave huge, dramatic sobs. “Have mercy!”

The Queen looked startled for a moment, her surprise showing through her façade. She quickly wiped her face clear and settled back into character.

“How dare you touch me! How dare you defile me! How **dare** you try to corrupt me!” Queen Elsa shouted, tugging her feet in the redhead’s grip in a half-hearted attempt to get them free. “Have you not committed enough sin for one night? What would your parents say if they could see you now?”

At that, Princess Anna let out an undignified snort as she released the Queen’s feet. Laughing, she fell onto her rear, unable to contain the giggles that burst from her. Miffed, Queen Elsa dropped her look of outrage to give her sister a disgruntled glare.

“‘What would my parents say?’” The Princess echoed, laughing. “They’d probably be wondering why I’d go along with this whole thing instead of just tying you to my bed and fucking you until morning.”

The Queen let out a frustrated sigh as she ran her hands through her hair in annoyance.

"**Language**, Anna! Also, I **highly** doubt that Father and Mother would wonder anything like that! Don't tarnish their reputation with your foul and filthy ways."

"**My** foul and filthy ways?" the redhead asked, amused. "I'm not the one who sent my lover a letter and script detailing her latest little fantasy. I'm not the one who gets so wet at the idea of screwing her baby sister on Daddy's throne that I soaked the cushions in the washroom."

Axel froze. He looked down at the cushions still in his arms and gently put them down on the floor.

"We **always** do things your way," Queen Elsa whined, unaware of the third presence in the room. "Couldn't you just play along a little longer?"

"Nope," the Princess replied cheerfully. "I'm not used to being the one grovelling on the ground, kissing my sister's butt. That's normally your job."

The Queen flushed red at that. "I told you, that was a one-time deal and you promised to never bring it up again."

"Well, I did," Princess Anna said, surprisingly chipper for someone committing one of the greatest sins on the planet. She cocked an eyebrow at the blonde. "Oops, looks like I lied to you. What will you do now? Punish me?" A mischievous light twinkled in the younger girl's eyes. "Make me beg for forgiveness?" She leaned in close to the blonde, whispering so quietly in her ear that Axel almost didn't pick up her next line. "Bend me over your knees and spank me with a riding crop?"

Embarrassed, the Queen shoved her sister, who laughed loudly at the elder's flushed cheeks and neck.

"You've absolutely ruined this for me, Anna. The mood is officially dead. You know that law prohibiting murder? You just broke it. **You killed the mood.**"

"Aw, don't be like that," the redhead chided as she perched herself on the throne's armrest. Sulking, the Ice Queen turned to face the other direction, trying to shove herself into the corner of the throne furthest from her grinning sister.

As the Princess tried to coax her sister out of her grumpy shell, chiding and wheedling and (did Axel just see that?) kissing and groping, the young steward saw the envelope that the Queen had tossed aside earlier, barely a metre from his foot. If he could grab that... No. No, no, no. It was too risky. The sisters would see him. Worse, what would he do with it? There was no one he could talk to about this, no one he could dare approach. And yet, Axel wanted to grab

it nonetheless, if only because it would serve as a reminder that this nightmarish blasphemy he was witnessing, this **incest**, had really taken place and was not the result of some fevered dream.

Back on the throne, the Queen had finally given into her sister's affectionate words and touches. Sighing, she uncurled herself to face the Princess, her face clearly showing that although she had stopped sulking, she hadn't forgiven the redhead for ruining their big night.

"Come on, Frosty," Princess Anna chided. "Don't give me that look. I would have been totally cool with this idea if you'd let **me** be the one on the throne."

"Not on your life," the blonde said stubbornly. "The throne is **mine**. If anyone's roleplaying as Queen, it should be me."

"Elsa, it doesn't count as roleplaying if you **are** the Queen," the Princess said, rolling her eyes.

"This is my throne," Her Majesty repeated, sounding much like a child claiming ownership of her favourite toy. Her lower lip jutted out in an adorable pout. "You've dominated me on every other surface in this castle. I am **not** letting you pretend to be Queen and bend me over the **throne**. I rule the kingdom from here, dammit! How am I supposed to ever concentrate here again if all I can think about is my face rubbing against the cushions with you taking me from behind!"

As soon as she said that, Elsa knew she'd made a mistake. A devious smirk spread on Anna's lips.

"Oh? So I distract you, do I? Do you remember every place where we've ever made love, Elsa? Does it make you wet to think about what we did there? Do you blush every time you look at the broom closet by the Dining Hall? Do you bite your lip whenever you walk into the conference chamber and remember me kneeling under your desk, sucking and biting and licking while you held a meeting with your commanders?"

"Anna," the blonde said uneasily in a tone that was half-commanding, half-pleading.

"Tell you what," the Princess continued, ignoring the look on her sister's face. "I'll let you keep your throne. I'll never go against any of your little plays again. **If**," and here, Anna paused, enjoying the wary look in the Queen's eyes. "**If**, we can have sex right here, right now, on Dad's throne."

Axel's mouth dropped to the floor. Elsa's eyes flashed with desire, but she bit her lip, trying to control herself.

"I don't know, Anna..."

"Come on, it'll be fun!" the Princess swung her legs over the blonde's, straddling her sister and effectively trapping her on her throne. At that, Elsa's eyes shot wide open as she felt something wet skinning against her abdomen.



"You can feel it, huh? You can feel how ready I am for this," Anna smirked. She leaned in close to gently kiss her sister on the lips. Frozen, Elsa barely responded, far too distracted by the wetness seeping through her icy dress.

"Guess what I'm wearing under this shift," Anna murmured against the Queen's lips.

Elsa's mind was so overtaken by lust that she could barely form a sentence. She settled for spitting out a single, needy word.

"**Nothing**," she gasped.

Anna's eyes lit with a blazing lust.

"There's a good girl," she whispered before she slammed her mouth against her sister's, her hands running up the blonde's sides to cup her breasts. Elsa mewled into the kiss before groaning as Anna began to rock back and forth, sliding her sex across the little studs of ice Elsa had worked into her dress. The weight of Anna's body pressed the ice into Elsa's skin, so that one shard was rubbing **right there**. Both sisters moaned as their restraint fell apart and they melted into each other, their love blinding them to everything but the other as their hands roamed and their hips bucked and their lips danced in the eternal lovers' waltz.

They were so engrossed by the other that neither noticed when a small hand darted out and snatched up an envelope lying abandoned on the floor, nor did they hear the door creak open as a shocked and horrified steward fled the Throne Room, lips flapping as he recited half-remembered prayers, leaving only three cushions behind.

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Axel sat glumly on the pier of Fisherman's Wharf. Arm still poised to throw, Davin looked down at his friend in disbelief.

"So you're telling me that not only did you see the Queen in a sexy strapless dress at the dead of night in her throne room, but that she was also having some sexy-times with her baby sister? And you expect me to believe this?"

"Look, I know it sounds... bizarre, but I'm telling you it's the truth!"

"Bizarre. Huh. More like completely unbelievable." Davin tossed the pebble across the water, watching it skip into the fjord. "Are you sure you didn't smoke something funny that night?"

Axel looked at his friend disbelievably.

"Really? You're accusing **me** of hitting the shrooms? After two weeks of building up enough confidence to actually **talk** to my best friend about something that's been giving me sleepless nights, I thought you'd be at least a bit more supportive!"

“All right, all right, calm down. I didn’t mean anything by it, it’s just that...” Davin scratched his head in disbelieving frustration, his other hand flipping a pebble as he thought. “**Fuck**, man.” Davin swore. He threw the pebble into the fjord, where it splashed into the water, causing ripples to disturb the peaceful surface. “What am I supposed to believe? That our Queen is an incestuous lesbian who’s banging her little sister?”

“More like the Princess is banging the Queen,” Axel said dejectedly. He still couldn’t believe what he’d seen. He felt like his mind had been permanently scarred by the event. After all the years he’d spent dreaming about going to the palace and serving his goddess of a Queen, **this** was what had awaited him? To learn that the Queen was a sinner? And not just any sinner, but the worst kind of abomination to walk the Earth?

Davin sat down next to Axel. He ran a hand through his hair as he thought.

“Okay, look Axel; I want to believe you. Well, actually, I don’t. I really, **really** hope that this isn’t true. But I also don’t want you to think I’m a bad friend or something. It’s just that... dude, this is completely unbelievable. And even if you’re my best mate, this is just beyond belief! It’s just not possible! I mean, even if it’s true, who are we going to tell? We have no proof, **no** proof whatsoever, and if we even **mention** this to anyone, we’ll both end up on the cutting block for slander.”

Axel took a deep breath.

“That’s not entirely true.”

Davin completely misunderstood his friend.

“It’s **completely** true! I mean, people are still scared of the Queen and what she can do, true, but the Princess? The people love her! If we try to even **suggest** that she’s doing something, something like **that**, the mob will lynch us before we get anywhere near the headsman!”

“I mean, Davin,” Axel said, reaching a hand into his coat. “We do have some proof.”

Davin gave Axel an odd look.

“What?”

Axel withdrew the letter from the inside of his coat. He’d originally thought of hiding it inside his pillowcase, but had thought better of it. What if it got lost? What if someone stole it? Then the only thing that reminded him that he wasn’t crazy would be gone forever. So, he’d kept it on his person for two entire weeks, even though it burned a dark fear into his body, scarring him with the heretical things it contained. He’d promised to never show it to anyone, but with Davin looking at him like he was some kind of lunatic...

Davin’s eyes widened.

“Is that...?”

Axel nodded.

Abruptly, Davin changed. For a split second, the boy that Axel had known all his life, the boy he'd grown up with, the boy who had been his best friend was gone. In his place was a strange man, with dead eyes and an intense focus buzzing from his body. He held out a hand.

"Give it here."

Axel hesitated, unsure of Davin's tone. He didn't sound curious. He sounded . . . angry.

"Give it!"

Hand trembling, Axel extended the envelope. Davin snatched it from his hand and turned away, pulling out the letter. His eyes flashed over the words, reading at a speed that Axel had never known his slightly simple friend was capable of. When he was done, Davin stood as still as stone, glaring at the page in front of him. He seemed to be frozen. Not by horror as Axel had been, but by something else. Anger? Embarrassment?

Fear?

Axel stretched out a tentative hand.

"Davin . . . ?"

Davin turned back to face the steward so sharply that Axel flinched, his hand whipping back to him. His friend had a dark look on his face that Axel had never seen before.

"Take this," he told Axel, shoving the letter back into the envelope and handing it to Axel. When the steward didn't move, Davin angrily pulled open his coat and shoved it into his pocket. "Take it! Take it, and don't tell anyone about this. No one must know about this letter, or about what you saw. No one. Do you understand? Not even your own family can know. All right?"

Axel nodded, shrinking in fear. This was not the Davin he knew.

"Davin . . . are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," Davin said, distracted, barely acknowledging Axel's existence. He bit worriedly at his thumb, an old habit from when he'd been a boy growing up on the streets alongside Axel before the two had gotten their first job on a brig. "I just, I just need to think, all right? I just need to come up with a plan."

Axel didn't know what to make of this. Ever since they'd been children, hiding in barrels for warmth, stealing apples and loaves of bread just so that they could eat, **Axel** had always been the one with a plan. He had been the one with the goals, with the ideas: how to turn the shipwreck by the fjord into a makeshift house where their mothers and sisters could stay, how to distract a merchant by taking his coins so that he wouldn't notice the other boy sneaking off with his

bread, how to collect enough coins to one day buy themselves an apprenticeship so that they could work at the castle and earn enough to move their families into proper homes. It had always been Axel. Davin had never been clever enough, fast enough, skilled enough to do more than what Axel suggested, always going along with his friend's ideas. But now... looking at his friend's retreating back, Axel couldn't help but wonder if he'd known his friend as little as he'd known the Queen.

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Axel didn't see Davin the next day. Or for the next week.

His friend had seemingly disappeared. After that day on the pier, when Axel had revealed all that he'd seen and learnt, Davin had vanished. Nobody had seen him, nor did they know where he'd been. He was just simply... gone.

Aside from Davin, Axel felt like he was losing his mind. Twice he'd called in sick, unable to face the Queen. Every time he saw her in her study, eyes focused as she signed and stamped document after document, all that he could do was wonder how many times she'd been lying on that very desk, screaming as the Princess rode her to climax. Every time she smiled at him and thanked him for his efforts, all that crossed his mind was the image of those lips wrapped around her sister's as they'd desperately moaned and whined and mewled into each other's mouths. Every time she stretched after a long day and blew out the lamp as she handed him the last of that day's paperwork before retiring for the night, Axel would go to bed haunted by the phantom screams and cries of pleasure as the Queen writhed against Princess Anna, delighting in their incestuous heresy.

Axel was lost. He couldn't sleep, he couldn't eat, he couldn't focus on anything. Everywhere he looked, he saw hallucinations, imagined acts of the sisters' desecration of nature defiling everything in the castle. He felt like he was losing his mind. With no one to talk to, Axel became withdrawn, unfocused, terrified. He lashed out at his co-workers, roared nonsensical orders at the serving boys and girls, whimpered and flinched at every touch, and oftentimes people reported seeing him wandering the castle halls late at night like some lost lunatic chasing the moonlight as he raved about sin and impiety and filth. He was losing his mind.

Then, one day, salvation. A breath of fresh air in all this madness. A note from Davin, left on Axel's pillow.

*Come to the alley three streets down from the Bloody Merry, the note said. Come at once. I have a plan. I know what we have to do.*

"*I know what we have to do.*" Axel repeated. For him, lost and confused, those seven words were like an oasis to a man dying of thirst in the desert. They spoke of direction. They spoke of cleansing. They spoke of redemption.

And so, Axel left the castle, ignoring the paperwork piling up on his desk, ignoring the documents awaiting him in the printing room, ignoring his duty to Queen and kingdom. He had sworn an oath, yes, but that was before he'd know his oath had been to, to a **witch**, a monster who would seduce her own sister. He needed out. He needed a plan. He needed **something**, and Davin had promised to give it to him.

Axel arrived at the agreed meeting place. The alley was deserted. Even the normal noises of Fisherman's Wharf, the hustle and bustle of the carts and horses moving through the streets, the loud cries of fishmongers and barked orders of sailors, and the drunken laughter from the pubs, all of it seemed to die into nothingness in this alley. Axel warily ventured deeper. Here, between the tall buildings blocking out the sun, it was dark despite the time. Axel could hardly see anything. His eyes squinted in the darkness as he looked for his friend.

"Davin?" he whispered. "Davin? Are you there?"

Axel's only answer was silence. The wind blew through the alley, sending papers stinking of the fish they'd wrapped fluttering through the air. But beneath that, beneath the flapping noise of paper that Axel heard so often in the printing rooms, he swore he could hear the *click-clack* of gears turning, the creak of groaning wood and tightening wires-

*Thwap!*

Axel felt something punch him in the chest. Confused, he looked around. Nothing was around him but darkness.

"Davin?" Axel asked. Or at least, he tried to. Instead, his mouth filled with blood and he spat a mouthful of bright red liquid onto the cobblestones. Bewildered, Axel looked down. Buried in his chest to the feathers was a quarrel. A crossbow bolt.

Axel tried to look back up, but his head was spinning. He collapsed sideways, falling against the cold stone of the wall. He leaned back against it, trying to breathe through the blood flooding his lungs.

"I'm very sorry about all this," a clear, cold voice said, cutting through the darkness. With great difficulty, Axel looked towards the source of the noise.

A man stepped out of the shadows, slight in stature. Although his hair was grey and his skin wrinkled, he stood tall and strong, his posture and voice more suited to a young man than the aging hermit he appeared to be. And despite his dusty, torn old brown robes, in his hands he cradled a state-of-the-art crossbow, freshly oiled and gleaming with a deadly light.

"You are a good man, Axel of Fisherman's Wharf," the man continued. He seemed perfectly at ease, as though they were chatting over tea and biscuits. "A hard worker. A diligent steward. It's just a shame that you weren't made for the royal court. Simple men like you who have clear, simple goals just don't have the shrewd minds to last long in the Queen's inner circle."

Axel tried to speak, but all he managed was to splatter blood down the front of his doublet. It was becoming difficult to breathe, to even focus. Indifferently, the man kept speaking.

"I suppose that you're not entirely to blame. Sometimes, Lady Luck just doesn't give us the right cards. For instance, you made the bad mistake of trusting Davin all your life, ever since the two of you were boys. I feel sorry for him, you know. Davin, I mean. He worked so hard, toiled for so long, and yet all of his hard work was undone by you and your damnable infatuation with the Queen. The master was not pleased when Davin was forced to report that the letter he had been entrusted with, the letter that he was responsible for, somehow ended up going from the Queen's hand to his to the Princess's to **yours**, of all people. And to think, he was about to be due for a promotion." The man sighed. "Such a pity."

Axel could barely understand what was happening. He mustered all the strength he could into a single word.

"*Why?*"

The man cocked his head, as if confused.

"Why? Well, isn't it obvious? You're a risk, Axel. The spymaster had been entrusted with keeping the Queen and the Princess's relationship secret. It was his solemn oath, and we were doing such a good job at it as well until you came bumbling along. The Vulture does not fail."

Axel's world was going dark. He struggled for every breath, wheezing around the shaft impaled in his lung. Despite this, he managed to hold on to spit out a question.

"*You... ?*"

The man laughed.

"Me? Of course not. I am not the Vulture, just one of his feathers, a member of his flock. As is Davin. As are so many others, some of whom you would never even suspect. When you are a spymaster, it doesn't pay to dirty your own hands. Instead, you ruffle your feathers and give each man his own task, his own duty. Speaking of which..."

The man stooped low and opened Axel's coat. He expertly flicked through the pockets before withdrawing the envelope. Holding it up, he gave Axel a small smile as he straightened.

"Ah, here we are. Surprising how much trouble a little paper can be, isn't it? Oh, and by the way, I'm sorry about this, but I'm going to have to dump you in the fjord now."

If Axel hadn't been dying, he would have spluttered indignantly. As it was, he did splutter, but only succeeded in spewing up more blood.

“Oh, don’t be like that. I’m a professional. I have to dispose of the evidence. The last time I didn’t, well, let’s just say that the Vulture wasn’t very happy. I’m sure that people will wonder where you’ve gone, but a few words here and there about how you’ve wanted to end your life for a while now and the rumour mill will take care of the rest. Your recent behaviour is certainly helpful in that regard, even if there’s a whole lot of bloody paperwork that isn’t being collected right now. Shame how this turned out, isn’t it? You were pretty good at your job, I mean.”

The man tucked the crossbow into a holster hidden among the folds of his robe. Bending low, he lifted Axel with a great heave onto his shoulder. The pain was so great that Axel almost blacked out. As it was, it was enough to make him vomit, his measly breakfast of half a banana spewing forward amidst a tide of red. He heard the man give a disgusted sigh, but even that noise was dim, as if he were already underwater and sinking ever deeper. His vision darkened to pitch black as his eyes failed him. Just before the end, he heard one last comment from the man, who had yet to stop prattling on, continuing to talk cheerfully to the near-dead steward.

*“... mean, really, in a way this serves you right.”*

Axel didn’t have enough time to appreciate the irony before he died.

**Fin**

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A/N: Holy crap this chapter was long. I really need a beta reader to cut down on my crap :l

Anyway, I hope that through your arduous slog through this wall of text you managed to find some enjoyment in this. I wanted to show that not everyone would be cool about Elsanna, and that certain measures would be taken to silence those who would ruin our favourite couple...

The next chapter won’t be any fluffier, I’m afraid. This chapter and the next are a look into the darker sides of the Arendelle court. But after that, things will be much brighter, I promise!

Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoyed. Don’t forget to leave a review!

Well then, catch ya later! :D

Rating: T

Genre: Drama, Crime, Suspense

Warnings: Incest, fem!Slash, Implied Mature Content

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A/N: So I'm back (for one day)! I'm not entirely sure I'll be able to get back to my regular daily update just yet, but I've got a lot of my work done so I decided to take a break and give you guys a little more Argos. I'm still working out ideas for Café Liégeois, so don't worry: I haven't completely abandoned that fic! Anyway, I hope you enjoy this chapter. It'll provide some much-needed insight into the royal court of Arendelle, even though there's very little Elsanna in this chapter. I'm sorry about that, by the way, but this chapter *will* be important later on! Also, it's a little rough around the edges, but that's because I was a bit rushed. I apologise for any tardiness detected in this chapter.

Also, some people have been complaining about my use of bold for emphasis, so I'm trying out italics instead. Hope that this helps.

This takes place during The Steward.

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### *The Vulture*

Arendelle, for all its magic, is like any other kingdom. It has its good neighbourhoods, and it has its bad neighbourhoods. There are the rich, prosperous areas, and then there are the murkier, darker districts, the places filled with shifty-eyed men, silently brutish thugs and illegal markets that provide for the more depraved tastes. These are the areas that are shunned by the good, common folk, the districts that are only reluctantly patrolled by the City Watch, the streets and squares inhabited where all residents keep some crude weapon within reach of their bed.

Naturally, these are the places where the Vulture meets her Birds.

The Sinking Ship was one of those inns that could only be described as a wretched hive of scum and villainy. It was not affiliated with any particular gang, but found itself frequented by many of the lower-tier thugs, the common muscle that could be hired for a few coppers, and thus it managed to defy its name and stay financially afloat. The beer was bad, the bread stale, the beds had more fleas than a mangy dog, and the less said about the meat the better, but for the street toughs who wanted little more than to get drunk and possibly find a whore who hopefully didn't carry the pox, the Sinking Ship would suffice. The service wasn't noteworthy (in all fairness, it wasn't even basic), but then again patrons rarely paid in anything better than a chipped copper, or, on a good day, a scratched and blood-stained bronze.

Even the Sinking Ship had standards, though, so today the Vulture had chosen her disguise with care. Anything too clean or too respectable would draw far too much attention, but anything too filthy or too dirty would likely get her mistaken for a beggar and then she'd find herself kicked out of their fine establishment.

And so, this was why on that particular day a knight in rusted armour with a tattered cape and an iron, face-concealing helm strolled into the Sinking Ship. A



few of the regulars glanced his way, but none paid attention for too long. They had seen plenty of his kind, landless knights who wandered from battle to battle, little better than a common mercenary. Though some of these hedge knights had ascended their humble beginnings to become great legends or feared warriors, the one who just entered was a far cry from the myths of his brethren. In all honesty, he wasn't even impressive. His figure was slight, his height was short, and what little bulk he had seemed to come from his armour. The only thing that seemed slightly dangerous was the longsword hanging from his belt, which was polished steel, the only clean thing on his person. Silently, ignoring the dark look the bartender gave him, the knight moved to sit at a table in the corner of the inn, deep in shadows and far from everyone else. Mail rustling, the knight sat down heavily and, declining to take off his helm, instead started playing with an old iron coin, flipping it through his fingers.

Beneath the heavy armour, thick leather tunic and the threadbare cloak, Kaya felt a drop of sweat start to bead on her brow. The disguise was effective, she reflected, but it was also incredibly cumbersome. The armour, taken from a dead guardsman who had accepted a few bribes too many, had been a few sizes too big for her, forcing her to stuff it with some rags so that it didn't hang unnaturally off her body. Her breasts, petite as they were, had also caused problems with the breastplate, which had been fitted to the guard's muscle-less chest, meaning that she had had to strap them tightly to ensure she didn't scrape her mammaries all over the inside of the rusty metal. The boots had been specially modified to have some extra unnoticeable heel, adding an inch or two to her height, but she was a small woman, so that made her attempted average-height knight be more on the midget side of the scale. The iron helm was perfect for concealing her face, but it was incredibly stuffy, even more so than usual thanks to her heavy breathing. Kaya wasn't fond of exertion and exercise at the best of times, but she had been forced to walk all the way from her hideout six streets away in this get-up, and the weight of the steel on her hip hardly helped matters. Worst of all, Kaya hadn't impersonated a man in so long that her voice was lacking experience, meaning that if anyone talked to her and she had to respond, her fearsome knight would sound at best like a young teenaged squire parading around in his master's armour.

This was what she hated most about fieldwork, Kaya concluded. It wasn't the blood, it wasn't the poisons, it wasn't the surveillance, it wasn't even the danger sense constantly prickling at the back of her neck: it was the disguises. Kaya was a flawless actress to be sure, and no one had in over twenty years ever doubted her false position as handmaiden to the Queen, but it was the *other* disguises that caused problems. They were risky and dangerous, and it always felt like a waste when she'd slave away for hours on a disguise that could at best be used once or twice again, but her work was too important to risk it on a half-assed performance just because she was uncomfortable. Thus, she had adopted the habit of disguising herself whenever she left the castle. Even though it was a pain, she was spymaster; certain precautions had to be taken.

Still, even after nine years of working as the Vulture, Kaya still couldn't help but wonder if she'd made a mistake when she'd decided to *replace* Orn after she'd determined he was no longer fit to act as Vulture. At the time, the decision had seemed obvious; a man who couldn't keep one Bird in its cage wasn't fit to be spymaster. More importantly, ever since she and the other Birds had found out about Torsten's death and, more importantly, what he'd stolen in his attempted escape, they had become aware of the existence of the other Birds; something that no Vulture should ever allow to happen.

If a Bird was ever to learn that he was not, in fact, the sole heir to the title of Vulture, it was only time before he concluded that the best decision would be to remove his competitors and then *take* the title of Vulture for himself, before new Birds could be chosen. Kaya had known that; they'd all known that. It had only been a matter of who would win. It had been a dangerous game, trying to find out who the other Birds were without Orn learning of their investigations and their plot to ultimately overthrow him. Luckily, Kaya had managed to deduce the identities of her competitors first, and so she had quietly gone about eliminating each of them. Though she had been indifferent to the deaths of most, it had secretly given her great pleasure and relief to be able to see Rasmus choking on the floor in front of her, clawing at his throat as the poison burned its way through his body. If she ever began to doubt her takeover, Kaya would conjure up that image in her mind and reassure herself that, no matter how inadequate she felt as Vulture, she was at least doing better than Rasmus, the reckless, unstable, violent fool, ever could have.

Speaking of which. . . Kaya spotted a man step away from the bar, a beer in hand. He was a big brute, an enormous slab of muscle and aggression. Anyone who saw him could immediately identify him as a sailor, and most likely a rough one: the type of sailor who would brawl in the fighting pits of every port his ship laid anchor in. His bandana was navy blue and greasy, and his silvery hair was tied back into a messy ponytail. He had an anchor tattooed into one bulging bicep, and Kaya could glimpse yellowed and blackened teeth as he took a swig of ale. As he turned away from the bar, she could see a frayed cloth covering his left eye, though it could not completely cover the ruined flesh around the socket that spoke of burns and a hot poker.

As the sailor made his way drunkenly to the back of the inn, Kaya couldn't help but appreciate her apprentice's work. The Albatross may be impulsive, bad-tempered, and ultimately unfit to ever become Vulture, but his disguises were perfect and convincing. Even Kaya, who had taught him how to apply make-up in just the right way to give the illusion of terrible burns, was impressed by how real the scars around the eyepatch seemed. And if his bulk stopped him from ever being able to spy on others in person, it at least allowed him access to gangs with men who would spy for him.

Soren wedged his great body into a chair at the table next to Kaya's. His back was facing hers as he took a large swig of ale, neither facing the other or even acknowledging that the other even existed. Kaya didn't stop flipping her coin.

Even though the Albatross had noticed, it didn't do to give away the fact that it was a sign by instantly putting it away the moment he sat down near her.

