

## 5 princes and I Chapter 61-65

### Chapter 61 Not so Friendly Fish

I was thinking of a fish mutant, but I guess a mermaid is acceptable.

“Haven’t you seen one before?” She said and flipped her hair.

I closed my mouth then – not trusting myself to speak – and shook my head.

Her eyes cast downward towards the bota bags beside me and her eyebrow raised. “Getting some water?” She asked.

I nodded my head as my answer.

“Well then. Let me help you with that.” With one powerful push of her arms, she hauled herself up, scooped the bota bags, and swam a semi-circle around the lake at an amazing speed before coming back again. “Believe it or not the water is fresher at the center. You’re welcome.” She said and placed the now-filled bota bags beside me. When I didn’t speak, she started to frown. “What? Can’t you talk?” She said.

This time, I tried using my voice so I wouldn’t offend her. She’s nice and it would be rude for me not to say thank you. “Um...Thank you.” I said.

Her face seemed to light up and she did a backflip in the lake before coming to the surface again. “You can talk! And you have a very pretty voice.” She said.

“Thanks...you too,” I replied shyly.

“My name is Hira.”

“Rose.”

She rested her hands on the edge and stared at me. “Never have I seen a girl come into these woods before. And judging from those bags I carried I assume you’re not alone? Are there more girls with you here in these woods?”

I snorted as I thought about the prince being called girls. “Yes, I am not alone, and no, they are not girls. They’re boys.”

At the mention of ‘boys’, I noticed a change in her facial expression. It became sour and bitter like the word alone was poison. “You’re traveling with men?”

“Princes.”

“And they’re princes?” Her voice rose and I could see her face turning red. She started to swim around and mutter something that I couldn’t quite understand. She was making me dizzy with all her movements.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

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“Men. Princes!” She yelled and swam back towards me. “A pretty girl like you traveling in a group full of those.....creatures!!”

“Is...that a problem?” I was slowly starting to back away. I can sense a red flag when I am one. Trust me. I am an accident-prone person.

“It is!” She exclaimed. “Men only bring misfortune to women! Look at you. They are making you bring water to them! Those lazy pigs.” She snarled.

“I kind of volunteered for the job.”

“Women should not do heavy jobs!” She hissed. “Women should be superior to men. They are the queen!”

With the way that she was acting right now, I was getting uncomfortable hanging out with this racist mermaid that I want to grab the bota bag and run the heck out of here. “Sure,” I said as I slowly reached out to grab the straps of the bota bag without her noticing. “I think they should drop to their knees and kiss our feet or tail, right?” I said for the sake of humoring her.

Just before I could reach the bota bags her hands shot up and grabbed mine. And I screamed. “Exactly!” She said. “And you are not going back there again with those men.”

What she said caught me off guard that I looked at her with a fearful expression.

“What?” I squeaked.

“You’re coming with me. We shall become sisters.”

“Hate to break it to ya, but I already have a sister and she’s very cut-” I yelped when she pulled me towards her and into the lake. The water hit me in the face first before the rest of my body followed. The lake is quite deep and I have to swim up to get some air. I wiped the water off of my face to see the mermaid swimming circles around me like a shark.

“You can swim. Good.” Hira said and swam closer to me. “You will make a fine mermaid, sis.”

Before I knew what hit me, she grabbed my hands again and dragged me under. My eyes were closed but I could feel her dragging me lower and lower before she changed courses. I didn't have much time to prepare and take a deep breath that my current supply was slowly going out. A wave of panic hit me and I started to struggle.

...why am I always in a situation like this? Why is it always me!? Why me!?

I felt her hands locking mine in a tight grip as she continued to swim. Not long after, we started swimming upwards and towards the surface again. The first thing I did was to take heavy gulps of air before wiping water from my face.

And that's when I noticed something creepy.

The place was like a cave with bright white light coming from pearls s\*\*\*tered everywhere lighting up the place. Seashells decorated the place and I saw a big shell-like bed partly drenched in water. We headed that way and she pushed me up until I sat on the shell bed. Then before I could face her, she threw some sort of dust on my face.

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"There. I'm not sure what kind of men you are hanging out with, but if they have sensitive noses then they would surely have a sneezing fit."

I cough at the powder. "W-What t-the hh-heck?" I was shivering but I was also fuming in my anger as I glared at her.

"You're safe here." She said cheerily.

"I don't need saving!" I growled. "You're the one that I need saving from...if I ever do need saving!" I pointed a finger at her.

"You say that, but then you'll regret it later. Men are nothing but barbarians. They know nothing except fighting. They are emotionless and insensitive. They kill." She said. Frowning the entire time as she talked about men.

"That's not true!" I argued and I thought of Nate being emotionless, Fred a barbarian, Ren, and Dan insensitive, and Ace knowing nothing but to kill – which I am reconsidering. "Men are not all the same. They are unique in their way."

Hira shook her head at me. "You are far too young to understand everything." She said and turned her back to me. "I have lived in this lake for 3 years now."

"Cry me a river." I rolled my eyes at her. "Take me back out. Now!"

She turned back to me again. "Aren't you even interested in why I'm stuck here?"

“Not even a bit.” I deadpanned. “Now, when are you going to take me back?”

“It all started three years ago.”

“You’re going to tell me the story anyway, aren’t you?”

“I was a young mermaid about 18 years of land creature age.”

I snorted. “We all were young 3 years ago. Now cut the crap and go to the ending! I don’t have time for storytelling!!”

“I fell in love with a land creature. He was very handsome with silver eyes and-”

“Faki Hell!” I grunted. This little mermaid just won’t shut up! “Let me guess. He’s the first land creature you have ever met?” Hira nodded, making me slap a hand to my face and grunt out in frustration. “Oh for freak’s sake! We got a real live Ariel over here! Don’t you have a red-friendly crab to tell you otherwise not to go flirt with men who live on land and sing songs about under the sea? Wait for no. Don’t answer that. But anyways. Go on, but skip the description of the guy. I don’t care anyway.”

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“Alright. So I fell in love.” Pfft! Little Mermaid over here. “He’s a fisherman. He captures fish for his business. I know he’s very poor so every time that he fishes, I would drop a pearl on his net. See, mermaids are gifted in getting pearls from clams. We can quicken the time in processing the pearls of every clam to get their pearls. I heard that it cost a fortune on the land.”

