

CHAPTER 12

Sora and Ginko were off on their first date, Sora wearing a fashionable navy blue blazer he'd gotten from the Murphy's clothing store about a year ago, and Ginko wearing a cute silver ballgown-type dress. She'd even done up her nails for the occasion.

They were walking on air street, but something was off. Sora had finally gotten up the courage to ask Ginko out on a date, but Ginko hadn't said a word since they left the catacombs. She had simply been drifting along, her entire face red as a beet. Sora was starting to get worried he had made a terrible mistake in asking her out.

"U-um, so is there anywhere you'd like to go?" He finally asked, desperate to break the tension.

Ginko kept drifting, in a daze.

He stopped walking and Ginko bumped into him.

"O-oh! I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I asked if there was anywhere you wanted to go."

Ginko, as if her brain was completely scattered, remembered the situation they were in, and her head started steaming from embarrassment.

"W-we don't have to go anywhere if you don't want to."

"N-no! That's not it at all! It's just, I've never been on a d-date before."

They seriously needed to break this air of awkwardness. Then Ginko remembered a place nearby that had good cake.

"Th-there's a good cafe nearby, we could get something to eat while we think about where else to go."

"Sounds good to me."

They arrived at the cafe, which Ginko finally noticed the name of. 'The Chameleon'.

As they entered, the owner greeted them with the same welcoming grin from when Ginko had eaten here before. She welcomed Sora with a strange sense of familiarity, and then she saw Ginko and her eyes grew excited.

"Hey, welcome back! I didn't know you knew Sora!"

"He-hello."

"What can I get for you?"

"I'll have some of that good soup you made me that one time."

"The cream cheese minestrone? Comin' right up. What can I get for you, dear?"

Ginko was quiet.

"What's the matter, dear? Something botherin' you?"

Sora cut in.

"Um, bring her a cup of the soup too."

"Okay. Well, I'll let you two chat while I heat up the soup."

She headed into the kitchen to prepare the soup.

Sora knew he had to clear things up with Ginko.

"Listen, if the whole thing of calling it a 'date' is the problem, you can just think of it as hanging out."

Ginko snapped out of her daze and got really defensive.

"You don't get it at all, do you?!"

Sora jumped back, Ginko sounded angrier than he'd ever seen her.

"The whole reason I've been so nervous is because I WANTED to go out with you!"

She realized what she'd said and went full red again.

"I'm sorry for not realizing..."

The two of them sat in silence for a moment, and then they started laughing.

"Hahaha, what are you laughing for?"

"Haha, me? Why are you laughing?"

Just then they noticed a face peeking around the corner of the kitchen.

"Eep!"

"Uh..."

The owner came back into the room with 2 cups of soup.

"Heehee, so that's how it is. I'll tell you what, you two lovebirds can have a

strawberry smoothie on the house."

"Oh, you don't have to do-" Sora began to say, but then he noticed Ginko. Her eyes were sparkling once she heard about the smoothie.
"Thank you very much, Mrs. Dewey."

The owner, Mrs. Dewey, brought out the smoothie when they'd finished their soup. They had finally managed to calm down, and were acting like normal, but then they saw the smoothie. The ONE smoothie. The one with two straws in it.

Ginko and Sora sat in suspense at the sight in front of them.
"Heehee, Enjoy!"

The owner tip-toed back into the kitchen, but they felt like they could sense her keeping watch from the doorway.

"Wh-what do we do?" Sora asked, apprehensively.

"I guess we'll have to drink it." Ginko said, her two emotions of shyness and hunger fighting with each other.

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They finished the smoothie together and the mood was back to about what it was before they got there.

And then the owner came back with the bill.

"Come back anytime now. And good luck!" She said with a wink.

They paid the bill and left, feeling embarrassed and unsure of what to do next. Surprisingly, Ginko was the one to break their awkward silence.

"S-so, you knew the owner of that place?"

"Yeah, I've been to The Chameleon before. It's been a while, but Mrs. Dewey always makes good soup."

"That was a really good cup of soup."

"I hope it was okay that I ordered for you."

"It's fine, I didn't know what I was going to order anyway. You probably stopped me from ordering dessert for lunch..."

"Uh, so where do you want to go now?"

"I've spent so much time in the castle, I'm not really sure what there is to do in town."

Just then they saw a big crowd of people gathering around a man handing out fliers.

"What's all this about?" Sora asked.

"Come one, come all, to the water street aquarium's annual Merperson Circus show! They only come to the kingdom for one show a year, so get your tickets today! The show is today after all."

Sora got a great idea.

"Wait here."

He weaved through the crowd and asked the man for a flier. Once he got it, he headed back to where Ginko was waiting for him.

"Let's go to this!" He showed her the paper.

"A...Merperson Circus?"

"Yeah, it'll be fun!"

Back at castle Nogard, things were very...unusual to say the least. The staff were preparing for Prince Apex's meeting with Syrus Stelxis' daughter, Alexis, but the most peculiar things were happening. The royal chefs would be preparing an extravagant meal for the royal family, and suddenly the appetizers would disappear! Other things like this occurred where something would just suddenly vanish, or a fridge door or closet would suddenly be standing wide open while somebody wasn't watching.

Prince Apex had developed a pretty bad headache. He trudged down a corridor of the castle, using the wall to help him walk. He was heading to his meeting with Alexis Stelxis, but he was beginning to wonder if he'd make it.

He saw the Koyosei sisters fluttering past him.

"Ah, excuse me, captain Koyosei?"

Aoko turned back to him.

"Yes, Prince Apex?"

"I'm feeling a bit under the weather today, would you mind heading over to the infirmary and telling the doc I'll be in shortly?"