The big man slammed his tankard down onto the table, grumbling something about a lazy crew and a stingy captain. However, while he angrily recounted the day's events to his beer, his other hand, the one hidden from view by his body, reached behind him to lightly fall on Kaya's left thigh. Invisible to any onlookers and not stopping in his rant, his calloused finger lightly began to tap on Kaya's thigh, rapping and sliding and pausing in the specific code she'd taught him when he'd still been a little boy growing up in the tough neighbourhoods of Fisherman's Wharf.

*"Is it you?"* his finger asked.

Kaya didn't react at all. At least, not overtly. The knight in rusted armour stopped flipping the coin, and instead began tapping it on the table.

*"Yes"* the coin replied in the sharp rap of metal against wood.

Soren didn't stop talking as he continued to moan about the long week at sea he'd just had, all while his large, rough fingers drummed out his message onto her leg. She remembered how hard it had been for him, to learn how to secretly pass on messages whilst giving the appearance of doing something else. Still, he had been a determined boy, and she had been in need of Feathers, and her musings on whether or not she should just give up and replace him with someone better qualified had managed to motivate him enough to pull through via sheer determination. When she had taken over as Vulture, she had been sure to include Soren as one of her Birds. The man could not and never would become the Vulture in turn, but she appreciated the work he could do.

*"I got a report from Davin."* His fingers drummed.

*"What is it?"* The coin asked.

*"Axel the steward knows about the Queen and the Princess."* Soren replied, his fingers flashing in a quick staccato blur to get the sentence out fast enough.

The coin stilled on the table for but a second as Kaya contemplated this new development. But only for a second.

*"That means little and less. Do not waste my time. The boy has no proof."*

*"Davin says he does."* The Albatross replied. *"Axel has the letter Davin delivered to the Princess, complete with the royal seal."*

And this time, the coin did stop moving. Within the confines of her armour, Kaya found herself grinding her teeth. She stopped immediately, inwardly scolding herself for allowing her emotions to get the better of her. Normally she was better controlled than this.

But then again, normally, she wasn't so frustrated by a lapse in judgement and uncharacteristic stupidity. Even when her Feathers or even her *Birds* failed her,

Kaya managed to remain calm and rational, pushing away the emotions to keep a clear head. But that was because her assistants had failed in being unable to complete her instructions, not because they had completely disregarded her cautionary advice.

The Queen and the Princess had tried hard to keep their love secret from everyone in the early days. Several months after the disastrous coronation, their relationship had gone from sisterly to romantic, and, despite the duo's best efforts, it was only several months and roughly two weeks before Kaya had caught wind of their trysts.

She had requested an audience with the Queen in private. It would have been only the fourth time she'd had direct interaction with Her Majesty. Even when the Royal Council met, Kaya sent her most public Bird in her place, the Eagle, who almost everyone else believed to be the true Vulture. Only the Feathers, the Birds, and the Queen knew the real truth. And Kaya intended to keep it that way.

Which was, truth be told, part of the reason she had insisted that the Queen give up her foolish fancies. While it would be true that if their relationship was exposed, there would be a major debacle that would quite possibly force both Queen Elsa and Princess Anna into exile, Kaya was more concerned with the fact that it could very well be possible that her role would be uncovered as well. As spymaster, it would be her duty to conceal the incestuous romance happening within the castle, and should anyone discover the truth and leak it to the public, there was little doubt in Kaya's mind that the resulting catastrophe would cause her entire web of intelligence to crumble. If that were to ever happen, then it would very well be possible that her Birds could learn each other's existence, and that revelation would quickly lead to rebellion, just as she herself had rebelled. Kaya remained confident that she had what it took to defeat her Birds, if it came down to it, but after that her identity would be exposed, her deceit obliterated. And a public spymaster was soon to be a dead one.

It was for all these reasons that Kaya had demanded that Queen Elsa be reasonable and break off her unbecoming relationship with the Princess. Kaya quite honestly didn't care about the incestuous nature of their romance (royals had been fucking their relatives throughout history), but the risk to the kingdom and, more importantly, the risk to herself was too great for her to stand by and watch the two practically flaunt their love all over the castle.

To Kaya's despair, Queen Elsa, who was normally so wise, so reasonable, so *dutiful*, had done what all monarchs do when they hear something not their liking: she had ignored her spymaster's advice, and then wielded her royal authority with about as much subtlety as a warhammer to force Kaya, as the Queen's loyal servant, to instead help Her Majesty hide her secrets. It had been at that moment that Kaya had sincerely considered the option of simply arranging an *accident* for the Queen; a great tragedy, to be sure, and a shame as well since Kaya actually liked Elsa, having watched the girl as she grew up, but her own

safety came first. She had only ruled out the possibility since, given Her Grace's powers, Kaya wasn't entirely sure if any assassin or even any poison would succeed in removing the Queen.

Taking Princess Anna out of the equation was out of the question, of course. The younger girl had no idea that Ivar was not the Vulture, merely a Bird, and any action taken against her would only alert her elder and far more powerful sister to Kaya's treachery. Thus, forced into a corner, Kaya had no choice but to agree to help keep the sisters' secret just that: a secret.

Apparently, though, despite the vast resources she'd diverted into and spent on that particular venture (including being forced to pluck a few of her own Feathers when they threatened to refuse her orders), she had now been presented with this. Fuming inside her helm, Kaya rolled the coin angrily over the table's surface, glaring at each grain embedded in the wood.

Soren waited patiently. He had stopped his ramblings to take a swig of ale. There was little doubt he'd get drunk enough to start spilling secrets. If Soren had learnt his lessons well (as Kaya was sure he had), he would have already subtly dropped a small pill in, a particular compound that Kaya herself had invented which would dilute the alcohol enough that it would require at least seven litres of beer to be consumed before the drinker would even begin to feel tipsy.

Finally, Kaya tapped the coin into the wood once more, a plan already forming within her brilliant mind.

*"Very well. Is that all?"*

*"Nothing else to report."*

*"Good. Demote Davin for his failure. Do not kill him. This is our fault as much as his. But punish him for this. Also, the ambassadors will be arriving in three weeks for the tourney, not two. Storms have delayed them."*

*"All right. I'll tell my men to keep working at the market for a while longer. But some of our surveillance equipment might get damaged if it's hidden in those fish barrels if we have to wait that long."*

*"That's your responsibility. I just want results. Deal with it as I would. Or are you unable to plan like a Vulture?"*

Kaya could feel Soren's irritation at that, even if there was no visual cue. She had trained him since he had been a child, however, and so she, even if no one else could, was able to tell when his fuse had been lit.

To her satisfaction, Soren managed to quickly blow out his anger before it became difficult to control. Maybe there was hope for the Albatross yet.

*"No need to worry. I'll handle it. Any more instructions?"*

*“No. That’s everything. Report to me in one week’s time with any updates on the situation with the Twofinger gang. They’ve been too quiet, and it’s bothering me.”*

*“Done.”*

And thus, their meeting was over. No greetings, no farewells. They had little time to waste on trivial niceties. There was work to be done.

Kaya stood first, tucking her coin into a pouch on her belt. She roughly pushed her way through the drunken throng, rusty armour and mail clanking and scratching as she left the Sinking Ship. Soren, as she had taught him, did not react to her departure, not even checking to see if she’d left. He would wait a further forty minutes if he did as she’d taught him. If he was truly worthy of being a Vulture, though, he would have realised by now that twenty minutes would suffice, and thus give him more time for his other duties.

Kaya hoped that Soren had learnt that (as well as several other realities and tricks) by now. Not because she believed he would ever truly become Vulture, but because she was rather fond of the man the little street urchin had grown to become, and when (not if) the Birds learnt of each other’s existence and began to kill each other off before coming after Kaya, the spymaster hoped that Soren would at least get to die an honourable death.

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Queen Elsa was intelligent, studious, respectful, respected, reasonable, considerate, practical, and an altogether wise queen. She was also, Kaya reflected, a young woman who had a young woman’s needs.

She had been supposed to meet the spymaster after her little tryst with the Princess in the stables, but apparently the two lovebirds had decided that a matter of national urgency could wait a while. They were truly insatiable.

Kaya, of course, didn’t just sit in her office twiddling her thumbs while she waited for the Queen. She had other duties to take care of. She flipped through copies of the royal treasurer’s ledgers, watching for any unusual payments made by any noble. As the old man used to say, even if your enemies hid the physical evidence, there was always a paper trail to follow. Thieves, frauds and hitmen didn’t work for free, after all, and when their payday finally came, the Vulture would be there to swoop down on her prey.

The spymaster was halfway through the accounts of Lord Eero when the Queen finally arrived. A section of the wooden panelling swung open on well-oiled hinges, revealing Her Majesty herself. Although Elsa’s hair and make-up had been expertly redone, Kaya took note of the Queen’s flushed cheeks as well as a suspiciously fresh mark on her neck.

“Your Grace,” Kaya said. Although she considered greetings a waste, certain forms were to be observed, especially with royalty.

“Lady Kaya,” the Queen said in response. She noticed the Vulture’s raised eyebrow and pointed look and tugged the collar of her dress higher, covering the lovebite. “I apologise for my tardiness. I was... preoccupied.”

“Is that what they’re calling it these days?” Kaya quipped. She closed the ledger, memorising which page she had been on. “I should warn you Your Highness, your indiscretion and brazenness in regards to your relationship with the Princess is causing an already risky situation to teeter on the brink of disaster. While I’ve never been supportive of this particular fancy, I at least respected your decisions. But now that you’re practically flaunting your obvious preference for the Princess, as your advisor and spymaster I must inform you that this behaviour-”

“I didn’t come here to listen to the same lecture for the umpteenth time, Lady Kaya,” Queen Elsa interrupted. Although her expression was still smooth and calm, her tone had an air of finality to it. “Both of our time is limited. The longer I’m here, the greater the risk of your own discovery. So let’s finish this as quickly as possible. What news do you have?”

“Well, in that respect, I have lots of news that I believe is worth Your Majesty’s attention,” Kaya said, expression indecipherable. She brushed aside her irritation at being ignored. It was part of the job. “Should I start with the least or most important?”

“Least,” the Queen said, taking a seat opposite the Vulture. “I find that it’s easier to deal with problems if I’m eased into whatever catastrophe is happening this week.”

“Very well, then,” Kaya shuffled her sheets. It was all for show, of course, since she’d already memorised everything on the pages, but she’d long since discovered that it never paid to reveal the full extent of one’s abilities.

“In regards to the tourney, the ambassadors have been delayed. Their arrival will be in three weeks, not a fortnight. Although the given reason is storms and general bad weather, I’m currently investigating to ensure that it isn’t to buy time for some plot. The likelihood of that is low, but it always pays to be cautious.”

“Do you truly believe there to be a plot against me?”

“Your Majesty, there are always plots against the throne. It’s not my job to confirm conspiracies; it’s my job to figure out the details and who the schemer is this time.”

“If you say so. Go on.”

“The Duke of Weselton has mostly given up on his vendetta against Arendelle, though the loss of finances is affecting their kingdom enough that King Hector is considering to send an envoy to negotiate a renewed partnership, though his Commander is insisting that he send an assassin instead. Although thus far King Hector seems to be unconvinced by that option, I have taken the precaution of

sending a few of my Feathers to spice up the Commander's afternoon wine with a little something, just in case."

"I know nothing of this, nor do I believe I particularly want to," the Queen said flatly. Her eyes had taken on that dead look again, the one she wore when her personal morals clashed with her royal duties. "Anything on the situation in the Southern Isles? How are they responding to my proposal?"

"The Queen was most relieved to hear that you are willing to reconcile, my Feathers tell me, though the King himself was far more cautious. He has reached that stage of life wherein everything seems a trap to him; age brings out the paranoia in people, and he is most suspicious of your invitation to Prince Dane. As with most fathers, he is reluctant to risk his firstborn son's safety, a reluctance exacerbated by his advisors' whispers that Arendelle is still hostile."

"Well, Arendelle *is* hostile, but the fact remains that, after cutting of ties with Weselton, we need to build what relations remain to us. I promised Prince Dane safe conduct during his stay here, as well as permitting him to bring a thousand companions, guards and servants, even though I've got no idea where we'll fit all of them. It seemed to be a more-than-reasonable offer."

"My reports tell me that, no matter what his father's wishes are, Prince Dane *will* come. The man loves a good tourney where he can display his skills. There's also the fact that, even now, the Southern Isles are under suspicion due to Prince Hans's actions. To decline your obvious peace offer would do more than earn the wrath of Arendelle; it would be a massive political faux pas on their part that would endanger their other alliances."

"Which would be truly tragic, of course," the Queen commented dryly. Even with all her training, she could not entirely disguise her dislike of the Southern Isles and the measures she'd been forced to take to keep them as allies, even tentative ones. "How likely do you think it is that Prince Dane will use this as an opportunity to lower my guard?"

Kaya thought for a second.

"I'd say that there is a 10% chance that the Prince's acceptance will be a ploy," she concluded. "There is simply too much at stake for the Southern Isles to risk another attempt on your life. They are afraid of you, this is true, but they are more afraid of what their allies will think."

"10% is still a large number," the Queen argued. She bit her lower lip as she thought. "For as long as the Prince stays in Arendelle, I want you to keep a man on him at all times. I want to know everything he's doing, everyone he's meeting, and I want to be able to arrest him instantly if it comes to it. I will *not* have another Hans running around in my kingdom."

"*Because of Princess Anna?*" Kaya thought, but she did not voice her opinions. She had already tried to express her concerns over the Queen's excessive fondness for the girl and been chastised for it. The Vulture did not have its feathers ruffled twice in so many minutes.



"If you say so," she said instead. "If you order it, then I will see it done."

Kaya looked at the last report still in her hand. *The* report. The big one, the one that mattered. She wondered how she would let the Queen know. Should she be gentle? Harsh? Throw in an "I told you so"? That would be *immensely* satisfying, if petulant.

"Is that all? Because I promised Anna that I'd be back soon."

That decided it for her.

Kaya tore the report neatly in half several times, before tossing the shreds into the waste basket under her table. At the end of the day, all contents inside would be incinerated.

"About that," Kaya said. She looked the Queen straight in the eye, black eyes meeting startling blue. "Your Highness, there is a reason that I am always insisting that you be careful, and that you should restrain yourself. Your relationship with the Princess is, to be blunt, an unnecessarily stupid risk. You are putting so much on the line just so that you can indulge in this little fancy. If you are so in need of love and attention and a warm bed, I can make secret, untraceable, and above all *safe* arrangements. I wish that you could see that, as much as it may please you to relish in this *fetish* of yours, this whole affair is a risk, one that could be easily avoided if you would accept the fact that your lover does *not* have to be Princess Anna."

At her words, the Queen's eyes went dead. It was not a stunned, blank expression, the kind that follows an unpleasantly unexpected surprise. It was, in all honesty, the nastiest look that Kaya had ever seen appear on Queen Elsa's beautiful face. The temperature dropped several degrees as frost crept up the walls.

"Lady Kaya," the Queen said in a deadly calm, coldly measured voice. Her blue eyes, normally similar to the clear sky on a beautiful day, now seemed like chips of ice swirling in a frozen tundra of a wasteland. "I have tolerated more, for lack of a better word, *insolence* from you than I have from any other person regarding my personal life. And I have tolerated it because you are a competent Vulture, and because I believed that you would come to understand my position on this matter. I have always appreciated your advice and I respect your experience in these matters.

"However," and now the frost was beginning to spread across the ceiling, crackling as it froze its way over the secret office, "if you ever *dare* to imply that my love for Anna is driven by some *perverse* lust, or that it is some fleeting fancy and that I will soon tire of her and dispose of her like an old boot that I have outgrown..." The Queen took a deep breath, closed her eyes. When she opened them, her eyes bored into Kaya's. "Then I *will* be forced to punish you severely. I will not kill you or harm you in any way, because that is against what I believe in and because you have done so much for me that death would be an unjust reward, but I will make it abundantly clear to your Birds that their mentor is not all that she appears to be, and that they may not be as unique as they think."

Kaya's insides turned cold. She had not been unduly worried by Queen Elsa's threats, because she knew the Queen far too well to believe that any real harm would come to her person. This, though... This was different. This was dangerous. This, Kaya realised, may force the Vulture's hand into committing regicide.

No, no, that was too risky. There were too many variables with that option. Too many chances of everything going to hell. Kaya would try to reason instead. At least, for now.

Keeping her voice level, the spymaster gave her employer a cool gaze.

"Tell me, Your Grace, do you know what a vulture is?"

The Queen's eyebrow quirked upwards. Her face betrayed no emotion.

"I can't say that I do, outside of the fact that it is an ugly bird which scavenges to survive."

Kaya ignored the thinly-veiled insult. She'd heard far too many to be bothered by petty taunting.

"A vulture is a bird that was once brought to Arendelle as a gift by a man from a land far away, many centuries ago, when the kingdom was still young. The King of Arendelle at the time had no spies, nor informants, nor assassins. His throne had been won by diplomacy, an arranged marriage, and he kept that idealistic belief with him when he came to rule. Of course, idealism is as deadly as any poison in the realms of politics, and the King found himself being manipulated by everyone from his allied Kings to his own son and heir. Then, one day, this man from the faraway land came. Bearing his bird, the man approached the King, and told him that the vulture was a gift, and all that the man asked for in return was to be admitted into the King's servants. Fascinated by the vulture as people often are by foreign creatures, the King accepted, not once suspecting that this strange man was in the employ of his rival, a spy and assassin who was tasked with a single mission: to open the King of Arendelle's throat with a knife. What this rival king failed to realise was that even those who have been paid have not necessarily been bought. The spy came to enjoy Arendelle and its King, who was a good-hearted, loving man who, whilst an abysmal failure of a politician, was an affable fellow and a good friend. More importantly, the spy realised that what he had was an *opportunity*, a chance to rise to power. In his own land, there was little chance of his ascension to spymaster. He was little more than a mercenary, a hired knife, and such types rarely climb high in the social ranks. But in Arendelle, young as it was, there was potential for expansion, for benefit, and for profit. And so, one day the spy decided that he would much rather be spymaster of Arendelle than a disposable blade, and he sent a letter to his employer that was coated with a poison which would cause agonising death upon contact with human skin, whilst at the same time he approached the King of Arendelle with another proposition: give him the power, the men, and the finances, and the man would create a network of information

for the King. No longer would he be the butt of every joke in the taverns, no longer would he be ignorant, no longer would he be so easily manipulated, no longer would he have to fear his own son. The spy gave the King a proposition that would make them both great men, and the King, desperate for a way to hold on to his failing power, agreed. And thus, the spy became spymaster, and he named his position after the ugly scavenger that had bought his position."

"Is there a point to this tale, or are you creating an elaborate allegory that mocks my supposed idealistic ignorance?" the Queen asked in a sarcastically polite tone.

Kaya gave her a wry smile.

"The point, my Queen? The point is that the Vulture, as the man came to be known, not only outlived the King, he outlived the King's heir as well. By the time he had finally died, he had seen four different monarchs sit the throne of Arendelle, all of whom died a more painful death than the last. Whilst the mighty lions fought and roared over their proud rock, the vulture circled overhead, swooping down and snatching whatever morsel the lions, blinded by their pride, ignored. In this manner, the vulture lived for many years off the crumbs that others ignored, for crumbs can be pieced together into an entire loaf. Meanwhile, the lions all mauled each other to death, unable to see beyond their own, single-minded goals. Some wanted the rock, some wanted the plains, and some just wanted the best mates in the pride, but all *died*."

"And how did the vulture die, I wonder?" Queen Elsa asked, hard and cold as the ice she created.

"The same way that all who are murdered die, Your Majesty. The vulture drew too much attention. For while it could live off the scraps of the lions, who neither knew nor cared that the same bird who had served their predecessors still flew over their heads, those who live in the skies can see that which eludes those who live on the ground. A falcon flew by the rock one day and, upon seeing the vulture, wondered to itself how it was that such an ugly bird could fly so high and mighty above the kings of the plains. No such creature should be hold that right, the falcon decided, and it soared through the skies and killed the vulture, which was so focused on the lions that it did not see the other bird. But after it killed the vulture, the falcon saw that the view from the skies over the rock was superior to any view it had ever seen. 'Why, from here I can see every mouse for miles around!' the falcon cried. 'I would never have to toil to hunt again!' And so, that is how the falcon found itself soaring above the lions, reluctant to leave, and thus became much like the vulture it had replaced."

"If I were you, I'd avoid falcons for a while, then." Queen Elsa quipped, her eyebrow still arched sceptically.

Kaya clasped her hands together, the picture of vulnerable insecurity.

"What I am trying to tell you, my Queen, is that, soaring as high as I do, I can evade scrutiny. From my perch, I can see all the vermin that infest your kingdom,

whilst remaining out of sight. I can keep you informed of all that transpires outside of your gaze. But the only things that can harm me are those with whom I share the most attributes, the ones who I have taught to fly like I do. Throughout history, almost every Vulture died to the hands of one of its Birds. Because Birds are jealous creatures. They all want to fly the highest, soar the furthest, and to know that there are challengers is to prompt it to murder any which would threaten its goal. Including the Vulture which gave it its wings."

"I seem to recall that you have attained this position in much the same manner." Queen Elsa said dryly.

Kaya chuckled at that.

"Why, I did. When Torsten tried to flee Arendelle and was killed as a result, all the Birds learned of each other's existence, and at that moment Orn was as good as dead. A Vulture cannot fight off the other Birds; it is a scavenger, which protects itself with concealment and deceit. I am in much the same position. Should my Birds learn of the existence of their colleagues, they will turn on each other and then on me. That is the greatest protection and weakness I have, Your Grace. If only seven people, my Birds and you yourself, know that I am Vulture, my successor need only convince or eliminate those seven people in order to fully supplant me. If that should ever happen, regardless if I live or die, then my secrets will be exposed. Including, as it should happen, my knowledge of *your* secrets, my Queen."

The Queen's expression darkened, but outside of that there was no hint that she had understood the implicit threat. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She lifted her gaze to match Kaya's.

"Your predecessor met his end when his Birds couldn't be controlled. Can you claim that you will not suffer the same fate?"

Kaya waved her hand dismissively.

"Orn died because he chose his Birds recklessly, allowing emotion to cloud his judgement. Torsten tried to flee Arendelle over some golden coin he'd stolen from the treasury, an item of considerable value to the King. My own Birds will not fall victim to such stupid greed."

"Are you certain? I will not have my secrets endangered because of your failings."

Kaya grimaced at that.

"Actually, my Queen, about that..."

Queen Elsa's eyes were like icy flints.

"Yes?"

Kaya sighed. She handed Davin's report to the Queen.

"There is a reason I urge you to take caution in this matter with the Princess, Your Highness. Because of your indiscretion, my job escalates from difficult to nigh impossible."

The Queen read in silence. Though her face remained impassive, Kaya noticed the way the paper crinkled as Queen Elsa's grip tightened.

"Who is this boy?"

"Axel is one of your stewards, Your Grace. He is not particularly influential, meaning that this situation is not an unsalvageable disaster, but if he should tell anyone..."

"What actions have you taken to prevent this information from spreading?"

"As of yet? Nothing."

Queen Elsa's eyes snapped up from the page in disbelief.

"Noth- *What?!* What am I paying you for, Lady Kaya? This is a serious matter that should have been dealt with as soon as you received this report!"

Kaya bridged her fingers in front of her, calm in the face of the other woman's fury.

"You had made it clear that I was to bring all matters regarding your relationship with the Princess straight to you and not take any action until I have received your permission."

"You know full well I told you that only because I wanted you to stop have your spies creepily staring at my sister in the bathtub. Not for situations like this!" The Queen's expression calmed from a suppressed panic to tranquil fury as a thought struck her. Her eyes, previously wide with disbelief and frustration, narrowed as she glared accusingly at Kaya. "This is a test, isn't it? You wanted to see how I would react, how devoted I was to keeping my secrets safe. You wanted to see how strong I could be, didn't you?"

Well, she was no fool. Kaya considered denying it, but there was no point in lying.

"Yes." The spymaster answered simply. "This is a test. I wanted to know how far you were willing to go to protect that which you held dearest to your heart."

"Because no Vulture wants a weak Lioness to feed it." The Queen murmured. She bit her lip in thought. Kaya waited patiently. Silence stretched between them as the Queen ran through her options.

"How likely is it that the boy can be trusted to not speak of what he saw?"

"0%. He already told his best friend. It's only through sheer luck that the boy was a Feather. Had he been anyone else, then the current situation would not be dangerous; it would be catastrophic."

"This other boy, your Feather: can he be trusted?"

"Davin has no clue that the man he reports to is not the Vulture but one of my Birds, so I have never actually met him. However, from what I have learned of

him, he is utterly loyal to the cause. The fact that he reported this information straight away is proof enough, in my opinion.”

“Can we somehow buy the steward’s silence? Bribe him, or send him away?”

“We could, but it would not guarantee anything. As the first Vulture proved, paying for a man’s services does not necessarily buy his loyalty, and distance will only make the tongue even looser. There is only one way to deal with a leak like this, Your Grace, and I think you know what it is.”

“I will not order it in my own voice with my own words. It is not who I am to command another man’s execution.”

"In that case, my Queen, you had best share your plans on how to contain any uprising in our future, for there *will* be backlash if anyone finds out about your-"

"I *know* that, Lady Kaya!" The Queen snapped. She stood abruptly, the chair skidding backwards. "I am not a fool, no matter what you think. I *know* that the love I hold for Anna is dangerous, and I *know* that the throne and the crown is at risk. But in my heart, in the deepest corners of my soul, I have measured the whole of Arendelle against Anna, and I find myself choosing my sister every time."

The impassioned outburst rang in the stunned silence that followed. Kaya stared at the Queen, who was breathing heavily, shaken by the violence of her emotions. She turned sharply and made for the door that led to the secret passages, no doubt intending to return to the Princess’s loving embrace that awaited her in her chambers.

“Your Grace,” the Vulture called out to her employer. “The boy. You haven’t told me what you want me to do.”

The Queen stopped at the door. She did not turn around, but Kaya could hear the anger, the fear, the self-loathing, and the desperation in her voice.

"I will not say it, Lady Kaya. I will *not*. But I know that you know what my orders are."

“You trust me enough to give me such vague instructions?”

At this, Queen Elsa laughed. It was a loud, bitter laugh, so unlike the politely graceful chuckles the ruler of Arendelle normally limited herself to.

“Oh, Lady Kaya. You are a loyal servant, a brilliant woman, a competent spymaster, and an old ally. I have known you since I was so very young. You have known every secret that I have ever had, and I still remember the times when you would held me in your arms when I was so scared of what my powers could do. You were my handmaiden before my Vulture, and my friend before my handmaiden. You could bring enough evidence against me to execute me three times over, and you have done such an incredible work as spymaster of Arendelle that I cannot help but admire you. There are few people who know me as well as you do, and even fewer people on whom I rely so heavily.”

Queen Elsa then did turn, and though she was smiling slightly, it was a sad smile, and her eyes were bitter and hard.

“But I would be a fool to trust you.”

The Queen turned back to the wall and pushed open the wooden panelling, the secret door swinging open on its hidden hinges.

"The tourney is in three weeks, Lady Kaya. I want this boy dealt with within the week. Those are my orders. *Deal* with this. I want to hear from you in one week's time for the next report."

The door closed behind Queen Elsa as she left, smoothly sliding shut, leaving the Vulture to her work.