“Please continue.” I urged when I noticed her pausing. Can she just go to the ending?

“So the man noticed the pearls on his net and became curious as to where it comes from. One day, I made myself know and-”

So I am going to save you guys the trouble from her sad and tragic story. The two fell in love and they became a couple. The man then brought her home with him so they can live together. She makes the pearls for him to help him with the expenses, but not long after their stay together she noticed that the man became thirsty for money that he would threaten her just to get some. He even killed her sister when she attempted to rescue her from him. Not long after that, she saw the true side of the man; greedy, and power-hungry. So one night she made her escape, but since she was too far away from the ocean, all she managed to get was the lake. She had loved her ever since and was too afraid to go back into the ocean in case the man would spot her again.

See? Was that so hard to tell the story?

“Great story!” I said and gave her a slow sarcastic clap. “Now where is the closing curtain? I need to leave.”

“Weren’t you listening to my story? I just pointed out that men cannot be trusted-” She paused and swam towards the giant pearl sitting at the side of the shell bed. She waved her fingers over it and a mist suddenly formed and I saw two figures emerging from the forest. It was Ace and Nate. I gasped when I recognized them. “Nate! Ace! I mean PRINCE Nate! No, PRINCE Ace!”

“So they came here to look for you.”

“You bet they are because they aren’t here for you. They don’t know you.”

“Well too bad. They won’t find you. At least the real you that is.”

“What do you mean? Ow!” She plucked a strand of hair from my head and wrapped it around her ring finger. She fished a pearl in one of the many ones that lay scattered on the bed and placed it on top of the strand wrapped around her finger. She kissed it and suddenly her face morphed and her hair color changed. Suddenly, I was staring at my face.

“I always wanted a darker shade of blond,” Hira said in my voice and my face as she watched her reflection on the water and gently touch her – my face!

“Get off of my face!” I barked.

“I will. Once I get rid of the pest.” She said sweetly, giving me one last grin before diving back in the water.

“Come back here!” I yelled and made a move to jump but stopped myself when I realized that it was a bad idea. There is no way for me to get out of this cave if the only exit I have is underwater. I can barely hold my breath and with my current speed in swimming, I would say that there is about 97% of me drowning before I could even reach the bottom.

There was a faint noise to my left and I turned towards it and let out a scream.

Chapter 62 Drowning A Mermaid By PRINCE Ace

**\*\*MEANWHILE\*\***

Ace’s vision was getting blurry. He was alone in the woods as he hunted for food when he was suddenly attacked by a splitting headache. He grabbed onto a tree trunk and leaned his weight slightly onto it for support.

What the hell is wrong with me?! Ace thought.

Lately, he has started having headaches that either make his nose bleed or blackouts at night. Sometimes the pains are mild and he has trouble sleeping at night. It's also becoming hard to hide it from the others every day and he would want nothing more than to kill them when they find out.

Ace felt something cold and tasted something metallic in his mouth. He ran his hand to wipe his lips with the back of his hand only to see blood. "Great." He muttered and pulled out a cloth from his pocket as he wiped the blood from his nose. His headache was starting to fade until it was bearable for him to move. Once the blood was cleared did he pocketed the cloth away.

He looked around in the forest as he searched for squirrels or rabbits. That useless vampire told him specifically that he can only skin and gut small animals.

Tch! Useless.

So far, he could not see any squirrels or rabbits nearby. They must have been hiding somewhere or are far too small for him to see. Either way, he has to hunt fast. He wasted enough time cleaning my blood and he didn't want them to think that he was having trouble with his hunting.

He started to close his eyes and concentrated around him. He used his ability to see into the forest and to get a feel of the living and breathing creatures. There is no point in him to try and kill his gift anymore by waiting 10 more years. He was getting attuned to it already and he finds it convenient on some occasions.

Then he spotted them. Two squirrels fighting over an acorn on a tree just above me. Another one is 5.7 meters 8 o'clock from me. 3 fully grown rabbits East.

He used his ability through his eyes. He grabbed some arrows and first targeted the rabbits since they are in a group and are more likely to flee since they are on the ground. Once he knocked the arrows he hit the squirrel at 8 o'clock before shooting the two, which are above him. It was a quick kill. All arrows are directed to their heads to make their endless pain.

He heard the drops of the squirrels that he killed falling from the trees.

He gathered his kill, strapped them to his belt, and headed back to camp.

Once he arrived, he dropped the kill in front of Nate. "Gut and skin them quick so we can leave." He told him. He walked past him and settled on to sit on a log beside Midnight. Ace saw the idiot twins gushing about their berries and showing them to each other like little girls squealing over makeup.

"Has anyone seen Rose?" Idiot twin number one – Ace doesn't care about his name nor did he even know – asked.

“What? Miss her already?” Idiot twins number two wiggle his eyebrow at number one.

“Brother, she’s been gone for far too long. Surely fetching water wouldn’t take that long.”

Tch. Well if he’s talking about fetching water then why doesn’t he do it? He’s a dog. But now that he mentioned it, the blond bimbo seemed to be missing. Again.

The prat vampire seemed to pause gutting and looked up at the simpleton twins.

“Should we go look for her?”

“We should.” number one asked, making him breathe out heavily. These fools are always worrying about that blond bimbo. No wonder she acts like a spoiled brat when she’s with them.

“She’ll be back. Probably took too long because she got eaten by a lion or something.” Ace said tiredly and earned strange looks from the others. Then he realized that he had said it out loud.

“Prince Ace, don’t say stuff like that. Aren’t you worried?” Nate asked.

“No,” Ace answered honestly.

“Should we not look for her? Make sure she’s fine?” Twin number one – or two – asked.

This one pisses me off. Not only is he an idiot, but he’s annoying! “You didn’t hear her scream, did you?”

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“No.”

“Then she’s fine. Unless she was killed before she could even scream.”

“ACE!!” They all shouted.

“IT’S PRINCE!” He corrected and gave them all a pissed-off look. “And fine. Go look for her. Sniff her out and bring her back if it means shutting your traps up. Tch!” When Ace signed up for being a candidate for the king he did not expect to be in this kind of situation!

