

Royal Class

-Synopsis

Anais Academy, an academy where only the best of the best can attend. And out of those, the royal class. The 5 most talented students of the academy. Talented, but untouchable, unapproachable, cold. Then..

How did this happen?!

Ceol Lyndon, a silent music prodigy.

"Clarissa! I missed you so much! You're finally here! I waited for hours!"

Silent... Sure...

Akio Kiyoshi, an arrogant art wonder.

"Hey, Clarissa? Thank you for understanding anything and everything I do. I... really really like you."

Arrogant, you say... Interesting...

Apollo Kyna, an apathetic writing genius.

"The one who taught me emotions and the one who made me feel emotions is you. Maybe that's why I can't control them when you're around, Clarissa."

Apathetic? I see...

Zain Beaumont, a narcissistic actor.

"Thank you for seeing past my looks, and looking at the real me. You're the only one who matters a lot to me."

Narcissist... Okay...

Julian Rockwell, a cruel yet elegant dancer

"It was you who taught me how to accept myself. You really are the light of my life."

Cruel...? Alright...

The entire royal class changes, due to the appearance of one girl in their lives, Clarissa. How did she change all of them for the better, and why do they treat her so differently? Find out in Royal Class.

"Class, listen up. We have a new student joining our class as of today."

"Psst! Ceol! Wake up!"

"?"

"There's going to be a new student in our class."

"But, sir. I thought only 5 students were allowed in the royal class."

"That would normally be true, Apollo, but the school made an exception due to her talent and skill."

Just then, I open the door.

"Umm, hello?"

"Ah. There she is. Introduce yourself please."

"I'm Clarissa Pavati, but you can also call me Claris or Claire if you want. My talent is in design and song. It's nice to meet you all."

Clarissa Pavati ↓

After I introduce myself, I take a look around the classroom. Is this entire class full of boys?! There's one with white hair and violet eyes with headphones on. Another has golden locks and blue green eyes. The third has dark brown hair with hazel eyes and glasses. The 4th has silver hair with striking red eyes. The last one has long, shining, white blond hair and dark blue eyes. All 5 fix their eyes on me.

"..."

"She's in the royal class? No way. She's not good enough. I bet I'm at least 10 times better than she could ever be."

"According to my calculations, the chances of you being able to match our abilities are less than 5%."

"Ah, my beautiful face. Mirror, mirror in my hand, who's the fairest in this school?"

"This is quite the annoyance. Do you think the school will allow me to rearrange your class or give me the pleasure of... rejecting your application form?"

... Is this really the school of my dreams...? This is the royal class at Anais Academy, a school dedicated to teaching talented and gifted children and nurture their talents. The school itself is notoriously hard to get into, and the royal class consists of the best students to have ever walked these halls in their generation. Each year, 5 students are selected to be the royal class and it's considered a great honor. Gender, ethnicity, background, etc has never mattered. Only thing that mattered was talent. It didn't matter what talent you had. In fact, it was common for the royal class to have students with vastly different talents. I'm quite a special case though. I transferred to this school later in the year, after the members of the royal class had already been chosen. I usually wouldn't even be in the royal class, but due to my records from my old school and multiple awards I received for my designs and singing, I was accepted as a member of the prestigious royal class. Although... I do feel gender suddenly plays a role this year. How else would all the 5 members of the royal class be boys?! And there's an equal ratio of boys and girls in Anais Academy as well, so I know it's not a shortage of girls... It's usually 3 boys and 2 girls or vice versa. It's never been 5 boys and 0 girls... Are they just... so talented that the others couldn't even compare and that's why there are only boys in this class? But... All of them seem to have some sort of issue. The first one doesn't say anything. He never talks and sleeps all day. The second is so arrogant and acts like he's above everyone and the third is like a machine. He always calculates the outcomes before deciding on anything. The fourth is like the high school male version of snow white's wicked stepmom. Obsessed with his looks. A narcissist who either looks into his mirror or a photo of himself. As for the last one, he's... difficult to figure out. His words and actions are definitely harsh and cruel, but they're so elegant they have you mesmerized at the same time. Even his words take you a moment to register what he says as mean because his language and vocabulary is so refined. As for his actions, no matter how small they are, like raising his hand or tucking a lock of his hair behind his ear, are so graceful it's like I'm watching a dance. Oh, yeah. Because he's a dance prodigy, Julian Rockwell. The silent boy is a music genius, Ceol Lyndon. The arrogant guy is an artistic wonder, Akio Kiyoshi. The third is named Apollo Kyna, a writing wonder. The fourth, Mr. Narcissist, is called Zain Beaumont. He's an acting marvel. Although they're all so different, they've all made one thing abundantly clear. They hate me being in their class. Ceol doesn't say a word, but looks at me with such disdain and disgust that he doesn't even need words to express how he feels. Akio is forever talking about their accomplishments in an effort to show that they're better than I am. Apollo is just calculating everything about me. Zain is just... flirting with me, even though I've made it clear I have no interest in him, while Julian

keeps insulting me gracefully. Why are they so against me? Because there are only meant to be 5 members? Is that it? Haaa... What should I do...? ! I suddenly trip over something and my bag crashes to the floor. Wh- What should I do?! I was told to bring all the trophies and awards to prove my worth today. Some of them are glass, what if they broke?! I quickly check on them, tossing random awards and proof of my skill out of my bag at random. Thank goodness none of them are broken.

"Your clothes were featured in paris fashion week when you were 15?"

"Your design was on the front cover of Vogue 3 times?"

"Isn't this trophy from when you were 7?"

"Uhh... Yes, to all of those questions. Can you give them back now?"

"You might be better than I thought, but I'm still infinitely better than you."

"Upon recalculation taking this newfound information into account, the probability had increased to 50%."

"Paris fashion week and Vogue? So... I guess you weren't playing when you said your talent was design. I thought you drew some dresses and called it 'design'. And a trophy for singing at 7... Not too bad."

That's when I see what he has in his hand.

"Wh- H- Hey! Please give that back! It's important to me!"

"Oh, is that so? This little booklet full of some pointless drawings? Is this what you call important?"

"That's my design book! All of my designs and inspiration are in that book!"

"Here you are. Have it back. I don't have a need for such useless items after all."
"

"Thank you!"

I clutched the little book tightly to my chest. It's my most prized possession, so I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to it. Awards and other things are nice and all, especially when I'm making a portfolio or I have to prove myself, but my ideas and designs are what really matters, and they're all inside this little book. Julian was quite nice to give it back without a fight, although I still don't appreciate the fact that he called my designs useless. Especially since dancers of

ten wear costumes. He and Zain should know how much of an important role clothes play in their performances.

"Alright class! So, our school's annual festival is coming up, so any ideas on what we should do? Remember, each class has to do something and each member of the class must contribute in some way."

Oh! I have a good idea!

"Clarissa?"

"How about... a play?"

"A play?"

I nodded.

"Zain's an actor, so it's obvious how he'll contribute. Akio can work on props and backdrops. Ceol could work on some background music or sound effects. Apollo is a writer, so he can come up with the main plot or script. I'm sure we could integrate some dance into the play, which is where Julian would help. I can design and create the costumes for the play, and I guess I could sing some song in a dramatic scene. All in all, I think we can all contribute fairly."

"I see. What about the rest of you?"

Ceol shrugs. Zain seems enthusiastic about it. Apollo's scribbling down a few things in his notebook like how many people we have and how we would need to divide the parts.

"Well, if I must do it, I suppose I could contribute a bit. Consider it an honor that I will personally draw backdrops."

"Dance? Apollo, be sure to put in at least one scene."

"Okay. I can devote at least a few minutes to a dancing scene."

"Then... Do you all agree, or..."

"... You really must have a low level of intelligence. Have you not been listening to I and Apollo's conversation?"

"Okay, then. Thank you for agreeing to my idea, everyone!"

"Okay, it's most efficient if we work in pairs. Zain, you'll work with me. Clarissa, with Ceol. And Akio with Julian."

Ceol...? You mean... that guy who never talks? How will I work with him if he refuses to even talk to me? I feel a tap on my shoulder, and look up. Ceol is holding out his hand to me. I don't really know what to do, but based on his actions, I think I'm supposed to take his hand? I gingerly place my hand on his, and he pulls me up from my seat and leads me somewhere. Is this a music room and recording studio in one? It's really big and everything is so high tech and quality too! I guess the academy wasn't kidding when they said they only present their students with only the best of the best equipment to better hone and nurture their talent. Ceol sits down and holds out his phone to me. There's a message from Apollo. Well, I think it's Apollo. There's a pencil where the name of the sender is usually written.

Ceol's contacts

Apollo → 📞

Akio → 🎨

Zain → 🎭

Julian → 🏃

Clarissa (if he adds her) → 🗨️ + 🎤

It says 'Talk to her and get to know her better.'

... Somehow, I don't really see him talking. At all. He hasn't said a word during the whole time I've been here. He motions to a chair facing him. I sit down and look at the ground. A few moments later, he holds out his phone to me. There's a message on it.

'Your name's Clarissa, right? Can I call you Claire?'

I nodded.

'Okay, Claire. We'll start with testing your voice range.'

I nod again. He makes his way to the piano and has me sing, my voice going from octave to octave. I have no problem going higher, but it's difficult to hit low notes. He stops playing.

'Soprano.'

I take out my own phone and type 'I know.' His eyes widen a little.

'You... don't have to type like I do.'

'I know.'

'Then why are you typing? Just talk. Isn't that what you're used to anyway?'

'Yeah, if the other person does the same.'

'What does it matter to you how I communicate?'

'I wouldn't say it specifically matters, I just wanted to try understanding you.'

'Understand...?'

'Well, we'll be together for the rest of the year, right? And we'll be stuck together for every class until the school festival.'

'Oh.'

'Although, if you don't mind me saying so, I'd prefer it if you talked. I want to hear your voice. You're a music prodigy, so I guess I sort of automatically thought you'd have a nice voice? Sorry if I'm wrong'

'Aren't you supposed to have a good voice, not me?'

'Well, yes, but...'

'Then that's that. Besides, I don't make music like that.'

'Oh? Then how do you make music?'

He pulls out a laptop and his fingers practically fly over the keys. A few moments later, a melody starts playing.

'See?'

'Wow~ Do you have lyrics for them?'

He gets a notebook and shows me the pages. The pages are full of lyrics, but no titles, except one. I reach for that page and he harshly knocks my hand away. I look at him, wide eyed with surprise and hurt. Although silent, Ceol seemed like a fair

ly gentle person. His eyes widen as if surprised at his own actions and looks to the side. He takes my hand and inspects it. Once he sees it's not seriously hurt, he lets go of my hand.

'Sorry, let's stop for today.'

'No, it's fine.'

'It's for me, rather than you. And, as for trying to understand me, don't waste your time and energy on something like me. It's for the best if you don't get close to me.'

He gets up and walks off.

"Ceol?! Wait!"

He obediently waits for me to catch up, and starts walking slower when I do. When we get back to the classroom, he taps Apollo's shoulder and goes back to his seat. Apollo lightly sighs.

"The chances of Ceol getting his voice back are dropping lower every day."

"He used to talk?"

"Of course. He used to sing too. We would work together to create songs when we were little. I would write the lyrics, he would create the melody and sing it too."

"Oh... Why doesn't he talk now?"

"That... I don't know. He still creates music, but only the melody. Still, you held out longer than I expected. I thought you'd walk back in this room 5 minutes later, saying he refuses to talk to you or something like that."

"Oh, no! He does communicate in his own way. He doesn't talk, but he types what he wants to say on his phone and shows it to me. He was fine until he accidentally slapped my hand away, which was my fault in the first place..."

"He did something like that? He's never done that to anyone, including me. Clarissa."

I jump, startled.

"Y- Yes?!"

He sighs.

"I don't want to scold you, Clarissa. You can stop being so wary. I was going to ask a favor of you, and it's fine if you fail as well."

"What is it...?"

"Please watch over Ceol well."

"What?!"

"Ceol, as you've noticed, never talks. Well, he used to, but he doesn't talk now. This is true for everyone, including me. However, you seem different, as he made an effort to communicate with you."

"Wait, wait. That's because you sent him a text to talk to me and get to know me, not because he likes me or anything."

"No."

I look at him, confused.

"Ceol is my childhood friend. Do you really think I'm that unfeeling that I wouldn't care if he suddenly went mute, and try to revert him back to how he was?"

"Well... Sort of, yeah."

"... Not the point. I do care. So, I tried this with everyone we met, since he clearly doesn't think I'm trustworthy enough to tell me what happened—"

"That's not true. That's definitely not it."

"What is?"

"Ceol doesn't think of you as 'untrustworthy'. In fact, he probably isn't telling you because he cares about you. Ceol cares about you more than anyone. That's why he doesn't want to tell you. He probably wants to protect you or doesn't want his problems to burden you. It's not that he doesn't trust you, he just wants to make sure you don't have more things to worry about than necessary. And, this is just my thought, but you must have a lot."

"Maybe. But, what I'm trying to say is, I think you could help Ceol regain his voice."

"Me? Haha, I'm honored you think so."

"Haaaa... So annoying. Just help him."

"Umm... Okay?"

A bit perplexed and confused by Apollo's sudden interest in me, I look over at Ceo l. Ah... He's sleeping again. Will I... really be able to help him find his voice again?

The next day

"We'll be working individually today. Clarissa. The roles and main plot are done, so read it and go design costumes for everyone."

"Oh, okay!"

I take the script Apollo hands me and quickly read it through. ?! Why is this about a competition for a princess? There's a narrator, played by Apollo. Then there's the princess, naturally played by me, and the others are supposed to be competing to... take my hand in marriage?! The ending, so the winner, will be decided by the audience, and it'll end with the winner and the princess holding hands and looking at each other... lovingly.

"Apollo! What is this plot?!"

"Oh. Zain suggested it, as I'm not very good at writing emotional stuff. He helped me with the plot, but I did the roles. I decided on the audience affecting the ending of the play though."

"I- Isn't this too romantic?!"

"What?"

"It's about marriage!"

"Zain wanted it to be in the middle ages so he could be a prince, so I looked it up and it said that princesses were often asked for their hand in marriage at your age. Besides, you had to be the prize, considering there are 4 men, excluding me, and it was set in the middle ages. No prince, let alone 4 different princes from 4 different countries, is going to go to a foreign land to meet some random country girl. So, you're a princess, the prize

"F- Fine... So, you're the narrator, so you can just wear your uniform. I'll make costumes for myself and the others."

"Okay."

I take out my measuring tape and a notebook and pencil to write down their measurements.

"Zain, Akio, Ceol, Julian! Come here for a moment please!"

"Of course, princess~"

"How dare you call me? You're unworthy to even say my name."

"..."

"Ah. Although I am not quite sure what you need, I assume it is for the performance."

"Okay, great! You're all here!"

I get my measuring tape and write them down. They all have such different reactions. Zain tries to flirt the whole time, but I expected it, so I ignore him and finish. The hardest was surprisingly Akio. His face suddenly turned bright red and tried to push me away.

"A- Akio! What are you doing?! I need to measure you to make your costume!"

"D- Do you n- n- need to be s- so close?!"

"Of course! What did you expect?"

"Can't I just measure myself?"

"Yes, but it's more accurate if I do it. Besides, I'm doing it through your clothes, so what's the big deal? You sound like I'm trying to sexually assault you or something, not measure you for clothes."

Ceol and Julian were easy enough. Silent and still, and did what I asked with little to no complaint.

"Okay, I got everything! I'll draw up the designs and show it to you after I'm done, so let me know if you want to change anything. Oh, also please let me know if there are any requests you'd like to make beforehand, as it would help save time."

"Make mine look princely and highlight my good looks."

"Okay, contrast for Zain. Anyone else?"

Akio and Ceol shrug, so nothing.

"Make mine elegant and easy to move around in, as I need to dance for this play."

"Ah, good point! If that's everything, I'll be going now."

