

# THE Reincarnated Princess Spends Another Day SKIPPING STORY ROUTES



Story by Bisu  
Illustrations by Yukiko

9



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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

### Leonhart von Prelier

The former knight captain of the Kingdom of Nevel's royal guard and the number one swordsman in the country. Married Rosemary.

### Rosemary von Prelier

A girl who was reincarnated into the world of an otome game and retained the memories of her past life. As the first duchess regnant of this world, she now governs the Prelier domain. She works hard every day to become a splendid lady worthy of being Leonhart's wife.





## Julia von Merkel

First princess of the Kingdom of Lapter. Visits the Prelier Duchy incognito.

## Hakuto Shinshi

Third prince of the Kingdom of Osten. Having interest in pharmaceuticals and the Kingdom of Nevel, he visits the Prelier Duchy for a tour.

## Johan von Velfalt

Rosemary's younger brother. Second prince of the Kingdom of Nevel.

## Queen

The queen of the Kingdom of Nevel. Adores her daughter, Rosemary.

## Randolf von Velfalt

King of Nevel and Rosemary's father.

## Christoph von Velfalt

Rosemary's older half brother on her father's side. First prince of the Kingdom of Nevel.



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# Prologue

Among all the many fairy tales that exist, almost all of them conclude with the same line: “And they all lived happily ever after.” When I was a child, I often read stories that ended with those very words.

A hero sets off on an adventure, overcomes many hardships, and returns to his hometown where his parents await—a kidnapped princess locked on the highest floor of a tower is rescued by a prince on a white horse. *Those types of stories have comforting endings that’ll leave a smile on your face...and it’s the grand finale that I love the most. Of course, I love being left in suspense or feeling my heart race with excitement, but I can enjoy those emotions because I’m promised a happy ending. Even as an adult, I’ll still feel the same way.*

However, a thought suddenly struck me. What comes after that “happily ever after”? Will the hero go on a new journey after he returns to his village? Or will he build a family with that girl who was his childhood friend? Will the princess marry the prince now that she’s been rescued from her tower?

With those vague questions leading me, I daydreamed about what happened afterward. And now, those fantasies pertain to my reality.

Ever since I was a child, all I had ever dreamed about was becoming Sir Leonhart’s bride. Then, because I single-mindedly charged toward that goal without pause, my dream miraculously came true. Sir Leonhart and I pledged our devotion to each other in a church while our loved ones watched over us. It was the happiest day of my life, and it was just as I had always pictured it would be.

But that was not my final scene. After marrying my dearly beloved, my life continued on. Creating an epilogue befitting that “happily ever after” would depend on me. *As the first titled duchess in the kingdom—no, in the world—and as the wife of Sir Leonhart, the former captain of the royal guard and the kingdom’s hero, I want to become a magnificent lady approved by all.*

My new objective certainly wasn’t a reckless one. At the very least, it was far



more realistic than stopping a war between nations, halting the demon lord's resurrection, or preventing an epidemic.

*Even someone like me—someone my own father calls a wild boar—should be able to become a splendid lady... Probably... Surely...*

*That's what I'll believe.*



# The Reincarnated Duchess Socializes

“The Kingdom of Osten?”

We were in a room in the medical facility. Wolf, who’d been leafing through some documents, stopped moving his hands and repeated what I’d said. It wasn’t a kingdom people mentioned often, so he looked puzzled.

“Yes, it’s an island nation situated to the east of the continent,” I said.

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“That’s fair. After all, we hadn’t had any diplomatic relations with them until recently. They’ve established a completely self-sufficient and independent culture. They’re known for their deft craftsmen, and their products are extremely high quality, so they’ve drawn the attention of many merchants. It was rumored that the Osten people are exclusionary, but they actually have a strong thirst for knowledge and are brimming with curiosity. Apparently, their culture is quite advanced too,” I gushed enthusiastically.

“Mary, you know an awful lot about them. You’re doing a fine job as a feudal lord,” Wolf said with admiration.

Hearing praise made me choked for words rather than happy. I hadn’t actually learned that knowledge during my studies to become a feudal lord—my close friend and renowned merchant, Lord Julius, had taught me all of it. Furthermore, I hadn’t gathered all this information on our neighboring nations to be a good feudal lord. No, my reasons...were very much personal.

“Why the weird expression? That was a compliment.”

“Um... You see, this nation actually produces rice.”

Though I was hesitant, I decided to tell him the truth. Lord Julius had given me rice flour in the past. At the time, finding some had been a coincidence, but then he’d investigated its source and established a trade route—and not for rice flour, but whole rice grains. The aforementioned Osten Kingdom had a rice-based diet. In short...it had all happened because of my voracious appetite and



culinary desires. I'd gained this knowledge because of my hobby.

"Ah. Your eyes light up whenever it comes to food and cooking."

It seemed "produces rice" was all he needed to hear to understand my motives.

*I mean, if they're a rice-based society, then they might have other products too. Like miso, soy sauce, sake... And my research shows they have tons in common with Japan. Of course I'll become fascinated and study them from top to bottom.*

"You'd better rein in your hobbies so you don't turn off your husband."

His words stabbed me right in the chest. It was out of the question to let my interests impede my work, so obviously, I only read books about the Osten Kingdom during my free time. However, I did have to wonder what Sir Leonhart thought of me when I sat in the same room as him with my nose constantly buried in a book.

*He's usually reading something himself, and he doesn't look particularly displeased by it. But Sir Leonhart is mature, so it's possible that he's just being considerate of me. What'll I do if all his accumulated discontent explodes one day? No, it's still salvageable if he gets upset. That would be a chance to improve our relationship. But if he brings up a divorce, I'll die. I'm not talking about a mere mental death—I'll have a heart attack and physically die!*

Just imagining Sir Leonhart leaving me sent shivers down my spine.

*I can't leave things like this. Just because he's older doesn't mean I can keep depending on him like a spoiled child. I need to initiate too! When we both have time, we should chat a lot. And we shouldn't constantly do what I like to do. I want to do things Sir Leonhart enjoys too. I may not be athletic, but even I should be able to handle some light exercise.*

Determined, I solemnly nodded to myself.

"Well, I'm sure you don't need to worry about that though," Wolf said with a faint smile.

"No, that was very helpful advice. I shouldn't push my hobbies onto him. It's



important that I learn about his hobbies too.”

“Aren’t *you* your husband’s hobby?”

“Huh?”

“No matter what you do, he’ll always have that lovestricken look on his face when he sees you. He’s probably thinking something like, ‘Oh well, she’s cute.’ I’m telling you, you’ve got nothing to worry about. You could snore while you sleep or look like a fool when you yawn and he’d probably still call you cute.”

“I-I don’t snore!”

*I don’t, right?! But what if I just never realized?*

Seeing my mind spiral in the wrong direction, Wolf sighed. “That’s not the takeaway I wanted you to have... You two truly are a perfect fit for each other. In more ways than one.”

I was a bit curious about what he meant by the last statement, but hearing that we were a perfect fit honestly made me happy. I was in a superb mood now. Wolf, on the other hand, looked like he’d witnessed something regrettable.

“Oh well. Anyway, back to our topic of the observation session,” he said.

“Right.”

We’d gotten quite sidetracked, but I had come to discuss that topic with him. Only a year and a half had passed since the medical facility had been completed and begun its operations. Most of the divisions were still trying to acclimate, so it was in a trial period of sorts. The only place that was completely up and running was the treatment center spearheaded by the Khuer tribe.

However, despite being only partially functional, the facility was still getting an obscene amount of attention from other nations. We had been receiving incessant requests to allow inspections ever since the facility opened. No matter how many times we’d declined—citing the trial phase as our reason—they’d persisted and continued to hound us.

We’d decided we would show the treatment center (and *only* the treatment center) to a handful of people. In addition, observers would not be allowed to

interfere with the employees' work, though this condition didn't seem to deter anyone.

We'd already hosted a number of sessions after reluctantly opening our doors. This time, the request had come from a distant island nation, the Kingdom of Osten.

"I don't mind. It's not like this will be our first rodeo anyway. Still, I wonder whether another high-ranking idiot will be joining us again."

"That...was a unique case."

My eyes glazed over with a faraway look as I reminisced.

The participants of our observation tours were generally medical professionals, scholars, researchers, or bigwigs involved in politics, plus a few guards. However, a high-ranking noble who had no medical knowledge or interest in the subject once took part.

Perhaps wealth and peerage were not enough to satisfy him, so he sought fame too. He brandished his authority to force his way into the observation group without understanding his position.

During the tour, he ignored the terms we set and did whatever he pleased. He entered places we prohibited and did every single thing we explicitly instructed him not to do. He hurled insults at the workers and patients and conducted himself with utmost arrogance.

When I heard that, my patience reached its limit. Using my authority as a feudal lord, a card I rarely ever pulled out, I banned him from the medical facility.

He was a man accustomed to being served and apparently couldn't handle it when a young woman like me opposed him. He raised hell, his face bright red like a boiled octopus.

He kicked up a fuss, yelling things like *"How dare you treat me, a duke, with such insolence!"* or *"This will turn into an international issue!"* but I couldn't care less.

I was a duchess myself and ex-royalty. If that was how he wanted to play,



then I would engage at full force. I was ready to utilize all my power and connections in a way befitting a former villainess.

*“This certainly will be an international issue.”* When I said that with a sweet smile, his complexion changed. But, even though the duke’s face turned an even deeper shade of red and he seemed irate, the reactions of those with him were the exact opposite. They turned white as a sheet and trembled.

It was a reasonable reaction on their part. Anyone capable of sound judgment would recognize when they were at a disadvantage. They groveled before me, apologized profusely, and shoved the still-fuming duke into a carriage and left.

I received an official apology letter from his country sometime later. They seized part of the duke’s territory to show he was bearing the responsibility for his actions. I didn’t pity him. If anything, I wanted to laugh in his face and say, “Serves you right.”

My mind snapped back to the present when Wolf spoke up.

“Well, those kinds of fools are a dime a dozen everywhere, so perhaps it was for the best that it happened early on. It set an example for other countries. Moreover, now we all know that if anything happens, you’ll do everything in your power to protect us.” Wolf’s lips curved into an amused smile. “We’re working more fervently than ever. It’s only left us with good things.”

*Come to think of it, after that incident, I feel like I’ve gotten closer to the other employees. Everyone in the Khuer tribe is friendly with me, but there used to be a wall between me and the new workers. Even though I’m actually a ball of disappointment on the inside, to people who don’t know me, I’m a former princess and now duchess, so I’m difficult to approach.*

The ruckus had occurred while I had had no other choice but to sadly bide my time and wait for them to warm up to me. *Sometimes disasters are actually blessings in disguise. This will be the only achievement that domineering duke will ever leave behind.*

Now no one commented when I secretly disguised myself to help out the hospital when it was busy. They watched me with tepid gazes, and perhaps they gossiped about what a bizarre feudal lord I was.

“I don’t want to have to deal with any more fools though.” Wolf sighed. “I dearly hope the group from Osten has some decency.”

“I heard that people from the Kingdom of Osten are very courteous, so I think it should be fine... But apparently, their third prince applied to be part of the observation group.”

“A prince? Why? And the third prince at that. He’s not hoping to gain achievements or whatnot for some wearisome plot, right?” Wolf raised a brow suspiciously.

“No, that doesn’t seem to be the case,” I replied.

The royalty of the Kingdom of Osten had been blessed with fertility for many generations. There were four princes and two princesses under the current crown. However, there wasn’t a power struggle as Wolf might’ve feared. Primogeniture ideology had deep roots in their country—perhaps it was due to their history of having many children. The crown prince and his right-hand man, the second prince, got along very well. The third and fourth princes also intended to become their brother’s subjects once they came of age.

After I explained that to Wolf, he nodded. “I see. Perhaps he’s paying a visit to broaden his insights for when he has to become independent.”

“Most likely.”

“Then I’m sure he won’t misbehave.”

“I hope not. But in the unlikely chance he’s like that domineering duke, I’ll handle him.”

“Oh my, how reliable.” Wolf smiled. “Very well. I’ll allow it, and as long as they’re not busy, I’ll have Lily or Rolf guide them.”

“Thank you.”

Lily seemed like a natural choice for that job, but I’d been surprised when I’d heard that Rolf had taken on the role of guiding observers. He even had an excellent reputation for being succinct while thoroughly answering any questions.

*I can’t believe it! Rolf, the brat of all brats. The little twerp who flung insults at*



*me as easily as he breathed. People really do change. Well, he still treats me the same though. I guess it's more accurate to say he adjusts for the situation now rather than say he's changed. According to Wolf, he still acts like a spoiled kid, though I haven't been able to confirm that.*

*Oh well. Rolf's insults don't really deal any damage, so I don't mind. I just think of it as parenting practice for when my own child goes through their sullen, rebellious phase. He'd fly into a rage if he knew that though, so my lips are sealed.*

After my discussion with Wolf wrapped up, I left the room. Klaus, who'd been standing guard outside the door, turned his gaze to me.

"Sorry for making you wait so long," I said.

A broad smile spread across his handsome face. "Not at all! I had an exhilarating time."

My expression stiffened reflexively. *It's great that you find your duty worthwhile, but I wish you weren't so happy about standing guard in the corridor. Does this count as abandonment play? All I did was get a bit engrossed in conversation.*

A young female staff member happened to pass by and see his smile. She blushed, captivated by him, and I wanted to tell her to snap out of it. *His appearance might be first-class, but he's a ticking time bomb on the inside, okay?!*

One year had passed since Klaus had resigned from the royal guard and joined my duchy's chivalric order. Now in his thirties, he had matured into a calm man appropriate for his age.

He no longer only praised my every move, and he now also admonished my shortcomings. He'd sworn his loyalty to me, and he did everything he could to support me, but he was no longer a mere yes-man. He was an excellent subordinate with his own opinions.

This part of him was the only thing beyond repair—he treated me like a coddling granddad would treat his grandchild, and his tendency to make

perverted remarks that I couldn't overlook was still going strong.

“Working under Your Grace is a blessing in itself, but being in a position where I can protect you—the object of all my love and respect—with my own two hands is a truly special honor.”

Sir Leonhart worked as not only my aide, but also as my guard when we were together. And since we were nearly always together in our mansion, Klaus had few shifts. As a result, he was excessively zealous today. I could practically see the sparkle effects around him. *My eyes hurt.*

“Klaus, are you giving Mary trouble again?” a voice asked with a sigh.

I turned around to see a familiar beauty. She wore a white apron over a simple, gray dress with a tight collar. Not even the loose-fitting nurse uniform could hide her splendid proportions. She had thick, wavy black hair and long lashes that framed her upturned eyes. Her red lips and the mole beneath them gave off a sexy allure. The young woman looked at me and smiled.

“Bianca!” I said.

“It's been a while, Mary.”

Big Sis Bianca, Michael's older sister and my friend, had left the viscounty to start working at the medical facility. During our sea voyage, she'd assisted with administering treatment for the sailors and Klaus, which had sparked her interest in medical care. Apparently, she'd been secretly studying medicine ever since.

“Have you gotten used to working here?” I asked.

“I'm still a novice, so there's much to learn.” Though she said that, she wore an energetic smile.

She'd always been beautiful, but she appeared even more radiant now. As with Michael, a career related to medicine suited Big Sis Bianca's nature very well.

“Mary, I'll improve enough that you can depend on me, so just you wait.”

Delighted, I broke into a smile. “Yes, I look forward to it.”

Big Sis Bianca's eyes went round with surprise and she gave me a long, hard



look.

“Hm?”

“Mary... You...”

“Huh? Is something wrong?”

She placed her hands on my cheeks and scrutinized me closely. I was overwhelmed by her serious expression. *Is there something on my face? Maybe a loose thread or lint?*

“Have you become a goddess?”

“Huh?” It took me several seconds to process what she’d said. I’d heard her words loud and clear, but I couldn’t understand why she’d said them.

*Was that a hard joke to understand? It didn’t feel like one to me. She called me a goddess with such a straight face that I don’t know how to reply!*

“I always knew you were cute, but I can’t believe you’ve become so lovely... Oh, you mustn’t show off that smile so readily. If you’re careless, there’ll be fatalities. I’ve built up resistance to a certain extent, but just now, I thought my heart was about to stop.”

“Huh?”

“Goodness, that adorable look won’t do either. It’s far too cute. I fear you’ll be swarmed by unsavory people.”

“Um.”

“You were an angel in the past, but you’ve become a goddess after your marriage. So precious... You’re just too precious. You’ve grown into a goddess and I get to meet you here? My workplace must be heaven.”

*Big Sis Bianca, I think your enraptured expression is much more like a goddess’s than mine. Your gorgeous face would turn anyone’s head, and yet the words pouring out of your mouth are much too regrettable. Also, we’re in a hospital, so I wish you’d stop talking about ominous things like heaven.*

Unable to watch me petrified any longer, Klaus stepped between us. “You’re the one giving her trouble,” he grumbled, exasperated.

That snapped her back to her senses, and Big Sis Bianca apologetically averted her gaze. “It’s been so long since I last saw you that I got too excited... I’m sorry, Mary.”

“O-Oh, it’s okay.”

“You don’t hate me?” she asked with a crestfallen look.

Though I’d been overwhelmed by her intensity, I hadn’t particularly disliked it. I smiled at her cute question and nodded. “I don’t! I like you a lot.”

“So precious...” Big Sis Bianca and Klaus—who’d chimed in for some reason—said in unison. They put their hands together as though they were praying to me.

*I wish you guys would stop that. The people passing by seem put off, so cut it out already. Really. Stop it.*

I somehow managed to make them stop, but the two of them shared a look and then exchanged a firm handshake. Despite being a young man and woman of marriageable age, neither had the slightest bit of attraction for the other. They gave each other a knowing nod with the energy of young boys making peace after brawling next to the river.

*These two always quarrel when they’re together, but they’re actually quite like-minded. They would probably get upset if I told them that though, so I’ll keep my mouth shut.*

Suddenly, hurried footsteps approached us from behind, and a voice called out to us.

“Sister!”

When Big Sis Bianca saw who it was, she waved at him. “Michael!”

“I could use your help with something if you’ve got the time... Hm? Princess.” Michael, a handsome young man who had black hair with a bluish tinge and gentle eyes of the same color, blinked when he noticed me. He then smiled softly. “It’s great to see you again. Have you been well?”

“Yes, very. You look busy.”

“I’m sure you’re much busier than I am. Please take care of your health,



Princess— Oops, I reverted to my old habits. It's Lady Mary now." As he realized his mistake, his cheeks flushed in embarrassment. A grown man wouldn't be pleased to be called this, but I found him to be as cute as ever.

"Thanks to everyone's hard work, the hospital is operating smoothly, so I can rest more," I said with a smile.

"I'm glad to hear it," he said, his lips curving up even more.

"By the way, aren't you in a hurry?"

"Oh, that's right. Sister, could you lend me a hand? We have a lot of patients today, so I'd like it if you could assist Lily."

"Help Lily? Of course! Leave it to me!" Big Sis Bianca's eyes twinkled. She adored younger girls, so working with Lily would be like a reward for her. She squeezed my hands. "Come again, okay?" she said before leaving with a light spring in her step. She was almost on the verge of skipping.

Lily and Michael had gotten much closer as of late, and it seemed I wouldn't need to worry about any bride versus sister-in-law battles ever occurring.

Klaus let out a tired sigh. "She's like a storm."

"She's always cheerful. She'll brighten up the hospital," I said.

"I'm not sure if that's being cheerful or eccentric..." Klaus muttered, struggling for the right words.

*Uh, you're two peas in a pod in my book.*

The carriage proceeded down the road, its wheels rattling noisily. When we passed through town, the scenery outside the window changed to the idyllic landscape of sprawling fields and grassy meadows.

We were in the Prelier region, a territory formerly managed by the royal family and now by my duchy. Though it wasn't far from the capital, its townscape gave off a leisurely atmosphere, and residents were laid-back. The area was moderately rural and developing at a decent pace, similar to a suburban city in modern Japan.

This was the land I managed.

By the way, since I had relinquished my status as royalty to become a subject of the state, I'd adopted the name of the territory as my surname, making me Rosemary von Prelier. It sounded cute, and I was very fond of my new name. I liked it much more than the ostentatious-sounding Velfalt.

And all other things aside, my surname was the same as Sir Leonhart's! It was only natural, since we were a married couple, but I couldn't help thinking about our marriage every time I signed a document. To this day, I was mentally still more of an obsessive and nerdy fangirl than a wife.

Merely greeting each other every morning filled my heart with joy. His gallant and handsome face captivated me every day, and my chest raced every time he treated me kindly.

*There's a Japanese saying that goes, "You'll get tired of looking at beauty in three days," but that's preposterous! Can someone please teach me how to stay calm instead? Not to mention he's been even sexier lately. With every year that passes, his dashing good looks show no sign of waning— No! He's only getting more charming! The way he narrows his eyes and raises the corners of his lips when he smiles is so sinful. His sweet smile directed at me is enough to make me almost collapse.*

*I love anything and everything about Sir Leonhart then, now, and forevermore, but his current appearance might be my favorite. His gentle smile and calm demeanor, his flawless posture—manhood has completed his killer good looks.*

*And yet, I have faith that his beauty has not reached its pinnacle yet. I'm absolutely confident that the Sir Leonhart of next year and the year after that will become my favorite. Simply imagining what an attractive middle-aged man he'll be in ten, twenty years is enough to rouse me. I'm sorry, Sir Leonhart. I may never be able to calm down. Your wife will probably be a possessive fangirl nerd for the rest of her days.*

We'd arrived while I'd been lost deep in silly thought. I alighted from the carriage and entered my estate. There in the entrance, standing in a spacious atrium area, was Sir Leonhart. He was in the middle of discussing work with the captain of our knight order, who was standing beside him. When he noticed my presence, Sir Leonhart's expression changed from manly work mode to a gentle

smile.

“Rose.”

*Ohhh... I wuv you... My husband's fan service is phenomenal, as per usual.* It felt like there were literally hearts in my eyes as I responded with my own smile. Sir Leonhart greeted me with open arms and I leaped into them without hesitation. He hugged me gently. *Ah, he smells so good.*

“I’m home.”

“Welcome home. How was the hospital?”

“They were busy as ever, but everyone seemed to be in high spirits. Oh, I also received approval for the observation.”

“That’s great. We were in the middle of discussing the security for the observation session.”

After enjoying my fill of Sir Leonhart’s scent, I pulled away from him with great reluctance. When I directed my gaze at the knight captain, he raised his hand to his chest and bowed.

“Welcome home, Duchess,” he said with a smile.

His name was Gunther von Kolbe. He had soft, chestnut hair that reached his shoulders and slightly downturned eyes of the same color. He had well-sculpted features and a sweet face that would make him popular among young mademoiselles.

Due to his excellent conversational skills and bright aura, my first impression of him was that he was, I’m sorry to say, frivolous. But after speaking to him, I learned that he was a nice, diligent man.

Gunther was Sir Leonhart’s peer and an old friend. He was a skilled swordsman, but he hadn’t been part of the royal guard. He’d been the vice-captain of the third division, which managed the capital’s security, but he’d resigned and transferred to my dukedom. At present, he was the captain of Prelier’s second division, which managed the security within the domain.

“I’ve returned, Captain Kolbe,” I said. “The observation group will stay for one week. I’m sure it’ll be a lot of work for you, but I leave them in your capable

hands.”

“I’m happy to serve if it’ll help a beautiful duchess like yourself. We will dedicate our best efforts to carrying out this task.” His soft, effeminate features were well matched to his smug gestures and words.

He was a gentleman to all women, so his compliments were merely polite greetings, but I worried he might regret it one day if he spoke so glibly all the time.

Gunther was unmarried, but he had someone in his heart. The target of his affection was a beautiful older woman who worked in the capital, and she had already rejected him numerous times. Apparently he’d coincidentally overheard that she wanted to settle down here after she retired from the front lines, so he had swiftly moved here.

*What a determined and enterprising stalker. Though, he’s not a stalker that’s done any real harm... I mean, he’s actually a purehearted one despite his looks—I’m sure he would be too terrified to do anything that might make her hate him, so I’ll just keep an eye on them for the time being. If she doesn’t like it, then I’ll do everything I can to get him away from her.*

Gunther raised my hand and kissed my fingertips. Sir Leonhart pushed him aside, wrapped his arm around my waist, and drew me close.

“Don’t touch my wife with such familiarity.”

“Hwah!” The unexpected affection caused a strange cry to spill from my lips. A side view of his displeased expression made my heart flutter unceasingly. *My husband is so cool that I could die...*

“It was but a greeting. How will you handle a soirée if you throw a fit after this much?”

“I don’t need to put up with it in my own house.”

“I see.” Gunther smirked. “Which means you’ve been putting up with it in formal settings.”

Sir Leonhart averted his gaze. That childlike response, unlike how he usually handled everything with acuity, was more telling confirmation than words.



*What...? Is this real? Is this really real? He hates it when another man touches me, even if it's for a greeting? He's always so composed, so I didn't notice at all. Does that mean he's secretly jealous? No way, that's amazing!*

I hid the smirk that was threatening to form under my hand and looked up at Sir Leonhart. He glanced down at me. An embarrassed blush faintly dusted his cheeks. He blocked my gaze with his hand.

"Please don't look at me," he said. Then in barely a whisper, he added, "I look pathetic right now."

My heart almost stopped. "Leon, you're always cool," I whispered back. *You're cute today, though.* I would keep that thought a secret—after all, he'd probably sulk.

Perhaps he'd picked up on my inner murmurings because Sir Leonhart wore a conflicted smile.

"I see, so even *you* become like this when you're with your wife," Gunther muttered as he watched us. "I'm envious of you newlyweds. I wish someone would tell me, 'You look wonderful even when you're pathetic' too."

"Gunther..." Sir Leonhart sent him a sharp glare.

He raised his hands up in surrender. "Sorry." The way he apologized with a cheerful smile showed he was not remorseful whatsoever, but he had a magnetic quality to him that made people let it go. "It's not much of an apology present, but how about you show her your attractive side now?"

"Huh?"

"It's been a while, so why don't we spar? The knights want you to train them as well."

Gunther's suggestion made my eyes sparkle. Sir Leonhart was always the bestest, most exceptional husband, but he was especially handsome when he wielded a sword.

"Why now?" Sir Leonhart looked at him with displeasure.

Undaunted, Gunther turned his gaze onto me. "There's no point if you don't do it now. Do you want to waste the perfect chance to make her fall in love

with you all over again? Come on, Lord Commander.”

Sir Leonhart fell silent, his expression sour. He didn’t seem to truly hate the idea, but his face was still somewhat red.

By the way, Gunther addressed him as Lord Commander because I’d entrusted all military matters of the duchy to Sir Leonhart. *Supreme Commander... That has a nice ring to it too. It’s just my preference though, and I’d never have him assume that title... No, really, I wouldn’t. Probably.*

“Rose... Will you watch?”

“Of course!” I replied enthusiastically.

Sir Leonhart smiled shyly.

After that, I spent around an hour in utmost exuberance. *God, that was amazing...*

Time flashed in the blink of an eye and the observation group soon arrived at the Prelier Duchy.

The plan had been for them to rest the first day since they would be tired after the long journey. Then on the second day of their stay, we would give them a tour of the land and hold a welcome banquet dinner. Finally, the focus of their trip—the hospital observation—would begin on the third day.

However, as soon as they arrived, a messenger came delivering news that the tour, welcome dinner, and any other plans for the second day would need to be canceled. Several members of their group had fallen ill.

I suggested that they go to the hospital for an examination, or we could dispatch doctors to their lodging, but they refused. Apparently, they didn’t have any visible symptoms like a fever or cough; they were physically weary and lacked any appetite, so they were simply overfatigued.

The Kingdom of Osten was an island nation quite a ways from the continent; the long sea voyage would be enough to whittle away someone’s strength. They’d had to traverse the Kingdom of Grundt on top of that, so of course they would be exhausted.

*Plus, the food here will be different from their home country's. I'm not exactly sure how closely Osten resembles Japan, but if their culinary culture mainly has dishes that have low oil content and light seasonings, then it'll be fairly trying for them here. I hope they don't get upset stomachs from all the heavy Western-style dishes with lots of meat, butter, and cream.*

*Oh, but they brought ingredients from their country. Rice and spices should keep well, so it's highly likely they can cook for themselves if they buy vegetables and fish. With that in mind, perhaps it was a good thing we aren't hosting the welcome dinner.*

Lord Julius had procured ingredients from the Kingdom of Osten in large quantities so I, in my excitement, had prepared Japanese-esque dishes for the banquet. The original plan had been to serve Nevelian cuisine using ingredients from my domain, but I'd also wanted to serve something using rice.

I'd figured they would miss the food from their home country after coming such a long way, but I hadn't taken into account the possibility that they could cook for themselves even after reaching the continent. *It's a pity that I couldn't have Osten natives try my faux-Osten dishes when they've come all the way here, but such is life.*

I assured the extremely apologetic messenger not to worry, and I had some fruit prepared for him to take back as a get-well gift. I also threw in the honey lemon drink we'd made in advance because the words "sea voyage" brought scurvy to mind. *I might be overthinking it, but I want them to get some vitamin C, just in case.* So, I recommended they mix a small amount of salt with water and lemon juice to make a delicious drink.

We packed the gifts into a carriage and I saw the messenger off. He bowed his head over and over as he left.

"Now then, what to do..." I sighed when I thought of all the ingredients we'd prepared for the banquet.

*I don't want to waste anything, so we'll just have to slowly eat it. Fortunately, the ingredients that haven't been prepped yet can still be preserved. We could dry the meat, but that feels like a waste.*

"Since I have this wonderful opportunity, I'll personally cook for the first time

in a while,” I said to no one in particular.

I changed into a dress that was easy to move in and headed to the kitchen where all the cooks were already working. They were in the process of preserving the ingredients so that none of them would go to waste. I was hesitant to speak up since they looked fairly busy, but I boldly called out to the head chef.

“Excuse me, may I have a moment?”

“Well if it isn’t the duchess. How can I help you?”

“I’m sorry to bother you during such a busy time. Could I borrow the kitchen? Just the corner would do.”

“Of course, you can use whatever you’d like, but... Duchess, will you be the one cooking?” The head chef was clearly perplexed.

It was a natural response. This was a world where not even noblewomen and ladies from affluent merchant families cooked, so it made sense to question what a former princess would do in a kitchen. I’d proposed the recipes for the banquet, but the staff had likely assumed that I was only knowledgeable on the theory.

“I want to make Leon lunch. Could I use some of the ingredients we bought for the guests’ welcome banquet?”

“Very well,” the head chef said with great pause.

During the several long seconds of silence, he’d probably pushed down the words he’d wanted to say. Even if he thought a former princess would be incapable of cooking, he couldn’t refuse her when she wanted to prepare a meal for her husband. *I’m sorry for putting you through the inner turmoil.*

I took some meat, eggs, and so on, and got down to business near the edge of the kitchen. The chefs observed me with apprehension at first, but their expressions changed to shock after I quickly and skillfully finished the prep work.

“Duchess, you have experience cooking?” asked the head chef, who’d been



standing next to me. He'd apparently determined that it would be fine to leave me to my own devices.

"I've dabbled a bit as a hobby."

"You're far more skilled than the apprentice cooks. Incidentally, what sort of dish are you making?"

I was going for a classic Japanese spread for the lunch box I'd give to Sir Leonhart: rice balls, karaage, and tamagoyaki. Since I didn't have all the necessary seasonings, it would turn out a bit different, but it would be similar enough. And if I racked my brains I was sure it would be delicious.

I gave the head chef a brief explanation and he sank into a momentary thoughtful silence.

"If you permit it, could I sample the dishes once you've finished them?" he asked. "Just for future reference..."

"They may not be to your taste."

"That won't be a problem."

"Really? In that case, I'll make as much as I can."

*If memory serves, due to the observation group's change in schedule, the knights should be gathered to discuss rearranging the guard and patrol schedule. Everyone has their own preferences, so I'll let them choose whether they want to try some or not. At the very least, I have a feeling Klaus will want to eat my food.*

After that, I became so busy that I felt dizzy. I was no longer acting like a good wife elegantly cooking a handmade lunch for her husband. This was catering.

I cooked a mountain of rice in a large pot, marinated chicken, and cracked then mixed eggs. Though each step of the process was simple, it was a formidable amount of food. I stopped thinking somewhere along the way and instead just single-mindedly moved my hand around like a karaage frying machine.

"Hm? Why is it so noisy?"

I heard a commotion amid the sound of sizzling oil so I raised my head. I

surveyed the room to see that people had gathered around the doorway. And what was more, they were all handsome men.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

The head chef, who’d been assisting me, smiled wryly. “It seems the knights were lured here by the smell.”

*Now that he mentions it, those men are all part of the second knight division. What on earth? Our elite, the pride of Prelier, are acting like hungry grade school boys.* It was amusing and yet not amusing at the same time. I had mixed feelings knowing that they usually looked so gallant. *Evidently, it’s the same in any world—people who partake in physical activity love karaage.*

“I’m glad the ingredients won’t be going to waste.” I was somewhat disconcerted, but I forced myself to accept it.

I returned my attention to my work and scooped the fried chicken from the oil. I stacked the pieces on top of a rack for draining oil and repeated this motion multiple times. Finally, I stopped to wipe the sweat off my brow.

“Huh?”

*Is it just me, or are there more people than before? Wait, when did the first division join the crowd?* The realization stunned me.

The knights of the first division mainly worked as bodyguards for the Prelier duchy and other important people. Because the dinner banquet had been canceled, their schedule had been greatly altered. I’d heard that the captain, the vice-captain—Klaus—and Sir Leonhart were locked up in their office discussing the changes.

Ordinary knights didn’t participate in that meeting, but that didn’t mean they should have been loafing around here. I was worried they’d be reprimanded. Their magnanimous captain might’ve let it go, but Klaus would surely get on their case. Though Klaus disliked holding an executive position, he was performing his duties diligently and was unexpectedly suited to the role.

Klaus had initially declined the nomination to be the vice-captain of the first knight division. He’d modestly cited that it was because he was undeserving, but it was actually because he felt it too bothersome. He valued being free from

responsibility over rank or honor.

However, Sir Leonhart had known better—he'd outsmarted Klaus. He'd coolly said, "Then I can't let you guard the duchess," and Klaus had immediately folded. He'd looked extremely bitter about it, but he'd consented nonetheless.

*In the end, he's doing a good job. You could say that Sir Leonhart has a discerning eye. He's got a tight grip on the reins of a quirky subordinate—Klaus, I mean. My husband truly is amazing. I've fallen in love with him all over again.*

"Will this be enough?" asked the head chef. His fretful tone brought me back from memory lane.

While I'd been zoning out, the number of people had increased even further.

"We've made so much. It should be sufficient... I hope." I was feeling uneasy too.

*Karaage doesn't even exist in this nation, so why are they so keen on it? I tilted my head in confusion as I piled heaps of karaage on a large plate. Simply looking at all this fried chicken is enough to give me heartburn...and this still might not be enough? Just how much can these knights eat?*

I first set aside a portion for Sir Leonhart and me. I also saved some for Lord Julius since he had helped supply all the ingredients, and then I left the rest to the head chef to handle at his discretion.

After I packed the karaage into a basket together with rice balls and tamagoyaki, I weaved my way through the crowd of knights who were on the verge of rushing in, and then left the kitchen.

The knights were still in discussion when I reached the office. I didn't want to hinder Sir Leonhart while he worked, so I called out to the head steward instead.

"I brought Leon's lunch. Could you hand it to him for me?"

Usually, the steward promptly acknowledged my requests, but this time he pursed his lips with a troubled look. Watching him hesitantly and carefully choose his next words unnerved me.

“I feared this might be the case... Is this unsuitable for a duke’s meal?” I asked.

I had figured rice balls would be the perfect introductory food for those new to rice, but I’d also been concerned that people would be reluctant to eat with their hands. Sandwiches existed in this country, but they were considered peasant food. Eating a meal with side dishes was regarded as peasant food as well; I may have partitioned the food, but it was still being served in one container. This was fairly atypical for nobles who partook in course meals.

“I knew it. I shouldn’t have.” I hung my head in shame.

“No, not at all!” the head steward cried out hastily. He grasped the basket that I had retracted and shook his head. “Your Grace, no one in this duchy would dare scorn a dish that you made yourself.”

“But it’s uncustomary.”

“This is a cuisine from another nation, correct? They say that when in foreign lands, follow the local customs. If this culture uses their hands to eat, then it only stands to reason that we should abide by their ways. It would be far more impolite to object to another country’s traditions and impose one’s own country’s standards, wouldn’t you say?”

“Y-Yes, that’s true.” I blinked a few times, surprised at his effusive outpour. Our head steward was normally quiet and always wore a gentle smile, so I was somewhat taken aback by the panic that tinged his tone.

“Pardon me.” Realizing that he’d overwhelmed me, he took a step back. He seemed abashed—his cheeks turned a light red and he cleared his throat.

*Teasing elderly men in their sixties isn’t a hobby of mine, but seeing him like that tickles my heart a bit.*

“Um, then, is something else the matter?” I asked.

The head steward collected himself and wavered for a moment before speaking. “Forgive my impertinence, but I believe your husband would be happier to receive such a gift directly from his wife rather than me.”

I was surprised by his suggestion, and my eyes went round. “But isn’t he in



the middle of work?”

“Only his fellow knights are in there right now, so I’m sure they’ll permit it. Please wait a moment.”

“Huh? Wait—”

My attempt to stop him fell on deaf ears as he entered the office. *The head steward isn’t acting like himself. Normally, he’s a calm and elegant silver fox. But the maids don’t look particularly surprised by his pushy demeanor—I’m the only one who’s baffled here.* I tilted my head, confused.