**Fin**

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A/N: Whew! Once again, this turned out way longer than I'd expected, and there's practically no romance in it to boot. I hope that this wasn't too boring, but it *is* very important now that we're actually getting some plot! The next one will be *much* fluffier, and will give us a break from all this gloom! Also, please forgive OOC Elsa: she's really stressed right now! (Lame excuse is lame)

Anyways, hope you managed to glean some enjoyment from this one! Please leave a review!

Happy New Year! :D

Rating: K+

Genre: Family, Friendship, Humour

Warnings: None

Disclaimer: This is a work of fiction. All names mentioned do not represent the true persons. All brand names do not belong to the author. No copyright laws or personal privacy laws are intended to be infringed.

A/N: This is a chapter I've been wanting to do for a *long* time. It has one of my favourite themes to explore: Elsa and Anna's childhood, and how they became who they are today. Also, it's only fair to admit that this is *heavily* based on the cut songs from the movie "We Know Better" and "More Than Just the Spare", as well as the *outstanding* fic "Bribery, Force, and Other Nefarious Tactics" by the wonderful 'yumi michiyo'!

As a side note, I'd love to thank all of you amazing Elsanna and Frozen fans who have been following this fic. We're only on Chapter 5 (which is, if everything goes to plan, only a third of the way in), and we're sitting at nearly 100 reviews, 160+ favs, and almost 260 follows, as well as 13k+ views. I punched those

numbers into my calculator and I got a smiley face :D So thank you so much for the support, you ridiculously awesome people!

This takes place before Frozen.

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### *The Nursemaid – Part I*

The baby just never stopped crying.

Mia wiped a cloth across her brow, clearing the sweat that had started beading. The newest member of the royal family was only a few weeks old, but she was already proving to be a far greater challenge than Princess Elsa had ever been. Any concerns about her health had quickly been dismissed as well, as the baby princess proved that she was far more robust than a new-born had any right to be, and it was not uncommon for everyone in the castle to be abruptly woken from their slumber by the baby's powerful lungs. These days, anyone who stayed in the castle for more than a few days was quickly identifiable by the dark circles and heavy bags forming around their eyes from a lack of sleep. If this continued, Mia wasn't sure how much more she could take. She liked her job, make no mistake, and the King and Queen were fair employers, and Mia *adored* Princess Elsa, but loyalty and affection could only take her so far.

“WWWaaaaahhhhh!”

Oh gods, there it was again. The sound that had started to haunt Mia's dreams as of late, the ear-shattering cry that would pierce through every wall and worm its way into every crevice of the castle. Wearily, Mia gathered up her skirts and began to make her way to the nursery, and tried to get her muddled senses together as she pondered on what tactic she should try this time to placate the baby. Unlike Princess Elsa, who had been content to stay wrapped up in her blankets and simply stare curiously at all the people gathered around her cot, Princess Anna was simply impossible to please and soothe once she was upset. Her moods were spontaneous and her fancies were ever-changing; a doll that would calm her for three straight days could just as easily be thrown with surprising force into the mobile hanging above the crib on the fourth. Nothing, not even suckling at her mother's breast, seemed to be a permanent solution for quelling Princess Anna's tempers.

Mia was considering whether or not the Princess would benefit from a new rattle (preferably one that could withstand an impromptu flight from the nursery window this time) when she noticed the door to the nursery was ajar. Strange. Normally, anyone who was visiting the Princess would take care to close the door to prevent a chill from entering the baby's warm and cosy domain.

And, even though nobody actually said it, the door was always closed in a futile attempt to muffle Princess Anna's cries.



Mia walked over to the door and pushed it open, wondering who on earth would visit the Princess while she was having one of her tantrums. Normally when Princess Anna started up, everyone would find reason to be somewhere else (typically somewhere far outside the castle walls). Mia supposed it could be one of the other nursemaids, or perhaps even the Queen, if she had recovered enough from the flu that had struck her not soon after birthing Princess Anna.

To her surprise, Mia found not the broad, matronly figures of the other nursemaids akin to hers, nor the willowy and slim beauty of the Queen in the nursery. Instead, Mia found, standing atop a makeshift stepladder constructed from a pile of fairy tale books, a small girl in a blue dress peering over the edge of the cot to stare down at the bawling Princess. The blonde head was quirked to the side in fascination, and, much to Mia's surprise, the crying momentarily ceased as the baby looked up at her new visitor. And thus, for a moment, the nursery was blissfully silent as the two Princesses regarded each other.

Mia considered intervening. Princess Elsa hadn't actually met her new sister yet. Sure, Elsa had seen snippets of the baby and had been introduced once while the baby was cradled in her mother's arms and Princess Elsa hid shyly behind her father's legs, but the two had never been left together without an adult there to bridge the shy, fascinated silence between them. Besides, Mia wasn't entirely comfortable with Princess Elsa's current position. The heir to the throne may be remarkably sure-footed, and had avoided any major tumble thus far, but Mia didn't like the way the books were leaning heavily to the side. Her resolve strengthened, Mia opened the door wide and opened her mouth to call out to Princess Elsa. . . only to hastily retreat when she heard the heir begin to speak.

"Hello, little baby," Elsa said softly, her youth shining through her voice as she lisped slightly over the words that had yet to naturally form in her young and still inexperienced mouth. "You're a princess just like me. Bet you're thinking, maybe it's a pretty cool thing to be."

To Mia's surprise, Princess Anna remained quiet. Normally, strangers to her crib could get through maybe half a sentence before the Princess would banish them from her nursery with tremendous wails, but she seemed remarkably docile before her sister. Princess Elsa gently reached into the crib, and Mia saw Princess Anna's little hand reach outwards uncertainly before grasping tightly on her sister's index finger. Princess Elsa smiled and continued her first conversation with her younger sister.

"But soon you'll see that everyone expects a lot from you," Princess Elsa said, ignoring the fact that Princess Anna had become more interested in jamming her sister's finger in her toothless mouth than in listening to her sister's speech. "They'll say that there are things a princess should and shouldn't do."

Princess Elsa gently but firmly tugged her finger out of Princess Anna's grasp. As Mia expected but still feared, the loss of her new toy caused the baby to begin revving up her scream motors, and the nursemaid braced herself against the incoming onslaught of infant displeasure.

But it didn't come. Just before Princess Anna could unleash her mighty roar, Elsa took a quick look around and, failing to see the nursemaid hiding behind the nursery door, turned back to the crib satisfied about her privacy. Elsa flicked her fingers, and a white light sparkled from her fingertips as ice and snow flickered in the air. The winter's light, the magic that Princess Elsa had been blessed with but so rarely ever showed to the world, shot through the air to coat Princess Anna's mobile, the ice creeping over the fish suspended over the crib, before bursting into a fine glitter that shimmered in the air.

And then, for the first time ever, Mia heard Princess Anna let out a cry unlike any other that had left her baby lips. A cry of joy, a wondrous gasp.

Smiling, Princess Elsa reached back into the crib and clasped her baby sister's chubby fist in her own slim hands.

"But you and me, we know better."

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Several years passed, and, as far as Mia was concerned, those were the happiest years that the castle had ever experienced.

Watching the two Princesses grow up together, and watching their friendship and sisterly bond blossom and bloom like the first daisies pushing out of the melting snow in spring... had Mia ever been more content in her life? The two Princesses were her wards, that was true, but they were like the daughters that she'd never had as well. She would feed and clean them, she would brush their hair and help them with their dresses, she would teach them basic household necessities like courtesy and eating and sewing, and, if necessary, yes, Mia would punish them as well, proving that even a Princess wasn't above a good spanking if she wasn't careful. The Queen was with her children as often as possible, but she had duties to attend to, as did the King. Thus, whilst the two monarchs did their best to be good parents as well as good rulers, it had fallen to Mia to take charge of the sisters' growth. It had been Mia who had seen Anna take her first steps, who had encouraged Elsa to show off her powers for her little sister, who had heard Anna say her first words, who had helped Elsa deal with the loss of her first tooth. It had been Mia who'd patiently listened to Elsa's ramblings about seeing a fairy-bird in the morning while she had tried to get Anna to relinquish the jar of honey that the baby had been trying to shove into her porridge, and it had been Mia who'd had to change Anna's diapers when the younger princess had spontaneously decided that if she couldn't keep her honey, she would at least have the last laugh by ruining everyone's last laugh.

But as much as Mia wanted to think of the Princesses as her own children, and as much as she wanted to proudly present the duo to their parents and tell the King and Queen of how much she had taught them since the last time they'd met, Mia was acutely aware of the fact that it was Princess Elsa who had taken charge of a good deal of Anna's education. More than once, the nursemaid had

entered the Princesses' room to take them to their waiting tutor and had found Elsa trying to teach Anna how to write and read, patiently ignoring the fact that the redheaded baby was more interested in drawing crude snowmen all over the floor. It had warmed Mia's heart to see the bond between the two of them grow, and no matter how many times she saw it, it always warmed the woman's heart to see Anna proudly show off her newest work of art to her older sister, or hear Elsa singing a silly little ditty to Anna as the two of them splashed about in the tub.

And so, the years passed in this manner, with Elsa carefully guiding Anna through babyhood into her toddler years with Mia looking onwards, heart bursting with love for these two precious children, and a warm feeling rushing through her body at every display of their ever-strengthening bond.

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"Nanny!"

Mia looked up from the half-finished sweater in her hands to see two chubby-cheeked faces smiling broadly up at her. It still amused her to this day to see the family resemblance between the two; Anna looked exactly like a Elsa had at four, and Mia had no doubt that Anna would be a spitting image of currently-seven-Elsa in three years' time.

"Yes, girls?" Mia said with a smile. "What is it?"

"Well, Nanny," Elsa began. "Anna and I have been practicing a song and-"

"And we wanted you to see it! It's really, really cool, and Elsa came up with it!" Anna interrupted, shouting gleefully as she clung on to her sister. "Isn't she awesome, Nanny?"

Mia chuckled, amused as always by Anna's absolute worship of her older sister, who smiled affectionately and hugged her little sister closer to her. Setting down her knitting needles, Mia stretched out her back before sitting back comfortably in her chair.

"Very well, let's see it."

And thus, with much giggling, Elsa and Anna stood to face each other, Elsa taking hold of Anna's shoulders to make her stand still whilst the younger pranced about from foot to foot in joy.

"Okay, are you ready Nanny?" Elsa said excitedly.

Before Mia could reply, Anna cut in, unable to hold back her excitement.

"She's ready, she's ready, she's ready! Let's do it, Elsa! Come on~!"

"I'm ready, girls," Mia said, chuckling softly. "Now, show me what you've got!"

Pleased, the two girls faced each other again. Both took a deep breath, before letting loose in a flurry of fast-paced chanting and choreography.

"One two three together, clap together, snap together,

You and me together, knees together, freeze together!

Up or down together, princess crown together,

Always be together, you and me!"

With the last word, the two struck a dynamic pose and Elsa let loose a small icy explosion that had snow bursting from her fingertips. Laughing at the spectacle, Mia clapped her hands as she rocked back and forth.

"Bravo, girls! Bravo!"

Elsa, prim and proper as ever, reacted by quickly stifling (badly) her wide smile at the compliment underneath a poor mask of professional calm and swept into a curtsy. Anna jumped up and down, clapping her hands together as she squealed at the snow settling on the ground, before she noticed Elsa curtseying next to her and hurriedly tried to imitate Elsa. This resulted in Anna falling flat on her face, and Elsa, startled, tripping backwards in surprise before rushing to her sister's aid.

"That was very good, girls!" Mia complimented. "Did you show this to your parents yet?"

"No, not yet," Elsa admitted as she helped her sister back to her feet. "We wanted to make sure it was good before we tried. Madame Lilja said that Papa and Mama are very busy, so we should try not to disturb them."

"That's why Elsa and me were practicing!" Anna said brightly, cheerfully ignoring the snow melting on her cheeks. "To make sure that it's good enough!"

"Elsa and I" Elsa corrected, affectionately tweaking Anna's nose. "If you're going to be a Princess, you're going to have to speak properly."

"I can speak properly," Anna said, pouting. "Just because I'm not as good with numbers as you are doesn't mean I'm bad at English! I know my letters!"

"Really?" Elsa asked, amused. "What comes after Q?"

"Um..." Anna chewed her lip as she thought. "Well, Q is for Queen, so... P! P for Princess!"

"Wrong~" Elsa sang, poking Anna in the belly. "P comes *before* Q!"

"Well that doesn't make any sense!" Anna complained, pushing Elsa's hand away with as much righteous stubbornness as a four-year-old could muster. "Then why are Queens stronger than Princesses!"

"Just because it comes earlier in the alphabet doesn't mean it's stronger, Anna." Mia said, a smile gracing her features as she looked at Anna's indignant pout.

"It does so!" Anna denied loudly. "A is better than B! A for Anna!"

Anna stood with her feet apart and her hands apart, a metre of ginger infant pride. Suddenly, a thought occurred to her and she turned excitedly to Elsa, who had been watching her sister's antics with a smile on her face.

"Elsa, Elsa, Elsa! Idea time!"

"Okay, what is it Anna?"

Anna grinned.

"When you're Queen, you should make a rule that the alph-, alfa-, *elfabet* is changed, and make P come after Q! Ooh, and also make A and E next to each other!"

"Whatever for, Princess?" Mia asked with an indulgent smile, knowing full well what the answer would be.

"A for Anna and E for Elsa!" the Princess proclaimed with gusto. "If we're going to be together forever, then our letters should be together forever also!"

Elsa giggled at that.

"Okay, Anna, I'll do it. And when I'm Queen, I want you to go to all the other kingdoms and tell them that the alphabet's changed, and that they need to learn it again."

"Of course I will!" Anna said happily, face brightening as she envisioned a future devoid of the tyrannical letters B, C and D.

"I hardly think that will impress your future prince, Princess Anna," Mia chuckled as she picked up her sewing needles again.

The comment caused the 4-year-old's brow to furrow in confusion.

"What do you mean, Nanny?"

"Well, I don't think that princes want to have to relearn the alphabet, that's all I meant," Mia said as she began continuing work on the sweater.

"So, princes won't like me if I put A and E together?" Anna said, confused.

"Don't worry, Anna," Elsa said. "Princes are just a different type of boy. They're dumb, and they don't like reading or learning. That's why they won't like it if A and E are together."

"Princess Elsa!" Mia's head snapped up from her needlework. She fixed Elsa with a hard stare. "I sincerely hope that you did not sincerely mean that comment."

Elsa bit her lip, a sure sign of nervousness.

"No, of course not Nanny. I'm sorry, I just... forgot myself for a moment."

"Make sure it doesn't happen again," Mia said sternly. "I will not have your father thinking that I am inspiring his daughter to say discourteous things."

"If princes don't want to marry me just because they don't want to learn how to spell," Anna suddenly said, dismissing Elsa and Mia's conversation as 'grown-up talk' and having reached her own conclusions. "Then I don't want to marry them either. I don't want some stupid boy. I want someone smart and clever, like Elsa." Anna's eyes sparkled at the idea. "I know! I'll marry Elsa instead! Then it'll be perfect!"

Elsa burst into laughter at that, whilst Mia couldn't help but chuckle at Anna's youthful naiveté and innocent enthusiasm. Anna looked at the two of them, perplexed.

"What? It *is* perfect! Elsa's amazing! And she's better than some stupid prince! Elsa's pretty and funny and smart and fun and she has powers! And she's going to be *Queen*! Who needs a prince anyway? He won't become Queen! And he's probably dumb, like Elsa said!"

Mia shot Elsa a look that said "*Now look at what you've done.*"

"Princess Anna," Mia started. "You *cannot* go around calling princes dumb. It is unbecoming. And you cannot marry Princess Elsa."

Anna's eyes went wide at that.

"Why not? Elsa's so nice! She's the bestest sister ever! Why can't I marry her?"

"Princess Anna," Mia said with a sigh, not wanting to break the news to the Princess who looked like she was on the verge of tears, but knowing that she'd have to learn this someday. "You cannot marry Princess Elsa because—"

"But I *want* to!" Anna wailed, incoming tears making her choke.

"Princess Anna, please don't cry. But this isn't something that can be discussed. You cannot marry—"

"Don't say it!" Anna shouted, tears beginning to cling to her eyelashes as she covered her ears with chubby toddler hands, eyes closed tight shut. "Why won't you let me and Elsa be together?"

"I'm not trying to stop you from being sisters, but you have to face the fact that someday you will be married and have to leave Princess Elsa—"

*Zing!*

Abruptly, Mia found herself frozen to her chair, ice sticking her rear to the cushions. Mia looked dumbfounded at Elsa, whose fingers were outstretched. The blonde's expression was just as stunned, like she couldn't believe she'd done that. Anna's crying ceased as she heard the familiar sound of magic. Silence descended on the room as the Mia stared at Elsa, Elsa stared at Mia, and Anna stared at both of them, eyes flitting from one to the other.

The silence lasted about three seconds before Mia's face turned red and her chest swelled as she prepared to roar.

"*Princess Elsa!*" Mia thundered. "*Unfreeze me this instant!*"

Elsa's lower lip quivered as she stood there, fingers still pointing at Mia's chair. Anna looked wonderingly at Elsa, her eyes still watery with unshed tears, but a look of absolute marvel on her face. Faced with the nursemaid's wrath, Elsa began to wilt, eyes reflecting her guilt, and she began to raise her hand to undo the ice. Uncertain, Elsa's eyes flitted about the room, trying to look anywhere but at the furious woman. Her eyes settled on Anna, and Elsa's panicked look disappeared as she saw her sister's expression of absolute adoration.

Elsa's trembling stopped, and her shaking hand steadied, halting halfway through the gestures for melting. The seven-year-old's face hardened with resolve. Mia stared at her unbelievably, unable to process the fact that Elsa would rebel against authority and reason.

"Princess Elsa-" Mia began.

"Run!" Elsa shouted, cutting off the nursemaid. She seized Anna's hand and made a dash for the door, dragging the redhead along behind her. "I'm sorry Nanny!"

Anger took hold of Mia at the sheer disrespect that the Princesses were showing her.

"You two girls are in so much trouble!" Mia yelled, rocking hard to try and free herself from the chair. "When I tell your father about this, there *will* be punishments! No dessert for a month, and fifty spankings! Each! Princess Elsa! Princess Anna! This is *not* appropriate! Do you hear me? *Come back here!*"

The two girls paid no heed and fled from the room, hand tightly in hand, leaving Mia to grumble unhappily as she tried to shuffle the armchair over to the window, hoping to melt the ice with the midday sunlight.

### **To Be Continued**

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A/N: So, I've decided to split this chapter into two parts, for a few reasons. First, I want to pump these out as quickly as possible, and I think that isn't a bad place to stop the first half. Second, the tone of the two halves is radically different, and I think it'll work better if I just leave this fluffy family half as one chapter and then add the angsty second half as a different chapter. Third, I've been posting chapters that are extremely long and tiring to read, so I decided to make a short, sweet first half to reassure you that I am still writing. Fourth, I'm struggling with work and so I can only muster brief bursts of energy for writing, so instead of making you guys wait a long time I thought that I'd just release this to help sate your Elsanna needs ;)

Anyway, this first half takes place before Frozen and is mainly based on "We Know Better". The second half will take place during Frozen's prologue and will take elements from "More Than Just the Spare" and "Bribery, Force, and Other Nefarious Tactics". Stay tuned for that!

I hope you enjoyed this first half! Please leave a review if you have the time J  
Once again, thanks for all the support! You people are awesome! Catchya later!

Rating: T

Genre: Family, Drama, Angst, Tragedy

Warnings: None.

Disclaimer: This is a work of fiction. All names mentioned do not represent the true persons. All brand names do not belong to the author. No copyright laws or personal privacy laws are intended to be infringed.

A/N: Time for Part II of the Nursemaid, the first character to serve as our POV more than once. I hope you enjoyed the fluff of the previous chapter, because this one is going to go straight into hard angst and family drama. Heavily based on the song “Do You Want to Build a Snowman?”, the cut song “More Than Just the Spare” and yumi michiyo’s excellent work “Bribery, Force, and Other Nefarious Tactics”, this next chapter’s hopefully going to help better characterise this particular version of Elsa and Anna.

I’d just like to take a quick moment to give a shout-out to all my friends and critics who have supported me so well thus far. We’re only a third in, and all of you have been so amazing, but there have been a couple of people who have really helped me stay motivated on this project. So, here’s to battousai24, yumi michiyo, Bason, Mad Possum, Monkey Blues, BlueLion, NeniioN, thesassygaypanda, elsayoustinker, syuchang, FuronSpartan, HanFei and The Denominator. Whew! Long list of truly epic people! :)

Oh, one last shout-out: here’s to username tubs, the most passionate of all reviewers. Seriously dude, your reviews are crazy awesome :D

Now, on to the fic! Enjoy!

This takes place during the prologue of Frozen.

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### ***The Nursemaid – Part II***

They were forbidden to speak of it, those permitted to stay in the castle after the gates had been closed. None knew for sure what had transpired, and if they did, they were smart enough not to say. When none of the high-ranking staff were around, though, when the candles had been put out and the Royal Family and their top advisors had gone to bed, when the remaining serving girls and stewards and cooks and washerwoman and stablehands gathered in the kitchens for a cup of tea or mug of ale, they would whisper and fret and wonder and worry.

“What could have happened?” they would ask each other in hushed voices, faces half in shadow as they crowded around the sole lantern in the centre of the table.



“What would make the King close the gates for the first time since Geoffrey the Malevolent?”

“It must be that damned Vulture, Lord Orn,” barrel-chested Boden muttered, quickly glancing around to make sure that he wasn’t heard. “You know what they say: all Kings turn craven when the Vulture crows.”

“Surely not our King? Not King Nicholas?” Fjola said aghast. She looked at the others, distress evident on the maid’s face. “He’s been the best King us common folk could ever ask for. Why would he give in to the Vulture now?”

“He wouldn’t,” Delling growled. The hot-blooded lass who had convinced herself that even girls could become fearsome knights slammed her mug down on the table, wiping the froth from her lips. “Not Good King Nick. We all know that the Vultures haven’t had any real power, not since Queen Aren the Third executed hers and tore up its nest. Sure, coupl’a them have *tried* to get their old glory back, but a Vulture’s always been a goddamned ugly thing; what glory could it have ever had?”

“Be quiet, lass,” Hakan urged. The old master-at-arms had been around for far longer than any of those sitting at the table, and though he never spoke loud nor often, when he did speak the others tended to listen. “You’re still young, still fed by the songs of them silver-tongued minstrels. You haven’t seen things change around here. The Vulture has been making a comeback. Lord Orn is a right fool, aye, but his predecessor wasn’t; the fact that we still don’t know who he was tells you all you need to know. Don’t believe everything that your ma and pa have been telling you, girl; they may not know the truth any better than you do.”

“What do you think, Hakan?” asked Olson, the messenger boy, cutting off Delling’s angry response. “Do you think that it’s the Vulture that’s the cause of all this fuss?”

Hakan took a long time before answering, staring contemplatively into his tankard.

“I don’t know, lad. I don’t know for sure, but here’s what I think: Lord Orn isn’t the cause for this. He may or may not be the true Vulture, for Vultures in the past have been known to use decoys, to use one of their thousand little Feathers to stand in for them, but there’s no reason for this. No, whatever has caused Good King Nick to close the gates has nothing to do with politics, I think. If anything, closing the gates sends a bad signal to everyone who’s got ties to Arendelle. The only reason His Majesty would risk that kind of backlash is if it’s something that ain’t political, but still important enough to warrant such risk.”

There was a silence that descended on the group as half pondered on what the cause could have been, and the other, less-educated half tried to understand Hakan’s words.

“Do you think it has something to do with the Princesses?” Donar said suddenly. The guardsman was one of the few who wore the golden cloaks of the Royal Guard

that would attend these get-togethers, and he had not been readily accepted, often regarded with suspicion or dislike. However, he had gained their trust over the months, and even those who still had little love for the man tolerated him for the fresh gossip he could bring to the group. Donar cleared his throat at the questioning looks of the others. "I mean, I was on guard the other night, just a few days before they closed the gates. I'd been posted outside the Keep, so I didn't hear nor see anything that happened inside, but late at night, when the moon was still high in the sky, I had to help the King and Queen saddle their horses. They wouldn't accept my offer of an escort, in fact they ordered me to stay at the castle. But they were holding both Princesses, except Princess Anna looked sick, real sick. When they came back, and this was early morn, just when the I was being relieved by the dawn patrol, they seemed... *different*. They weren't as urgent as they'd been when they left, but there was still the same sense of, of *fear* and worry. That was also the day when Princess Elsa got her own room."

Those gathered began to murmur as they considered the possibilities of this. The Royal Family rushes out somewhere, on horseback no less. Princess Anna seems deathly ill. After they come back, Princess Elsa gets her own room.

"So do you think..." Olson began, before stopping, looking around worriedly at the others. He continued cautiously. "Do you think that there might be something wrong with Princess Ann-"

"No."

Everyone swivelled their heads to face the broad woman sitting gloomily at the end of the bench, gloomily drawing circles with her mug on the table's surface. Mia looked up from the hard grain to fix the gathered servants with stern glare.

"I've been looking after those girls since the day they were born, and I can tell you that there is *nothing* wrong with them. They are sweet, they are healthy, and they will make fine rulers of Arendelle one day."

"Come on now, Mia, I know that you love the girls, but can't you even stop and *consider* that maybe there might be something-"

"No." Mia said firmly, cutting off Boden. "I'm telling you all now, whatever happened that made the King close the gates, it wasn't the Princesses."

The others muttered to each other about that, but Mia had eyes only for Hakan, the most senior and most respected attendee at these meetings. The grey-bearded man was enormous and strong, built like a mountain bear, but there was a deep weariness to him, the tired aching of an old soldier. His dark green eyes burned into Mia's face as he regarded her.

"You sure of that, Mia?" he asked, his voice gruff but soft, with a hidden gentleness.

Mia thought of the visit she'd gotten the night before, of the items she'd discovered on her bedside when she'd woken that morning. The note, the black

feather... and the knife.

“Yes,” she said clearly. “I’m sure. There is nothing strange about the Princesses. They have nothing to do with this.”

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If the first few years of Princess Anna’s life had been the happiest the castle had ever known, Mia was convinced that the following thirteen would be the saddest and most gut-wrenching, worse even than the reign of Queen Onika the Cruel. For although Queen Onika’s rule had been plagued with fear and terror, it had nothing on the sheer heartbreak that tore at Mia’s soul to watch as her precious girls were torn apart, and their bond replaced by a beautifully carved, marvellously decorated, utterly *solid* door.

It hadn’t been bad at first. Not for the first few days, when Princess Anna was still five, still impressionable, still young and naïve. Those had been the days which Mia had believed were nothing more than a necessary separation, a little time apart to help Elsa get her powers back under control.

“Where’s Elsa?” Anna would ask Mia every morning as the nursemaid brushed the little girl’s fiery hair.

“She’s in her room, darling.”

“When will she come back to our room, Nanny?”

“I don’t know, dear.”

“It’s sad that she’s not in here anymore.”

“Don’t be sad, honey. It’s always better to laugh than to cry. Now, smile.”

Anna would then flash Mia a charming smile, which would grow broader when she looked out the window to see the fresh snow settled on the grass outside.

“Do you think she wants to build a snowman?”

“I don’t know, dear. Why don’t you ask her?”