I walk off and start designing. For me, I'm probably free to do whatever I like, as long as it looks princess-like, but since the others all have such different... aesthetics, I decide to make mine white with some gold embroidery. This will be fun. I love making elaborate princess like dresses with lots of lace, frills, and sparkles. It's actually the type of dress I enjoy the most. I already measured myself at home, so I already have my measurements. Let me see... I want it to trail on the ground a bit, and have the skirt be big and poofy. Kind of like it has a crinoline, but I want to use tulle and a lot of underskirts, as a crinoline is kind of complicated to make, and I've never actually made one before. For Ceol, let's make something white with violet accents. A purple jewel, like an imitation amethyst, as a brooch could also look nice and a bit more princely. Oh, and a chain. Since the white and violet are both kind of cold, maybe I should make the trim and embellishments gold to balance it out a bit. Zain has silver hair and red eyes. So... I guess some turquoise would look nice? I want white and gold to be a pivotal color in all, so it kind of matches my dress. So, white and turquoise with a jewel like a ruby to match his eyes should look good. For Akio, he has blond hair and blue green eyes. Typical fairytale prince. I feel like bright colors would suit him. Maybe some slightly more feminine colors to contrast with the blue green? But red is a bit too strong for my taste. A pinkish purple maybe? And of course we have a white blouse underneath the vest. I want gold trimming. Yeah, basically white and gold again. And... a pinkish jewel I guess? Last, Julian. He's the hardest, because princes do not wear very comfortable clothes that are easy to move around in. So, I need to use a light and airy type of fabric, without it being see-through, as people tended to be very conservative, and I might as well make the costumes semi-accurate, since Zain and Apollo wrote the play to be set in the middle ages. Of course, my dress isn't going to be very accurate either, since I want it to be an off-shoulder dress, but it'll still be at least semi-accurate. At least it's easy enough colorwise. Julian has this platinum blond hair and dark blue eyes, so I guess white, blue, and gold? I guess it had better be dark blue, so his eyes match the clothes. No chain because that'd restrict his movement. He can have an accessory though. I'd just have to secure it tightly and make it lightweight. Maybe a light blue gem? Oh, and I want to make it flowy for elegance. Well, that's all the designs

done. I'm okay with nearly every fabric, so last is to choose which one. For Julia n, something like crepe or viscose? Silk is slippery, so maybe not the best. For t he rest, something luxurious like... velvet, brocade, damask, satin, and we can us e silk for them. I want lots of tulle and lace for my underskirts, but I suppose I should use something stiffer like damask or mikado for the bodice. With enough lay ers, the top skirt can be something light like chiffon. Okay, all done now! I shou ld go show it to them.

"So... What do you think?"

"Is this mine?"

"Yeah."

"It looks sort of... girly?"

"That's just the colors. You sai- Well, you implied you had no preference. You sho uld've said something beforehand."

"Apollo. Can I go to a professional who I deem worthy of clothing me?"

Apollo, who's reading over the script, looks over at Akio for a second and then at my design.

"No. What's so wrong with it?"

"It has pink in it."

"I am aware of that."

"Pink's a girl color."

"Actually, although you may not know this, Akio, color has no gender. In fact, lon g ago, pink was considered more appropriate for boys due to it being more boistero us and bold, while blue was for girls, because it seemed more dainty and delicate. Besides, pink and purple look good with your hair and eyes as they're complementar y colors. Just deal with it."

"What?! No way!"

"No way what?"

"No way pink was for boys and blue was for girls!"

That's when I step in.

"Okay, so you agreed to work with it, thank you so much for your understanding! Next please!"

Ceol just nods.

"You like it?"

Another nod.

"Do you want to change anything?"

He shook his head.

"Alright then, I'm happy you like it. What about you, Zain?"

"Nice~ I like how you used turquoise but made the accessory red like my eyes."

"Haha, I'm glad you noticed. I did the same for Ceol, except his is all violet."

"Hmm... I like the ribbon like decorations on mine, it looks elegant like I requested. However, is it easy to dance in?"

"O- Oh, yes! I made sure to make yours very lightweight and comfortable!"

"I see. Good. I dare say it shall suffice. Ah, when you finish, please bring it to me as soon as possible so I can practice in it."

"Umm, okay. I'll keep that in mind."

"The sooner the better by the way."

"Okay then, I'll make yours first then."

"Good. I shall be awaiting the end result."

- A week later

Okay, finally done! The original plan was to work in pairs, but it changed due to our roles. We've all been really busy. Apollo's writing and correcting the script, Ceol's working on background music, Akio's painting backdrops and creating props, and... actually, Zain and Apollo are still working in pairs, but Zain can't do much besides memorize his lines and act on stage, so he's just looking at the script

and throwing out random ideas that he thinks could make the play more fun. I'm sewing up the costumes. My hands hurt...

"Julian! Here, I'm done with your costume."

"Ah. Thank you, so you did heed my request after all. You were taking so long I thought you had forgotten."

"Sorry, but I tend to value quality a lot, so it often takes a long time to make clothes. I did try to finish it as quick as possible though, so do forgive me for the delay."

"It is quite alright, as long as you finished it. I shall go try it on now. Would you like to see the fit and how it looks?"

"Ah, yes! Please do, so I can make adjustments if anything doesn't fit."

He walks off and comes back a few minutes later, looking stunning. Well, it's a bit embarrassing to praise my own work, but I'm really proud of myself! Oh my god, he looks just like a prince from a far away land! It looks like he stepped out of a fairytale book! And the flowing elements I added also suit him really well, and certainly has that elegance he asked for.

"Well? Does it not suit me very well? Why is everyone just staring at me like that?"

"No, you look great! Anything I should fix?"

"It seems you can actually do something right for once in your life. The length, fit, etc are all done to a T. There is no need to fix anything, and the quality is certainly very high. I suppose it was worth the wait."

He smiled at me gently and I felt a hand caressing my head. I cautiously look up.

"Well done, lady Clarissa. You should be proud of yourself. It's not everyday I openly praise someone like this."

...! Julian looks... really nice when he smiles. He's always handsome, smiling or not, but his foul mouth kind of makes it difficult to look past his words. If he was nicer, I bet he'd have at least half the girls at school wrapped around his little finger. I give him a bright and happy smile.

"Thank you!"

- Weeks later

"Okay, done with everyone's, including mine! Please change into them! Julian, you too. I need to see what you all look like together, and with me."

"Clarissa? Are you done? All of us are. You're taking a very long time. Do you need help with anything?"

"No, no! I'm just putting on the last skirt and doing my hair and make up."

"... Did you just say you're putting on your skirt?"

"Yeah?"

"Why would you tell us that?!"

"Akio... Can you stop talking like this is weird? This dress is made to look like it belongs to a princess. They either have a crinoline or layers of underskirts to make the skirt look poofy. I said the last layer, so at that point I'm nearly done with my clothes. Actually, I'm done."

After I give my appearance a final check in the mirror, I step outside.

"So? How do I look?"

I twirl around for them, so they can see how the skirt moves when I do.

"... Guys? Do I look weird? It's okay if you think so, I can always make some adjustments or buy a dress if this one doesn't suit me very well. Can at least one of you show me some sort of reaction?"

"You forgot something. Luckily, I made it for you. This is a great honor, so you better be grateful for this, got it?"

"Eh?! Akio, what did you just do?"

I gently take it off my head to find a beautiful golden tiara embedded with sparkling crystals.

"Wow~ It's so beautiful! You made this?!"

"If you think the school will pay for some props, you're wrong. The general rule for the festival is we have to make virtually everything, not counting the stage or some equipment if necessary. Ah. What about your shoes? Do they match?"

I lift up my skirt a little to show him. I have these white heels with golden floral decorations on them. They do make me taller, but... They're all way taller than I am, so it doesn't make much of a difference.

"Okay, they match."

"But give me some reaction! How is it?"

Ceol types something on his phone.

'You look beautiful. Just like a real life princess. Nice dress. It works well with all of us, as it's white and gold.'

"Thank you, Ceol. Anyway, you all look great as well. Anything I should fix?"

"Yes. Fix the color. Now."

"But... The color is quite difficult... I meant something like the length or width ...?"

Apollo glances over at Akio and looks him up and down.

"Are you still not over it, Akio? As I told you before, color has no gender. Plus, her clothes don't make you look like a girl, so what's the big deal? Work with it."
"

"Not the point! Your stone cold logic isn't what I want right now! It's not helping!"

... I truly didn't think he'd hate it that much. Now I feel dreadful for the color ...

"I- I'm sorry... If it's what you really want, I'll change the color as you say... I mean, it'll be a bit troublesome as I'll need to work more, but it can't be helped if you really dislike it that much."

"No. Akio needs to learn to stop acting like a spoiled brat and learn that things don't always go his way. Deal. With. It."

"U- Umm..."

"No. Don't change anything, or you'll just be enabling him to get his way all the time without facing any consequences."

"Okay then... I- I'm sorry, Akio..."

"Stop acting like you know all about me, Apollo! You don't know anything about my past at all! I hate know- it- alls like you who always act superior to others!"

With that, Akio runs off.

"Akio! Wait!"

I start to go after him, but Apollo holds me back, preventing me from doing so.

"He'll be fine. This will be good for him in the long run. He'll be back soon."

"... Sorry, Apollo... But, I can't just ignore him after he ran out like that. I'll be back."

I shake his hand off and run after Akio.

"Akio?"

He turns around, tears staining his face.

"Akio..."

"... Leave me."

"No. I can't do that."

"If you're acting like this because of the costume, I'll wear it. Happy?"

"That's... not why I'm here, but thank you either way. Hey... What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"If you don't want to tell me, that's fine, I understand. You barely know me anyway. I just wanted to check if you were okay."

"Ah... Y- Yes, it's fine. And... Um... Thank you for coming to check on me."

"It was nothing, really. Here, let's get back, yeah? Everyone is probably waiting for us."

"I don't need your help, but since you offered it, I'll accept it this once. Be thankful I'm allowing you to do this."

"Yes, thank you so much."

He takes my outstretched hand, and we walk back together, hand in hand. When we get back, Apollo walks up to him and apologizes, albeit apathetically.

"Sorry about what I said."

"It's fine. I was also wrong for lashing out."

I clapped my hands twice.

"Alright, now that that's done, Akio, why don't you like it?"

"It's pink."

"Okay, and? Have you at least looked in the mirror?"

"No."

"... Okay, how about you take a look at yourself before judging my color choice?"

I gently lead him to a mirror and hold his shoulders from behind, making him look into the mirror. He seems surprised.

"Huh. It actually doesn't look all that bad. It doesn't make me look that feminine at least. The colors of the clothes actually go pretty well with my hair and eyes."
"

"See? It's not that bad, is it?"

He shakes his head.

"Do you still want to change it?"

He shakes his head again.

"It's fine, I can make this work. In fact, I'm probably the only one who can."

"Haha, yeah, I guess. You're the only one with this color, so you're correct."

After, I barely see Apollo, Zain, and Julian, but started spending lots of time with Akio and Ceol. Akio would have me get all dolled up, put my dress on, pose, and would paint me all day long. Mainly because all of them were going to showcase their talents to woo the princess and make her accept one as her fiancé. Akio's role as an artist requires him to paint a portrait of me as a way to show off. The others are all performing though, and Akio's the only one who has to prepare everything beforehand. It kind of reminds me of the costumes, so I feel a bit of solidarity between us. It's sort of weird though, as it's totally different. Maybe it's because we both don't really have a big performance scene. I literally just talk for the whole play, despite being the female main character and the 'prize'.

"Okay, I'm done with the sketch. Take a break, Clarissa. I need you looking as pretty as possible. You're already not that beautiful, I don't need you looking worse than you do now. I always look great, but you? Not so much. Freshen up a little."

"H- Huh?! That's so rude! Are you sure you're some great artist?! They're supposed to make their model look good no matter what! Who on earth complains I'm not pretty enough while trying to paint me?! It's for a play anyway! Who gave you the right to insult me like that!"

Akio suddenly steps forward and tilts up my face by cupping my chin.

"What are you doing?!"

"Ah, okay. A mix of coral and rose. Got it."

He then lets go and steps away.

"What was that for?"

"What?"

"Why did you abruptly tilt my face up?"

"Your cheeks."

I was very confused at his matter of fact answer, as if it was obvious. He sighed in what seemed to be exasperation.

"What's the role of a portrait?"

"Huh?"

"Just like a article of clothing's role is to fit whoever's wearing it, a portrait is meant to, as you said, portray the subject's beauty at it's fullest. After I'm done with a sketch, I tend to mix up all the colors I'll need to use on my palette . Even the subtle things, like the shine in your hair or the sparkle in your eyes. Naturally, this includes when you blush. I figured the quickest way I could find out what color your cheeks were when you blushed would be to make you mad. So, I said a couple dumb things to make you mad. Sorry if I went a little too hardcore. I wanted to get it over with quick, you see."

"Oh... Well, can I see the sketch?"

He shrugs and moves aside. I think that's a yes...? I walk up and take a look.

"Umm... Akio, are you sure this is me?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I look... too beautiful, don't you think? It doesn't really look like me."

Akio turns around looking so frustrated I can nearly see an irk mark on his forehead.

"What do you want me to do?! I've never met someone as hard to please as you! You get mad when I say you don't look that great, saying I'm supposed to make you look beautiful! Then when I do as you say, you say it doesn't look like you! What do you want me to do then?!"

"I- I... I'm sorry... You're right."

Tears started to gather and run down my face. Akio stares at me in slight surprise . He then takes out a lace handkerchief and gently starts to dab away my tears.

"There, there. Don't cry. Your pretty eyes will grow red if you carry on like that ."

"M- My eyes are pretty?"

"Yes. Very pretty, actually. They're the one feature I can't find fault with on your face. Now please stop crying. The painting will look even less like you with your reddened eyes, as it's meant to highlight your beauty. But... Does it really look that different to you? I think it's quite accurate."

"Well... It... just doesn't look a lot like me."

"In other words, yes, it looks different. Hmm... Ah. So, if we prettify you, the portrait will look like you, right?"

"Huh?! What logic is that?!"

"You said the painting doesn't look like you because painting you is too pretty, right? So, if we flip that around, it means painting you will look like the real you if you were to look prettier in real life."

"I... That is true, but..."

"So, all I have to do is prettify you."

"Do you even know how to prettify me?"

"Of course. I'm an artist after all. Making people look better is also an art, you see."

He then leads me to another room with a vanity, make up, accessories, etc.

"Here we are. Now stay still and do as I say. You'll look much better in no time."

He sits me down and starts to... prettify me, I guess? He starts off with brushing my hair. Akio always acts so arrogant and haughty, but he's being surprisingly gentle with me now, and when I cried. I feel like he's secretly a nice person. The brush gently combed out any tangles in my hair. After he's done and the brush goes through my hair smoothly without getting caught on anything, he starts using clips and elastics to section off parts.

"There's your hair done. I'll have to repaint the hair a little, but that's okay."

"Wow~ So pretty! You're really good at this Akio! I'm impressed!"

My hair was in a half up half down braided bun that looked like a rose. Akio laughed a little and looked down.

"Yeah, well, I used to do this a lot."

He looked sad just now... Is anything wrong? I blink and his sad expression is gone, so was it just my imagination? He then gets a make up palette and starts putting some make up on me like foundation, blush, eyeshadow, lipstick, etc.

"Okay, all done. What do you think?"

"I- Is this me...? I look so... beautiful..."

"Haha, looks like I did my job well then. By the way, you have a surprisingly cute face, so try and dress up a little more. Even a diamond looks dull if you don't polish it. People are the same. You should strive to become more beautiful both on the inside and out to shine brighter, don't you think?"

I nodded, and he smiled before fetching the portrait. He held it up to my face so I could compare myself and the painting in the mirror.

"Does it look a little more like you now? Don't mind the hair, I'll fix it later."

"Yeah! It looks a lot more like me! Thank you so much, Akio! You really are amazing in lots of areas! No wonder you're in the royal class with your talent for art."

"Really? Good. I worked too hard on this painting to start all over again, so I decided I had to fix your face. You should be grateful I personally painted you and dolled you up. This doesn't happen often."

... Everytime I start to think he might actually be nice, he just has to go and say something like that, doesn't he?

"Let's go back now. Ceol is waiting."

"Ah, okay!"

I quickly get up and follow him back to the classroom. I didn't think Apollo was serious when he told me to look after Ceol, but turns out he was, as he told Ceol to showcase what he can do in front of me, while everyone else was free to practice in private, alone. Well, Akio didn't have a choice, so he doesn't really count. When we get back Akio hands me off to Ceol. We go back to the music room that we went last time. God, this is even more awkward than last time.

"So... What are you planning on doing?"

After a few minutes of neither of us saying anything, I decide to break the silence. He walks to a corner and picks up a violin case that was lying around.

"Oh, you can play the violin?"

He nodded.

"Cool. Can I hear you play?"

He nodded again. I really don't see what Apollo saw in me to make him think I could somehow make Ceol talk. I think hearing his voice is close to impossible at this point. He literally never, ever talks. Suddenly, I feel a poke on my cheek. I quickly turn to see Ceol poking my cheek with his finger with no expression. He gives me one last poke and starts to play. Oh my... I knew he was a music prodigy and heard his music before, but hearing him actually play something is so different. He really is a musical genius... His music is so rich and full of emotion. I could play the exact same song and it wouldn't even compare to him. It's like... he talks through his music instead of his mouth- That's it! This might be the key to getting him to talk again! Sort of... But back to his performance, I'm... sort of sad and jealous of the others in the play. They all have a performance scene in which they showcase their special talents and I... I just talk and remain seated for nearly the entire play! Come on! What kind of prince, let alone 4 very different princes from 4 different kingdoms, all with different looks, personalities, and talents go to pursue a young princess who is seemingly weak, indecisive, and untalented?! It makes no sense! Well, unless my kingdom happens to be super prosperous and wealthy so their parents told them to marry me for the good of their kingdom. But if it's not that, it's unrealistic. I know I already did contribute, but I'm going to be the only one who looks like I don't have a talent at this rate... I feel another poke.