Twin number one or number two – hell if he knows – closed his eyes and started sniffing the air like the dog that he is. Once he got a good whiff, he started sneezing.

“Acho! Achoo!”

“Hey! Watch where you spray it!” Said Nate and moved the skinned animals to his other side and away from the twin that was sneezing.

“Sorry. It’s just that – Achoo! – I can’t – Achoo! – get a proper – Achoo! – whiff of Rose’s scent – Achoo!!”

Beside that twin, his other twin shook his head at him. “Oh brother. What will you do to find your girl when you can’t even track her?”

“What?”

“Let me try it.” The twin said arrogantly and started sniffing the air for Rose’s scent. A few seconds later and he started sneezing too.

“Seriously you two! Get away from the food!” Growled Nate.

“Sorry.”

Sniffed one of them as he covered his nose. “It’s just weird – Achoo! – why can’t I sniff her out? Achoo!”

What he said started to make me wonder. He can’t find that idiot’s scent? What does it mean? Somehow Ace has a bad feeling about this.

He caught Nate’s look and saw that they somehow have the same thought. What kind of trouble did that girl get into now? It’s like she’s a walking disaster. He’s kind of surprised she’s still alive.

While the three of them continued to talk Ace tapped into his gift and used the forest and animals as his eyes. He remembered that she brought her horse, Cloud, along with her so he tried to locate her horse instead. His vision sped up as if he was riding and soon he was seeing in the eyes of a horse; Cloud.

Through her eyes, he saw the area around her. He could see the lake located just below the cliff-like He saw it from a hawk’s eye a while back. He willed her to look around more and found no signs of that moron anywhere. Suddenly, Ace saw something – or Cloud did. Just by the edge of the lake are their bota bags that that good-for-nothing-human is supposed to fill up with water – useless as ever – and located just a few inches from them is the idiot’s shoe. It was missing one pair. He tried to get Cloud to move closer but her reins were tied to a tree branch tightly. She let out a disgruntled noise when she couldn’t move closer and he had to calm her down by projecting calm thoughts. After she settled down, he tried to focus again on the spot where she most likely had been a while ago. The area around it was wet and there’s a sign of dragging from the ground. Something pulled her down. His head started aching again and he was thrown back into his consciousness.

The three were still talking about her, which he was glad since blood was dripping down his nose again. He turned back slightly to wipe the blood off of his nose and lips. He gritted his teeth as the pain in his head doubled, but he fought it off since they have



more important things as of now. Someone took Rose. Ace has no idea who or what but he does know that whatever it was, it came from the lake.

Despite his migraine, he got up and headed towards the useless fools. "You two," Ace addressed the twins with his gaze. "stay here and guard our camp. Prince Nate and I will look for her." Ace said and gestured for the vampire to drop the kills.

"I want to go too!"

"Yeah! Let Ren come. Dan will stay here and guard."

Ace glared at them. "No. With the state that you two are in you both are useless." He said. Besides, he can't tell which one Prince Ren is. When the two looked like they were about to protest, he faced them fully and fixed them a murderous glare if they dared to disobey. That shut them up and they sank to the ground and sulked.

"Come on." He told Nate. "We'll start looking at the place where she last went to."

"Where?"

"The lake." Tch! Ace can't believe this idiot even asked.

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They arrived at the location and just like what he saw through Cloud's eyes, nothing seemed to change. The area still seemed...well empty.

Ace heard Nathaniel gasp, then he started running towards our bota bags. "What are these things doing here? And where's Rose?" You could hear that he was about to freak out at any moment. And Ace was not in the mood to see him rant about it. He looked around again until he saw Cloud still tied to the tree branch. He headed towards the white horse and started petting her as Ace let Nathaniel have his moment of tantrums. Let Romeo there has his moment.

If Ace remembers it right, Romeo is a character from Shakespeare's novels in the human world. It's a tragic romance story of two lovers in different families, who both oppose each other. Ace remembered that when Juliet pretended to die for a reason that he could not remember – maybe because she thought her Romeo died and wanted to be free from her engagement with a third wheeler. Then when Romeo thought she died he killed himself. At that moment, that dumb human woke up and saw Romeo really die and killed herself too. Tragic and stupid, but still a good story.

Now, he wonders that if Nate is Romeo and Rose is Juliet he would kill himself if he thinks that she's dead. The only difference is, Ace doesn't think Rose would kill herself for him. Too bad. The world would have been better with two idiots gone.

“Rose?” Ace heard Nathaniel say behind him. He snorted at the hopefulness and the sound of delight behind it. He’s starting to hallucinate.

Cloud made a noise and seemed to jerk her head upward as if in fear. Ace has to pull her down by the reins to calm her down. “Hey. Calm down.” He said, but my voice lacks any emotion or softness.

“Where have you been? We were worried.” Nate continued to hallucinate.

Cloud continued to jerk and seemed restless. “I said calm down.” He muttered. What’s her deal? Is her head as broken as her owner’s? Great.

“I was just walking around.”

Ace turned around as soon as he heard the voice. What he saw made him confused and weird out. Standing in front of Nate was Rose and yet it wasn’t. Ace stared at her. He has this feeling that something was not right here. It was her face alright, but today it was beautiful unlike her usual pig face that even any amount of makeup could not hide. Also, her voice was still the same, but there seemed to be an added sweetness in it. Before, he couldn’t even tell if she’s a girl or a guy who looks like a girl wearing a fancy dress. Now, she looks like a girl. A pretty one at that.

Nate and Rose were still talking while he observed. She is different. She acts flirty and twirls her hair around her fingers. The sight alone makes me want to puke. Suddenly, she did the most unexpected thing. She leaned forward and kissed Nate.

Ew.

He doesn’t even know why but he blocked their view from her horse, which is weird.

As soon as their kiss ended, Nate seemed to be in a daze for a few seconds before turning to face the lake and then jumping.

“Nate!” Ace yelled. The fool!! Who says he can swim!? He will butcher him for that! He will cut a hole in his stomach and use his intestines as ropes to pull him ashore!! He stormed to the edge of the lake furiously while Nate swam to the middle of the lake and suddenly played dead. Oh, he’ll be dead alright! And it will be slow and painful.

“Get out of the water!” Ace growled.