And so, after having her hair tied into her twin plaits and wriggling into her green dress, Anna would dash to the door down the corridor to rap sharply on the wood and then plead valiantly with her older sister to come out and play. Every morning, though, it would end in the same way. Anna’s pleas would be in vain, Elsa would dismiss her younger sister in a voice full of misery and worry, and the little five-year-old would dejectedly make her way back to her room to search for the doll impersonation of the sister who no longer seemed to want to play with her. And so every morning, Mia’s heart would break a little more, cracks carving their way through her spirit as the days turned to weeks, and the weeks turned to months, and eventually, Mia gave up hope that Elsa would ever walk out of that door, smile triumphant on her face as she displayed how much she had improved with her powers.

But those were just the normal days, the early days. The worst days were the ones when Anna would wake up with determination colouring her little baby face, no doubt having spent the previous day working up a new plan to coax her sister out of her room. These days, the days when the daily ritual was broken, these were the ones which would cause the cracks in Mia's heart to become splinters, and would send the nursemaid hurriedly searching her pockets for her handkerchief to dab at the corner of her eyes.

"Elsa?" Anna asked one morning. The toddler held in her chubby hands a sheet of paper, one covered in clumsy, crossed-out letters in varying crayon colours. Mia watched from the end of the hallway, having not the heart to dissuade the redhead's never-ending attempts to reconnect with her older sister.

Anna knocked on the door, her knocking sharp and firm, strengthened by her confidence.

"Elsa, I remembered that you didn't like dumb boys. So I wanted to show you that I'm not dumb like them! I studied really hard! I learnt my letters, just like you taught me. Look!"

And with that, Anna shoved her paper underneath the door, through the inch of space that was all that was left of their sisterly bond.

"See? I wrote out the entire elfa- *alphabet*, just like you taught me! A-And, I know now that *R* comes after *Q*, and that *P* comes before it! Before *Q*, not before *R*! And that *A* and *E* don't go next to each other! See?"

Silence was Anna's only reply, before a thin sigh blew through the keyhole.

"That's nice, Anna."

Anna brightened, her entire posture lifting upwards as she stared hopefully at the door handle, waiting for it to turn. But, as Mia knew, it remained where it was. It didn't move an inch.

After a few seconds, Anna's shoulders began to slump, and her excited anticipation began to break into nervous confusion.

"A-Aren't you going to come out?"

A soft, muffled sound puffed through the hard wood.

"N-No, Anna. I'm busy right now."

Desperation flooded the toddler's face at the dismissal.

"R-Really? B-But I learnt the alphabet! I learnt all the letters and how to write them and everything! Look! It's all on the paper!" Despair was rolling off the young girl and tears formed at her eyes as a thought struck her. "Y-You don't think that I cheated, do you? I-Is that why you don't want to play with me anymore? You think that I'll cheat? I-I *promise* I did that myself! I didn't ask Nanny for help, or Madame Lilja! I didn't even look in the books! I really did learn it! Look! A, B, C, D, E, F, H, no, I meant G, G!"

"Please, just go away, Anna." The door said remorsefully.

"No, *no*, I **do** know it, Elsa! Please, you *have* to believe me!" Anna leapt forward, small hands clutching desperately at the door handle, twisting it with all her five-year-old might. "J-Just listen, okay? A, B, C, D-"

"Anna!" The door's voice was sharp, cracking like a whip, but there was definitely tearful despair, barely hidden underneath. "Go *away*!"

Anna stopped dead, freezing at the complete rejection. The little girl took a few steps backwards, hands releasing the handle as if it had burnt her. The look of utter dejection on her soft, round face was heart-wrenching. Tears began to leak from the corners of her eyes and the little girl sniffled as she tried to hold back the tears.

"W-*Why* won't you come out, Elsa? Why don't you want to play with me anymore? I-Is it b-b-because I'm still stupid? I-I p-p-p-*promise* that I learnt! I *swear* that I know the l-letters! I can prove it! Just g-g-give me another chance!"

"Anna, I'm not going to say it again. Just, please: **go away**!"

Anna burst into tears at that, and she turned and fled, wailing her heart out as she ran as fast as her short legs could carry her, leaving behind only tears. As the echoes of her crying dimmed, Mia could hear sniffing from the door.

Mia approached uncertainly, retracing the steps that Anna took every morning in her neat black shoes. Hesitantly, Mia knocked on the door.

"Princess Elsa? Are you okay?"

The sniffing continued, followed by a loud snuffle as the blonde no doubt tried to hide her tears. When she spoke, though, her voice was still thick with emotion.

"I-I'm fine, Nanny. Don't worry about me."

"Are you sure? If you need anything-"

"Please, I'm fine, Nanny. Please just, leave me alone. Don't come in right now. I-It's a little chilly in here."

"If you insist, Princess Elsa."

Sadly, Mia turned away, wondering what had happened to the little girl who had carefully pushed open the nursemaid's bedroom door, teddy bear clutched in one hand with her baby sister's hand held tightly in the other, lip quivering and face tear-streaked from whatever dark terror had woken her that night, while Anna yawned sleepily and rubbed at her eyes next to her big sister.

Even when she had been five years old, Elsa had refused to leave Anna's side, even to seek solace from nightmares with the warmest mother figure she knew.

Several years passed. Elsa and Anna remained separate. Mia watched both as they grew older, wiser. . . sadder.

Princess Anna was the one who Mia watched bloom. As her limbs lengthened, her height grew, and the baby fat began to drop from her features, Anna was a constant in Mia's life. Even as their normal customs began to fade away (Anna no longer asked for help getting dressed in the morning, no longer requested bedtime stories about the legendary heroes Flynn Rider or Aladdin, no longer approached excitedly to ask if the mythical metals electrum, which controlled storms, or mithril, which was indestructible, really existed), Mia was glad to be able to watch Anna flower in front of her, smoothly transitioning from toddler to girl to preteen. Anna was a whole person to Mia, a girl whose growth Mia had witnessed.

In contrast, Princess Elsa was nothing more than snippets, brief glimpses into a child's maturing. Ever since Gerda had been tasked by the King to personally take care of most of Elsa's needs, Mia saw the heir to the Arendelle less and less frequently, and it was with those increasingly rare encounters that the nursemaid had to piece together an image of the other girl she'd loved so dearly but had lost over the years, something that had been confirmed when 'Princess Elsa' had one day become 'Your Highness'. Elsa matured beautifully, looking more and more like her mother every day; even the eyes, so full of sadness and fear and worry, were a striking resemblance to the Queen's, something which Mia was none too pleased about. No child should have such unhappy eyes.

Still, these pieces, these fragments of Elsa. . . they were still more than Anna ever had. Though Anna had steadfastly refused to give up on her mission to reconnect with her older sister, Mia could tell that the trials of time were taking their toll. What had once been daily visits became weekly. What had once been 'Why don't you come out and play?' became 'Why won't you open the door?'. What had once been hours of pleading with the girl behind the door became thirty minutes of talking to the door.

And then, the second incident happened.

It couldn't have been long after Princess Anna's twelfth birthday. The celebration had been warm, but Mia had been disturbed by the lack of children Anna's age. Ever since the staff had been severely reduced to barely more than a skeleton crew, it was increasingly hard to find employment at the castle, and even generations who had served the family faithfully were now having their children turned away. No more stableboys, no more serving girls, no more messengers, no more lasses strapping on armour and hammering away at squealing squires. Instead, Princess Anna had to make do with the elderly staff still permitted to stay at the castle, all of whom meant well but none of whom could truly fill the void of peer interaction. The presents had been especially telling. Brooches, gloves, bracelets, even a fine dress from Captain Halden, one of the few rich enough to afford such a gift. . . they were all given with good intentions, and they were all lovely enough, but they were gifts for a woman, not a young teenager. The

surest sign was how their gifts compared to that of Princess Elsa's. Though the heir had not attended, she had ensured that her present would be delivered to her younger sister.

Anna had barely been able to contain her squeal at the sight of the bicycle that was led down the stairs. And while the others had merely shrugged and commented to each other that her joy was probably because it was only in gestures like this that Princess Elsa could interact with the ginger (while everyone secretly groaned inside at the thought of all the damage that was sure to follow when Anna mounted her new vehicle), Mia couldn't help but think that it was also just as likely that Anna loved the gift especially so simply because it was a reminder that not only did Elsa think of her, but Elsa also knew what Anna liked and wanted.

Anna had spent the next few weeks riding up and down the halls, hefting the bike up stairs and tumbling down them afterwards. The staff had groaned, the King and Queen had shaken their heads affectionately, and Mia had wiped at the Princess's cuts whilst grumbling about the fresh patch of bruises forming on her freckled skin. But this had all just been typical Anna behaviour. No one had thought too much of it, no one had questioned the Princess's hyperactivity nor her penchant for tumbling off the bicycle repeatedly. They had been far too used to her antics by that point to believe that there was intent to her antics.

As it turned out, there was. And that had led directly to incident number two.

Mia had been picking up Princess Anna's muddied dress from her romp through the gardens that morning when she heard the redhead shriek from the bathroom. Startled, the nursemaid had rushed to the Princess and had slammed the door open, a question already on her lips... to see Anna sitting in the bathtub with blood staining her thighs and fingers with a look of absolute pleasure on her face.

"Princess Anna... Are you okay?" Mia managed, looking dumbfounded at the bizarre scene before her.

Anna looked up at her, the redhead's eyes sparkling with joy.

"Oh, Nana! It's finally happened!"

Mia tried to look relieved, but her confusion must've shown on her face for Anna let out an exasperated laugh.

"Nana, it's my moon blood! It's finally happened! I've finally become a woman!"

Comprehension dawned on Mia, and for a moment she wasn't entirely sure why she was so deeply unhappy that Anna had entered the beginnings of her womanhood. Did she think of the Princess as her daughter so strongly that she was honestly miffed by the idea of the Princess now being eligible for marriage? Mia shook her head crossly. She mustn't let thoughts like that distract her. She had to be professional, even if Mia in all honesty couldn't imagine how Anna found a bleeding vagina to be a good thing.

“Why, that’s wonderful Princess Anna! Have you been, um, anticipating this for a while?”

“Of course! Why do you think I rode my bike so hard and fell off it all the time? The washerwomen in the kitchens told me that it would help bring the moon blood sooner!”

Mia made a mental note to have Gerda slap all the washerwomen in the kitchens silly, whilst holding back the urge to tell Anna that she fell off everything all the time.

“Well, it’s certainly good to know that you’ve matured. You are now truly leaving childhood. How do you fee-”

"How do I feel? I feel *amazing*!"

Mia wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that.

“Are you sure you’re not feeling any remorse or regret, maybe a little nostalgic about saying farewell to your early years. . .”

"Nope! This is *perfect*!"

“As much as I wish that I was as young as I used to be, Princess Anna, I’m not, and thus I am feeling extremely confused right now.”

“Oh, Nana!” Excitedly, Anna stretched out her hands to seize Mia’s, so relieved she could just dance around the entire castle. Mia hastily retreated, backing away from the crimson-stained fingertips. "This means that I’m a *woman*! It means that I could get married, and have children, and have possible heirs to the throne! It means that I’ve got worth now! I’m more than just the spare!"

That statement was so bizarre, so unexpected, and so out of character for Anna that Mia temporarily forgot herself and responded as bluntly as she would to her own child.

“Wait, what?”

Anna blushed, realising that she probably should’ve elaborated a bit.

"I just mean that, you know, Elsa’s always been the heir to the throne, so ever since birth she’s been important, but I’ve always just kinda been. . . *there*, if you understand what I mean."

“Oh Princess,” Mia sighed, dragging her hands down her face. “Who on earth said this to you?”

"Well, no one said it *exactly*. They were just. . . actually, forget it. It’s not important."

“Princess Anna, tell me who would say such things to you.”

“I really shouldn’t.”

“Princess Anna-”



"Nana, as princess, I *order* you to stop prying."

"Nice try," Mia acknowledged. "But it's no use. I have orders from the King himself to keep you safe and out of harm, and I consider such speech to be harmful to you. Now, tell me, who said that and what did they say exactly?"

"Ugh, I hate it when you use that excuse," Anna groaned, leaning back and hitting her head against the back of the tub. She grimaced, and was about to reach back to rub the point of impact when she saw the blood on her fingers.

"Eugh," Anna shivered at the idea of smearing blood all over her hair. "Okay, fine. I'll make you a deal. Nana, if I tell you who it was and what they said, then you have to promise to do *whatever* I ask." Upon seeing the look on Mia's face, Anna quickly amended her statement. "Just one favour! It won't even be hard! Or embarrassing! I just need your help with something that you normally wouldn't agree to otherwise."

Though sceptical, Mia considered her options. On the one hand, that was a pretty risky condition. Mia remembered the last time she'd agreed to that kind of proposition, and she'd paid for fulfilling the Princess's request (delivering to her an entire chocolate cake) by having to personally reassemble every suit of armour in the Grand Hall after Anna's sugar-fuelled rampage had led her to personally joust each and every one by lining them up in front of the staircase and then sliding down the stairs on a tray stolen from the kitchens. On the other hand, Mia *refused* to allow anyone to damage Anna's self-confidence by making such comments. The *spare*?!

Her mind made up, Mia sighed.

"Very well, Princess Anna. I acquiesce to your proposal."

Anna grinned broadly.

"Excellent! Normally I'd say we shake on it, but..."

"That is perfectly unnecessary," Mia said quickly. "You have my word. That should be enough."

"All right, then," Anna chewed her lower lip, a habit she'd picked up from Elsa when the two had been growing up, one that meant that she was gearing up to say something difficult.

"Nana, you know those two new guards, right?"

Mia shook her head.

"I don't know every person who works in the castle, Princess Anna."

"Well, I don't know their names either. But they were posted by the stables a few weeks ago. One's kinda tall, with sideburns and a nasty rash on the back of his neck. The other one's pretty short, and he has a big moustache and a beard."

"Noted," Mia said, planning to ask Captain Halden about these two fellows later. She fixed Anna with a hard stare. "What did they say?"

Anna averted her gaze, uncomfortable beneath Mia's glare.

"Well, they didn't say it *at* me, I just kind of overheard them talking-

"Princess Anna, *what did they say?*"

Anna hung her head, defeated.

"They said that... they said that I'm just the spare to the throne. They were having a good laugh about it. They said that they'd seen Elsa the other day, for when Mom and Dad took her to meet those dignitaries from France. They said that Arendelle was lucky that it was Elsa, the smart and beautiful one, was going to become Queen, and not..."

Anna trailed off, and Mia could barely contain her rage at seeing the way Anna's shoulders slumped. When Captain Halden found these guards, Mia would personally make sure that they were assigned to cleaning out the barracks' chamber pots for the next three years, at least.

"Yes?" Mia prompted through gritted teeth.

"They said that Arendelle's lucky that the screw-up isn't the heir," Anna muttered. "The screw-up who can't do anything right except get married off someday, and who probably won't even be able to do that right. They said," and when Anna lifted her gaze to meet Mia's the nursemaid felt her heart break all over again at the sadness in the Princess's eyes. "They said that it's no wonder Elsa doesn't want anything to do with me. 'Who'd want anyone to know that the castle fool is actually the Princess's sister?', they said."

Mia closed her eyes and tried to calm her breathing, trying to soothe the righteous fury that was rising up within her. Not yet, not now. Right now, she needed to comfort Anna, take care of her, help repair the damage done to her self-confidence. Later, though... oh, later there'd be hell to pay.

"But it's okay now!" Anna said quickly, seeing her Nana's face turn a dangerous shade of red. "It's okay, because I've had my moon blood now! This means that I'm not just going to be a burden to Arendelle! This means I'm a woman now, like Elsa! Nana, this means that I'm the same as Elsa now! She won't shut me out anymore! I'm not just the irritating kid sister now!"

For the nth time in so many minutes, Mia found herself completely perplexed by what Anna was saying.

"What are you talking about, Princess?"

Anna stood up, drawing herself up as regally as she could.

"Nana, it's time we discussed your end of the bargain. You promised to do whatever I said, remember? You gave your word."

Mia had a bad feeling about where this was going.

"Well, yes, but-"

"Nana, I order you to help me get into Elsa's room, so that I can talk to her face-to-face, as equals. We're both women now; there's no more need to hide immaturely behind doors from each other. We can discuss things like adults now, but only if she'll open that door. And that's where *you* come in!"

"*Oh no*," Mia thought. "*Oh no, no, nononono-*"

"I want you to pretend that you're collecting Elsa's laundry," Anna continued, oblivious to Mia's internal panic. "And then, when Elsa opens the door to let you in, you'll stick your foot in the door and stop it from closing. Then, I'll jump out of my hiding place from behind you and dash inside! It'll be perfect! Just like one of those old stories!"

"Princess Anna, I don't think that this-"

"Nana," Anna interrupted. "Please. You gave your word that you would help me."

"I know I did, Princess, but this-"

"Nana, please," Anna looked at Mia, looked her straight in the eyes, and Mia was knocked flat by what she saw there. Underneath the joy and cheerfulness that Anna displayed to the world, there was a lonely, scared, sad girl, one who was desperate to reconnect with her sister. "I've grown up on the other side of a door from Elsa for the last seven years. My sister absolutely hates me, and I don't even know why. We were such good friends as children, and I need to know what I did that pushed her away like that. I *need* to know, Nana. And I'm asking for your help. I'm *asking* now, not ordering. Because I trust you, and I know that you'll do what you think is best."

"*When*," Mia wondered, "*did Princess Anna learn how to guilt-trip people?*"

Obviously, she knew what the right answer would be, what the expected answer was. *'I'm sorry, Princess Anna, but I can't help you. Your father and sister both have their reasons for keeping you separated. No, I can't tell you what they are, but you have to trust me when I say that they are very good reasons.'*

But in all honesty, Mia was sick of the expected answer. She was sick of continuing this enforced isolation, this emotional torment. For too long, she'd had to sit by and watch the girls she loved be violently torn apart by circumstances outside of their control. Mia thought back to that day twelve years ago when she'd walked in to see Elsa charm her little sister with her magic. Surely, if Elsa could do that at age 3, she could do it now at fifteen. Maybe the magic was getting worse not because Elsa was losing control, but because she was separated from her sister. Mia remembered the stories she'd heard as a child and had repeated to other children now as an adult, tales of sibling bonds that allowed them to permit great feats. She remembered stories about how a man had once lifted an entire wagon off of his brother to save his life. What was to say that Elsa's powers, her *Ismakt*, wasn't the same?

Mia looked Anna in the eye, and was surprised to feel relief. Relief that the two beautiful girls could finally reunite, and this terrible age could be brought to a close.

"Very well, Princess Anna. I'll do it."

Anna's mouth dropped open.

"Really, Nana? You'll really help?"

Mia nodded.

Anna let out a squeal of delight.

"Thank you, thank you, *thank you*, Nana! Oh, I *knew* I could count on you!" Anna leapt out of the bathtub, energised at the idea of meeting her sister for the first time in years. "Let's go do this!"

"Um, Princess. . ."

"What?"

Mia gave Anna's blood-stained thighs and fingers a meaningful look. Anna looked down and flushed bright red.

"You may want to wash up and get dressed first, Princess."

Anna nodded, ears burning crimson and blushing so heavily that her freckles were camouflaged against her skin.

"O-Of course. But *after* that, we will do this, right?"

Mia smiled at this lovely, wonderful girl, the Princess who she thought of as her own child.

"Yes, we will, Princess." A dreamy look overcame Mia's eyes at the thought of seeing her darling girls reunited, once again sisters whose bond could never be overcome. "Yes, we will."

---

"Princess Elsa?"

Mia knocked on the door. In her arms she was cradling a huge basket full of laundry, using it in addition to her own breadth and wide skirts to hide Anna, who was hiding behind her.

"Yes?"

The soft reply came through the door, and it never ceased to bring tears to Mia's eyes at how subdued her little girl had become.

"I'm here to collect the laundry."

"The laundry?"

And then, to Mia's eternal joy and Anna's silent cheers, the door cracked open a bit, and a pale face with platinum blonde hair and startlingly icy blue eyes peered through the tiny gap.

"Yes, Your Highness. It *is* laundry day today."

The eye stared at her, and Mia couldn't help but feel discomfited by the suspicion shining in that cold blue.

"Well, yes, it is, but Mia, Gerda said that only she or my handmaiden would take care of my room from now on. Has there been a change to the arrangements?"

"Well, you see Your Highness, Gerda said that your handmaiden wasn't feeling well today, so she sent me to take care of things, just for today."

*"Keep talking, keep talking, keep talking,"* Mia thought. She needed Elsa to open the door wider, so that she could jam her foot into the gap and give Anna enough space to dash inside. At her age, Mia wouldn't be able to move quickly enough to block the doorway unless there was just a bit more space. . .

"Oh? What's wrong with her?" Elsa said, cracking the door open a bit more. Now Mia could see the side of a perfect nose and the edge of rosy, unsmiling lips.

*"Come on, a little more, just a bit so that Anna can get inside-"*

"She's caught a bit of flu, Your Highness. She's been spending an awful lot of time in draughty rooms these days, if you understand what I mean."

Elsa winced at that, and Mia instantly regretted her words. But it was a necessary evil, Mia would bear whatever emotional pain it took to get her girls to be reunited-

"That's unfortunate," Elsa admitted. "My room's always a bit chilly, true." Finally with a sigh, Elsa began to creak the door open, inch by inch. "I'm sorry about all this, Mia, I really am. I'm just so used to shutting everyone out these days. Come in, everything's ready to be collected-"

*"Yes, yes, **YES!**"* Mia mentally celebrated as the door opened more and more. Just a bit more, and then she could have ample room to jam the door open and give Anna space-

"Your Highness?"

A cold, clear voice rang through the air. Mia turned her head around, and Anna awkwardly tried to shuffle herself around so that she remained hidden from Elsa whilst concealing herself from this newcomer. Elsa frowned as she tried to see past Mia to see who it was.

"Who is it?"

Mia's insides turned cold as she saw the young woman dressed in simple cleaning garb, a laundry basket resting on her hip. The woman (Elsa's *handmaiden*) was in her mid-twenties, and had dark, lush hair as well as a pretty, angular face. Just looking at her made Mia feel old, except. . .

Those eyes. Those black eyes were like staring down two cold, desolate tunnels, a pair of gaping maws that threatened to swallow whatever fell inside and would never let them out again.

The woman frowned at the sight before her.

“Your Highness, what’s going on here?”

*“Oh **shit!**”* Mia heard Anna whisper from behind her.

Elsa tried to shove Mia out the way so that she could see who was calling her.

“Kaya? Is that you?”

“Your Highness, who is this?”

Elsa’s puzzled expression was rapidly hardening.

“This is Mia. She said that you were sick, and that she was taking care of your duties for today.”

“No, the other one, the one hiding behind Miss Mia’s skirts.”

“Well, obviously there’s been a mistake!” Mia said as cheerfully as she could manage as a cold sweat began to drip down the back of her neck as the cold handmaiden (Kaya, was it?) glared at her whilst craning her neck, trying to see who was crouching behind the nursemaid’s wide breadth. “An unfortunate misunderstanding, nothing serious! Apologies Your Highness, Miss Kaya-”

“Now wait one second-” Elsa began.

“Is that-” Kaya exclaimed, her eyes going wide.

*“What do we do?!”* Anna whispered frantically, her eyes wide in panic.

Time seemed to freeze for Mia. She looked around, horrified at how this was turning out. To her one side, Elsa was opening the door as the heir emerged, frowning at Mia. On her other side, the handmaiden’s eyes were wide with shock, her mouth opening to shout a warning, her other hand digging in the laundry basket. Behind Mia, Anna was staring up at her Nana, cowering beneath her skirts and staring up at the nursemaid with panicked, pleading eyes. Mia knew that her next action would determine how this sad story was to end. If she did nothing, the worst that could happen was an admonishment to both her and Anna as well as a light punishment. If she came clean, there would be a reprimand, but nothing else. But if she resisted, if she tried to force Elsa’s door open... that would have dire consequences indeed.

Mia took another look at Anna, who looked so young, so vulnerable crouching behind her.

*“Don’t my girls deserve to be happy?”* Mia asked herself. *“Don’t A and E deserve to be together?”*

...

*They did.*

“GO!” Mia bellowed, spinning herself around and seizing the door to Elsa’s room. With a great heave, she wrenched it open, causing Elsa, eyes and mouth wide open in shock, to stumble backwards, falling back into her icy room. Anna seized her opportunity and darted around Mia, aiming for the slight gap between the nursemaid and the doorframe, determined to reach her sister. Behind her, Mia heard the handmaiden, Kaya, scream Elsa’s name, and there was a sharp whistle as something flew through the air. Then suddenly a bee stung the back of Mia’s neck, and suddenly she felt her muscles going loose, and an intense headache exploded in her brain. Drowsiness threatened to drag her down, and Mia felt herself totter on her feet.

“No!” she thought desperately. *“No, it can’t end like this. A and E, they have to be together!”*

Desperation lent Mia strength, and she managed to regain her footing, and she tried to shove the door open wider. As she’d stumbled, she’d accidentally knocked Anna to the side, sending the girl banging against the doorframe painfully. Mia saw Elsa scrambling to get to her feet, trying to reach the door and slam it shut, to keep Anna out, to keep them apart.

Mia gave a great heave and she felt the door groan in protest, heard something crack and splinter. *“Ice,”* said some small lucid part of her brain. *“Elsa must’ve iced the door to stop it opening too much.”*

Mia shoved harder, trying to get her drugged muscles to cooperate. Next to her, Anna was rubbing her aching side, but still trying to get into the room, into Elsa’s room, to reach her sister, to reach Elsa...

Another bee stung Mia in the neck, this one’s sting longer and reaching much deeper. Mia’s head spun as the drugs from the dart pumped themselves into her bloodstream, heading straight for her brain. Mia stumbled to the side, her vision going dark.

“No,” she thought. *“No, no, no. Anna... must... door... Elsa... girls...”*

Mia heard a the sound of wood slamming closed, a lock clicking into place. She heard a high-pitched wail of fury, frustration and heart-breaking despair, heard a woman’s voice crack as she shouted for guards, cursing someone’s idiocy...

Mia summoned what strength remained to her to try and see Anna, to try and peer through the gap in the doorway to see her two girls tearfully, joyfully reunite...

Just before the blackness of sleep overcame her, all that Mia could see was carved, decorated, *solid* wood.

When Mia finally awoke, she was lying in her own bed, head extremely groggy and the vile taste of bile and vomit in her mouth. Despite this, though, she was alive. Whatever that handmaiden, that *Kaya*, had hit her with, it had just drugged her. Badly drugged her, true, but just drugs.

Of course, that begged the question of what the hell a handmaiden was doing with drugged darts, anyway.

That thought was quickly swept aside as Mia realised with horror what had happened. She had failed. Worse, she had just tried, in front of a *witness*, to force her way into Princess Elsa's room, into the *heir's* room.

"*And for what?*" Mia thought bitterly. It had all been for nothing. She remembered those last moments before the drugs had overcome her. Anna's wail, the door clicking shut, those intricately painted snowflakes on the door taunting her as she fell into the dark pit of drug-induced slumber. . .

"*A and E will never be together,*" Mia lamented, rolling over and sitting up, fighting the nausea rushing through her at the motion. "*My precious girls will forever remain separate.*"

At that thought, tears, the tears Mia had been holding back for seven years, tears burst from Mia's eyes. Sobbing, she buried her face in her hands, shoulder heaving as she wailed at the sheer hopelessness of the situation. She had done what she could, but good was one old, foolish nursemaid against the might of the King and Queen of Arendelle, two parents who seemed determined to keep their daughters separate. The note had said it was for Anna's safety, to protect her from Elsa's own powers, but what good was physical well-being when one's emotional health was crumbling? When one's heart and soul was being torn into a thousand, irreparable pieces?