'You keep zoning out. Is anything wrong?'

'H- Huh?! Umm, no, it's nothing!'

'Really...? Because your expression says otherwise. I was considering helping you out, but since you say it's nothing, okay.'

"I- It's just... I'm the only one who doesn't do anything. You, Apollo, Akio, Zain, and Julian all have your moment in the spotlight when you showcase your talents, but all I do is sit still and watch you all."

Ceol smiles a bit and starts typing again.

'If that's the case, I believe I can help you. What you want is a chance to show off what you can do, same as us, right? I don't think you can do that with clothes, but singing will work nicely. If you'd like, I could compose a song for you and you could sing it whenever you want.'

" Really?! Thank you so much! But... how will you know when I'll sing it?"

'Easy. A signal. Akio's in charge of props, isn't he? He's also making a throne for you. Tap 3 times on the right armrest. That'll be our signal. Just don't tell Ap

ollo. He can get a bit aggressive when things don't go according to plan, and he definitely won't like the fact that there isn't a set time for you to sing the song . Deal?

"Deal!"

I hold out my hand for a handshake. He seems hesitant... Is it because he accidentally hurt me that one time? I was about to take it back when he gently grasps it and shakes my hand. His touch is so gentle... I guess he wants to make sure I'm not hurt again...

Days pass and it's the day of the festival before I know it. Ceol and I worked really hard on the song, but I'm not sure if I'll sing it or not. Well, I'll decide based on how it goes.

"Clarissa! You're taking so long... again... Come out quickly. I still have to do your hair and makeup, remember?"

"Yeah, I know! Sorry, Akio, you must've waited for me a long time, right?"

"... It's alright. Turn around, Clarissa."

He takes a brush and starts to style my hair and does my makeup again.

"And... There we go!"

"Thank you, Akio! As expected, Akio is really kind and amazing~!"

"I- I'm not kind, so shut it!"

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry."

"Whatever. Just stay still. I still need to put on your accessories like the tiara ."

I feel him pin the tiara in my long hair and clasp a necklace behind my neck.

"Okay, you're finally ready to go."

"Julian, you good?"

I turn around to see Zain and Julian.

"I am perfectly fine, so there is no need to worry about me."

"You sure?"

"Yes, but thank you for your concern."

As expected... He's still so elegant. But... he seems to be limping a little.

"Are you sure? It looks like you sprained your ankle..."

He stiffens. That probably means I'm right... But I don't think he'll admit it. As expected, he denies it and limps off. I just hope he doesn't make a mistake during the performance... I'm worried about him. Ah, it's almost time. I'm supposed to go onstage after Apollo narrates what's going on and introduces who I am to the crowd. I come onstage and sit down on the throne Akio prepared for me. After that, all of them come onstage and do their thing. Ceol with his violin, Akio with his portrait, and Zain declaimed a poem. Last is Julian... Who I am very worried about. At least he's not limping, which is good. Wow... I've never seen Julian dance before, so this is my first time but I can clearly see why he's in the royal class. Only a few seconds in and it's already enchanting. The way he moves is like a fairy with wings... So light and graceful. Suddenly, he falls. As I sit there in shock, the play continues on, and the stage goes dark except for one spotlight, which shines on me. Originally, this is the part where I have a long monologue to myself and then ask the audience for help. However, I can't just leave Julian like this..! Ceol... will remember this well, right...? I gently tap my fingers on the right armrest 3 times. I internally breathe a sigh of relief when I hear the start of the melody backstage. Thank god Ceol got the signal. I start singing while walking toward Julian. !... I- Is he... crying?! He's trembling, practically on the verge of a mental breakdown. It's like he's having a panic attack... I kneel down to his level and gently embrace him, rubbing circles in his back in a soothing pattern. I feel him calm down a little, so I pull away. He quickly gets up and bows to me. What's going on?

"I am ashamed to show her highness such poor skill. Therefore, I shall withdraw from the competition."

... Is he serious?! There is no way I'm accepting this. But I can't refuse hi- Oh, wait. In this case, I can. I'm the princess, the person who has all the power.

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, princess? Is anything the matter?"

"Tell me, prince of Rockwell. Who is this competition for?"

"You, your highness."

"Exactly. So, who has the most power?"

"You, your highness."

"Yes. And I don't recall me giving you permission to withdraw just like that. Once you enter this competition to win my heart, you shall see it through to the end."

"Princess, while I understand, that--"

I cut him off harshly, trying my level best to channel my inner 'regal princess with the authority of a true blood royal'.

"This is an order."

"... I understand, princess."

He rises from his bow, and whispers to me furiously.

"Are you insane?! How much more do you want to humiliate me?! You... really..."

"Shhh..."

"Seriously?! You want me to stay quiet and just take this?! If it weren't for this stupid play, I would've killed you by--"

"I'm here with you, right?"

He looks confused, but nods.

"So, don't worry. I will ensure you will never fall by my side. I didn't want your skill to be judged like that, so I acted like that. I'm sorry, so could you please continue? I promise you that you will never fall again."

"In that case..."

He bows to me and holds out his hand. When he speaks again, his voice is louder, indicating that this is for the audience.

"Then, your most honorable highness, will you allow me the great pleasure of having this dance?"

"Oh... Are you sure...?"

"Of course, your highness."

"I... I do not wish for prince Julian's reputation to be damaged due to my poor skill... Due to having a weak constitution from birth, my parents forbade me from doing anything that involved physical exertion, including dance..."

"I promise to lead you well, your highness, so please do not worry."

"Then... It would be my pleasure."

I place my hand on top of his outstretched one. He kisses my hand before beginning. Ballroom dancing music starts to play. I don't think we prepared that, but it's fitting for the occasion so I think of it as luck. He does nearly fall a few more times due to his ankle, but I hold him upright so he doesn't fall, while making it look like my mistake simultaneously. He expertly twirls me around, making the gold embroidery on my dress sparkle in the light. When we finish, the audience erupts in applause. Originally, the audience was meant to decide, but... I really don't think I need to see the results to know who the winner is. It seems the others thought the same, as they all come back onstage.

"Although all of you were wonderful, the one that left the deepest impression on me was prince Julian from the Rockwell kingdom, so he is the one I shall choose."

After I said that, Apollo comes onstage and ends the play with a classic 'and they lived happily ever after'. Everyone in the audience claps as we take a bow and go backstage. And that's when Apollo shows his controlling nature that Ceol warned me about beforehand...

"Clarissa, was there a song in your script?"

I shake my head 'No'.

"Since when was there to be a line about you having a weak constitution since birth? I don't remember that line."

"Well, yes, but..."

"And what was the deal with you forcing Julian to continue?"

"Please do stop reprimanding her, Apollo. She, in my point of view, did her absolute best in an unprecedented situation. There is no need to berate her so. Besides

that, the audience applauded, so is this not a classic example of all's well that ends well, Apollo? Her improvisation was extremely well executed and natural."

"But... Julian...!"

"Even if she were to be chastised, I would be the one to do that, as she and I are the 2 people most directly involved in the conflict, not you, as you were backstage. Since I view the event as 'fine', I believe it would be in your best interest to let it go."

Apollo ignores Julian and starts scolding Ceol as well.

"You helped her with this, didn't you? And I saw you turn on that ballroom dance music. Did you 3 plan this whole thing?"

I quickly shook my head.

"N- No! Julian had nothing to do with this!"

"Alright. Fine. Ceol, did you play a part?"

Ceol nodded, not even bothering to lie.

"You were my friend. I thought I could trust you, and you betray me like this?"

Ceol bows in apology. I watch anxiously, until Julian takes hold of my hand and drags me out of the situation.

"Are you alright?"

I nod. He breathes a sigh of relief.

"So... Thank you... for what you did..."

"Hmm? Oh, it was nothing. I must admit though, I was surprised. You always looked so... calm and in control of things."

"I do try to emulate that personality."

"Emulate?"

"It's nothing. Pay no mind to what I said."

"Oh, right. Let me see your ankle."

"W- Wait!"

"Julian..."

His legs are covered with bruises and bandages. Just how much did he practice for him to get hurt so many times...? At least now I know why he told me to wait. With the condition he's in, no wonder he fell. I found it a miracle he can walk.

"I'll treat my ankle myself, so let it be."

He quickly covers up his leg again and walks off, his long, white-blond hair fluttering in the wind as he walked. I stare, mesmerized, until I come back to my senses and run after him.

"W- Wait!"

"What is it?"

"Can you please allow me to treat you?"

"Why are you so desperate to help me?"

"What do you mean, 'desperate'?! This is a normal human reaction!"

"It is?"

"Yes! Are you telling me no one offered to help you after seeing your wounds?!"

He nodded.

"Yes, it was considered normal. If I couldn't do something, I would practice until I could do it flawlessly. It never mattered if I got hurt during the process."

I stand there in complete and utter shock.

"There, there. Please don't cry, Clarissa."

Julian walks closer and starts drying my tears.

"It's okay, so don't be so upset. You said you wanted to treat them, right? I'll let you if you stop the tears."

I try to stop, but it isn't really working. Julian sighs before embracing me and pats my back gently.

"Shhh..."

When I stop crying, he releases me.

"Finally. Now you can take a look at my injury. As expected, such a good girl."

"... You're treating me like a kid who you're bribing to get me to stop crying."

"Am I?"

"Yes!"

"Haha, I'm sorry. Are you angry at me?"

"... It's not a matter of I am or not, I can't."

"You can't?"

"You're hurt, how can I be angry at you when you're not in good condition?"

"Of course you can."

"...Well, maybe others can, but I made a promise to myself to never get mad at someone if they're sick or hurt in any way."

I then take him by the hand and lead him to my dorm.

"Please sit down while I go get the first aid kit from my workroom."

I push aside the beaded curtains I used to create a partition between the living room and my workroom and get the first aid kit from the cabinet. Haha... I still remember when I first started sewing. I'd pierce myself with a needle so many times I'd wrap bandages around my hands before I began to save myself the trouble of bandaging when I got hurt, as it was inevitable. Of course, I got better as I practiced and I don't do that anymore, but looking at the first aid kit reminds me of that time. I was really bad at it back then.

"I'm back."

"Your dorm is very... you, isn't it?"

"...Yes?"

"Your dorm gives off the same atmosphere as you."

"What atmosphere is that?"

"Bright, happy, full of light and color, etc."

"That's how you see me?"

"Am I wrong? I'm usually quite skilled at character analysis, although you're a bit difficult to figure out."

"I wouldn't say you're wrong, I've just never heard that before. I can treat all your bruises and scars, but I advise you get a professional to look at your ankle. I think it's sprained, but it might be broken. I'll ice it for now to reduce the swelling, but try not to put any weight on it and get a doctor to look at it as soon as possible."

"Can I call one now?"

"If you can, then sure. Will they come right now though?"

"I'm pretty sure all I have to do is pay them a few extra 100 dollars and they'll come."

"A- A 100 dollars?!"

"Or a few thousand if they happen to be really stubborn and unwilling. But around 500 dollars should do it. I think."

He then dials a number and starts negotiating.

"How much will I give you? Like, besides the actual pay? I don't know, like 300? Not enough? 500? Okay, thank you."

I stare at him open mouthed.

"What is it?"

"You can just pay someone 500 bucks just like that?!"

"Of course. Can't you? 500 barely makes a dent in my bank account. I was prepared to pay up to 10 thousand, although I knew it probably wouldn't come to that."

"I barely have a 100 and here you are with more than 10 thousand..."

"... Do you want me to pay you for the clothes you made me or something?"

"What?! No! Why would you suddenly bring that up?"

"Isn't that what you were insinuating when you remarked on the difference in our financial situations?"

"No, that's not what I was trying to say. In fact, I was just making an observation."

"Oh. Most people generally try to get money out of me by being nice to me, so I naturally thought you wanted payment."

"... I'll have you know that I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself and I work 2 jobs. So, no. I don't need money. And can you stay still? I can't apply the ointment properly if you keep moving around like that. If it hurts and that's the reason you're moving, I'll try and be more gentle, although I like to think I'm being fairly gentle currently as well."

"No, it doesn't hurt. It's actually sort of ticklish. You're being a little too gentle."

"Ah..."

I apply a little more force, but not too much in fear I might hurt him. I finish up when I hear a knock.

"That must be the doctor."

"Oh, I'll get it then."

I open the door to see a doctor.

"Hello, young lady. Is second young master of the Rockwell household here?"

"Uhhh... If you're referring to Julian Rockwell, then yes."

Julian sighs.

"Don't call me that in front of others, they'll get confused, much like Clarissa is now."

"Apologies, young master. I'm afraid it's a habit of mine."

"Just check on my injury."

"As you wish, young master."

The doctor takes a look at Julian's ankle.

"You did a good job icing it, young maste—"

"I didn't ice it. She did. But continue."

"It's just sprained. Rest it and don't put any pressure on it. You should be fine in 4 to 6 weeks. I'll bandage it for now."

Meanwhile, Julian looks shocked and horrified.

"I need to rest for a month at minimu—!"

"Julian! Sit back down! I know you're upset, but forcing it will only worsen it and make it take even longer to heal!"

I quickly run over and prevent him from standing up. The doctor nods, agreeing.

"She's right, master Julian. You should refrain from doing anything that could possibly strain your ankle. If not, you may never be able to use it again."

Julian sits down, his head in his hands.

"Leave."

"Y- Yes, young master?"

"Leave. I want to be alone."

"As you wish, young master."

... What do I do...? He wants to be alone, but this is my dorm. But then again, I don't think it's a good idea to kick him out now... I'll just go to a different room and let him have his solitude. This must be really hard on him, as this means he won't be able to dance for at least a month... Poor Julian... I get up from the sofa in my living room and start to make my way toward the bedroom, when Julian grabs my wrist.

"Julian...? What is it? I thought you wanted to be alone... Do you need anything?"

"That was for the doctor. You stay."

"Umm... Okay... What should I do...?"

"You don't have to do anything. Just... please stay by my side for a bit."

"Sure..."

I sit down beside him and run my fingers through his shiny, silky hair. He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't stop me either, so I assume this much is okay.

"Hey..."

"Hmm?"

"I know I said you don't have to do anything, but... do you mind listening to me talk about myself?"

"Depends. By listen, do you mean actually listen to what you're saying, or just treat it like background noise while you talk?"

"The first one."

"Then, of course. Feel free to talk."

"Thank you..."

This is the first time I've seen Julian so... upset. He's usually so calm and put together, creating this perfect persona...

"My family is full of prodigies. My parents, my sister, my brother, all of them. Older sister, June, is kind of like me. Ballet prodigy. Older brother, Juno, is a tech genius. He creates programs and codes in the blink of an eye. They're twins. All of them went here and were accepted into the royal class immediately, no questions asked. It's our family's tradition to go to this school and get into the royal class. Naturally, I was expected to do the same. Although I must seem exactly like them, I was never like them because... they were perfect. I've never seen them make mistakes. Sister could master a routine in one try, while I had to practice and practice until I was close to collapsing. Still, I would rather collapse from practicing and master the routine rather than face the wrath of father, so I didn't mind too much."

"Di- Did you ever collapse for real?"

"Probably multiple times. I don't remember very much though. The most I remember is everything going black and waking up in my bed. Still, I was satisfied if I mastered a routine, even if I passed out during it."

"Julian..."

"Don't worry, I'm not that weak. I didn't collapse once every week or something like that. It would happen once in a while. Not that often. Akio's the weakest."

"Akio?"

"Yes. You didn't know? Akio's an artist, so he's pretty high strung. Maybe that's why he gets sick all the time."

"Goodness... That sounds awful..."

"It is, which is why we always tell him to be careful, but since nearly everything could trigger a reaction, he gets sick and misses class quite often. The teachers know this, so they let him off really easy. A drawing that he did while sick in bed is all that he needs to pass his classes."

"... I'm not sure if I should feel jealous or not..."

"I kind of get being jealous, but don't. Akio got quite defensive when we got jealous, and started to say that he'd gladly change places with us anyday. Well, it was more of Apollo saying it was a fairly effective way of making him practice while sick, Ceol just staying quiet, and Zain being jealous. And Akio got mad at him. I was just observing the situation."

"Aha... I see."

"But Akio is better than I am, sick or not. At least he can still practice his talent."

"That's because the nature of your talents are different. All Akio needs are his hands and eyes. You need your entire body."

"I know that... in my head, that is."

"Ah. You still find it difficult to accept?"

He nodded.

"I remember when I felt like that."

"You? I bet you were perfect from the start."

"What? No way. All the other kids at my school who liked making dresses and clothes were all these super rich and privileged kids, and their parents hired the best designers and seamstresses to teach them. Of course, while I had the talent, I didn't have the guidance, so I had to learn everything myself. I knew that I wouldn't be as skilled as them, but I could never quite accept that their clothes were undeniably better than mine."