Before long, the door opened again, and this time, Sir Leonhart stepped into the hallway. He seemed a bit flustered. His dark eyes softened when he spotted me loitering nearby.

“I’m sorry for interrupting you in the middle of work,” I said.

“Don’t be. We were about to take a break anyway. More importantly, I heard you made lunch for me.”

“Yes, um, I don’t know if you’ll like it...but will you eat it?”

“Of course,” Sir Leonhart said as he took the basket from me. “Thank you. It must’ve taken a lot of effort. I’ll savor every bite.”

Seeing his bright smile brought me immense happiness. If I hadn’t handed it to him myself, I wouldn’t have gotten to see that joyful grin, and for that I was grateful to the head steward.

“I’m off on my way to town now. After I deliver a thank-you gift to Lord Julius, I plan to check and see how the town is faring.”

“Are you taking Klaus with you?”

I thought for a moment and then shook my head. Klaus had his own work to do as vice-captain so I would bring a different guard today. There would also be a reliable (albeit a tad too violent) agent watching over me from the shadows.

“I see.” Sir Leonhart nodded. He bent over and kissed my cheek gently. “Enjoy your trip. Be safe.”

“I will. I won’t be gone long.” I kissed his cheek back.

*I know it's just a greeting, but this is still a little embarrassing.* I felt my face heat up as I moved back and made eye contact with a beaming maid. The head steward wore a pleasant smile as well. *I'm glad you're all so supportive of us, but it's mortifying having an audience watch us with those warm gazes, so please stop.*

My carriage stopped at a corner in the center of town. I was one street down from the bustling main road, where an old building made of stone stood. After its owner had passed away, it had been left unattended for around ten years or so, but it had been spruced up as of late. Needless to say, Lord Julius had purchased it.

He'd left the building itself alone and replaced the damaged wooden frame and doors. He'd also put up simple decorations like hanging planters and a sign. The building had been transformed into a chic store.

Lord Julius's headquarters was in the capital, and he also owned various locations in Eigel territory and around the harbor, but recently, he'd been operating out of Prelier. *"Prelier will become the center of our economy in the future,"* he'd said.

Being the eagle-eyed merchant that he was, he would never miss out on a business opportunity. I'd been astonished to hear that he'd bought this building back when the medical facility was still in its planning stage. Furthermore, he had also secured shops along the main road. *He's truly a shrewd man.*

When I knocked on the massive wooden door, Lord Julius himself came out to greet me. "Welcome. I've been waiting for you," he said. His elegant and beautiful features were unchanged, and he appeared youthful as ever, with no signs of aging.

When I stepped into his store, I let out a gasp of admiration. The walls were ivory with black wainscoting on the bottom. The floor was a dark brown that was a shade away from black, and the overall interior gave off a tranquil air.

The vintage, dark oak shelves were lined with a diverse variety of items, ranging from a clock discernibly crafted with the finest workmanship to pieces with avant garde designs. Though things seemed a touch unorganized, the

placement of everything offered a sense of mystery and harmony.

Coupled with its secluded position and the ambience of an old building, the store had a unique vibe. I felt like I'd stepped into a magical store, and I was secretly excited. On top of that, it was staffed by a genteel elderly man who silently bowed to me. *As expected of Lord Julius. He really gets it.* My eyes sparkled with delight.

"If you have time, please allow me to show you around the store," Julius suggested. "I would appreciate hearing your opinion and getting a woman's perspective."

*I'm a full-grown adult, and here I am acting like a child brimming with curiosity.* It was embarrassing, but I honestly wanted to hear about his products, so I agreed. "Yes, please. Oh, and is Lord George not with you?" I asked after looking around. He was nowhere in sight.

Lord Julius's nephew, George, was undergoing education to become the future marquis. At the same time, he was assisting Lord Julius with his line of work. I'd heard that George would be coming to Prelier today on business regarding their upcoming store.

"Oh, he's supervising one of the stores on the main road. The remodeling is taking longer than expected, so I left him there."

"Huh?"

"It'll be fine."

*Will it really be fine? Aren't you pushing your work onto others again? If this follows the usual sequence of events, you're going to get reprimanded.*

Lord Julius was undeniably an amicable and intellectual man, but at the same time, he was quite the free spirit. I'd heard many stories about how he'd set off to purchase goods and hadn't returned home for ages. And the ones who had to pick up after him every time were his outstanding employees and his overly serious nephew.

With his graceful demeanor and gorgeous looks, George was now popularly known as "the Spring Prince" in high society. Unfortunately, the version of George that lived the most vividly in my mind had veins bulging on his forehead

as he gave his uncle a scathing tongue-lashing.

*He's probably raging over his missing uncle right now. Good luck, Momma George. Live strong.* I felt pity for George the worrywart as I followed after Lord Julius.

He led me through the store to a room in the back. We stepped inside, and he gestured to one of the sofas. After taking a seat there, I then turned to the maid accompanying me and signaled to her with my eyes. She swiftly prepared what I'd brought and set it on the table.

"Is this cuisine from the Kingdom of Osten?" Lord Julius asked, his eyes twinkling as he gazed at the spread.

"Not quite. I did use a few of the ingredients you procured from there, but I cooked the meal as I saw fit. I seasoned everything to my liking, so it'll taste completely different from Osten's cuisine."

"In that case, I'm sure I'll love it." His bright, boyish smile was infectious, and I felt the corners of my own lips curling up. "Do you mind if I try it now?"

"Not at all! This over here is their staple, rice."

"Is this paper...? No, of course not. What kind of plant is this?"

"It's the dried husk of a plant called bamboo."

Lord Julius picked up the bamboo husk and began examining it closely. He had the curiosity of a merchant, but he also liked rare things in general. *He would probably be thrilled if I made him a bamboo flask.*

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forget my surroundings when I'm fascinated by something." Lord Julius scratched his cheek shyly and put down the bamboo husk.

Right when his interest finally turned to the rice, we heard a voice coming through the door. The speaker sounded harsh, but not so much that it felt like they were trying to start a quarrel. However, the noise wouldn't have reached all the way back here if they hadn't been speaking fairly loudly.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Pardon me. Could you wait here for a moment?" Lord Julius stood up and opened the door. We could hear the voice more clearly than before.



“I don’t care what price you name. Please sell me rice.”

*Rice? Did he just request to be sold rice?* Surprised, I reflexively jumped to my feet too. I wanted to follow Lord Julius, but my guard and maid stopped me. *Right, I shouldn’t approach strangers when I don’t know who they are.* My curiosity got the better of me though, and I stood near the door to covertly peek outside.

“Auguste, is it a customer?” Lord Julius asked. He must’ve been addressing the elderly employee at the front. They had a brief exchange before another voice interjected.

“Are you the owner of this store?” The voice was dignified. I couldn’t see who it was from here, but he sounded like a young man.

“I would indeed be the proprietor of this store. Is there something I can do for you?”

“I apologize for disturbing you. I was informed that this shop is not yet open, but there is something I desperately need, so I hope you will forgive my impertinence and hear out my request.”

He had a loud, yet courteous voice. The way he spoke was reminiscent of a warrior, and his mention of rice made me think of the people from a certain island nation.

“Is there any way you could sell me rice?”

“I apologize, but we don’t have any in stock.”

“What?”

“The branch on the main road will be handling those products in the future, but we are still in the process of setting up. We don’t yet carry that product in our inventory here. Our stock is currently stored in a distant warehouse, so we cannot proffer any on short notice.”

“I see... I apologize for asking the unreasonable. Since I am already here, would you happen to know of any other stores that might sell rice?”

“Unfortunately, it hasn’t been long since trade has opened up with the Kingdom of Osten,” Lord Julius said, subtly implying that he didn’t.

“I see,” the man said again in a dispirited tone. “It truly must be so, then. I’ve visited every single store in the area, and not a single person knew what rice was.”

He’d likely visited dozens of shops until he’d finally heard of one that handled unusual goods—he’d then come to see Lord Julius. *I feel bad that he went through such lengths only to return empty-handed. If what we have at the duchy will suffice, I’d like to offer it to him.*

“Please wait for a moment,” Lord Julius said. While I fretted over whether I should cut in or not, he returned to the backroom. “Did you hear everything?”

“Yes, I did. I’m sorry,” I admitted, feeling rather ashamed that I’d been caught eavesdropping.

“Then the rice in your storehouse...”

“We should still have some remaining at home. Shall we offer it to him?”

Lord Julius’s brows drooped apologetically. “I would be very grateful. I’m sorry for the exorbitant request.”

“Not at all. You always listen to my selfish requests, so please think nothing of it.” I gave him a big smile, but his expression stayed cloudy.

*He’s a merchant; he must be reluctant to ask me to return the goods that he’s already sold me. However, he’s prioritizing a troubled customer over his own pride. Very commendable. Telling someone like that not to worry about it would have the opposite effect.*

I didn’t say any of that out loud. Instead, I just grinned and said, “I’ll deliberate on what request I’ll have for you next time.”

Lord Julius’s eyes widened. He seemed caught off guard—he blinked a few times and then cleared his throat before breaking out into a smile. “I am yours to command.”

Relieved that his smile was back, I returned to the topic at hand. “I’ll return home and confirm how much we have left.” *The customer will probably be happier if we go quickly.* I glanced at my maid and waved for her to prepare the carriage before continuing. “I expect it will take longer if you come to my

residence to pick it up, so shall I have it delivered to you instead?"

In terms of distance, it would be faster for him to come fetch the rice, but it would actually take twice as long if we took into account all the formalities he would have to go through to do so. My home *was* a duchy after all. In principle, people could not enter without any prior arrangements. The fastest way to transport the rice here would be if I returned to my mansion and had it delivered.

However, my suggestion troubled Lord Julius. "You don't have to go that far. I will go collect it."

*In all honesty, it isn't much effort on my part, but I think he'll feel bad if I turn him down.* I nodded. "Incidentally, how much does he need?"

"I'll go check." He went back into the store, and I heard him say, "I found someone who is willing to sell you rice."

"Really?!" The man's tone instantly cheered up.

*He's an open book,* I thought, amused.

"I'm not sure if we can meet your expectations, but exactly how much are you looking to purchase?"

"As much as they have... Oh, but that would be far too shameless. As much as they are willing to sell. Naturally, I'll pay whatever amount you desire."

"Understood. Are you in a hurry by any chance?"

"I'd like it as soon as possible."

*He wants as much as I have, and he's in a hurry? Huh.*

"My lady, if you'd like, I can send a messenger ahead to fetch the goods," my maid said.

"Please do, that would be wonderful."

*How smart. Aren't my maids just too talented?* The corners of her lips quirked up ever so slightly when I smiled in thanks. *The destructive power behind the seldomly seen smile of a cool beauty is absolutely staggering. I just saw something delightful...* While I was feeling all warm and fuzzy, the conversation

in the store continued.

“Shopkeeper, if the kind soul who is willing to sell the rice to me is in the back, I would like to meet them.”

“No, that is unnecessary.”

“To me, their help is godsent. I purely wish to see their face and give them my thanks. I beg of you.”

He sounded like a rather pushy fellow, and he didn’t relent even when Lord Julius tried to let him down gently. This customer was honest, virtuous, and appeared to have not a trace of ill will, but at the same time, I glimpsed a hint of arrogance—he did not know when to yield. Combined with his poor grasp on financials (given how ready he’d been to shell out whatever amount Lord Julius requested), I had formed a decent picture of his character.

*He must be a son of someone highborn who raised him with love and care. And when it comes to who would eat rice in this nation, the answer is obvious. I don’t have any hard evidence, but I’d wager I’m right. But if that’s true, why do they need rice? Once their trip was set in stone, they should’ve had ample time to build their reserves.*

*Did something happen to ruin their supply? Maybe it got soaked during the sea leg of their voyage. It’s also quite warm and humid, so perhaps insects got inside. If they lost their supply on their way here, then they would’ve had to eat what was available on the continent while they traveled by land... I’m beginning to understand why they canceled the welcome banquet.*

*On top of being exhausted from the long trip, they’re probably on the verge of collapsing when they’ve only been eating food they’re not used to. Having to participate in a meal with dignitaries from another country when you’re in that condition and definitely going to be in a terrible mood? And the menu’s going to be high-calorie food that’s hard on the stomach? Yeah, I’d cancel too.*

*I’m sure they didn’t want to offend us by declining, but if they’d forced themselves to participate when they didn’t feel well, it could’ve turned out even more disastrous. Imagine if someone threw up—that would be abysmal. I completely understand why they stated poor health as the reason for canceling to throw up a smoke screen.*

“Which means I definitely can’t meet him,” I murmured, brows furrowed.

Coincidentally bumping into someone who had canceled on me last-minute would be beyond awkward. It would be hell. *Maybe I should leave through the back door right now. Wait, no, I sent someone to fetch the rice.*

Lord Julius returned to the backroom while I paced around. He looked remarkably worn out. A pushy customer without malice was much harder to handle than one who was high-handed. *I’d love to help if meeting him would solve the problem, but I’ve got my own circumstances to worry about. How do I explain this?*

“Lady Mary?” he said.

I looked up and immediately noticed a young man standing behind him.

The first thing that struck me were his monolid, almond-shaped eyes. They were clear, with black irises, and the way the corners of his eyes rose sharply made him seem aloof. His skin was somewhat tan, but it was a familiar shade of ivory-white that many Japanese people had. He had soft features and a weak jawline, but that only added to his dignified and exotic charm. His straight black hair was tied at his nape, and it reached his waist.

I judged that he was about a hundred and eighty centimeters tall. As for his clothes, they looked closer to traditional Chinese attire than Japanese. He wore a black crossed-collar coat with a white and gray hem on top and matching black pants. It was a plain color combination, but the tailoring looked exceptional. The embroidery on it was mind-bogglingly detailed.

I caught a glimpse of a handle between the gaps of his long haori; he was likely wearing a sword. The man was in his late teens and he appeared slim at a glance. However, based on his wrists and neck, I could tell he trained considerably.

As I’d predicted from his voice, he had the appearance of a cool and dignified young warrior. I’d seen plenty of gorgeous faces since I’d reincarnated into this world, but it was my first time seeing a Japanese beauty, and he looked out of place.

“Shopkeep...” The young man trailed off when he saw me, and his eyes

opened as wide as saucers.

Our eyes locked. It was too late to run or hide now.

*How could I let this happen?* I kept an eye on him, silently berating myself for my carelessness. Suddenly, the handsome face behind Lord Julius's shoulder flushed crimson.

"Excuse me?" I uttered, discomforted by his intense stare.

I tilted my head, about to ask what was wrong, but then his temperature shot up. The word "redden" was insufficient to describe what had transpired. He was *boiling*. From the nape of his neck to the tip of his ears, any visible skin was completely bright scarlet.





“Huh?” *I-Is he okay? Is he ill?*

Lord Julius followed my panicked line of sight and saw the young man’s face. His gaze bounced between me and the young man, comparing our expressions, and then he shut his eyes and rubbed his forehead with his hand.

“Drat,” he muttered.

“U-Um. I merely wanted to relay my gratitude, but I’m sorry. Pardon me,” the customer mumbled and fled back toward the storefront. He was so flustered that he slammed his shoulder into the side of the door.

“I-Is he okay?” I asked, concerned. *He’s staggering around in a precarious manner.*

Lord Julius was not the only one looking at me—the gazes of my escort knight and maid were also focused on me.

“I was too late,” Lord Julius murmured.

“Huh?”

“There is nothing we can do for him now.”

“Huh?”

He was not the only one wearing a grave expression. The knight had also donned a harsh look. I turned toward my maid for help, but she slowly shook her head.

“I will need to discuss this with the master as soon as we return.”

“Discuss what?!”

They sounded like doctors discussing a patient’s terminal illness, and I was the only one left out.

## A Certain Merchant in Consternation

I, Julius zu Eigel, was generally acknowledged as an optimist. Like most people, I had my own fair share of ups and downs, but because I wasn't much for worrying, I could speedily overcome any obstacle. Even if, say, I was on the edge of a precipice that could spell my watery demise with one wrong step, I would usually surpass it by saying, *"Oh well, life is long. Things like this happen."*

It was partially my nature to be like this, but that wasn't the only reason. It was also due to a certain someone's powerful influence... In other words, I wouldn't be who I was now if not for that person. And who might that certain someone be? Why, Her Highness Rosemary von Velfalt, the princess. No, that would be Duchess Rosemary von Prelier now. She was a beautiful young lady over ten years younger than I.

Though she had the appearance of a graceful princess, she was the personification of proactivity itself. She looked at walls she didn't need to climb and clawed over them through sheer effort and determination, and she never balked in the face of an arduous and seemingly insurmountable challenge.

I'd ended up like this as a consequence of witnessing her oppose those very challenges. I had also developed a habit of regarding my issues as trivial compared to the problems she'd solved.

Meeting her had pointed me in the right direction—my business had expanded rapidly since I'd become acquainted with Lady Mary. It had more than doubled, scaling up to dozens of times its original size.

The entire Eigel household felt a debt of gratitude toward her already, but I felt personally indebted to her as well. I racked my brain for ways to repay her, no matter how small the gestures seemed, but I didn't feel confident that I was returning the favor.

I wasn't sure why, but for some odd reason, whenever I toiled away for her, I was somehow also benefiting from it. Years later, that fact had remained unchanged.

When Lady Mary had become a duchess, I had established a base in her domain so that I could swiftly come to her aid when she was in trouble, but I already sensed that there was only profit to be made here.

Although the Prelier domain had a decent position near the capital, it was a land that had not seen any development for a long time. It had been blessed with fertile soil and a temperate climate, but it did not have any special products or resources that stood out.

It was also a place travelers from various lands often frequented, but it was too close to the capital to flourish as a travel hub. On top of that, the people who lived here were mostly laid-back and had no greedy desires to climb in the world. For a variety of reasons, Prelier was just another rural town with no presence.

*In that case, I can repay her if I help her revive the economy...* That had been the thought, except I knew my goal to help her had reached a standstill before I'd even started.

Her plan to build a combined treatment center and learning institution had been unprecedented, and it'd become a hot topic not only in the capital but around the world. All the merchants with sharp noses had rushed into her domain, and thus, the commerce scramble had begun.

Prelier would've flourished without my help. As proof, there was an endless stream of merchants who had come to negotiate for their wares to be sold at the store on the main road, which hadn't even opened yet.

I was constantly benefiting from the situation, and the most I could do for her was to fetch items that she liked. *Lady Mary always reacts with such delight—you would think I'd offered her a glistening star from the heavens. I'll meet whatever requests she asks for.* At least, that was what I'd thought.

I had never expected that the item she yearned for would attract trouble. The import of rice had only become possible recently—it was an ingredient she had been seeking for many years. I had obtained it from an island nation east of the continent, so it was not a well-known product yet. A curious merchant or chef would inquire about it from time to time, and that was about it, but it would surely gain renown from here on out.

That was a story for the future though—not now.

However, a customer seeking rice appeared. And while Lady Mary was here at that. If that had been all, it would've still been within acceptable boundaries, but this man was a problematic one.

Black hair, black eyes, ivory skin with a light yellowish undertone, and facial features that were less pronounced than the people of Nevel's. All of these traits were characteristic of the people from a certain nation. It was the very island nation that produced rice and had finally begun trading with us—the Kingdom of Osten.

A delegation from Osten had traveled to Prelier to observe the medical facility, so I was relatively certain of this. The clothes he wore were likely traditional Osten wear. The colors were mostly black and his outfit looked plain, but based on the garment's luster, it was made of silk. The embroidery on the overlapping hems was done with silver thread, and the pattern of creatures and ivy that decorated it were extraordinarily intricate. It wasn't impossible, but it certainly wasn't a quality a normal commoner could afford.

He was armed, but I doubted he was one of the observation group's guards. With all those facts on hand, there was only one person that he could possibly be. It was someone of royalty who was also skilled with the blade—someone who could match the knights of the royal guard in skill.

This someone was interested in pharmaceuticals and Nevel, and his name had been listed as part of the observation group.

He was the third prince of Osten, His Highness Hakuto.

*It's my first time seeing him, but he is indeed handsome.* He had a refined and exotic face, and an excellent posture. I privately decided that his handsome aloofness would be popular among the young ladies of our nation. *He shouldn't be wandering around alone, but if his skills are as good as the rumors say, he doesn't need guards.*

According to the letter I'd received from Lady Mary, a number of their observation group members had fallen ill, so he was likely running about trying to keep them fed. I could've turned him away—after all, we didn't have what we didn't have—but he was a distinguished guest. *I should be hospitable to him*

*for Prelier's sake...and for Lady Mary's.*

It was vexing that I needed to make this request of Lady Mary, but we arranged for buyback of the rice. After that, I would have His Highness Hakuto return to his lodging, then I'd pick up the rice from the duchy and deliver it to him. It should've been a quaint little story that ended there.

So why did it come to this?

Because His Highness Hakuto had refused to yield. He'd wished to meet the Good Samaritan, and I had returned to the backroom. I had planned to make a show of pretending that Lady Mary and I were talking it over, though I actually had no intention of letting them meet. However, because he'd peeked down the hallway, I had accidentally allowed him to lay eyes on Lady Mary.

When he spotted her, his eyes widened. He drew a sharp breath and froze. A few moments passed where he stood there dumbstruck, blinking rapidly. There was no mistaking the faint red glow on his cheeks.

*This is bad.*

Lady Mary was beautiful. She had been lovely since she was young, but as an adult, she was a beauty deserving of the epithet "unparalleled." Anyone who met her for the first time would be captivated by her without a doubt. Whether those feelings would transform into romantic ones depended on the person, but there was no small number of people who despaired once they found out she was a married woman.

*Is a prince of Osten going to become one of those people? Imagining that worrisome future made my stomach ache. I'm begging you. Just let it be fleeting admiration. Please let this become just another tale of your trip—an exciting story of how you encountered a beautiful woman.*

As I prayed, I also began to think of excuses to separate him. I needed to get His Highness back inside the store immediately. However, I couldn't be disrespectful to him, so I hesitated. But that hesitation only lasted a few seconds.

During that meager period, the situation ran amok.

"Excuse me?" Lady Mary looked unsettled by His Highness Hakuto's intense



stare. She then tilted her head to show her puzzlement.

His Highness's face was instantly dyed bright red. And it wasn't just his face—his ears, neck, and everywhere visible looked like he'd been boiled.

The phrase "fall in love" suited the moment well. The young man looked like the slightest movement would make him crash to the ground. As if I wanted to escape from this moment, a faraway look had glazed over my eyes, and a dry laugh had escaped from my lips.

*Right, of course he would. An unattainable flower on a high cliff—an unparalleled beauty who's probably tired of all the compliments. Someone like that sends a hot glance followed by a confused, childish gesture your way? Show me a man who wouldn't be weak in the knees from that! Even high-class prostitutes who are skilled in the art of seducing men would struggle to pull this technique off. However, as worrisome as it is, Lady Mary pulls it off naturally.*

*It would be far better if she were someone who toyed with the hearts of young men. Those lads could learn a valuable life lesson and soon return to reality. That would be far more preferable than getting caught in the throes of an ill-fated romance.*

*Okay, what now? What should I do? A peaceful ending is impossible at this point, so it'd be best to reveal Lady Mary's identity. She's a former member of royalty, the duchess of this land, the person in charge of the medical facility, and she's already married. Of the numerous reasons he should quit while he's ahead, that one word, "married," should be enough.*

*Furthermore, her husband is the strongest and most renowned former knight captain of the royal guard. Add the fact that the entire nation adores and celebrates this married couple, I'd say there's no other choice but for him to throw in the towel.*

Thinking it'd be best to deliver the deadly blow sooner rather than later, I faced His Highness Hakuto.

His face was bright red as he hemmed and hawed. "U-Um. I merely wanted to relay my gratitude, but I'm sorry. Pardon me."

The disparity between his behavior now and his confident demeanor from

before made me dizzy. *That was too quiet!*

He turned on his heel, bumped into the wall, and staggered out.

*Oh God, he's done for. He's far too gone now. There's nothing we can do.*

"I was too late," I said solemnly.

Lady Mary's guard and maid wore mournful expressions as they nodded in agreement. Only Lady Mary, the one standing in the center of this possible scandal, was flummoxed by what had just transpired.

*This is out of my control. Someone please tell me what I'm supposed to do.* I was tempted to resign, as this was a burden I could not carry, but I could not forsake my benefactor. I pulled myself together and ushered Lady Mary back into the room. *I'll talk to His Highness Hakuto later, and whatever happens, happens, but I shouldn't put them in the same room.*

"Um, Lord Julius...?" She sat on the sofa and looked at me uneasily.

Unable to keep up with the series of events, she fretted over whether she had done something she should be guilty about. I put on a smile to put her at ease.

"I will talk to him. I apologize, but could you wait here for a little longer?"

"I don't mind, but did I do something rude?"

"Not at all. You didn't do anything untoward." I shook my head and flatly denied it. Lady Mary truly had done nothing wrong. The young man had tumbled down of his own accord. "There's one thing I'd like to confirm first."

"What is it?"

"May I let that young man know that you are the duchess of Prelier?"

Lady Mary was rendered silent. She lowered her eyes, hesitant.

It would be awkward for the person who'd sent an invitation and the person who'd declined the invitation to meet. Even more so when the Osten group was buying ingredients after they had declined to participate in the feast.

Lady Mary was a rational person—she would intuit their situation and be considerate, but a haughty person might take that as an insult. If she handled this poorly, she could sow seeds for international discord.

If it were a problem at a personal level, it would be better to explain who she was now. However, if it were to be handled as an international issue, it would be safer to pretend like the Duchess of Prelier and the Third Prince of Osten had not met here.

Even if they met in the future during his stay, that would be that. As long as both parties understood the situation, it would be like this encounter had never happened.

Lady Mary must've been thinking the same thing. She shook her head. "No, it'd be best not to introduce me," she said. "If he inquires, simply tell him I'm traveling incognito."

Telling someone they were incognito was equivalent to saying, "Don't pry any further." Even the pushiest of fellows would know to back down then.

"Very well."

We quickly shared any other pertinent information. Apparently, Lady Mary's servant had gone to fetch the rice while I'd been out front. *She is truly talented at nonchalantly showing consideration for others. I have to take my hat off to her.*

"I'll return after I talk to him then." I went out to the store where His Highness Hakuto was loitering near the entrance. His cheeks were slightly flushed, and he gazed off into the distance at empty air like a maiden in love. My headache suddenly returned, and I had to massage my brow.

"Pardon me for keeping you," I said.

His shoulders shook.

Despite his restless behavior, I continued to speak. "First, to address the matter of the goods, the other party will kindly have them delivered here. If you'd like, I can send someone to deliver it to your designated location once it arrives."

"N-No, I couldn't inconvenience you that much. I will carry it."

"Very well. In that case, I will contact you when it arrives."

*His head must be full of thoughts of Lady Mary.* When I'd cut to the chase,

he'd frozen for a moment, and he was a step slow to process information.

"You have my deepest apologies for all your trouble. I am in your debt." The serious expression returned to his face and he bowed his head. However, the dignified look crumbled away in the matter of seconds. "Um... Would that beautiful lady be the one who helped me...?" he asked in a small voice, shyly peering down. I caught him glancing down the hallway at the back room door.

His innocent gestures, expressions, and the way his tone had changed were all telling signs. *He's royalty, but he fares poorly when it comes to love affairs. Is he going to be okay?* It wasn't my business, but I was still concerned.

"That customer visited our store incognito. I beg your understanding," I said, brushing his question aside with a smile.

His almond-shaped eyes opened wide. "I see..." His brows drooped, and a sigh spilled from his thin lips.

The sight of this attractive young man, dejected and crestfallen, could've been made into a painting. If a young woman had witnessed this, it would've tickled her maternal instincts and perhaps a new romance would've been born. However, nothing would be born here since an old man in his midthirties had been the witness. Time simply passed by fruitlessly.

I kept my business smile pasted to my face while I internally pleaded, *Please go home already.*

His Highness Hakuto took one last reluctant look at the back room door and then his expression changed. "Also, shopkeeper, I have one more inquiry."

"Yes?"

"I wish to rent a kitchen. Do you know of a place?"

"A kitchen?"

There were plenty of eateries on the main road. It was possible to give them ingredients and request certain dishes, but I'd never heard of borrowing an entire kitchen. There was a chance they might lend their kitchen outside of their operating hours, but I wasn't sure they'd allow it if they knew unfamiliar ingredients would be handled. On the other hand, letting his delegation light

open fires in the middle of town would be asking for trouble.

*I'd love to kick him out and leave him to his own devices, but that would trample Lady Mary's hospitality, and I can't have that. Also, if some of them are ill, they'll want a location posthaste.*

I fell into pensive silence and somehow pushed down the big sigh that threatened to spill out of me.

Since this building used to be someone's residence, it was equipped with a kitchen, albeit a small one. However, even if we lent it to them starting tomorrow, they would still need to eat today. Lady Mary had reached the same conclusion as I had without any discussion needed.

Ultimately, we decided to give them the food that she had brought for me. She had been apologetic to me, but I was the one feeling distraught. *She put in all the effort to make this for me, and I have to hand it over to someone else without getting to eat a single bite? Unbelievable.*

Unlike I, who was internally grumbling about how unnecessary it was to go this extra mile for them, Lady Mary was virtuous through and through. She stood in the kitchen herself, believing it would be better to have additional sustenance prepared for the patients. She quickly prepped dried fish and seaweed, ingredients that even I—the one who had obtained the ingredients—did not know how to use.

"All that's left is to boil it down later. Can you handle that?"

"Yes."

"We can put this in a container once it's cooled a bit, but still be careful while carrying it."

"Yes."

"Please pour this liquid on the rice and break it into small pieces before you eat it. Oh, that has grilled fish inside. I tried to remove all the bones, but warn everybody just in case."

"Yes."

Lady Mary explained each dish as she deftly prepared the food. I found her side profile stunning as she cooked with gusto; it was one of her favorite activities after all. It was the last thing a young man needed to see when he'd just become aware of his love.

His Highness Hakuto was absolutely spellbound—his eyes saw her, and only her. I was dubious about whether he'd remember the steps being described to him. I had thought he was a nice young man with a promising future, but I didn't see a shadow of that man left. He acted as though he'd forgotten all other words besides "yes," which bewildered Lady Mary.

"Excuse me...?"

"Yes... Oh, uh, um... Y-You're very good at cooking."

Her timid gaze snapped His Highness Hakuto out of his absent-minded daze. Though he was still a bit awkward, he was finally speaking full sentences, which put Lady Mary at ease.

"I don't know if I'd call myself good, but I do love it."

"Love—" Her smile stupefied the words out of him.

*She loves cooking, not you! I feel embarrassed just watching, so please don't overreact like that. Is he possibly a child...? No, he's significantly more inexperienced with women than I expected.*

Lady Mary gave High Highness Hakuto's shifty behavior a mystified glance, but thankfully, she still didn't seem to understand the reason behind it.

"It's only one of my hobbies in the end, but my husband tells me my cooking is delicious, so I can't help but lose myself in it."

There was no ill will behind the young belle's remark, but it choked the life out of him. No one would object to calling her bashful smile beautiful...making it all the more cruel.

"Your...husband?" His Highness Hakuto parroted as though he'd never heard those words in his life before.

*You have my condolences, but it's fortunate you found out rather quickly.* The expressions of her maid and guard who had been anxiously standing by lit up



brightly. In contrast to those two who were ready to break into applause, His Highness slowly turned pale.

“You have a...?” He couldn’t bring himself to finish the question.

*He doesn’t want to accept it.* I pitied the fellow.

“Yes! My husband is quite the flatterer and very kind.”

However, Lady Mary smiled blissfully without the slightest idea of what was going through that poor man’s heart.

# The Reincarnated Duchess's Introspection

*I'm worried.*

I repeated those words in my mind as the young man gawked at me, his back straight as a board. *A sharp-looking man from a foreign land... Based on what I've seen, he's most likely the third prince of the Kingdom of Osten, His Highness Hakuto. He seemed like a diligent and levelheaded fellow when he spoke to Lord Julius. But he's been acting strange.*

While I'd been explaining the dishes that would be easy for patients to digest, he'd been restless and fidgeting nonstop. It wasn't a huge deal, since he seemed to be paying attention; however, he'd stopped responding somewhere along the way for reasons unknown to me.

In the middle of our conversation, His Highness Hakuto's mouth had frozen wide open like a cat in the middle of a flehmen response. Then his complexion had gradually lost color until finally, he just stood there silently with his head hanging.

*Is he feeling unwell? Or did I say something that rubbed him the wrong way?* I tried to ask him in a roundabout way, but he said no. It pained my heart to see him shake his head with a smile forced on his face when he seemed on the brink of crying.

My chest tightened with guilt—I felt like I'd bullied a little child. Even though he was only one or two years younger than me...and he was much taller than me too.

*I was trying to make harmless small talk, but did I step on a land mine? Customs vary depending on the region. For example, offering someone bubuzuke in Kyoto is the same thing as telling them to scram. What if offering someone ochazuke is the equivalent of that in Osten?*

Seeing his unsteady gait renewed my concerns. *I'm also worried about how the others in his observation group are faring...*

After I watched Lord Julius escort His Highness to the shop area, I headed to the back entrance. I opened the door, which led to an alley sandwiched between tall buildings. Although the narrow strip of sky above was clear, the alley was dimly lit because the sun had begun its descent.

“Are you here?” I asked in a low voice. I didn’t need to say his name.

The alley had been devoid of any other presence, but suddenly, a tall figure emerged from the shadows.

“Hey, Princess. You’re as stunning as ever.” The handsome young man gave me a friendly smile and waved.

It was quite an impressive sight every time I saw it. I admired the way Ratte could nonchalantly appear in a place that had seemed empty of life seconds ago. He was exceptionally skilled at erasing his presence, but that wasn’t the only amazing thing about him.

Despite his dashing good looks, he somehow managed to naturally blend in with his surroundings without drawing attention. Whether he was in a crowd, a lively tavern, or a shop that catered to nobles, he had the uncanny ability to melt into the environment, as though he had always rightfully belonged there. Even I would’ve assumed he worked at a nearby shop if I hadn’t known his identity.

*He’s not a former master assassin for nothing.*

“I have a request for you—do you mind?” I asked, cutting to the chase.

“Ah, does it involve that little black pup perhaps?” Ratte replied lightheartedly.

*Black pup... That definitely refers to His Highness Hakuto. His name may mean “white rabbit” in Japanese, but his honest and diligent demeanor is quite doglike. Still, that’s a rude way to address royalty.*

“Do you want me to check in on him and his companions?” he asked.

“Please do. I’m a bit worried.”

“Understood.” His thin lips curved into a smirk. It was strange to see Ratte in such a cheery mood when I’d given him a bothersome task. The suspicion

must've shown on my face because he winked at me and said, "It's because your requests are precious."

*Precious? I'm constantly foisting piles and piles of work on you. I almost feel bad about it. Unless you're saying that a request motivates you differently than an order?* I stood there baffled, unsure how to interpret his statement.

Ratte watched me puzzle over this. His narrowed eyes and mischievous expression made me flinch. He gave a cute cock of his head to the side, imploring me to lower my guard, but that only made me even more wary.

"Will you say 'please' again with that look on your face?" he asked.

*What kind of request is that? I don't understand. What is going through his head?* "For some reason, I don't want to," I said, scrutinizing him with leery eyes.

"Too bad." Ratte shrugged. His expression didn't look disappointed whatsoever though.

*I'm a bit nervous, but surely I can leave this to Ratte.*

"Welcome back."

Greeting my return was my faithful dog Hachiko—or not. It was a crestfallen Klaus.

"I-I'm back. I see your meeting has ended."

"Yes. It ended soon after you left with a guard that wasn't me." He sent me a spiteful look, and I instinctively averted my eyes.

*I was trying to be considerate by not interfering with your work! But I guess Klaus must be shocked that I went to town with another knight.* "Really now? Um... Oh, I almost forgot. How was the food I made?" I said in a last-ditch effort to change the topic.

Forget about distracting him though—I'd stepped on an even bigger land mine. Klaus fell silent, his mouth clenched in a line with his eyes trained on me.

*I fucked up.*

“I didn’t get to eat it.”

“Huh? Did it not suit your taste?”

“No. There was none left by the time I reached the dining hall...”

“That can’t be,” I said, astonished.

*I made sooo much. I made enough karaage and rice balls that it wouldn’t have surprised me if someone asked, “Are you preparing for a food fight?” Plus, Klaus said his meeting ended right after I left, but he’s telling me he didn’t make it in time? They must’ve demolished all of it in literally seconds. I underestimated the appetite of a swarm of knights.*

“Duchess! Thank you for the food you made. It was delicious!”

“Please cook again!”

A few knights who were passing by called out to me when they saw me. It was plain to see that they meant no ill will, but Klaus glared at them viciously. He had been like a soggy puppy getting rained on moments ago, but now he looked like the watchdog of the underworld.

“Klaus, I’ll make food again. And next time I’ll save a portion especially for you.” *So please cheer up. Your subordinates are confused and turning white as a sheet.*

“Okay... I’ll look forward to it.” My promise to give him preferential treatment successfully perked him right back up, and his usual expression returned.

*I can’t break this promise. If I do, it’ll be a disaster for not just me, but his subordinates too. I was going to ask Lord Julius for another batch of supplies anyway, so let’s not forget to put some aside for Klaus when the time comes.*

“Welcome back.”

I had retreated to my room for a moment’s respite before heading to my office. There, Sir Leonhart greeted me.

I let him pull me into an embrace and I pecked him on the cheek. “I’m home,” I replied. He planted a kiss near my mouth.