Finally, the sobs passed. Rather than feeling better after having a good cry, Mia just felt inexplicably worse.

*"Now my mouth tastes of bile, vomit **and** salt."*

The thought was so random, so bizarre that Mia had to laugh at that, a sad, bitter laugh that echoed through her small chamber.

The manic laughter petered away when Mia saw what sat on her bedside table. Something she hadn't seen in seven years. And then Mia felt cold. Colder than she'd felt in her entire life.

Hand trembling, Mia reached for the knife that sat so prettily between her apron and that black, terrible feather. There was no note this time. Instead, a word had been etched into the blade of the knife, the knife that sparkled with such terrible beauty in the light of the rising sun.

"*LEAVE*" the knife declared at her, the letters flashing.

Fingers shaking so badly that she was afraid that she might drop the blasted thing, Mia flipped the blade over to see the rest of the words scratched into the cold steel.



*“OR ELSE”*

That was it. Three words. Of course, what more could be needed? The Vulture was not known for wasting time or resources. If three words were all that sufficed, three words were all that would be given. No more, no less.

And that was it. In three words, Mia’s fate had been dictated to her. Lord Orn had given his warning. If she wasn’t gone by the end of this day, then she’d be gone by morning, and a lot more permanently.

It was a cruel, ironic fate, Mia supposed, that the world’s retribution for daring to hold a mother’s love for two Princesses who were no children of hers was to tear her away from them forever, knowing that they would never have that chance to re-forged their broken bonds. Instead, they would have to live as they always had, broken apart with the links of their sisterhood lying in the dusty wake of their stupid, old, foolish nursemaid.

A snort burst from Mia’s lips. Before she realised it, another had followed, and another, and another. The nursemaid began to chuckle, each giggle coming out louder than the one before. And with that, Mia sat there on her bed, laughing manically at the sheer unfairness of the universe, its sheer maliciousness, and the cruel irony that it so loved.

She just had to laugh at it all.

After all, it was always better to laugh than to cry.

**Fin**

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A/N: It is currently 2:15AM. I started this fic at 10:00PM. So, yeah, I’ve basically worked for four hours straight on this, not to mention that I forgot to eat dinner because I was so amped to write this chapter xD I hope that it’s good, and that the long work hours haven’t caused too many issues with this J

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this. I sure as crumpets know that I did. A lot of people didn’t really warm up to Mia in Part I, since she got in the way of kid!Elsanna, but I hope that this helped to soften your view of her. It made me kind of sad to write that confrontation, even though I knew that she wouldn’t succeed. Meh, I get emotional when I’m developing tragic ends for characters

So, I’m toying with the idea of writing an epilogue to this, set after the events of Frozen, when Elsa and Anna have gotten together, and they set out to find out what happened to their dear old Nana. Just to give this part closure. So, would you guys be interested in reading the last meeting between Mia, Elsa and Anna? If so, please leave a review saying so!

Again, hope you guys enjoyed this. It’s your support that helps me write and stay motivated, even with mammoth chapters like this. Please leave a review if you have the time! :D

Catchya guys later! Keep writing, keep reading, and keep being awesome! :D

Rating: T

Genre: Family, Friendship, Romance

Warnings: Incest, fem!Slash

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A/N: Hey everyone! It's update time! :D

So, you guys have had to wait way to long for this, so I think I should first apologise and then explain why.

I'm *so* sorry that this took so long. Thank you so much for all being so patient and putting up with my irresponsible behaviour. This chapter wasn't originally part of my planned line-up, but thanks to popular demand I've decided to write it. I hope that it lives up to your expectations J Enjoy!

This takes place during The Dancing Master.

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### ***The Nursemaid – Part III***

They were called peace lilies, and they were the only constant companion during Mia's long years of exile.

The flowers had been specially imported by a doting uncle, who had worked as a cook aboard a merchant ship. Brought from the New World, the flowers had been easy enough to cultivate, and they had soon spread throughout Mia's flowerbeds. The woman had originally held little intent to help the flowers flourish, but after some research and a few days of indifferent watering, Mia had found herself dedicating more and more of her time to ensuring the little buds' growth.

If there was one positive to exile, it was that she had a lot of time now.

It still felt strange, waking up every morning and realising that she wouldn't be rolling Anna out of bed and dragging the drowsy girl to the bathroom to wash up. She found herself having to resist the unconscious urge to go upstairs and check if the Princess had gone to her dancing lesson at two in the afternoon, and had more than once opened the door to an empty bedroom with a reminder to wash up before dinner on her lips.

Old habits die hard, and Mia had drilled herself into maintaining a daily schedule of watching over the royal heirs for fifteen years.

*"Good gods, fifteen years?"* It still left Mia bitter to think about how, after a decade and a half of dedicated service, she had still been fired without much

preamble, all of her emotional and physical investment into her work being reduced to a single sheet of paperwork, a confirmation that loose ends had been cut, and a somewhat respectable severance package. She should be grateful for that last one, at least; Mia was fairly certain that if things had gone the Vulture's way, she would've just been cast out into the streets on some trumped-up excuse, or found herself at the bottom of the fjord with a knife in her throat. But when Mia had left the castle, she had turned back to look at her former home one last time and had seen Princess Elsa at her window, staring down sadly at the departing former nursemaid. It had been at that moment that Mia had realised that the only reason she was being exiled to a remote but comfortable college in the forests far away from Arendelle was because Princess Elsa had requested it.

Nice to know that someone still cared enough to make sure that you could waste away the rest of your life in comfort.

Mia knew that she sounded whiny and bitter, as well as more than a little self-pitying. But as she'd discovered in the first few weeks after moving into her new home, it was easier to be a grouchy old lady grumbling about her misfortunes than the alternative method of coping with her fate: staying in bed bawling her eyes out until she died from starvation or her heart gave out due to sheer misery (which, in hindsight, wasn't really coping with her fate at all).

Mia told the flowers so in the afternoon as she sat on her front porch, knitting needles clacking together as she created yet another jumper that would sit in her closet for a few days before being sold off to the market. With nothing else to do and with her purse of gold growing light, Mia had taken to creating an entire wardrobe's worth of clothing every week, which would be picked up by her cousin every Saturday to take to the nearby village and be sold at the market. Though Derek had offered to split the profits 50/50, Mia had declined, asking only for a 30% share. Derek had a family to support, a wife and two little girls, as well as old Aunt Olga in the attic. Mia... Well, she just needed enough to buy food and water, as well as fertiliser for her plants and feed for her chickens. Outside of that, there wasn't much else in Mia's life. She didn't have a husband, or children, or crippled relatives. Her family only visited once a year on her birthday, because the trip to the cottage was weary and long, and they all had jobs and families of their own to return to. Every so often, a relative or an old friend would pop by for no reason other than to visit, bringing news of the outside world, but it was never frequent. As the Vulture had planned, the sheer isolation of the cottage made any visit a painstaking endeavour which few had the time or finances to make.

So, Mia stayed alone in her cottage, passing time by knitting, feeding the chickens, and talking to her flowers. It was a quiet life, but a simple life. Nothing was too hard, and nothing was ever required of her. All she had to do was sit tight, keep all of the castle secrets to herself, and then eventually die alone, taking what she knew to the grave with her. When news had been brought that Good King Nick and Queen Helen had been lost at sea, Mia's sorrow at their passing had been matched only by her hope that now, with Elsa to ascend to the throne,

she would be recalled and all would be forgiven. But as the weeks wore on, and a castle messenger failed to show up, Mia's hope began to diminish, whilst her sorrow only grew. When Derek informed her that the Council would act as Regent until Elsa came of age, Mia showed no reaction other than to fold a sweater carefully and stack it on the assembled pile, quietly folding away her hope with it.

She was a foolish old woman, Mia confessed to her flowers one rainy afternoon. She should know better than to expect that Princess Elsa, heir to the Arendelle throne and due to ascend to it in three years, would take the time to remember her silly old Nana, or care enough to risk going against the Vulture himself just to bring her back. As the new Queen, Elsa would need to consolidate her position by reinforcing the bonds linking her allies to the throne, and that would be considerably more difficult to achieve if her first orders as Queen were to undo her predecessor and father's last. It would be better to just accept her fate and resign herself to her exile, and give up any foolish hope that Mia would ever see her darling girls again.

The peace lilies didn't answer. They never did. But Mia was content to speak to them nonetheless, recounting old tales and past regrets, all the while trying hard to quell the cold voice in her heart that admonished her for trying to replace two wonderful, lovely, beautiful girls with a flowerbed.

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Years went past. Nothing changed. Mia's chickens died after a particularly harsh winter storm burst open the coop during the night and left them exposed to the freezing winds, and she just couldn't be bothered to replace their cold, ice-crusted corpses. Mia herself fell ill that winter, and was reluctantly taken care of by Derek's wife, a quiet, smiling woman named Brenda, who was willing to take some time away from her newborn grandchildren for a few days to feed her cousin-in-law hot broth and to reheat the hot water bottle in Mia's bed. Although Mia recovered, she couldn't help but feel that this latest flu was yet another sign of her growing age, a sentiment that was reinforced by the growing ache in her bones.

Mia's cold came back with a vengeance when, in the middle of summer, a blizzard abruptly dumped twenty feet of snow onto the old woman when she was coming home after buying some meat from the peddler on the road. She'd been forced to slog through several fields of snow just to reach her cottage, and then she'd spent several more hours outside in the chill ensuring the safety of her peace lilies, all the while wondering what on earth could have caused this midsummer winter. The nagging voice inside her wondered if this was somehow Elsa's doing, but Mia had grown accustomed to ignoring it. Besides, Elsa may have been able to do a few magic tricks when she was younger, and maybe cause her bedroom to ice over when she was in a particularly bad mood, but something on this scale was beyond the capabilities of the girl Mia remembered.

The flu lasted for a few more days, until summer remembered that it was mid-July and chased away all the snow and ice. Mia, who had been bedridden, woke won morning to find that she was sweltering under her winter furs, and that the frost that had been creeping over her windows had mysteriously vanished. All in all, it had been a bizarre experience that Mia would've chalked up to a particularly realistic hallucination had it not been for Derek's visit that week.

Upon learning the full details of what had transpired back in Arendelle, Mia's first thought was to hop on Derek's wagon and order him to take her back to the castle. It was her second thought, too. Only a dose of cautious reason which came from what Mia was starting to call 'old people sense' stopped the idea from becoming her third thought as well.

Mia didn't know if Elsa wanted to see her. Mia didn't know if Elsa even remembered her. Furthermore, Mia didn't need to be a genius to figure out that after the debacle of her coronation, Elsa would need to work extra hard to earn back the trust of the throne's allies, including the Vulture. The Vulture, who had promised that the day Mia went beyond a mile radius from her cottage would be the day she would die.

And so, Mia stayed, ignoring the nagging voice, which was screaming at her and calling her a lot of obscenities Mia didn't remember knowing. She fought down every impulse, bit down on every tear, choked down every swell of emotion, and she quietly attended to her flowers, which were wilting from their unexpected encounter with winter.

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Mia had never thought of herself as a dreamer. In all honesty, she'd been firmly convinced that she was a realist who, outside of talking to peace lilies, was absolutely incapable of supernatural fantasies. Despite this, when Mia heard a horn sound and saw a squad of mounted soldiers dressed not in the dark green of the City Watch but the golden cloaks of the Royal Guard escorting a carriage up the dirt road leading to her cottage, the retired nursemaid told herself that she must be dreaming.

The procession stopped at the gate to Mia's garden, and the lead horseman dismounted from his destrier and took off his helm. He respectfully stood at attention, waiting for Mia to come and greet him at the entrance to her home. Even from her spot by her living room window, Mia could recognise the man as the Captain of the Royal Guard. Despite the growing grey in his hair and beard, there was simply no mistaking Halden's massive girth and that rigidly professional military stance.

"Miss Mia," the man called. "Are you in?"

Mia considered ignoring him. She considered pretending that she wasn't home, or demanding that he leave. If this was all some cruel trick played by the Vulture, Mia didn't want anything to do with it.

But... But on the small chance that this wasn't a trap, that this was genuine... How could Mia pass up on that chance?

"Yes, I'm here," Mia replied, pushing open her front door and making her way to the front gate. "Good day, Captain. What brings you to these parts?"

"A royal order, Miss," Halden replied, stepping to one side and gesturing to the carriage.

The carriage door burst open, and out tumbled a redheaded young woman in a green summer dress, scrambling to get out of the royal transport.

"Nana!"

Mia's breath caught. Her brain stopped working, and her entire body froze. The woman in front of her was not the Princess she remembered. She was too tall, too beautiful, had curves where none had existed, the once-gangly limbs were graced with hard wires of muscle, and a rapier hung in its sheathe form a swordbelt on her waist.

But the smile, the eyes, the freckles, the joy: they were all Anna.

The Princess of Arendelle was standing on the other side of Mia's gate, and not only had she remembered who Mia was, she was actually happy to see her old Nana.

Mia's eyes shifted from the glowing face of the Princess as the other door of the carriage opened. The old woman's grip on the gate tightened as she fully expected Lord Orn himself to step out, dressed in unfriendly black, his trademark beaked tricorne hat perched on greasy hair.

But the figure that stepped out was not the Vulture. Dressed in a simple white-and-blue dress which bared far more pale skin than Mia could ever remember, the shapely young woman timidly approached the gate where her sister and former caretaker awaited, the former bouncing with excitement and the latter frozen in place by shock, surprise, and sheer disbelief. Fingers stroking nervously at long blonde hair that hung in a plait over her shoulder (when had she ever taken to letting her hair down?), the Queen of Arendelle gave Mia an uneasy smile.

"Hello... Nana," Elsa managed, the words laced with worry, guilt and regret.

In future retellings of this incident, Mia would speak of how she had thrown open her front gate and had grabbed both of her girls and just brought them close to her, hugging them for the first time in years. Mia would always take care to mention how she had admonished both of them for being so foolish for so long, and asking what had taken them so long to remember their poor old Nana, and the former nursemaid had then complimented Anna on growing up into a strong, beautiful woman, as well as congratulating Elsa on her ascension to the throne and for regaining control over her powers, fondly stroking the smiling blonde girl's cheek. She would offer her condolences on the fate of their parents, and would offer both the girls and their escorts into her home for a cup of tea.

As it happened, however, none of this would come to pass until perhaps twenty minutes later, when Mia had finally gotten herself back on her feet after collapsing on the ground, weeping tears of pure, uninhibited joy.

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Elsa and Anna would remain at her cottage for two weeks, the Princess informed Mia at dinner around a mouthful of biscuit. Although they wanted to stay longer, there was simply too much happening back at Arendelle for them to linger. Although Anna had proposed that Mia come back with them, Mia had been forced to decline. Despite her inner voice screaming at her to accept, Mia knew the limits of her body, and she admitted that the recent flu had greatly weakened her, and that she was not up to such a journey. Elsa had offered to leave behind a few guards from the escort, which was staying in the nearby village, so that when Mia felt up to it, they could help bring Mia back to the castle, but Mia refused. Although this royal visit indicated a workable relationship between the Queen and her Vulture, Mia wasn't entirely sure if the earlier threat was still standing.

She told Elsa as much later, while Anna was out admiring the flowers in Mia's garden. There was an unspoken agreement between the two that Anna, who knew little of the Vulture beyond title and position, would not be kept in the loop of the circumstances behind Mia's exile. Elsa herself said little of the Vulture, merely informing Mia that Lord Orn was no longer in power, and instead spoke of the details concerning Mia's possible return. Elsa admitted that the ties between her and the new Vulture were tenuous at best, and that the Queen had more or less had to force the Vulture to permit even this visit. Elsa also quietly confessed that while the secret that had exiled Mia was a secret no longer, the Vulture had said in no uncertain terms that Mia should not be permitted to return to the castle, having already proven herself to be a potential liability. Though Elsa had offered to ignore the Vulture's 'advice', Mia denied Elsa's proposal. It wouldn't do for Elsa's reign as Queen to be weakened on behalf of an old woman unfit for her former task anyway. Besides, the youths who Mia had once been charged weren't youths anymore, and they certainly didn't need her around to look after them anymore.

Mia had been surprised (but pleasantly so) when Elsa's response was to embrace the old woman (Mia couldn't remember the last time she'd seen Elsa touch anyone) and whisper that, no matter how old they got, Elsa and Anna would always need their Nana.

This, of course, made Mia cry again, which in turn caused Elsa to tear up as well, prompting Anna to come back inside and stare bewildered as the weeping women clutched at each other and sobbed out thirteen years of regret and separation. In those few minutes, crying into each other's shoulders, Mia and Elsa both knew that all was forgiven.

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When you work as a member of the royal staff, you learn to see things, but more importantly, you learn to not mention seeing them.

But Mia wasn't a member of the staff anymore, and so she was no longer obligated to obey staff rules.

The past few days had been pure bliss for the old woman. After so many years of separation, it was still hard to believe that she could wake every morning and enter the kitchen to find the young women she'd longed to see for so many years casually enjoying a morning cup of tea at her table. Every so often, Mia would have to pinch her arm to reassure herself that this wasn't another cruel dream, and that she wouldn't suddenly jolt awake in bed to find her home as desolately empty as it had been for the past six years. But it wasn't, and Mia considered the ache in her elbow to be a small price to pay to see Anna and Elsa together for breakfast in her home, enjoying one another's presence after so many years of separation. More often than not, if the girls weren't doting on the old woman and checking after her health (whilst ignoring her protests that such behaviour was unbecoming for royalty), they would be in her garden snuggling closely as they watched a line of ants march through the grass, or in the den, with Elsa sitting on the sofa reading whilst Anna snoozed in the afternoon heat, chewing on her fiery head as she used her sister's lap as a pillow.

And therein lay Mia's problem.

For most people, this would be little more than sisterly affection, something hardly amiss between two siblings who'd been torn apart for so long. But Mia wasn't most people. She'd known Anna and Elsa since they were mere babes at their mother's breast, and she had read more than enough fairy tales and bedtime stories to the young girls, particularly Anna, to not recognise that particular look of enrapture in the redhead's eyes. Mia knew that look. It was a look that only shone from Anna's eyes in specific occasions: when Mia had finished reading a book about high fantasy and epic courtly romance... and when Anna looked at her sister. Most importantly, though, that look was absent whenever Anna prattled on about her potential suitor, a certain Royal Ice Harvester and Deliverer (which, despite Mia's dubious look, was apparently an official position).

"Kristoff's the *best*, Nana! You'd love him, I'm sure! Well, maybe not *love*, because he always smells a bit like reindeer, and you'd probably try to give him a bath or something, but I think that you'd still learn to like him. He seems a bit gruff, but he's a real sweetheart underneath it all. Just a bit of a fixer upper, you know, just needs a little love to really shine!"

"A 'fixer upper'?" Mia said, amused, lying back in her cosy chair on her porch. The Princess was practicing her dancing, but she had been reluctant to leave her Nana's side, so they had compromised: Anna would rehearse her steps in the garden, and Mia would sit on the porch and watch. At least, that had been



the plan. Instead, Anna was playing with a blade of grass and chatting to Mia, sitting cross-legged in the garden, her sword lying forgotten next to her.

"You know, someone who's got a couple faults, but nothing too big. Kind of like a chair that's missing a leg; you just need to prop it up a bit to keep it steady!"

"Surprisingly, that metaphor actually makes sense," Mia chuckled.

"I've used it a lot to explain to people what it is about Kristoff that I like," Anna admitted. "A lot of people keep telling myself that he's not good enough for me, that a Princess shouldn't get into a relationship with a commoner. But I don't care what they think; Kristoff's sweet, he's nice, and he's a great boyfriend. Can you ever really ask for more from a person?"

"You seem quite fond of him," Mia acknowledged. She gave Anna a sly look. "Might I be expecting a wedding invitation in a few weeks?"

It was incredibly endearing that even after all these years, Anna's ears still turned bright red to match her cheeks when she blushed. The hair helped to hide it, but Mia knew it when she saw it.

"Don't be silly, Nana! I've only known him for a couple months; you can't marry a man you just met!" Anna dropped the grass that she had been tearing to shreds and snatched up her sword. She turned and settled into a ready position, saluting an imaginary foe. "Besides," she continued, taking careful steps as she circled around her non-existent enemy. "I need to get Elsa's blessing before I can do anything."

"Well, of course. She is your Queen. What kind of guardian would she be if she let some 'fixer upper' make off with her sister?"

Anna rolled her eyes. She made a few practice swings, blade flashing silver through the air.

"Nana, *everyone* is a bit of a fixer upper. Nobody's perfect; everyone could do with a little polishing now and then."

"Oh? Even me, Princess?"

"You're the worst, Nana," Anna teased (an incredible display of confidence, in Mia's opinion. The Anna she'd known had been far too concerned with not offending anyone to indulge in a bit of ribbing). "You never let me have enough chocolates as a child. That's why I babble so much; I am suffering from the traumas of a sugarless childhood."

"You and I both know that sugar will make you talk even more, not less, Princess. Besides, you have me to thank for your graceful figure and healthy teeth. Don't be ungrateful now; I didn't spend hours forcing you to sit still so that I could brush your teeth for you to criticise me years later." Mia watched Anna, unsure of what to make of the supreme confidence burning within the girl who had once been so desperate for love and attention that she'd been utterly shameless in her pursuits of adoration. "And what about Elsa?"

“Hmm? What about her?” Anna said in a voice that was far too casual for someone who was impaling a leaf.

“Is she a fixer upper?”

Anna spun around at that, the leaf flying off the tip of her blade as she gaped at Mia.

“Of course not! Elsa’s perfect! She’s like, like freshly fallen snow! Completely unmarked! No, wait, snow melts. Umm... she’s like ice! Ice that’s clear as crystal! No, scratch that, ice melts too... Diamond! Elsa’s a diamond! She’s got a lot of different faces, and they’re all different, but they’re all perfect!”

Mia gave Anna a strange look. The Princess was surprisingly impassioned, and her calm and teasing exterior had given way to the rambling, terrible-at-similes, overly excitable girl of Mia’s memories. The confidence that had so surprised the old woman was still there, but it was different. Whereas before it had been relaxed but coiled tight, like a viper in the moments before it strikes, Anna’s newfound strength was burning with an intense fire that Mia had not seen in a long time. Could it be...?

Hesitantly, Mia gave voice to a thought that had been troubling her since one fateful day almost fourteen years ago.

“Princess, I am entirely aware that Elsa is a perfect young woman. And I’m sure that others are aware of it as well. How has her search for a suitor been going, may I ask?”

Anna blinked. Her feet that had been so graceful just a moment ago stumbled as the girl lost her balance, as if she had been physically struck and unbalanced by the question.

“Wait, what? What search? What suitor?”

Mia raised her hands defensively, placating the suddenly frantic Princess.

“Well, I just assumed that, as Queen, surely there must be someone who asks for her hand in marriage. If not a King, at least a firstborn Prince or high-ranking Lord. It is a rare thing to have an unmarried Queen, and even more so to have a Queen who is not betrothed to anyone. Has Elsa truly not been approached with a marriage proposal?”

“Well, of course she has! For her and for me! But she promised me that she wouldn’t betroth me to anyone without my permission, and that so long as I was with Kristoff, she wouldn’t even consider any suitor asking for my hand!”

“A respectable decision, I suppose,” Mia allowed. “But what of her own hand? Has she truly not at least considered marriage?”

Anna’s eyes flashed for a second with something that Mia couldn’t make out.

“Elsa wouldn’t marry a man she doesn’t know.”

“Elsa wouldn’t,” Mia admitted. “But the Queen would, if the marriage could guarantee an alliance which would benefit Arendelle. To be sure, she is Queen, not a Princess; her power is secure, and that gives her the position and power to wave away proposals from lesser nobles and even royals, but what if a King was to propose? Someone who was her equal in position, and perhaps even her better in power.”

An intense look darkened Anna’s normally cheerful features.

“Nobody is more powerful than Elsa. Nobody is a match for her and her powers.”

“Princess, even if nobody can outmatch Elsa, they can outmatch Arendelle. We are not a militarily powerful kingdom, surely you know that. Many competitors could conquer us if they wished to do so. Currently, the only thing that prevents them is the ice trade, and the fact that, in the long run, Arendelle is simply not worth the effort of calling the banners. But if they did, we simply wouldn’t have the might to stand against them. But if our Queen could guarantee our safety through an alliance, through marriage... are you certain that she wouldn’t do it? Or at least consider it?”

“You don’t know Elsa, Nana,” Anna said stubbornly. “She’s not a little girl who can make a few snowflakes. She can do incredible things! She froze everything without even knowing it! And she kept things frozen without even having to will it! Nobody would dare try anything so long as Elsa’s alive. She’s too strong. They might as well bring a spoon to a swordfight. And besides, Elsa doesn’t need to marry. She doesn’t *need* a King. Arendelle’s fine with a Queen. It’s not the first time in history that a woman ruled the kingdom. Our first ruler was a woman! Queen Aren the First! My ancestor!”

“Princess, she is only your ancestor because she took on a consort and married the prince of a conquered neighbour in her later life. She had a son, King Andren, to continue the legacy. If Elsa remains unmarried, the royal line will have to continue through you. But if you are serious about your relationship with Christoffer-”

“His name’s Kristoff, Nana.”

“Regardless, if you were to marry a man with no highborn blood, then your children will forever be looked down upon. Unless Elsa has a child, your own children will become Arendelle’s King or Queen, but with Kristoff as their father... No man or woman or child in all the world will take the monarch of Arendelle seriously, Princess. They will be disregarded or mocked for possessing doubtful blood. Your descendants may even be decried as bastards, another cruel lie born simply because their ancestor was an ice harvester.

“And what of you, Princess? You speak so surely for your sister, but would you be happy in marriage? It has been a long time since I saw you last, and I cannot speak for how you grew after we were no longer together, but the Anna I remembered loved nothing more than defying all authority. The only voice to

which she heeded was that of her sister's and her parents'. Would you truly be happy as a wife and mother, remaining at home to care for your children?"

"It wouldn't be so bad," Anna protested. "I'd have Elsa and Kristoff and Olaf. I could show the kids all of my favourite spots in the castle, like where you can hide from people without them ever finding you, or the best spots for an afternoon snooze..."

"And what if Kristoff doesn't wish to stay in the castle? What if he would rather you left the castle and lived with him, wherever he may make his home for wife and children?"

"W-Why wouldn't Kristoff want to live in the castle?" Anna's voice had grown noticeably uncertain. "It's amazing! It's huge, and it's got so much history, and there would be people to take care of us"

"People who would have been born as lowly as he himself was," Mia interrupted. "Sweetheart, have you considered that maybe Kristoff has thought of what it means for a commoner to court a Princess, even if you haven't? Only a year ago, he was but a man with a simple ice business who owned little more than the clothes on his back and the tools in his sled, a sled he most likely hasn't even finished paying off. Back then, even the palace staff would've seemed like an impossible dream. Now, he finds himself in a position in which he is suddenly told that he is better than all these people simply because of you. He would feel uncomfortable, always, a discomfort made worse by the looks of envy and resent that the staff would give him. Is it really such a wonder, then, that he may not want to stay in such a place?"

"Kristoff wouldn't do that to me," Anna said. "He knows how much I love Elsa. He wouldn't try to separate us, not again."

"Tell me, sweetheart," Mia said softly. "Do you truly love Kristoff?"

"Of course," Anna replied instantly, confusion etched into every contour of her freckled face. "Why would you even ask that?"