“I-I can’t!” Yelled Nate. Ace looked at him and noticed that he seemed to be in an internal struggle.

“Oh. You’re here.”

He turned towards Rose, who was giving him a sweet smile while batting her eyelashes. Ace cringed for a second before glowering at her. "You." He said and reached for her as he wrapped my hand around her neck. "I don't know who you are or what's going on, but I have a feeling that you're behind all of this." The person, who looks like Rose, choked and clawed at his hand. Her eyes widened in fear. "W-What are you talking about?"

"I am not a fool." He said. "I can tell by the way that you act and look that you are not Rose. Also, I heard the charm in your voice when you were talking to Nathaniel. Tell me, what do you want from us, a siren?" He left out the part about her smelling like a fish. Mermaids tend to smell when they're out of the water even for a few minutes. The longer they are out, the worse they smell.

The fish lady smiled at him. "Well, you certainly are a smart one. Now, why don't you unwrap your hand from my neck and we can talk about it?"

If it weren't for the headache that he was constantly having, she might have lured him with her charm speech. The pain helps him concentrate.

"How about you start talking. Now!"

Her jaw dropped when her charm speech failed on him. "H-how-"

"Speak!" He asked her again. His voice is firm. "Where. Is. She!?"

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At that, the mermaid looked at him and frowned. "You men are cheaters and liars!" She screamed at him which he did not appreciate.

Ace snorted and jerked his thumb in Nate's direction. "If you are looking for a cheater and a liar, then your dream guy is over there. Drowning." He said. "Now back to the matter at hand. Tell me where she is!"

"No!"

"No?"

"NO!! As in...NEVER!!!" She yelled and sprays of spit hit my face. He ran his sleeves over his face using his free hand and glared at her.

She's dead!!! She dared to spit at him!? HIM! A PRINCE!

Growling, he pushed her face down into the water and she laughed. He drew her head slightly for her to talk. She only laughed at him. "You intend to drown me? Hahaha! I'm a mermaid! I don't drown!"

Ace raised an eyebrow at her and smirked. "Wanna bet?"

"Wha-" Before this creature could talk Ace pushed her face back in the water and squeezed her neck. Not a second later and she started to flail and fight him, but he was too strong for her.

She was laughing a while ago, now Ace was laughing.

Once he was satisfied, he pulled her back again to ask her where Rose was. But as soon as he did, she hissed at him. "You're a monster!!"

"And you're the first mermaid who just drowned."

"Let me go, Ace!!" She called him by his name and with no t\*\*LE which angered him more. He dipped her head in the water again for a long time before pulling her back up.

"IT'S PRINCE Ace! No one can call me by my name without my t\*\*le!!"

"But Rose-"

"She has no brain and she cannot follow simple instructions!!" Ace drowned her again before pulling her back up.

Her face was now red in anger. "I'm wearing the face of the girl you are looking for. Do you not feel any guilt at all?"

"That's exactly why I'm enjoying this. Now talk."

"Never."

He drowned her again for a few seconds before pulling her back up.

"And they said that mermaids are good swimmers. But look at you. Shocking." He mocked. "Are you willing to talk now?"

"Atrocious!"

"Guess not."

Then Ace drowned her again. And he would be lying when he said that he is not enjoying this.

Chapter 63 Little Wolf

\*\*\*ROSE\*\*\*

I sat and stared frightfully at the thing that was staring at me. The little brown spirit wolf that has been following me since pa\*\*ing the ruins of Gija is now staring at me.

“Dude, I don’t know why you are following me, but this is starting to get creepy.” Not to mention that it’s like I am in a real-life horror movie!

The little brown wolf shifted on its feet and wagged its tail excitedly when I spoke to it and started barking.

I let out a little cry of fear when it kept barking at me. I didn’t even do anything! “Please go away.” I cried and moved farther back into the shell bed. “I don’t wanna play with you!” I said.

As if it understood me, it started to whimper and its ears folded in sadly. Looking at it, I kind of started to feel bad. I mean, it is cute, but creepy at the same time. I don’t even know how it keeps following me no matter where I go or even when I am inside a cave with the only exit is to swim to the bottom. Oh, wait. Hang on....how did that wolf get in here?

I turned my head to the little wolf again and gave it a curious look. “Hey,” I started. “How did you get here?” I asked, which I think I’m starting to think that I’m crazy for even talking to it. But hey, I think it can understand me because the moment I addressed it, it perked up and looked happy.

It started barking at me again and turned around and kept jumping before looking back again. “Um.....you want me to....follow you?” I asked uncertainty, feeling weirded out for even talking to it. The wolf barked at me and headed deeper into the cave. It stopped midway and turned around to see if I was following.

“Okay.” Gently, I got up from the shell bed and lifted the skirt of my dress, which was heavy from all the water is absorbed, and slowly made my way to the shore. I was barefooted and the cave’s ground was partially submerged in water and making it a bit slippery. By the time that I got to the dry part of the ground, I looked up at the wolf to see it regarding me curiously.

“Um....now what?” I asked.

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The wolf looked back into the deeper part of the cave before looking back at me and barked once. “That way?” I guessed and pointed towards the direction ahead of it. The wolf barked happily and walked at a quick pace deeper into the cave. I scratched my head in thought as I debated on whether I should go in and follow the wolf or stay here and wait for real help.

Then again, I am not the type of girl who likes to be rescued all the time. I'm a girl with a big pride in my head and there is no way in heck that I allow myself to be rescued again if I have any say in it. Besides, I have this gut feeling that whatever the wolf was doing was all to help me. I don't even think it has the intention of harming me in the first place. It just creeps me out with all its stalking. I don't know why but somehow I feel safe with it.

Having those thoughts in mind I started to follow the wolf. The rocks on the ground hurt my bare feet. Some of them were jagged and pointed that I have to walk at a slower pace to not hurt myself – accident-prone girl here.

The wolf was generous enough to wait for me every step as I tried to follow it was careful and as quickly as I can – though I would say that those two words don't go together. We went deeper and deeper and I noticed that the cave walls seemed to soften the farther we went until it looked like the corners were now made of soil.

The wolf finally stopped and stood in front of a little rabbit hole on the side of the cave wall. It barked happily and kept looking at me and back at the hole.