The knight in the room saluted and then passed by us. He was the same person who had escorted me in town; he'd likely come to submit his report on the day's events.

"Was lunch all right?" I asked timidly.

Sir Leonhart smiled and nodded. "I savored all of it without leaving a bite behind. The egg dish and fried chicken were both seasoned perfectly. They tasted delicious even cold, which surprised me. That was my first time trying rice, but it was delicious as well. When I bit into it, it had a subtle sweetness to it that complemented the grilled fish within it superbly."

"Thank goodness!" *He wouldn't be so specific if he was just being polite. I'm overjoyed that my beloved enjoys my cooking...not to mention some of my favorite dishes!*

I let out a sigh of relief and buried my head into his muscular chest, nuzzling him like an affectionate cat. He caressed my head.

"You are truly so lovely."

I looked at him questioningly. It felt like the atmosphere had suddenly changed.

"It's no wonder that there's a never-ending procession of men infatuated with you when you're so beautiful."

"Eep!"

His deep, sexy voice poured straight into my ear. His breath grazed my earlobe and sweet tingles ran down my back.

"However..." Sir Leonhart traced his fingers through my hair, then slid them behind my ear and down to my chin. He tilted my head up with enough force to make me look up at him.

Our eyes locked.

His clear, obsidian irises gazed into mine, sucking me into their depths. The anguish that tinged his expression was fiercely sexy. *He's staring at me at point-blank range.* I stopped breathing.

"I'm the only one who can see your adorable side."



I'd forgotten how to breathe. I whimpered like a small puppy.

"Don't you think so?" He retracted the dangerously seductive allure he was exuding and grinned at me.

Weak in the knees, I clung to him, my face bright red. "Yesh..." I replied in a piteous tone.

Sir Leonhart wrapped his arms around me again. "I suspect you don't understand what I mean."

"Huh? No, I do..."

"It's partly due to my carelessness that you still don't understand."

"Huh? I'm fully—"

"No."

I hastily tried to object from within his embrace, but he interrupted me without letting me finish. Sir Leonhart normally listened to whatever I said with enthusiasm, and he only ever became like this when I'd done something wrong. *I have a feeling I've unwittingly stepped on the lion's tail again.*



And from experience, I knew what was coming next.

“Let’s discuss this further tonight, okay?” he said.

“Okay...” *I fear for myself tomorrow... No, tonight, but no way can I protest now.*

All I could do was quail before him and nod.

## The Lord Commander's Introspection

I lowered her slender body on top of the fresh sheets. I tried to be careful so she wouldn't be hurt, but she showed no signs of rousing in my arms. Her quiet breaths remained undisturbed, and her eyes were shut. My wife was in deep slumber—her limbs sprawled out on top of the bed.

Guilt prickled my chest when I saw how soundly she slept. I covered her with a blanket, pulling it all the way to her shoulders, then sat on the edge of our bed and stared at her sleeping face. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, so I placed my hand against her forehead to check her temperature.

"Hm... She doesn't have a fever," I murmured, relieved she wasn't ill. *She must still be warm after taking a bath.* "I'm sorry, Rose."

I gently caressed her soft cheeks. The apology that spilled from my lips was one of self-satisfaction and nothing more. *If I was truly sorry, I would've released her before midnight. No, I should've stopped much sooner. I should've ended the night with a hug so she wouldn't be encumbered tomorrow. I should've let her sleep peacefully.*

Though I knew this in my heart, there were nights when my desire to touch her flared up so intensely. I found myself wanting to confirm that I was allowed a level of intimacy that passed a line others were forbidden to cross.

It wasn't that I doubted Rose's love for me. She was straightforward and never spared words to convey her wholehearted affections. My jealousy was merely a result of my petty-mindedness.

Rose was loved by all, and I meant it when I said I was proud of her for that. But it was also true that I sometimes thought about how nice it would be if I was the only person who could see her adorable smile.

"I'm sorry for being a petty man." I leaned forward and touched my forehead to hers. "Please don't get tired of me," I said as though I was praying.

Rose suddenly twitched. Her eyes that had been firmly shut slowly opened.

She seemed dazed, still dreaming with her eyes half-open.

“Sir...Leon?” she called for me with that bewitching voice of hers. Unable to fight off her drowsiness, her eyelids flickered. She must’ve been half asleep since she’d addressed me as she used to in the past.

“It’s not dawn yet. Rest more.” I cupped her cheek in my palm and placed a kiss on her forehead.

The way she smiled defenselessly at me, surrendering her everything to me, made my heart tighten. She was so lovely that I felt like I was losing my mind.

Rose was always like this. She constantly saved me without even intending to. She calmly accepted me, allowing me to expel all the grime that had built up in the depths of my heart.

“Rose...”

Her eyelids had closed and I could hear her tranquil breath once more. I had no doubt that I gazed upon her sleeping face with a slovenly smile.

“Thank you for accepting me, as pathetic as I am,” I whispered lovingly. I gently kissed her flower petal lips.

I wanted to continue watching her sleep forever, but it would affect my schedule tomorrow. I tore my gaze away from Rose to shake free from my reluctance. Right when I was about to join her in bed, I froze.

*I sense someone.*

I grabbed my sword lying on the nightstand and glared at the balcony. For a split second, I thought it was an intruder, but this would be too sloppy of an attempt. The person outside wasn’t trying to hide—they were openly letting their presence be known.

They knocked on the glass, confirming my speculation. *Not many people would do something like this.* The pretty face of a certain individual flashed through my mind. *Come to think of it, Rose mentioned she sent him to check on the observation group.*

I quickly strode over to the balcony and opened the curtains. Just as I’d predicted, Ratte was standing outside, practically blending in with the darkness

of night. He grinned at me and waved.

I sighed, put my sword down, and opened the glass doors as silently as I could so I wouldn't wake Rose up. I quickly stepped outside and immediately shut the doors behind me. When I leaned against the door as though to block his way, Ratte's grin turned into a wry smile.

*He must be fed up with my unceasing jealousy, but I don't care. Letting another man catch a glimpse of Rose's sleeping face is out of the question.*

"Your report?" I asked curtly.

His brow furrowed. "Aw, but this was a rare request given to me by the princess herself."

"I regret to inform you that I am your direct supervisor."

Ratte acknowledged and served Rose as his only master, but he was formally part of the military unit which was under my control. Needless to say, as the head of the duchy, Rose could give him orders herself. However, as Rose was an assiduous woman, he received all orders through me unless there was an emergency. I could count the number of times she'd brandished her authority on one hand.

"Give up," I said.

Ratte shrugged. He put on a show of being disappointed, but he didn't mean it. He knew with certainty that I would be the one to deal with him if he showed up to our bedroom at night.

"Okay, the report it is," Ratte said before jumping into the particulars.

He described the state the Kingdom of Osten's observation group was in, their symptoms and progress, and the third prince. He'd gathered all the crucial information in such a short amount of time—it was an impressive feat.

"The doctor accompanying their group diagnosed them with malnutrition and fatigue. The fruit that the princess sent them appears to be helping a little. They also ate all the food the prince brought back with him yesterday, so I estimate they'll recover after a few days of rest."

"I see. As I thought, it'd be best to extend their stay and adjust the

observation schedule.”

When Rose and I had heard that some of their members had fallen ill, we’d considered postponing the plans. The hospital had also been informed of the matter, so it would be possible to play it by ear.

“Also, one more thing about the prince.”

I wordlessly narrowed my eyes. Ratte now wore an amused expression.

“He seemed extremely pleased by the princess’s cooking. He was quite preoccupied. He would be blushing in a daze one moment, and then agonizing, pale-faced over something the next. I hope things don’t get complicated. Then again, the woman he fell in love with at first sight also cooks exactly the way he likes it, so I don’t blame him for feeling like it was fate.”

“Ratte,” I said in a low voice.

He put on an exaggerated show of fear. “Ohhh, sooo scary,” he said while laughing. “He’s just a young man. Well, more like a little puppy. The princess doesn’t even see him as a potential love interest. I don’t have the faintest clue why you of all people would panic over him.”

“I don’t doubt Rose’s feelings.” I received plenty of affection from her to be conceited enough to know she had eyes for no one but me. Nevertheless, I still became irritated because of an immature and pathetic reason.

“Really now? Then why?”

A beat passed. “I simply don’t like it,” I spat out, sulking like a child.

Ratte’s eyes rounded. Then, as though he couldn’t hold it in, he cracked up.

*Laugh if you want to laugh*, I thought half-heartedly.

“Whether I trust my wife or not is a separate matter from my dislike of more unwanted insects following her around,” I said defensively.

“I certainly see no contradiction there,” Ratte agreed, surprisingly. Once he got his tittering under control, he lightly added, “Welp, I don’t really care as long as the princess is happy.”

Then his expression changed, as if he’d just remembered something. “Oh,

that's right. I have one more piece of information for you."

"What is it?"

"Apparently, the prince has become interested in the Duchess of Prelier."

My brows knitted together. "And has he become even faintly aware that Rose *is* the duchess?"

"Doesn't seem so. He's been going around gathering information, casually asking the innkeeper and guests about her reputation and what not."

*Then he's not searching for the person he fell for. In that case, is he worried that we will halt trade with his nation because they declined our banquet? He shouldn't be once he's heard a few rumors about Rose.*

I couldn't make much sense of his actions, but there wasn't enough information to reach a conclusion yet. I told Ratte to keep an eye on them for a bit longer. He nodded and then vanished into the darkness.



# The Reincarnated Princess Oversleeps

“Good morning.”

“Good...morning?” *It’s bright. The sunlight...and his smile! Too bright!*

The sun sat high in the sky, informing me that it was long past sunrise; its rays poured through the gossamer curtains. My husband sat on the edge of the bed, gazing at me with a smile as radiant as sunshine. *I know he’s handsome, but he’s like a national treasure today! This is too much stimulation when I’ve only just woken up.*

I blinked repeatedly and his large hand cupped my face. A shadow fell over me and he kissed my cheek in one smooth motion.

“I had fruit brought for you. Would you like to eat it?” He spoke to me in such a gentle voice that it made me all the more drowsy.

“Yeah...” I nodded, one foot still in dreamland.

Sir Leonhart deftly began preparing the fruit.

*What’s this? I feel like he’s in a very good mood today.* I tilted my head to the side. He looked like he might begin humming. *Yesterday, he wasn’t angry, per se, but he was certainly in a bad mood.* He lifted me up and sat me on his lap. *I don’t feel any negative emotions from him now though.*

He briskly and efficiently fed me fruit and water like a mama bird, and he looked like he was having a ball all the while.

“Rose?” he asked quizzically.

*Oops, I’ve stared too long.* I thought for a moment and then smiled gently. “I was just thinking about how it makes me happy when I see you in a good mood,” I said honestly.

Sir Leonhart’s eyes widened. I felt embarrassed after the words left my mouth and averted my eyes to hide it. His strong arms wrapped around my waist, hugging me from behind.

“Leo—”

“I’m sorry for pushing you too far last night.”

Surprise flashed across my face. For a moment, the words “last night” revived vivid memories. The warmth and sensation of damp skin, his glistening eyes, and his husky voice calling my name... Those thoughts did not suit such a refreshing morning, so I fervently shook my head to drive them out.

“Oh, no, don’t be. I... I didn’t dislike it either...”

*Oh my god. What am I saying so early in the morning?! But I’m not lying when I say I didn’t dislike it, I mean it. Okay, “didn’t dislike” it is an understatement, I was over the moon! Sir Leonhart has been my favorite since my past life and he’s my first love. I chased after him for over ten years—no way would I hate making love to him. If anything, it’s a reward.*

“Even though you can’t get up now?” he pointed out.

“Urgh...” I groaned. *I may be emotionally happy, but I physically can’t keep up.*

“Don’t spoil me too excessively. I fear I’ll become permanently selfish,” he said in a pouty tone. He snuggled against my head.

*What the— That is so cute. My heart skipped a beat there. Please stop asking me not to spoil you while doing things that make me want to spoil you silly!*

“Why not be selfish? That’s much more preferable than making you feel bad.”

I reached my hand up and gently patted his head. I thought he’d get upset and tell me not to treat him like a child, but he let me continue so I enjoyed the feeling of his coarse hair. He placed his hand on top of mine and gave it a light squeeze.

“I’m a fool.”

“Huh?”

“You shower me with love, so why do I feel such a trifling emotion like jealousy?” Sir Leonhart said with a bitter laugh.

*Huh? He’s jealous? Is he jealous over me?! He told me he tends to be possessive, but I never knew what triggered it, so it never really clicked. I see...*

*So he feels jealous...* A creepy chuckle leaked out of me.

Sir Leonhart peered at me curiously. "Rose?"

"Me too."

*I'm the same. When I see Sir Leonhart enjoy a conversation with another woman, my chest tightens. I know there's nothing for me to worry about, but it's difficult to reconcile logic with emotions. But I feel much better knowing that he feels the same way.*

"I'm secretly jealous when I see a beautiful woman with you... We're truly a match."

Caught off guard, Sir Leonhart froze. Then, his rounded eyes slowly softened and his lips arched up in delight.

"As I thought, I'm no match for you."

*I feel the same way about you, so we'll call it even.*

After I leisurely ate breakfast and got dressed, I received several reports. The first pertained to the Kingdom of Osten's delegation extending their visit. Though their infirm were already on the path to recovery, they would need a few days to recuperate. We pushed the observation schedule back a week and also lengthened their stay.

Also, Sir Leonhart offered to attend the first day of their observation as my proxy. Since I had "nearly" run into the prince, I would've felt awkward seeing him again and saying, "Nice to meet you!" So I gratefully entrusted the matter to him.

I thought we were finished once we reviewed all of the patients' symptoms, but Sir Leonhart looked at me hesitantly and then opened his mouth.

"I don't think you need to give much heed to this... But apparently, the prince is investigating Duchess Prelier's reputation."

"My reputation? Why?"

"We haven't identified his reason yet."

*I haven't met him as Duchess Prelier yet, so he shouldn't be wary of me. Besides, I have a feeling that that straightforward prince would come to me directly if he had any complaints. Then did he overhear any unsavory rumors about me?*

*Women have lower standing than men in this world; there's a fair number of people who loathe me for being the first duchess with authority. I have powerful people backing me, so barely anyone opposes or attacks me openly, but they might be gossiping behind my back.*

*Oh well. At any rate, it all depends on what he decides to do next.*

*"Please don't dwell on this too much." Sir Leonhart gave me a concerned look.*

*I smiled back. "Very well."*

*Honestly, I don't really care what His Highness Hakuto thinks of me. It's more important that Sir Leonhart shared that piece of information with me. He's a kind and deeply compassionate man who is also extremely overprotective. He would keep me away from anywhere that shows even the most imperceptible sign of danger. And I don't just mean physical danger—he protects me from unkind words and malicious rumors too.*

*For him to share negative news with me means...he doesn't want me to be unprepared in case I do hear hurtful words. But at the same time, he trusts that I won't flinch at something of that degree. Knowing that makes me feel elated.*

# The Reincarnated Duchess's Long-Cherished Desire

My schedule was completely empty on the day of the observation group tour since Sir Leonhart had gone in my place. I'd completed my normal duties ahead of time, but I still had plenty of miscellaneous tasks to address. While I was in the middle of knocking those off my list, I received a letter from Lord Julius.

It was regarding the rice. His shop had received stock from the distant warehouse and they could return the quantity we'd sold to the Osten delegation. He wanted to know when they should deliver it. I thought for a moment.

*I feel like getting out for a bit, so perhaps I'll go fetch it myself. I want to see the new goods at Lord Julius's shop too.*

My butler sent out my request and I immediately received a reply. The goods would not be in the side street shop that I'd visited prior, but in the new shop on the main street. I hadn't seen that one before, so I was excited.

I quickly readied myself to go out. *It'll be crowded there, so it'd be best if I don't stand out too much.* I picked out a dark-blue day dress with an unassuming design. And just in case, I also donned a bonnet of the same color lined with white lace.

Once I'd finished getting ready, I opened the door to find Klaus waiting for me outside. I jumped; he hadn't been there before.

"I will accompany you."

"Yes... Please do." Overwhelmed by his picture-perfect smile, my tone unintentionally came off excessively polite.

*Is he still holding a grudge because I went out without him the other day?* I headed to my carriage with Klaus right at my heels.

The main street was jam-packed as always. We were a high-profile region, but I'd predicted that the buzz would die down after some time. Contrary to my

expectations though, it was crowded around the clock.

Lord Julius's storefront was particularly congested. The building was painted the same colors as the surrounding ones to harmonize with the streetscape, but its large lattice windows and decorative plants attracted attention. It wasn't open yet, but I was sure it would thrive once it did.

My carriage came to a stop, and Lord Juilius appeared shortly after.

"Welcome, thank you for coming. Please follow me this way." Intuiting my desire to stay inconspicuous, he kept his greeting brief and led me inside. I had only brought Klaus and one maid with me, and we all followed after him.

The store was brimming with items now that its grand opening neared.

"I apologize for the mess and for making you come all this way yourself."

"Please don't." I hastily shook my head. "If anything, I should be sorry for selfishly making you carve time out for me when you're so busy."

*I'm the one who refused his offer to have the rice delivered to me, and I'm the one who barged in here. I should be apologizing, not him. But I won't lie, I'm quite excited. It's not every day you get a chance to see a store before it opens, and I'm dying to see what rare items they have.*

*I wish I could look around as much as I want, but that would probably bother them. I'll have to give up on that, unfortunately. Let's come back as a proper customer once they've officially opened.* The merchandise threatened to suck me in if I let my mind wander so I tore my gaze off of it and turned to Lord Julius.

"I don't want to interfere with your work, so I'll be on my way once I receive the rice."

"Don't say that—please peruse at your leisure."

I thought he was just saying it to be polite, but I could tell from his face that he meant it. Given the difference in our ages, he often doted on me like I was a niece or younger sister.

"I got my hands on excellent tea leaves, so please have a cup with me. Also, I have some rare items. Feel free to take a gander."

“Would that be okay?”

“Yes, go on ahead.”

Lord Julius wore a smile as he led me into a room that he presumably used for business negotiations. He placed his hand on the knob and then suddenly froze. He glanced back at me and put his finger to his lips, gesturing for me to be silent. For some odd reason, he was in a jovial mood.

His peculiar behavior felt nostalgic somehow. *What’s this? I feel like I’ve seen him do this before... When was it?* The sudden stroke of déjà vu befuddled me as Lord Julius opened the door. I couldn’t see past his tall frame.

“Pardon me,” he said.

“Where have you been gallivanting off to when we’re been so busy?” said a young man in a menacing tone.

*I recognize that voice. I’ve definitely heard it before, and I know it’s not just my imagination.*

“I merely left my seat for a moment.”

Irritated by Lord Julius’s unapologetic tone, the man’s voice became even sterner. “The grand opening is close at hand. You of all people should understand that even a ‘mere moment’ is valuable.”

“Dear me. My nephew is as captious as ever. I recommend you learn to be a tad more composed.” Lord Julius sighed and shrugged. His handsome visage made it seem like he was acting in a scene from a Hollywood movie, but I knew he’d chosen to exhibit poor behavior in this situation.

“You shitty old man...!” I heard the curse and the sound of something being crushed. “Every single time you wander off on a whim, your work gets pushed on to me! How dare you say that?! Do you have any idea how much suffering I’ve endured because of your selfishness day in and day out?!”

“I’m ecstatic that I have such an outstanding nephew.”

“Well, I regret being born your nephew,” the other man said rudely.

*Based on the conversation, the young man is certainly who I think it is.* Memories from my childhood resurfaced. *Come to think of it, I witnessed a*

*similar scene a long time ago. It was when I visited Lord Julius in search of clues to the medicine I was seeking. He was upset about his uncle's free-spirited nature back then too.*

I hardly ever saw him now that I'd become the duchess and moved to Prelier, but I heard stories about him. Though he was lauded as an elegant young nobleman who was popular among women in high society, whenever Lord Julius spoke of him, he was a fussy nephew constantly being pushed around by his uncle.

"Don't say that. As thanks for your diligent work, I've brought pleasant tidings for you."

Their conversation proceeded while I reminisced about my childhood. Even Lord Julius's amused tone felt like a flawless reproduction of my memories. *He's like a naughty boy plotting a prank.* I wasn't wrong to feel that way because his nephew became guarded and suspicion tinged his voice.

"It's never good news when you have that look on your face."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Huh?"

"We have a very special guest."

The "ta-da!" sound effect played inside my head as Lord Julius moved aside in a grandiose manner. My eyes met with the flabbergasted young man's.

*George.*

"H-Hello," I said stiffly.

He was petrified—his eyes were as wide as saucers. *Just like back then.* Even the considerable amount of time it took him to start moving again felt like a throwback.

"It's been a while," I said.

"Lady...Mary?"

"That's me." I nodded.

George's cheeks flushed. I knew that he only acted so informally around



family members, so the realization that I'd been there during his whole tirade must've been shocking and embarrassing.

Red-faced, he glared sharply at Lord Julius. "You are truly such a— You never change!"

"Aw, you don't need to compliment me so."

"I really want to give you a good wallop," George growled, clenching a crumpled document in his hand.

The freewheeling uncle had his fastidious nephew wrapped around his finger, as per usual.

Once George had unleashed enough of his wrath, he reverted to being an amicable gentleman. Beautiful eyebrows and long lashes adorned his violet eyes. His pretty nose sat above his thin lips and his soft, platinum-blond hair was loosely fastened with a ribbon.

He no longer looked like a young girl, but he still bore a strong resemblance to Emma's beauty. He sat on the sofa across from me dressed in a white shirt and a chocolate-colored waist coat; simple, but elegant.

"I apologize for showing you my unseemly side." He coughed, trying to hide his embarrassment. "I wasn't notified that you'd be here." George shot his uncle an icy glare.

Lord Julius was unbothered though. He had brewed the excellent tea he'd mentioned earlier and placed a cup in front of me.

*I'm glad he's giving me tricks for brewing it and telling me where he got it from. I really am...but I'd be more happy if he quit messing around and read the room. Actually, I'm sure he's reading the room. Lord Julius is a clever man in all situations, but the way he shows affection for his nephew is just a bit twisted.*

George sulked, wearing a sour expression as he sipped his black tea.

"Oh, that's right. George," Lord Julius said.

George remained silent.

"George?"

This time George replied, his face still sullen. “What is it?”

“Hm? Shouldn’t you get *that* ready? Didn’t you want to give it to Lady Mary?”

George’s squinted eyes widened. He put his cup down on its saucer and stood up. “Please excuse me for a moment,” he said as he rushed out the door.

He returned in less than five minutes with a decent-sized bottle in hand. It was about one sho, the size of a large bottle of sake, so around 1.8 liters.

“Thank you for waiting.” He placed it on the table.

I examined the glass bottle that was filled with a black liquid. *What is it?* I tilted my head and then picked up a distinct scent.

“Don’t tell me, is it...?”

“I had a feeling you’d know what it is.” George nodded, impressed. “It’s a seasoning made with beans. I heard it’s well-known within the Kingdom of Osten.”

*I knew it... Soy sauce! After I obtained rice, I figured there might be soy sauce somewhere in this world, but I can’t believe they’ve found it so soon!*



I fell silent and was deeply moved, as though I'd just reunited with a long-lost sibling. George and Lord Julius were taken aback by how emotional I appeared.

"I didn't think you would be this thrilled... Er, you *are* happy, right?" George asked, confused.

I nodded my head enthusiastically.

"I'm glad then."

"Um, could I buy this?" I asked.

"Of course, please take it."

"Thank you so much!" I exclaimed with a beaming smile.

"You're the only woman who would react this jubilantly over a single seasoning from another country."

"This is worth more than precious jewels or dresses to me." I pushed down my desire to hug and rub my cheek against the bottle and gazed lovingly at the soy sauce. "I never expected that you'd find this so quickly. It must've been difficult."

"All the credit goes to George. He worked hard during negotiations."

I turned toward George. He lowered his brows, troubled, then slowly shook his head. "It wasn't only me. It would've been impossible without your help, Lady Mary, and my uncle's."

*When did I do anything?*

To answer my question, George explained.

Apparently he had had the opportunity to trade with merchants from the Kingdom of Osten, but they only knew a few words in the continent's tongue, so it had been difficult to negotiate with them. Right when he'd been brooding about what to do, an incident had occurred. Because Lord Julius and I had assisted a certain someone from the Kingdom of Osten the other day, a member of the observation group had felt indebted to us, so they had acted as an interpreter for George.

*They say no good deed goes unrewarded, and I'm astonished to say that I've*

*experienced that idiom now.*

“I’m overjoyed. I’ll cook something up with this and bring it for you to try next time.”

“I can’t wait.”

However, George and I had no idea that in a few days, he would need to depart for sudden business to a distant branch store. And the kicker? All the food I made would end up in Lord Julius’s stomach.

## A Certain Doctor's Worries

The Kingdom of Osten's observation of the medical facility had been delayed by a week, but it had finally begun the day before yesterday. For some reason, Mary didn't greet them as the face of the duchy—instead, her husband came as her representative. I suspected that this was Leonhart's ploy to fend off any pesky bugs, but apparently, there had been some complications.

*Oh well. I prefer it this way.*

The Prelier territory took pride in its young duchess who was unbelievably beautiful. Considering the number of men she'd unintentionally swept off their feet, it was too dangerous to let a young prince meet her. It only made sense to avoid any preventable headaches.

Fortunately, the name of the renowned Black Lion—who was admired by all the fledgling knights in every country—had also reached the distant island nation. The third prince of Osten was no exception and idolized him as well. His Highness Hakuto's eyes twinkled like he was a child who'd met a hero from a fairy tale. He certainly did not mind that the duchess hadn't come to receive him.

Rolf, who was in charge of showing the Osten group around, reported that the tour had followed the schedule without any issues. He had said it'd been quite easy because the members of the delegation were very diligent, perhaps a trait that was characteristic of their nation. I wished a certain moronic noble would take a page out of their book.

"Wolf."

I was walking down the hallway when I heard someone call for me. I stopped and turned around to see Lily running over to me.

"Do you have some time?" she asked.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Lady Mary is currently in a meeting with the research institution, but...their

discussion has reached an impasse,” she said with a frown.

I knit my brow and sighed. In an exasperated tone, I asked, “Are those stubborn old men being selfish again? We have plenty of materials and equipment to work with, so they’re bound to get struck by lightning if they demand anything more.”

Lily’s eyebrows drooped. “Actually, the elders say that Lady Mary’s proposed budget...is, well, too generous.”

“Huh?” My hand that had been scratching the back of my neck froze, and a dumbfounded noise spilled out of my lips. “Wait, did I mishear? Did you just say ‘too generous’?”

“Yes, that’s what I said...” Lily said weakly. She hastily checked our surroundings and leaned toward me. She motioned for me to bend over, so I complied, and she whispered an outrageous sum into my ear.

“What? Did I mishear?” I repeated, my voice cracking and trembling. I dearly wished I’d just had a lapse of hearing, but my hopes were shattered when Lily shook her head.

“There’s more... She said that the amount she’s granting us is only the initial investment and that we should apply for supplementary budgets as needed.”

“Mary!” *What on earth is that girl thinking?!*

I turned on my heel and changed my destination from my office to the research institution. Lily trotted behind me.

“How much does she think it cost to construct this hospital in the first place?! Plus, we can’t guarantee that our research will bear fruit. I can’t believe she would invest that much into an institution that’s not only unprofitable but is also almost guaranteed to be in the red for the next few years!”

“Lady Mary understands that, of course. She said there’s nothing more valuable than life, so no amount is enough for lifesaving research.”

“Well...that’s...” I was stumped for words. I lost momentum and my run gradually slowed to a stop. “It’s an idealistic sentiment—a greatly appreciated one. But we can’t promise that we’ll produce results for her. I don’t want us to

become a burden on the duchy's finances. We should help her by economizing where we can."

"If it's not possible, then just proving it isn't is a huge accomplishment," Lily recited in a dignified tone. My eyes widened and I glanced behind me. Her gaze was unwavering as she continued. "If you learn that a procedure and ingredients are incorrect, then you can try a different method. Realizing you've erred can lead you to the right path.' That's what Lady Mary said."

"Are you telling me she's already accounted for the fact that we won't be able to produce results easily?" Exhausted, I peered up at the sky.

Merely building this hospital had improved the standard of healthcare in this nation—no, of this *world* by a considerable degree. But it seemed that our master was not satisfied with just that much. Now that I knew she was striving for heights no one had ever seen before, I was speechless.

*How deeply does that girl want us to fall for her before she's content? She's giving us funding, facilities, ingredients, everything. We don't have to worry about any of the usual tedious issues. She gives us the best environment and tells us to devote all our efforts to saving lives. Unbelievable.*

*Anyone involved in medicine would be charmed by her. Who wouldn't want to give their all to her? At the very least, she's got a firm grip on the hearts of the entire Khuer tribe.*

I covered my face with my hands and mumbled, "Ugh, jeez. I love her."

"Me too," Lily agreed.

We sounded like two people who were reaffirming their love for each other, except the arrows on our relationship charts both pointed toward Mary.

"In other words, you don't want me to admonish Mary, is that right?" I asked.

"I'm always on Lady Mary's side."

*So I should curtail those frightened old men, huh? I see—a suitable role for me.*

"To tell you the truth, when I heard the amount, I got cold feet too," Lily continued. "However, I understood just how much Lady Mary believes in us."



“You’re right... It’s truly sobering to know.”

Dishonest people were a dime a dozen, and it only took an instant of corruption for someone to slip down the stairs they’d painstakingly climbed. Depending on the recipient, Mary’s good faith could become a deadly poison. However, she trusted that we wouldn’t go down the wrong path. She had judged us as people who wouldn’t shirk our duties—people who would continue to work hard, even if our lives were stable and the budget plentiful.

“I’m honestly happy...but we’ll still need to discuss this further.” I took a moment to savor the joy and then put on my poker face.

We would never betray her, and we would never allow anyone within our sight to betray her either. Still, from here on out, the hospital would only grow larger. We would need to hire more people to keep up. We couldn’t be sure that everyone would practice upstanding integrity.

“I agree with the direction she wants to go, but we should devise strict requirements.”

“Yes!” Lily exclaimed enthusiastically.

We set off for the research facility once more.

“Oh?”

We spotted a familiar figure on our way there. He had brown skin, stiff ash-gray hair, and amber eyes. Though he’d grown considerably over these past few years, and his appearance had matured, he still acted like a cheeky little brat around Mary. He was a very hardworking subordinate when it came to work though.

“Look, it’s Rolf,” I said.

“He must be taking a break.”

A young man and Rolf were talking on the deck attached to the break room. I couldn’t see who he was speaking to, but I surmised from the man’s long black hair that he was the prince from Osten. I was glad to see that they’d gotten close enough to enjoy making small talk.

We were about to continue on our way, but Rolf’s stiff tone stopped us in our

tracks.

“Why do you ask that?”

Lily and I glanced at each other. Rolf was generally very serious while working. Also, though he treated Mary and us rather casually, he was polite to outsiders. He would be all the more courteous when dealing with a guest.

The two of us hid nearby, erased our presences and secretly watched. Eavesdropping certainly wasn't a commendable thing to do, but we were worried about Rolf, since he was acting differently than usual.

Plus, no matter how mild-mannered people said Osten citizens were, it was very probable he would be punished for being rude to a prince from another nation. As Rolf's superior, it was important that I monitored him during critical moments like this.

“That was an impertinent question, I apologize.”

Fortunately, it didn't seem like he'd offended the prince. If anything, the prince sounded remorseful.

“I've heard many things from a variety of people since arriving in this country, and through those conversations, I've realized my preconceptions were erroneous.”

*Preconceptions? What are they talking about?* I cocked my head to the side. Rolf remained silent and showed no signs of responding.

“I asked that to determine whether I was wrong, but I didn't consider how you and your colleagues might feel. I'm sorry.”

The prince's earnest apology surprised me. *I can't believe it—a royal willingly admitting to his mistake.* I used to believe that all royalty and nobility were haughty, high-handed people who only thought about their own gain. In fact, my assumption held true for most highborns.

However, after meeting Mary, I learned that there were exceptions. In fact, they say birds of a feather flock together, and she was certainly only surrounded by fellow exceptions. Sometimes, I even worried that the world had been purified at some point without my knowledge. When I saw the

domineering behavior of other nations' nobility during their hospital observations, I thought, "*Oh, the people in Mary's circle are special*" and left it at that.

"I've no doubt you were displeased to hear me discredit someone you respect."

I'd gone off on a mental tangent, but the prince's voice snapped me back to reality. I couldn't see his expression from this angle, but it must've been as austere as he sounded.

Rolf, who had been silently frowning, closed his eyes and sighed. "Our master, the Duchess of Prelier, is nothing like that hearsay. I don't know anyone more virtuous than her," he said quietly. "The Khuer tribe is a group of stubborn folks who would never be intimidated by or yield to money. We only work by our own wills and for our master, who respects our wishes."

He opened his eyes and looked straight at the prince. "I'm here because I want to be. There's no other reason," he declared, his eyes resolute.

"I see," replied the prince. Although I couldn't see his face, I heard a hint of envy in his voice.

Lily and I exchanged glances. Her eyes were round, and I was likely wearing a similar expression. Those of us close to Rolf knew that he held Mary in high regard. However, being the pubescent boy that he was, he acted like a contrarian and never admitted how he truly felt about her out loud. We never would've expected to hear him say that.

It was heartwarming to see, but I also felt awkward that I'd peeped on my relative baring his heart. *I think it'd be best for everyone if we sneaked off now.*

"That is purely my personal opinion," Rolf finished.

Lily couldn't remain silent after Rolf said that. "I feel the same!" she whispered through gritted teeth.

I didn't think she needed to contend with him over that, but she always lost her composure when it came to Mary.

I tried to calm her so she wouldn't leap out from where we were hiding, but

Rolf snapped his gaze in our direction. “I can’t speak for other people, so why don’t you ask those two?”

*Looks like he noticed we were eavesdropping.* I gave up on running away and followed Lily out. She proudly strode over and said, “I’m also here of my own volition. Serving my master, the Duchess of Prelier, is my *raison d’être* and my joy.”

Although we’d suddenly jumped into their conversation, the prince showed leniency. He listened to Lily’s impassioned speech about how wonderful Mary was without showing any ridicule, and I thought him a person of character for that.

Before long, other hospital employees who were passing by joined in and took turns sharing favorable stories about the Duchess of Prelier. Every single one of them boasted about her like they were talking about themselves. The kindhearted prince and his serious attendants didn’t seem opposed to it, so no one bothered to stop.

I had no right to complain about their behavior. After all, I’d also added my two cents, albeit a bit chagrined. *If Mary were here, she would be bright red and pleading for us to stop.*

After around thirty minutes of this, everyone was still quite worked up about the topic, but I somehow managed to break up the crowd. I watched them return to their respective duties and then asked the prince the question that had been on my mind.

“Your Highness, what sort of rumor did you hear?” *Based on his conversation with Rolf, I gather it isn’t a good one.*

The prince hesitated, unsure if he should recite the rumor again when it had enraged Rolf. However, Lily and I waited patiently. Seeing that we wouldn’t back down, he told us.

According to the prince, he’d heard that the Duchess of Prelier was a tyrannical lord who used her authority as a shield to oppress commoners. If someone said or did anything that wasn’t to her liking, she would use her power as former royalty to punish them.

When he finished, I was dumbfounded rather than upset. *Who on earth is spreading that hogwash? It hasn't been that long since Mary became duchess, but I can't think of a single time she has used her authority for personal affairs. Whenever she utilized her position as a princess, it was always for the lower classes. And she becomes a force to reckon with when she's protecting her subordinates and friends.*

*On the contrary, she doesn't care much for herself! Insults and malicious rumors bounce off her. She's so blase about it that I sometimes wish she'd get angry. For goodness' sake, I'm on my way to quibble with her about her budget proposal, and Rolf hurled dozens of insults at her just the other day that could've gotten him executed a hundred times over.*

The picture the rumor had painted of our master was so far removed from reality that I was more bewildered than indignant. Not even Lily, who faithfully adored everything Mary, was angry.

"Did they mistake her for someone else?" she murmured, perplexed.

All the members of the Khuer tribe who were present had similar expressions as well. A wry smile formed on the prince's handsome face.

"I'm thinking the same. I haven't met a single person who's spoken poorly of Duchess Prelier since I came to this country. Men and women of all ages from all walks of life respect her greatly. Even an outsider like me can see that."

Lily nodded with a satisfied look that screamed, *"Yes, yes, that's exactly right."* The prince's amused smile spread wider. However, it was suddenly replaced with a serious gaze.

"Actually...that sentiment also holds true outside of your nation. The sailors and travelers we met on our journey also regarded her highly. The only person who mentioned anything unfavorable about her was the one who told me that rumor."

*Which means it's possible that whoever told him that might be deliberately and maliciously spreading gossip.*

"May I ask who told you that?" I asked.

The prince nodded. "This is off the record, though."

The name he divulged was the high-handed noble who had visited during one of the hospital observations, behaved haughtily, and infuriated Mary, who seldom got upset. When I realized that, the rumor finally made sense.

*Come to think of it, the stupid noble whose land was confiscated is from the Kingdom of Grundt. The Kingdom of Osten is an island east of the continent, so the prince's party must've crossed Grundt to reach Nevel. He must've received a warm welcome from that moron on the way.*

*That fool should've been grateful he was fortunate enough to be forgiven with such a minor punishment after his insolence. He should've stayed lying low and barely scraping by, but instead he responded to her magnanimity with resentment and tried to drag her through the mud. Mary may forgive him, but the people around her certainly won't.*

"It's true—there's no cure for stupidity," I said, exasperated.