"If you love him," Mia said sadly, as understanding shook her to her core, "then why would you choose Elsa at his expense?"

"W-What are you saying?"

"Princess, answer me truly, and think before you answer: if today was to be the last day of your life, would you spend it with Kristoff? Or Elsa?"

Anna stood in front of Mia, stunned. Her mouth worked as her mind churned through thoughts, searching for an answer, but for once the girl was silent, and no words passed through her lips.

"I'll let you figure this out. Don't feel the need to come to me with the answer. So long as you can speak true to yourself, that is enough for me." Mia rose to her feet, wincing as her joints groaned in protest. "I'm going inside. This summer heat is becoming quite unbearable. Would you like a glass of lemonade?"

Mia looked back at Anna to find her still standing stiffly, mouth flapping like a goldfish's. Her eyes were wide as she struggled internally to figure out the rush of emotions flooding her.

"Oh darling," Mia said apologetically. She drew Anna into a comforting hug. "Do not fret, dear. We do not choose for whom our hearts pound."

*"If we did," Mia reflected, "I probably would've been smart and found a husband, instead of choosing to devote my life to two girls who are wonderful, lovely, intelligent, royal, and utterly oblivious of their own love."*

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Anna was unnaturally subdued over the next few days. Mia wasn't sure of that was a good sign or not. On the one hand, the girl seemed to be genuinely considering her Nana's words, thinking them over and pondering what it was that she really wanted. On the other hand, Anna had become increasingly defensive, rejecting Elsa's customary signs of affection, flinching when her sister tucked back a strand of her red hair or stepping back when the Queen approached for a hug. Although Mia could understand Anna's reluctance, she knew that Elsa wouldn't, a sentiment proven true when the blonde confessed to Mia about it one afternoon.

"I don't know what's gotten into her," Elsa said, fiddling with a pile of snow. It was a welcome change to see the Queen so comfortable with her powers, after spending well over a decade fighting to conceal them from everyone, including herself. She rippled her fingers, forming the snow into a miniature Anna figurine. "She's normally so energetic and touchy. Normally, *she's* the one who always complains that I'm not affectionate enough. Did I do something wrong?" The snow Anna crumbled into a formless clump. "I've been trying so hard to bridge the gap between us, but... You know me better than anyone, Nana. I'm terrible with people. I don't know how to comfort anyone, or make them feel better." With a sigh, Elsa tossed the snow upwards and it transformed into an icy butterfly mid-air. Specks of frost flew from its wings in a silvery dust as it fluttered its way back down to Elsa's hand. "I don't know. We were doing so well. What went wrong?"

Mia couldn't help but wonder how she ended up in these situations. She knew *exactly* what was bothering Anna, but there was absolutely no way she'd share that particular information. How do you even tell the girl who is effectively your daughter that her sister's feelings for her may go beyond platonic sisterly affection?

"I'm sure she has her reasons," Mia said, trying to keep as neutral a face as possible. "Just give her some time. Heaven knows that she waited for you long enough."

"Ouch," Elsa said, holding the butterfly up to the sun and watching the light gleam through its icy wings. "Guilt trip much?"

Mia raised her hands defensively (it was a gesture that was becoming a frequent pose for her).

“All I mean is that she’s still a teenager. She’s just as susceptible to whims of depression as she is flights of fancy. Give her some room and she’ll come around.”

“It’s just that... We’ve been apart for way too long. And it kind of hurts that she’s pushing me away.” Elsa sighed, her breath misting in the air. Whenever Elsa used her powers, it seemed, her internal temperature would drop accordingly. “I guess one would call it karma.”

“Maybe she’s just missing her boyfriend?” Mia said without thinking, desperate to avoid saying anything that might implicate her in Anna’s current crisis.

Elsa visibly tensed, but her voice remained civil, controlled.

“Why would you say that? She has you, and she has me, the two people she’s longed to see for years. I don’t think that she’d be so shallow as to put Kristoff before family.”

Mia shrugged. “Love does strange things to people.”

The butterfly crinkled like paper as the icy planes shattered beneath Elsa’s grip as her hand reflexively shut closed. She winced and quickly opened her hand, but the butterfly was now nothing more than icy dust in her palm.

"It’s a little early to classify Anna and Kristoff’s relationship as *love*. They’ve only known each other for a few months; this could easily just become an intimate friendship, nothing more."

Elsa’s voice cracked like a whip, and Mia abruptly found herself reminded that as much as she considered Elsa to be just her little girl all grown up, the woman before her was the Queen of Arendelle. In that moment, she looked so much like her father that Mia felt her throat tighten as emotion threatened to choke her.

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Mia said stiffly.

Elsa’s face fell as she turned to face the older woman.

“Oh no, I didn’t- Come on, Mia. Don’t be like that.”

“No, it’s perfectly understandable. I am no longer your nursemaid, and I was never your mother. You are independent from me, and are free to make your own decisions. It is my duty to support your choices.”

“Nana,” Elsa whined, a tinge of childish stubbornness entering her voice. Just like that, Elsa was abruptly a child again, swinging between a little girl and a mature woman, as those in the early stages of adulthood often did. The blonde stood up and walked over to Mia, hugging the old woman tightly from behind. “You don’t have to pretend to be dutiful. You’re not my nursemaid and you’re not part of my staff, but you are pretty much family. And family’s allowed to do and say what they want, because in the end they’re all we’ve got.”

“Do you truly believe that?” Mia asked, warily trying to breach the topic of discussion that had been burning in her mind since this conversation had begun.

Elsa gave her a curious look.

“Believe what?”

“That family can do and say what they want, because family will always love each other no matter what?”

Elsa nodded.

“Yes. Yes, I really do believe that.”

“So you would love Anna no matter what?”

Elsa smiled in a way that Mia had never seen before. It was a warm smile, a caring smile, one that had never before graced the Queen’s features. Mia wasn’t sure what to make of it, other than quell the sinking feeling in her stomach by reminding herself that, no matter the circumstances, she had sworn to forever love and support the two sisters.

“She’s my sister,” Elsa said simply. “She’s my sister before all else. No matter what she does, no matter who she becomes, I will always love her.”

“Well, that’s good to know,” Mia said cheerfully. “Certainly makes things easier.”

“Makes what easier?”

“I think I could use a nice cup of tea,” Mia decided, pretending not to hear Elsa’s question. At her age, people could get away with all sorts of obliviousness. “Would you like some too, dear?”

“Wait, you just said-”

“All right then. Let me go and put the kettle on,” Mia continued, walking into the house and leaving a very confused Elsa on the front porch.

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All too soon, the day arrived. The day of farewell. And although the sisters assured Mia that they would be back, that they would visit when they had the time, and Mia promised that she would visit the castle when she was feeling up to the journey, when her bones didn’t ache so much at the prospect of a long ride to the castle, there was definitely an air of finality to their parting as they stood on Mia’s front porch. Captain Halden and his troops were waiting by the carriage that would take the sisters back to the castle, back to their duty, back to their crowns.

Elsa refused to say goodbye.

“If you say goodbye, it makes it feel as if there won’t be a ‘Hello’ again,” the blonde insisted. “This isn’t farewell. This is merely a formality that needs to be observed for the next time we meet.”

Still, when Mia closed her arms around the girl, marvelling at how slim the Queen's frame was, Elsa sobbed and clutched tightly at Mia's arms, burying her face into Mia's ample bosom. She'd never liked anyone seeing her cry, not even as a child. Mia remembered when Elsa had once scraped her knee bloody after falling off her horse as a child, and half the flesh had been torn off her young leg. But still the girl had refused to let her tears flow. They had formed in her eyes, but she had bit her lip, gritted her teeth, squared her jaw, and had managed to sit through the entire bandaging process before finally wailing from the pain in the safety of her room.

"Now remember, Elsa," Mia said. "Being Queen is a very important duty. You will have many responsibilities. But don't let the stress and pressure get to you. You have a duty to family and friends as well. I know that you've always been a hard worker, but you must remember to take care of your health as well. If I hear that the Queen has become bedridden, I will ride an ox all the way to the castle if I have to, just so I can spank you with a wooden spoon for being so foolish."

Elsa giggled at that, remembering that particular aspect of her childhood. It had never been frequent (she'd always been a good girl), but that made the few times it did happen all the more memorable. It warmed Mia's heart to see Elsa laugh, something that had been absent for many of the blonde's teenaged years.

"Now, that's a pretty noise. You should laugh more often, sweetie."

"I don't want to," Elsa said in a teasingly childish voice. "I hate my laugh. Queens shouldn't snort."

"Queens shouldn't," Mia agreed. "But girls should. And I'd rather that you were a happy young woman than a sad Queen."

"I'll miss you, Nana," Elsa admitted in a soft voice, as if she was afraid anyone would hear. "I wish you could come with us."

"So do I, child," Mia confessed with a sigh. "But my time in the castle is done. We should not live in the past. We must focus on the present, and on our futures."

Elsa pulled away from Mia, and she hastily wiped the tear marks from her cheeks. She drew herself up to her full height, and still managed to look small next to Mia's considerable girth.

"Well, then, Mia, I must be off. Duty calls. Till next we meet." Her queenly expression faltered for a moment as a warm look shone through the excessive formality. "Take care of yourself."

Mia laughed and curtsied so deeply that it went from respectful to teasing, ignoring her back's protests.

"And may the gods continue to bless your rule, Your Majesty."



“Nana?” Mia turned at the sound of Anna’s soft voice. The redhead was lurking in the doorway of the house, as if reluctant to come outside.

“Yes, sweetheart?”

Anna’s eyes shifted nervously to her sister, and then back to Mia.

“Can I talk to you inside? Alone?”

Mia noticed Elsa’s face fall slightly, but Mia shot the Queen a look that said *‘Now, now, be understanding. Give her room.’* Elsa sighed, but took a step backwards, silently giving Mia the go-ahead. Mia turned back to Anna and re-entered her home, suspecting that she knew what it was that prevented Anna from speaking freely in front of her sister.

The Princess certainly seemed reluctant to speak. She twirled a braid around a finger as she chewed her lip, avoiding Mia’s gaze.

“Yes, Anna?”

The girl’s eyes flickered to Mia’s face, then through the door to where Elsa waited outside, then back to the floor.

“Nana, I’ve been thinking about what you said. I’ve been thinking about it a lot. And I think I’ve reached my own conclusions.”

“Is that so?” Mia asked, more as a prompt than an actual question.

Anna sighed, and she looked up from the floor to meet Mia’s eyes.

"I’ve decided that I’m going to call it off with Kristoff when we get back home. I’ll try to explain to him as best I can, but the truth is that I don’t think I should lead him on if I’m not sure about what I want. It’s not fair to me, and it’s not fair to him, *especially* to him."

“Well, what is it that you do want?”

Anna looked back down at the floor.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I like Kristoff. I like holding hands with him, and I like the warm feeling I get when he hugs and k-” Anna’s voice caught and she looked guiltily at Mia, as if expecting her former guardian to rage at the girl’s indiscretions. “When he kisses me. I like that I finally have someone who loves me and adores me and takes me out on dates. He’s not a prince, not by a long shot, but he’s charming, and he’s cute, and it feels like a fairy tale ending.”

Anna sighed again, this time a little wearier, a little sadder.

“But life’s not a fairy tale. We don’t get happily ever afters. Not really. Stories make it look nice, but if you want a happy ending, it all depends on where you close the book. Kristoff’s everything that I thought I ever wanted. . . but he’s not what I need.”

“And what is it that you need?”

Anna's gaze met Mia's, but this time the doubt and guilt was gone, instead replaced by a fiery passion, a red hot heat.

"Mia, do you remember when I broke my ankle, back when I was only four?"

"Of course," Mia said. "How could I forget? It was one of my earliest failures as your nursemaid. I should've known better than to let you girls go out by yourselves. Thank heavens that you only broke your ankle when you fell out of the tree and not your neck."

"After I fell, I couldn't get up. I couldn't even stop crying. Elsa had to carry me all the way back to the castle. It wasn't a long distance, and I wasn't even that heavy, but for a seven-year-old girl? The effort made Elsa cry. It was the first time I'd ever seen her do that. She was always the big sister, always the strong one, always the one who knew how to take care of me. But when she had to slog all the way up the hill with me on her back, she cried, and I felt terrible. Elsa was supposed to be my protector, my big sister, forever strong. So to have to be there, to witness her struggle and cry and shake, all because of me... It was the worst feeling in my life."

"Halfway up the hill, Elsa fell. She tripped on a stone, and she tumbled to the ground. I fell off her back and ended up rolling downhill because my ankle hurt too much and I couldn't catch myself. At that moment, I was so scared. Not because I thought I'd get hurt or anything, but because I thought that Elsa would leave me. I thought that she would scream at me for being so useless and clumsy, and that she would just run up the hill by herself because she didn't want to look weak. I thought that she'd tell me to stay put, and that she'd go get help."

"But she didn't. Instead, Elsa got back to her feet, and she wiped her face of her tears. She then ran back down the hill to where I was, and she asked if I was okay. She *apologised* for dropping me. Then, she picked me up again, and restarted that long trek up to the castle."

"By the time we got to the palace gates, Elsa could barely stand. Her legs were shaking, her hands were slipping off my legs and she was sweating all over. Nana, Elsa *never* sweats. But that was an impossible trip for a seven-year-old, especially a seven-year-old with a four-year-old girl on her back. I never thought we'd make it. But we did. We made it because Elsa refused to leave me behind, and she swore that she would always look after and protect me. And since that day, whenever I dreamt about my future prince, he always had blonde hair and pale skin, because I couldn't imagine a hero looking like anyone except Elsa."

"For a long time, I thought that the only reason I could imagine my prince as someone who looked like Elsa was because that it had hurt so much when she shut me out that I wanted someone to replace her, someone to be my new Elsa. But now I know better. After what you told me, Nana, I think I finally understand. I didn't want someone to *replace* Elsa. I wanted *Elsa*."

Mia remained silent. There was nothing to be said. Anna had opened her chest

and showcased her heart. She was at her most vulnerable, and her most powerful. Love burned in her eyes, but beneath it, there was a fear, a nervous quiver, as if Anna was afraid of what Mia might say.

"Is there... Is there something wrong with me, Nana? Isn't this against everything that everyone has ever taught me? The scriptures say that it is a terrible sin for a woman to want a woman, but for a sister to love her sister? People have been *hanged* for incest, Nana. Wasn't that the fate of King Esben the Unworthy? And that was with his cousin. For sisters, for two women who came from the same womb... Nana, what would people do? What would Mother and Father do? What should *I* do?"

Mia was silent for a long time as her brain whirled into overdrive. What should she say? What *could* she say? Everything that Anna had said was true. Ever since ancient times, it had been blasphemy for people of the same sex to ever harbour romantic feelings for each other, and incest was a crime punishable by death in any part of the world. And Mia knew what the correct answer was. She should tell Anna to not cut off her relationship with this Kristoff fellow, in the hopes that maybe his companionship would help convince her that men were to her taste. She should also inform Anna that there were alchemists, herbalists and apothecaries all with different medicines and rituals that could cleanse her of her perversion. Finally, she should advise Anna that it would be best if she never revealed her feelings to Elsa, and that she should move out of the castle as soon as possible, hopefully to a husband's home.

But none of these answers *felt* correct. Worse, none of them would help Anna. None of them would encourage Anna. But all of them *would* hurt Anna.

And so, for the second time in her life, Mia damned all consequences to hell and ignored the correct answers.

"I cannot say for sure, Princess," the old woman admitted. "People have always responded poorly to things that they do not understand, or to things that are... *different*. I do not know how the people may react to this confession. Also, I cannot speak for the late King and Queen, and I did not know them well enough to assure you of what their responses may have been. However, I can speak for myself, and I hope that you have not yet lost faith in your Nana's words of wisdom."

Mia took a deep breath, preparing to ignore all that she had ever been taught, all for the sake of this wonderful woman's happiness.

"I think that you should do what you feel is best, and that you should heed the words of both your heart and your mind. Too many smart men have died foolish deaths for ignoring their mind, and too many reasonable men have died lonely deaths for ignoring their heart. Just know this: I will always stand by you, and I will always support you, no matter what you may choose. For you are my Princess, and I am your Nana, and I love you and your sister both far too much to care what others may think."

Mia had been hoping that her words would help steel Anna's gaze, straighten her spine, and give her the courage to face the world. She had not been expecting the redhead to burst into tears and fling herself into Mia's arms, sobbing violently. Mia was stunned for a second, unsure of how to react. But only for a second.

"There, there," Mia said softly, soothingly patting Anna on the back. "It's all right. It's all right."

"Thank you so much Nana," Anna mumbled, hiccupping slightly. "Thank you so much. I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry about everything, everything that I did to you, all the hardships I've caused you..."

"It's all right, sweetheart. It's all right. There is nothing I did that you are responsible for, and there is nothing I did that I regret. The past is behind us. It doesn't matter. What matters now is that you go outside, you face your sister, and you go back to your castle. Go back to your home, go back to Kristoff, and go back to Elsa. Forge your own future. Do not let anyone shape your destiny. It is in your hands now, so please be careful with it."

"I'll miss you, Nana," Anna sniffled.

Mia sighed heavily, blinking back tears of her own. "I will miss you too, child. I'll miss you too."

Later that day, when the golden armour of the Royal Guard had vanished from view, when the sounds of horses snorting and hooves stamping and wheels creaking had echoed into nothingness, when the carriage containing Mia's heart disappeared over the horizon, the old nursemaid went into her garden and dug up all of the peace lilies from her flowerbed. Then, she went inside, and threw the flowers (the *snowflowers*), into the fire.

**Fin**

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A/N: So this took *way* too long for something that doesn't advance the plot at all, and basically acts as filler explaining how Anna discovered that she loved Elsa in this particular universe. Again, I apologise for the long wait, and I hope that this wasn't a disappointment to anyone. It was harder than I thought to write this meeting xD

Also, yes, peace lilies are in fact a real South American flowering plant known as snowflowers. The more you know, am I right?

Anyways, hope you enjoyed! Leave a review if you have the time; if not, thanks for taking the time to read this. I promise that the next update will be faster. Because this is now Part I of Argos done! In the next chapter, we're moving on to Part II: the tourney! Expect a lot of cameos from a lot of familiar faces ;)

Well, until then, see you all next time! Catchya later! :D

Rating: T

Genre: Family, Friendship, Romance

Warnings: Incest, fem!Slash

Disclaimer: This is a work of fiction. All names mentioned do not represent the true persons. All brand names do not belong to the author. No copyright laws or personal privacy laws are intended to be infringed.

A/N: I'm starting to realise that I may have the most patient readerbase ever. I mean, you guys have to wait forever for Argos updates, but you're all so incredibly patient. But hey, at least you get updates faster than the BBC Sherlock fans, right?

Well, in any case, here is the newest chapter, and the start of Part II of Argos. It's here that we'll be moving into the tourney of Arendelle, in which we have many foreign visitors, and the shape of an actual plot starts coming together.

Shout-out to yumi\_michiyo, who did the beta as well as Scottified the characters' dialogue. I'm trying to go for authenticity, so it's helpful if the actual conversation reflects that. Love ya, yumi!

This takes place after The Vulture.

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### ***The Archer – Part I***

"Please Mum?"

"Merida, we've discussed this. It is not proper for a Princess to participate in a tourney. What man in his right mind would dare to compete? There is great honour in becoming a champion, but there is greater dishonour in shaming royalty."

"Mum, there'll no' be any shaming; I'll beat any archer who dares to string his bow!"

"Merida," Queen Elinor said with a sigh, putting down her book. She walked over to her gloomy daughter, who was glaring out of the cabin window. "I have no doubt that you've the skill and the talent to outdo any archer in all the lands. But that won't matter here. No matter how large the winner's pot, no sane man would dare try to best a Princess. They would all lose *on purpose*. What honour is there in that?"

"Are ye sayin' that those lily-livered cowards would *let* me win? Brave men they are. Mighty warriors who can't make their wives proud, no doubt."

"Don't be too quick to judge, Merida. The life of a common man is not the same as the life of a Princess. Besides, what would you do with twenty thousand gold pieces anyway?"

"Maybe buy me mum a new dress?" Merida suggested as she turned away from the window to face her mother, smiling shyly. "I mean, I owe you one after that witch's spell made you tear your nice green one."

"Don't be silly, dear. I'm sure that you have better uses for that money than getting me something to replace that old thing. Maybe you could commission a new bow? Or new arrows? You could get cedar shafts."

"Mum, I don't need *cedar*. Ash wull do jest fine. Besides, I break most of mah arrows anyways. T'would be a waste." Merida turned back to gaze out at the horizon. "Maybe I'd jest save the money."

"Well, with ten thousand gold pieces as your dowry, I'm sure that you'll be ever more the attractive bride."

"Mum!" Merida groaned, turning back to face Queen Elinor, who was stifling a giggle behind her hand. "I told you, I'm not getting married. And if I am, I'll not be giving anybody any *dowry*. I am a Princess! Gods, they should be payin' me for the trouble of taking their princeling off their hands."

"I'm sure that the clan Lords and their sons will be most disappointed to hear of this," Queen Elinor replied in a queer tone most unlike her. Merida gave her a questioning look, unsure if her dignified mother was capable of sarcasm. "You will be quite the lonely Queen one day."

"Pfft. I'll be fine! Times are changing, Mum. You don't need a royal husband nowadays. I mean, this Arendelle queenie's doing a braw job by her lonesome."

"Please do not refer to Queen Elsa as 'queenie' in her presence, dear. Or, in the presence of any citizen of Arendelle. And that is hardly an equal comparison. Queen Elsa possesses... *supernatural* skills, I'm told."

"So? I've got me bow. An arrow is jest as deadly as an icicle, I'm certain o' that."

"Merida, Queen Elsa froze over an *entire kingdom*. That is hardly the same thing as a single archer, no matter how skilled or talented she may be. More to the point, however, I'm told that Queen Elsa is quite unlike you. She was a *proper* Princess, and now she is a *proper* Queen."

"I heard she's a witch, too." Merida mumbled, fiddling with the corner of her cushion. "D'ye reckon she's anything like that smarmy witch wi' the bear spells?"

"I strongly advise you to keep that opinion to yourself, Merida. Queen Elsa is not a witch. She is simply... *gifted*, shall we say? And just because she had a... difficult coronation, that is not a reflection on her reign. Amongst all the swirling rumours, there are many positive things to be heard as well. Not all magic is to be regarded with suspicion, Merida. I hear that the smallfolk have much love for their Queen, who has proven herself to be competent, dignified, skilled, diplomatic, polite, gracious, and all else that a Queen should be. Perhaps you may want to take lessons from her, to give you a role model to emulate?"

"Mum, I'm no' needing *another* majestic Queen to correct how I sit and stand and eat; I've already got you for that."

"Speaking of which, Merida, I hope you won't slouch as much while we're at the Arendelle court. You are a representative of DunBroch, and we must show the world that the Highlands are not the places of savagery that they think they are."

Of course, King Fergus chose that exact moment to burst into the cabin with a huge cleaver in one hand and some unidentifiable piece of bloody meat in the other. Lord of Clan DunBroch, Ruler of the Highlands, Protector of the Realm, and renowned throughout the lands as the Bear King, Fergus cut an impressive figure: easily over six feet tall with a bulk akin to the beasts he hunts, his great girth bulged with hard muscles disguised by a prominent belly that spoke of monstrous strength as much it did of a food lover's indulgence. A shaggy beard and impressive moustache that was as red as the Firefalls back home sprouted from his face, further adding to his ferocious demeanour, an aura of aggressive power that was strengthened by the great double-headed war-axe strapped to his back.

Of course, none of this could prevent him sounding like a whiny child as he threw himself at Elinor, an incredibly sulky expression shining from underneath his curly crimson beard.

"Elinor! I've jest got word! At the rate we're travelling, those deil o' Vikings'll arrive three days afore us! Tell me true, how is that possible? They set sail from Berk. *Berk!* That bloody isle is twelve days north o' Hopeless and jest south o' Freezing to Death. It's in the Meridian of Misery! I dinna know how those horn-heads can get here afore us?"

"Da, dinna fuss yersel' ower no reason," Merida said hesitantly, eyeing the dripping hunk of blood and gristle in Fergus's hand uneasily. "Vikings ha'n't invaded our borders for decades. They ain't our enemies no more."

"Merida, you weren't born yet when the Heelands were being overrun by those deils. We barely won that war, and we only did it because I managed to unite the clans under the DunBroch banner! Losh, I remember that day well. It was a dark night, with all the chieftains gathered in my war tent. They were all arguing and fighting, all being auld safties about who would stand where and which clan would get the vanguard, and a bunch of other silly things like that. Finally, after two hours of sitting in there, listening to the bunch of pansies whilst our enemies gathered around our homes, I decided that I had enough, so—"

"—so you snatched up your axe and threw it into the table so hard that you couldn't get it back out later. I ken this story, Da. I just meant that tis no' so bad if the Vikings get here afore us. T'ain't the end of the world."

"Auld Cloutie tak' me if a bunch of barbarians riding on overgrown lizards show up DunBroch in front of a' the kingdoms throughout the lands!" Fergus

thundered, waving his arms animatedly, as if daring the gods themselves to challenge his claim.

“Fergus, dear, please put down the pig stomach when you’re defending your manly honour,” Elinor said with an air of long-suffering weariness. “I’m sure that there will be plenty of time to resume your feud with the Vikings when we’re at the tourney. I even promise to watch the melee with you, if that’s what you want. You always did like watching a Highlander batter a Viking senseless with a warhammer.”

“Elinor!” Fergus said, aghast. “I thought that *ye’d* understand, at least! I canna have the name of me forefathers shamed like this! No Viking has bested a Highlander, ava, and no Viking ever will! I’m going to speak to the captain this meenit! I want us to increase our speed! Full wind in all our sails!”

And with that, Fergus spun on his heel and thundered out of the cabin, foot and peg shaking the floor so hard that the lanterns rattled as he stormed past. Elinor stood up with a sigh, running a hand through greying hair.

“Merida, I’ll be back soon. I’m afraid that your father’s gone too long without a good fight. He’s always hated travelling by boat; it makes him antsy. Thank heavens you’re not as bad as he is.”

“Mum, I puked all over the deck. Twice. On the first day.”

“That’s only because you keep stuffing your gob with enough meat to keep a bear fed through winter, darling,” Elinor giggled, tweaking Merida’s nose affectionately. Pouting, Merida patted her nose protectively, as if making sure that it hadn’t been twisted out of place. “I’ll be right back. Just don’t get into trouble, and, if you have the time, you might want to go over your introductions and greetings again; a Princess has to make a good first impression on other royalty, you know.”

“Why are there so many things that a Princess has to do or not do?” Merida sighed as she flung herself onto the bed. “Honestly, Mum, I dinna ken how you manage it.”

Elinor laughed at that, hand daintily covering her mouth.

“Practice, Merida. It’s all about practice.” The Queen smiled warmly at her daughter as she closed the cabin door. “Behave yourself, Merida. I shan’t be long.”

“Pfft,” Merida snorted. She crossed her arms grumpily and glared at the ceiling. “Practice. As if practice can just make somebody into a propa’ Princess. I bet this new Queen lady’s naething like Mum. There’s no way that someone can just be all queenly; it’s barely been a year syne her coronation. She’s probably more like me when I have to be all Princess-y: awkward and stuttering and messing up all the different titles and countries. Who even knows all of these places anyway?”



Sighing, Merida flopped over onto her belly, staring gloomily at her mother's empty seat.