"Ouch. You do realize I'm one of those super rich and privileged kids who was willing to spend 10 thousand on a doctor, right?"

"Oh, no. I don't mean rich people like you who also happen to be nice. I'm talking about people who have their own rich clique and think they're above everyone because of their overflowing wealth. At the time, making your own clothes was considered 'endearing' and 'cute'. So, it was mainly some big trend. I also didn't appreciate my passion being treated like a trend, so that could've been a factor for my dislike of those girls?"

"Nice? Since when was I nice?"

"I thought you were nice from the first day actually. Because you returned my book."

"Of course I gave it back, since it was important to you. It's clear you'd be devastated if you lost it. Like how I feel sorry for myself for being so idiotic."

"Ah... So that's why. Thank you for recognizing it's importance to me!"

"Pfft... Hahaha..."

"Wh- What is it?"

"Nothing really. It's just that I find it amusing that you'd say thank you for something so small, especially after I gave you a hard time over the book."

"I think it was nice of you, so thank you!"

I give him a bright smile while expressing my gratitude, which makes him widen his eyes, most likely in surprise.

"... No need. Do I really have to rest for a month?"

"Unless you can heal very quickly, yes."

"..."

His mood immediately darkens. I feel bad now... Should I have sugarcoated it a bit?
? He laughs in a self-deprecating way.

"I really am pathetic... I can't do anything right, can I? I can't even practice right. Everything I do is a failure. I'm useless. No wonder my family was disappointed with me as I'm like this."

... I had no idea what to say... I honestly want to cry because his comments about himself are making me sad, but I hold it in as he's probably even more upset than I am, and hug him. I thought he'd push me away and play it off, but... he instead clings to me, crying. I really didn't think this through, did I? I should fix this habit of doing things without thinking of the consequences... I gently rub circles in his back, hoping it would help him calm down a little. His story actually fits a song I wrote when I was a year or two younger. Although... I was mainly trying to convince myself that someone else was singing it to me, and it wasn't my voice. I did write it hoping someone else would say something similar to me one day, so it makes sense why I'd try and fool myself. But I like the song, let's make that clear. I like the lyrics... Which I wrote... Okay, yeah. Let's just not think about it. I feel like I'm bragging if I keep going on and on. Ah... What should I do to calm him down...? I don't know if this will work, but I suppose my voice might help in the same way a lullaby helps a child fall asleep...? I softly start singing a song that's meant to be calming. I feel him calm a little, so I pull back.

"Do you feel better?"

He looks down, nodding. I can't see his expression, but his ears are bright red. Is he... blushing? Is he embarrassed?

"Hey, what's wrong? Why are you so red?"

"I- It's nothing!"

Seeing him like this makes me want to tease him a little.

"Really? Are you sure?"

I tilt his face up and feel his forehead.

"You feel a little hot, are you sure you're not running a temperature?"

"I- I'm fine! I'm just... embarrassed."

"Embarrassed? Of what?"

He averts his gaze and he blushes deeper, if that's possible.

"I- I... It's just been a really long time since I've shown my vulnerable side to somebody else, so I realize I may have gone overboard and made you uncomfortable, which I really don't want to do as you've been nothing but kind, so I- I'm rambling, aren't I? Sorry."

"Haha, it's fine~ Although, I do admit I'm a bit surprised. Your perfect mask dropped so quickly. Is this how you usually act?"

"Well, it's exhausting acting 'perfect', so I guess that's why. This is how I acted before I developed my perfect personality, so I guess you could say it's how I usually was? I also have to pause and arrange my words before speaking, which was also tiring. Mentally, I mean. Not physically."

I lightly hug him, giggling.

"Well, I like you better when you're like this, rather than when you're perfect!"

"W- Woah... D- Don't just hug me out of the blue like that, you surprised me! But... Why? Isn't perfect me so much better?"

"Not at all! I always felt awkward around you before. You were always so... well, perfect that I could never really say anything to you. You always felt so far away and untouchable. Above us all."

"... I felt like that?"

"Well, at least to me, yeah? But wasn't that your intention? Why are you so surprised?"

"I- I didn't mean that at all. If anything, it was the opposite. I acted that way to be liked and loved. I wanted to be liked and admired, not feel far away."

"Really? Because you didn't give me that impression at all."

"I didn't?"

"... If you think back on our previous encounters, you'd clearly see why."

"Yeah, I see it. I'm so sorry for my terrible treatment of you up until now. My obsession with perfection naturally makes me judge others harshly, as no one is perfect, and with you coming into our class in the middle of the semester with no real warning probably amplified my negative feelings towards you. But... Thank you. I really do appreciate you for all you did. So... I... I'll try to be better."

"Really?! Yay! Thank you so much!"

He laughs a bit and shakes his head.

"It's me, not you who should be saying thank you. So, let me say it again. Thank you. And... I'm sorry."

"It's okay! I'm just glad you apologized."

He flicked me on the forehead.

"Ow!"

"You forgive too easily."

"... Is that bad...?"

"Not necessarily, but I feel like you'll trust anyone at the drop of a hat."

"Wh- What...?! That's not true at all! A- And besides! Who says that to someone who's trying their best to help you!"

"I don't remember me asking you to help. Last time I checked, weren't you the one begging to help me?"

"... Mean."

He laughed a little and wound a strand of my hair around his finger.

"I'm sorry, Clarissa. But you can't be mad at me anyway, right? Your hair is pretty by the way."

I finger a lock of my long hair gently.

"It is? I think it's weird. Especially the color. It's like this weird lilac-brown."

"No, no. It's pretty. Better than my hair."

"What? Your hair is beautiful."

"No it's not. Wait, don't get upset."

He threaded his hand through his hair, looking straight into my eyes.

"Clarissa, listen. I really do appreciate you trying to make me feel better, and you are being helpful, despite me not asking for your help. However, I don't need you denying the truth as well. There's no need to lie that something looks good."

"... Julian, I think you misunderstood. I'm not lying. Your hair is really really pretty."

"Well, if you compare it with the rest of my features, I suppose you could say that."

"Julian. While I kind of get your insecurity about your skill, what do you dislike about your face? There's nothing wrong with it."

"It's too... feminine."

I blink for a few moments, not getting it.

"Yes?"

"My features look too delicate and pretty."

"So... You're saying you look like a girl?"

He frowned a bit.

"That wasn't exactly what I was trying to say, but yes, that is the main gist of it."

"If that's your problem, isn't it better to cut your hair? Long hair will only make you look more like a girl. Not that all girls have long hair and all guys have short, but it's more common for girls to have long hair than for guys to have it."

"I would, except my parents dislike it."

"Cutting your hair?"

He nodded.

"But... It's your hair, isn't it? And do you contact your parents often?"

"It's not by choice, but they check up on me at least once every week."

"I don't know whether to feel jealous or not. My parents cut contact the second I told them this is an all expenses paid boarding school with no tuition fee."

"I wish they'd cut contact, so don't be jealous. Speaking of, I might block them again, although it won't do much good. The last time I tried, they called everyone around me due to my older brother hacking into the system and getting people's phone numbers. I gave up and unblocked them once I saw how far they were willing to go to control me from afar."

"Control...?"

"Oh, yes. We were talking about my hair. My parents viewed me as a disappointment. They already had their mentally prodigious son and physically talented daughter, so they didn't really wish for another kid. But, well they didn't abort me, which I suppose I should feel thankful for. Since I was unwanted, I had to at least be perfect to fit in and be accepted as a member of my family. But I wasn't perfect, unfortunately. My family hated even seeing my face. They forced me to grow my hair to hide my face. They told me I was ugly and that I was lucky I was alive. Stuff like that. They still tell me that, so they probably won't allow me to cut my hair."

"Well, this works, right?"

"Clarissa...?! Wh- What did you do to my hair?!"

"I braided it. You don't mind, right? I always wanted to touch it ever since I first saw it. It was so shiny and silky, haha."

He sighs and takes the braid to see.

"I suppose this could make it more manageable. I'm not mad, just surprised."

"I'm glad. I don't want you to be angry at me."

"Clarissa. I'd honestly be very confused if anyone could be mad at you if you did for them what you did for me, so I'll never get angry at you for at least today. Relax."

"Really? Yay! Thank you!"

"Ah! Clarissa, don't hug me like that so suddenly, you surprised me."

"Ahaha... Sorry."

"It's really alright. I wouldn't tell you off even if you did nothing for me if it was just a hug. You meant no harm, right?"

"Hey! Nothing I did meant you harm!"

"Oh, really? Then what was that about forcing me to dance? Couldn't you tell it caused great mental distress?"

"That... I'm sorry about what I did... I just couldn't stand it. I admit I don't know a lot about dance, and it was my first time seeing you perform... However, your dance was so enchanting it completely captivated even me, a person who knows nothing about dance. It was like watching a snowflake dancing in midair. I thought it such a shame. You, who had immense talent, wasn't able to show it properly. Plus, the audience would misjudge you as well. I couldn't just stand by and watch that unfold, especially while knowing I could do something through improvisation, as I was, in the play, the princess, the person who had the most authority out of everyone there. So, that was actually me trying my best to fix it and give you a chance to redeem yourself. And if you really must know, it hurts my feelings when you put it like that. You make it sound like I forced you when you were clearly in no condition to. I made sure you were calm enough to resume before ordering you to continue."

"I... captivated you?"

I nodded

"But... But... I failed... How could that..."

"It doesn't matter whether you failed or not. To me, that is. I tend to view the effort that goes into something, rather than the end result. Even if you fell, I still thought you were amazing. You were more graceful than anyone else I've ever seen. Even the way you fell looked like something you did on purpose, as part of the dance, not something accidental."

"..."

He doesn't say anything, but looks down. Wait... Are those tears falling from his eyes?! What did I do wrong now? Umm... Gosh... Okay, calm down Clarissa...

"Julian? Hey, what's wrong? Did I say something wrong? I'm sorry if I hurt you..."

"Huh? Why are you apologizing?"

"Be- Because you were crying!"

"I... Oh... You must've been worried. But I'm really okay, you know?"

He wipes off his tears as he speaks, and gives me a bright smile once he's done.

"See? So, don't worry about it. Thank you for listening to my story."

I just stand there, entranced again. His smile was so bright and pure. It was beautiful, blinding really. Is this... his real smile? It's so... dazzling...

"Clarissa? Clarissa, what are you doing?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry! I zoned out for a bit."

"What? Ah, seriously? You're so high maintenance at times. I know you're an artist, but you can't live in your own imagination all the time. Come back down to earth from time to time, yeah?"

"Haha, sorry again. You're not too angry... Right?"

"Haaa... Jesus, no. I was never angry at you. How could I ever get mad at you for anything after what you just did?"

"What I did?"

He suddenly turns red.

"N- Nothing! Ignore it."

"Fine, fine. On one condition."

"What?"

"Hug me?"

"... What?"

"I want a hug to prove that you're not mad. So... Can I please have one hug?"

"That's it? Of course."

He hugs me and I'm suddenly lifted up in the air.

"Ah!"

"Done. Are you satisfied, my princess?"

W- Was that... a princess carry?! I've only ever heard about it in books... I never imagined I'd receive it... I feel my cheeks flushing a light pink, but I can't help smile. I always wanted to be carried like that, even if just once. One of my wishes... Wait...

"Julian! I told you not to stand!"

I was so caught up I didn't notice!

"This much is fine though? It was just a few seconds."

"... Julian. Promise me you won't overdo it okay? If you do, you'll get hurt like this."

He looks down, seemingly feeling guilty.

"I promise. I won't do anything that makes you sad. But... If I can make a request... Will you watch me when I practice?"

That's it? And... If I watch, I can make sure he doesn't overwork himself, right?

"Sure! I can definitely do that."

"Really? Thank you! Then I promise to never overwork myself ever again!"

Julian's POV

"Again. Again. Again."

"How are you so untalented? Your siblings mastered this in no time."

"You're just not good enough."

"You should've never been born."

"Spectacular!"

"Congratulations on winning."

"Your son is truly a child prodigy."

"You must feel so lucky with your talent."

I can never quite tell which side is real or fake. My family denies any talent I might possess, but the public declares I'm a child prodigy. Who cares. Either way, I won't ever be able to satisfy either side. But... I like being called a prodigy, regardless of whether it's true or not. It's the only time I'm ever praised. Nothing I do for my family is ever enough. Apparently, perfection is expected, so praise is a luxury. But... If I mess up, that's over too. So, I have to appear perfect to the public. And the only way to do that is to practice and practice until I get it right. So... I must master this, no matter the cost. Ah... My legs hurt... They're already bruised all over because of the times I fell. Whatever. They'll heal. Okay, let's do this once more. Step one, two and...

"Ah!"

Ow... I landed awkwardly on my ankle... And it's the day before the play too... I gingerly try moving it but give up due to the pain. I had no choice but to go up on stage with my sprained ankle. Because if anyone knew, they would dissuade me from going up on stage.

- The play (when he fell down)

"You will never be enough."

"You will always be useless."

"If you're imperfect, you are nothing."

S- Stop... Please... I'm sorry.... I'm sorry I let you down again... You were right. I'm useless. I am nothing. I-! I suddenly hear a song that I don't know being sung in a sweet voice. All of a sudden, I'm in a soft embrace. So warm and comforting... I calm down fairly quickly due to the hug. Ah... Right... This is... a play... When I calm down enough to assess the situation, I quickly withdraw, but Clarissa refuses and prevents me from doing so. I furiously whisper in her ear, hoping

she rethinks the decision, but... How can I refuse you when you say things like that... I feel like tearing up. Nobody has ever told me that... I have never had anyone to support me when I fall down. I was always alone when I did. I continue per her wish and receive a standing ovation. The performance was successful... even though I failed...? I don't understand. The one thing I do know, however, is that this is all thanks to Clarissa. So... Why is Apollo getting angry at her? I try and calm him, but... He refuses to do so. Getting annoyed with his tantrum, I take Clarissa's hand and walk out. Apollo acts so logical all the time, but one thing that doesn't go as planned and he goes ballistic. I get liking things going as expected, but isn't that mainly because nothing went wrong? Things not going as planned means something went wrong. And as soon as she saves the day and makes it a huge success anyway, he blows up at her for it? Honestly, sometimes I have no idea what goes on inside that head of his. After we get out and escape his wrath, I ask if she's okay. I mean, Apollo didn't get physical or anything, but she seems quite sensitive, so I thought I should check. She says she's fine and offers to heal my ankle, and rolls up my pant leg. She looks stunned. Not surprising. I quickly walk off again when she suddenly runs after me and legit begs me to let her help me. I don't get it. Why is she so desperate to help? It's weird- well, she says it's a "normal human reaction", but my family never did that. And then she starts tearing up. As I thought. Sensitive. Wait, no. This won't do. If anyone sees us, my reputation will be ruined. I calm her down and let her treat me as a prize for stopping her tears. She leads me to her room and sits me down while she goes behind a beaded curtain. I look around her dorm as I wait. The only word I can use to describe her dorm is... Clarissa. Everywhere I look has traces of her personality and taste. I can clearly see what she likes through the way she decorated her room. She comes back carrying a first aid kit.

Ceol: Accidentally caused Apollo an injury, which Apollo forgot about shortly after. The injury did some damage to his brain, causing a condition called Alexithymia. This made it difficult for him to define emotions. He can feel them, but he can't identify them very well. After this incident, Ceol felt great remorse as Apollo was his only friend, and began to think that he ruins everything he holds dear with his own hands, and this causes him to be very sensitive whenever he hurts someone emotionally or physically. He immediately pushes them away and tells them to stay away to protect them from being hurt.

Akio: Once called an artistic child wonder and admired by all, his talent soon caused great misfortune to his family. After that, he was hated and pushed away, even if he approached someone with pure intentions. This caused him to put up an arrogant facade, to distract himself from all the hate he faced, thinking 'I'm too good for them. They're just jealous of my talent.'

Apollo: A childhood friend of Ceol, an accident caused the once bright and emotional child to become apathetic and find it difficult to describe emotions. However, his memories were intact, and therefore knows that he and Ceol played together, and that Ceol was different from his memories. Due to their memories together, he theorized they must've considered each other as friends. Since Ceol was so different from when they were friends, he felt uncomfortable. When he talked to others about it, they said that he shouldn't worry so much, and Ceol would be fine, leading him to name this emotion as 'worry' and using it to describe his feelings for Ceol since. However, even if he finds it difficult to name emotions, he still feels them pretty well, as he was overly emotional, so even with Alexithymia, he still feels an average amount. Unfortunately, he can't define them, so he often feels uncomfortable and irritated. He relies solely on facts.

Zain: His parents didn't want him to grow arrogant because of his looks, so they always told him he was ugly. Although it was done with good intentions, it ultimately backfired completely, as now he has a constant need to validate his looks and convince himself worthy of love by becoming narcissistic and vain. His flirting also comes from missing out on the love he should have got when he was a child. He flirts with every girl in sight to relieve his sense of being lonely and fill his need for love and security that he never got.