Lily and Rolf nodded in agreement.

# The Reincarnated Duchess's Requiem

*This is turning into a huge pain.*

Evidently, His Highness Hakuto had heard an awful rumor about the Duchess of Prelier (aka me) on his journey, which had instigated him to investigate my reputation. He had a strong sense of justice and admired Sir Leonhart greatly, so he'd wanted to confirm the validity of the rumor.

*It makes sense—he wouldn't want his idol's wife to be a wicked woman. That's all fine with me, and I don't care what he heard. However, the problem is who is spreading the rumor. Surprise, surprise, it was that domineering nobleman from my mix-up with the Kingdom of Grundt's delegation.*

*In all honesty, I'm more annoyed than angry. Why does he insist on making blunder after blunder? I can't comprehend him.*

When I became the first duchess in this world, I knew I would be treated harshly. I didn't mind though—other people could insult me and I wouldn't bat an eye. However, I wanted to tell this nobleman to choose a better target.

*He went after a group from a distant nation that had only recently begun trading with our continent...and he said all that to someone from their royal family? Now that's just too foolhardy. Did it never occur to him that his petty little act of malice could cause the Kingdom of Osten and the Kingdom of Nevel to lose trust in each other and sow discord between them? We could've ended up in a situation that was no laughing matter.*

*If he'd kept his gossiping to the other nobles in Grundt, we wouldn't be able to step in nor would we bother. Why would he blab to someone who wouldn't just sit back and watch?* The shock had been so great that I'd frozen up, but I quickly returned to my senses. The very first thing I did was check where Ratte and Klaus were.

Thankfully, Klaus was currently guarding me and he was smiling nearby. It was a very intense smile. Though veins bulged on his forehead and his right hand

clenched the hilt of his sword, that was definitely a smile on his face. *Scary.*

*Where's Ratte?* As soon as I thought that, I remembered that I'd sent him to investigate His Highness Hakuto's environs. *Oh no. That means Ratte knows about this already.*

I summoned one of my spies and ordered him to capture Ratte immediately. I also instructed that spy to pass a message to Ratte informing him that he was on standby until he received orders from Sir Leonhart.

"As you wish," the spy responded bitterly, the life leaving his eyes.

I had never seen that look on him before; he was usually an expressionless and taciturn man who was always ready for any mission. It showed just how unreasonable my order was. I felt sorry from the bottom of my heart.

*Klaus and Ratte are outstanding subordinates, and sometimes I feel that they are wasted on me. However, they both have one flaw: they can become real nightmares to handle every now and then.*

After I somehow pacified those two extremists, I sent a formal complaint to the Kingdom of Grundt. I was informed that His Highness Hakuto also intended to send a letter requesting an explanation to Grundt after he returned to Osten and discussed the matter internally.

*Last time that arrogant noble had part of his territory confiscated, but I doubt he'll face the same punishment this time. Given his personality, I bet he's made many enemies—he's in for a world of hurt if he's stripped of his peerage... Oh well, you reap what you sow. All I can say is good luck.*

The days passed and the hospital observation ended without incident. It was now the day before the Kingdom of Osten's departure. At His Highness Hakuto's request, he and Sir Leonhart would be dueling today.

*What? I absolutely must see that.* I wanted to watch them badly, but I had urgent work to attend to. I mowed through the documents as quickly as I could while gnashing my teeth, and as soon as I finished, I rushed to the training grounds. It was extremely crowded. On top of those who were there to practice, there were also off-duty knights mobbing the area.



“What an amazing turnout,” I remarked.

Klaus protected me as I wove my way through the crowd. “They’re all burning with curiosity. I hope they realize that blocking your path is a crime worth ten thousand deaths.” He clicked his tongue, his expression sinister. “Shall I cut them down?” he asked, deadpan.

My brow instantly knit. “Stop that.” *Klaus’s jokes don’t sound like jokes sometimes.*

“I suspect some of them are supposed to be working.”

“That is a problem...but it’s fine. We can overlook it today.”

“You’re too soft on them.” Klaus scrunched up his face into a grumpy frown.

I put on a dry smile and attempted to placate him. “Everyone looks up to Leon, after all.”

When Sir Leonhart was the captain of the royal guard, people had called him the strongest knight in the Kingdom of Nevel. He was admired by youths from not only our kingdom, but from neighboring nations as well. The one who had forced him to retire from his illustrious position was none other than *me*.

*I can’t return my beloved husband to the masses, so in return, I’ll pretend like I don’t notice they’re slacking. Plus, I want to see this too.*

“After you.”

“Thank you.”

Klaus used his body to part the great sea of people, and I slipped in through the opening he created. I lowered the hood of my cloak (my poor attempt at a disguise) and was immediately hit by a wave of cheers and enthusiasm from up close. I looked down from the floor above the training grounds and saw two people standing in the center.

The spectacle rendered me speechless.

Sir Leonhart and His Highness Hakuto were facing each other, and in their hands were weapons I had never seen in this country before. Black handles and golden guards—even from this distance, I could tell that they were single-edged swords with straight temper lines down the blades, crafted so finely that they

were bewitchingly beautiful.

*Japanese swords!!!* I clapped my hands over my mouth and screamed internally. *Sir Leonhart is fighting with a katana?! Of course he looks cool!*

Unlike myself, who was trembling from excitement, Klaus raised an eyebrow dubiously. "What is that weapon?"

"They said it's a weapon from Osten," answered a nearby spectator. He was clearly unable to contain himself and his voice dripped with elation. "Sir Leonhart won their duel with swords by a landslide. As thanks for having a bout with him, His Highness gave him that weapon and now they're having a rematch!"

*I wanted to see them fight with swords too... But I can't do anything about the past. Let's just be grateful that I am lucky enough not to miss a rare CG of Sir Leonhart fighting with a katana.*

"Good luck!" I yelled, my voice mingling with the cheers. Sir Leonhart flicked his gaze in my direction. He beamed at me and waved, so I waved back with a shy smile.

A few people had noticed my presence, but I didn't pay them any attention. They were probably thinking something along the lines of, *"Ah, they're at it again,"* but I could endure their warm stares.

"Hm...?"

His Highness Hakuto had also spotted me, and for some reason, shock painted his face. He gaped at me as though he couldn't believe his eyes, which unsettled me.

*Is he upset that some woman addressed his idol in a rude and overly familiar tone? I'm his wife, but I never introduced myself, so I guess it's inevitable he feels that way.*

Their match soon began and it was a truly breathtaking one. His Highness gripped his sword with two hands while Sir Leonhart used only one. His Highness closed the gap between them and launched forward, but Sir Leonhart blocked his blow and countered.

Both men moved so absurdly fast that I wouldn't have been able to keep up if I blinked. Everyone in the audience held their breath as they watched—silence blanketed the training grounds. Only the harsh sounds of blades clashing reverberated through the air.

At first, His Highness Hakuto seemed to have the upper hand because he was more agile, but Sir Leonhart gradually pushed back as he got used to handling the foreign sword. Their sleek movements were beautiful, and I felt like I was watching a dance performance. I was so captivated that I even forgot to breathe.

With one loud clang, His Highness Hakuto's katana was sent flying. Before he could reach for his fallen sword, Sir Leonhart thrust a blade in front of his eyes.

"I yield," the prince said quietly.

A split second passed, and then the grounds were enveloped in deafening cheers.

"Klaus, did you see? Did you see that?!" I squealed excitedly.

He sent an irritated glare at Sir Leonhart. *I won't ask you to celebrate with me, but can't you muster a slightly better response than that? Hey, don't click your tongue! Stop that.*

After I regained control of myself, I waved at Sir Leonhart, and he beckoned for me to come down.

"Is my fave calling for me?" I murmured. "Am I dreaming?"

"Yes, it's a dream. You must be exhausted, so why don't we leave?" Klaus pushed my back and turned me around. We were about to exit the training grounds just like that, but my fave—I mean, my *husband*—came to get me and we stopped.

Klaus clicked his tongue again, but Sir Leonhart ignored him with a smile.

"Rose, why don't you say hello? You came all the way here, after all."

Ever since we'd accidentally met each other in an informal setting, I had continued to avoid greeting His Highness Hakuto as the Duchess of Prelier. *I feel a bit awkward about it, but we'll be trading with the Kingdom of Osten going*

*forward, so I should properly introduce myself.*

Sir Leonhart wrapped his arm around my back and turned me toward His Highness.

“I apologize that we’ve taken so long to introduce her to you, but this is my wife.”

“I’m delighted to finally meet you. I’m the head of the Prelier Duchy, Rosemary von Prelier.” *It’s not our first time meeting, but please let that slide.*

“You are...?” His Highness Hakuto was paralyzed with surprise.

I was anxious he might bring up our exchange at Lord Julius’s shop, but he didn’t broach the subject.

“I... I see. So you are Duchess Prelier,” he murmured, shoulders drooping.

His entourage became flustered when they saw him turn into an empty husk. His attendants apologized to Sir Leonhart and me for his discourtesy, surrounded him, and whisked him away.

*I’m concerned, but there’s nothing I can do. At the very least, I’ll pray they all return to their homeland safe and sound.*

# The Third Prince's Unrequited Love

Land began to peek out from beyond the horizon. Everyone on the deck gazed at the scenery, their faces filled with relief.

"We're finally home."

"Yeah."

Rather than feeling overjoyed that we had finally returned to our homeland, I felt forlorn instead. *Our long journey ends today.*

Born as the third prince of the Kingdom of Osten, I grew up lacking nothing. Though I was of royalty, my family got along well, and my vassals and subjects were mostly good-natured people. I understood that I was in a privileged position. However, I couldn't cast away my longing for the outside world.

The continent across the sea was incomparably vaster than our tiny island nation. There were many countries and people living in them. Each had its own clothing, culture, cuisine, and special products. There were so many unseen vistas, and I wanted to witness them with my own eyes.

Along with my studies and training, I also took the initiative to learn the continent's language and cultures. Though I claimed that it was because I wanted to help my father and brother when trade flourished with other nations, I couldn't deny the truth—the greatest driving force was my curiosity.

After many years, my education had substantially deviated from my standard responsibilities. Then, one day, this knowledge bore fruit in an unexpected way. We heard that Nevel—a nation located in the center of the continent—was starting a groundbreaking initiative that would revolutionize the medical world. I was granted permission to accompany the observation group that would visit their new facility.

It was a long trip that was not all fun and games. The sea voyage was especially harsh; when we were hit by a storm and large waves rocked our ship,

I even steeled myself for death.

But I had no regrets. Born and raised on a small island nation, I was oblivious to the outside world. For me, everything I saw on our journey gave me a newfound sense of joy. The small island that we'd stopped by and the Kingdom of Grundt on the continent—each place had its own charm. Nonetheless, the Kingdom of Nevel was especially exceptional.

Not only were its major trade hubs thriving, but even the small towns along the border were well-off. The streets were beautifully maintained; traveling by carriage was noticeably more comfortable when we entered Nevel territory. Its reputation as a powerhouse was certainly not for nothing.

I was interested in not just its highways, but also its buildings, facilities, and everything else. Their technology was more advanced than ours, and I wanted to use it as reference. However, there was one thing about Nevel's culture...no, about the whole continent's culture that was difficult to digest: the food.

It wasn't unpalatable. Although I wasn't used to the flavor profiles, Nevel's cuisine was delicious. It was just not a flavor that I wanted to eat every day.

In Osten, rice, vegetables, and fish were at the heart of our cuisine, and on top of that, our methods emphasized preserving an ingredient's natural flavor by seasoning it lightly. For those of us who had grown up eating that style of food every day, the continent's dishes were too rich.

To make matters worse, we had lost half of our rice reserves in the middle of our sea voyage because of the storm. We'd salvaged enough to hold us over until we arrived at the continent, but our supply was nearly depleted.

Unable to cook for ourselves, we'd had to eat food we weren't accustomed to, and as a result, a few people fell ill. We were already extremely drained from the long voyage, so the mental strain dealt the finishing blow. By the time we finally reached our destination, the Prelier Duchy, half of our party was bedridden.

The feudal lord, Duchess Prelier, had arranged a welcome banquet for us, but we had no choice but to back out. It was unavoidable, but I was still anxious that we'd offended them.

I might've been a member of royalty, but a prince from a small, unknown island nation wasn't particularly threatening. After all, I was dealing with the most influential nation on the continent. Not to mention I'd also heard that the duchess was former royalty too.

She was the central figure behind establishing the medical facility, *and* she had numerous impressive achievements to her name. If we incurred her wrath and she canceled the observation program, we would have no choice but to quietly obey and go home.

I was filled with fear at the possibility, but the duchess was much more benevolent than I'd anticipated. Not only did she readily cancel the welcome banquet, she also showed concern for our ill and sent gifts to help them recover.

During our travels, I had heard from a certain person that she was an irascible woman, so I couldn't hide my surprise. *Is the rumor incorrect? Or is she just keeping up appearances because I'm royalty, albeit only a third prince from a tiny nation? I don't have enough information, so it's too soon to make a judgment.*

*If she's as problematic as the rumor makes her out to be, the hospital employees must be suffering. I can't do anything as an individual, but perhaps I can use my status as royalty to help.* I knew it was rude of me to touch on the subject, but I decided to gather information on the Duchess of Prelier.

I asked around about her while searching the town for rice. But after much inquiry, not a single person spoke poorly of the duchess. Everyone—regardless of gender, age, and rank—only had good things to say about her, which made me rather skeptical.

*They all have the same cookie cutter response of "she's kind and beautiful." Is that really possible? Although people have preferences for beauty, there's no such thing as someone who's loved by everyone.* I began to suspect she was so tyrannical that she didn't allow anyone to speak ill of her.

Leonhart von Orsein, the former captain of Nevel's royal guard, was widely known as a noble hero. I prayed that his spouse wasn't a wicked person, but I couldn't cast aside my suspicions.

*What kind of person is Duchess Prelier? If she's not suppressing and terrorizing her people, then just how beautiful and how capable is she for her to be endorsed by so many?*

A foreign picture book that I'd read when I was a child came to mind. Its drawings were completely different from our nation's, and I'd been so engrossed in the fine penmanship and colors that I'd read it over and over until it was worn out. Its cover had a drawing of a petite princess who looked like she would vanish with the slightest touch. I scoffed at my own shallowness.

*I'm not immature enough that I'd confuse a fairy tale with reality.*

Then, right when I'd just mocked myself for imagining that, a woman who was as beautiful as I'd envisioned—no, a woman far more beautiful than that—appeared before me.

She had soft, wavy platinum-blond hair and clear blue eyes. Her skin was fair and her pretty, light-pink lips resembled a blossoming flower. Though she had well-defined features, she didn't come off stern, and her kind-looking face indicated she had an elegant and gentle personality.

Every country and region had its own beauty standards, but if you showed her to one hundred people, ninety-nine of them would say she was beautiful. In fact, she fell outside my nation's definition of beauty, but I was still captivated.

At that point, I was purely impressed. It was akin to appreciating beauty by gazing at a splendid work of art. However, when she tilted her head like a young girl because she was confused by my insolent stare, I instantly fell in love.

I could've controlled myself if I viewed her simply as an attractive person, but it was over for me the moment I realized that she was *cute*. She was still out of my reach, but I couldn't stop myself once it sank in that she was a real living person.

*I am truly a fool.*

*Remember, you're here for rice!* Though I reprimanded myself, my eyes would chase after her lovely figure every time I lost focus. I didn't even know her name, let alone her background, but the shopkeeper said she was traveling incognito, so surely she was a high-ranking noble.



Then, as though delivering a coup de grâce, she cheerfully mentioned that she was already married...and I knew my budding love had no future. And yet, the troublesome part of love was that the more I wanted to give up on her, the more my afflictions grew.

Despite the unfamiliar methods she used, the food she made tasted nostalgic. Some of my companions were so fed up with eating foreign cuisine that they shed tears of joy when they finally ate their long-awaited rice and delicious cooking.

*Not only is she beautiful and good-natured, but she's also a skilled cook.* Contrary to my desire to find her bad points so I could become disillusioned by her, only her good traits caught my eye. My feelings grew by the day and I was soon beyond help.

*What on earth did I come to this distant country to do?* I forced myself to focus on my duty, and the day of the hospital observation soon arrived. We couldn't examine the research facility and learning institution because they were not yet operational, but just laying eyes on the medical facility was of significant value.

I'd heard that doctors and healers cooperated with each other here to provide treatment, but witnessing its efficacy firsthand was astonishing. Merely sharing information among colleagues drastically improved the accuracy of treatment. *What will happen when the research and training facilities are operating as well?*

Nevel's healthcare standards would advance tremendously within a few years. Even I, an amateur, could predict that future. *I must say, the duchess is extraordinary to have conceived this plan.*

As for my concerns about the duchess's character, I was convinced that the nasty rumor had been false. When I recounted it to the doctors working at the hospital, they did not become angry or frightened—they were simply flabbergasted. Their reaction attested how impossible it was and showed their absolute trust in their master.

*So the testimonies of the citizens that said, "she's kind, beautiful, and adored by all," are true.* What I heard from the hospital staff supported that theory as

well. For the first time, I forgot my sense of righteousness and indignation, and I genuinely wanted to meet the duchess.

My misgivings cleared, the meaningful observation trip came to an end, and I was extremely satisfied. As a bonus, Sir Leonhart—every swordsman’s aspiration—agreed to duel me. It was the best ending to this journey.

I felt like I was walking on clouds, but I was quickly sent crashing down to the ground because of a chance meeting with the aforementioned duchess.

She was the same woman I’d fallen for—my first love.

*She certainly is beautiful. People call me a straitlaced person, and even I fell for her at first sight. She certainly is kind too. She cared about my companions and me even though she didn’t know us, and she sold me the rice without concern for loss or gain. She even went as far as to cook for us.*

*In addition to her upright character and stunning appearance, she also proposed the groundbreaking medical facility, and she was competent enough to turn her idea into a reality. If I heard everyone under the sun adored her, I would only think, “Yes, that makes sense.” I can also accept that she’d be loved by a hero.*

Just learning of her identity answered all of my questions. Real life had surpassed fairy tales. There was only one thing I could not—no, one thing I *did not want*—to accept, and my lovelorn heart resisted the truth.

On the day we were to depart from Nevel, she, Duchess Rosemary von Prelier, came to see us off. *This may be the last day I ever get to meet her.* Thinking that, my feelings became uncontainable, and I wanted to at least tell her how I felt.

*I love you. That’s all I want to say. I won’t ask for anything in return. I feel like once I get it off my chest, I’ll be able to end these feelings of mine and move on.* I made up my mind and stood before Lady Rosemary.

“Um, La... Duchess.”

“Yes?”

The moment she turned her blue eyes onto me, I felt my body heat up. She’d

given me her full attention, and I was now struggling to even breathe. *Why is love such a maddening emotion?*

I desperately tried to collect myself, but my heart betrayed my mind. *This is impossible*, it cried. *Can I really give up on her given my condition?*

“I, um, I... About you...” I somehow managed to wring sounds out of me, but the key three words were stuck in my throat and refused to come out.

My suspicious behavior caused Lady Rosemary’s eyes to fill with concern. Fear overcame me as I gazed at her face.

*If I tell her I love her, how will her expression change? A member of the observation group—that is, a prince visiting on official business—confesses his love to a married woman. That is not laudable behavior.*

*Doing so could inconvenience Lady Rosemary, Sir Leonhart, and also my companions in the observation group.* My head cooled when I realized that. *Merely falling for someone, merely wishing to confess to someone...that alone could become a sin.*

Novels and plays sang praises like “love is wonderful” or “love is more sacred than anything,” but society was not so simple. There were some loves in this world that needed to be extinguished.

“Your Highness Hakuto?” she questioned.

“I...respect you.” I clenched my hand into a fist. In place of my overflowing affections, I said something else. “Duchess, you love your people and they you. I want to become like you one day.”

Caught off guard, Lady Rosemary’s eyes widened for a moment and then she smiled brightly. “I saw how hard you worked for your delegation. I view you the same way.”

I looked at her in surprise. “I’m delighted that someone like you would see me as a goal.”

I certainly had been concerned about my companions. However, when I’d met Lady Rosemary, I had become a boy infatuated with his first love, so I didn’t feel deserving of her praise. My guilt outweighed any joy.

“I will continue to devote myself so I don’t disappoint you.”

When I saw Lady Rosemary’s radiant smile, I closed my eyes. It was too dazzling for my lovestruck heart.

“During our journey, all I wanted was to return to our homeland, but now I feel sad that it’s coming to an end.”

I’d been lost in thought as I vacantly gazed at the ocean, but one of my companions spoke up.

“Yeah.”

“We went through a lot of tough times, but there were many fun things too. Nevel was especially magnificent. I hope I can visit them again. Not for another hospital observation though—I’d like to take my time sightseeing.”

“I want to study there. I’d like to attend Prelier’s school and learn medicine from scratch.”

“The research facility’s caught my eye. Considering how talented all the healers who work there are, it’ll be difficult to get hired with half-hearted efforts, but it’ll be worth a try.”

My companions chatted about their dreams, their eyes twinkling with excitement. None of them would forget the brief time they’d spent at the Prelier duchy. It showed just how vivid and fulfilling the days we’d spent there had been.

“The Kingdom of Nevel’s medical facility was splendid, but I must say, what shocked me the most was the duchess herself.”

“I’d heard rumors of their first princess’s beauty, but I didn’t expect her to be that gorgeous.”

Every one of my companions sang praises of Duchess Prelier. The young men in the prime of their manhoods blushed; they looked like they’d seen their favorite stage actress up close, and it was honestly comical how euphoric they were. But at the same time, I was envious of them.

*If only I could be like them. I wish these feelings merely amounted to*

*excitement over a riveting tale about how we encountered a beautiful lady during our travels. My first love was a fresh wound, one that still stung. I wonder if I'll be able to look back on these memories fondly one day.*

"It won't happen for a while though..." I murmured.

"Your Highness? Did you say something?"

"No, nothing."

I turned in the opposite direction of our homeland—toward the continent. The mainland had disappeared from sight long ago. I stared at the watery horizon, and a quiet sigh spilled from my lips.

# The Sorcerers' Chitchat

"Yikes..."

I placed my hand on the prone back in front of me and channeled magic into it. I warmed him up gradually and carefully regulated his temperature as I massaged him, focusing on his sore areas like his shoulders and lower back. A weak noise escaped from his lips.

"You haven't been exercising properly," I said.

All of Lutz's muscles were stiff. Everywhere I touched was hard as a rock, which was concerning. He wouldn't have been in such a terrible state if not for the fact that his profession had him spending most days at a desk. I'd once massaged an old man who worked as a clerk and he'd felt exactly like this.

"I'm sure you're busy, but you need to take breaks more often. If you lose muscle, you'll tire more easily."

"Ah, Teo. There, press harder."

"Are you listening to me?"

He paid attention to my advice the same way the elderly men I'd worked on had—not at all. Despite my exasperation, my hands didn't stop. I knew very well how busy Lutz was. He lay there, eyes closed and a blissful expression on his face. And as he'd requested, I doubled down on the areas he'd specified and pressed harder.

"My shoulders can finally move again!"

"That's not the reaction of a twenty-something-year-old..."

Lutz spun his arms around, his face beaming. However, there were dark circles under his eyes and his complexion was poor. That frankly ruined his good looks.

A few years ago, after we had gone from being apprentice mages to full-

fledged sorcerers, our paths had diverged. We both still belonged to Nevel, but I now worked for the Prelier Duchy, and Lutz had remained in the capital.

He had become Master Irene's assistant and was undergoing merciless education to become her successor. Contrary to his delicate features, Lutz was actually quite the hot-blooded meathead, so spending every day surrounded by documents was taking a considerable toll on him, and his fatigue had built up.

Lutz had finally managed to get time off, and he'd come to Prelier to visit the research facility, but he'd been so worn out that I'd ended up giving him a massage. He still looked terrible though, and I contemplated what I could do about his face while I brewed tea.

I filled a kettle with water and placed it on a stand. When I touched the magic gem underneath it, a small flame flared up. It continued to burn even after I removed my hand, and I let it be until the water boiled.

"How user-friendly is it?" Lutz asked.

"Very," I replied as I opened a tin of tea leaves.

Magic gems were one of our research subjects; their performance had improved greatly compared to the past. Before, one had to continuously pour magic power into a gem, but now they could function for a period of time with a single touch.

"It's convenient," I said.

"Too convenient." Lutz wore a dry smile as he nodded. "Which is why the princess is putting a stop to it."

Magic gem development had produced better results than predicted. Although channeling large amounts of magical power into a gem was a time-consuming preliminary process, once that was complete, a sorcerer could simply touch it whenever they wished to activate it. Plus, it could continue to function even if we stepped away.

The two of us had jumped for joy when our experiments had turned out to be a success. With this, we could aim for even loftier goals. We had hoped that non-sorcerers would eventually be able to use them too. The gem I'd once given to the princess as a charm had been a knockoff and had no real use, but

perhaps a functional one would be possible if we continued to make improvements. If we succeeded, the world would become a more convenient place for everyone.

We'd been excited by the prospect, but the princess had snapped us to our senses. Her eyes had twinkled and she'd celebrated our success, but when she'd heard our vision for the future, her face had clouded over.

The princess had been kind enough to not say anything negative on the spot. She hadn't wanted to rain on our parade when she knew how hard we'd worked to reach that stage. Nonetheless, she'd chosen to play the part of the villain in the end by offering us advice.

*"Let's end the magic gem development here,"* she'd said. *"We don't need any further improvements."*

We never would've expected the princess to suggest such a thing and we'd been astonished. However, after listening to her explanation, we'd come to realize how dangerous our research was.

First and foremost, it would be risky if *anyone* could use magic gems. It would be fine if people used them only to boil water, preserve food, and so on, but unfortunately, there were countless ways for people to abuse them for evil.

Then there was the issue of sorcerers becoming a rarity. Only sorcerers who possessed more than a certain amount of magical power could channel enough energy into a magic gem. The only people who fit the criteria right now were Master Irene, me, Lutz, and Michael. The number of people who had magical powers was rapidly decreasing and we couldn't expect that it would ever increase again. However, what would happen if demand for magic gems increased exponentially?

Saying that our value would go up would be a massively understated and naive outlook. The whole world would be after us. If we were ever captured by the wrong people, they would wring every last drop of magic from us until we died.

We'd gone white as a sheet by that point. Then, the princess had said, *"You've created something extraordinary, however, we are far too immature to reap its benefits."*



The two of us had taken our peace for granted. We were warm and happy by the princess's side, and we'd become just a stove and an ice-room...even though we were well aware that before we'd met her, we'd been weapons.

We'd thanked the princess who'd stopped us with a pained look on her face, and then we'd permanently suspended magic gem development.

"It would be great if everyone in the world were like the princess, though," Lutz grumbled. I internally agreed with him.

The princess had used the word "we" when she'd said humanity couldn't reap the benefits of such technology, but that didn't include her. Lutz and I had been beyond even our teacher's control, but the princess had treated us as a stove and ice-room. No matter what amazing inventions we came up with, she would only use them for good—no, she was *incapable* of using them for anything but good. Thinking about that put another idea in my mind.

"Sometimes I think that if the world was filled with people like the princess, magic wouldn't be waning," I said.

In the past, magic had been a power anyone could use. However, that power had become lost over time, and now only a handful of people could wield it. Once we passed away, it would likely be lost forever.

Perhaps it was just as the princess had said: humans were too immature to handle magic. It was unlike me, but every now and then, I wondered if the gods had decided just that and confiscated that wondrous ability from humanity.

Lutz's stern expression softened. "Maybe. Oh well, we can live without," he said in a lighthearted tone.

I felt the tension leave my shoulders. "Yeah. I'm not needed if there's firewood and tinder."

I poured some boiling water over the tea leaves and handed Lutz his cup.

"I'm irreplaceable during the summer, though," he said proudly.

"Yeah right. The summer heat always gets to you, so you're useless," I retorted with an exasperated look. Lutz was certainly handy to have around during the summertime, but because he was weak in hot temperatures, he

generally wasn't that useful.

"It's cooler here than in the capital. Maybe I should come here to escape the summer heat."

"Prelier isn't far enough away to have any meaningful temperature difference. You know what, Master said something like that too...but it's just not possible."

"That!" Lutz suddenly shouted, interrupting our silly conversation.

"What?" I asked, cocking my head to the side.

"Our master! Her!" He exclaimed.

I raised my eyebrows.

"She's been hinting about her retirement these days. She keeps saying stuff about how she's old enough to retire and pass her work on to me!"

"Oh," I replied half-heartedly. I could easily imagine our teacher nonchalantly forcing her work onto Lutz, him desperately trying to stand up for himself, and then her cajoling him into doing it in the end.

"She's got way more energy than I do, so why is she acting like she's getting up in years?!"

"You're going to get a scolding."

Our teacher, Miss Irene, was a beautiful woman whose age was a mystery. She seemed to be in her thirties, but I would've been convinced if someone told me she was in her late forties. Regardless, she certainly wasn't old enough to retire.

"Maybe she's purposefully being more strict with your education."

"No! She's just jealous of you, Teo!"

"Me?"

"Master just wants to work as a researcher. You get to devote yourself to research without the annoying hassles of socializing and guessing what the nobles want—it's the best environment for studying magic! And she's always doted on the princess like her own daughter, so she definitely thinks it'd be

paradise to work close by her side!”

*I see.* I accepted his theory quite readily. Our teacher was the Head Sorceress, but she wasn’t interested in power. If she hadn’t possessed magical powers, I presumed she would’ve become a scholar or a civil servant.

“I want to come here too!”

“You can’t, though.”

There were only four sorcerers in Nevel; imagine what would happen if all of them resided in Prelier. There would be too many powerful people centered in one place, and an overabundance of military strength. I did not want to be suspected of instigating a rebellion or trying to overthrow the crown.

“Prelier is managing just fine with two sorcerers: me and Michael.”

“Why don’t we swap every three years?”

“No way.”

“Coldhearted demon!”

Though Lutz puffed out his cheeks, I knew he wasn’t serious. He was an obstinate person, and now that he’d set his mind to it, he would continue to work his way up in the capital. *Our teacher’s the real problem. Given her personality, she’s such a maniac for research that she might actually move here one day.*

“I’d better work hard so I don’t get booted out...”

*I’m afraid she’ll actually instate a shift system and I’ll be sent back to the capital...*

Feeling a sense of urgency, I immediately started brainstorming ways to hone my skills. I also began massaging Lutz once more. The circles under his eyes weren’t the worst I’d ever seen, but they were too terrible for me to ignore. I was in the middle of warming a towel for his face massage when someone knocked on the door.

“Yes?” I asked.

The princess’s head peeked in through the crack of the open door.

“I heard that Lutz is here.”

“Princess!” Lutz jumped up from the treatment bed. He moved with such vigor that it was hard to believe he’d been flopping around like he didn’t have a backbone just moments ago.

“It’s been a long time, Lutz.” The princess smiled and waved at him.

He stared at her with a dumb look on his face and his cheeks flushed ever so slightly. I chuckled dryly. *I can relate, though. The princess has become very beautiful.*

She’d always been pretty, ever since she was young, but it felt like her beauty had become even more radiant these days. I was supposed to be used to her, but even I lost my breath from time to time.

I elbowed Lutz to bring him back to earth.

“Oh! Y-Yeah, long time no see,” he stuttered.

“I heard you’ve been busy. Are you taking care of yourself? You look pale.”

“No, I’ve just, um, been staying up late at night...” Lutz turned away, raising his hand over his face to hide the dark circles under his eyes.

Unable to sit back and watch him act like a nervous wreck who was meeting her for the first time, I cut into the conversation. “Princess, did something happen? I don’t believe you were supposed to come by the institution today.”

“I had business nearby, and I also wanted to ask you for some advice, so I dropped by. Then I heard Lutz was here too.”

“Advice? Is it about the medical facility?”

“No, it’s a personal matter.”

“What is it?” Lutz asked. “Are you feeling unwell?”

Lutz, who’d been acting like a shy adolescent boy, suddenly became serious. No doubt a similar expression had spread across my face too.

“Huh? No, it’s nothing so major.” The princess hurriedly waved her hands in the air but didn’t deny Lutz’s question outright, indicating that his guess wasn’t too far off the mark.

“Princess, a novice shouldn’t self-diagnose,” I said.

Lutz and I examined her closely. Her brows drooped and her gaze wandered the room. It was like she was afraid to spit out whatever it was. Finally, she sighed.

“It’s truly nothing severe. I’m just...sleepy.”

“Sleepy?” I parroted.

She nodded. Her face was slightly red with embarrassment. “You know how the weather has been nice lately? I’ve been in a bind because I keep getting sleepy during work.”

“Are you having trouble sleeping at night?” Lutz asked.

The princess shook her head. “No, I’m sleeping very soundly at night too. That’s why I don’t think I’m ill, but it’s getting in the way of my work, so I was hoping you could teach me some methods to curb my drowsiness. Could I push on some pressure point? Or maybe there’s an invigorating drink I can make...”

“Hm...” I put my hand on my cheek and thought for a moment.

*Is it normal for someone to sleep soundly at night and still be sleepy during the day? Perhaps. It’s not abnormal enough for me to immediately conclude that she’s sick. The weather has been very pleasant lately; I occasionally get drowsy while working too.*

“Have you noticed anything else? Have you felt out of breath or feverish?” I asked.

“Nausea, dizziness, or any other minor symptoms?” Lutz added.

“I’m fit as a fiddle otherwise. I’ve had a bigger appetite lately and I’ve even gained a little weight.”

The princess answered our rapid-fire questions with a wry smile. She’d even divulged her weight, a sensitive topic for women. *Her complexion looks fine, and I don’t notice anything particularly wrong. Drowsiness and an increased appetite are phenomena that commonly occur when the season changes.*

“I’m glad to hear that then,” I said, feeling relieved from the bottom of my heart.

Lutz seemed to feel the same—his lips curved up into a soft smile. “Princess, you’ve always been thin. I think you need to fatten up a little more,” he joked.

“Yeah. Sometimes I worry you might snap in half,” I agreed.

The princess glowered at us. “I appreciate the sentiment, but you shouldn’t tell a lady to get fat.”

I’d never seen that conflicted expression on her face before. She didn’t look any different to other people, but evidently, she was worried about her appearance. I wasn’t trying to flatter or poke fun at her—I truly thought she ought to put on a little more weight—but I held my tongue since she’d likely get upset.

*I don’t understand the inner workings of a woman’s mind. If I’m not careful, I’ll end up saying something insensitive again.* I was ready to drop the subject, but there was a man right next to me who understood a woman’s heart even less than I did.

“Princess, you’ve got nothing to worry about. You’d be cute even if you were fat.”

*Lutz, you can’t say that.* I was internally looking up at the sky. *A grandpa could say that to his young grandchild, sure, but you should not say that to a young lady. Even our gentle princess might get angry.* I was on tenterhooks. Watching Lutz and the princess converse was like monitoring a volcano on the verge of erupting.

“Oh, I know. I brought dried dates with me, do you want some?” Lutz offered with a smile, digging his grave even deeper.

I could tell from his eyes that he meant no ill will, and that was exactly why the princess was tongue-tied and unable to hold on to her anger.

“I heard that dried fruits are good for your skin.”

“Thanks... I’ll take some.” The princess’s shoulders loosened up and she smiled. She gazed at him gently—albeit with a hint of dismay—like she was looking at a child who’d played a naughty prank.

*She’s treating him like a child instead of as an adult man. That’s all, but I feel a*

*bit envious. It seems I'm not so different from Lutz. I may have matured on the outside, but I'm still a brat who wants to mess with her and be fussed over by her on the inside.*

"Come to think of it, someone gave me some nuts the other day. Will you have some?" I asked.

"Teo..."

Unlike Lutz, I wasn't an airhead, so she wouldn't let me get off scot-free. Sensing her shift in tone, I hastily said, "Oh. I'll make you a cup of tea," and quickly fled before she could reprimand me.

# The Reincarnated Duchess's Tryst

*Maybe...there'll be a small rice boom in the Prelier Duchy.*

That was my wish, but it was still only a possibility. The shop that Lord Julius's company ran had opened up for business, but although a few astute merchants had displayed interest in rice, it hadn't circulated in the market much.

Rice was an unknown ingredient in the Kingdom of Nevel. Forget about combining it with other ingredients or seasoning it—people here were struggling with the basic step of *cooking* it. It wasn't an item that a random person could casually try out.

I had thought it would end up as a rare delicacy enjoyed by gourmands who took pleasure in unusual foods, but now the tide was turning. The cause? Me.

When I had lovingly made a lunch box for my husband, I had also given some to the servants and knights, and news of my homemade cooking had spread via word of mouth. The knights of the second division had had an especially big hand in this since they were in charge of the town's security. They had many more opportunities to mingle with the citizens, so they'd made small talk with all sorts of people, and the story had proliferated from there.

*This is my chance. If a rice-centered diet becomes popular, then maybe one day we'll have a restaurant that specializes in Japanese...er, I mean, Osten cuisine. Not only will I be able to eat there whenever I please, but it could become a Prelier specialty. Truly two birds with one stone!*

Thus, I went to Lord Julius for advice. He was of the same mind and saw this as a business opportunity to open a trial store. He wouldn't recklessly open a specialty restaurant right off the bat, but he instead planned to set up a food stall in the plaza to observe people's reactions to the new cuisine.

So, here we were, discussing the menu for the food stall.