"Is that how you got here?" I asked and raised an eyebrow as I studied the rabbit hole that was too little to fit me, but just enough to squeeze the little wolf in.

The wolf jumped happily and I took that as a confirmation. Suddenly, it pawed at the hole and looked at me expectantly, in which I figured it was a way for it to tell me to get in. "Er...I don't think I fit in there." I said, which made the wolf tilt its head to the side in confusion. I sighed and made a hand gesture. "That," I pointed at the rabbit hole. "It's too small for me." I made a small circle with my hand before pointing to myself; hoping that the wolf would finally understand.

The wolf seemed to finally understand what I was saying since it started to go to the hole and dug its paws to the ground and started digging. The sight of the little wolf digging was very cute yet it also got me worried that it would tire itself. I was just about to ask it to stop, but the little furball got talents in digging that it had gone deeper into the hole, which was now growing thanks to the wolf, and was gone before I knew it. Piles of dirt and soil gathered near the end of the hole as the wolf continued to dig. I was kind of tempted to bend down and take a sneak peek at the wolf's progress but I was afraid that I would get hit in the face with flying dirt.

I don't know how long it took for the wolf to dig, but soon the furball came crawling out of the now bigger hole and was now shaking the dirt off its fur. It looked up at me once again and looked happy with its tongue lolled to the side of its mouth as it wagged its tail.

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Looking at its happy wolf face I decided to try out and fit myself into that hole that the wolf re-sized for me so as not to waste its effort. "Well here goes nothing." I sighed and bent down and started crawling into the hole.

As embarra\*\*ing as it sounds, my hips got stuck in the entrance as I tried to pull myself forward. "Ah, crap," I muttered and tried to push myself up but to no avail. I was stuck! The wolf didn't make the hole big enough!

Speaking of which, the wolf started barking behind me and I felt it sniff my b\*\*\*. "Hey hey hey!! Get your nose away or I might fart on you. I'm not even kidding!" I warned. "And thanks. Really. The hole that you made got meow!!" I screamed and jerked myself forward when I felt something sharp poking my b\*\*\*.

I growled in annoyance and attempted to turn to glare at the wolf. "You little furball! You just clawed me!!"

The wolf made a series of noises as if it was whining or something and then it started nudging its head to me as it urged me forward. "Alright alright. I'm going. Sheesh!" I said and moved forward and soon realized that I wasn't stuck anymore. I guess the reason that the wolf clawed me earlier was to make me move and unstuck myself from the mouth of the hole. "Wiseguy," I said and continued to crawl farther into the hole.

I have to admit that it was gross crawling in a hole of soil because dirt tends to get stuck on you. Especially when your dress is wet – I don't even want to tell you guys how disgusting it is right now. I noticed that the hole was curving slightly upward making it a bit harder for me to move forward, but soon enough, I was out and breathing fresh air again.

"FREEDOM!!!" I screamed and threw my fist up in victory as I crawled my way out of the hole and slumped down on the gra\*\*y patch of the ground and breathed in hard. I closed my eyes for a second to rest when I felt soft fur brushing my face. I opened them once again and saw the wolf's face hovering over mine. Since I was too tired to freak out, I only stared at it.

"What?" I said.

The wolf drew its head back and wagged its tail cheerfully at me.

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I rolled my eyes and let out a groan. I got up and into a sitting position as I looked around me. I was back in the forest just a few meters from the lake, which is just to my right. As much as I hate to go back there again I have to. I have to go out there, grab my bota bags, get Cloud, and run before Hira comes back from...

OH MY GOSH!! Nate and Ace!!!

I remember that mermaid sneaky copied my face and went after them! She better not do anything embarra\*\*ing in front of them or else! And she better have not harmed them or else...she'll be a grilled half-fish when I am done with her!

Gathering up my skirt, I got up and ran towards the lake. I didn't look back to know that the little brown wolf was following me as I emerged from the forest and into the open area where the lake is. As I got there, I expected a war of some sort. That Hira would be torturing Nate and Ace until I come to the rescue and be the hero of the day.

Well, I should have known better. What was happening in front of me was way beyond my imagination. In the middle of the lake was Nate trying to drown himself and save himself at the same time. Weirdo. He must be in some kind of spell or something.

Then my eyes darted towards the two figures by the edge of the lake where Ace crouched down and was pushing Hira's head underwater. By the looks of it, Hira looks like she was drowning judging by the way that bubbles emerge from the water and the way that her hands tried to claw Ace.

Wait.....Hira drowning? Isn't she a mermaid? Mermaids do breathe underwater, right? Is the world coming to an end?

I stood there stupefied at the sight in front of me. What the heck is going on here? Do I still get to play hero or what?

## Chapter 64 Collapse

"Tell me where the heck she is!!" Ace growled at Hira when he pulled her back.

Hira threw up water and glared at Ace. She was now wearing her face and got her mermaid tails back. "Why are you so eager to know where she is?"

"I'm asking the questions here." Said, Ace. "Now you tell me where she is or you're going back into the water until you will forget that you could even breathe underwater."

"You are not getting her to make her your slave!!" Hira screamed at him.

Ace's brows drew back in anger. "You think I'm doing this to make her a slave? She can barely do anything helpful without causing any problems! If it wasn't for the fact that she was the one who's about to choose the future king of Thalia then I might never have put up with her in the first place!"

Something about the way that he said it hurts. He's putting up with me just because I have the power to choose the future king of Thalia? Really? I thought we...if not a friend then maybe an acquaintance. But this? He made it sound like I was a tool.



Sensing me for the first time, Ace looked up and spotted me. Once he did, I half expected him to be apologetic or at least look guilty, but he hardly seemed bothered at all. "Were you standing there the whole time?"

I heard a slight shift in the bushes to my left and turned to see golden brown fur jumping into it. Well, my furry friend just left. "Sort of," I answered.

Ace let out an annoyed grunt. "Well, why didn't you say something? You made me suffer by touching this fish girl over here!"

"Hey!" Hira protested but Ace didn't say anything to it.

His lack of guilt for what he said somehow angered me. "Oh, so now it's my fault? I didn't ask you to come!"

"Well, you didn't give us a choice because you were gone for so long and the twins could not track you!!"

"I can take care of myself."