"Mum knows fair well, but she's Mum; she's been Queen for years. And she has Da to help. This Queen Elsa's all by her ainsel', and she's but a few years older than me. How regal can she be?"

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Queen Elsa, Merida decided, was by far one of the most boring people she'd ever met.

Apparently, when someone's reputation precedes her, the reputation isn't guaranteed to be true. The talk surrounding the mysterious Arendellan Queen had been varied and inconsistent, but one thing that had seemed to be within all the reports was that Queen Elsa was by far one of the most interesting rulers throughout the land. She had frozen over an entire kingdom, and could create golems of ice and snow on a whim. Her powers were strong enough to take down teams of professional killers, it was said, and her mind was sharp enough to mentally draw out the plans for an entire castle. It was said that her beauty was so radiant that any man who laid their eyes on her would fall in love with the icy seductress, who wore garb constructed from frost and possessed hair woven from threads of the rare winter sunlight.

The woman seated on the throne when Merida and her parents were admitted to pay their respects was nothing like the supernatural goddess that Merida had heard so much of. As they approached the throne, with dignitaries from all the other kingdoms rising respectfully at their entrance, Merida observed the Queen who had been the talk of all the lands for the past year. She was beautiful, true, but in the mundane, comely manner that befitted a lady, not the bewitching enchantment of a sorceress. Her dress, though decorated with minute icicles, was just plain fabric, and while it left her arms and shoulders bare, the dress was conservative enough that reminded Merida a bit too much of her old aunt Coira. Her hair was just like spun gold, the archer allowed... what little she could see of it, anyway. Most of the fabled hair was pulled back into a tight bun, atop which sat a crown, hiding the blonde threads from view.

Merida would have been perfectly willing to forgive all of this, of course, if Queen Elsa had washed away the disappointment by being as mystical and magical as her reputation suggested. Unfortunately, as soon as the Arendellan Queen opened her mouth, Merida found herself in the disconcerting position of having her mother speak to her through another person.

"Welcome to Arendelle, King Fergus, Queen Elinor," the Queen said graciously. She rose from her throne and walked down the stairs to stand before Merida's father, who was doing his darned hardest to appear respectable. "Thank you for taking the time to attend the tourney. I pray that you had a safe journey."

“Well, ah, thank ye maist kindly, lass, sorry, Your Grace. The trip wasn’t too bad, all things conseedered. Sure, we could’ve gotten here faster, but no harm done, eh?”

Elinor resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose in frustration, whilst Merida simultaneously did her best to stifle her giggles. Her father looked so *awkward*, as he addressed a lass who was less than half his age with as much formality and respect as he could manage. Truth be told, Merida knew that her ol’ da was far more comfortable charging enemies with his broadsword in one hand and mace in the other than greeting allies as cordially as a proper King should.

To her credit, Queen Elsa didn’t even blink in response to Fergus’s underwhelming courtesy. In fact, she still kept that same gracious smile on her face, with nary a change in expression. Merida couldn’t help but wonder if her ice magic had extended to her cheek muscles, to keep her face in that position.

“Of course not. So long as you have arrived comfortably, all is well. I pray that your pleasurable journey extends into a pleasant stay. The purpose of this tourney is to entertain, after all, and I hope that it will provide sufficient merriment to make the visit worth your while. Might we be expecting any participants from the Highlands?”

“Um, sure, maist certainly. We brought a few of our best men to compete! Our greatest lancers and archers and spear-throwers and brawlers! Let it never be said that a man of the Highlands holds his manhood cheap! In fact,” Merida winced when she noticed her father’s voice rise in volume. He was entering rant mode. Nothing quite like the talk of battle and audience of other kingdoms to get the King’s testosterone pumping, the Princess reflected. “In fact, if I can say so, let it be known to all that there is no’ a man in all of the Clans ava whose spear in hand is ower long than the spear in his pa-”

“*Fergus*,” Elinor hissed, pinching her husband discreetly.

“The spear in his, um, pavilion,” Fergus finished lamely, remembering that the bawdy jests his Lords loved so would not go over so well with this *sophisticated* lot. He coughed, looking down at the floor, while Elinor standing next to him looked ready to die.

It was taking all of Merida’s (very limited) self-control to keep her face still and her posture as poised as any Princess from all the kingdoms, especially when all she wanted to do was fall over onto the floor and laugh her hearty lungs out. In stark contrast, though, Queen Elsa was looking remarkably unperturbed. In fact, unlike most of the other royals and nobility in the throne room, she seemed remarkably at ease.

“I’m certain that your champions will prove the truth of your boast during the tourneys, King Fergus. Though, if I may be so bold to say so, it surprises me that you yourself are not competing. It is a rare thing to have a warrior of such renown as yourself to not ride in the lists or battle in the melee.”

“Ah, well, as to that, I had definitely conseedered doin’ so, but, after much, uh, debate, I ha’,” Fergus glanced down at his left hand, where he had scrawled down a few words selected by Elinor to help refine the King’s rough speech. “I ha’ reconseedered my position and decided that I might gie the lads a chance to prove themselves. What kind of king would I be if I took all the glory for meself, eh? Our champions are all, uh, capa- capable of representing th’ Heelands an’ the Crown.” Gulping, Fergus looked around the throne room, aware of all the others in the room. Taking a deep breath, he drew himself up to his full height, as if he hoped that his bulk would say what his tongue could not, and in that moment Merida was struck just by how *tiny* Elsa was.

Sure, Fergus was a big man, and Merida herself wasn’t the tallest tree in the woods, but at least the Scottish princess’s form was lined with hard muscle, cultivated by years of archery. Elsa was literally shadowed by Fergus’s enormous frame, and Merida could tell by the Queen’s slim wrists that the toughest thing she’d ever drawn was a picture. Her slim frame might make her a possible candidate for archery (a small target was preferable when you were likely to be targeted by crossbows and musket balls), but Merida highly doubted that Elsa would be able to draw the bow she’d practiced with at age 5, never mind the longbow that had given the Highlanders their famed range.

Then again, Elsa was a witch, and witches could hardly be measured by their physical form. Merida’s own experiences had proven that. Did it matter if you were an old woman with a bent back and frail bones if you could summon an immortal bear to fight in your stead?

Merida was jerked out of her thoughts at the sound of her mother’s voice. Ever the diplomat and the dependable wife, Elinor had saved Fergus from his embarrassment by stepping forward and redirecting Queen Elsa’s attention to a royal who was more at home in the office than on the battlefield.

“Of course, our primary motivation was to pay our respects to the new Queen of Arendelle. Although we did send our letters of condolences and congratulations, we were unfortunately unable to attend your coronation, and so we are most grateful that you have invited us to this tourney, thus giving us an opportunity to meet you in person.”

Queen Elsa smiled at Elinor with the easy grace which so eluded Merida yet came so naturally to her mother. For an instant, Merida felt like she was looking at her mum’s long-lost, extremely blonde twin.

“I did indeed receive your letters. Thank you for your consideration and kind word. I was most grateful for your support, and I assure you that your presence here is greatly appreciated. It is an honour to meet the acclaimed Queen Elinor. Your skills as a diplomat are oft said to have no match, and now that I have met you in person I can understand why. I am truly glad that you were able to come.”

Elinor dipped her head graciously, and again, despite the many years between them, Merida was struck by the resemblance between the two Queens.

*“By all the spirits of the warrior kings, please don’t tell me that this is what I’m going to grow up to become.”*

“The honour is mine, Queen Elsa. May I ask, where is your sister, Princess Anna? We had hoped to meet you both today.”

“My dear sister is unfortunately otherwise preoccupied, Queen Elinor. As much as she would have loved to stand beside me and greet you and all other dignitaries, she is indisposed at the present moment. I hope that you understand.”

*“Translation:”* Merida thought, *“she’s mair canny than a’ pussy, and decided to not show up so that she wouldn’t have t’ sit through a’ these boring meetings.”*

“I understand, Your Grace, more than you know. I pray that we have the opportunity to meet Princess Anna in the future. In the meantime, if it would please you, allow me to introduce our firstborn child, Princess Merida, heir to the Highlands.”

And before Merida could fully process what her mother had just said, she was being hoisted forward between her parents and abruptly found herself staring face-to-chest (high heels were *so* unfair) with the Queen of Arendelle.

Gulping, Merida raised her chin to look Queen Elsa in the eyes, feeling her mother’s hand gently nudge the small of her back, a reminder to stand up straight. The blonde woman gave Merida a polite nod and a courteous smile.

“Welcome to Arendelle, Princess Merida. I hope that you enjoy your stay here.”

Merida had always fancied herself her dad’s little girl. Sure, she aspired to be much like her mother, all diplomatic and knowledgeable with a silver tongue that could churn out a bunch of fancy words that would make men and women alike listen and heed her wisdom, but in her heart of hearts, she was Fergus’s lass. Without Queen Elinor to help guide her, Merida completely froze up, all of the prepared speeches and quotes she’d painstakingly learnt during the voyage vanishing like a Wisp from her brain.

“Grand to meet ya!” Merida blurted, dropping into a bow. She winced internally at the loudness of her voice, and suddenly remembered that she should probably be curtsying. Bolting upright, Merida gripped the edges of her dress in clenched fists and blasted her arms outwards, curtsying clumsily. “I mean, ’tis ower grand – a pleasure to meet Your Majesty. I’ve heard lotsa, I mean, lots of great things about ya... you.”

Merida was intensely grateful that she had convinced her mother that the bonnet was unnecessary. With her wild mane of curls hanging about her face, it was easy to hide her bright red cheeks from the onlookers. She cursed internally, trying to will the blood to leave her face.

*“The great Scottish warriors never blushed like some bit lassie swept off her feet! Get it together, girl, afore you embarrass everyone back home!”*

If Merida had never had any doubts on just how similar Queen Elsa and Queen Elinor were, they evaporated when she heard the Queen's response. Peeking up at the snow sorceress through dangling red curls, Merida saw that her face was carefully controlled to be just amused enough to be human, but still gracious enough to be polite. She raised her hand to quiet the chuckles erupting around the throne room, and instead returned Merida's greeting with a curtsy of her own, a sign of respect from one royal to another. And unlike the Scottish girl's choppy execution, the Queen of Arendelle was as graceful as a diving swan, the movement well-practiced but smooth enough to pass off as natural. It was all Elinor, and in that moment Merida felt a flash of irrational jealousy.

*"Havers, tyke! By the bye, you're goin' ta get all prissy jest because the Ice Queen is mair like your Mum than you are? Noo, Merida, ye're better than that!"*

"Likewise, I have heard many great things about you as well, Princess Merida. I hear that you are an acclaimed archer yourself, a shield maiden who has been said to be Hilda the Great or Davina Godschild come again. Your royal father must be very proud. May we expect to see you in the lists, to represent your people and the throne?"

"You're ower kind, Your Majesty." "Especially since I dinna ken who Davina Godschild is. Hoo does this Arendelle lass ken mair aboot Heelander history than I do?" "And no, I, uh, I'll no' be particeepating in the tourney neither. As my royal father said, 'tis a chance for the lads to show their wurth."

"Oh, I see. Forgive my assumption; I merely assumed that one such as yourself would be interested in competing. Apologies for my presumption. It is a shame that we shall not have the opportunity to witness your acclaimed skills in practice."

*"Good gods, is there anything that comes outta this lady's mouth that don't sound fancy?"*

"I share your feelings, Yer Grace," Merida admitted, shooting her mother a pointed glance. Clearing her throat, she focused back on the Queen of Arendelle, and flashed her most winning smile. *"Maybeh me pretty face will distract them from just how badly I've spoken. Princesses are supposed to be pretty, right?"* "Mayhaps I can gie you a private demonstration at a later date?"

Merida instantly knew that she'd said the wrong thing. That had sounded *far* too flirtatious, and even if that hadn't been her intent, it had certainly come across as such. Her father inhaled sharply, and Merida could feel her mother's eyes snap to the back of her head, hair crisping under Elinor's disapproving glare. The throne room came alive with murmurs as all assembled began to question if they had heard right, and Queen Elsa's own impenetrably polite expression faltered for a moment as her eyebrows raised in disbelief at the overt entendre. Merida quickly averted her gaze, eyes flashing around the hall as she tried to look anywhere except at the Queen. In the gallery, she noticed a redheaded lass with a sword strapped to her waist glare at her with intense dislike, before turning

on her heel and pushing her way through the throng of assembled dignitaries. Her friend, a short brunette in a pretty pink dress, looked down with a worried look before chasing after the angry redhead. Merida winced, wondering who she had offended this time.

"That is a, uh, most gracious offer," Queen Elsa said stiffly, her courtesy now sharp and brittle. She raised her voice so that she could be heard over the murmurs of the crowd, causing them to quiet down to listen to the Queen. "Unfortunately, I do not think I will be able to follow up on it, given the current circumstances. There is much to do when organising a tourney; I hope you understand. Thank you for your proposal, nonetheless. I hope you enjoy your stay in Arendelle."

There was a definite air of finality in her tone, one that Fergus and Elinor were not loathe to recognise. They hurried forward, shunting Merida behind them, bowing and curtsying with an accompanying 'Thank you, Your Grace' and 'May the gods smile down upon you', before they retreated to the side of the hall, half-dragging Merida with them.

"*What*," Elinor hissed once they were safely seated in the stands set aside for the Highlands' representatives, "*was that?*"

"I wasna' meanin' it to sound like that!" Merida protested as loudly as she dared. She cast a worried eye towards Queen Elsa, who had taken a deep breath and returned to sit regally in her throne. The murmur of the audience had grown into a steady buzz. "I was jest offerin' to show her my archery, being polite an' all! I was trying to show that we're friendly, potential allies!"

"Well, lass, you made it sound like we were less potential allies and more potential suitors," Fergus muttered. He was scratching at his beard, a sure sign of nervousness. "Merida, lass, what were ya thinking? E'en if you didna mean to sound like a flirt, t'was a flirt you sounded like. That kind of behaviour would've been daring for any princeling, but from a princess? T'was a bad idea, lass."

"Don't get too upset, Merida," Elinor said quickly, noticing the look of utter distress on her daughter's face. "It's not too bad. So long as we show that it was a poor choice of words and nothing more, this situation is still tenable. People will talk for a bit, but they'll quickly forget it. You just need to be careful, okay? Be polite, be courteous, and be respectful."

"Okay, Mum," Merida said. "Okay. Ah can do that."

"Good girl," Elinor said, smiling reassuringly. "And remember, most importantly, do *not*-"

Whatever it was that Merida wasn't supposed to do, the Scottish Princess would never find out, for at that moment the great doors opened once more to admit the next group of ambassadors. And what a group it was.

As the doors parted, a group of near fifty men and women marched into the throne room, their feet pounding along the red carpet. Roughly twenty of

the company seemed to be an honorary guard, men clad in plate armour and chainmail, but with flowing capes of red with a white cross emblazoned across the fabric. On their chests was a coat-of-arms Merida was unfamiliar with: three blue lions on a golden shield, atop which sat a royal crown. The men-at-arms stood in straight lines of ten men on either side of the main party: roughly thirty men and women garbed in the rich clothing of lords and ladies. At their head stood a man who appeared to be in his late 20s/early 30s, with brown hair and sideburns as well as a neatly trimmed beard. He wore a military uniform which, judging by the assorted medals and stars, seemed to be the official attire of at least an admiral. He was quite good-looking as well, with intelligent brown eyes and a comely nose. He was also quite well-built and muscular, and whilst not as massive as King Fergus, he was broad-shouldered enough that Merida guessed that he would be quite the fine jousting or swordsman.

“Bleddy hell,” Fergus whispered, gazing upon the assembled men and women, “it looks like they brought their entire court. Who are these people?”

As if on cue, a herald stepped forward and unfurled his scroll.

“To the esteemed Queen Elsa, rightful ruler of the kingdom of Arendelle, the kingdom of the Southern Isles respectfully presents the ambassadors of King Eero and Queen Brynja, may the gods bless their names. Before Your Grace stands Lord Dyre of House Goran, Lord Malek of House Moor, Lord Janus of House Wendel, Lady Delia of House Strongwood, Lady Esther of House Pandal, and the aforementioned Lords and Ladies’ retainers and advisors. At their head, accompanied by the Royal Guard of his noble House, stands Prince Dane of the Royal Family of the Kingdom of the Southern Isles, heir to the throne and firstborn son of King Eero and Queen Brynja.”

Prince Dane stepped forward, and respectfully sank to one knee, the perfect image of chivalry. Behind him, the lords, assistants and guards all did the same, sinking in perfect mimicry of their Prince. The ladies settled for a deep curtsy.

“Queen Elsa, I am most honoured to finally meet you in person. Though I have heard much of you from my ambassadors, and I have oft read your correspondence, it is truly an occasion of note that we may meet face-to-face. I thank you for your most gracious invitation.”

“The honour is mine, Prince Dane,” Queen Elsa responded, sitting stiffly on her throne. All of her earlier warmth was gone; she was polite, yes, she was courteous, without a doubt, but she was regarding Prince Dane as if he was a bug she would much like to squash. “Arendelle welcomes you and your noble companions, and prays that your stay here is a most welcome one.”

Prince Dane rose and stood before the Queen. Merida could tell just by his posture alone that the uniform was no façade, no position granted to the Prince merely because of his birth; if his stance, strictly military, was anything to go by, he had worked hard for his station.

“Queen Elsa, I will not mince my words nor speak any falsehoods; our purpose

here is to not only celebrate your people and your kingdom through this tourney, but also to mend any damage done to the relationship between Arendelle and the Southern Isles by my treacherous younger brother. It is truly a monstrous scheme that Hans had concocted, and I speak on behalf of the entirety of the Southern Isles when I say that we were mortified to hear of it, and are most apologetic for any harm that may have befallen you, Princess Anna, or any of your people.”

“Your apologies have been long since accepted, Prince Dane,” Queen Elsa said in a coldly polite tone. “I have been in regular correspondence with your royal father, King Eero, and we have come to an agreement that all has been forgiven, so long as Prince Hans receives his rightful punishments. The Southern Isles have already paid recompense for any damages done; there is nothing that needs to be forgiven any longer. Rest and be at ease, Prince Dane; this is a tourney for friends and allies, a celebration of continued relations and strengthening bonds. It is a time for mirth, not regret. Enjoy your stay, and indulge in your pleasures.”

“Much as I appreciate your offer and your kindness, Your Majesty, I do not think that I have been clear in my intent,” Prince Dane said, stepping forward. “All has been formally forgiven, but I cannot help but still feel ashamed by the dishonour my brother has brought upon my House. When I told my father that I would like to be his representative, it was because I wished to mend any bonds that have been damaged between our two kingdoms. It is not enough to acknowledge their existence; I mean to heal them and make them stronger than ever before. When my companions and I leave Arendelle once the tourney is done, I intend that we leave not as allies, but as friends.”

His eyes were warm, his tone was honest, his face was open, and his words were sincere. Everyone in the throne room couldn’t help but be drawn to Prince Dane’s natural charm and grace, completely enamoured by his desire to reconcile any lingering resentment between two kingdoms. Fergus was giving an approving nod, and Elinor allowed herself a small smile, the kind of acknowledgement that one accomplished statesperson gives another on a spectacular display of diplomacy and tact. It seemed that Prince Dane had won over all of the assembled dignitaries, completely convincing them of his honest intents. Even Merida couldn’t help but feel drawn towards this charismatic man, who was almost twice her age. Everyone was enraptured.

Everyone, it seemed, except Queen Elsa. For when Merida tore her gaze from Prince Dane to watch the Queen of Arendelle, she saw the Queen dig her fingers into the armrests of her throne. Unless Merida’s eyes were deceiving her, a light frost was spreading from the Queen’s fingertips as well.

Queen Elsa wasn’t impressed by Prince Dane’s honesty and charisma, it seemed. In fact, judging by the emotions boiling just underneath her perfect façade of calm and courtesy, Merida could see that... Could it be possible?

She hated him. Queen Elsa hated Prince Dane with every fibre of her being.

**To Be Continued**



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A/N: I'm going to try and break these up into smaller chapters so that I can update more regularly, and hopefully make it less intimidating to read. Let me know if you prefer this format as opposed to the massive blocks that I posted previously.

In regards to the colours of the Southern Isles, I've chosen to assume that they are a stand-in for Denmark. This is by no means me portraying Denmark as a villainous producer of evil princes: I am certain that it is a lovely country, with a wonderful people. It's just that since Arendelle seems to be based on Norway/Scandinavia, the most likely place that the Southern Isles can be is Denmark.

Oh, and if the Scottish dialogue makes the reading uncomfortable, or if you're actually Scottish and are offended by the portrayal, please let me know in the comments; I'll go back and fix it if possible, and I'll leave Part II un-Scottified!

Also, a lot of people have been asking me about the chronology of Argos, so I'm going to be adding this to the end of each chapter to help everyone figure out where they are in the story. Hope this helps.

The Nursemaid I = The Nursemaid II = Frozen = The Dancing Master = The Nursemaid III = The Dancing Master = The Captain = The Steward = The Vulture = The Archer I

Rating: T

Genre: Friendship, Crime, Mystery, Romance(?), Humour

Warnings: Violence

Disclaimer: This is a work of fiction. All names mentioned do not represent the true persons. All brand names do not belong to the author. No copyright laws or personal privacy laws are intended to be infringed.

A/N: I've got nothing. I guess I ask for forgiveness and hope that you guys understand that real life can sometimes be... unforgiving, shall we say? Nevertheless, here's our newest chapter. Hopefully it's been worth the wait (probably won't, but hey, I'm an optimist).

I'd just like to say that work started on this before the release of How To Train Your Dragon 2, so there may be inconsistencies with the canon material. Assume that this story happened in the interim between the two movies.

Shout-outs to the amazing fics A Formal Arrangement by requ, r9kElsa is Suffering by AnonElsa, Stolen Ice by Aesla, and A Snowflake in Spring by celery sticks. For those of you who have justifiably given up on me and my awful updating schedules, I sincerely recommend you check these out. Seriously, dudes; they're way better than the stuff I come up with. Go!

This takes place after The Archer – Part I.

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## *The Archer – Part II*

### *Summer*

Two days.

That's how long Merida's patience lasted. Two ten-hour days of festivities and tournaments and jousts and melees and (extremely mediocre) archery, in which Merida had nothing to do other than sit in her royal seat sandwiched between her parents and attempt to disguise her immense boredom. And that wasn't even including the feasts and parties that seemed to be in full swing at any hour, so that when the dignitaries had their full of watching men knock each other off horses with sticks or were put off by the ruined remains of some squire's knee after a mace crunched it into pulp, they could soothe their growling bellies or flustered sensibilities with a plate full of delicacies.

Needless to say, Merida could only stomach so many roasted reindeer sausages and well-fermented rakfisk in a single day before she felt certain that her dress would burst open around her waist, and the plethora of desserts (almost all of which incorporated chocolate, for some reason) served only to make the fiery-haired princess sick. But if she was honest with herself, Merida supposed that she'd much rather force down another plate of kjøttboller and try to sip some of Fergus's beer when Elinor wasn't looking than have to sit through one more hour of the tourney.

Jousting was boring; in Merida's opinion, there wasn't much excitement to be found in watching two men reduce an armoury's worth of lances into splinters just to knock the other off his pony (sorry, *destrier*). The javelin- and hammer-throwing were just as tedious, if not more so. The only event which had managed to at least mildly stimulate her interest had been the melee, an interest which had quickly dwindled after the Highlands' champion, Conan of Clan Dingwall, was felled by a skinny Viking warrior barely older than Merida herself. The incident, embarrassing already for the Highlanders, became ever the more shameful when the warrior removed his helm to reveal that he was in fact a she; the Viking turned out to be a blonde shield maiden barely older than Merida herself, and despite her gangly limbs she had proven herself more than capable with her double-headed war axe. Whilst Elinor had politely applauded the young champion and Fergus tried not to throw a hatchet at the smug Viking chief, Merida had only sunk further into her seat and tried to hide her resentment that this *girl* had been allowed to compete, whilst the Scottish Princess was forced to sit at the high table with nothing to wield but a skewered hare.

Well, no longer. Today was to be the archers' tournament, the third day of the week-long tournament and festival. Merida had toyed with the idea of disappearing from sight and entering the tournament as a mystery archer, an idea inspired by the daring tales of her childhood hero Robin Hood, but that plan had been quickly shot when it became obvious that there was no way in

seven hells that Merida would be able to hide her fiery, bushy mane and still be able to shoot comfortably.

But just because she couldn't compete didn't mean that Merida couldn't shoot. So, that morning, she'd begged off sick to her royal mother, putting on a rather convincing performance in her humble opinion. Normally, Queen Elinor would not have been even remotely swayed by Merida's hammy melodrama, but that particular morning had been plagued by raging hangovers from the previous night's *hjemmebrent*. The Scottish had quite underestimated the Norwegian moonshine, and thus at the groggy Fergus's insistence, Elinor had left Merida to rest in her chambers, rubbing her aching temples as she and her husband left for the tourney grounds.

As soon as the Scottish rulers' footsteps faded from hearing, Merida leapt out of her bed, already fully dressed. She seized her bow and quiver from their hiding spot inside the wardrobe under a pile of dresses, along with the rope she'd *borrowed* from the royal stables. After securing one end to her bedpost, Merida tossed the rope off the balcony. It was a forty-foot drop if she happened to slip, and Merida would have to hope that the fall killed her, because if it didn't she'd have to face the wrath of Elinor.

It was a foolish worry, though. Merida never slipped. She had been the first of the Scottish royalty to brave the Firefalls in generations. She'd helped bring an end to the terrible Mor'du. She'd managed to halt an outbreak of war among the Clan chiefs. She'd lifted the witch's spell from her mother. Climbing down a rope was child's play compared to that.

The Scottish Princess squared her shoulders, made sure that her bow and quiver were securely fastened to her back, and began the long climb down. The rope wouldn't reach the courtyard, but it wouldn't have to. So long as she could make it to the rooftops, Merida had little worry that she'd be able to find a way inside, and from there navigate her way to the castle's shooting range. It wasn't like it would be hard to find, surely; the guardsmen would all know where it was. Merida was absolutely sure that she wouldn't get lost.

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It was only when Merida walked past the armless suit-of-armour for the fourth time that she accepted that she was hopelessly lost.

It had seemed simple enough. She had asked for help from a steward after managing to convince him that she was *not* looking for the tournament grounds, and had followed his directions to the letter. Well... she might've taken a left when she should've gone right, but that didn't really matter, did it? The paths had to reconnect *somewhere* down the line, right?

Right. And while she was fantasising about unlikely outcomes, Merida supposed that her waltz would one day cease to resemble the wild thrashings of a spastic spider.

It would have been easy enough to get un-lost, of course. All that Merida need do was find another of the various servants scurrying around the castle, or one of the many patrolling guardsmen, and then she would be off on her merry way, her path correct once more. Unfortunately, for this plan to work, Merida had to, well, find a servant or guard.

In hindsight, stubbornly convincing herself that the stairs behind a heavy oaken door descending into the darkness of the castle's underbelly lead to the firing range wasn't the best of ideas.

She wasn't altogether sure of where she was. This wasn't the dungeons, she was sure of it; too few cells, too few torches, too much junk. And not "stuff that you keep but never use" junk, but actual, honest-to-gods *junk*. Chairs with their legs splintered into bristly points, wagon wheels with shattered spokes, rugs with huge holes eaten into them by mothballs, dented armour, a torn chainmail vest rusty with the blood of whoever had been unfortunate enough to wear it when a blade had slashed it open; it was as if Merida had found a graveyard. This, she deemed, was where items no longer wanted, the old and the broken and the bitter memories... This was where they went to die.