*Rice won't be for everyone though. I love rice balls, and it was a big hit with the knights, but people's likes and dislikes will vary. We should have something*



*more familiar, so it'll be easier for customers to take the first step. What if we used glutinous rice flour to make sweets?*

“And so, here’s the finished product!” I exclaimed, singing “ta-da” in my head.

Wearing a triumphant smile, I revealed the dango to Sir Leonhart: four white balls made of glutinous rice with net-shaped grill marks skewered on a stick. They were drenched with an amber-colored sauce that I had painstakingly created through much trial and error.

“They’re called mitarashi dango.”

“Are these the same?” Sir Leonhart asked, raising a skewer in his hand.

“Those are isobe dango, not mitarashi.”

I had recreated isobe dango by smearing the glutinous balls with soy sauce, grilling them until they browned, and then wrapping them with seaweed. For the record, I hadn’t bought any of them this time, but the food stall also served dango with red bean paste, and the paste was made from proper azuki beans too. Because trade with the Kingdom of Osten had picked up significantly, I’d managed to get my hands on azuki beans. Satisfied with what we’d devised, we’d finally opened the food stall last week. People had flocked to the stall out of curiosity and they hadn’t stopped coming, even after a week had passed. We were getting more repeat customers, and the line was growing steadily.

Needless to say, I’d also lined up properly to buy them. I’d eaten quite a lot of them during the taste-testing trials, and Lord Julius had told me he could have them prepared for me as I pleased, but waiting in line on a date in town had its own special charm. After all, Sir Leonhart and I had buckled down to get through all of our work so we could have a day off to come here.

I glanced up at my husband standing next to me. We were incognito, so Sir Leonhart was dressed simply in a navy blue shirt, black trousers, and boots. His hair wasn’t neatly styled as usual, and his bangs weren’t slicked back.

*God, why does he look dizzyingly hot? Is it his well-toned body? Or is it his handsome face? Nothing can hide his radiance, not even when he’s relaxed and unstyled! His formal wear for soirees and his knight uniform are attractive in*

*different ways!*

“Is something wrong?” Sir Leonhart asked with a slight tilt of his head.

Clearly, I’d ogled at him for too long, but I even found that minor gesture to be wonderful, and my heart tightened. *I want to brag to everyone here that this man is my husband.*

“Haah... I love you...”

“Rose?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

*Shoot. My inner voice leaked out. I’m not a nerdy fangirl today, I’m his wife!* I warned myself. After my hasty response, I changed the subject. “Shall we eat?”

*It would be a shame if I didn’t enjoy my date with Sir Leonhart—we don’t get many chances to do this, after all. Plus, we’ll be punished by the heavens if we don’t eat the dango while they’re fresh and tasty.*

“Looks great!” I opened my mouth wide and dug in.

The dango was soft and had a subtle fragrance. It went perfectly with the salty-sweet sauce, and even though I’d eaten enough to get tired of it during the taste-testing period, I still found it delicious.

“Mmm!” I couldn’t speak since I was still chewing, but the delectable flavor caused me to break into a smile. “It’s delicious!” I exclaimed after I swallowed.

“Yeah, it is,” Sir Leonhart said. I could tell from the gleam in his eyes that he wasn’t being polite.

I giggled cheerily.

“Rose?” He looked at me quizzically.

“I’m elated that you like what I like.”

Sir Leonhart’s eyes widened and his cheeks turned a light shade of red.

“We’re eating the same thing and we both think it’s delicious. This is happiness.”

“Rose...”

The words had come out of my own mouth, but I suddenly felt embarrassed. My embarrassment was only heightened when Sir Leonhart called my name, his voice brimming with emotion. I focused on eating dango and feigned mental clarity.

“Mm-hmm, it’s tasty. We should get some for everyone on our way ho—”

I had been speaking rapidly, but I suddenly broke off. He had twined his fingers around my free hand. Shocked, I looked up at him and met his tender gaze.

“I feel the same.”

“Huh?”

“I revel in joy every day.”

Surprise flashed across my face.

“Every time I see you asleep next to me, I feel like I might cry. Perhaps I’m getting old,” Sir Leonhart said with a sheepish smile.

I felt an arrow pierce my heart. I’d endured the embarrassment, conveyed my affections, and received more than double that in return. *I don’t think I’ll ever be able to best Sir Leonhart for the rest of my life.*

“Do you want to try this one too?” Sir Leonhart held out a dango skewer, trying to divert us from his embarrassment.

The notion of being fed by him in public was a bit embarrassing, but I brushed it aside. I held my hair back and bit into the dango. His eyes widened slightly. He’d made the offer, but he hadn’t thought I’d actually follow through.

*He’s getting bashful, ohhh, so cute!*

After I savored the isobe dango, I raised the skewer in my hand. I held my other hand below the skewer like a plate. “Ahhh,” I said, lifting the mitarashi dango toward him. I could feel myself growing redder and redder.

I could visibly see him vacillating—his eyes swam wildly and his brows creased together. *Maybe I’m teasing him too much.* I was about to pull away, but then he looked at me with a steady gaze. Determined, Sir Leonhart opened his mouth.

However, before he could take a bite, someone grabbed my wrist and the dango disappeared into that person's mouth instead.

"Huh?" I uttered, flummoxed.



I recognized the person who was frowning deeply and chewing on the dango—in fact, I knew him very well. He had soft, wavy blond hair, and slightly upturned blue eyes. As a child, his face had been rather androgynous, but he'd matured into a masculine young man. He was well-built and quite tall, though he was not nearly as tall as Sir Leonhart, who stood at around one hundred and eighty centimeters.

The beauty he'd inherited from our mother remained unblemished, even with sauce marking his shapely lips.

"Jo... Johan?"

My younger brother, who I hadn't seen in a long time, didn't bother to hide his foul mood. He'd become a dashing young nobleman, but the sour face he wore when he sulked hadn't changed at all.

"The two of you are as close as ever," Johan said. The corners of his lips quirked up.

It looked like a perfect smile straight out of a textbook, but it didn't reach his eyes. His sweet voice had thorns, and I had a feeling he was silently admonishing me and urging me to "think about my position."

"S-Sorry," I said.

Johan panicked when he saw me wilt in dejection. "Oh, no, I wasn't trying to criticize you..."

"No, I didn't think you were. I simply realized what I've done and felt I should reflect upon it. We shouldn't flirt like this in public, I know. I didn't think about how onlookers might feel."

The words got stuck in Johan's throat. He clutched his chest as though overwrought with guilt. I hadn't meant to sound sarcastic, but my wording might've come off as unpleasant, as though I was playacting a victim.

"That's not it."

Johan mumbled something quietly. However, the tumult around us drowned out his voice and I couldn't hear what he said. I was debating whether I should ask him to repeat himself when a large hand grasped my daintier right hand.

“Rose.”

The large hand, of course, belonged to Sir Leonhart. He grinned at me. I’d thought he was going to reassure me, but he leaned in close. I felt his breath against my ear and instinctively froze.

“Next time let’s do this away from prying eyes,” he whispered in a saccharine tone.

A wordless exclamation formed on my lips and my hand shot up to my ear. My face was bright red, and I trembled against him.

Johan grabbed my shoulders and tore me away. “You’re the one who needs to reflect!” he snapped angrily at Sir Leonhart.

My husband seemed unaffected. He put on an amused smile and said, “Sorry.”

When it came to my fave, I was of the opinion that I should always wholeheartedly back him up...but I had to admit that he didn’t seem very sorry at all.

The three of us stood out quarreling in the lively plaza. Our identities hadn’t been exposed just yet, but we were still *trying* to be inconspicuous. Not wanting to attract attention, we decided to go somewhere else—we migrated to the medical facility and borrowed one of the drawing rooms.

My handsome young brother drank his black tea, all the while looking like he’d come out of painting. He was still in a terrible mood though, and his attitude was that of a petulant child.

When he placed his cup on its saucer, I asked, “So, Johan. What brings you here today?”

An additional crease appeared between his brows. “Can I not come visit unless I have business?” he replied. His tone was too endearing to call reproachful, but too sharp to call pouting.

“Of course not! I’m happy if you came because you missed me,” I said honestly.

Johan's eyes grew wide and round.

"However, I heard you and Chris were very busy, so I thought we wouldn't be able to see each other for a while."

"Well..."

"I'm glad you're here, even if you have no particular business. But if anything does happen, I'd be even happier if you depended on me."

A light blush dusted his fair cheeks. He opened his mouth, wanting to say something, but then shut it wordlessly. He covered his reddening face with a hand and looked down.

"Sister, you're too sly."

"Huh?" *I only wanted to let him know that he could rely on me without reserve. Why did he say that?*

Perplexed, I looked up at Sir Leonhart, who sat beside me. He simply smiled wryly, his brows lowered slightly. His expression seemed to agree with Johan's words, and I grew increasingly more confused.

*If you'd at least point out my mistake, I might be able to rectify it.* I mentally passed the blame to him.

Johan let out a small sigh. "It's true that I missed you, but that's not the only reason I'm here."

"What's the other reason?"

"I wanted to spend some time away from the capital."

"Why?"

"Are you aware that Lapter's princess will be visiting our nation in the near future?"

"Yes, of course."

The Kingdom of Lapter's first princess, Her Highness Julia's face came to mind. I'd briefly crossed paths with her in the Kingdom of Vint—I recalled that she was a very pretty lady.

A few years ago, it would've been unthinkable for Lapter's royalty to visit



Nevel, but times had changed. Little by little, we were building an amicable relationship with them.

The purpose of Princess Julia's visit this time was to deepen the friendship between our countries. There was also an additional goal of showing off this relationship to other countries. We were essentially declaring that we'd wiped the slate clean of our past grudges and were now on good terms.

*I was certain those were the reasons, but perhaps she has another objective... Princess Julia, Chris, and Johan are all unmarried. I have a feeling there will be betrothal discussions to strengthen the bond between our countries. Maybe I'm overthinking.*

However, when I asked if that was it, Johan didn't deny it.

"Chris, our crown prince, is still single. So is Princess Julia. They're around the same age too, so isn't that just swell?" Johan said indifferently. "Well, I don't care whether he gets married or not, but I'm the one bearing the brunt of the consequences." Johan's voice was low as he spoke and he grimaced. "It's fine if I meet a lady in a social setting because I can treat it as work. However, women are now appearing out of nowhere during the scant few breaks between my duties and it's whittling away at me. I'm going to lose my mind."

To the single ladies of this nation, Chris and Johan were the cream of the crop among all the bachelors. Not only were they royalty, but they were also incredibly handsome and talented too. It only made sense there would be many women vying to become their fiancées.

However, although my brothers behaved like upstanding gentlemen to the ladies, they treated all of them equally. It mattered not if a gorgeous woman aggressively pursued them, or if a pretty lady showed them her lovely tears—all efforts were ineffective on them.

The women, all forced to stand on an even playing field, had kept each other in check so that no one could steal the march on them, but now Lady Julia was coming for a visitation. *They must be frantic since their targets might get snatched from right under their noses. Johan must be exhausted from being chased around by an army of women.*

I pitied my tired brother, but another question crossed my mind. *Johan's*

*behaving like he's got nothing to do with Princess Julia, but I wonder if that's really true. Considering she's a princess from a large country, Chris is a suitable partner for her since he's the crown prince. But after Lapter's king was replaced, they went through dramatic changes in policy. They also had to accept economic sanctions from neighboring countries, compensate their impoverished citizens, and pay indemnities to Nevel.*

*It'll cost them a lot of money to restore the trust that they lost. They can't go around acting like a powerhouse anymore. They may be our allies now, but we're only equals on the surface. They're not one of our vassal states, but it'd be no exaggeration to say that they're now under our jurisdiction.*

*I worry that if Princess Julia becomes our crown princess under those circumstances, she'll be treated harshly. We had hostile relations with Lapter only a few years ago, and there are many voices pushing for a prominent noblewoman from Nevel to become the crown princess. With all that in mind, I think there would be less conflict if she married our second prince instead.*

*Then again, there's the issue of Princess Julia's chemistry with Johan. I'm an outsider, so I shouldn't meddle... I shouldn't, but I can't help fretting and brooding about it.*

Marriages of convenience were the norm for royalty—I alone had married for love. Perhaps I felt guilty being the sole exception out of the three of us.

*I wish Chris and Johan could find partners they can be close to, and I'll spare no effort to help them achieve that. Be that as it may, look at how peeved Johan looks. I highly doubt he intends to get married in the first place.*

"Therefore, please shelter me for a short while." He worded it as though it was a request, but he'd already made up his mind to stay.

"I don't mind, but..." *Isn't this just a temporary fix?*

I couldn't bring myself to point out the glaring issue, so Sir Leonhart took over. "If you run away, you'll only face more trouble later on."

Johan frowned. "Just think of this as someone else's problem."

"Take my word as advice from someone who used to be in a similar position," Sir Leonhart said with a dry smile.

Johan and I both regarded him with wide eyes.

*Oh yeah, Sir Leonhart was still a bachelor when he was in his early thirties. That was fortunate for me, but there aren't many people in Nevel who remain unmarried at that age. Furthermore, he was the eldest son of a count with a distinguished bloodline and the captain of the royal guard. It's very likely that he's gone through one or two—no, dozens of marriage proposals.*

*We're only together today because of all sorts of intertwined factors: his preoccupation with his career in his twenties, the various circumstances that surrounded him, his philosophy on love, and his opinions on marriage. But if the tiniest detail had been different at any point in time...Sir Leonhart might have married someone else instead of me.*

Just imagining that made me shudder.

"Rose?" Sir Leonhart peered at me, his face filled with concern since I'd gone silent.

I suddenly felt the urge to embrace him, but I somehow managed to resist. *It'll only put him in an awkward spot if I explain that I got scared of alternate timelines that don't matter anymore.*

I shook my head to show him nothing was wrong, but Sir Leonhart's expression became downcast for some reason.

"Are you tired of me?"

"Huh?"

"You must find me pathetic, knowing that I ran away from marriage proposals for thirty-odd years," he said in a self-deprecating tone.

"Of course not!" I instantly replied. "I consider the fact that you remained a bachelor until I became an adult the greatest blessing of my life."

When I told him my heartfelt words, Sir Leonhart froze in surprise. He'd become so still that I worried he had even stopped breathing. After more than ten seconds had passed, he slowly began to move.

He covered his face with one hand and let out a long sigh. It was now my turn to worry whether he was tired of me, but when I looked closely, his ears had

turned red. *Oh, I think he's embarrassed.*

"No matter how you look at it, Leonhart is obviously the lucky one," Johan said with a sigh. He leaned on his crossed legs and rested his chin on his hand. He squinted, glaring daggers at Sir Leonhart.

Sir Leonhart languidly took his hand off his face. "I agree." He closed his eyes and cleared his throat, but there were still traces of a blush on his cheeks.

"Argh." Johan leaned back into the sofa and stared up at the ceiling.

I took in his slovenly posture that was so disparate from his flawless appearance. Our eyes met—he didn't look away and kept his gaze fixed on me.

"Wh-What is it?" I asked, ill at ease.

"Sister, are you and I actually siblings?" Johan remarked nonsensically.

"Huh?"

"What's the probability that we aren't related by blood?"

"Zero," Sir Leonhart cut in since I was too dumbfounded to respond. "Please look in the mirror. It's absolutely impossible for you to insist that the two of you are not related by blood."

"I've looked in a mirror before and we look completely different."

"Your personality and expressions differ, so you may come off differently, but your eyes, nose, hair, and so on and so forth are strikingly similar."

"But to say it's zero is—"

"Irrefutable."

Johan was persistent—he didn't know when to give up—but Sir Leonhart dismissed every single one of his postulations.

*Sir Leonhart is right. There's a slim possibility that Chris and I aren't related, but Johan and I are the spitting images of our mother. There are some differences, since he's a man and I'm a woman, but if you compare our features, we look identical. It's impossible for us not to be related. And there's a bigger problem with what Johan said...*

"You could start a royal scandal. Stop making those unsavory jokes," I chided.

*We're royalty, there are some things we aren't allowed to say even as a joke. Our parents are the queen and king. They sit at the top of this nation. We may be their children, but we could still be tried for libel or lèse-majesté. If anyone heard what he said, he could go straight to prison.*

"Okaaaay," Johan replied dourly. He didn't show any signs of nervousness.

"Even if you two weren't related by blood, Rose is already my wife. Please give up."

*I was taken aback by Sir Leonhart's assertion. Johan may have a sister complex, but he wasn't being serious. I don't think he needs to keep my little brother in check, but I'm still happy about it.*

Johan put on his sulking face, turned away, and clicked his tongue. "You've got it good. You got to marry the love of your life."

"Yes, thankfully."

"Bragging about your wife to a single man? You've got an awful personality."

"If you hate being single, then why don't you search for a partner?"

"Ugh, you really do have an awful personality," Johan grumbled. "I don't think I'm suited for marriage. The old coots tell me it's my duty as a prince to get married, but I'm prepared to support my brother even if I don't have a wife and her family backing me."

The childish pout on Johan's face had transformed into a solemn expression—he spoke in a matter-of-fact tone.

"If I carelessly create a family, I'll only gain more people I'm obligated to. I want to avoid sowing seeds of conflict as much as I can."

I understood what Johan was getting at. There had been cases in the past when the family of a prince's wife had gained too much power and gone out of control. There were other possibilities to consider too—what if the future king and queen couldn't sire a child? I could see why Johan might think twice about marriage.

However, whether he could have his way or not was a separate issue, and he was painfully aware of that.

“Isn’t there a woman out there who’ll be satisfied with being contractual partners rather than husband and wife...?”

It was a soliloquy meant for no one’s ears but his own, and quite a disrespectful one to women, but those were nonetheless his true, unmitigated feelings.

## The Second Prince's Bewilderment

The days I spent with my beloved sister could be summed up in one word: sublime.

I could see her just by waking up and taking my seat at breakfast. She looked like a goddess whenever she greeted me with an angelic smile and a “good morning.” I received a jubilant “thank you” simply for helping her with work. In the evenings, we’d say “good night” and part ways, but that would come with the promise of “see you tomorrow.”

The hindrance would periodically flash by my peripheral, but my time was one of such beatitude that I could pay him no mind. I could even shrug off the hellish days of being assailed by work and women, since I’d endured that suffering for the joy of today.

That was just how blissful my days had been. And yet, one day later, my peaceful holiday came to an end when I met an unexpected person during my stroll through town.

“Oh my, if it isn’t Prince Johan. What a coincidence.”

“Why are you here?” I growled in a low voice.

I found my tone to be quite nasty, so surely she must’ve picked up on it too. However, she didn’t appear daunted in the slightest—she merely showed me that exemplary, sweet smile of hers.

She had black hair that fell all the way to her waist and long lashes that framed her onyx-colored eyes. Her skin was whiter than fresh snow, which, coupled with her graceful features, made her seem almost otherworldly. She was so dainty and thin that she looked like she might snap if I mistakenly touched her with too much force. Surely she roused countless men’s desire to protect her.

However, contrary to her delicate, glass-like appearance, she was tenacious

and calm on the inside. The Kingdom of Lapter's first princess, Julia von Merkel, was a dangerous woman.

"You arrived much sooner than anticipated," I said.

"The weather seemed volatile, so I sought to give myself extra leeway."

*Lapter's delegation isn't scheduled to arrive until next week. This is far too soon for some extra leeway, I bitterly retorted in my mind. And that doesn't answer why you're in the Prelier Duchy and not the capital.*

Princess Julia was dressed in an extremely simple olive green dress. Her hair was plaited into a braid, and she wasn't wearing a single accessory. As for guards, there was only a single one within sight. That wasn't enough to hide her dignified air, but it barely managed to camouflage her as the daughter of a respectable family rather than a princess.

*Her outfit is too purposeful. She clearly meant to look around from the very beginning.*

As though she'd read my inner thoughts, she continued on. "Also, I wanted to catch a glimpse of the highly acclaimed Prelier Duchy."

It was true that Prelier was the limelight region of the world right now. With the construction of the medical facility, merchants from all over had flocked here, and it was on its way to becoming a major trade hub for our nation. The day when this town would be at the forefront of the latest fads wasn't too far off.

It was no surprise that a young lady would be interested in this place. However, considering that she was the princess of a former enemy nation, I had an alternative perspective. I couldn't ask a foreign princess whether she was here for reconnaissance, but the question showed on my face.

Princess Julia sighed. "Please be at ease. My nation doesn't have the courage or power to try anything that might incur the wrath of a dragon."

*Wrath of a dragon? Does that refer to the Prelier Duchy or my sister? Likely both.*

To the Kingdom of Nevel, Prelier had the potential to become the second



most important region, and its value was steadily increasing. And the value of my sister—the feudal lord who had brought about the rapid growth of this once rural region—needn't be stated either.

In the past, the Kingdom of Lapter had incurred the wrath of the Kingdom of Nevel in the worst way possible by attempting to assassinate my sister. Their next transgression wouldn't end with us merely shaving away at their nation's power. That being said, it was still too early to lower my guard.

"I'm simply here out of my own *personal* interest."

When I saw the expression on Princess Julia's face, I was taken aback. The flawless smile that perpetually lingered on her beautiful face was gone. She wasn't trying to sustain a charade, and I could tell from her eyes that she wasn't lying.

"But if you're still concerned, why don't you join me? Keep me under surveillance?"

"Huh?" I was slow to react, surprised by how her expressionless mien—a glimpse into her true self—had disappeared in an instant and been replaced with her usual smile.

"It's my first time here, so I don't know my way around. Would you escort me?" Her request was accompanied by an unspoken, "*You wouldn't embarrass a lady, would you?*"

My face was on the verge of twitching. "Of course. If you're satisfied with me, then it would be my pleasure."

Although I felt a sense of defeat, I did my best to smile back.

Princess Julia did not show interest in the shops that a typical noble lady would like. She did not ask me to guide her around the block lined with dress and accessory stores catering to nobility. Instead, she wished to see the main road that was bustling with commoners. Her face noticeably lit up when she saw the storefronts lined with everyday items, ingredients, and other miscellaneous objects.

She'd carefully selected her attire so as to not stand out today, but her

natural-born elegance and attractive face drew gazes. She picked up a wool item and examined it closely, unaware that her beauty was overwhelming our surroundings and creating empty space around her.

Feeling tired, I felt a sigh accidentally slip out of me. I picked up a random shawl lying nearby, called the shop assistant, and paid for it.

“Miss Julie.” Given how conspicuous she already was, I couldn’t call her by her real name. It was just a temporary alias, but it accidentally came out like a pet name. I felt my fatigue shoot up.

“Oh, I’m sorry for keeping you.” She looked up at me apologetically when she remembered that I was waiting.

We stepped away from the fabric store and walked along the street.

“You were perusing the wares quite avidly. Are you interested in knitting?” I asked.

She gently shook her head. “I must admit, I’m not very good at knitting or embroidering. But I’ve got a discerning eye, so I can tell the quality of a product.”

At her instruction, her guard purchased the wool item that she had been looking at. *So that’s a good quality item then.*

“The stitching and material are both excellent, and the quality is consistent across the board. Also, I heard prices have been stable over the last few years.”

*Come to think of it, the demand for wool from a town in northern Prelier has been on the rise recently.*

It had been a huge business opportunity, and the obvious approach would’ve been to mass-produce the goods and sell them, but my sister had thought differently. If they aggressively increased the production rate and output, the quality of each item would fall. It might have earned them a massive profit in the short term, but they couldn’t expect that the demand would remain high. If the quality of the goods fell, trust from consumers would fall as well.

*I think she said they would impose tariffs and develop legislation to guarantee that production would increase at a reasonable pace. She’s hoping that the price*

*will be stable without any sharp rises or sudden declines all year round.*

Though I was hesitant to explain this in the middle of all this traffic, I gave Princess Julia a brief outline of my sister's plan. She blinked at me.

She was human too, so it only stood to reason that she could feel surprise as well. However, I was so used to seeing a smile pasted to her face that seeing a genuine reaction out of her discomfited me. Her refined appearance already stood out, but that defenseless and childish expression was such a large contrast that she attracted even more attention.

When I saw a few men who'd passed by blush and turn around to catch another glimpse of her, I remembered the item I'd bought a few minutes ago.

"The sunlight is getting stronger, so please use this—if it's to your liking," I said as I handed her the shawl. I'd come up with a sloppy excuse, since I couldn't outright tell her to cover her face because she stood out.

She obediently accepted the shawl and wrapped it around her head like a hood. Then, she stopped in front of a store that had caught her eye and slowly took her time examining each item. She showed interest in the wide variety of spices, the freshness and price of ingredients, and so on. She looked like a normal girl when she was amazed, and it knocked me off my stride.

Princess Julia came to a stop at one corner of the plaza. "Your sister is a remarkable person," she murmured as she gazed at the medical facility up ahead.

There was no flattery or contempt in her voice. Her true thoughts had inadvertently spilled out, and they contained only a hint of resignation and admiration.

# A Certain Princess's Soliloquy

I stood at the end of a plaza bursting with people. Towering over us was a particularly large building in the distance. Not a single carving or mural decorated the great stone building. It looked like it had been stripped of all excess, and no doubt it must've appeared boorish in the eyes of those who believed that luxury was the duty of nobility.

But in my eyes, it was beyond priceless. Its walls had been built without care for ostentation or pageantry, discarding all gaudy splendor. The way the structure emphasized sturdiness revealed the integrity of its originator, the duchess.

*She is completely different from me. We share similarities in countless ways: our rank, age, gender, and environment. And yet...why is the gulf between us so vast?*

"Miss Julie?"

I'd been lost in deep thought, but a voice snapped me back to my senses. When I looked up, my eyes locked with Prince Johan's. He must've been puzzled when I'd suddenly stopped amid the crowd of people. He usually had a smile pasted on his face that hid his true emotions, but now was a rare moment when I could glean bewilderment from his expression.

I'd thought that Prince Johan differed from his elder sister—that he was cut from the same cloth as me. We made decisions by weighing advantages and disadvantages rather than good or evil. If there was something we wished to protect, we were the sort of people who would dirty our hands without hesitation.

"If you're feeling unwell, then let's rest somewhere. I believe there's a café nearby."

However, when Prince Johan showed me reluctant consideration, I knew my judgment of him had been faulty. He was a kind soul, one who was simply able

to make cruel decisions in the face of necessity. We were fundamentally different people.

For I was someone who only treasured herself.

I, Julia von Merkel, was born as a princess to a powerful nation. My homeland, the Kingdom of Lapter, spent more than half of each year covered in snow. Though our territory was vast, a third of it consisted of mountains and everlasting permafrost where crops could not flourish. Our nation had a long history of chronic food shortages, which we compensated for with our abundant mineral resources and by pillaging our neighbors.

In Lapter, might was justice, so women were tools to be won or traded. Even as royalty, I was no exception to this rule, and I was treated as just another political pawn.

I'd been an adept learner since childhood, and though I'd been lauded as a child prodigy by those around me, my ability was meaningless to the king. To him, I was a tool, and my exceptional talents merely raised my value by a marginal amount. Nothing was expected of me besides one day marrying into an influential family and working to benefit the country.

My mother, the queen, always did as her husband said; her favorite phrase to tell me was, "Never disobey your father."

She kept me away from foreign books, outstanding teachers, and anything that I, a woman, did not need, so I wouldn't stand out and displease my father. I didn't know whether that was how she showed her love for her child or for her own self-preservation, but it was a fact that she'd saved my life. However, her concern had been undesirable.

The choices in my life had disappeared for the sole reason that I was a woman. Knowing this was humiliating—it brought me despair. I prided myself on being a gifted person. Despite that, men who were less competent than I were given preferential treatment solely based on their gender. I couldn't bear it.

*I don't want to inherit the throne in place of my older brother. Nor do I desire vast lands or wealth. I wouldn't mind becoming a commoner if it meant I could*

*test my own strength. Perhaps I could start from nothing and magnificently become a billionaire. Or perhaps I'd face setbacks along the way and die a dog's death. I would be satisfied either way. All I yearn for is the right to live the way I want.*

However, as I had been born a princess, that modest freedom was far out of my grasp. The only path I was permitted was one where I fawned over men. *In that case, I'll do my utmost to dress beautifully, I had thought. If I'm to be bought anyway, I might as well make them pay a hefty sum. I'd prefer a man in a powerful position who is foolish and easy to manipulate. I'll passionately make eyes at him, whisper promises of love, and then someday, I'll be in control of everything from the shadows.*

But one day, my twisted resolution crumbled apart in an instant. The Kingdom of Vindt changed its crown prince, my nation began to decline, and we entered an alliance with the Kingdom of Nevel. These were all critical global affairs, but they were not the reason.

Upon her marriage, the Kingdom of Nevel's first princess, Her Highness Rosemary, left the royal family to become a subject of the state. She was the first woman in the world to be bestowed the title of duchess. On top of that, she had proposed a groundbreaking plan to construct a complex medical facility, and the land she governed was developing rapidly.

The Prelier duchy was attracting attention from all over the world, and everyone expected it to make even greater strides. Though she was supported by her husband, the former knight captain of the royal guard, there was no doubt that Lady Rosemary was shouldering the responsibilities for constructing the medical facility and spearheading her domain's operations herself.

She did not curry favor with anyone or become sullied by others, and her heart was as pure as her appearance. I had been astounded when I'd learned that there was a woman who had obtained everything I'd ever wanted.

*What was the point of everything I've done up until now?* The moment the thought struck me, the floor beneath me crumbled.

I had spent so long walking along the narrow path toward the future I yearned for, desperate not to miss my footing, and yet I'd caught sight of the back of a

woman who was freely marching on the untrodden ground.

The despair I felt at that time had been incomparable to the despair I'd experienced when I'd given up on my life because of my gender. I was not the brilliant woman I had thought I was—I was merely another mediocre, overly conceited person. Acknowledging such a cruel fact was not easy.

Using the invitation to visit the Kingdom of Nevel as a pretext, I visited the Prelier Duchy as some form of futile struggle. It was a cheerful town. The market brimmed with life and the people lived energetically. There were antiquated buildings along the newly paved streets; the townscape was a mishmash of old and new, so the scenery wasn't exactly neat and orderly. However, that had its own mysterious charm.

Although nobility and commoners lived in separate areas, there didn't seem to be a large disparity in wealth. Prelier's town had no dark underside—not behind buildings, in narrow alleys, or even on the outskirts of town. There was not a single sign of the adverse symptoms that were common in towns that experienced rapid growth.

*This is impossible. If a young girl pushes for policies in a hasty pursuit of glory, harmful consequences would have to appear somewhere. Behind every resplendent success lies a dark shadow.*

However, I came to an understanding when His Highness Johan—who happened to be visiting his sister—showed me around the town at my behest. Though Lady Rosemary had many innovative ideas, she was pragmatic at heart.

This town was overflowing with people and goods alike. If one wasn't picky with their methods, amassing enough wealth to rival the national budget would be no dream. But Lady Rosemary was not one to be tempted by immediate profit. She governed her land with the aim of long-term stability that would last many generations, not a scant few years of prosperity.

*If it were me, what would I do?* I felt guilty as I contemplated it. *She is someone who exercises due diligence and takes the time to develop regulations for even a small village's wool products. How could I ever compete against her?*

*I wasn't defeated because I was born a woman. I was never a person of her caliber, that's all.*

It felt like a large hole had opened in my chest. I didn't even know if I wanted to laugh or cry. I was simply confused, like a lost child who'd been abandoned in the middle of a street.

His Highness Johan was at a loss when I suddenly came to a halt. He wore a sour expression, a rare sight for a man whose placid demeanor never faltered. He rubbed his forehead, sighed, and then took my hand and led me to the largest building in town.

He announced our presence to the gatekeeper, and after a short wait, the person I wanted to see the least, but who constantly plagued my mind, appeared. She was a woman so stunning that even her surprised expression was enough to make one sigh wistfully.

Duchess Rosemary von Prelier.

She stared at me with the same bewildered look that Prince Johan had worn moments ago. Then, a gentle smile spread across her face.

"It's been a long time. Welcome to Prelier," she greeted. Her voice and smile exuded the same warmth I had felt from the town.



# The Reincarnated Duchess in Distress

My younger brother had left to go on a stroll and returned with a beautiful young lady in distress. Not to mention that she was the princess of the Kingdom of Lapter, Her Highness Julia von Merkel. I'd heard she would be arriving in the capital soon, but no one had informed me that she would come to Prelier.

I wanted to ask how she had wound up in such a state, among a mountain of other questions, but I could tell Johan didn't know either. He was at a loss, and his eyes pleaded for me to help. My little brother, who always flawlessly completed any task, did not know how to handle a despondent woman. It reminded me once more that Johan was still only a young man in his teens.

*It's good that he's still innocent. It is, but I'm not sure if I can help. This isn't my first encounter with Princess Julia, but we've only met once. It was in a formal setting where we only had a vapid conversation. Otherwise, we've never interacted on a personal level. Can I really cheer up someone who's basically a stranger?*

Although I'd welcomed her inside with a smile, I honestly had no plan. I was internally floundering around, just like Johan was. Princess Julia barely spoke during the tour of my residence and over dinner. She acknowledged us when we spoke to her and answered our questions, but only in a few words. I wanted to know what the cause of her anguish was, but I didn't know how to broach the subject.

She didn't treat me with disdain or ignore me, but she drew a clear line between us. I sensed that she had put up a wall she didn't want anyone to cross. Furthermore, there was a regalness to her quiet smile that made it difficult to address her in a friendly manner.

*I want to alleviate her grief and cheer her up, but that's my ego speaking. I have a feeling she doesn't wish for that. And she won't be able to tell me anything if this is related to the Kingdom of Lapter's domestic affairs.*

Deeply immersed in my thoughts, a sigh escaped from my lips.

“Rose?” called a voice from behind me.

Sir Leonhart stood behind the sofa I was sitting on. He had just taken a bath, and his skin was still slightly flushed. I couldn't tear my eyes away from his damp hair that clung to his nape.

“Your hair is still wet,” I said, pointing out the droplets rolling off the tips of his hair.

“Will you dry it for me?”

He sat down next to me and leaned over so it would be easier for me to reach his head. He stole a glance at me to check my reaction. My beloved was behaving like a spoiled child, and that made my heart flutter.

*I really love this part of him.*

“Jeez, my husband is helpless.” I pretended to complain, but I broke into a grin, so my delight was transparent to see.

“It's because you pamper me,” Sir Leonhart retorted with a quiet snicker.

He handed me a towel, and I carefully dried his glossy black hair.

“So, did something happen? What's worrying you?”

“Hmm... It's not exactly *my* worry...so to speak.”

Though I'd given an evasive answer, Sir Leonhart grasped what I was getting at and nodded. “Is it about Her Highness?”

“Yes.”

“She certainly seemed to be in low spirits.”

*Looks like Sir Leonhart noticed Princess Julia's abnormal behavior too.* “I think she's worrying about something. I wanted to chat with her for a bit after dinner, but...”

“She immediately returned to her room,” he finished for me.

As he'd said, Princess Julia had retreated to her room as soon as dinner had ended, a silent declaration that she didn't want us to pay any further attention to her.

“Are you friends with her on a personal level?”

I shook my head. “I’ve only met her once in the Kingdom of Vint. It was in a formal setting, and we barely spoke.”

“Considering the circumstances back then, you didn’t have much of a choice.”

At the time, Nevel and Lapter had already been enemies below the surface. Moreover, both nations had also been in a standoff over forming an alliance with the Kingdom of Vint. We’d been in a state in which an information leak over even the most insignificant thing could’ve been fatal, so a careless person like me becoming friends with the princess of an enemy nation would’ve been beyond reckless.

*My decision back then to part ways without incident wasn’t wrong...but not being wrong isn’t the same as being correct.* My thoughts were going in circles, and my hands had stopped moving. Sir Leonhart looked up at me. When he saw the miserable look on my face, he smiled wryly.

“Do you regret it?”

“No, I don’t.” The words came out of me clumsily and I sounded like a small child. *I want to do something, but the reality of the matter is that I probably can’t. I know very well how awkward I am.*

“Then what’s important isn’t the past, but the present.” Sir Leonhart cupped my face with his hands and squished my cheeks. “If you don’t know what she’s agonizing over, just ask.”

“Won’t haphazardly barging in makes her feel uncomfortable?”

“If she doesn’t like it, then she just won’t tell you.”

“What if I hurt her feelings?”

“I think she’ll tell you to leave before that happens.” He paused and then added, “With a smile in a roundabout manner.”

The image flashed through my mind, and I quietly giggled. “But then I might get hurt,” I replied.

Sir Leonhart let out an amused chuckle as well. He tilted my head up and placed a kiss on my brow. “If that happens, I’ll comfort you and lift your spirits.”

The surprise kiss and his alluring gaze made my face heat up. We had been married for over a year now, and I still wasn't used to this. I puffed up my cheeks and pretended to pout in an attempt to hide my embarrassment. I lightly pounded on his chest and he pulled away as he raised his hands in surrender.

I returned the towel to Sir Leonhart and then stood up from the sofa. I picked up a thick coat and threw it over my shoulders.

"All right then, I'll go have a chat with her." *She probably isn't asleep yet. Maybe I should bring her a warm drink.* "I don't know what time I'll be back, so go ahead and sleep."

"I'll be here warming the bed all alone."

Sir Leonhart walked me to the door. Before I left, he raised his fingers to my cheek and lifted a strand of my hair that had gotten caught there. I thought he would move it aside, but he brought it to his lips and kissed it. I readied myself for another teasing remark, but when I looked up, I was met with a surprisingly tender gaze.

"Even if it doesn't go well, I hope you'll stay yourself. I and many others have been saved by your clumsy straightforwardness and good nature."

I looked at him in surprise.

"Please don't forget that."