Ace gave me a once over and snorted. "Yeah. You look great." He said sarcastically which only infuriated me more.

"Well, at least I was able to make it out on my own," I said and left out the part about the little wolf helping me.

"Thank goodness you were able to do something right." He said. "For a second there I thought you were useless. You volunteered to fetch water for us and you didn't come back."

"Eeeer...."

"Well, I don't have a choice since someone made me feel guilty for being the only one having anything to do."

"Um..."

"It's not my fault. I'm not the one who fed our food to my horse you know."

"Seriously you two. I'm still here."

"And it's not my fault that you are here to help me for your benefit." I retorted.

"Hey. Are you guys even giving a s\*\*\* about me?"

"What do you mean?" The b\*\*\*\*\* asked, making me roll my eyes at his fake innocence.

“Hey!”

“Oh don’t pretend to not know. I heard you say it.”

“Excuse me.”

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“Say what?!”

“That you’re keeping me alive so you can have a chance to become king of Thalia!!”

“I SAID EXCUSE ME!!”

“WHAT!?!?!” Ace and I both growled at the mermaid who kept inserting random comments in between our arguments.

She pointed at the hand that was still around her throat and looked at Ace. “I hate to break it but you’re kind of squeezing too much.” She said.

“So?” Ace said. Geez! What an insensitive brat!

“You’re going to kill me.” Said Hira.

“Like I said.” Ace said. “So?”

Monster, I thought.

“She’s now standing over there.” Hira pointed at me.

“I thought you don’t want us to have her?”

“I can see that she has already been influenced by you men with her violent words just now so I don’t want her.” She said and glanced at me. “No offense.”

“None taken.”

Then she looked back at Ace. “Aren’t you going to let me go now?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Not unless you cure that drowning vampire over there.” Ace said and pointed towards Nate’s direction, who was still having a battle of either killing himself or saving himself.

“Thank you for finally noticing me!” Called out Nate.

The mermaid huffed and crossed her arms over her chest. Her mermaid tail flipped once in annoyance. “Why should I do that?”

Uh oh. Wrong word, girl. Wrong word. One should not question him if he/she does not wish to die.

Already predicting what he was about to do, Ace unsheathed his sword from his belt and pointed the tip at the mermaid’s chin. “I could kill you right now.”

The mermaid stared fearfully at the sword before looking back up at Ace. I kind of feel bad for her, but yeah, she had it coming for talking back at him. “T-Then you won’t get your vampire friend back.” She said.

She better shut up. Like, right now. She’s only making things worse for her.

“I don’t care. Let him die for all I care if I kill you. You both annoy me and getting rid of you will be like hitting two birds with one stone. So either you save him and save yourself or kill him and kill yourself. Choose.”

The mermaid gulped and shifted her gaze at Nate. “Back on land. Now.” I heard a shift in her voice as she spoke to Nate.

Suddenly, Nate stopped struggling and paused for a moment behind turning around and swimming back to us. Once he was able to pull himself on land did he lay down on his back. Panting. “I’m-I’m alive!” You could hear the relief in his voice as he said it.

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Meanwhile, Ace was still holding the mermaid by her neck and stared at her. “What did you do when you kissed him?” He asked.

“Nothing.” Replied Hira. “I only did it to get him caught off guard to make it easier to control him.”

“Hang on,” I said and made them both look at me as I fixed my gaze on Hira. “You kissed Nate? Please tell me you didn’t do it with my face.”

“She did.” Ace.

“I did.” Hira.

“Trust me, Rose. I thought it was you too.” Said Nate, who was still resting on the ground.

"I'm going to murder you," I said.

"Not if I kill her first." Grunted Nate as he came into a sitting position. "You played me!" He snarled at Hira, who, in return, only shrugged.

"You were an easy target."

"No one is going to kill her." Said, Ace. "I made a deal that if she helps Nate I won't kill her."

"Awwww, PRINCE Ace! You do care!" Beamed Nate and made a joking girly giggle.

Ace got up and stared down at Nate. "Don't make me regret it." He warned, which immediately muted Nate's girlish giggles.

"Now." Ace said and looked down on the mermaid. "Back to the water you go." Before any of us could guess what he was about to do, Ace bent down and picked up Hira princess style and threw her in the water none too gently making her do skips along the water's surface making Hira's scream move like waves going high and low then high and low back again until it was gone. There was a plop sound when she disappeared underwater.

Beside me, I heard Nate let out an impressed whistle. "Look at the flick of that wrist."

Ace came back to us and pointed at the bota bags, which were still where I left them. "Get those bags and let's get out of here." He said and started to turn away.

"Rose!"

"There you are!"

All heads turned to the forest only to see that the twins emerged from it. They were running and almost tripping on the process, which I almost laugh from.

Ren was the first one of the two to reach me. "You're safe." He said and seemed relieved about it. "Were you hurt? Why didn't you scream for me to help?"

"Because, she was dragged in by a mermaid, idiot." Said Nate who was sitting beside me.

"No one asked you." The twins said to Nate.

A cold breeze started and I sneezed. "Acho!"

"Bless you." Said Dan.

“Thanks.”

Ren was studying me for a moment before shrugging out his coat and offering it to me. “This coat isn’t thick enough unlike my other one, but it will provide a little warmth.” He said and looked back at his brother. “Dan, lend Rose your-” There was a splash and suddenly Dan was in the water and swimming back onto the shore.

“Oopsie. I slipped and fell. You were saying, brother?” Despite his current predicament, Dan was smiling mischievously at Ren at bathing his lashes.

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Ren sighed at his brother. “I was going to ask you to lend Rose your coat.”

“Aw...sorry. I guess she’ll just have to use yours then.” He said while still wearing that wicked grin and looking at me and winked. What a weirdo.

“Real help you are.” Said Ren and looked down at the bota bags before going towards them and retrieving them. He slung it over his shoulder.

“I can take care of it,” I said.

“But I wanna do it.” He reasoned and I felt Nate getting up and stood beside me.

“Nah. Let him do it.” Said Nate and placed a hand over my shoulder. “You shouldn’t even be doing such heavy work.”

“Are you saying I’m weak?!” I said to him and then started hearing fits of coughing. I turned and looked for its source until I found Ace with his back to us leaning on a tree near Cloud. He was bent over with one hand on the tree and the other covering his mouth. “Ace?” As soon as I called his name the others seemed to pause and look at him too.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“I don’t know.”