Julian: Growing up in a household where everyone was a prodigy at something, he always watched his older brothers and sisters bask in the spotlight. They never made mistakes. Although he was an extraordinary genius at dance, he often made mistakes due to his young age. Everytime he did, he was harshly berated, causing him to develop atelophobia (fear of imperfection) later on. He developed an elegant way of speaking and moving to seem perfect, and made sure to never fail anything, at least, where others could see. Unfortunately, this phobia also caused him to judge others harshly, if they weren't perfect. He also has a tendency to overwork himself a lot as he thinks he's 'not good enough' yet.

The stage was simple and small. I only had one person as an audience. It was much plainer than a majority of my performances. But... even so... It was my favorite of them all, as it was the first time I ever felt joy when I danced.



After I introduce myself, I take a look around the classroom. Is this entire class full of boys?! There's one with white hair and violet eyes with headphones on. Another has golden locks and blue green eyes. The third has dark brown hair with hazel eyes and glasses. The 4th has silver hair with striking red eyes. The last one has long, shining, white blond hair and dark blue eyes. All 5 fix their eyes on me.

"..."

"She's in the royal class? No way. She's not good enough. I bet I'm at least 10 times better than she could ever be."

"According to my calculations, the chances of you being able to match our abilities are less than 5%."

"Ah, my beautiful face. Mirror, mirror in my hand, who's the fairest in this school?"

"This is quite the annoyance. Do you think the school will allow me to rearrange your class or give me the pleasure of... rejecting your application form?"

... Is this really the school of my dreams...? This is the royal class at Anais Academy, a school dedicated to teaching talented and gifted children and nurture their talents. The school itself is notoriously hard to get into, and the royal class consists of the best students to have ever walked these halls in their generation. Each year, 5 students are selected to be the royal class and it's considered a great honor. Gender, ethnicity, background, etc has never mattered. Only thing that mattered was talent. It didn't matter what talent you had. In fact, it was common for the royal class to have students with vastly different talents. I'm quite a special case though. I transferred to this school later in the year, after the members of the royal class had already been chosen. I usually wouldn't even be in the royal class, but due to my records from my old school and multiple awards I received for my designs and singing, I was accepted as a member of the prestigious royal class. Although... I do feel gender suddenly plays a role this year. How else would all the 5 members of the royal class be boys?! And there's an equal ratio of boys and girls in Anais Academy as well, so I know it's not a shortage of girls... It's usually 3 boys and 2 girls or vice versa. It's never been 5 boys and 0 girls... Are they just... so talented that the others couldn't even compare and that's why there are only boys in this class? But... All of them seem to have some sort of issue. The first one doesn't say anything. He never talks and sleeps all day. The second is so arrogant and acts like he's above everyone and the third is like a machine. He always calculates the outcomes before deciding on anything. The fourth is like the high school male version of snow white's wicked stepmom. Obsessed with his looks. A narcissist who either looks into his mirror or a photo of himself. As for the last one, he's... difficult to figure out. His words and actions are definitely harsh and cruel, but they're so elegant they have you mesmerized at the same time. Even his words take you a moment to register what he says as mean because his language and vocabulary is so refined. As for his actions, no matter how small they are, like raising his hand or tucking a lock of his hair behind his ear, are so graceful it's like I'm watching a dance. Oh, yeah. Because he's a dance prodigy, Julian Rockwell. The silent boy is a music genius, Ceol Lyndon. The arrogant guy is an artistic wonder, Akio Kiyoshi. The third is named Apollo Kyna, a writing wonder. The fourth, Mr. Narcissist, is called Zain Beaumont. He's an acting marvel. Although they're all so different, they've all made one thing abundantly clear. They hate me being in their class. Ceol doesn't say a word, but looks at me with such disdain and disgust that he doesn't even need words to express how he feels. Akio is forever talking about their accomplishments in an effort to show that they're better than I am. Apollo is just calculating everything about me. Zain is just... flirting with me, even though I've made it clear I have no interest in him, while Julian keeps insulting me gracefully. Why are they so against me? Because there are only

meant to be 5 members? Is that it? Haaa... What should I do...? ! I suddenly trip over something and my bag crashes to the floor. Wh- What should I do?! I was told to bring all the trophies and awards to prove my worth today. Some of them are glass, what if they broke?! I quickly check on them, tossing random awards and proof of my skill out of my bag at random. Thank goodness none of them are broken.

"Your clothes were featured in paris fashion week when you were 15?"

"Your design was on the front cover of Vogue 3 times?"

"Isn't this trophy from when you were 7?"

"Uhh... Yes, to all of those questions. Can you give them back now?"

"You might be better than I thought, but I'm still infinitely better than you."

"Upon recalculation taking this newfound information into account, the probability had increased to 50%."

"Paris fashion week and Vogue? So... I guess you weren't playing when you said your talent was design. I thought you drew some dresses and called it 'design'. And a trophy for singing at 7... Not too bad."

That's when I see what he has in his hand.

"Wh- H- Hey! Please give that back! It's important to me!"

"Oh, is that so? This little booklet full of some pointless drawings? Is this what you call important?"

"That's my design book! All of my designs and inspiration are in that book!"

"Here you are. Have it back. I don't have a need for such useless items after all."
"

"Thank you!"

I clutched the little book tightly to my chest. It's my most prized possession, so I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to it. Awards and other things are nice and all, especially when I'm making a portfolio or I have to prove myself, but my ideas and designs are what really matters, and they're all inside this little book. Julian was quite nice to give it back without a fight, although I still don't appreciate the fact that he called my designs useless. Especially since dancers of

ten wear costumes. He and Zain should know how much of an important role clothes play in their performances.

"Alright class! So, our school's annual festival is coming up, so any ideas on what we should do? Remember, each class has to do something and each member of the class must contribute in some way."

Oh! I have a good idea!

"Clarissa?"

"How about... a play?"

"A play?"

I nodded.

"Zain's an actor, so it's obvious how he'll contribute. Akio can work on props and backdrops. Ceol could work on some background music or sound effects. Apollo is a writer, so he can come up with the main plot or script. I'm sure we could integrate some dance into the play, which is where Julian would help. I can design and create the costumes for the play, and I guess I could sing some song in a dramatic scene. All in all, I think we can all contribute fairly."

"I see. What about the rest of you?"

Ceol shrugs. Zain seems enthusiastic about it. Apollo's scribbling down a few things in his notebook like how many people we have and how we would need to divide the parts.

"Well, if I must do it, I suppose I could contribute a bit. Consider it an honor that I will personally draw backdrops."

"Dance? Apollo, be sure to put in at least one scene."

"Okay. I can devote at least a few minutes to a dancing scene."

"Then... Do you all agree, or..."

"... You really must have a low level of intelligence. Have you not been listening to I and Apollo's conversation?"

"Okay, then. Thank you for agreeing to my idea, everyone!"

"Okay, it's most efficient if we work in pairs. Zain, you'll work with me. Clarissa, with Ceol. And Akio with Julian."

Ceol...? You mean... that guy who never talks? How will I work with him if he refuses to even talk to me? I feel a tap on my shoulder, and look up. Ceol is holding out his hand to me. I don't really know what to do, but based on his actions, I think I'm supposed to take his hand? I gingerly place my hand on his, and he pulls me up from my seat and leads me somewhere. Is this a music room and recording studio in one? It's really big and everything is so high tech and quality too! I guess the academy wasn't kidding when they said they only present their students with only the best of the best equipment to better hone and nurture their talent. Ceol sits down and holds out his phone to me. There's a message from Apollo. Well, I think it's Apollo. There's a pencil where the name of the sender is usually written.

Ceol's contacts

Apollo → 📞

Akio → 🎨

Zain → 🎭

Julian → 🏃

Clarissa (if he adds her) → 🎨 + 🎤

It says 'Talk to her and get to know her better.'

... Somehow, I don't really see him talking. At all. He hasn't said a word during the whole time I've been here. He motions to a chair facing him. I sit down and look at the ground. A few moments later, he holds out his phone to me. There's a message on it.

'Your name's Clarissa, right? Can I call you Claire?'

I nodded.

'Okay, Claire. We'll start with testing your voice range.'

I nod again. He makes his way to the piano and has me sing, my voice going from octave to octave. I have no problem going higher, but it's difficult to hit low notes. He stops playing.

'Soprano.'

I take out my own phone and type 'I know.' His eyes widen a little.

'You... don't have to type like I do.'

'I know.'

'Then why are you typing? Just talk. Isn't that what you're used to anyway?'

'Yeah, if the other person does the same.'

'What does it matter to you how I communicate?'

'I wouldn't say it specifically matters, I just wanted to try understanding you.'

'Understand...?'

'Well, we'll be together for the rest of the year, right? And we'll be stuck together for every class until the school festival.'

'Oh.'

'Although, if you don't mind me saying so, I'd prefer it if you talked. I want to hear your voice. You're a music prodigy, so I guess I sort of automatically thought you'd have a nice voice? Sorry if I'm wrong'

'Aren't you supposed to have a good voice, not me?'

'Well, yes, but...'

'Then that's that. Besides, I don't make music like that.'

'Oh? Then how do you make music?'

He pulls out a laptop and his fingers practically fly over the keys. A few moments later, a melody starts playing.

'See?'

'Wow~ Do you have lyrics for them?'

He gets a notebook and shows me the pages. The pages are full of lyrics, but no titles, except one. I reach for that page and he harshly knocks my hand away. I look at him, wide eyed with surprise and hurt. Although silent, Ceol seemed like a fair

ly gentle person. His eyes widen as if surprised at his own actions and looks to the side. He takes my hand and inspects it. Once he sees it's not seriously hurt, he lets go of my hand.

'Sorry, let's stop for today.'

'No, it's fine.'

'It's for me, rather than you. And, as for trying to understand me, don't waste your time and energy on something like me. It's for the best if you don't get close to me.'

He gets up and walks off.

"Ceol?! Wait!"

He obediently waits for me to catch up, and starts walking slower when I do. When we get back to the classroom, he taps Apollo's shoulder and goes back to his seat. Apollo lightly sighs.

"The chances of Ceol getting his voice back are dropping lower every day."

"He used to talk?"

"Of course. He used to sing too. We would work together to create songs when we were little. I would write the lyrics, he would create the melody and sing it too."

"Oh... Why doesn't he talk now?"

"That... I don't know. He still creates music, but only the melody. Still, you held out longer than I expected. I thought you'd walk back in this room 5 minutes later, saying he refuses to talk to you or something like that."

"Oh, no! He does communicate in his own way. He doesn't talk, but he types what he wants to say on his phone and shows it to me. He was fine until he accidentally slapped my hand away, which was my fault in the first place..."

"He did something like that? He's never done that to anyone, including me. Clarissa."

I jump, startled.

"Y- Yes?!"

He sighs.

"I don't want to scold you, Clarissa. You can stop being so wary. I was going to ask a favor of you, and it's fine if you fail as well."

"What is it...?"

"Please watch over Ceol well."

"What?!"

"Ceol, as you've noticed, never talks. Well, he used to, but he doesn't talk now. This is true for everyone, including me. However, you seem different, as he made an effort to communicate with you."

"Wait, wait. That's because you sent him a text to talk to me and get to know me, not because he likes me or anything."

"No."

I look at him, confused.

"Ceol is my childhood friend. Do you really think I'm that unfeeling that I wouldn't care if he suddenly went mute, and try to revert him back to how he was?"

"Well... Sort of, yeah."

"... Not the point. I do care. So, I tried this with everyone we met, since he clearly doesn't think I'm trustworthy enough to tell me what happened—"

"That's not true. That's definitely not it."

"What is?"

"Ceol doesn't think of you as 'untrustworthy'. In fact, he probably isn't telling you because he cares about you. Ceol cares about you more than anyone. That's why he doesn't want to tell you. He probably wants to protect you or doesn't want his problems to burden you. It's not that he doesn't trust you, he just wants to make sure you don't have more things to worry about than necessary. And, this is just my thought, but you must have a lot."

"Maybe. But, what I'm trying to say is, I think you could help Ceol regain his voice."

"Me? Haha, I'm honored you think so."

"Haaaa... So annoying. Just help him."

"Umm... Okay?"

A bit perplexed and confused by Apollo's sudden interest in me, I look over at Ceo 1. Ah... He's sleeping again. Will I... really be able to help him find his voice again?

The next day

"We'll be working individually today. Clarissa. The roles and main plot are done, so read it and go design costumes for everyone."

"Oh, okay!"

I take the script Apollo hands me and quickly read it through. ?! Why is this about a competition for a princess? There's a narrator, played by Apollo. Then there's the princess, naturally played by me, and the others are supposed to be competing to... take my hand in marriage?! The ending, so the winner, will be decided by the audience, and it'll end with the winner and the princess holding hands and looking at each other... lovingly.

"Apollo! What is this plot?!"

"Oh. Zain suggested it, as I'm not very good at writing emotional stuff. He helped me with the plot, but I did the roles. I decided on the audience affecting the ending of the play though."

"I- Isn't this too romantic?!"

"What?"

"It's about marriage!"

"Zain wanted it to be in the middle ages so he could be a prince, so I looked it up and it said that princesses were often asked for their hand in marriage at your age. Besides, you had to be the prize, considering there are 4 men, excluding me, and it was set in the middle ages. No prince, let alone 4 different princes from 4 different countries, is going to go to a foreign land to meet some random country girl. So, you're a princess, the prize

"F- Fine... So, you're the narrator, so you can just wear your uniform. I'll make costumes for myself and the others."

"Okay."

I take out my measuring tape and a notebook and pencil to write down their measurements.

"Zain, Akio, Ceol, Julian! Come here for a moment please!"

"Of course, princess~"

"How dare you call me? You're unworthy to even say my name."

"..."

"Ah. Although I am not quite sure what you need, I assume it is for the performance."

"Okay, great! You're all here!"

I get my measuring tape and write them down. They all have such different reactions. Zain tries to flirt the whole time, but I expected it, so I ignore him and finish. The hardest was surprisingly Akio. His face suddenly turned bright red and tried to push me away.

"A- Akio! What are you doing?! I need to measure you to make your costume!"

"D- Do you n- n- need to be s- so close?!"

"Of course! What did you expect?"

"Can't I just measure myself?"

"Yes, but it's more accurate if I do it. Besides, I'm doing it through your clothes, so what's the big deal? You sound like I'm trying to sexually assault you or something, not measure you for clothes."

Ceol and Julian were easy enough. Silent and still, and did what I asked with little to no complaint.

"Okay, I got everything! I'll draw up the designs and show it to you after I'm done, so let me know if you want to change anything. Oh, also please let me know if there are any requests you'd like to make beforehand, as it would help save time."

"Make mine look princely and highlight my good looks."

"Okay, contrast for Zain. Anyone else?"

Akio and Ceol shrug, so nothing.

"Make mine elegant and easy to move around in, as I need to dance for this play."

"Ah, good point! If that's everything, I'll be going now."

I walk off and start designing. For me, I'm probably free to do whatever I like, as long as it looks princess-like, but since the others all have such different... aesthetics, I decide to make mine white with some gold embroidery. This will be fun. I love making elaborate princess like dresses with lots of lace, frills, and sparkles. It's actually the type of dress I enjoy the most. I already measured myself at home, so I already have my measurements. Let me see... I want it to trail on the ground a bit, and have the skirt be big and poofy. Kind of like it has a crinoline, but I want to use tulle and a lot of underskirts, as a crinoline is kind of complicated to make, and I've never actually made one before. For Ceol, let's make something white with violet accents. A purple jewel, like an imitation amethyst, as a brooch could also look nice and a bit more princely. Oh, and a chain. Since the white and violet are both kind of cold, maybe I should make the trim and embellishments gold to balance it out a bit. Zain has silver hair and red eyes. So... I guess some turquoise would look nice? I want white and gold to be a pivotal color in all, so it kind of matches my dress. So, white and turquoise with a jewel like a ruby to match his eyes should look good. For Akio, he has blond hair and blue green eyes. Typical fairytale prince. I feel like bright colors would suit him. Maybe some slightly more feminine colors to contrast with the blue green? But red is a bit too strong for my taste. A pinkish purple maybe? And of course we have a white blouse underneath the vest. I want gold trimming. Yeah, basically white and gold again. And... a pinkish jewel I guess? Last, Julian. He's the hardest, because princes do not wear very comfortable clothes that are easy to move around in. So, I need to use a light and airy type of fabric, without it being see-through, as people tended to be very conservative, and I might as well make the costumes semi-accurate, since Zain and Apollo wrote the play to be set in the middle ages. Of course, my dress isn't going to be very accurate either, since I want it to be an off-shoulder dress, but it'll still be at least semi-accurate. At least it's easy enough colorwise. Julian has this platinum blond hair and dark blue eyes, so I guess white, blue, and gold? I guess it had better be dark blue, so his eyes match the clothes. No chain because that'd restrict his movement. He can have an accessory though. I'd just have to secure it tightly and make it lightweight. Maybe a light blue gem? Oh, and I want to make it flowy for elegance. Well, that's all the designs

done. I'm okay with nearly every fabric, so last is to choose which one. For Julia n, something like crepe or viscose? Silk is slippery, so maybe not the best. For t he rest, something luxurious like... velvet, brocade, damask, satin, and we can us e silk for them. I want lots of tulle and lace for my underskirts, but I suppose I should use something stiffer like damask or mikado for the bodice. With enough lay ers, the top skirt can be something light like chiffon. Okay, all done now! I shou ld go show it to them.