I was so caught off guard that it almost moved me to tears. I knew what I was about to do was likely unwanted meddling, so his words affected me all the more. It felt like he was gently pushing me forward and telling me that it was fine to make mistakes.

"Please don't pamper me too much!"

"Rose, you pamper me too, so it's even."

I turned away so he couldn't see my teary eyes. Sir Leonhart saw me off with a small wave. "Take care. See you again soon."

Determined to see Princess Julia, I first headed to the kitchen.

*It's better to chat over drinks. A warm drink can help her relax, and I can use it to start a conversation. Also, it's a bit crafty of me, but it'll be harder for her to turn me away if I go bearing a little gift.*

It was night, so the kitchen had fallen completely silent. The staff had finished preparing for tomorrow's breakfast, and there was not a single cook to be seen. Occasionally, I secretly used the kitchen after-hours for my hobby, so I was used to handling fire. I deftly lit a flame and boiled water.

After I made drinks for two, I placed them on a tray. I'd found a trolley in the corner of the room, but I decided not to use it. *Making noise in the middle of the night will bother others, and they aren't heavy enough that I need to use one anyway.*

Thinking that, I went to Princess Julia's room. But there, I finally realized my foolishness.

*I'm holding the tray in my hands so I can't knock on her door. Right. Of course. Why did I decide I didn't need the trolley a few minutes ago? I need it badly! My idiocy gave me a headache.*

I considered returning to the kitchen to retrieve the trolley, but then the drinks would get cold. Hoping to ask for help, I looked around and locked eyes with a knight on night patrol. I didn't want to yell since it was late, so I used my gaze to ask him to open the door.

*I'm aghast at being seen in such an undignified spot, but it can't be helped now.* In response to my silent plea, he respectfully bowed and then looked away.

*Huh...? Why'd you do that? Wait, from his perspective, did I look like I was seriously ruminating about something because I was walking through the hallway in the middle of the night while looking down? Is that why he decided he shouldn't call out to me?*

*No! I didn't make eye contact to tell you not to look at me! My hands are just full, so I wanted you to open the door for me!*

"Now what... Huh?" A shadow suddenly flitted through my legs. I felt soft fur brush against my ankle. "What? Oh, Nero?"

I lifted the tray and glanced down at my feet. There stood a black fur ball... I mean, my beloved cat.

“Why are you here?”

Nero was a male cat that I’d been taking care of since I was a princess. I’d heard that cats hated changes in their environment, so when it was decided that I would become the lord of Prelier, I’d been unsure about what to do with him.

Had the decision been purely up to me, I’d absolutely wanted to keep him with me, but I also hadn’t wanted Nero to fall ill from the stress of a new home. If it’d come down to it, I’d been ready to leave him in the care of my mother and make frequent trips to the capital. However, contrary to my concerns, Nero showed no particular changes after moving to the duchy. If anything, he was living a leisurely life even more comfortably than me, the lord.

For the record, his favorite spots were the greenhouse, the arbor, and my office. He’d spent all of today sleeping on top of my sofa, so he must’ve been wide awake now.

His blue, jewellike eyes gleamed, which gave me a bad feeling.

“Wait, Nero.”

*I can’t play with you right now.* Though I earnestly tried to convey this to him, a cat couldn’t exactly understand.

“Wait, no!”

His claw clung to my nightwear. He was eager to clamber up my clothes, and I was in a panic. *If I move away and spill the cups, the hot drinks might get on Nero. But if I don’t do anything, Nero will begin climbing.* While I was hesitating, Nero had continued to wriggle up. His hind legs were already hanging off the ground.

He was slender, but he was still a fully grown cat—I heard the cry of fabric under his weight. The material of my nightwear was light and dainty; its threads would come loose at the slightest pull, and the lace lining along the hem was especially delicate.

“Ahhh...” I paled. The sorrowful faces of my maids flashed through my mind.

*If memory serves, this is the most expensive of my nightgowns. Sorry, everyone... I couldn't protect it.* I'd given up. I heard the lamentable sound of fabric tearing—

No, it was the creak of the door opening.

Princess Julia and I wordlessly looked at each other for ten seconds.

She was clearly baffled, but she opened her mouth. “What...are you doing?”

*Reasonable question. Anyone would react like that if they opened their door in the middle of the night and found a woman standing there with a cat hanging off of her.*

“Erm... Could I come in?” Not quite sure how to answer, I replied with a question instead.

She hesitated and then finally opened the large doors. “Certainly.”

Before I could enter her room, Nero slipped in through the gap first. He proceeded into the room as though he owned the place and hopped onto the sofa.

Princess Julia's expression softened. “How cute.”

“I'm sorry he went in without permission.”

“Don't be, it's fine. I like cats.”

She sat next to Nero, leaving some space between them. She didn't thoughtlessly reach out to touch him, but instead, watched over him with a gentle gaze. *Looks like she really does like cats.*

I'd managed to set foot in the room without making things awkward because of my beloved cat. *Thanks, Nero. I'll give you some chicken later.*

“It's delicious,” Princess Julia said with a sigh after she took a sip of my drink. “I thought this was black tea, but it seems not. This scent... Is this lemon and honey?”

“Yes. I considered brewing tea, but I worried we'd have trouble falling asleep if we drank that, so I made this instead. Please don't force yourself if it's not to

your taste, okay?”

“I’m fond of this fragrance. It’s very calming.”

“I’m glad then.”

Our bland conversation continued little by little. Time passed slowly and eventually, Nero fell asleep in a ball. It was then that Princess Julia closed her eyes.

“If it were me, I wouldn’t have come here,” she said quietly.

“Huh?” I uttered, slow to process what she meant.

I turned a questioning gaze onto her, but she didn’t meet it. She kept her eyes on her hands and smiled. It was a beautiful, sorrowful smile that reminded me of powder snow soundlessly piling up on the ground.

“I may be a guest of Nevel, but I’m still a princess from a lesser nation. You could’ve offered me the bare minimum of courtesy and left it at that. As long as I don’t fall ill, you shouldn’t need to care about my well-being.”

I was surprised by her crude choice of words, but I listened to her speak without interjecting.

“After all, you have nothing to gain from me. It’s inefficient to offer up your precious time and curry favor with someone who won’t bring you profit. Even if you wanted to act in order to maintain appearances, a quick word tomorrow morning would have sufficed.”

Princess Julia’s hands were clenched tightly. The fingers that held her empty cup had lost their color and turned white.

“That would’ve sufficed, and yet...” She trailed off. Her eyes, dark as black quartz, narrowed as though she wanted to simultaneously laugh and cry. “You made me a warm drink and came to visit me. Even though I’m below you... Even though I might hate you.”

Her dignified voice was husky. It trembled ever so slightly, and because of that, it made me restless. I couldn’t bear to watch her hang her head lower and lower and do nothing, even though I’d come determined to quietly listen to her until the end.



“I could never do that.”

“You don’t have to,” I said reflexively.

Surprised by my forceful tone, Princess Julia raised her head. *I wanted to let her talk about her problems, so what am I doing? She was finally opening up, and I just went and cut her off and then rebuffed what she said. But I just couldn’t stay silent any longer.*

“There’s no need for you to be the same as me,” I said.

“You and I could never be the same after all.”

Wanting to remove that self-deprecating smile from her face, I pushed onward. “That’s true. You’ve never been stuck and unable to open a door because your hands were full, right? Have you ever struggled with a cat hanging off of your clothes?”

Her black crystalline eyes widened with surprise. It was a childlike expression that made me view the dauntless princess in a different light.

“I’m the only person who needs to experience such foolishness,” I said with a smile.

Princess Julia blinked at me a few times.

“I’m certainly one to take action rather than dwell on things. But I’m not like that because of any praiseworthy reasons like having faith or pride in myself. I’m simply a clumsy person. In my case, I often get positive results when I immediately jump in rather than think things through.”

*That’s right. I just choose what’s better for me. That doesn’t mean it’s the best option for other people.*

“There are people who praise me for being proactive, but it’s not all wonderful. Even when an outcome turns out well, I always think that there must’ve been a more efficient way to go about it.”

*In truth, I want to be like my father, who can make decisions purely based on documents and reports. It would be ideal if I could complete everything from my office. But the reality is that I’m still inexperienced, and consequently, I need to verify situations with my own eyes. It’s a reliable method, though it takes more*

*than twice as long. But there's no way around it—that's me. Everyone is suited to different things so it's only natural that our modus operandi would differ.*

“What I do is not the correct answer. But I make the choices I do because I believe that they are optimal for me.”

“Optimal...”

“Yes. Therefore you should pick the most optimal way for yourself.”

Her lashes fluttered, and with each blink, I could see the light returning to her eyes. The uncertainty in her expression disappeared like mist clearing up before me.

*Dignified, clever, and beautiful—despite the Kingdom of Lapter being far more chauvinistic than Nevel, she bloomed like an indomitable black lily. I admire her greatly for that, so I hope she doesn't belittle herself even when she's lost or troubled.*

“That's right. I'm me and you're you,” Princess Julia said, the tension leaving her voice. She smiled shyly at me. “Thank you. I feel a bit better.”

## A Certain Princess's Smile

When I smiled, Lady Rosemary beamed back at me. I could tell she felt relieved from the bottom of her heart by the way her expression softened. It was a curious feeling, knowing that there existed someone who could be so concerned over a stranger.

*She's different from me through and through.* It was the same sentiment I'd had a few minutes ago, but somehow, it no longer pained me.

"Come to think of it, Lady Julia, how long do you plan on staying?"

"Perhaps another day or two. I'd like to explore the Prelier Duchy a bit more before I depart for the capital," I said.

Lady Rosemary's eyes lit up. "Have you decided on a destination already?"

"No, not yet." I shook my head.

Envious of her success, I had come to nitpick the town like a petty sister-in-law, but those feelings had evaporated. I wanted to spend my remaining time here solely enjoying myself. I asked her if she had any suggestions, and Lady Rosemary grinned like a child scheming up her next prank.

"In that case, could I have your time?"

"Huh?"

The day after our chat, Lady Rosemary and I set out for the town while incognito.

"I'm glad the weather is nice."

Her hair was dyed chestnut brown and tied up in a high ponytail. She wore a typical outfit for commoners: a dark red dress and boots of the same color. Perhaps it was her hairstyle, or maybe it was her clothes, but she appeared younger than yesterday.

When she was fully dressed up, she had the elegance of a gorgeous duchess,

but today, she was an effervescent young girl. Her cheery smile was more dazzling than the sun, and it drew the gazes of people passing by. Although I'd also dyed my hair chestnut brown, my transformation was not as drastic as Lady Rosemary's.

*Not many people's appearance changes this remarkably just by altering their clothes or hair color. I must say, even the type of people she attracts will change as well.* The handsome face of the former royal guard captain came to mind. *There's no doubt her husband experiences much turmoil.*

"Now then, where should we go first?"

I was stunned to see Lady Rosemary's eyes twinkle with excitement as she scanned our surroundings. I had assumed, based on our conversation yesterday, that our destination had already been decided.

"Shall we walk along the street and window-shop at stores that catch our eye?"

"Huh?"

"Oh! I think that would look good on you, Julie."

Lady Rosemary pointed at a corner of a shop and moved closer to it. She picked up a hair ornament, looked back at me, and beckoned me over with a smile. Though perplexed, I joined her, and she handed me the accessory.

It was a striking white flower made of cloth—a lovely, high-quality item that had been meticulously crafted down to the last detail by a skilled craftsman. The fabric was of superb quality as well. However, I was astonished to learn that the price was less than half of what I'd estimated.

"Surely you jest. What on earth is happening in Nevel—no, *Prelier's* economy?" I muttered to myself.

"I'll take this. Please wrap it up." Lady Rosemary plucked the hair ornament out of my hands and swiftly purchased it. "On to the next shop!"

"Hold on. Is this store truly profiting?"

"Don't worry. They have a partnership with clothing stores, so they purchase fabric scraps at a low price."

“Now that is an intriguing idea. I’d love to hear more.”

“We can talk about it another time. After all, we’re here to enjoy ourselves today.” Lady Rosemary gently pushed my back.

I was speechless. During our chat yesterday night, I had mentioned my stroll in town with Prince Johan. Since she’d asked, I’d given her a rough outline of where we’d gone and what we’d done. Her expression had clouded over with every word until she’d eventually fallen silent.

*“That’s not a stroll in town—that’s an inspection,”* she had said with a conflicted look.

I realized then that I’d been so preoccupied with the price and quality of the products that I hadn’t considered whether I wanted them or not.

After that, we went from one shop to the next, stopping at whatever places caught Lady Rosemary’s eye. Glass orbs the size of a head, wooden sculptures of a bear—she showed me so many enigmatic items with unknown purposes that I stopped thinking about money matters.

“I’m a little hungry. Do you like sweets?” she asked.

“I don’t dislike them.”

“Then let’s go to the plaza. There are a ton of stalls there.”

“Okay.”

The plaza was bustling with people as usual. *There are more stalls than yesterday; perhaps the number changes depending on the day of the week.*

Colorful candies that glistened like jewels and pastries that were baked to a mouthwatering brown, the fragrant smell of fried dough and juice made from plump fruit—everything in sight was new to me. I couldn’t decide what to try. Lady Rosemary responded to my indecision by purchasing every single thing that piqued my curiosity.

“There’s so much, though. What are we to do with it?”

“Eat it of course!” she replied like it was obvious, her arms full of food.

“A-All of it?”

“All of it.” She nodded, brimming with confidence.

I inadvertently did a double take at her slim waist.

“Where shall we eat?”

I scoured the area and noticed that it was especially crowded near the fountain. *I can hear music, so there must be a minstrel or street performer.*

Lady Rosemary lightly tapped on my shoulder. “Come this way.”

I tried to walk in the direction she indicated, but the crowd thickened. I couldn’t move past the wall of people, and I was getting pushed around. Just as panic washed over me, Lady Rosemary held out her hand to me.

For a split second, I froze. It wasn’t that her gesture confused me—no, the occasions when I touched other people outside of soirees were simply rare, so I was discombobulated. I hesitated, but she grasped my hand. The warm, soft sensation made my heart flutter.

We slipped through the crowd and reached the bench on the opposite side of the fountain. Lady Rosemary put down our haul. It must have been heavy to carry all that, but she didn’t seem tired in the slightest. In fact, she seemed to be having a ball.

“What should we eat first?” She unwrapped one of the packages and an enticing fragrance wafted through the air.

*Upon reexamination, this is an obscene amount of food.* “If we eat all of this, we’ll certainly gain weight.”

“Let’s save those thoughts for tomorrow.”

Although I was flabbergasted, I found myself enjoying the moment. I picked up a sun-colored candy and popped it into my mouth. A cloying sweetness that threatened to melt my teeth spread across my tongue.

I didn’t dislike sweets, but I didn’t particularly like them either. Confections that appeared like lumps of sugar weren’t exactly my cup of tea. However, strangely enough, this one didn’t taste too bad. Perhaps I’d been influenced by the girl who was happily stuffing her cheeks next to me.

“Delicious... Ah!”

Without a care in the world, Lady Rosemary had opened her mouth wide to take a bite, but something had snatched the snack out of her hand. Crumbs fell to the ground.

“Huh? What was that? A...bird?”

The culprit was a pigeon. The fat, round bird blissfully pecked at the fallen morsels by her feet. *This snack made by toasting corn kernels until they burst has a pleasant aroma. It must've been attracted to that.* The next thing I knew, Lady Rosemary was surrounded by dozens of pigeons.

“We’ve been targeted,” she said, her voice trembling as she clutched the food bag, pale faced.

“Pffft...”

I found her grave expression so amusing that I almost burst into laughter. I tried to stifle the urge, but it kept bubbling up within me. Knowing that she was completely serious made it even funnier.

When we were about to reach the climax of Lady Rosemary’s battle with the pigeons, a loud noise resounded throughout the plaza. A bell rang from the top of the stone belfry, signaling that it was noon—the sound also scattered the pigeons. White feathers fluttered down from the clear blue sky. The water cascading from the fountain reflected the sun’s rays and shimmered in the light.

It was an exceptionally beautiful sight, one that moved my heart.

“That was amazing.”

“Yes, it was amazing.” I wanted to put my feelings into words, but the only thing that came out was cliché. My head was dominated by emotions, and I’d lost my vocabulary. I wanted to burn this moment into my mind for eternity.

“I’ve never seen such a spectacle before.”

*No precious metal or castle with the most pristine, white walls could ever compare.* For the first time in my life, my heart trembled with emotion.

“It’s a first for me too. I’ve never been surrounded by a giant flock of pigeons before.”

It took me a few seconds to process that. “Pigeons?” I repeated.

She nodded with utmost solemnity. “Yes, pigeons.”

Her expression revived memories of the dramatic skirmish from moments ago. The image of Lady Rosemary—white as a sheet and surrounded by pigeons—vividly came to mind and the urge to laugh returned.

“Heh... Ha ha ha!” I’d managed to briefly suppress it, but it was too late now. I felt like I was bursting open.

Lady Rosemary was taken aback. Her cheeks gradually reddened as she became increasingly embarrassed.

“You don’t need to laugh so hard...”

“Well, you looked so serious that... Ha ha!”

She sent me a sulky glare. But I knew a single apology was all that was needed for someone as kindhearted as she to forgive me.





“Haaah... This is fun,” I said, wiping the tears that had welled up in my eyes from laughing too hard.

My heart was as clear as the sky above.

The evening sun sank past the horizon. Even the finale of this scintillating day that sparkled like a precious jewel was beautiful. Watching that dazzling sight made my chest tighten with a loneliness I had never experienced before. I was secretly dejected that this dreamlike time was coming to an end, but even though the sun disappeared, the day was still not over.

After dinner and a bath, sleep was all that was left. Suddenly, someone knocked on my door. It was Lady Rosemary with a pillow tucked under her arm.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“Could I sleep here tonight?” she replied.

“S-Sleep here?”

*You’re asking me? But everything in this mansion belongs to you.* While I stood there dumbfounded, Lady Rosemary passed by and entered the room. She hopped onto the bed, adjusted the pillows, and placed the one she’d brought next to them. I finally snapped out of my stupor then.

“W-Wait a moment. Are you serious?”

“I can’t?”

She had peremptorily launched into action and I was the one in a fluster, so it was nasty of her to act meek.

*How many people could ever deny or reject such a peerless beauty when she looks up at you with those puppy eyes? I could never.*

“Yes, of course you can.”

A smile bloomed across her face. She looked like a child as she hummed while repositioning the pillows and blankets. It was a heartwarming sight.

*She’s an unpredictable person in a lot of ways, but I’ve discovered one new thing about her: she’s a genius at manipulating people.* I gazed at her, amazed,

and sighed when she beckoned me over with a grin.

*Being manipulated doesn't make me feel disgruntled, but that's probably because I know Lady Rosemary's actions stem from kindness. Visiting me at night with a drink, taking me out to town, and having a sudden sleepover with me—all her eccentric propositions were surely made to cheer me up when I was feeling down.*

"Come, Lady Julia." She lifted the blanket and invited me in.

I smiled wryly and climbed in beside her. "You are quite the demanding duchess," I jokingly scolded in a quiet tone.

The beauty next to me smiled and wrapped us up in the sheets. Under the dim light of the lantern, her faintly illuminated figure had a different charm than it did under daylight. She had looked like the incarnation of the sun while strolling through town, but now she looked like a goddess of the moon. My heart beat wildly for her even though we were both women, once again reaffirming that she was an irregularity.

After that, we talked about all sorts of topics. It was my first time chatting with a woman my age outside of a formal social setting. Deep down, I was nervous, but my worries about finding a common subject lasted for only a moment.

Lady Rosemary was an excellent listener and orator. From the vivid descriptions of her journeys, I could easily imagine the scenery of foreign countries. The salty sea breeze during her ocean voyage, the dry heat of Flanmer, and the thick, humid air of the forest—she shared a world I couldn't know about. After all, I'd lived a life of plenty in the royal palace, catered to by servants at my beck and call.

The world was far more vast than I'd imagined. There were a myriad of incredible sights like the priceless treasures I'd discovered today. The night wore on, and we continued to chat nonstop, even after the lantern ran out of oil and the light vanished.

The next day, both of us overslept. We woke up just before noon. *It's an appalling disgrace for any respectable princess, but surely a day like this would be fine just once.*

I left for the capital the day after that and received many presents from Lady Rosemary on top of the hair ornament she'd gifted me during our outing. When we parted, she embraced me tightly like I was her family.

"You must come again, okay?" she said.

I was given a warm welcome at the capital, but it was no match for the time I'd spent in Prelier. I recalled the minstrel's singing I'd heard over the hustle and bustle, as well as the bell striking noon—these sounds were lovelier than the melodies performed by a first-rate orchestra. The flavor of that sugary candy lived much more vividly in my mind than the sumptuous banquet, and Lady Rosemary's tales of her adventures were far more riveting than the conversations I shared with dolled-up noble ladies.

A few days' worth of memories had completely changed my being. I didn't know whether that change was a good one, but I could no longer return to the time when I had been unaware. The day after I returned to the Kingdom of Lapter, I requested an audience with my uncle—His Majesty the King.

"Welcome back, Julia."

When my uncle had been coronated king, his pallor had been ghastly, but he'd recovered to some degree as of late. The dark circles that had been etched underneath his eyes had faded considerably too.

"How was your visit to Nevel? Did anyone bully you because you're the princess of Lapter?" he joked.

I smiled wryly. "I was treated hospitably as their guest."

"I see, that's wonderful to hear." He nodded and reached for his tea.

The tea leaves that I'd received from Lady Rosemary were very fragrant. My uncle noticed this and sighed with admiration.

"Not only is this tea aromatic, it has a polished astringency and full-bodied flavor. It's delectable. What country is it from?" he asked.

"It's a rare tea cultivated in the mountains of the Kingdom of Schner. I heard it's only recently begun distribution, even in Prelier."

When I divulged the knowledge that Lady Rosemary had imparted to me, my

uncle's eyes widened.

Disconcerted by his gawking, I asked, "Is there something the matter?"

"No... It's nothing." He shook his head and then changed the subject. "That aside... I see, Prelier. I heard through the grapevine that you can find anything and everything from all over the world there, and it seems that was not entirely an overexaggeration."

"They certainly had a wide variety of merchandise."

*From the latest trends to rusted antiques, rare masterpieces of the highest grade, and knickknacks whose purpose was unclear. Just like how the town of Prelier was a conflation of new and old, there was a mix of all sorts of objects. It was jumbled and chaotic, yet strangely enough, a warm place. That town, just like its lord, is full of charming aspects.*

"It seems like you enjoyed yourself." My uncle's voice brought me out of my reminiscence. Seeing me snap back to attention put a sly smile on his face.

"I was—" I started, dismayed.

"Oh, don't misunderstand. It wasn't an accusation," he interrupted. "You looked like you were on death's door before you departed, so I'm glad that you've regained your spirit... You may not expect it from me, but I *was* concerned about you."

Embarrassed, my uncle averted his gaze. I was a bit surprised—it was an expression that was unlike the detached and elusive man I knew.

"Uncle..." I uttered reflexively.

Our eyes met. He put his cup down and laced his fingers together.

"You're a smart girl. You understand your role and take action without needing to be told. However, in my opinion, that cleverness of yours has constricted your life."

I looked at him in shock.

"As a princess of a declining nation, you don't have many options to choose from. Nonetheless, you are much too young to despair and give up on everything." He winked at me. "Unlike me."

My uncle had given up many things in order to avoid being killed by his tyrannical older brother. Though he had survived until now, he'd been forced to shoulder the burdens that the previous king had left behind...and I was the one who had made him choose that path.

*That's why I have the responsibility to sacrifice myself for Lapter as well. I am not allowed to run away on my own.* That was what I had thought, and yet...

"If you loved one of Nevel's princes, you could simply marry him, but you don't, do you?"

"With the way I am now, I am not a good match for either of them."

The crown prince was as handsome as the rumors painted him to be. Though he had a cold demeanor, his gaze softened when he spoke about his family. When that happened, he looked gentle and showed some semblance to Lady Rosemary.

Prince Johan had been quite reproachful during my stay in Prelier because I'd hogged his dear sister all to myself. Despite complaining that he rarely got to see her, he'd never once disturbed us. He truly was a kind soul.

They were both wonderful people, and that was exactly why I wasn't fit to stand by their sides. Before I'd visited the Prelier Duchy, I had intended to propose a contractual marriage to one of the princes on my own selfish grounds.

Presently, the king of Lapter, my uncle, did not have a wife or any children. I, as a woman, did not have the right to succeed the throne, but I could have children. There were plenty of scheming nobles who wanted to take me as their wife and have me bear their child so that they would become relatives of the future king.

Those fools—unable to forget the glory days of the past and dissatisfied with the sound governance of the current king—blustered about how I and my future child were more worthy of the throne since the blood of the previous king ran through my veins.

My uncle had endeavored to purge the treacherous subjects and traitors who had lined their pockets during the previous king's rule, but there was no end to

them. Countless people tried to sabotage his efforts, and punishing all of them would be unrealistic.

However, when my uncle eventually married and had children of his own, if I had children as well, I feared that nobles harboring wild ambitions would come crawling out of the woodwork. That was why I'd wanted to leave this nation. My plan had been to have a marriage blanc with whoever became my husband and leave birthing his heir to another woman.

Asking that of the crown prince was, as expected, unfeasible, but I'd thought there would be a chance Prince Johan would agree since he was a man of rational judgment. I had the potential to become an obstacle in his older brother's reign, so perhaps he'd want to monitor me from a close distance. I even had value as a hostage. *Surely there's room for consideration*, I had thought.

*Now that I think about it, I was considerably off the mark. Prince Johan is a gentleman. Even if it is someone he dislikes, he would never treat a woman as a tool.*

"Then you don't need to rush into marriage. As long as we're royalty, I regrettably can't promise that you can do whatever you like...but, well, it'll work out." The corners of his lips gently quirked up. "Let's leave tomorrow's business to our future selves."

Encouraged by his words, I resolutely opened my mouth. "Uncle. If you'll permit it, I want to see the world."

A beat passed and his eyes went wide as saucers. My unexpected request had struck him speechless.

"When I went to the Kingdom of Nevel... No, when I met Duchess Prelier, I learned of my own ignorance. I finally realize how narrow the world I've been living in is, and how rigid my thinking was."

My uncle was shocked, but he did not interject and silently listened to me speak.

"I do not intend to flee from the responsibilities I must fulfill as a princess. If there is anything I can do to assist the Kingdom of Lapter, I will humbly accept.

However, before that, I would like time to reexamine myself.”

*The red soil of Flanmer, a ship that voyages across the ocean, grand mountains that tower over vast swaths of forest—I want to go out into the world and witness views I’ve never seen before. Once I ascertain the immensity of the world, I want to reassess what I can do.*

“Hmm, very well.”

“Huh?”

He’d given me permission so readily that it was now my turn to freeze. A princess of a country going on a journey of self-discovery would normally be rejected without needing to think twice. I hadn’t planned to give up easily if he had denied my entreaty, and I’d even come up with a few points to argue my case—I hadn’t expected an immediate yes.

“As I told you before, you’re still young. I can afford to give you a grace period, so you may do as you like until you come of age.”

“I’ve already made my debut though.”

“You’re only in your teens. You’re still a child! Come now, if you try to argue on that point, how many years do you think I spent aimless?” He chuckled, but I wasn’t sure if I should laugh along with him. “Go out there, Julia. I’ll be waiting for your return here.”

I was shocked. My uncle regarded me with affectionate eyes like my father... No, it was a fond gaze that my blood father had never directed at me. His gentle smile made my chest tighten.

“Yes...” I somehow managed to suppress the urge to tear up and clumsily smiled back.



# The First Prince's Melancholy

"Yes, I have verified the information. This is the last one for today."

My aide, who was reviewing a document, looked up at me. I'd put down my quill pen and turned my gaze outside the window. Although the sun was low in the sky, it was still too early to call it dusk.

Before I'd begun working on my duties this morning, there had been a mountain of documents due at the end of the day. Though I'd been dejected, and I'd known I would need to stay late today, we'd made more headway than I'd expected.

"There is still time before your meal. Shall I prepare you a cup of tea?" he asked.

"No, I'm fine."

I'd anticipated a quick and simple dinner today, so who would've thought that I'd have spare time for a break. *I'm an easy one to understand, if I do say so myself.* Self-derision and shame welled up inside of me.

My work pace had been largely affected by a letter that had arrived just before noon. It sat on the corner of my desk, constantly within my field of view. When I reached out to pick it up, my aide broke into a smile. He looked at me as though he were watching something heartwarming, and it made me even more self-conscious.

"I shall deliver these documents to each division then." My prudent aide didn't say anything superfluous, but his eyes conveyed, *"So please take your time"* to me.

Now that I was over twenty, I was opposed to being treated like a child. However, I was well aware of how elated I'd become because I'd received a letter from my beloved younger sister, so I didn't say a word.

I coughed to cover up my embarrassment. Then, I opened the letter once more to read her pretty, feminine handwriting. It began, *"To my dear brother*

*Christoph,*” and I slowly traced the letters with my eyes.

Usually, Rose’s letters contained information about recent affairs and her territory’s condition, but this time, her correspondence came with joyful tidings: she would be coming to the capital soon.

I hadn’t seen Rose in person since her wedding—more than a year had passed since then. She had been devoting her efforts to managing Prelier, so she couldn’t leave her territory, and I, as the crown prince, couldn’t take time away from the capital so easily either.

I knew we had no choice, but I still felt lonely. When I’d heard that Johan had surreptitiously gone to meet her, I’d even felt somewhat envious of my precious little brother... But now that it was set in stone that I would be seeing her too, I could tolerate anything.

I almost felt like humming as I reread the letter. Then, I suddenly felt someone’s gaze. I whipped my head up, and my eyes bulged. I’d thought no one else was present in my office, but someone had entered without my knowing. That person leaned on the door, not bothering to mask his exasperation as he observed me.

“Wipe that slovenly expression off your face,” he said arrogantly. “Your reputation as the ‘Flawless Crown Prince’ is weeping.”

I wanted to retort with something, but I was tongue-tied. I had a plethora of objections like “‘Flawless Crown Prince’ is an embarrassing moniker, so I’d rather not be called that” and “When did you come inside?” However, it was difficult to rebut when I knew that I was making an unbecoming expression.

“Your Majesty, could you please say something before entering my room?”

At the end of all my brooding, what came out instead was a muted complaint. *I know I’m pathetic. I know that more than anyone, and I don’t need to hear it from someone else.*

I had to eat my words though when he—the king—sighed and said, “I did. You didn’t answer, so I let myself in.” He continued in a blase tone, pursing his lips. “It seems I’ve disturbed you in a time of concentration.”

He was expressionless. Somehow, he was ridiculing me without even needing

to raise the corner of his mouth. I would rather be lambasted head-on than suffer such humiliation.

“How can I help you?” I asked curtly, suppressing my irritation.

*I'll lose even if I try to argue, so I'd prefer not to squander my time meaninglessly. It would be wise to summarily drive him away.*

“This.”

With one artless motion, the king tossed what he was holding. What landed on my desk was a thick book...or not. It wasn't a book, but a stack of pictures that I was unfortunately quite acquainted with.

I didn't need to leaf through them to know that they were all paintings of young, beautiful noblewomen. They were for me to choose a future partner from—these were matchmaking portraits.

I was fed up, and my face contorted. I knew I was of marriageable age, but this all felt awfully sudden. Every time I made an appearance in a social setting, I was surrounded and forced to listen to other people prattle on about my marriage, their eyes blazing. I was tired of it.

As the crown prince, getting married was one of my responsibilities. Each of the ladies who swarmed around me had her own circumstances, and there were women who were taking action for the sake of their family or domain, not their own desire. Despite knowing this, I felt like I'd become a stud horse.

“You didn't need to bring me these yourself. You could've had them delivered,” I said.

“I saw the ones left in the corner of your room to gather dust, so I came to have another word with you.”

I silently shifted my gaze away.

Though the portraits would never be covered in dust thanks to my capable servants, there was indeed a pile of portraits that I'd never perused relegated to the side. My aide and other attendants admonished me in a roundabout manner every now and then. However, I was extremely busy, so they never hounded me. I'd expected the king to summon me at some point, but I never

predicted he'd march into my office himself.

"Are you and your brother even serious about getting married?"

"It will happen when the need arises."

I was prepared to marry anyone if it was a political marriage for the sake of Nevel, and I would make every effort to make my wife happy. But telling me I could choose who I liked conversely put me in a dilemma.

The only way I could deliberate on the matter was by taking her faction and situation into account to search for the best partner. That being the case, I wasn't sure if that was the correct approach. When I recalled my younger sister's blissful smile as she'd stood next to her beloved husband, my outlook wavered.

"It seems that day will be far off as long as your expression turns into that sloppy mess whenever you read a letter from your sister."

"Please get off my case," I griped.

"If that one were a man, the issue of a successor would be easily solved," the king said, wrinkling his brow.

*"That one" must refer to Rose.*

"The princess of Lapter showed not a shred of interest in the two of you—she only spoke about that one."

Lapter's princess had visited our country a few days ago. I'd heard rumors that she was a beautiful yet dangerous woman, like a poisonous flower, but the person I'd met was gentle. I'd gauged her to be an intelligent noble lady from the way she had carried herself in conversations with sagacity, and it hadn't seemed to be a contrived act.

When the topic had turned to Rose, her expression had softened into one that suited a girl her age. Evidently, my sister had managed to befriend the princess of a former enemy nation without my knowledge.

*Her social skills and popularity are astonishing. If Rose were a prince, there would certainly be a procession of women who'd want to marry her, regardless of her standing or power. I would relinquish the title of crown prince to her as*

*well. Johan and I would gladly assist her.*

“If you have the time to daydream about a nonexistent future, then look over the files,” he scolded.

My face must’ve slackened while my imagination had become disproportionately inflated. I screwed up my face without bothering to hide my annoyance. He scowled at me with narrowed eyes.

After our brief glare-off, the king sighed. “Don’t treat the privilege to select your wife like it’s a nonnecessity. Remember, there are people who yearn for that so desperately that they will risk their lives to attain it.”

I unconsciously breathed in sharply. It felt like I’d been stabbed in the chest.

*That’s right. My sister, Rose, did not have that privilege. Despite having her heart set on someone, she was almost compelled into a political marriage to strengthen our alliance with another nation. How many times did that girl dive headfirst into danger so she could seize the hand of her beloved? How many hardships did she have to overcome before she could wed Leonhart?*

*I don’t want to make light of my dear sister’s efforts, even if indirectly.*

“My apologies,” I said regretfully, hanging my head in shame.

When I lifted my face, the king was impassive as always, and I couldn’t tell what was going through his mind. Regardless, he also hadn’t been able to choose his partner. He had likely married my birth mother and stepmother for political reasons.

*I’m allowed this freedom because we live in peaceful times, and I mustn’t take that for granted.*

“If you understand, then skim through them.”

“Yes, sir.”

I did not like my father, but I respected him as a king. After all, the Kingdom of Nevel would not be thriving now if not for him. *I have much to learn from him. I shouldn’t avoid things I struggle with like a child would. Perhaps it would be worth trying to listen to him.*

Done with his business, he turned to leave, but he suddenly came to a halt.

“Shall we have a new portrait painted for you?” he asked.

“Of me? My last portrait was drawn two years ago, and I haven’t changed much.”

*It would be problematic if my matchmaking portrait and my actual appearance were poles apart, but my growth period has long since ended. There shouldn’t be a substantial difference between me now and me from two years ago.*

“That’s not it. I think the young ladies would be relieved to see the slovenly expression you were making rather than the cold and unattractive one of your current portrait.”

He was ridiculing me once again with that deadpan face. My dumbfounded astonishment was soon followed by rage welling up inside of me. My hands clenched into fists; my lips curved into a smile.

“That will be unnecessary.”

“Is that so?”

*Why do I get the impression that he’s mocking me when his expression doesn’t change in the slightest?* I watched him go, quelling my desire to jump-kick him in the back, and sighed.

*I really do hate him.*

# The Reincarnated Duchess Schemes

I gazed up at the ceiling. The cloudless blue sky stretched beyond the other side of the iron beams. The dazzling sunlight, unobstructed by the roof, shone through and blinded my eyes. I used my hand to create some makeshift shade, then surveyed the area.

Glass had been used to construct not only the ceiling, but the walls in every direction, so there was nowhere to hide from the sun. It was steadily warming up inside the structure, and it had reached a temperature hotter than early summer—it mimicked the midsummer heat. A gentle breeze blew in through the ventilation window, caressing my sweaty nape. *The air circulation is excellent as well.*

“Great, it’s shaping up well,” I remarked with a satisfied nod.

“You’ve made *another* outrageous thing again,” called a voice from behind me.

I turned around. Wolf was giving me a look that was a mixture of shock and admiration. The people standing behind him wore similar expressions.

“Isn’t this four times the size of the palace’s greenhouse?” Teo asked, his eyes focused on the ceiling.

“Just by size, yes.”

This greenhouse was nowhere near as extravagant as the one in the royal palace that he, Lutz, and I knew so well. That one was dome-shaped with a lotus pond and aqueducts in it, and it also served ornamental purposes.

In contrast, the one we’d built here eliminated all excessive features in pursuit of functioning purely as a greenhouse—it was almost boorish. *That’s fine though. I only plan to use it to cultivate rare medicinal herbs, and it won’t be accessible to the general public.*

“We’ll be able to grow plants from southern lands with this heat.” Michael looked around the vicinity, eyes gleaming with curiosity. His voice was

surprisingly spirited for someone who was usually so reserved. His love for plants matched his status as an earth-affinity sorcerer.

“Yes! I’ll need your help until they take root though,” I said.