“PRINCE Ace, are you alright?”

Ace’s coughs stopped and were suddenly replaced by a strangled cry as he clutched his head. “Argh!!”

“Ace!”

“PRINCE Ace!”

We all screamed and started running towards his side. Ace was now laying on the ground still in pain. Only when I got closer did I notice that his nose was bleeding. "Oh my gosh!" I screamed. "Someone help him! Does anyone know any healing magic!?"

They all shook their heads. "Fred does," Dan said while giving me a cautious look. Of course, Fred knows. I remember him healing the blisters behind my feet on our first dance lesson.

That was a long time ago.

"He needs immediate help and we're far from Hazel now. It'll take us days!" Ren said.

"But there is one place where we could go. We'll make it by dawn with little breaks." Said Nate while looking at Ace.

"Where?" I asked.

"Tordis. Ace's home."

"No," Ace said in a pained voice as he still clutched his head. He was gritting his teeth so hard that I was surprised that he hasn't broken them yet.

Nate glared at Ace with a hard expression. "You are in no position to order us around, Prince Ace. You're ill and unless you get a cure, I'm in charge." It was a whole new side of Nate that I haven't seen before and he looks cool. Ace was about to say something to him but was cut off when another wave of pain hit him. Nate's brow furrowed in both worry and fear. "Whether you like it or not, PRINCE Ace, we are going to Tordis to help you get fixed up. I don't know what's wrong with you but we are not letting another prince go from this group." With that, Nate turned to me and the twins. He was in charge now.

"Ren and Dan, go back to camp and pack our things while Rose and I will help carry Ace back. Ready our horses too. We're leaving."

Without a single word, the twins nodded and left. Nate bent down to help Ace up while I went to Cloud to get her. I brought her up to Nate and together we helped Ace sit on top of her.

"Tch! You're not getting any thanks from me because of this." Ace said.

Nate grinned. "I don't expect you to." He said before looking back at me. "Let's go."

## Chapter 65 Elf Kingdom

We arrived in Tordis quicker – as Nate had planned – by only taking a few breaks and traveling the whole night. Looking at Ace's kingdom, you could tell that it was truly a

magnificent place for the elves. The area itself already looked magical with an alternating jagged tree bark surrounding the whole area as fences. The tallest bark stood at the farthest; near the castle coming smaller and smaller as it surrounds the entire kingdom until it just stops and vanishes into the ground – didn't even make a full circle.

"This is the place where the once-great oak tree stood. It was once inhabited by the whole elven kingdom." Ren spoke behind me as if sensing my wonder regarding the tree barks. The whole way to Tordis, I took a ride with Ren since Ace was too weak to transfer on Midnight. Also, I was too scared to ride on Ace's horse. Trust me, it's like Ace and his horse buddy are one for they share that same frightening look in their eyes.

I did try to ride and Midnight. And guess what? The stallion snapped at me. And if that wasn't enough, it rose on its two back legs and started chasing me. It stopped when I hid behind Cloud. Cloud simply snorted at midnight as if challenging it to proceed. It might be my imagination but I think Cloud threatened Midnight that she will drop PRINCE Ace if he attacks.

"Hang on," I told him and looked back down at Tordis. "The whole diameter of the kingdom is the same diameter of a giant tree?"

"Yes. It was said that it protected the people from evil." He answered.

"What happened?"

"It's a long story." Ren shrugged. "But to make it short; Tereau tried to invade Tordis. The tree died in trying to protect its people." He said. "I heard that little magic still exists in these barks though. They said that you can feel it when you enter Tordis."

I looked back at Tordis and pictured the enormous tree standing there and couldn't. I lack imagination with these things.

I looked back at Ace instead. He was not looking so good. Even with his usual perfect posture and stone-cold eyes, you could see weakness by the unusual paleness of his skin as he rode on Cloud. Nate was riding beside him in case he might fall while Dan was holding Midnight by his reins. Throughout our travel, Ace didn't seem to get enough rest despite our efforts into forcing him to sleep. His PRINCE ego was too greater than his concern for his health.

While the others got too little rest, I was feeling guilty as I was able to accidentally fall asleep on Ren's chest along the ride. He only woke me up when we were now overlooking the kingdom of Tordis.

"Let's go," Nate ordered and soon we made our way to the entrance of the kingdom where the barks seemed to sink into the ground and the only entrance to the kingdom.

Once we entered did I feel a strange sensation sinking into me. It was like every nerve and muscle in my body became active until the feeling of something being cut from me settled in. I looked at the others to see if they were feeling the same, but no.

They looked lively and energized.

“You okay, Rose?” Still riding close to Ace, Nate asked as he moved a little closer to Garius but still keeping a good distance. Somehow, I noticed that Nate has been acting weird when he’s with me. He often keeps his distance and would only talk to me when needed.

I shook my head and thought about what it was that I was feeling. The feeling that you lost something but you don’t know what. “I don’t know,” I said. “I just feel...weird. How’s Ace doing?” I asked quickly to divert the attention from me.

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At that, we all looked at Ace to see that he had gotten a little better. Some of the colors returned to his cheeks. Somehow, I have forgotten about that strange feeling and felt relief.

Feeling satisfied that our bratty prince was alright, I started to take in my surroundings. When I said that Tordis was surrounded by trees, I don’t mean it like the trees in Sanver. The trees here in Tordis –I realize – are in fact, the houses of the elven people!

Pavilion-like houses perched on top of each of the vine twisting and root curling trees. Each flooring was round with intricate designs with gla\*\* windows and several hanging crystals for decorations. The sizes of these treehouses vary to the thickness of the trees supporting their weight. Some are bigger while some are smaller.

Then I noticed something. From one of these said houses, I saw one elf with big pointy ears and long bronze hair looking at us. When it caught my gaze, it immediately hid. I blink and search around the place to see if I can find another elf. There were none.

“Stop.” Ace said. We all stopped as we looked at him. Ace was sitting up tall while looking straight ahead without any emotion at all. “Lower your weapons. They’re guests.” All of us wore confused looks as to who Ace was addressing since there seemed to be no one around here except for us.