"So... What do you think?"

"Is this mine?"

"Yeah."

"It looks sort of... girly?"

"That's just the colors. You sai- Well, you implied you had no preference. You sho uld've said something beforehand."

"Apollo. Can I go to a professional who I deem worthy of clothing me?"

Apollo, who's reading over the script, looks over at Akio for a second and then at my design.

"No. What's so wrong with it?"

"It has pink in it."

"I am aware of that."

"Pink's a girl color."

"Actually, although you may not know this, Akio, color has no gender. In fact, lon g ago, pink was considered more appropriate for boys due to it being more boistero us and bold, while blue was for girls, because it seemed more dainty and delicate. Besides, pink and purple look good with your hair and eyes as they're complementar y colors. Just deal with it."

"What?! No way!"

"No way what?"

"No way pink was for boys and blue was for girls!"

That's when I step in.

"Okay, so you agreed to work with it, thank you so much for your understanding! Next please!"

Ceol just nods.

"You like it?"

Another nod.

"Do you want to change anything?"

He shook his head.

"Alright then, I'm happy you like it. What about you, Zain?"

"Nice~ I like how you used turquoise but made the accessory red like my eyes."

"Haha, I'm glad you noticed. I did the same for Ceol, except his is all violet."

"Hmm... I like the ribbon like decorations on mine, it looks elegant like I requested. However, is it easy to dance in?"

"O- Oh, yes! I made sure to make yours very lightweight and comfortable!"

"I see. Good. I dare say it shall suffice. Ah, when you finish, please bring it to me as soon as possible so I can practice in it."

"Umm, okay. I'll keep that in mind."

"The sooner the better by the way."

"Okay then, I'll make yours first then."

"Good. I shall be awaiting the end result."

- A week later

Okay, finally done! The original plan was to work in pairs, but it changed due to our roles. We've all been really busy. Apollo's writing and correcting the script, Ceol's working on background music, Akio's painting backdrops and creating props, and... actually, Zain and Apollo are still working in pairs, but Zain can't do much besides memorize his lines and act on stage, so he's just looking at the script

and throwing out random ideas that he thinks could make the play more fun. I'm sewing up the costumes. My hands hurt...

"Julian! Here, I'm done with your costume."

"Ah. Thank you, so you did heed my request after all. You were taking so long I thought you had forgotten."

"Sorry, but I tend to value quality a lot, so it often takes a long time to make clothes. I did try to finish it as quick as possible though, so do forgive me for the delay."

"It is quite alright, as long as you finished it. I shall go try it on now. Would you like to see the fit and how it looks?"

"Ah, yes! Please do, so I can make adjustments if anything doesn't fit."

He walks off and comes back a few minutes later, looking stunning. Well, it's a bit embarrassing to praise my own work, but I'm really proud of myself! Oh my god, he looks just like a prince from a far away land! It looks like he stepped out of a fairytale book! And the flowing elements I added also suit him really well, and certainly has that elegance he asked for.

"Well? Does it not suit me very well? Why is everyone just staring at me like that?"

"No, you look great! Anything I should fix?"

"It seems you can actually do something right for once in your life. The length, fit, etc are all done to a T. There is no need to fix anything, and the quality is certainly very high. I suppose it was worth the wait."

He smiled at me gently and I felt a hand caressing my head. I cautiously look up.

"Well done, lady Clarissa. You should be proud of yourself. It's not everyday I openly praise someone like this."

...! Julian looks... really nice when he smiles. He's always handsome, smiling or not, but his foul mouth kind of makes it difficult to look past his words. If he was nicer, I bet he'd have at least half the girls at school wrapped around his little finger. I give him a bright and happy smile.

"Thank you!"

- Weeks later

"Okay, done with everyone's, including mine! Please change into them! Julian, you too. I need to see what you all look like together, and with me."

"Clarissa? Are you done? All of us are. You're taking a very long time. Do you need help with anything?"

"No, no! I'm just putting on the last skirt and doing my hair and make up."

"... Did you just say you're putting on your skirt?"

"Yeah?"

"Why would you tell us that?!"

"Akio... Can you stop talking like this is weird? This dress is made to look like it belongs to a princess. They either have a crinoline or layers of underskirts to make the skirt look poofy. I said the last layer, so at that point I'm nearly done with my clothes. Actually, I'm done."

After I give my appearance a final check in the mirror, I step outside.

"So? How do I look?"

I twirl around for them, so they can see how the skirt moves when I do.

"... Guys? Do I look weird? It's okay if you think so, I can always make some adjustments or buy a dress if this one doesn't suit me very well. Can at least one of you show me some sort of reaction?"

"You forgot something. Luckily, I made it for you. This is a great honor, so you better be grateful for this, got it?"

"Eh?! Akio, what did you just do?"

I gently take it off my head to find a beautiful golden tiara embedded with sparkling crystals.

"Wow~ It's so beautiful! You made this?!"

"If you think the school will pay for some props, you're wrong. The general rule for the festival is we have to make virtually everything, not counting the stage or some equipment if necessary. Ah. What about your shoes? Do they match?"

I lift up my skirt a little to show him. I have these white heels with golden floral decorations on them. They do make me taller, but... They're all way taller than I am, so it doesn't make much of a difference.

"Okay, they match."

"But give me some reaction! How is it?"

Ceol types something on his phone.

'You look beautiful. Just like a real life princess. Nice dress. It works well with all of us, as it's white and gold.'

"Thank you, Ceol. Anyway, you all look great as well. Anything I should fix?"

"Yes. Fix the color. Now."

"But... The color is quite difficult... I meant something like the length or width ...?"

Apollo glances over at Akio and looks him up and down.

"Are you still not over it, Akio? As I told you before, color has no gender. Plus, her clothes don't make you look like a girl, so what's the big deal? Work with it."
"

"Not the point! Your stone cold logic isn't what I want right now! It's not helping!"

... I truly didn't think he'd hate it that much. Now I feel dreadful for the color ...

"I- I'm sorry... If it's what you really want, I'll change the color as you say... I mean, it'll be a bit troublesome as I'll need to work more, but it can't be helped if you really dislike it that much."

"No. Akio needs to learn to stop acting like a spoiled brat and learn that things don't always go his way. Deal. With. It."

"U- Umm..."

"No. Don't change anything, or you'll just be enabling him to get his way all the time without facing any consequences."

"Okay then... I- I'm sorry, Akio..."

"Stop acting like you know all about me, Apollo! You don't know anything about my past at all! I hate know- it- alls like you who always act superior to others!"

With that, Akio runs off.

"Akio! Wait!"

I start to go after him, but Apollo holds me back, preventing me from doing so.

"He'll be fine. This will be good for him in the long run. He'll be back soon."

"... Sorry, Apollo... But, I can't just ignore him after he ran out like that. I'll be back."

I shake his hand off and run after Akio.

"Akio?"

He turns around, tears staining his face.

"Akio..."

"... Leave me."

"No. I can't do that."

"If you're acting like this because of the costume, I'll wear it. Happy?"

"That's... not why I'm here, but thank you either way. Hey... What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"If you don't want to tell me, that's fine, I understand. You barely know me anyway. I just wanted to check if you were okay."

"Ah... Y- Yes, it's fine. And... Um... Thank you for coming to check on me."

"It was nothing, really. Here, let's get back, yeah? Everyone is probably waiting for us."

"I don't need your help, but since you offered it, I'll accept it this once. Be thankful I'm allowing you to do this."

"Yes, thank you so much."

He takes my outstretched hand, and we walk back together, hand in hand. When we get back, Apollo walks up to him and apologizes, albeit apathetically.

"Sorry about what I said."

"It's fine. I was also wrong for lashing out."

I clapped my hands twice.

"Alright, now that that's done, Akio, why don't you like it?"

"It's pink."

"Okay, and? Have you at least looked in the mirror?"

"No."

"... Okay, how about you take a look at yourself before judging my color choice?"

I gently lead him to a mirror and hold his shoulders from behind, making him look into the mirror. He seems surprised.

"Huh. It actually doesn't look all that bad. It doesn't make me look that feminine at least. The colors of the clothes actually go pretty well with my hair and eyes."
"

"See? It's not that bad, is it?"

He shakes his head.

"Do you still want to change it?"

He shakes his head again.

"It's fine, I can make this work. In fact, I'm probably the only one who can."

"Haha, yeah, I guess. You're the only one with this color, so you're correct."

After, I barely see Apollo, Zain, and Julian, but started spending lots of time with Akio and Ceol. Akio would have me get all dolled up, put my dress on, pose, and would paint me all day long. Mainly because all of them were going to showcase their talents to woo the princess and make her accept one as her fiancé. Akio's role as an artist requires him to paint a portrait of me as a way to show off. The others are all performing though, and Akio's the only one who has to prepare everything beforehand. It kind of reminds me of the costumes, so I feel a bit of solidarity between us. It's sort of weird though, as it's totally different. Maybe it's because we both don't really have a big performance scene. I literally just talk for the whole play, despite being the female main character and the 'prize'.

"Okay, I'm done with the sketch. Take a break, Clarissa. I need you looking as pretty as possible. You're already not that beautiful, I don't need you looking worse than you do now. I always look great, but you? Not so much. Freshen up a little."

"H- Huh?! That's so rude! Are you sure you're some great artist?! They're supposed to make their model look good no matter what! Who on earth complains I'm not pretty enough while trying to paint me?! It's for a play anyway! Who gave you the right to insult me like that!"

Akio suddenly steps forward and tilts up my face by cupping my chin.

"What are you doing?!"

"Ah, okay. A mix of coral and rose. Got it."

He then lets go and steps away.

"What was that for?"

"What?"

"Why did you abruptly tilt my face up?"

"Your cheeks."

I was very confused at his matter of fact answer, as if it was obvious. He sighed in what seemed to be exasperation.

"What's the role of a portrait?"

"Huh?"

"Just like a article of clothing's role is to fit whoever's wearing it, a portrait is meant to, as you said, portray the subject's beauty at it's fullest. After I'm done with a sketch, I tend to mix up all the colors I'll need to use on my palette . Even the subtle things, like the shine in your hair or the sparkle in your eyes. Naturally, this includes when you blush. I figured the quickest way I could find out what color your cheeks were when you blushed would be to make you mad. So, I said a couple dumb things to make you mad. Sorry if I went a little too hardcore. I wanted to get it over with quick, you see."

"Oh... Well, can I see the sketch?"

He shrugs and moves aside. I think that's a yes...? I walk up and take a look.

"Umm... Akio, are you sure this is me?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I look... too beautiful, don't you think? It doesn't really look like me."

Akio turns around looking so frustrated I can nearly see an irk mark on his forehead.

"What do you want me to do?! I've never met someone as hard to please as you! You get mad when I say you don't look that great, saying I'm supposed to make you look beautiful! Then when I do as you say, you say it doesn't look like you! What do you want me to do then?!"

"I- I... I'm sorry... You're right."

Tears started to gather and run down my face. Akio stares at me in slight surprise . He then takes out a lace handkerchief and gently starts to dab away my tears.

"There, there. Don't cry. Your pretty eyes will grow red if you carry on like that ."

"M- My eyes are pretty?"

"Yes. Very pretty, actually. They're the one feature I can't find fault with on your face. Now please stop crying. The painting will look even less like you with your reddened eyes, as it's meant to highlight your beauty. But... Does it really look that different to you? I think it's quite accurate."

"Well... It... just doesn't look a lot like me."

"In other words, yes, it looks different. Hmm... Ah. So, if we prettify you, the portrait will look like you, right?"

"Huh?! What logic is that?!"

"You said the painting doesn't look like you because painting you is too pretty, right? So, if we flip that around, it means painting you will look like the real you if you were to look prettier in real life."

"I... That is true, but..."

"So, all I have to do is prettify you."

"Do you even know how to prettify me?"

"Of course. I'm an artist after all. Making people look better is also an art, you see."

He then leads me to another room with a vanity, make up, accessories, etc.

"Here we are. Now stay still and do as I say. You'll look much better in no time."

He sits me down and starts to... prettify me, I guess? He starts off with brushing my hair. Akio always acts so arrogant and haughty, but he's being surprisingly gentle with me now, and when I cried. I feel like he's secretly a nice person. The brush gently combed out any tangles in my hair. After he's done and the brush goes through my hair smoothly without getting caught on anything, he starts using clips and elastics to section off parts.

"There's your hair done. I'll have to repaint the hair a little, but that's okay."

"Wow~ So pretty! You're really good at this Akio! I'm impressed!"

My hair was in a half up half down braided bun that looked like a rose. Akio laughed a little and looked down.

"Yeah, well, I used to do this a lot."

He looked sad just now... Is anything wrong? I blink and his sad expression is gone, so was it just my imagination? He then gets a make up palette and starts putting some make up on me like foundation, blush, eyeshadow, lipstick, etc.

"Okay, all done. What do you think?"

"I- Is this me...? I look so... beautiful..."

"Haha, looks like I did my job well then. By the way, you have a surprisingly cute face, so try and dress up a little more. Even a diamond looks dull if you don't polish it. People are the same. You should strive to become more beautiful both on the inside and out to shine brighter, don't you think?"

I nodded, and he smiled before fetching the portrait. He held it up to my face so I could compare myself and the painting in the mirror.

"Does it look a little more like you now? Don't mind the hair, I'll fix it later."

"Yeah! It looks a lot more like me! Thank you so much, Akio! You really are amazing in lots of areas! No wonder you're in the royal class with your talent for art."

"Really? Good. I worked too hard on this painting to start all over again, so I decided I had to fix your face. You should be grateful I personally painted you and dolled you up. This doesn't happen often."

... Everytime I start to think he might actually be nice, he just has to go and say something like that, doesn't he?

"Let's go back now. Ceol is waiting."

"Ah, okay!"

I quickly get up and follow him back to the classroom. I didn't think Apollo was serious when he told me to look after Ceol, but turns out he was, as he told Ceol to showcase what he can do in front of me, while everyone else was free to practice in private, alone. Well, Akio didn't have a choice, so he doesn't really count. When we get back Akio hands me off to Ceol. We go back to the music room that we went last time. God, this is even more awkward than last time.

"So... What are you planning on doing?"

After a few minutes of neither of us saying anything, I decide to break the silence. He walks to a corner and picks up a violin case that was lying around.

"Oh, you can play the violin?"

He nodded.

"Cool. Can I hear you play?"

He nodded again. I really don't see what Apollo saw in me to make him think I could somehow make Ceol talk. I think hearing his voice is close to impossible at this point. He literally never, ever talks. Suddenly, I feel a poke on my cheek. I quickly turn to see Ceol poking my cheek with his finger with no expression. He gives me one last poke and starts to play. Oh my... I knew he was a music prodigy and heard his music before, but hearing him actually play something is so different. He really is a musical genius... His music is so rich and full of emotion. I could play the exact same song and it wouldn't even compare to him. It's like... he talks through his music instead of his mouth- That's it! This might be the key to getting him to talk again! Sort of... But back to his performance, I'm... sort of sad and jealous of the others in the play. They all have a performance scene in which they showcase their special talents and I... I just talk and remain seated for nearly the entire play! Come on! What kind of prince, let alone 4 very different princes from 4 different kingdoms, all with different looks, personalities, and talents go to pursue a young princess who is seemingly weak, indecisive, and untalented?! It makes no sense! Well, unless my kingdom happens to be super prosperous and wealthy so their parents told them to marry me for the good of their kingdom. But if it's not that, it's unrealistic. I know I already did contribute, but I'm going to be the only one who looks like I don't have a talent at this rate... I feel another poke.

'You keep zoning out. Is anything wrong?'

'H- Huh?! Umm, no, it's nothing!'

'Really...? Because your expression says otherwise. I was considering helping you out, but since you say it's nothing, okay.'

"I- It's just... I'm the only one who doesn't do anything. You, Apollo, Akio, Zain, and Julian all have your moment in the spotlight when you showcase your talents, but all I do is sit still and watch you all."

Ceol smiles a bit and starts typing again.

'If that's the case, I believe I can help you. What you want is a chance to show off what you can do, same as us, right? I don't think you can do that with clothes, but singing will work nicely. If you'd like, I could compose a song for you and you could sing it whenever you want.'