“Please leave it to me!”

*Reliable as always. Michael has the power to stimulate plant growth, so having him is like having a hundred gardeners.*

“With such a magnificent facility, anything seems possible,” he said. Michael appeared to be ready to do literally anything, which was both heartening and also made me a tad uneasy.

*After how long I’ve known him, I’m aware Michael is an extremely diligent and hardworking person. He’ll laboriously toil where no one can see, and coupled with his reserved personality, he reminds me of the classic Japanese disposition. He enjoys beavering away on even the most simple and straightforward tasks, and he becomes anxious when he has free time. He’s got too many attributes of a corporate slave...*

I was hesitant to put a damper on his mood, but I couldn’t help adding a little warning. “That’s very reassuring, but you’re forbidden from overdoing it.”

Michael gasped and snapped back to attention. His cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “I’ll be careful.”

“Michael’s earnest, unlike Lutz. I’ll keep an eye on him and make sure he takes breaks.” Teo smiled cheerfully and patted Michael on the back.

*Teo’s good at taking care of others, so I can have peace of mind with him around. His communication skills are off the charts, and he can get along with anyone; he may look rough around the edges, but he’s exceptionally thoughtful and considerate.*

*Michael’s shy, but Teo’s steadily been getting close to him, and now he’s won his trust. Even the querulous Khuer tribe has taken a liking to him. He’s amazing. Once again, I think the Prelier Duchy has been inordinately blessed with talented personnel.*

“Mary, I knew you were unorthodox, but this blows everything else out of the



water,” Wolf said, scratching his head.

I looked up at him. “Is it not to your liking?” I asked.

“You dullard,” he said, dramatically pulling a face. “It’s the opposite! This is absolutely sublime!”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“What doctor wouldn’t be overjoyed when bestowed the perfect environment to grow ingredients for medicine?”

He looked angry, but I could tell he was delighted, and a relieved sigh spilled from my lips. *An earth-affinity sorcerer and medicine-making specialists—I was determined to build such a large greenhouse because both Michael and the Khuer tribe are here.*

“I am incredibly happy, but is this okay?” Wolf asked. *“This must’ve been expensive,”* said his gaze.

I nodded solemnly. Though I had used Lord Julius’s connections to get in touch with an atelier, glass was still fairly expensive. Furthermore, greenhouses were a rarity in themselves, so there were few craftsmen who could design and construct one.

*Uncommon materials multiplied by special techniques equals sky-high costs. My purse was already bruised from building the medical facility, but now it’s taken an even larger blow. I hardly ever made purchases for myself when I was a princess, and the amount I’ve spent as a duchess is beyond a sum that would make me shudder—it’s enough to make me faint.*

*But, I daresay this is a necessary expense.*

“We just need to earn money from here on out,” I said.

“That’s an ambitious expectation,” Wolf said.

“Hey, I think we could sell anything in the market right now,” Teo remarked.

I shook my head. “No, we can’t just sell ‘anything.’”

*Prelier is experiencing an unprecedented economic boom. People and items from all over the world are gathering here, and we could make huge profits*

*depending on how we handle the situation. Nonetheless, I rejected any notions of simply decreasing agricultural production in favor of expanding the marketplace.*

*Depriving farmers of their livelihoods to invite more merchants here would be a terrible move. I don't want to do anything that would nip my people's future just to make a quick buck. I'm also against relying on Prelier's inflated brand value because of the medical facility to buy low and sell high.*

*Our customers aren't fools; they'd notice if we sold them subpar products. After we woke up from dreams of everlasting prosperity, Prelier would only be left with ill repute. So, I decided we should sell high-quality items at a high price—the higher the quality, the higher the price.*

*As trade with the island country to the east, Osten, continues, we'll procure more rare commodities besides food. We also have curios that were imported from other nations that you can't even find in the capital. Of course, I can't promise that all of them are first-class goods, and it's a mixed bag, but I've found many excellent purchases.*

*As for our ornament production, fortunately Prelier is attracting not only doctors and merchants, but also craftsmen of all kinds who dream of success. There are plenty of young, unpolished gems out there ripe for the picking!*

*If we accumulate materials from all over and have highly skilled professionals, we should be able to create extraordinary products... No, I'm convinced we will!*

*"You're scheming something interesting again." Wolf's eyes narrowed and the corners of his lips curved up. "Don't tell me—is that your objective for your upcoming visit to the capital?"*

*"Yes, well, that's a part of it."*

*It's almost time for the social season to begin. Last year, the medical facility project was only beginning to get into full swing, and it was my first year as a feudal lord. I was allowed to ignore the social season and stay within the Prelier Duchy to deal with the never-ending barrage of observation applications from various countries too.*

*But things are different this year. It's my duty to attend as a high-ranking*

*noble, and connections are essential to developing my territory. My goal is to put my eye-catching status as former royalty and the first duchess to good use and expand my network.*

*And while I'm at it, I'll be a walking billboard for us. I've been avoiding high society since I'm out of my element there, but if I have to attend anyway, then I want to kill two birds with one stone.*

"I'll do my best," I declared, balling my hands into fists.

# The Reincarnated Duchess's Defeat

A strong sour aroma wafted through the air together with the rising steam. I picked up a polished silver spoon and lightly mixed my cup of black tea. A round slice of lemon floated inside the white porcelain tea cup.

*You wouldn't have found this sort of tea culture in the past, but it's flowed in from other nations and taken root in the past few years. I heard this refreshing flavor is popular among ladies who are tired of drinking tea plain or with milk.*

It had struck me as odd in the past that the Kingdom of Nevel didn't drink lemon tea, but I'd never expected it to gain traction. Lemons existed, so I could've added a slice to tea if I craved it, but I simply didn't like lemon tea so I didn't.

*I like lemons and I like black tea, but for some reason I didn't enjoy them together. I still don't know whether it was the taste or scent that turned me off from it. In any case, I've now conquered this drink!*

A short time ago, lemon tea had become the new fad in the Prelier Duchy as well, so it was being served more often by other families and shops. Unable to disregard their kind consideration, I forced myself to drink it and eventually got used to it. If anything, I'd even begun to find it delicious as of late.

I scooped the lemon slice up with my spoon and set it aside on the saucer. I looped my finger around the cup handle and took a sip. Its rich fragrance filled my nose. *Yeah, it is yummy. I heard your palate changes as you age, but I never thought it'd change this dramatically.*

While I pat myself on the back for my growth, I heard the quiet rustle of paper. I stole a glance at the person in front of me and then exhaled. *Speaking of growth, here's another one. When I was young, just entering this room was enough to make my stomach churn. Now I'm calm enough to leisurely savor tea. No, "calm" isn't quite the right word. I'm stronger... No, sturdier?*

"You've become much more impudent," a voice said as though he'd heard my

thoughts.

I looked up and locked eyes with a pair of light-blue orbs. Even with age, his intimidatingly beautiful mien showed no sign of decline. As always, despite his age-indeterminate appearance, he was troublesome to handle because his intensity only ever increased.

“I’ve you to thank for that,” I replied with a smile.

He let out an unamused snort and dropped his gaze back down at the documents. The cause of my impudence sat across from me—my father. He had unreasonably demanded the impossible from a child over and over again. Just when I’d crawled up the edge of a cliff, he would push me right back off—he had a vicious personality. A lion would’ve been gentler than him.

However, though it vexed me, I also felt gratitude toward him. If my father had left me alone and I’d only received the education to be a modest lady, I wouldn’t have been able to become a feudal lord. I would’ve ended up as a trophy wife and all the official duties would’ve been dumped onto Sir Leonhart.

*In the first place, if I’d lived as a regular princess, I wouldn’t have married Sir Leonhart nor would I have been conferred the position of duchess, but we’ll set that aside. I’m exceedingly happy right now so I won’t sweat the small stuff.*

“Did you put this together on your own?” My father lifted his head and tapped the documents with the back of his hand. “All this?” he asked.

What I’d submitted to him was a draft for a scholarship system.

“Of course not,” I immediately denied.

*I only proposed a rough framework for it. Though I have hazy memories and knowledge from my past life, I don’t recall the finer details. Not to mention my ideas need to be adapted to fit this world. My husband took charge and—together with our reliable friends—worked out the specific conditions and system, filled the gaps, and refined its design.*

“I have many talented people in my territory.”

“Indeed.” My father furrowed his brow. “Are you certain this shouldn’t be restricted to only commoners?”

“Yes.”

Commoners were not the only ones who were forced to give up on education because of financial reasons. Just as there were affluent commoners, there were nobles living destitute lives as well. Furthermore, many women were not given the opportunity to study. Compared to in other countries, female empowerment was making progress in Nevel, but the notion of male chauvinism still held strong.

*Commoner, noble, man, or woman, it doesn't matter what you are. As long as they have the ability and ambition to excel, my goal is to foster talented people who would otherwise be left buried because of financial reasons and make them bloom.*

“Very well.”

My face lit up.

“But, the criteria for judging whether a grantee should be required to pay interest is still too lax. Revise that part and bring this back for review.”

“Understood.” I was smiling both inside and out. I had known that my father wouldn't approve this on the first pass, and, if anything, his reaction was much more positive than I'd anticipated.

“You truly have become impudent. Consider picking up how to be cute from some place.”

“Oh, my. What a funny joke.” *How would being cute help me in front of my father? I don't want to hear that from the man who didn't show me a shred of mercy when I was a pure, innocent child, and shoved me down a ravine.* “Father, I became strong thanks to you, and I'm ever grateful for that.”

He tapped the rejected papers on the table to put them in order, and then made an exasperated face. I had a feeling his gaze was silently chiding me, something along the line of *“Impudence and strength are different,”* but I pretended not to notice.

*Oh, that's right. Speaking of gratitude, I have another important matter with him.*

“I just remembered, I have something I’d like to give you,” I said.

“Something you’d like to give me?”

I ignored his suspicious gaze and summoned the maid waiting on me. I took a blue velvet case out of her hands and placed it in front of him. “It’s a gift from me.”

“From you...to me?” My father looked uncharacteristically surprised, and his long lashes fluttered slowly. Even the way he lifted the box and opened it was inordinately cautious and measured.

“Yes. I would be delighted if you would be our billboard... I mean, if you would wear it.”

My inner thoughts had leaked out, but I’d managed to correct myself posthaste. I was afraid he’d refuse it as I described the artisans in Prelier and the Kingdom of Osten’s ornamental craftsmanship to him, but his reaction was somewhat lacking.

*No, he’s not responding whatsoever. He’s always stoic, but he’s not looking down on me or bored at all! I don’t know how to classify that expression, he almost looks like a vulnerable child.*

The stifling silence probably lasted for only a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity to me. My father let out a small sigh, his gaze still locked on the present.

“You have some nerve to make the king advertise for you.”

*I think he’s figured out my goal.* “Is it too much to ask for you to put your magnificent face to good use sometimes?”

“The queen and princes were overjoyed to receive gifts from you; they’ll weep if they hear you say that,” he instantly quipped back, shutting me up.

I had given my mother, Chris, and Johan presents as soon as I’d arrived in the capital. They had been over the moon, and the harrowing guilt I’d felt was still fresh on my mind. *It’s true I want them to advertise for me, but I’m also very grateful to them.*

“If you don’t like it, then I’ll take it home.” The words came out like a sulking

child's, even for me. I held out my palm, demanding the case back, but my father pulled it away.

"I didn't say I disliked it."

I glowered at him with watery eyes, and my father's expression softened. He smiled at me with a gentleness so uncharacteristic of him that I thought I was hallucinating. My eyes grew as wide as saucers.

"What parent would dislike receiving a gift from their daughter?"

"Guh?!" My face heated up. I knew I'd turned bright red. I frantically tried to hide it, but my father was indifferent.

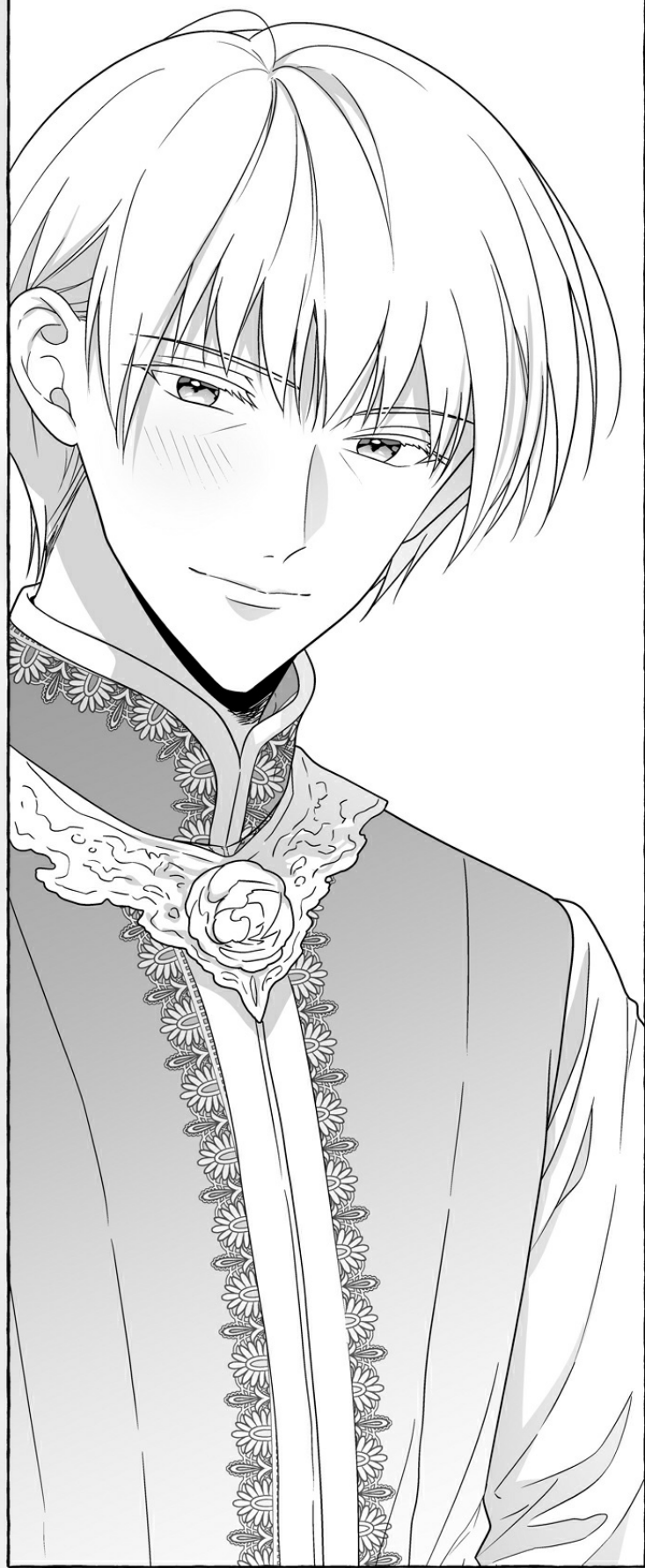
"I'll gratefully accept." He closed the velvet box. His face had already reverted to his usual impertinent expression.

"That's not fair..." I muttered, feeling an odd sense of defeat.

"*Did you say something?*" came his glance, but I turned away with a pout as a small sign of defiance. However, my reaction only reaffirmed my own childishness and my sense of defeat grew.

*Never mind, I really can't handle him.*





## The Reincarnated Duchess Asks for Help

After my meeting with my father ended, I left his room. As soon as I stepped out, I reflexively exhaled deeply. I was relieved I'd accomplished my goal, as well as worn out from being rattled by him.

"Lady Rosemary." Klaus, who'd been waiting for me in the hallway, peered at me with a concerned gaze when he saw the fatigue on my face.

I forced a smile in return to his frown. "I'm fine."

"Would you like to return to your residence?"

"I really am fine. We came all the way to the castle so let's finish all our business here."

I hastily straightened my back. *If I let out a single cough, I'll be stuffed into a carriage and sent home. With my husband at the head, there's a lot of overprotective people in Prelier. Maybe it's because I'm normally unreliable, but everyone is constantly fussing over me. I'm grateful, but I feel like I'm going to become a useless bum and it scares me.*

"But your complexion—"

"Pardon me, I apologize for interrupting."

Klaus persisted, but he was interrupted by a knight waiting in front of my father's room. I remembered his face, but I couldn't recall his name. *If memory serves, isn't he Klaus's friend...? I believe they joined the royal guard at the same time.*

He respectfully bowed to me. "I know it's presumptuous of me to offer, but I have a suggestion. I'll prepare a room nearby, so how about taking a brief respite there?" he suggested.

"Dennis. Could you summon the head sorceress or her pupil there?" Klaus asked, pushing the conversation forward without my acknowledgment.

*I am here to discuss rare medicinal herbs so Miss Irene or Lutz would be the*

*people to go to. Still, I didn't intend on calling them to me. It doesn't make sense to force the people I'm asking for help to make their way here. Suddenly, I snapped back to my senses. Wait, I don't feel particularly ill in the first place!*

"Um..." I said.

"Please send a message to the mage tower, and prepare some tea."

I'd tried to speak up, but I'd been too quiet and they didn't hear me. The knight named Dennis handed a few orders to a young knight nearby. While I hesitated, they immediately set off.

*I'd feel bad declining their consideration at this point. I am a bit tired so let's just obediently let them pamper me.* I mentally apologized to Miss Irene and Lutz again and followed the knights. However, I obliquely insisted that I was not under the weather. *It would be a disaster if word gets around and it reaches the ears of all my worrywart mothers. "It'd be better for you to live in the palace," they'd say.*

Most nobles had a country house in their domain and a separate town house in the capital. The Prelier Duchy was no exception and also possessed a prime piece of real estate here. My parents had gifted it to me as a wedding present.

During the social season, I'd planned to stay there, so I'd ordered the servants to prepare it for use. Despite that, as soon as they'd found out I was coming to the capital, my mother and Johan had both suggested I stay in the castle.

"The castle is spacious and there are plenty of empty rooms. Your old bedroom was left as is, and if you don't like that then you could stay in the detached palace as well," they had said.

*No, no, no! You're the one who gave me that house! Also, maybe I'd take you up on your offer if it were just me, but Sir Leonhart is here too. One or two days would be a different story, but we'll be here for over a month. It's possible we'll be here for as long as three months! I'd feel bad for making him live with his wife's family.*

*Besides, I'm not royalty anymore. It wouldn't be a good look if I loitered around the castle like I owned the place. I somehow managed to convince them to allow me to use the town house as my home base on the condition I visit*

*frequently. And yet, if this talk about my health gets blown out of proportion, I'll be right back where I started.*

*I'll quietly rest and then swiftly leave,* I decided and patiently waited in the room. Before long, Lutz finally arrived.

"Princess!" He must've rushed over because he was breathing heavily.

*What on earth did they tell him?* "I'm sorry for summoning you here." I was about to stand up, but he stopped me with his hand.

"No need for that. More importantly, how are you feeling?"

"Not bad. I was just a bit tired, that's all." *I feel like I'm worrying and inconveniencing a lot of people.* Feeling a headache coming on for different reasons than being sick, I continued on. "I had a lot of matters to attend to and I haven't had the chance to relax, so the fatigue has piled up. But I don't feel sick. I feel quite well, actually."

"Really?" Lutz asked dubiously.

"Yes, as you can see," I said, waving my arms cheerfully.

"That's good then." Convinced, he heaved a sigh of relief. Behind his long bangs, his blue eyes, clear as precious gems, gently narrowed.

His beautiful face had used to resemble a young girl's, but it had transformed into the countenance of a young man over the years. The epithet "peerless" still suited him well, but few would mistake his gender if they saw him now.

His robe had been altered to keep pace with his height, and it was now adorned with a chest brooch mounted with a glistening magic gem. I'd heard he'd become the head sorceress's assistant only a few days ago. Teo and Michael had been impressed, but the man himself didn't seem particularly happy about it.

"Lutz, I'm glad you're doing well too. How is Miss Irene?"

He took a seat on the sofa across from me. "Oh, she's fit as a fiddle. She has more stamina than me, and her magical power hasn't waned whatsoever. I suspect my master is drinking a potion of youth," Lutz said without hesitation.

"She's going to scold you."

“I’ll be fine. She’s dealing with a visitor right now.”

“Oh my, that’s a shame.” *I should’ve made an appointment before coming, I thought regretfully.*

“I’m sure you wanted to meet her too, so come again.”

“I plan to. I doubt I’ll finish all my business today anyway.”

“Oh, right, is this about medicinal herbs?”

Since we were cultivating rare medicinal herbs in Prelier, I’d ordered books on the subject. However, perhaps the literature was too old or it was written in a dialect I struggled to understand—or maybe it was both—but I struggled to parse the unique terminology.

Miss Irene studied ancient magic so she was well-versed in linguistics. Teo had also been involved in magic research, but not to the same extent as his teacher and Lutz, so he’d advised I turn to them for help.

I handed Lutz the book, and his demeanor became dignified. He flipped through the pages with a serious expression, and after a short while, he looked back up.

“You’re better off asking my master for help. I can read it, but, like Teo, I don’t feel confident in my interpretation.”

“Okay, I’ll come back again to request her assistance.”

“I’ll forward your message. Let me hold on to this and I’ll pass it on to her.”

“No.” *A hedge between keeps friendship green. I want to draw a clear line between work and private life. I don’t want her to provide me with knowledge without compensation because we’re friends, and I don’t want to skip necessary steps.*

“Master loves this sort of literature so I think she’d gladly work on it though.”

“Still no.” I snatched the book out of Lutz’s hand.

His eyes rounded for a moment and then he broke into a wide smile. “All right, we’ll be waiting.”

*He must be referring to the next time I return. He smiles the same way he did*

*in the past and it sort of puts my heart at ease.*

# The Reincarnated Duchess's Urge

I enjoyed chatting with Lutz and got a nice relaxing break out of it. Thanks to that, my complexion had improved greatly...apparently. I hadn't even felt like I was in bad shape to begin with so I couldn't tell if anything was different.

Before I returned to my residence, I had wanted to drop by a shop that had recently opened on the main street and look into the capital's latest trends, but I decided against it.

*It's true that I'm tired, plus I don't want to make everyone worry. I'm a bit... No, I'm very disappointed to miss out on the popular sweets shop that popped up recently though.* I resisted temptation and headed to where my carriage awaited.

"Huh?"

"Rose."

My carriage had a black body with gold trimming, and the Prelier Duchy Emblem glistened on the door. It was hitched to two horses with beautiful chestnut coats, and standing next to them was my husband.

The way he gently smiled and lightly waved at me was stunning. *It's a sight for sore eyes, but wasn't he supposed to be working at home all day today?*

"Welcome back," he said, holding his hand out for me.

"I'm home." I placed my hand on top of his. "Leon, why are you here? Did the royal guard summon you?"

Although he'd retired as captain of the royal guard, the influence of the Black Lion general remained strong. There were still many young knights who named Sir Leonhart as their target of admiration, and his skills were no less than when he was in active service. The number of people who wanted to cross swords with him or receive instruction from him was as high as a mountain.

*I presume the current knight captain wouldn't want to let a golden*

*opportunity pass when he heard of Sir Leonhart's visit to the capital. He must've summoned my husband here.* However, Sir Leonhart shook his head.

"No, that's not why," he said in an evasive tone, shooting me a forced smile.

*If I think it over carefully, he's not dressed to display his swordsmanship today.* He wore a black frock coat and trousers with a gray gilet. His blue ascot was a fresh addition to those dark colors. It was a style that tightly followed his silhouette, emphasizing his excellent figure, but it wasn't a design fit for exercise.

*Is he here for something else then?* When I saw how he struggled to explain, I felt a pang of unease.

"My father didn't summon you here, did he?" I asked timidly.

*I don't think he's the type to torment his son-in-law. I don't expect kindness or sincerity from him—he's simply a mass of rationalism. My father isn't programmed with those sort of humanlike functions.*

I'd asked him just in case, but Sir Leonhart stared back at me in shock.

"Of course not," he said.

"Right, of course not."

*Thank god. Forget about mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts, if a son-in-law and father-in-law conflict occurred out of left field, I wouldn't know what to do. I panicked for a moment there.*

*But in that case, why is he here? Don't tell me Klaus called for him. Did the overprotective Sir Leonhart come running over because he heard I was feeling unwell? No, Klaus doesn't look happy to see him so I don't think that's right. I wonder what happened?*

He courteously escorted me and I slowly stepped down the stairs. When I leaned over to board the carriage, Sir Leonhart drew his lips close to my ears.

"I missed you."

My eyes widened and I unconsciously stopped moving. I stared at him so hard that I could burn a hole through him, and his brow drooped with embarrassment.



“I had business to take care of in town so I stopped by the sweets shop you were interested in on the way. Then I was close to the castle so I came to see how you were doing, and I just happened to see your carriage here...and I ended up waiting for you.”

His voice sounded as calm as usual, but he spoke a bit faster. He must’ve known he was acting out of character, because although he appeared composed, the tips of his ears were tinged red.

*Even if my carriage home is already prepared, there’s always a chance that my return home gets delayed. He sent his carriage on ahead and bravely waited for me? We would have seen each other tonight though. Not to mention we were together just this morning.*

*Haaah... Isn’t he just too cute?!*

I somehow managed to suppress my desire to cover my face and scream. *He’s so cute. He’s so adorable that I just don’t know anymore!* A strange urge to pounce on him welled up inside of me. *I finally understand what the phrase “cute aggression” means.*

Sir Leonhart took a seat across from me. He seemed a bit restless, perhaps he was worried about my lack of reaction. His gaze roamed the carriage interior.

“Rose?”

His questioning tone almost made me lose it completely. I shut the door, signaled the coachman to take off, and let out a long sigh.

“Leon.”

“Yes...?”

“May I hug you?”

“Huh?”

Sir Leonhart had braced himself since I’d put on a serious expression, but now he looked caught off guard. I didn’t let my emotions show on my face even when he replied with confusion. I gave him a hard look and repeated my question, brows knit together.

“May I hug you, please?”

Sir Leonhart looked flummoxed, but he nodded. Permission granted, I spread my arms wide. Though he still didn't seem to understand what was going on, he moved next to me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and embraced his head. I squeezed him tight without holding back, and his shoulders jumped.

"Leon, you're too cute. I feel like my heart's going to explode."

Surprise flashed across his face.

"Goodness, you're so cute that I just don't know anymore. I love you!"

"I'm conflicted..."

Apparently he wasn't pleased with being called cute. Eyes moist, he weakly glared at me. He looked upset, but his cheeks were red so he wasn't particularly scary.

"A man in his thirties can't possibly be cute. Cute is..."

*My oh my. He's saying more cute things while making an adorable expression! He looks like he knows what he's doing, but in times like this, Sir Leonhart isn't being calculating. I can feel his temperature shooting up from embarrassment. I've seen something good. My inner self pressed her palms together in thanks. There's a certain kind of nourishment you can only get from seeing a grown man acting shy.*

"Oh my. When a woman calls someone 'cute,' it's a term of endearment, you know?"

Sir Leonhart was at a loss for words until his expression eventually softened into a mix of frustration and happiness. "You truly are a genius when it comes to toying with me." The words he uttered were similar to something he'd told me a long, long time ago.

*I wonder what young Rose would think if she saw us now. Would she jump for joy? Or would she be shocked and in disbelief? Maybe she'd even get angry at me for treating Sir Leonhart like this.*

"Don't be mad." I nuzzled my cheek against his head and kissed his hair whorl.

Sir Leonhart was nowhere near angry, let alone upset, enough that I needed to beg for forgiveness. He let out an embarrassed chuckle.

“Only if you give me the rest of your time today.” He gently kissed my cheek in return. “The cake should’ve arrived at home already, so let’s have some tea in the garden when we get back. I bought your favorite tart.”

“Gladly!”

I’d planned to tackle more work when I returned, but I flung my schedule far off into the distance. *Sir Leonhart and I have a tendency to work ahead of schedule so there’s nothing wrong with slacking off every once in a while.* I mentally fired off such excuses to no one in particular as I hugged my beloved husband once more.

# The Reincarnated Duchess's Afternoon

A pleasant breeze drifted by, carrying with it the smell of fresh grass. I inhaled the fragrance, my accumulated fatigue melting away with it.

I loved relaxing in the garden on fine days like this. The weather was especially delightful during the early summer in the afternoon. My parents must've been aware of my preferences because they'd spent more money on the garden than the town house itself for my wedding present.

The lawn and hedges were tidy, and the topiaries were shaped into animals. There was also a pond, albeit a small one, and a beautiful statue of a goddess smiled gracefully in the center. A bed of herbs that had been meticulously cultivated by the gardener bloomed along the narrow cobblestone path. This was the best time to see chamomiles and cornflowers, delighting the eyes of passersby.

After I passed under an arch covered in rambling roses that were still only buds and ascended a brick stairs, a location that resembled a hideaway appeared. It was a gazebo with a dome-shaped ceiling and white columns adorned with fine engravings and a spiral chapter. It reminded me of a birdcage and I found it lovely. Though it was a small structure that could only fit two elegant metal chairs and a garden table, this was my favorite spot.

*There's no replacement for the time I spend relaxing with Sir Leonhart here. It's even better with delicious tea and cake. I can declare that there's no greater luxury in the world than this!*

I stabbed my fork down, and it easily sank into the pastry with little resistance. A few crumbs gave way to gravity and fell on top of the plate as I shoved the bite into my mouth. The faint fragrance of cinnamon wafted up my nose. Then, the tantalizing sweetness of concentrated apple glacé and custard cream spread across my tongue.

"Delicious!" I cried on reflex as a smile spread across my face.

Sir Leonhart's lips curved up. Though he hadn't touched his own cake yet, his smile looked satisfied already.

A cherry tart sat in front of him. The distinctive aroma of kirsch and crème d'amande made a delectable combination, but it was too much for me since I was weak to alcohol. For the record, I couldn't have savarin either.

And Sir Leonhart knew that very well. He'd selected the pastries I was interested in but never ordered. Then, when he saw the desire in my eyes, he'd give me a bite.

*Sweet. Not the cake—Sir Leonhart is too sweet to me. There's a side of him that seems to function solely for the purpose of turning me into a ne'er-do-well. His old friend, Gunther, was also astounded when he saw him like this and said, "I can't believe a person can change so much."*

"Do you want some?"

I must've been staring too hard because Sir Leonhart pushed his plate toward me. I thought for a moment and then shook my head. He grinned at me like a child up to mischief.

"Shall I feed you?"

I could tell he was secretly holding a grudge against me for repeatedly calling him cute. "No, thank you."

"That's a shame."

I sent a glower his way, but it had no effect as he merely smiled back cheerfully. The cute and lovely Sir Leonhart from moments ago was a time-limited item. Knowing that made me savor the moment even more.

*Even though I feel slightly irked, I can't help but be captivated by the face he makes when he's being a tease. I'm quite calculating if I do say so myself.*

Sir Leonhart cut his tart into sizable pieces as he ate it. His expression suddenly hardened in seriousness. "Incidentally, how are you feeling?"

*Looks like Klaus reported what happened to him.* I smiled, trying to clear the cloud of worry from his face. "As you can see, I'm healthy as can be. I think I was just a little weary because I've been working nonstop for some time now."

“That’s good...but just in case, let’s have a doctor examine you.”

“What? That’s an overreaction.” Surprised, I accidentally dropped my tart.

*I’m not acting tough, I really am fine. Why does everyone disregard my assessment and make me out to be a gravely ill patient?*

The doctor employed by the Prelier duchy was advanced in his years, so we’d brought a younger doctor—his son—with us to the town house. A handful of the Khuer tribe had also accompanied us for an observation trip to the capital.

However, they were also tasked with gathering documents and picking out medicinal ingredients in town, so they were all fairly preoccupied. The medical facility plan had only recently become up and running, so everyone in our territory was flitting around regardless of occupation or social status.

*It’s a temporary situation, but I still feel sorry for causing other people trouble while I’m sitting here, carefree, enjoying tea. Especially when I’m perfectly healthy. In fact, I’m so full of energy that I could run around at full sprint!*

I racked my brains for a way to avoid a checkup, when a shadow suddenly appeared over my head. I looked up. Sir Leonhart had stood up from his seat and was studying me closely.

I was dumbfounded, but before I could pull myself together, he closed the distance between us and cupped my cheeks. He wasn’t angry or irritated; he simply kept his calm eyes glued on me.

“I don’t care if you’re tired of my overreactions or overprotective behavior. If you fear inconveniencing other people or burdening them, I’ll take full responsibility and make up for it.”

His expression was solemn and he spoke in such a prosaic tone that there was no room for me to interject. Unable to respond, the fork fell out of my hand and it hit the rim of the plate with a clatter.

“Rose, for the Prelier duchy and for me, your health takes precedence above all else. Your life is not yours alone.”

His earnestness made me gasp. Realizing I’d been remonstrated for my behavior as a feudal lord, remorse surged through me, along with the feeling

that I'd been a feckless wife.

*If our positions were reversed, I would do the same thing. If there was any sign of Sir Leonhart's health deteriorating, even if he reported no symptoms, I'd become anxious. Even if it was merely fatigue or a minor case of anemia, I wouldn't want him to dismiss it.*

"Yes. I'm sorry."

His expression finally softened from my heartfelt apology. "Your heart is connected to here." He thumped his chest with his fist. "Remember that."

My eyes went round. He gazed at me like he was looking at a puppy with poor memory.

"You're the one who made me a weak man who can't live alone. You'd better take responsibility and take care of me until my last breath."

Sir Leonhart finished saying what he wanted and left the gazebo just like that, leaving me behind in shock. He'd likely gone to fetch the doctor.

In a daze, I watched him beeline for the house, and then grabbed my head. I writhed around, flailing and stamping my feet under the table.

"Ahhh! God! I love him!"

*I had a rare moment in the carriage when I got to lead him by the nose, but then he paid me back a hundredfold! It's vexing, but I've been utterly defeated. Our experience gap is too vast—I don't think I can ever beat him.*

*I'll have you know I'm the same! I haven't been able to live without you since a long time ago!* I thought I was rampaging alone, but a voice suddenly called out to me.

"I feel like someone just ran up to me and shoved sugar down my throat."

A silent scream of surprise bubbled up my throat and my head jolted up. A different person now sat in the seat Sir Leonhart had been on seconds ago. My new guest sat there like all was right in the world.

I held back my shriek. After all, the person resting his chin on his hand with an exasperated look was someone I knew extremely well.

“Crow?!”

Crow was an outstanding spy under my father’s direct control, and on top of that, he was an amiable friend of mine. *Except, rather than feeling happy to see him after all this time, the first thing I’m wondering is why he popped up.*

“Why are you here?” I tossed the question out and squinted at him suspiciously.

“Princess, I heard through the grapevine that you’re feeling unwell, so I came to check on you.”

“Huh? S-Sorry.” *I can’t believe even Crow’s worrying about me now. I feel bad, but also a bit happy.*

He left me no time to feel moved though and followed up with a cutting remark. “But when I did, I witnessed a sappy exchange between newlyweds, and now I feel like I’m going to get heartburn.”

“Urgh.” *Excuse me! I’m also taking critical damage knowing that someone else saw that conversation and my disgraceful behavior that followed it.*

“What? Did you come here to bully our princess?” Another figure suddenly appeared in a spot that had been empty seconds ago. “If so, beat it.” Ratte wore a pleasant smile as he kicked the chair Crow sat in with his long legs. Ratte looked like he wouldn’t kill a fly, but he was actually quite vulgar on the inside.

*Crow, Ratte, I don’t care! They are both so stealthy, and it’s bad for my heart. Can people stop thoughtlessly popping out of nowhere like they’re a bunch of magic cards?!*

“I wasn’t bullying her.” Crow clicked his tongue, annoyed by the exaggeration.

However, Ratte, nerves as thick as heavy-duty climbing ropes, ignored him and breezily dodged his blow. “Oh, you’re right, I’m sorry. You’re just single and jealous.”

“You wish! You’re in the same boat as I am! You old fart!”

*I’ve always wondered this, but how old is Ratte anyway? He’s supposedly older than Crow, but they look the same age. A person’s age can be so hard to guess. I asked him once before, but he just laughed and deflected the question.*



“I may be single, but my master is a young, beautiful married woman, whereas yours is an old man with a pretty face. Our workplaces are nothing alike—they’re as different as heaven and hell.” Ratte’s lips curved into a smirk.

A vein popped on Crow’s forehead. “I’m gonna slaughter you, old coot.”

“Try it if you can, you shitty brat.”

*Ratte agitates Crow at every opportunity, so a fight always breaks out whenever they cross paths. Personally, rather than this being a case of bad chemistry, I think Ratte’s just got a nasty personality.*

*Also, must he emphasize that I’m a married woman? It feels suggestive when he says it. And please stop calling my father an old man. Hmm, though it is true that he’s an old man with a pretty face.*

I watched the two of them glare at each other and then sighed. *They’re both mature adults, I’m sure they’ll stop if I leave them be.* My optimism crumbled away when Crow slipped his hand into his breast pocket.

“Wait, wait! That’s enough!” I shouted.

He scowled at me, but still grudgingly lowered his hand. I breathed out in relief. *Concealed weapons are off-limits. No can do. He probably wasn’t serious, but drawing your weapon crosses the line. Their tomfoolery wouldn’t be so funny with blades flying around. They can be reckless because they trust each other—in a twisted way—to be able to dodge all attacks, but I sincerely wish they’d cut it out.*

“Crow, calm down. Knives are not allowed. I know this is Ratte’s fault, but don’t fall for his taunts.”

“Okay... Sorry, Princess.” Crow hung his head, almost seeming meek at a glance.