*"Weel, tha's a cheery thought,"* Merida contemplated gloomily. *"I wonder which o' these I'll end up being if I can't find my damn'd way out of this mess."*

Merida shifted her quiver from one aching shoulder to the other. Lifting a heavy tarp drooping from a mouldy wardrobe with her bow, Merida ducked under the obstacle... and then immediately backpedalled into the tarp when she saw what lay ahead.

A thin shadow, hooded and garbed in dark robes, was dragging a body through the murky gloom. Even in the dim, flickering light of the torches, Merida could clearly see the dark, crimson trail smearing behind the corpse, the blood clotting into a thick paste as it mingled with the dust that lay thick upon the stone floor.

The dark figure cursed quietly as the corpse snagged on a loose slab. Muttering under his breath (Merida was *sure* that voice was male), the figure knelt down to tug the blood-stained cloak free.

Fletching ghosted over Merida's lips, the feathers tickling the pink softness. The shaft whispered menacingly in a low rasp as it scraped back against the bow, the arrowhead sliding neatly into position. The Scottish princess took in a deep breath and let it out as quietly as she could as she flexed the strong muscles in her back, inching the bowstring back even further. She knew what was going on here. The man before her was a murderer, or at the very least an accomplice. In either case, he was dangerous. She'd only have one shot, and with those robes, she wasn't entirely sure whether or not he wore any form of armour underneath. The arrowhead crept back a little more. Better to be safe than sorry.

Merida lined up the shot, aiming for the elbow. As Fergus had oft told her, it didn't matter how strong a man was or how nimble his feet: a foot of ash tipped with cold metal smashing through bone and tendon would cripple any man with

pain. Ideally, the knee would be better, but with the man crouching over his victim, Merida wasn't sure if she'd be able to hit it without killing him. And she had no intention of killing him, even if he was a murderer. She was a diplomat, and it would be frowned upon to kill her host's subjects. It would be better for everyone to cripple him, and then deliver him to Arendellan justice. Preferably the kind of justice involving a short rope and a long drop.

Merida was about to loose her arrow when the sound of footsteps rang clear in the gloomy darkness. The hooded man, alerted, jerked towards the sound, the light *tap-tap-tap* of an approaching other. A hand slipped into the dark robes, and Merida heard the faint scrape of steel blade on leather scabbard.

*"Shoot!"* A voice screamed in Merida's head. *"Shoot now, while he's distracted! Ye'll no' have a better chance!"*

*"Don't shoot,"* another voice (sounding an awful lot like Elinor) countered. *"Better to wait and see who this other is. If it's an innocent, than you must fire to protect whomever has stumbled across this dark deed. If it's an accomplice... you have more to gain by listening to what they have to say. Might be there are more involved. Isn't it always better to bring the whole pack rather than a single lone wolf?"*

"Who goes there?" the hooded man cried loudly into the darkness. For a murderer standing over the still-fresh corpse of his victim, he was strangely confident. Merida glimpsed naked steel flashing in the flickering lantern light, glimmering amidst dark robes. "Who creeps like a thief in the night?"

A light, lilting laugh echoed through the darkness, high-pitched and female and cold enough to send shivers down Merida's spine. A slim figure stepped out of the darkness, lithe and graceful, dressed similarly in dark robes and hood. The newcomer crossed her arms over her chest, as if amused.

"What noise is this? Could this be the sound of the crow accusing the raven of being black of feather? Or is it the flustered accusations of a murderer shedding hypocrisy on the thief?"

The man grumbled as he sheathed his blade, the metal disappearing into his robes.

"The gods curse you, Ronja, and may they curse your pitiful attempts at humour as well. As much a thief as you I may be, but you are my equal in murder. Or could you be my superior? I've lost count, to be honest."

The other woman, Ronja, gave a light chuckle that somehow managed to freeze Merida's insides.

"But you are no raven, and I am no crow, Kasen. So where lie our metaphorical equivalences now?"

"Your loquaciousness is matched only by your evasiveness. I have no time to dance with you in the duel of tongue and wit. Why are you here?"

The woman, Ronja, ignored Kasen's question. Instead, she looked down at the corpse and tilted her head in a gesture of curiosity so overt that it hinted at mockery.

"Now who might this poor soul be? In what business was my sweet colleague meddling, and how did it turn so bitter that we now have a member of the City Watch lying dead at our feet?"

"I ask nothing of your tasks, woman; I would ask that you offered me the same courtesy. Facts neither said nor heard are naught but fiction, and no man has ever stood trial for deeds not done."

"Do not spout her maxims at me, Kasen; I have learnt them as well as you have, if not better. My mind was always the sharpest of us six."

"Be that as it may, but your tongue was always the loosest, and your brevity the most non-existent. Tell me what it is you have to say, or be gone from my sight. I have a body of which to dispose, a parcel in need of planting, and no time to waste sparring words with you."

"You should really speak more sweetly to me, dear Kasen," Ronja said in a light tone, but Merida heard a hint of steel beneath the friendly words. "Why, it may just be that I am tempted to renegade on our sworn oath of silence and secrecy."

Kasen laughed at that, a hard, cruel laugh that was more taunt than amusement.

"Should that happen, old friend, then your head will be impaled on a spike next to mine, so that I may forever remind you of your foolishness. Traitors are rarely viewed with mercy in our fair kingdom, and when the traitors are your personal flock of birds. . ."

"Oh, are we speaking candidly after all?" The woman said in a voice laced with amusement and steel. "We're not supposed to know about that, don't you remember? There is only ever two, one to hold the power and the other to covet it. Or have the rules changed since my induction as the successor to the power of that mangy feathered fiend?"

"Evidently so, since I was told the same thing at my own induction."

The two shared a laugh at that, some twisted joke that made no sense to Merida. She supposed it was a good thing that she didn't possess the same humour as murderers, though this particular laugh was laced with intense bitterness.

"How many of the others know, do you think?" Ronja asked.

"Very few. How many suspect? Nearly all," Kasen replied. The hooded man had leaned back comfortably against the corpse lying on the floor, propping himself up by an elbow planted firmly into the dead man's chest. Although he looked relaxed, smiling contently at his compatriot, Merida had hunted enough wildcats in the Highlands to recognise the posture. To the inexperienced, the creature looked at ease, guard down, content. But there was a certain tension, the muscles loose but supple, ready to spring into action at any moment.

Clearly, these two, for all their jokes and laughter, didn't trust the other to not stab them the instant their guard was down.

"Janli is no fool; she has already begun her own investigations," Kasen continued, heedless of their hidden observer. "She's begun to realise that maybe she has been paid for her service with false coin. Soren, bless his non-existent heart, still has no clue that the prize he fights so valiantly has been promised to each of us in turn. Ivar suspects, I don't doubt, but he's blinded by his own ambition. He likes to think of himself as the true successor, given that he sits on the Council in her stead." Kasen shook his head, his hood rustling softly from the movement. "Eagles have always been proud birds."

"Do not judge so harshly, old friend," Ronja said lightly. "Deception is her skill; it is no surprise that Ivar has bought into her schemes so heedlessly. How long were you led along, truly believing that you were her true successor, and that Ivar was merely a figurehead with no real position?"

Kasen sighed melodramatically. "Longer than I care to admit. But what of it? Her lies have now been laid bare, and the time for vengeance shall be soon. Our agents are already in or moving into place. Fools who are as witless in their devotion to us as we were to her."

"The great flaw with her system," Ronja agreed. "No one knows who truly sits at the top of the chain of command, so all you need to do is convince those beneath you on the chain that you are the new leadership, and *voilà*; instant servitude."

"Hardly the only flaw with the system," Kasen ruminated. "Why all the secrecy, one cannot help but wonder? What does she have to gain by thinking that there is only ever one bird?"

Ronja laughed at that, a genuine laugh which startled Merida by how normal it sounded. It wasn't a cackle or menacing screech or a deep rumble; it was just a laugh.

"Because baby birds are greedy creatures, Kasen, feathery little shits that eat everything that lands in their nest. When it's alone with mommy, the chick never rebels. Why should it? Mommy loves it, and feeds it, and has so much to teach it. How will the chick ever fly without Mommy to teach it? How will it hunt without Mommy to guide it? When it grows big and strong, when the nest becomes too small for them both, the chick will still submit to the mother hen, because there's still so much more that it has to learn, so much more that it depends on Mommy for. But add another chick? Add two chicks, three chicks, a whole flock? Then suddenly, the chick becomes competitive. It fights with the other chicks. It beats the other chicks. And when that happens, it realises that it doesn't actually need Mommy. It can fight without Mommy, it can fly without Mommy, it can kill without Mommy. So when the chick gets too big, and the nest gets too small... Well, why does it need Mommy?"

Silence followed this rant, a silence that was far too loud in this dark, dank dungeon. It was a thick silence, a potent silence, a silence ringing with emotion.

Merida tried her damned hardest not to breathe and break this sudden quiet.

"Sounds like someone is working through some issues," Kasen said. Something about his voice turned Merida's blood to ice. There was something about it. It wasn't threatening, it wasn't menacing. But there was something. That tone of amusement wasn't something she'd heard come from him before. It was almost... predatory. Like a wildcat growling when it realises that its prey is lying in the open, blood pouring from a wound.

Ronja noticed it too. She spun back to face Kasen, and even though Merida couldn't see her face beneath that hood, she could see the fear in the hard lines of the woman's body, the tightness not unlike a deer preparing to flee for its life.

"I don't care what you think," she hissed, dropping all pretence of affability. Her words were barbed, icy. "I came here to tell you that we're not ready yet. If this alliance is going to work, then it's not enough to take out just our illustrious leader. We need to take out the others as well, the rest of her pets. If we don't stamp out the rest, Ivar, Soren, all of them, then we're just setting ourselves up for a knife in the back."

"I've already considered that," Kasen replied. He too had turned as hard as stone at Ronja's tone, perhaps aware that they were no longer pretending to be anything more than enemies forced into a shaky alliance by circumstance. "My men will be ready. They've already infiltrated the City Watch and the Royal Guard. You see a man in the royal palace with a weapon? He's mine. You see a woman in the streets with washing out her pots? She's mine. You see a knight in the tourney smiling at the crowds? Mine as well. That apple you had for breakfast? Planted in your hand by my personal poisoner. Don't take me for an idiot, Ronja; I know what I'm doing."

"I don't care what you think you know, Kasen, I'm telling you that we're not ready. I'm not convinced that we've gotten all of the birds. There's at least one more. My men have been looking through her letters, and there's one that's going to a crane. Unless one of us changed our identity in the last week, then there's someone else we haven't caught yet. So far, I'm suspecting either Maja or Bjork, but there's nothing concrete yet. And until I find out who this 'crane' is, *we're not doing anything.*"

"Then you'd better make sure that you find this 'crane' soon, Ronja," Kasen said. "Because our sponsor won't wait for much longer. He wants this thing done while he's here. Something about needing to see the results first-hand."

"The tourney will last at least another week. Plenty of time to find one final bird. Our *sponsor* has nothing to worry about. He'll be here when all of Arendelle is turned upside down. But just in case..."

Ronja reached into her cloak and pulled out a metal tube, one that Merida recognised as a coin stick. A fancy new invention devised by the French, it let the rich carry their gold without it clanking along happily in their pocket and alerting every thief in the area that there was a bountiful mark nearby. A stick



that size could easily contain as many as sixty gold Imperials, enough money to buy a knighthood and set oneself up as a landed knight.

Ronja tossed this small fortune to Kasen as if it was a branch she'd picked up off the ground.

"What's this for?" Kasen said, catching the stick and tucking it into his cloak without even waiting for an answer. No doubt he was trained not to leave money out in the open for long.

"There are smugglers all along the docks. Some of them don't work for Soren, and can be convinced to hand over certain goods without asking or telling. If I don't find the crane, or you can't get a man to take whoever it is out when I do, then I want you to organise a little surprise. Just something to give our sponsor a reason to stay in Arendelle. I don't care what it is, or if this will even be necessary, but it's always good to have a contingency plan."

"Of course," Kasen said in acidic tones. "Now, is there anything else that you need to-"

"Hello?"

All three of them froze, the two spies and their Scottish eavesdropper. A new lantern was flashing down the hall as yet another approached what should have been a secret gathering.

Even though she couldn't see their faces, Merida could tell by the way their heads tilted towards the other that Kasen and Ronja were trading looks, no doubt wondering if the other had betrayed them. After a silent moment of communication, they were apparently satisfied that whoever had stumbled upon them was nothing more than an unlucky coincidence. As one, the two pulled their hoods lower, so that whereas before it had left their mouths uncovered, it now concealed their entire head. Merida heard a slight click, no doubt hooks that kept the hoods in place. It was professional equipment, and the ease with which they did it spoke of professionals.

*"Who are these people?"*

The thought echoed around in Merida's brain as the duo turned away from each other and dashed into the darkness, outside of the light of their lamp. They moved so silently that even Merida, who had watched them disappear into the shadows, quickly lost track of them once they were out of sight.

They left the corpse where it was.

Merida was debating as to whether or not she should leave herself when she spotted the newcomer. Holding the light in front of him as if warding off the darkness, the young man was the steward who had directed her towards the shooting range.

"Hello?" he called out again, his voice echoing in the empty blackness of the dungeon. "Princess Merida? Is that you? Your mother's looking for you, Your

Majesty. She was, uh, she was most displeased when I told her that I'd directed you to the shooting range. Only, you weren't there, so I realised you must've gotten lost, and maybe you were wondering around in the lower levels. . ."

The steward's voice trailed off as he spotted the lantern. Or, more accurately, it trailed off after he spotted the corpse next to the lantern. He began approaching carefully, suddenly afraid. Merida, still hiding in the shadows under the tarp, could see the dawning fear on his face as he came closer, his horror illuminated by the light from his torch. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw something flit behind him in the shadows, and a glint as the light caught on something metal. Something sharp.

"Gods almighty, is that the City Wa-"

Merida had been drawing her bow, opening her mouth to shout a warning, the arrow sliding into position.

The steward was dead before the arrowhead was even halfway to the shaft.

Ronja sank her knife into the steward's chest around the same time Kasen seized the unfortunate man from behind and lodged his own blade into the steward's throat. Kasen's hand clamped over the steward's mouth to hold back any sound, lifting the chin so that any blood would lodge into the steward's throat and not spray out over Kasen's hand. Meanwhile, Ronja's hand was already in the dying man's pockets, looting his corpse before it had even hit the ground.

The pair released the dead man at the same time. The body made a noise akin to that of a dropped sack of potatoes as it hit the floor.

"Damnit," Kasen muttered. "That's the second steward I've had to kill in the last few weeks, and now I've got two corpses to clean up. What the hell was he doing down here?"

"I don't know," Ronja replied. She was reading rapidly through the letters she'd pinched from the steward's body. "No instructions to come down here, nothing down here worth checking on and nobody down here to deliver things to. . . Unless Princess Merida is still here?"

"He said he sent her to the shooting range, but she got lost. Maybe she got lost here. We'd better check around, make sure she's not here."

"And if she is? We can't exactly kill her and hope that no one notices."

"We won't kill her," Kasen said, tucking his knife away after clearing it of blood using the steward's tunic. "We'll just convince her to not say anything. I'm quite persuasive, in my own way."

Ronja sighed. "Just don't leave scars. Those tend to raise awkward questions."

Kasen turned away into the darkness. "I'll get my men to look for her, spread them throughout the castle. You'd better have your thieves watch her parents as well. Don't want her telling anything to anyone."

Ronja nodded.

“Come on, let’s get out of here. We need to get our people to start searching for her. We’ll start in these tunnels and work our way up from that.”

It was a good plan, especially for one made up on the spot. Unfortunately, as it just so happened, Merida was long gone.

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Merida didn’t know how long she’d been running for. She didn’t even remember any of the rooms she’d made a mad dash through. Flashes fluttered in her memory: a dusty couch, a moth-eaten bathrobe, a chest of drawers lying forlornly on its side with most of the drawers hanging out or missing. But all of these were just snippets picked up by her subconscious, images registered by the eyes and processed by the brain before being dumped into some mental sinkhole that was quickly forgotten by the conscious mind.

Merida’s conscious mind was far too preoccupied with keeping her alive.

They had killed him. Just like that, they had killed him. They hadn’t even discussed it between themselves, hadn’t even considered another option. They’d just killed him, looted him still standing, and then talked normally as if nothing had happened while his body lay on the ground, still warm with the last vestiges of life.

Well, that wasn’t entirely true. They hadn’t acted as if nothing had happened. They’d registered that Merida had been down there. And now they had people looking for her and ensure her silence.

Given what they did to people who just wandered upon them, Merida didn’t want to know what they’d do to make sure she kept quiet.

Lunatics. They were lunatics. Lunatics who talked about nests and birds and knives and sponsors and tourneys and dead people and living people and a bunch of names Merida couldn’t even remember, and plans and schemes and something, something...

That was it. They’d been planning something. Something involving the tourney and a sponsor. The rest of it had been in some strange code Merida didn’t understand, but that much had been clear. She’d seen the coin stick. She’d heard the warning. They were looking for someone. They’d found a lot of people already, and now they were looking for one more, and then a lot of people would die, and someone involved with the tourney was paying them to do it. And paying extra to make sure it happened while he or she was here, in Arendelle. Which meant that he or she wasn’t always here. Which must mean a foreigner. And a foreigner with a vendetta against Arendelle would be-

***BLAM!***

Merida's train of thought was cut off as she burst through a door, causing the painting that had been concealing it to blast open and swing wildly on concealed hinges. That wasn't the thought-train-cutting part, though.

The thought-train-cutting part was the musket shot that nearly took Merida's head off.

"Whoa!" a burly man with blonde hair yelled, dropping his musket in surprise. A reindeer standing nearby let out a startled snort, backpedalling away from the red-haired mess that had just smashed out of the wall. In the midst of this chaos, a snowman with a cloud over its head was busy trying to dislodge a carrot from the barrel of a musket lying discarded on the floor.

Oh, and somebody was screaming, a high-pitched shrill noise. Who was screaming?

"Are you okay?" the blonde man yelled. He leapt over the railing that separated the marksmen from the shooting range itself. The man ran over to where Merida had fallen to the ground, clutching at her ringing ears, curled up into the foetal position. "Gods, where did you come from? Never mind that, are you hurt? Did I hit you? Oh, gods, please tell me that I didn't hit you."

Merida couldn't respond. Between the throbbing pain in her ears, the incessant screaming, and the raw scrape in her throat, she could barely think straight. She really wished that the screamer would just shut the hell up and-

Oh. Wait. Merida was the one screaming.

Merida gasped, swallowing huge gulps of air, throat raw. Tears started rolling down her cheeks as she slowly pulled her hands away from her ears, wincing as sound returned in painful, distorted bursts.

"Are you okay? Please tell me you're okay."

The voice was scratchy, tinny, distant. But Merida could hear. And as her hearing returned, so did her sense of balance, and with her sense of balance came rational thinking. Quickly, she mentally did a once-over of herself. She didn't feel pain anywhere outside of her aching throat. No numbness which would indicate shock. She checked to see if she could move her arms and legs. Tingly and burning after her sprint, but they could move.

She lifted her head slowly, and found herself within kissing distance of a reindeer.

"Ah!" Merida let out a startled yelp as she fell backwards onto her rear and scrambled away on all fours. The reindeer tilted its head with an almost human intelligence as it regarded her curiously, as if wondering why this manic human was imitating a scuttling crab.

"I'm so, so, sorry. Are you okay?"

Merida looked away from the reindeer, eyes darting frantically for the source of the voice. There. Next to the reindeer. A big, burly man with blonde hair. He

had warm, light brown eyes, which were shining with concern and worry. His hands were raised, as if to show he wasn't a threat, palms facing her, a placating gesture. As if Merida was some kind of wild animal that would attack or run at the slightest provocation.

*"Which," Merida thought as she clutched desperately to the edge of the painting which was still swinging from the force of her entry, "is a fairly accurate assessment, all things considered."*

A sudden thought crossed Merida's mind. That man, Kaser? Saren? He'd said that he'd have men in the palace, men to look for her. Men to keep Merida quiet. Could this be one of his men? Wouldn't that be convenient?

*"No, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. I was just in the firing range, and the Princess came running out. I didn't mean to pop her head off her shoulders, honest. It just happened. Just an accident."*

"Who are ye?" Merida said in low, threatening tones. She released the painting and quickly unslung her bow. Reaching over her shoulder, her trembling fingers fumbled around before finally seizing an arrow from her quiver. In one not-as-smooth-as-usual movement, Merida pulled the arrow out and set it against her bow, pulling the arrow back as far as her cramped muscles would allow. The tip bounced crazily around, her hands far too shaky to hold her aim steady, but at this distance, it didn't need to be aimed particularly well to hit a burly mountain man.

The burly mountain man in question, to his credit, didn't let the crazy woman pointing an arrow at him disturb him *too* much. Although he flinched backwards, as any person would when faced with potential injury or death, he didn't back away. Instead, he met Merida's gaze and spoke in soft, soothing tones.

"Relax. Please. You need to calm down."

"I'll calm down when I'm good and ready," Merida said through gritted teeth. Her arms were starting to shake as well, damnit. She adjusted her aim so that the tip of her arrow was pointing at centre mass. At least this way she was guaranteed to do *some* damage, even if she did miss the heart. "Noo, answer me! *Who are ye?!*"

The man didn't miss a beat. No hesitation, no reluctance; this was not a man used to hiding his identity.

"My name's Kristoff. Kristoff Bjorgman."

The reindeer snorted and nudged Kristoff hard. Kristoff gave the reindeer an annoyed look, but the reindeer simply gazed back at him, completely deadpan. Kristoff gave the classic 'all right' shrug-and-slump.

"Apologies, ma'am. I'm Lord Kristoff Bjorgman, the Royal Ice Harvester and Deliverer."

“What in the deil’s name is an ice harvester and deeleeverer?” Merida, despite herself, couldn’t hide her disbelief. *“Surely an assassin could coom up wi’ a better lie than tha’, right?”*

Kristoff winced and sighed, apparently quite used to disbelief.

“It’s a new position. I’m in charge of Arendelle’s ice business. Well, the local business, anyway. I’m not really qualified to manage the export and external trades and contracts and whatever.”

“That’s actually a thing?” Merida asked, forgetting for a moment that she could very well be talking to an assassin. The tip of her arrow dipped for a moment as she gave Kristoff a questioning look.

Kristoff shrugged. “I get that a lot.”

He took a cautious step towards her.

“And you are...?”

“Stay away!” Merida shouted, bow flailing she tried to realign her shot. Cursing, Merida gave Kristoff her best death glare, hoping to intimidate her would-be torturer and/or killer into submission.

His reaction was to share a confused glance with his reindeer.

“Look, I can’t get you to help if I don’t know who you are and who I should contact. You need to tell me your name-”

“I’m not telling ye anythin’!” Merida yelled.

She was hyperventilating. She hated it when she hyperventilated. Panic and fear was eating away at her reason, and the lack of oxygen wasn’t helping her think any better either. And the strange man with the warm brown eyes was taking another step closer...

Merida made her decision. She summoned what little strength she had left to pull back the arrow sharply, focused as hard as she could to ensure that the arrow nailed the mountain-man directly in the chest, and released her fingers, fletching brushing against her nails as the arrow took flight.

The arrow went maybe two centimetres before dipping and smacking against the floor. It slid across the stone with the remainder of its strength to give Kristoff a half-hearted poke in the boot.

The silence that followed was awkward enough that if Kristoff didn’t kill her, Merida was certain that she’d die of embarrassment.

“Okay, so, that happened.” Kristoff said. Despite the craziness of the situation (or perhaps because of it), he looked up and smiled indulgently at Merida. “I guess that makes us even, right?”

Merida was just starting to realise how exhausted she was. She slumped down, bow tumbling from loose fingers as she propped herself up against the painting-door.

“What?”

Kristoff walked over to Merida and knelt beside her, grinning.

“Well, I shot at you and missed, right? Now, you shot at me and missed as well. So it makes us even.”

Merida tried to think of some witty one-liner she could give before she was claimed by spies and agents, one last show of defiance before she disappeared, never to be seen again.

“My butt hurts.”

*“If it weren’t for the fact that Ma’s going to kill ye, I would kick ye in yer fule head right noo.”*

Kristoff, amazingly, laughed at that.

“Well, if you’re hurting somewhere, then I guess we should go to the Medical Wing, huh?”

*“Is that what they call yer torture chambers noo?”* Merida practiced mentally, to ensure that she could make the proper call this time.

“Aye, please,” came the meek response from Merida’s traitorous mouth.

“Okay then,” Kristoff said. He turned back to where his musket lay abandoned. “Olaf! If anyone comes by looking for me, tell them I’ve gone to the Medical Wing! There’s a girl that needs help!”

“Sure thing, Kristoff!” The snowman shouted back, waving with its left arm (stick?). The other arm was currently jammed in the barrel of the musket alongside the carrot.

“Can you walk?” Kristoff asked, this time addressing Merida again.

*“Let’s try this again. Say ‘Aye’.”*

“No.”

*“Gods, I hate ye.”*

“Oh. Well, um,” Kristoff rubbed the back of his neck. He gave his reindeer a pleading look. The reindeer met him with a flat stare before turning around and walking back to the snowman with a huff.

“Fine, be like that,” Kristoff grumbled. He smiled down reassuringly at Merida. “Looks like I’ll be carrying you there. Is that okay?”

*“I am th’ heir to the throne o’ the Bear King!”* Merida raged. *“I am a warrior o’ the Heelands! The firstborn o’ Clan DunBroch! I am no’ carried about like some simperin’ maid in a fulish fairy tale!”*

“There are birds fighting in nests underground,” somehow wormed its way out of Merida’s mouth.

“You’re really delirious right now, you know that?” Kristoff said as he scooped Merida up in his arms as if she weighed nothing.

*"When I get my strength back, I **will** get my revenge for this,"* Merida sulked as she shifted in Kristoff’s arms, trying to find a comfortable position. She was feeling extremely tired, and she let out a sigh as drowsiness started to claim her.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry that I almost shot you,” Kristoff said, looking down at the Scottish Princess in his arms. He gave her a small smile. “I’ve just started learning how to use a musket, you see. I’m not very good.”

“Should try archery,” Merida mumbled, struggling not to yawn mid-word. “Muskets are for sissies.”

Kristoff laughed at that. He had a nice laugh. Warm. For an assassin.

“Maybe you should teach me archery, then. That was quite a shot back there, Robin Hood. I think you almost scratched my boot.”

Merida huffed and tried to turn away, forgetting that she was currently being carried by the source of her torment. Instead, she found her head pressing against an impressively hard pectoral muscle, with a steady *thump-thump* sounding in her ear. It was an oddly soothing sound, given the trauma wrought upon her eardrums earlier.

Kristoff’s chest was warm as well. Like a pillow. A very muscular, very *thump-thumping* pillow. But a pillow nonetheless. A warm pillow.

Warm. Like his smile. His laugh. His eyes.

Kristoff, Merida concluded, was a very warm person.

For an assassin, anyways.

**To Be Continued**

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A/N: Shout-out to yumi michiyo for Scottifying Merida’s speech and thoughts. Go check out her fics as well, if you’ve got the time!

Till next time, peace out!

The Nursemaid I = The Nursemaid II = Frozen = The Dancing Master = The Nursemaid III = The Dancing Master = The Captain = The Steward = The Vulture = The Archer I = The Archer II