" Really?! Thank you so much! But... how will you know when I'll sing it?"

'Easy. A signal. Akio's in charge of props, isn't he? He's also making a throne for you. Tap 3 times on the right armrest. That'll be our signal. Just don't tell Ap

ollo. He can get a bit aggressive when things don't go according to plan, and he definitely won't like the fact that there isn't a set time for you to sing the song . Deal?

"Deal!"

I hold out my hand for a handshake. He seems hesitant... Is it because he accidentally hurt me that one time? I was about to take it back when he gently grasps it and shakes my hand. His touch is so gentle... I guess he wants to make sure I'm not hurt again...

Days pass and it's the day of the festival before I know it. Ceol and I worked really hard on the song, but I'm not sure if I'll sing it or not. Well, I'll decide based on how it goes.

"Clarissa! You're taking so long... again... Come out quickly. I still have to do your hair and makeup, remember?"

"Yeah, I know! Sorry, Akio, you must've waited for me a long time, right?"

"... It's alright. Turn around, Clarissa."

He takes a brush and starts to style my hair and does my makeup again.

"And... There we go!"

"Thank you, Akio! As expected, Akio is really kind and amazing~!"

"I- I'm not kind, so shut it!"

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry."

"Whatever. Just stay still. I still need to put on your accessories like the tiara ."

I feel him pin the tiara in my long hair and clasp a necklace behind my neck.

"Okay, you're finally ready to go."

"Julian, you good?"

I turn around to see Zain and Julian.

"I am perfectly fine, so there is no need to worry about me."

"You sure?"

"Yes, but thank you for your concern."

As expected... He's still so elegant. But... he seems to be limping a little.

"Are you sure? It looks like you sprained your ankle..."

He stiffens. That probably means I'm right... But I don't think he'll admit it. As expected, he denies it and limps off. I just hope he doesn't make a mistake during the performance... I'm worried about him. Ah, it's almost time. I'm supposed to go onstage after Apollo narrates what's going on and introduces who I am to the crowd. I come onstage and sit down on the throne Akio prepared for me. After that, all of them come onstage and do their thing. Ceol with his violin, Akio with his portrait, and Zain declaimed a poem. Last is Julian... Who I am very worried about. At least he's not limping, which is good. Wow... I've never seen Julian dance before, so this is my first time but I can clearly see why he's in the royal class. Only a few seconds in and it's already enchanting. The way he moves is like a fairy with wings... So light and graceful. Suddenly, he falls. As I sit there in shock, the play continues on, and the stage goes dark except for one spotlight, which shines on me. Originally, this is the part where I have a long monologue to myself and then ask the audience for help. However, I can't just leave Julian like this..! Ceol... will remember this well, right...? I gently tap my fingers on the right armrest 3 times. I internally breathe a sigh of relief when I hear the start of the melody backstage. Thank god Ceol got the signal. I start singing while walking toward Julian. !... I- Is he... crying?! He's trembling, practically on the verge of a mental breakdown. It's like he's having a panic attack... I kneel down to his level and gently embrace him, rubbing circles in his back in a soothing pattern. I feel him calm down a little, so I pull away. He quickly gets up and bows to me. What's going on?

"I am ashamed to show her highness such poor skill. Therefore, I shall withdraw from the competition."

... Is he serious?! There is no way I'm accepting this. But I can't refuse hi- Oh, wait. In this case, I can. I'm the princess, the person who has all the power.

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, princess? Is anything the matter?"

"Tell me, prince of Rockwell. Who is this competition for?"

"You, your highness."

"Exactly. So, who has the most power?"

"You, your highness."

"Yes. And I don't recall me giving you permission to withdraw just like that. Once you enter this competition to win my heart, you shall see it through to the end."

"Princess, while I understand, that--"

I cut him off harshly, trying my level best to channel my inner 'regal princess with the authority of a true blood royal'.

"This is an order."

"... I understand, princess."

He rises from his bow, and whispers to me furiously.

"Are you insane?! How much more do you want to humiliate me?! You... really..."

"Shhh..."

"Seriously?! You want me to stay quiet and just take this?! If it weren't for this stupid play, I would've killed you by--"

"I'm here with you, right?"

He looks confused, but nods.

"So, don't worry. I will ensure you will never fall by my side. I didn't want your skill to be judged like that, so I acted like that. I'm sorry, so could you please continue? I promise you that you will never fall again."

"In that case..."

He bows to me and holds out his hand. When he speaks again, his voice is louder, indicating that this is for the audience.

"Then, your most honorable highness, will you allow me the great pleasure of having this dance?"

"Oh... Are you sure...?"

"Of course, your highness."

"I... I do not wish for prince Julian's reputation to be damaged due to my poor skill... Due to having a weak constitution from birth, my parents forbade me from doing anything that involved physical exertion, including dance..."

"I promise to lead you well, your highness, so please do not worry."

"Then... It would be my pleasure."

I place my hand on top of his outstretched one. He kisses my hand before beginning. Ballroom dancing music starts to play. I don't think we prepared that, but it's fitting for the occasion so I think of it as luck. He does nearly fall a few more times due to his ankle, but I hold him upright so he doesn't fall, while making it look like my mistake simultaneously. He expertly twirls me around, making the gold embroidery on my dress sparkle in the light. When we finish, the audience erupts in applause. Originally, the audience was meant to decide, but... I really don't think I need to see the results to know who the winner is. It seems the others thought the same, as they all come back onstage.

"Although all of you were wonderful, the one that left the deepest impression on me was prince Julian from the Rockwell kingdom, so he is the one I shall choose."

After I said that, Apollo comes onstage and ends the play with a classic 'and they lived happily ever after'. Everyone in the audience claps as we take a bow and go backstage. And that's when Apollo shows his controlling nature that Ceol warned me about beforehand...

"Clarissa, was there a song in your script?"

I shake my head 'No'.

"Since when was there to be a line about you having a weak constitution since birth? I don't remember that line."

"Well, yes, but..."

"And what was the deal with you forcing Julian to continue?"

"Please do stop reprimanding her, Apollo. She, in my point of view, did her absolute best in an unprecedented situation. There is no need to berate her so. Besides

that, the audience applauded, so is this not a classic example of all's well that ends well, Apollo? Her improvisation was extremely well executed and natural."

"But... Julian...!"

"Even if she were to be chastised, I would be the one to do that, as she and I are the 2 people most directly involved in the conflict, not you, as you were backstage. Since I view the event as 'fine', I believe it would be in your best interest to let it go."

Apollo ignores Julian and starts scolding Ceol as well.

"You helped her with this, didn't you? And I saw you turn on that ballroom dance music. Did you 3 plan this whole thing?"

I quickly shook my head.

"N- No! Julian had nothing to do with this!"

"Alright. Fine. Ceol, did you play a part?"

Ceol nodded, not even bothering to lie.

"You were my friend. I thought I could trust you, and you betray me like this?"

Ceol bows in apology. I watch anxiously, until Julian takes hold of my hand and drags me out of the situation.

"Are you alright?"

I nod. He breathes a sigh of relief.

"So... Thank you... for what you did..."

"Hmm? Oh, it was nothing. I must admit though, I was surprised. You always looked so... calm and in control of things."

"I do try to emulate that personality."

"Emulate?"

"It's nothing. Pay no mind to what I said."

"Oh, right. Let me see your ankle."

"W- Wait!"

"Julian..."

His legs are covered with bruises and bandages. Just how much did he practice for him to get hurt so many times...? At least now I know why he told me to wait. With the condition he's in, no wonder he fell. I found it a miracle he can walk.

"I'll treat my ankle myself, so let it be."

He quickly covers up his leg again and walks off, his long, white-blond hair fluttering in the wind as he walked. I stare, mesmerized, until I come back to my senses and run after him.

"W- Wait!"

"What is it?"

"Can you please allow me to treat you?"

"Why are you so desperate to help me?"

"What do you mean, 'desperate'?! This is a normal human reaction!"

"It is?"

"Yes! Are you telling me no one offered to help you after seeing your wounds?!"

He nodded.

"Yes, it was considered normal. If I couldn't do something, I would practice until I could do it flawlessly. It never mattered if I got hurt during the process."

I stand there in complete and utter shock.

"There, there. Please don't cry, Clarissa."

Julian walks closer and starts drying my tears.

"It's okay, so don't be so upset. You said you wanted to treat them, right? I'll let you if you stop the tears."

I try to stop, but it isn't really working. Julian sighs before embracing me and pats my back gently.

"Shhh..."

When I stop crying, he releases me.

"Finally. Now you can take a look at my injury. As expected, such a good girl."

"... You're treating me like a kid who you're bribing to get me to stop crying."

"Am I?"

"Yes!"

"Haha, I'm sorry. Are you angry at me?"

"... It's not a matter of I am or not, I can't."

"You can't?"

"You're hurt, how can I be angry at you when you're not in good condition?"

"Of course you can."

"...Well, maybe others can, but I made a promise to myself to never get mad at someone if they're sick or hurt in any way."

I then take him by the hand and lead him to my dorm.

"Please sit down while I go get the first aid kit from my workroom."

I push aside the beaded curtains I used to create a partition between the living room and my workroom and get the first aid kit from the cabinet. Haha... I still remember when I first started sewing. I'd pierce myself with a needle so many times I'd wrap bandages around my hands before I began to save myself the trouble of bandaging when I got hurt, as it was inevitable. Of course, I got better as I practiced and I don't do that anymore, but looking at the first aid kit reminds me of that time. I was really bad at it back then.

"I'm back."

"Your dorm is very... you, isn't it?"

"...Yes?"

"Your dorm gives off the same atmosphere as you."

"What atmosphere is that?"

"Bright, happy, full of light and color, etc."

"That's how you see me?"

"Am I wrong? I'm usually quite skilled at character analysis, although you're a bit difficult to figure out."

"I wouldn't say you're wrong, I've just never heard that before. I can treat all your bruises and scars, but I advise you get a professional to look at your ankle. I think it's sprained, but it might be broken. I'll ice it for now to reduce the swelling, but try not to put any weight on it and get a doctor to look at it as soon as possible."

"Can I call one now?"

"If you can, then sure. Will they come right now though?"

"I'm pretty sure all I have to do is pay them a few extra 100 dollars and they'll come."

"A- A 100 dollars?!"

"Or a few thousand if they happen to be really stubborn and unwilling. But around 500 dollars should do it. I think."

He then dials a number and starts negotiating.

"How much will I give you? Like, besides the actual pay? I don't know, like 300? Not enough? 500? Okay, thank you."

I stare at him open mouthed.

"What is it?"

"You can just pay someone 500 bucks just like that?!"

"Of course. Can't you? 500 barely makes a dent in my bank account. I was prepared to pay up to 10 thousand, although I knew it probably wouldn't come to that."

"I barely have a 100 and here you are with more than 10 thousand..."

"... Do you want me to pay you for the clothes you made me or something?"

"What?! No! Why would you suddenly bring that up?"

"Isn't that what you were insinuating when you remarked on the difference in our financial situations?"

"No, that's not what I was trying to say. In fact, I was just making an observation."

"Oh. Most people generally try to get money out of me by being nice to me, so I naturally thought you wanted payment."

"... I'll have you know that I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself and I work 2 jobs. So, no. I don't need money. And can you stay still? I can't apply the ointment properly if you keep moving around like that. If it hurts and that's the reason you're moving, I'll try and be more gentle, although I like to think I'm being fairly gentle currently as well."

"No, it doesn't hurt. It's actually sort of ticklish. You're being a little too gentle."

"Ah..."

I apply a little more force, but not too much in fear I might hurt him. I finish up when I hear a knock.

"That must be the doctor."

"Oh, I'll get it then."

I open the door to see a doctor.

"Hello, young lady. Is second young master of the Rockwell household here?"

"Uhhh... If you're referring to Julian Rockwell, then yes."

Julian sighs.

"Don't call me that in front of others, they'll get confused, much like Clarissa is now."

"Apologies, young master. I'm afraid it's a habit of mine."

"Just check on my injury."

"As you wish, young master."

The doctor takes a look at Julian's ankle.

"You did a good job icing it, young maste—"

"I didn't ice it. She did. But continue."

"It's just sprained. Rest it and don't put any pressure on it. You should be fine in 4 to 6 weeks. I'll bandage it for now."

Meanwhile, Julian looks shocked and horrified.

"I need to rest for a month at minimu—!"

"Julian! Sit back down! I know you're upset, but forcing it will only worsen it and make it take even longer to heal!"

I quickly run over and prevent him from standing up. The doctor nods, agreeing.

"She's right, master Julian. You should refrain from doing anything that could possibly strain your ankle. If not, you may never be able to use it again."

Julian sits down, his head in his hands.

"Leave."

"Y- Yes, young master?"

"Leave. I want to be alone."

"As you wish, young master."

... What do I do...? He wants to be alone, but this is my dorm. But then again, I don't think it's a good idea to kick him out now... I'll just go to a different room and let him have his solitude. This must be really hard on him, as this means he won't be able to dance for at least a month... Poor Julian... I get up from the sofa in my living room and start to make my way toward the bedroom, when Julian grabs my wrist.

"Julian...? What is it? I thought you wanted to be alone... Do you need anything?"

"That was for the doctor. You stay."

"Umm... Okay... What should I do...?"

"You don't have to do anything. Just... please stay by my side for a bit."

"Sure..."

I sit down beside him and run my fingers through his shiny, silky hair. He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't stop me either, so I assume this much is okay.

"Hey..."

"Hmm?"

"I know I said you don't have to do anything, but... do you mind listening to me talk about myself?"

"Depends. By listen, do you mean actually listen to what you're saying, or just treat it like background noise while you talk?"

"The first one."

"Then, of course. Feel free to talk."

"Thank you..."

This is the first time I've seen Julian so... upset. He's usually so calm and put together, creating this perfect persona...

"My family is full of prodigies. My parents, my sister, my brother, all of them. Older sister, June, is kind of like me. Ballet prodigy. Older brother, Juno, is a tech genius. He creates programs and codes in the blink of an eye. They're twins. All of them went here and were accepted into the royal class immediately, no questions asked. It's our family's tradition to go to this school and get into the royal class. Naturally, I was expected to do the same. Although I must seem exactly like them, I was never like them because... they were perfect. I've never seen them make mistakes. Sister could master a routine in one try, while I had to practice and practice until I was close to collapsing. Still, I would rather collapse from practicing and master the routine rather than face the wrath of father, so I didn't mind too much."

"Di- Did you ever collapse for real?"

"Probably multiple times. I don't remember very much though. The most I remember is everything going black and waking up in my bed. Still, I was satisfied if I mastered a routine, even if I passed out during it."

"Julian..."

"Don't worry, I'm not that weak. I didn't collapse once every week or something like that. It would happen once in a while. Not that often. Akio's the weakest."

"Akio?"

"Yes. You didn't know? Akio's an artist, so he's pretty high strung. Maybe that's why he gets sick all the time."

"Goodness... That sounds awful..."

"It is, which is why we always tell him to be careful, but since nearly everything could trigger a reaction, he gets sick and misses class quite often. The teachers know this, so they let him off really easy. A drawing that he did while sick in bed is all that he needs to pass his classes."

"... I'm not sure if I should feel jealous or not..."

"I kind of get being jealous, but don't. Akio got quite defensive when we got jealous, and started to say that he'd gladly change places with us anyday. Well, it was more of Apollo saying it was a fairly effective way of making him practice while sick, Ceol just staying quiet, and Zain being jealous. And Akio got mad at him. I was just observing the situation."

"Aha... I see."

"But Akio is better than I am, sick or not. At least he can still practice his talent."

"That's because the nature of your talents are different. All Akio needs are his hands and eyes. You need your entire body."

"I know that... in my head, that is."

"Ah. You still find it difficult to accept?"

He nodded.

"I remember when I felt like that."

"You? I bet you were perfect from the start."

"What? No way. All the other kids at my school who liked making dresses and clothes were all these super rich and privileged kids, and their parents hired the best designers and seamstresses to teach them. Of course, while I had the talent, I didn't have the guidance, so I had to learn everything myself. I knew that I wouldn't be as skilled as them, but I could never quite accept that their clothes were undeniably better than mine."

"Ouch. You do realize I'm one of those super rich and privileged kids who was willing to spend 10 thousand on a doctor, right?"

"Oh, no. I don't mean rich people like you who also happen to be nice. I'm talking about people who have their own rich clique and think they're above everyone because of their overflowing wealth. At the time, making your own clothes was considered 'endearing' and 'cute'. So, it was mainly some big trend. I also didn't appreciate my passion being treated like a trend, so that could've been a factor for my dislike of those girls?"

"Nice? Since when was I nice?"

"I thought you were nice from the first day actually. Because you returned my book."

"Of course I gave it back, since it was important to you. It's clear you'd be devastated if you lost it. Like how I feel sorry for myself for being so idiotic."

"Ah... So that's why. Thank you for recognizing it's importance to me!"

"Pfft... Hahaha..."