"Is he already aware of your condition?"

"Yes. Oh, and don't worry about me, it's just a headache."

"My Prince, you really need to relax more. I understand you have a lot on your shoulders right now, I mean, the King is in worse shape than you. But everyone has a right to take a rest and calm their nerves."

"Is this an invitation?"

Aoko went flush red.

"P-P-P-Prince Apex! I meant nothing of the sort! I simply meant that proper rest should get rid of your headache."

The Prince gave a hearty laugh.

"Haha, I'm sorry, that wasn't very nice. But you're right, I do need a break. I've been hallucinating something fierce lately."

The sisters looked at each other.

"What kind of hallucinations?" They said in unison.

"I've been seeing visions of my sister all over the castle. It started when I went to her room a few weeks ago, and it's been pretty constant ever since. Every so often I'll walk into a room and there she is, but I rub my eyes or leave and come back and she's gone."

The sisters looked confused.

"I know, I know. You're going to say, 'Well, that's no surprise. You probably miss your sister to death.' or something like that, that's what everyone I've told about this has said."

Murasako spoke up this time.

"I was just telling sis, I mean, captain Koyosei, that I was certain I had seen the Princess in the laundry room the other day grabbing a whole bunch of things. But she told me I was seeing things because I was exhausted researching that dumb red-head's secret power."

"Secret power?"

"Oh! Um, was it okay to tell him, sis?"

"*Sigh* I guess, it is the Prince after all. I mean, we told the King, right?"

"Yeah..."

So they relayed the story of Sora's mysterious power exploding out on Aoko.

"Hmm... I've never heard of such a magic. The only thing close is something I read when I studied abroad in Susagep for a year. But only women could learn that magic."

The sisters were kind of curious what magic he was talking about.

"But getting back to the matter at hand, something fishy is going on around here, and I plan on getting to the bottom of it! Someone is disguising themselves as the crown Princess and running around causing mischief. I will not stand for it!"

Aoko saluted him, and Murasako hesitantly copied.

"We shall be on the lookout for the perpetrator as well!"

"Very good, hmm? Hey, what do you know, you can cancel that doctor's appointment, I'm feeling much better all of a sudden."

"It must be refreshing to know you weren't necessarily hallucinating. And that took a lot of pressure away from your head."

"That's probably it. Now then, as you were."

Prince Apex continued down the corridor to the room where Alexis Stelxis and her father were waiting.

He stood before the door and took a deep breath.

He opened the door to meet his haphazardly betrothed.

"Ah, welcome, prince Apex." Syrus Stelxis greeted him.

Sitting next to him was a young woman. Apex realized she must be his daughter, so he politely greeted her.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Alexis."

She turned to face him.

A twinge threatened to streak across his face. It's not that she was unattractive, it is simply a fact that makeup should be applied in moderation, and with a steady hand. Her very large chin did not aid his initial impression of her either. In comparison, her figure one would call above average in terms of attractiveness, but the whole picture together was frightening.

"Is something the matter, your highness?"

Apex instantly composed himself.

"Why, not at all, I am quite pleased to meet your daughter."

"Splendid! I'll leave you two to chat while I go settle another matter with your father."

"Very well."

Syrus Stelxis left the room, leaving the mismatched couple to formally meet for the first time.

"So..." Alexis said with a slight lisp, while she fiddled with a toy train.

"What kind of bugs do you like?"

Apex got a look of polite confusion on his face.

"I-I'm sorry, what?"

"Bugs! What kind do you like?"

He pondered what kind of strange person this was and was regretting accepting the terms Stelxis had given him.

"U-um, I don't really...have a favorite bug."

She frowned.

"That's lame. There's lots of cool bugs in the world. Some of 'em suck people's blood. Didja know that?"

Apex began to wonder if he had heard her age wrong when Stelxis said she was turning 18 this year.

"H-how...fascinating. So, what other things do you like?"

"Insects. They're different from bugs, didja know that?"

He started crying inside.

The meeting lasted 2 hours, and when it was finally over, Prince Apex had been drained of mental energy and his headache threatened to return. Alexis left with her father with an indifferent opinion of him, as if she had been dealing with a random coffee shop clerk whom she'd never likely encounter again.

As he slowly walked back to his room, Apex was interrupted by his attendant, Lewis, who was carrying a stack of papers to sign. He was a short man with a tall face, and near court-jester like attire.

"Siir, you muust finish these todaay."

"Do not bother me right now, I am dead tired and must rest in my room."

But Lewis just kept pestering him.

"Buut siir, the Kiing will be upseet if these don't get siigned todaay."

"I said I am tired! Leave me alone, or sign them yourself if they're so stinking important!"

Lewis slinked away to put the papers in the Prince's office.

More people kept pestering him as he very slowly made his way to his room.

By the time he finally made it, he simply collapsed onto his bed face-first, and fell asleep.

Several hours later, at around 5 in the afternoon, he awoke to a loud banging on his door.

"Ugh... what is it?"

Lewis burst into the room.

"It's teerrrible, aawful, I don't know whaat to do."

"What happened?"

"I seet the paapers in your office as usuaal, but I went to sweep uup a few miinutes ago and th-theey were gone!"

"What?! Did you ask my father about it?"

"Of coourse, I went to hiim first. He was in hiis office next dooor and he saaid nobody had come neear the room since I left them theere."

"What were those papers?"

"Moost of them were leegal documents about that youung man miss Giinko hired to saave miss Marissa."

"Who would want to steal them? And who could have?"

Somewhere dark and musty, a shadowy figure stood near a dim candle holding a stack of papers. The figure looked at them and grinned.

"So, this is the one? Not bad at all. Heheheheh..."

END OF CHAPTER 12