Ren started sniffing the air and tensed up when figures started appearing all around us; upon the trees, behind the bushes, by the tree trunks, and some even swinging on vines. All of them are elves armed and ready for combat as they regarded us.

My eyes roamed around the elves surrounding us. They were all beautiful – both men and women. They all have the same tip-pointed ears paired with either red, white, light and dark brown, and black hair colors that are either grown short or long for both



genders. The women in the group all wore skin-tight black leggings paired with either a leather brown or black fitted long-sleeved top while the men all wore riding pants and boots with army green or brown shirts.

At the sight of Ace, they all started lowering their weapons hesitantly as they studied us. One of the elves, a male with long red hair flowing behind his back, walked out of the bushes as he fearfully stood in front of Ace. "Prince Ace." The elf lowered his head as head dressed Ace, who was now on guard as he plastered on his authoritative PRINCE look. "We did not expect your arrival." Said the elf.

"I only came here to see how Tordis was doing." Ace said, which I know was a complete lie.

At that, the elf looked up at Ace with a concerned look. "We thank you for your concern, Prince. Tordis isn't doing so good."

This caused a frown on Ace's face to appear. "What do you mean?"

The elf's eyes darted towards us for a moment before looking back at Ace. "The protection of the barks is weakening. A rogue was seen entering our borders, but the palace guards managed to chase them away. Also, something has been eating our livestock and other small animals in the forest. We don't know what but we are planning on hunting it down."

Ace listened patiently as the elf talked to him. I could see that he was trying to calculate a possible solution for their problem. "Do you think that it's an animal?"

"We believe it is a snake, my prince. We've seen its tracks and we could tell that it is huge, but we couldn't find it. The forest is too big." The elf explained.

Ace nodded. "Don't hunt it because you will never find it; not when it doesn't want you to. Make it come to you by luring it with a trap. Once I get to the palace I will send in people with expertise in setting up traps to a\*\*ist."

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With that, the whole elf tribe bowed their heads. "Thank you, Prince." The elf said with his head lowered in respect to Ace.

"May the spirit mother guide you into becoming king." With that, the elf bid his farewell as he moved aside to let us through.

We started to head forward again and I couldn't help but look back at how different the elves were to the other kingdoms. They were all fighters and hunted their food. I don't see shops selling goods anywhere.

It wasn't long before we now stood in front of the Tordis Palace, Ace's home. The ground was beautifully cut grass with flowers blooming everywhere that changes colors when the temperature changes, at least that's what Ren told me. The castle was like a mixture of modern and old architectural design. Cool glass windows were decorating the palace. Strange yellow lights float around giving it a magical glow. Vines wrapped around the castle in an old, modern, and elegant look.

We descended from our horses with Nate assisting Ace while Ren and Dan tended the horses. We got closer and closer to the palace and the closer that we got, the more breathtaking it looked.

An elf palace guard came to greet us. "Welcome back, Prince Ace."

Ace nodded in acknowledgment. "Send some troops in town. Help the others about the situation. Call in our best trappers." He told the elf just before he left.

"Ace?" A voice came somewhere in the forest to our left and we saw another elf. This one was unlike the other elf that we saw. He was dressed for combat but his attire looked more expensive and sturdier than the others. He wore a black shirt underneath a dark army green midrib coat. His black shirt was tucked in brown trousers and leather hunting boots. His hair was a shaggy golden brown and his ears were accessorized by a silver ear cuff. The elf walked closer. "Brother, is that you?"

Brother?

"Darem." Ace said grimly and nodded his head at the one called Darem.

With that, a huge smile appeared on the elf's, Darem's, face as he ran towards Ace and engulfed him in a hug. "Baby barbie boo!! Welcome back!" He said ignoring the few curses and any of Ace's attempts to get the elf off of him. "I miss you, little bro!!"

"Get.off.of.ME!!!" Ace bellowed and was finally able to push his brother away who seemed amused and chuckled. He looked at Ace's pissed-off face. "And stop calling me little!"

"Man, is it me, or did you get a lot more moody?"

"Shut up." Ace glared.

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I must admit that I have never seen him look so ticked off or lose his composure to anyone like this. It makes me want to salute his brother for doing so.

“Aw, Ace. Don’t talk to me like that. Whatever you do, I am still your older brother and you will always be my little cute baby brother, aren’t cha?” He cooed and pinched Ace’s cheeks and drew back laughing before Ace grabs his hand and breaks all of his fingers.

“Knock it off, Darem!!” Ace’s voice was so dangerously deep that we all know that it would only be a matter of seconds before things get messy. And by messy I mean bloody murder.

“Alright alright. I’ll stop.” Ace’s brother said with a chuckle before looking at us and for the first time and looked surprised. “Who are they?”

“They’re the other candidates for the future king of Thalia.” Ace said.

A look of amazement appeared on Darem’s face before it was replaced with a huge grin. “You brought friends!” He gasped. “Finally!!” He threw his hands up and I could help but notice the relief in his voice as he said it.

I snicker, making Ren follow into laughter. But we were careful not to go overboard or Ace might hear us and chop our heads off.

“They’re not my friends!” Ace growled.

“Best friends then?” Darem said hopefully.

And that did it, the air that Ren was trying to keep in to hide his laughter exploded, making fart noises from his mouth. Because of that, I burst into laughter. We were laughing so hard that we started crying. We didn’t stop until we heard someone clearing his throat that we remembered that we weren’t alone. Ren and I immediately composed ourselves seeing as everyone was looking at us.

Nate has an unreadable expression on his face. Dan looked pleased. Ace looked like he was trying to decide on h\*\*\*\*\* us while Darem seemed shocked and amazed as he looked at me. His jaw dropped before he looked at Ace, stuttering,

“You....You brought a girl.” He said with a mixture of awe and excitement. I noticed that he was shuffling on his feet and moved a couple of careful steps back as if he were to flee.

“Darem. Don’t.” Ace warned as if he already predicted what his brother is going to do.

“You brought a girl.” This time when Darem said it, a huge grin appeared on his face. “You brought a girl!!” He said a bit louder and before Ace could say anything, Darem turned around and ran for the castle at lightning speed screaming, “Mom, Dad, El, Nora! Ace brought a girl!” He yelled. “He brought a girl!”