"Wh- What is it?"

"Nothing really. It's just that I find it amusing that you'd say thank you for something so small, especially after I gave you a hard time over the book."

"I think it was nice of you, so thank you!"

I give him a bright smile while expressing my gratitude, which makes him widen his eyes, most likely in surprise.

"... No need. Do I really have to rest for a month?"

"Unless you can heal very quickly, yes."

"..."

His mood immediately darkens. I feel bad now... Should I have sugarcoated it a bit? He laughs in a self-deprecating way.

"I really am pathetic... I can't do anything right, can I? I can't even practice right. Everything I do is a failure. I'm useless. No wonder my family was disappointed with me as I'm like this."

... I had no idea what to say... I honestly want to cry because his comments about himself are making me sad, but I hold it in as he's probably even more upset than I am, and hug him. I thought he'd push me away and play it off, but... he instead clings to me, crying. I really didn't think this through, did I? I should fix this habit of doing things without thinking of the consequences... I gently rub circles in his back, hoping it would help him calm down a little. His story actually fits a song I wrote when I was a year or two younger. Although... I was mainly trying to convince myself that someone else was singing it to me, and it wasn't my voice. I did write it hoping someone else would say something similar to me one day, so it makes sense why I'd try and fool myself. But I like the song, let's make that clear. I like the lyrics... Which I wrote... Okay, yeah. Let's just not think about it. I feel like I'm bragging if I keep going on and on. Ah... What should I do to calm him down...? I don't know if this will work, but I suppose my voice might help in the same way a lullaby helps a child fall asleep...? I softly start singing a song that's meant to be calming. I feel him calm a little, so I pull back.

"Do you feel better?"

He looks down, nodding. I can't see his expression, but his ears are bright red. Is he... blushing? Is he embarrassed?

"Hey, what's wrong? Why are you so red?"

"I- It's nothing!"

Seeing him like this makes me want to tease him a little.

"Really? Are you sure?"

I tilt his face up and feel his forehead.

"You feel a little hot, are you sure you're not running a temperature?"

"I- I'm fine! I'm just... embarrassed."

"Embarrassed? Of what?"

He averts his gaze and he blushes deeper, if that's possible.

"I- I... It's just been a really long time since I've shown my vulnerable side to somebody else, so I realize I may have gone overboard and made you uncomfortable, which I really don't want to do as you've been nothing but kind, so I- I'm rambling, aren't I? Sorry."

"Haha, it's fine~ Although, I do admit I'm a bit surprised. Your perfect mask dropped so quickly. Is this how you usually act?"

"Well, it's exhausting acting 'perfect', so I guess that's why. This is how I acted before I developed my perfect personality, so I guess you could say it's how I usually was? I also have to pause and arrange my words before speaking, which was also tiring. Mentally, I mean. Not physically."

I lightly hug him, giggling.

"Well, I like you better when you're like this, rather than when you're perfect!"

"W- Woah... D- Don't just hug me out of the blue like that, you surprised me! But... Why? Isn't perfect me so much better?"

"Not at all! I always felt awkward around you before. You were always so... well, perfect that I could never really say anything to you. You always felt so far away and untouchable. Above us all."

"... I felt like that?"

"Well, at least to me, yeah? But wasn't that your intention? Why are you so surprised?"

"I- I didn't mean that at all. If anything, it was the opposite. I acted that way to be liked and loved. I wanted to be liked and admired, not feel far away."

"Really? Because you didn't give me that impression at all."

"I didn't?"

"... If you think back on our previous encounters, you'd clearly see why."

"Yeah, I see it. I'm so sorry for my terrible treatment of you up until now. My obsession with perfection naturally makes me judge others harshly, as no one is perfect, and with you coming into our class in the middle of the semester with no real warning probably amplified my negative feelings towards you. But... Thank you. I really do appreciate you for all you did. So... I... I'll try to be better."

"Really?! Yay! Thank you so much!"

He laughs a bit and shakes his head.

"It's me, not you who should be saying thank you. So, let me say it again. Thank you. And... I'm sorry."

"It's okay! I'm just glad you apologized."

He flicked me on the forehead.

"Ow!"

"You forgive too easily."

"... Is that bad...?"

"Not necessarily, but I feel like you'll trust anyone at the drop of a hat."

"Wh- What...?! That's not true at all! A- And besides! Who says that to someone who's trying their best to help you!"

"I don't remember me asking you to help. Last time I checked, weren't you the one begging to help me?"

"... Mean."

He laughed a little and wound a strand of my hair around his finger.

"I'm sorry, Clarissa. But you can't be mad at me anyway, right? Your hair is pretty by the way."

I finger a lock of my long hair gently.

"It is? I think it's weird. Especially the color. It's like this weird lilac-brown."

"No, no. It's pretty. Better than my hair."

"What? Your hair is beautiful."

"No it's not. Wait, don't get upset."

He threaded his hand through his hair, looking straight into my eyes.

"Clarissa, listen. I really do appreciate you trying to make me feel better, and you are being helpful, despite me not asking for your help. However, I don't need you denying the truth as well. There's no need to lie that something looks good."

"... Julian, I think you misunderstood. I'm not lying. Your hair is really really pretty."

"Well, if you compare it with the rest of my features, I suppose you could say that."

"Julian. While I kind of get your insecurity about your skill, what do you dislike about your face? There's nothing wrong with it."

"It's too... feminine."

I blink for a few moments, not getting it.

"Yes?"

"My features look too delicate and pretty."

"So... You're saying you look like a girl?"

He frowned a bit.

"That wasn't exactly what I was trying to say, but yes, that is the main gist of it."

"If that's your problem, isn't it better to cut your hair? Long hair will only make you look more like a girl. Not that all girls have long hair and all guys have short, but it's more common for girls to have long hair than for guys to have it."

"I would, except my parents dislike it."

"Cutting your hair?"

He nodded.

"But... It's your hair, isn't it? And do you contact your parents often?"

"It's not by choice, but they check up on me at least once every week."

"I don't know whether to feel jealous or not. My parents cut contact the second I told them this is an all expenses paid boarding school with no tuition fee."

"I wish they'd cut contact, so don't be jealous. Speaking of, I might block them again, although it won't do much good. The last time I tried, they called everyone around me due to my older brother hacking into the system and getting people's phone numbers. I gave up and unblocked them once I saw how far they were willing to go to control me from afar."

"Control...?"

"Oh, yes. We were talking about my hair. My parents viewed me as a disappointment. They already had their mentally prodigious son and physically talented daughter, so they didn't really wish for another kid. But, well they didn't abort me, which I suppose I should feel thankful for. Since I was unwanted, I had to at least be perfect to fit in and be accepted as a member of my family. But I wasn't perfect, unfortunately. My family hated even seeing my face. They forced me to grow my hair to hide my face. They told me I was ugly and that I was lucky I was alive. Stuff like that. They still tell me that, so they probably won't allow me to cut my hair."

"Well, this works, right?"

"Clarissa...?! Wh- What did you do to my hair?!"

"I braided it. You don't mind, right? I always wanted to touch it ever since I first saw it. It was so shiny and silky, haha."

He sighs and takes the braid to see.

"I suppose this could make it more manageable. I'm not mad, just surprised."

"I'm glad. I don't want you to be angry at me."

"Clarissa. I'd honestly be very confused if anyone could be mad at you if you did for them what you did for me, so I'll never get angry at you for at least today. Relax."

"Really? Yay! Thank you!"

"Ah! Clarissa, don't hug me like that so suddenly, you surprised me."

"Ahaha... Sorry."

"It's really alright. I wouldn't tell you off even if you did nothing for me if it was just a hug. You meant no harm, right?"

"Hey! Nothing I did meant you harm!"

"Oh, really? Then what was that about forcing me to dance? Couldn't you tell it caused great mental distress?"

"That... I'm sorry about what I did... I just couldn't stand it. I admit I don't know a lot about dance, and it was my first time seeing you perform... However, your dance was so enchanting it completely captivated even me, a person who knows nothing about dance. It was like watching a snowflake dancing in midair. I thought it such a shame. You, who had immense talent, wasn't able to show it properly. Plus, the audience would misjudge you as well. I couldn't just stand by and watch that unfold, especially while knowing I could do something through improvisation, as I was, in the play, the princess, the person who had the most authority out of everyone there. So, that was actually me trying my best to fix it and give you a chance to redeem yourself. And if you really must know, it hurts my feelings when you put it like that. You make it sound like I forced you when you were clearly in no condition to. I made sure you were calm enough to resume before ordering you to continue."

"I... captivated you?"

I nodded

"But... But... I failed... How could that..."

"It doesn't matter whether you failed or not. To me, that is. I tend to view the effort that goes into something, rather than the end result. Even if you fell, I still thought you were amazing. You were more graceful than anyone else I've ever seen. Even the way you fell looked like something you did on purpose, as part of the dance, not something accidental."

"..."

He doesn't say anything, but looks down. Wait... Are those tears falling from his eyes?! What did I do wrong now? Umm... Gosh... Okay, calm down Clarissa...

"Julian? Hey, what's wrong? Did I say something wrong? I'm sorry if I hurt you..."

"Huh? Why are you apologizing?"

"Be- Because you were crying!"

"I... Oh... You must've been worried. But I'm really okay, you know?"

He wipes off his tears as he speaks, and gives me a bright smile once he's done.

"See? So, don't worry about it. Thank you for listening to my story."

I just stand there, entranced again. His smile was so bright and pure. It was beautiful, blinding really. Is this... his real smile? It's so... dazzling...

"Clarissa? Clarissa, what are you doing?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry! I zoned out for a bit."

"What? Ah, seriously? You're so high maintenance at times. I know you're an artist, but you can't live in your own imagination all the time. Come back down to earth from time to time, yeah?"

"Haha, sorry again. You're not too angry... Right?"

"Haaa... Jesus, no. I was never angry at you. How could I ever get mad at you for anything after what you just did?"

"What I did?"

He suddenly turns red.

"N- Nothing! Ignore it."

"Fine, fine. On one condition."

"What?"

"Hug me?"

"... What?"

"I want a hug to prove that you're not mad. So... Can I please have one hug?"

"That's it? Of course."

He hugs me and I'm suddenly lifted up in the air.

"Ah!"

"Done. Are you satisfied, my princess?"

W- Was that... a princess carry?! I've only ever heard about it in books... I never imagined I'd receive it... I feel my cheeks flushing a light pink, but I can't help smile. I always wanted to be carried like that, even if just once. One of my wishes... Wait...

"Julian! I told you not to stand!"

I was so caught up I didn't notice!

"This much is fine though? It was just a few seconds."

"... Julian. Promise me you won't overdo it okay? If you do, you'll get hurt like this."

He looks down, seemingly feeling guilty.

"I promise. I won't do anything that makes you sad. But... If I can make a request... Will you watch me when I practice?"

That's it? And... If I watch, I can make sure he doesn't overwork himself, right?

"Sure! I can definitely do that."

"Really? Thank you! Then I promise to never overwork myself ever again!"

Julian's POV

"Again. Again. Again."

"How are you so untalented? Your siblings mastered this in no time."

"You're just not good enough."

"You should've never been born."

"Spectacular!"

"Congratulations on winning."

"Your son is truly a child prodigy."

"You must feel so lucky with your talent."

I can never quite tell which side is real or fake. My family denies any talent I might possess, but the public declares I'm a child prodigy. Who cares. Either way, I won't ever be able to satisfy either side. But... I like being called a prodigy, regardless of whether it's true or not. It's the only time I'm ever praised. Nothing I do for my family is ever enough. Apparently, perfection is expected, so praise is a luxury. But... If I mess up, that's over too. So, I have to appear perfect to the public. And the only way to do that is to practice and practice until I get it right. So... I must master this, no matter the cost. Ah... My legs hurt... They're already bruised all over because of the times I fell. Whatever. They'll heal. Okay, let's do this once more. Step one, two and...

"Ah!"

Ow... I landed awkwardly on my ankle... And it's the day before the play too... I gingerly try moving it but give up due to the pain. I had no choice but to go up on stage with my sprained ankle. Because if anyone knew, they would dissuade me from going up on stage.

- The play (when he fell down)

"You will never be enough."

"You will always be useless."

"If you're imperfect, you are nothing."

S- Stop... Please... I'm sorry.... I'm sorry I let you down again... You were right. I'm useless. I am nothing. I-! I suddenly hear a song that I don't know being sung in a sweet voice. All of a sudden, I'm in a soft embrace. So warm and comforting... I calm down fairly quickly due to the hug. Ah... Right... This is... a play... When I calm down enough to assess the situation, I quickly withdraw, but Clarissa refuses and prevents me from doing so. I furiously whisper in her ear, hoping

she rethinks the decision, but... How can I refuse you when you say things like that... I feel like tearing up. Nobody has ever told me that... I have never had anyone to support me when I fall down. I was always alone when I did. I continue per her wish and receive a standing ovation. The performance was successful... even though I failed...? I don't understand. The one thing I do know, however, is that this is all thanks to Clarissa. So... Why is Apollo getting angry at her? I try and calm him, but... He refuses to do so. Getting annoyed with his tantrum, I take Clarissa's hand and walk out. Apollo acts so logical all the time, but one thing that doesn't go as planned and he goes ballistic. I get liking things going as expected, but isn't that mainly because nothing went wrong? Things not going as planned means something went wrong. And as soon as she saves the day and makes it a huge success anyway, he blows up at her for it? Honestly, sometimes I have no idea what goes on inside that head of his. After we get out and escape his wrath, I ask if she's okay. I mean, Apollo didn't get physical or anything, but she seems quite sensitive, so I thought I should check. She says she's fine and offers to heal my ankle, and rolls up my pant leg. She looks stunned. Not surprising. I quickly walk off again when she suddenly runs after me and legit begs me to let her help me. I don't get it. Why is she so desperate to help? It's weird- well, she says it's a "normal human reaction", but my family never did that. And then she starts tearing up. As I thought. Sensitive. Wait, no. This won't do. If anyone sees us, my reputation will be ruined. I calm her down and let her treat me as a prize for stopping her tears. She leads me to her room and sits me down while she goes behind a beaded curtain. I look around her dorm as I wait. The only word I can use to describe her dorm is... Clarissa. Everywhere I look has traces of her personality and taste. I can clearly see what she likes through the way she decorated her room. She comes back carrying a first aid kit.

Ceol: Accidentally caused Apollo an injury, which Apollo forgot about shortly after. The injury did some damage to his brain, causing a condition called Alexithymia. This made it difficult for him to define emotions. He can feel them, but he can't identify them very well. After this incident, Ceol felt great remorse as Apollo was his only friend, and began to think that he ruins everything he holds dear with his own hands, and this causes him to be very sensitive whenever he hurts someone emotionally or physically. He immediately pushes them away and tells them to stay away to protect them from being hurt.

Akio: Once called a artistic child wonder and admired by all, his talent soon caused great misfortune to his family. After that, he was hated and pushed away, even if he approached someone with pure intentions. This caused him to put up an arrogant facade, to distract himself from all the hate he faced, thinking 'I'm too good for them. They're just jealous of my talent.'

Apollo: A childhood friend of Ceol, an accident caused the once bright and emotional child to become apathetic and find it difficult to describe emotions. However, his memories were intact, and therefore knows that he and Ceol played together, and that Ceol was different from his memories. Due to their memories together, he theorized they must've considered each other as friends. Since Ceol was so different from when they were friends, he felt uncomfortable. When he talked to others about it, they said that he shouldn't worry so much, and Ceol would be fine, leading him to name this emotion as 'worry' and using it to describe his feelings for Ceol since. However, even if he finds it difficult to name emotions, he still feels them pretty well, as he was overly emotional, so even with Alexithymia, he still feels an average amount. Unfortunately, he can't define them, so he often feels uncomfortable and irritated. He relies solely on facts.

Zain: His parents didn't want him to grow arrogant because of his looks, so they always told him he was ugly. Although it was done with good intentions, it ultimately backfired completely, as now he has a constant need to validate his looks and convince himself worthy of love by becoming narcissistic and vain. His flirting also comes from missing out on the love he should have got when he was a child. He flirts with every girl in sight to relieve his sense of being lonely and fill his need for love and security that he never got.

Julian: Growing up in a household where everyone was a prodigy at something, he always watched his older brothers and sisters bask in the spotlight. They never made mistakes. Although he was an extraordinary genius at dance, he often made mistakes due to his young age. Everytime he did, he was harshly berated, causing him to develop atelophobia (fear of imperfection) later on. He developed an elegant way of speaking and moving to seem perfect, and made sure to never fail anything, at least, where others could see. Unfortunately, this phobia also caused him to judge others harshly, if they weren't perfect. He also has a tendency to overwork himself a lot as he thinks he's 'not good enough' yet.

The stage was simple and small. I only had one person as an audience. It was much plainer than a majority of my performances. But... even so... It was my favorite of them all, as it was the first time I ever felt joy when I danced.