“Huh? N-No, I’m sorry.” Taken aback by how he’d apologized, an admirable deed on his part, I stumbled over my words.

“Causing bloodshed in front of you is out of the question. I’ll change the location and my methods.”

“That’s not it!” I reflexively shook my head, my expression grave.

I wondered how serious he was being as he said things like, “I’ll prepare a replacement for you, though their performance may not be up to par,” or, “Let’s take this opportunity to get you some new blood.”

*My agents aren’t smartphones!* I politely rejected each one of his frightening suggestions until the displeasure returned to Crow’s face.

“Not even a little bit?” he asked.

“What do you mean by a *little*?” I asked gingerly.

“Just one.”

“I’m scared to know what you mean by that, so no.” *There’s a lot of room for speculation, which is terrifying. If I think too hard, it’ll be my loss. I don’t even know what game I’d be losing.*

“Do you see how much she cherishes me?” Ratte said with a roguish smirk. His attitude remained laid-back, even after our disturbing exchange that could’ve ended with trouble on his end.

This time, a vein popped on not only Crow’s temple, but mine as well. *Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to let Crow have one. Who cares how much or how far that means.*

“Princeeess...” Crow gave me a mopey look.

“Stop. I might actually approve, so stop.” I frantically turned away. The angel and devil on my shoulders were about to strangle each other.

“I really think this workplace is wasted on a miscreant like Ratte though.”

Crow heaved a long sigh. Perhaps he’d finally capitulated. He reseated himself in his chair and leaned back into it with all his weight.

*The workplace he’s referring to must be the Prelier Duchy. I’m delighted to hear such praise from a first-rate agent working directly for the king, but I think his assessment is unmerited. My territory has an assembly of brilliant personnel—which is how it’s operating smoothly—but in return, each person has a considerably large burden to carry. I work Ratte fairly hard too. He’s going to be toiling away for a long time until all my plans are on track.*

“Are you jealous?” Ratte asked.

“Shut up, you scumbag. How could I not be envious?” Crow snapped back.

“You wouldn’t say that if you knew how many hours Ratte works,” I said.

*He acts as my security, gathers intelligence, protects the Khuer tribe since they’re noncombatants, and so forth. Ratte has wide-ranging and diverse duties. Though I employ other agents, he’s often the one guarding me at night too, so his total work hours are long. He’s at the point that if we used time cards and a labor inspector came to audit us, we’d be ordered to suspend business.*

However, Crow snickered, unconcerned by my point. “When it comes to work hours, I’m not doing any better.”

*Now that he mentions it, that’s true. Father’s even more of a slave driver than I am. And in this world, there’s no such thing as a Department of Labor that will conduct inspections or advocate for worker rights.*

“Even if the hours are more grueling here, from an objective point of view, there’s nowhere else with a higher level of job satisfaction than the Prelier Duchy right now,” Crow continued.

“Huh? Our wages aren’t particularly remarkable though.” I tilted my head in confusion. *I want to offer more in terms of reward, and I plan to raise salaries in the future. But where things stand now, I can’t say we’re remarkably more generous than other fiefs.*

Exasperation colored his face. “People don’t only work for money.”

*Didn’t a commander from the Sengoku Era say something similar? Humans don’t only work for the sake of profit. A leader’s popularity and ability moves people...or something like that. It’s an evaluation I don’t deserve, but I’m elated that Crow’s opinion of me is so high.*

“Sometimes the thirst for glory outweighs any other desire,” he said.

*I got it wrong. Oh my god, that’s so embarrassing. Did I get super cocky just now? I wish I could forget how excited and conceited I was, even if only for a moment.*

“Princess, I have no doubt that people will tell tales about your feats for generations to come. Every action you take from here on will be recorded in

history books.”

Once the dejection had hit me, it was hard for my emotions to level with his praise. *There are too many words in there that make it hard to feel happy. Usually, people only record every action a person makes out of terror.*

“Only a few will leave their names behind in history along with you, but it’s not impossible for them to make their mark. I’m sure plenty of people think that’s a goal worth pursuing.” Crow said such a preposterous statement without hesitation. “Well, that’s got nothing to do with me since I live in the shadows.”

“Then, in the end, what are you jealous of?” I asked.

“Having a beautiful lady as a boss,” he replied, brutally honest.

All the energy left my body. Crow always seemed like a misanthropic sort of fellow because of his constant lethargy, but surprisingly, he was just like any other average adult man on the inside.

“Oh well, that’s enough about me. I’m sure all kinds of riffraff will swarm you from now on, so you’d better be on your toes. There will be hoards of people scheming to use you or enemies who want to sabotage you.”

The lax atmosphere vanished and Crow’s expression hardened. He knew all about my naivete and how tactless my negotiation skills were. I nodded at his advice.

*High society and the world of business won’t be kind to me. I’m inexperienced—if I don’t concentrate, I’ll be devoured bones and all before I know it.* My face must’ve looked dreadful because Crow’s expression softened and the corners of his lips quirked up.

“Nonetheless, you don’t need to take everything on by yourself. They say it takes a thief to catch a thief—let ruffians deal with other ruffians. You have a lot of annoying guardians lingering around you, right?”

“Use them,” his grin seemed to say.

Infected by his attitude, a small smile played on my lips too.

“Speaking of which, the representative of your annoying guardians hasn’t come back yet,” Crow muttered, directing his gaze to my house.

*Is that demeaning title supposed to refer to my husband?*

“I don’t think the Khuer tribe or doctor have returned from town yet. The guards who accompanied them aren’t back either,” Ratte added.

*Judging from his unconcerned attitude, even if they are running behind schedule, their tardiness is still within his expectations. However, after everything Crow said, I’m starting to get anxious. The doctors and Khuer tribe are deeply involved with the medical facility—they are definitely receiving a lot of attention.* I began to worry that they’d gotten dragged into some sort of trouble, wherever they’d gone.

“Are they all right?” I asked.

“Princess... I’m the one who frightened you, so I shouldn’t be saying this, but you’re worrying too much.” Crow looked concerned rather than exasperated.

*He’s right. Maybe it’d be justified if they were children out on an errand, but it’s much too soon to be fretting over a group of adults who have guards accompanying them.*

“I’ll go check on him then.” I stood up, wanting to hide my embarrassment. But when I did, my vision suddenly went dark. “Huh?”

Surprise flashed across the two spies’ faces.

I felt the blood drain from my skin. My legs were wobbly, and I felt nauseous. I couldn’t stay on my feet. The strength left my limbs, and just as my knees buckled, someone caught me in their arms.

The sound of my surroundings rapidly faded into the distance—I couldn’t distinguish the panicked voices. Was that Ratte or Crow? It even sounded like Sir Leonhart’s voice was mixed in.

# The Reincarnated Duchess's Shock

I suddenly came to with a start. When I forced my eyes open, I was met with the familiar sight of my room's ceiling.

*Huh? What happened to me?* My mind was in a haze as I asked myself questions. *After I came home from the castle, I had tea with Sir Leonhart. He left his seat and Crow appeared out of nowhere...* I slowly retraced my memories.

*What happened after that?*

Although I could remember minor details like the types of cake Sir Leonhart had brought home or what Crow and Ratte had squabbled about, my memories of what followed abruptly came to an end.

I took in my surroundings and realized that a considerable amount of time had passed. It was dim inside the room, and through the gap in the curtains, I could see that only a faint orange hue was left on the horizon—the sun had almost set, and the sky had been dyed a deep indigo blue.

*I don't remember nodding off... Don't tell me, did I pass out?* When that possibility crossed my mind, memories rushed back to me. People had pointed out that my complexion was poor at the castle, and Sir Leonhart had left his seat to call the doctor out of concern. When I recalled the sound of his anguished voice seconds before I'd blacked out, I went pale.

*Oh no! Did I cause Sir Leonhart to worry again?!* I twitched, trying to sit up, and someone beside me gasped.

"Rose?" came a dazed voice. I knew who it belonged to without needing to think.

There was a loud thunk—the sound of a chair falling over. Sir Leonhart placed his hands beside my pillow and peered at me. His face looked awful. His complexion was far worse than mine, and I'd been careless enough to collapse. His manly good looks had lost all color. His skin was surpassing pale and was now closer to a ghostly white.

“Rose!”

“Leon...”

“How do you feel? Are you in pain anywhere?” he asked, distressed.

I shook my head. *I really did worry him.* I was full of regret, but I’d only just woken up, so I couldn’t find the words to say. I stretched my fingers out to his rugged cheeks, and his large hand overlapped mine. His strong, rough palms were surprisingly cold. It showed how terrified he had been, and that made my heart tighten.

“I’m sorry for making you worry,” I whispered.

As soon as I apologized, his handsome face contorted. However, he instantly covered it up with a calm, bitter smile.

“Good grief, are you trying to kill me? Didn’t I just tell you that your heart is connected to mine?”

Sir Leonhart’s wording was playful, but I sensed a pinch of his true feelings mixed in. He closed his eyes, gave my hand a strong squeeze, and then moved it off his cheek.

“I’ll call the doctor, so wait here.”

He righted the chair he’d kicked over and then left the room. I heard hectic sounds from the other side of the door, and the doctor and herbalist came not five minutes later.

Though the doctor was dubbed Doctor Young by many, he was around forty-one or forty-two. Every once in a while, he’d grumble, “It’s about time people stop addressing me as Doctor Young.” But because the elderly and children alike referred to him as such, I suspected he would be stuck with that moniker for life. He was a slender man with a gentle mien that reflected his kind and earnest personality.

“Duchess, how do you feel? Are you experiencing any pain?” he asked.

“Right now... Not particularly,” I replied.

“That’s wonderful to hear. Do you think you can sit up?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll help you up.” Abby, a woman from the Khuer tribe, immediately lent me a hand.

She was quick-witted and an articulate speaker—it was rare for someone of the exclusionary Khuer tribe to exhibit such outstanding communication skills. If she’d lived in modern-day Japan, she would have made a superb saleswoman. As an herbalist, her talents naturally made her an exceptional negotiator, which was why I’d asked her to accompany me to the capital. She was in her late forties, and her child was already independent.

“Is this comfortable?” she asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

I sat up and leaned against a stack of cushions. My body felt a little heavy, and a sigh spilled from my lips. *I didn’t notice any symptoms, but it looks like everyone was right—I am in bad shape. It’s not good to overestimate yourself*, I repeated to myself over and over again. Then, I felt a gaze on me.

Sir Leonhart stood by the door, his expression clouded with worry. Doctor Young smiled wryly, his eyes darting between me—whose brows were drooping with shame—and Sir Leonhart. He gave my husband a small nod, and then Sir Leonhart hesitantly left the room. He slowly closed the door, a final declaration of how unwilling he was to leave.

“Now then, please let me examine you.” The doctor’s expression became serious and he leaned forward. He carefully studied my complexion, the underside of an eyelid, and the inside of my mouth. “You’re pale. It does seem to indicate anemia.”

Even in my previous life, I’d been a hale and hearty person since I was a child, so those words were foreign to me. *I endured a sea voyage and climbed a mountain in this body, so I figured I was fairly sturdy, but looks like I’m surprisingly delicate. I’m glad it’s a minor issue though.*

Doctor Young seemed to glean the relief from my face, and he continued to speak with a solemn expression. “Anemia, vertigo, and feeling dizzy when you stand up too quickly are not uncommon symptoms for women. In a way, you



could take that to mean your symptoms are not unusual, but don't get too optimistic. It's possible another cause is hiding behind the scenes."

"Another cause...?" I parroted, my face stiffening.

"Please answer a few questions," Doctor Young said as he measured my pulse on my wrist. He began by asking about my recent physical condition and appetite, and then we delved into my drowsiness, whether I'd felt feverish, my mental stability, any changes in my five senses, and so on.

*Come to think of it, maybe my new appreciation of lemon tea is related.* Thinking that, I told him about the change in my palate.

"A change in palate..." Doctor Young mumbled to himself and then nodded. "I see."

His eyes were lowered to the ground, so it was difficult to read his expression. That made me uneasy. *Am I overthinking, or does he look extremely somber with his face shadowed like that?*

I gently massaged my chest to try and calm my accelerating heartbeat. Abby, who'd been jotting down the questions and answers, noticed my dread and rubbed my back in a soothing manner.

"Oh dear, I've made you anxious. My apologies." Doctor Young smiled to put me at ease. "Unlike my father, I'm still green behind the ears. How embarrassing. I've been admonished many times and told that I need to fix my habit of falling silent whenever I'm pondering."

The elderly doctor who was still in Prelier was a good-natured old man, and I couldn't connect the word "admonish" with him. He constantly wore a grin, but perhaps he was a strict teacher. A smile tugged at my lips when I imagined Doctor Young being scolded.

"May I ask you one last question?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then... Has there been any irregularities in your menstrual cycle?"

I thought for a moment. *Now that he asks, I think it's late. It's been delayed by a few days before when I've gotten busy, but this time, it has been quite a*

*while...* I was counting on my fingers when I suddenly put two and two together and realized how the doctor's questions were related to the cause of my poor health.

Astonished, I gawked at Doctor Young and Abby. They nodded slowly, and after a few seconds, a meaningless squeal left my mouth.

"Rose?!"

The door flew open with a loud slam. Sir Leonhart barged in, his face wrought with panic, and he ran toward me. *"What happened?"* his eyes screamed, but I couldn't say a word in reply. I hadn't fully digested what this meant yet either, so I didn't have the composure to explain it to someone else.

I caressed my pounding heart and took deep breaths. Then, I slowly slid my palm down and gently touched my stomach. Of course, nothing moved. The blaring heartbeat I felt was mine, and it was my hand that was shaking. Even so, I felt a warmth in my fingertips, and tears welled up in my eyes.

*In here... In my belly, a new life dwells. Sir Leonhart and I are having a baby.*

"Kuh..." I choked on my breath. *I feel so emotional, and I can barely think. Do I want to cry or laugh? I don't even know.*

"Rose..."

A shadow fell over me. I looked up to see Sir Leonhart stooped over, gazing at me with sorrowful eyes.

*No! It's not news that should make you look so sad. I want to share this joy with you, but I can't put it into words. How many times in my life will I feel so happy that I'm in pain?*

My face crumpled, and he mirrored my expression. His large hands wrapped around my back and drew me close. He was so forceful that my nose bumped into his burly chest, and it hurt a bit.

"It'll be okay. It will," he said.

"Leo—"

"I will do anything for your sake. I'll prepare anything you need. Whether it's a secret remedy from another country or an herb that blooms on the edge of the

world—no matter what it is, I will obtain it.”

I tried to call out to him, but he was at his wit’s end and cut me off. He embraced me as though he were ascertaining my shape. His hands were cold, and his voice trembled. Though his large body completely enveloped mine, it felt like *he* was the one clinging and depending on *me*.

*He’s gotten the wrong idea and thinks I’m gravely ill.* His voice was hoarse and thick with pain. I frantically pounded on his chest.

“Leon, you’ve got it wrong,” I pleaded desperately, pushing myself off his chest to look up.

“I’ve got it...wrong?” he repeated. His complexion was so awful and pallid that it was hard to tell which one of us was supposed to be the infirm one. It agonized me to see him like that.

I nodded vigorously. “I’m not sick.”

“Rose...” Sir Leonhart knit his brows together. His expression had darkened further instead of clearing. He obviously did not believe me whatsoever.

He gave me an anguished smile. His gaze conveyed his love for me, and he brushed his hand against my cheek. Then his lips grazed against mine. It was a tender kiss, devoid of any traces of desire, brimming only with compassion. Because of that, I was slow to react. I didn’t even have room to feel mortified that we’d kissed in front of others.

“I love you. You are my heart... I will stay by your side to the ends of the earth.”

“Leon!”

A loud smack rang out in the room as I fiercely grabbed Sir Leonhart’s face. *That must’ve hurt.* His dull, dark eyes shot open in shock. I peered into his eyes from up close, and when the light returned to them, I sighed in relief.

“Leon, I’m sorry. You really do have the wrong idea.” It was an apology for both hitting him and worrying him. I caressed his manly cheeks and held his gaze. “I’m healthy, and I’m not going to leave you behind.”

He knew I was a terrible liar, so he believed me this time. His surprisingly long

lashes fluttered in silent confusion.

“Then...what is it?”

“Um...” *How do I break the news to him?* I let go of his cheeks, clasped his right hand with both of mine, and pulled it toward me.

“Rose?”

I could tell from his voice that he was only growing more perplexed. Still, he didn’t resist my touch and allowed me to lead him where I pleased. I pressed his strong palm against my stomach.

“We have a new family member here,” I said.

“Huh?” A silly noise leaked out of Sir Leonhart’s mouth.

I looked up at him; his expression had slackened into a stupor. Our gazes locked, and I slowly spoke up once more.

“We’re having a baby.”

He sucked in his breath and then everything went eerily still. There were supposed to be dozens of people inside the room and out, but there was not a peep to be heard. The hush dragged on for several seconds.

“Ba...by...?” Sir Leonhart pronounced the word like he was speaking a foreign language. He took a deep gulp of air, expression still blank. Words seemed to form on his lips, but a soundless sigh slipped out of him instead, and his lips trembled.

I had faith that he would be overjoyed, so I did not let the tense atmosphere daunt me. I maintained eye contact and gave him an enthusiastic nod. “I’m pregnant.”

As soon as I finished uttering that succinct statement, without any warning, tears overflowed from his eyes.

Surprise flashed across my face. Transparent droplets fell onto me. His brows didn’t even twitch, nor did a sob spill from his lips. Sir Leonhart looked so breathtakingly lovely with tears streaming down his face that I became enraptured by the sight and forgot the situation we were in. The tears trickling down his cheeks looked so beautiful that I almost mistook them for pearls.

“Kuh...”

*Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What should I do?! Petrified, I internally flew into chaos. Unsure how to react, I held my palms out like plates and caught Sir Leonhart’s tears. This probably isn’t the correct move for a wife to make when her husband is crying. This is clearly wrong. I know that, but it kind of feels like a waste!*

I broke into a cold sweat as I continued this nonsensical action. Suddenly, he pulled me close. He held me firmly in his arms, but not so tightly that it would put too much pressure on my body.

“Leo—”

“I’m so happy.” Sir Leonhart nuzzled his cheek against my head. “I feel so thrilled that I don’t know what to do.” His voice was sweet and somewhat hoarse from crying—just as his words suggested, he was bursting with joy.

His sincere feelings conveyed, I also broke into tears now. I hid them by burrowing my face into Sir Leonhart’s shoulder, and I sniffled there.

“I’m happy too,” I said.

We stayed nestled close together in a tight embrace for a while. After a considerable amount of time had passed, someone coughed, snapping me back to my senses.

I saw the awkward look on Doctor Young’s face and Abby’s heartwarming smile as she watched us with fond eyes. At that point, I finally remembered that we were in the presence of other people.



# The Lord Commander's Unrest

I had just spotted Rose from afar when she suddenly began to sway. She collapsed like a doll whose strings had been cut, and a shout rose in my throat. Though I immediately ran over to her, the distance between us did not seem to shrink. I despaired over how slowly my legs moved.

Thankfully, Crow and Ratte were nearby and caught Rose before she could hit the ground. And yet, I wrapped my trembling arms around her without offering a single word of thanks. I lifted her up; it felt like her body was lighter than normal, and a chill ran down my spine.

I didn't even want to imagine losing someone so dear to me. Just thinking about the word "if" made me feel like my heart was being torn to pieces. I drove that dreadful thought to the recesses of my mind and desperately rushed her to the doctor.

The doctor's findings were unclear. He made an ambiguous statement about how it was likely anemia, but he seemed to be hiding something. I was overcome with anxiety. He told me he needed to ask Rose for more details, and I could only wait for her to awaken.

I placed a chair next to her bed and gazed intently at her sleeping face. She lay there, white as a sheet. Her breathing was shallow and so inordinately quiet that I felt uneasy. I held my hand over her mouth countless times to ensure she was breathing properly. Every time, I felt relieved when her weak breath hit my palm, but that relief only lasted mere seconds.

*What if she's stopped breathing the next time I check? What if she never opens her eyes again? What will I do?*

As the clock's second hand ticked forward, my apprehensions snowballed. I felt like despair was slowly creeping up my skin and consuming me. My own frailty sickened me.

*I'm always useless during critical times. Rose thinks I'm a grown man who can*

*do anything, but I'm far from that. Look at me now, unable to do a thing. I'm just a useless fool who can only sit here and chew over my own incompetence.*

*Rose is the one who can do anything. She faces her hardships with that tiny body of hers and effortlessly overcomes them. It takes everything I have to simply chase after her.*

*Rose... Without you, I think I'd even forget how to breathe.* I was sitting there with my head hanging when I heard the bed creak quietly.

"Rose?" I called, my voice trembling and laden with fear.

I stood up too quickly and accidentally knocked the chair over, but I wasn't calm enough to care. I placed my hand next to the pillow and looked at her. Her blue eyes—wide with surprise—stared back at me.

Overjoyed that she'd opened her eyes, I felt all the strength leave my body. However, it was still too soon to feel relieved. I summoned the doctor, who was waiting in another room, and asked him to examine her. His gaze urged me to leave the room, but I didn't want to be separated from her. Nevertheless, I obeyed him in the end and reluctantly stood outside the door.

Contrary to how I'd felt while Rose had been unconscious, it now felt like time was passing far too slowly.

*Please finish up soon. Say it's just a minor case of anemia.* I prayed and prayed, but then, I heard Rose's voice. It wasn't exactly a scream, but I could tell something had happened, so I burst into the room in a panic.

I rushed to her side, my eyes begging her to tell me what'd happened. However, she didn't answer my silent entreaty. She was clearly shaken—my pulse shot up. When I saw tears welling up in the corner of her moist eyes, I almost stopped breathing.

"Kuh!"

I clenched my fists. *Keep it together,* I reprimanded myself. *Your beloved wife is suffering. This is not the time to show her an unsightly display and break down.*

"It'll be okay. It will," I told her, trying to convince myself with those words as



well.

I embraced her slender body. She seemed confused, and she wriggled in my arms. She tried to tell me that I was wrong and that she wasn't ill, but could I truly believe her? I wanted to believe that it was the truth and not a gentle lie to protect me.

I stared into her eyes, but she didn't smile back. Her gaze seemed lost, like she was searching for the right words to say, and it only fanned the flames of my unease. I was desperate to the core now, and when she insisted I was wrong, my heart was dyed black.

*I can't imagine Rose disappearing. If that happens, then I'd rather...*

"Leon!"

Seconds before my thoughts were painted jet-black, a light shock to my cheeks snapped me back to my senses. Rose had hit my face, sandwiching my cheeks in her hands, and once more, she repeated that I was wrong.

"I'm healthy, and I'm not going to leave you behind."

There was no lie hidden in her straightforward gaze. I finally felt like I could breathe properly. However, a different question came to mind now.

*Then why was she so shaken up?*

Seeing the bewilderment on my face, Rose's brows drooped. She appeared to be disconcerted as well. Another short silence blanketed us, but I didn't become anxious this time. I quietly waited.

Rose took my hand in hers, and I let her guide it to her stomach. Baffled by what that meant, I froze. Her blue eyes gazed at me.

"We have a new family member here," she said.

"Huh?" A foolish noise spilled from my lips.

For some reason, I couldn't comprehend what that meant. My mind was processing what she'd said oddly slowly—my mind merely repeated her words over and over.

*New family member? In Rose's stomach?* I stewed over what that meant until

it finally hit me. *Is that what Rose is trying to tell me? Her words point to a miracle—*

“I’m pregnant.”

All noise besides Rose’s voice vanished. As soon as I heard her words overlap with the conclusion I’d reached, tears spontaneously began to flow.

I couldn’t control my expression—my facial muscles were frozen. Rose went into a panic in my stead. She must’ve been markedly rattled because she was acting incomprehensibly and trying to catch my tears with her hands.

I found it funny, and so, so lovely. My emotions were overflowing now, and I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her petite frame. I nuzzled my cheek against her head and declared just how happy I was.

*If Rose didn’t exist, I never would’ve known a terror so overwhelming that I couldn’t breathe. And at the same time, I never would’ve known that people can shed tears when they experience too much jubilation.*

*Rose is constantly stirring my emotions, and she’s the only one who can. Love, jealousy, loss, euphoria—she’s the one who taught me all of that.*

We snuggled together, savoring our happiness. After some time passed, the doctor cleared his throat and I came to my senses. I realized we weren’t alone, but I still didn’t want to let her go.

Rose shyly tried to move away, but I pulled her close. She shot me a troubled look. The doctor and herbalist exited the room, aggravated by my unreasonable and childish behavior.

“They’re surely fed up with us...” Rose hung her head and covered her face with her hands.

*I suspect the only one they’re fed up with is me. I have a feeling the doctor in particular was scolding me with something along the lines of, “You’re a grown man. Control yourself.” But I didn’t rectify my behavior on purpose.*

I moved to the edge of the bed and tirelessly ran my fingers through Rose’s hair, peppering her temple and cheek with kisses every now and then. She sent a soft glare my way, irritated by my flirting.

“Leon, you’re acting like this isn’t your problem, but you’re equally guilty here!”

*Equally guilty? I’d say ninety percent of the guilt lies with me. Even now, I’m unilaterally clinging to her.* Though I thought that on the inside, I didn’t say anything. I simply smiled and kissed her forehead. Her face heated up and she turned bright red for some reason.

“You’re not fair!” She froze for a moment, her eyes wide and still blushing furiously with a vexed expression. “If you smile while looking so childish and defenseless...! You know I’m weak to that sort of face, don’t you?!”

*She’s weak to that? I’ve learned something useful. But unfortunately for me, I don’t know what sort of face I’m making right now.*

“See! As soon as I said that, you...!”

Rose was uncharacteristically upset, but her eyes were teary, so she didn’t scare me one bit. In fact, I found her extremely cute. I didn’t want to anger her too much, but at the same time, I wanted to see her in this state more. *On top of learning that our family is growing bigger, I got to see so many different expressions on Rose—today is truly a terrific day.*

“If you think you can manipulate me however you like forever, you’re greatly mistaken... Cu...cute... You’re cool yet cute too... How is this possible?”

She ran out of steam in the middle of her threat, and her voice died to a husky whisper, so I didn’t hear the last part. She hid her mouth with her hands and incoherently muttered what sounded like, “His face... Hot...”

*I’ve never considered myself unattractive, but I also don’t think I’m particularly handsome. However, if it matches Rose’s preferences, then I’m glad I was born with this face.*

I mentally thanked my parents while I moved Rose’s hands out of the way and brushed my lips against her dainty mouth. Her cheeks instantly flushed scarlet once more.

“Gosh! Don’t tease me so much.”

“Sorry.”

I wanted to see her in a huff for longer, but it wouldn't be good for her health to agitate her excessively. After I apologized, Rose relaxed. Tired, she leaned against me.

"I rarely get scolded by you, so I enjoyed it," I said.

"There you go with that again..."

I wrapped my arms around her waist, taking care not to put any pressure on her stomach. Rose frowned, her brows lowered, and then she sighed.

"What a troublesome father. Isn't that right?" She gently rubbed her stomach and smiled wryly. Her eyes were full of affection as she spoke to our child in her belly. I couldn't help but be entranced by how beautiful she looked.

*I'm sure she'd also forgive our child after chiding them like this.* When I imagined such a future, my face automatically slackened.

"If you give birth to a boy who resembles me, he'll certainly give you trouble, just like I do." I placed my hand on top of Rose's. "He'll want your attention so much that he may even play pranks on you."

"That would be...adorable. I'm not sure I'll be able to scold him."

"When that happens, I'll do the scolding."

"Then if we have a girl that resembles me, I'll scold her. You'd definitely pamper her rotten."

I pictured a girl who resembled Rose looking up at me. When I envisioned how she'd be prepared to receive an earful with teary eyes, I immediately waved the white flag. *It's impossible! I can't do it.*

"Please do," I said, my shoulders slumping weakly.

Rose giggled. Her laugh sounded pleasant to my ears, like bells chiming melodiously.

"I look forward to it," she said.

"Me too. I really can't wait," I agreed from the bottom of my heart.

*Regardless of whether they resemble one of us or not, girl or boy, all I wish is for them to be born healthily. They will be our precious child, mine and Rose's.*

*Your father and mother are eager to meet you.*

## A Certain Spy's Anxiety

When the princess collapsed, I felt incredibly useless. I couldn't believe what was transpiring before my eyes, and I was appalled by how slowly my mind and body were moving. I somehow ordered my muddled brain to stretch out my hand and catch her. Later on, when I thought back on that moment and recalled the torpid state I'd been in, I realized that it was a miracle that I'd made it in time—albeit by a hair's breadth.

Ratte stood in a petrified stupor across from me, and the foolish look on his face matched my own. However, I didn't even feel like laughing at him. Even after her husband ran over and scooped her up in his arms, the princess didn't open her eyes. Seeing her complexion white like a doll's sent a spine-tingling fear down my back.

The town house—usually swathed in a relaxed and tranquil atmosphere that reflected the disposition of the couple who owned it—suddenly erupted into tumult.

The princess's husband swiftly carried her into their bedroom. Not even thirty minutes later, the doctor and herbalist returned from town, flung their bags away, and sprinted to the princess's room, their breathing ragged. The servants of the house wore ghastly expressions as they practically herded them in the right direction.

Everyone was frantically running around. Their panic thoroughly expressed the severity of the situation, and the frenzied air made me dizzy.

*But she was so energetic mere seconds before she fainted. She was shocked, upset, and smiling.*

"Crow," Ratte called out.

I was hiding in the shadows of some furnishing. Normally, it would be unthinkable for an agent to speak while undercover. However, none of the servants and guards gathered in the hallway in front of her bedroom seemed to

notice us.

Incidentally, her husband had been kicked out of the room—he stood still as a rock, his face drawn. She was out of his hands now, and mine too.

Though Ratte had addressed me, he wasn't looking in my direction. His gaze was fixed on her bedroom door. His face was devoid of emotion, and there was no warmth in his voice.

He seemed entirely different from the man who constantly wore a flippant smile in front of the princess. It was as if he had reverted to the bygone days when he had been an assassin.

"I'm going to head back to Prelier to bring that grandpa here," Ratte said. "Lend me a messenger bird."

*Grandpa? He must be referring to the doctor employed by the duchy. The doctor had abandoned the idea of accompanying the princess to the capital because riding in a horse-drawn carriage over a long distance would be arduous in his old age. Is Ratte going to forgo the carriage completely, tie that elderly man to an unsaddled horse, and drag him here?*

I was taken aback, but I didn't feel like stopping Ratte either. After all, if he hadn't suggested it first, I would've taken action myself.

Right as I was about to stand up, I heard the princess scream from within her bedroom. Her husband immediately barged into the room. I couldn't move though—I was frozen in place. It felt pathetic to admit, but I was overcome with fear.

The doors were left open, and I could hear indistinct chatter. The servants and guards huddled around the entrance and peeked in. My ears were supposed to be sharp enough to pick up any clandestine conversations buried underneath idle chatter, but they had abandoned their duty now.

I was afraid to learn of her diagnosis—I was a failure of a spy. As though they were purposefully denying me the right of ignorance, my surroundings fell completely still. Despite the large crowd of people present, there was not a sound to be heard. Amid this unnatural silence, the princess's voice carried through the air.

“I’m pregnant.”

She wasn’t raising her voice, and yet I heard her very clearly. Someone exhaled sharply, I wasn’t sure if it had been me or Ratte. *Pregnant*, I repeated to myself. I rolled the word over my tongue, unable to connect it to the princess’s poor health. Even its pronunciation was foreign to me.

“Our lady is...pregnant?” someone murmured in the crowd of servants. They stood straight as an arrow and exchanged glances. Suddenly, color returned to their cheeks. Joy burst across their faces and they smiled widely as they joined hands with each other. They started making an uproar, cheering things like, “A child!” and, “What an auspicious occasion!”

I couldn’t believe that the women skipping around in circles were the same maids who normally completed their work in austere silence. Klaus, a knight who had idolized the princess since her days as royalty, lost all strength and crouched on the ground.

“Thank goodness...” He covered his face with his hand, hunched over, and let out an extremely long sigh. It was so long that for some, it could’ve filled the quota for a lifetime’s worth of sighs.

Klaus harbored more than loyalty for the princess. However, his expression and words were filled with wholehearted sincerity. He seemed truly happy for his master’s safety and the joyful news. Before I’d even realized it, the mad dog I remembered from the sea voyage who would snap at anyone and everyone had matured into a genuine, devoted knight.

“A child...?” Ratte mumbled.

His expression had been sharp as a knife mere moments ago, but it had melted away like an illusion and been replaced by a dumbfounded look. He leaned against the wall. He was unsteady on his feet, but I couldn’t laugh and call him pathetic. Doing that would’ve been the same as pointing at a mirror and jeering at myself. All the strength had left my body as well, and I wanted to plop down right there.

*I’m truly glad that the princess isn’t gravely ill.* Relieved, I rubbed my chest and vacantly gazed at the hallway, which was bursting with gleeful energy.



The smiling servants were making a fuss over procuring baby clothes, a bed for the child, and so on. They were certainly getting ahead of themselves when the child hadn't even been born yet. Though I felt exasperated, I was simultaneously overcome by a strange sensation.

I was someone who lived in the darkness—I never would've expected that I would be present during an occasion like this. This was perhaps the first time I had ever witnessed people react so jovially to a wholly commonplace event like conception.

In slums, red-light districts, and the battlefield, pregnancy was a tragedy. In an environment where one couldn't even guarantee that they would survive to see the next day, they had no room to provide for another human life. How many times had I seen cold, tiny corpses abandoned in dim alleys or on the sides of roads?

That said, whether someone was happy to have a child wasn't a matter of being able to afford it or not. Even a child of nobility could be endangered because of their lineage, the order in which they were born, or sometimes even their gender. How many children were loved, celebrated, and eagerly anticipated like this?

*This is how it should be.* It was an idealistic thought that I believed in, but the day when it would be a reality was still far off. That was why, although it was very much unlike me, I internally agreed with Klaus.

*Really... Thank goodness. I'm glad that the princess's child will be born with everyone's blessings. They don't need to know that there are children dying in garbage dumps—just like Ratte and I used to be. I won't be bitter and tell them to relish in their good fortune. They should grow big without experiencing sorrow and receive everyone's love like it's the most obvious fact in the world. May you get angry, smile, and become as happy as you can.*

*Please grow up into a cheeky brat who'll make me roll my eyes.*

I was basking in sentimentality when Ratte's voice interrupted my thoughts.

"The princess's child? How nice."

"What do you mean by that?"

There were many ways to construe his words, and I shot him a sharp glance. I didn't think Ratte would lay his hands on the princess. Though he was obsessed with her, he regarded her as sacred at the same time. Hence, he wasn't envious of her husband.

However, I suspected he didn't simply mean, "They seem happy, how nice." A scoundrel like him would never feel sensible emotions like that.

"Hm?" Ratte cocked his head to the side.

He had a pretty face, though he was a prime example of how a person's appearance did not necessarily reflect their personality. With a smile, he hurled a bombshell at me.

"I'm jealous that they get to be born to the princess."

I clammed up. My mind refused to comprehend his words. However, my body was more transparent; goose bumps crawled up my skin as horror washed over me. *I think he just said something outrageous and repulsive, but I must've misheard.*

I was at a loss for words, but Ratte paid me no heed and, with a grief-stricken look, he sighed. His well-sculpted facial features made him appear unjustly picturesque. However, I could only think him insane after what had just come out of his mouth.

"I wish I'd been born from the princess's womb too."

I gazed into the distance in silence. It was so sickening that I didn't even want to retort. I gripped the weapon concealed in my breast pocket as a thought ran through my mind.

*I wonder if the princess would forgive me if I reduced the Prelier Duchy's agent count by one?*

# The First Prince's Impatience

On that day, and at that moment, it was a coincidence that I—Christoph von Velfalt—was in the king's office.

I had been there to have the king look over our revised trade agreement with the Kingdom of Lapter. We had placed economic sanctions on Lapter in response to their previous king's foolhardy actions. Those had been lifted in less than a year, but even that short period had been adequate time for consequences to manifest. Lapter's power had been whittled away to the point that it was near impossible for them to reclaim its former glory.

Lapter's climate and soil made it a harsh land to live in, so a single stumble was difficult to recover from. Although they were on the road to recovery due to the efforts of their current king, if they were struck by any unforeseen circumstances such as poor weather conditions or a pest infestation, it would result in terrible disaster for them.

I had thought it necessary to reevaluate the tariffs and regulations placed on food and fuel. However, there were heaps of issues. Lapter had been our enemy only a few years ago, so there were many in Nevel who were still uncomfortable with them. Some high-ranking nobles believed we should weaken their power as much as possible, and some even wanted to keep them hanging by a thread, neither dead nor alive.

*Their suggestions are inhuman, but that shows just how deep-seated the emotions are regarding this matter. I can understand how the citizens feel. However, we can't leave things as they are.*

When I had advised the king such, he'd ordered me to put together revisions. *"Take both countries' issues into account and come up with a compromise,"* he had said.

It had been quite the challenge. If not for Johan, my reliable aide, I would've been left cradling my head in my hands. Utilizing his experience studying abroad in the Kingdom of Vint and interacting with merchants, he had more up-to-date

information than I had. He was also knowledgeable and a skilled diplomat.

With Johan's assistance, we had somehow shaped a proposition, and thirty minutes ago, we'd brought it to the king. The king had been away from his office, but he'd returned not long after we'd arrived.

Johan and I sat next to each other on a sofa, and the king sat across from us. Though I was trying to stay composed on the surface, I was eager on the inside. Unfortunately, the wind was immediately taken out of my sails.

The king was motionless. I was accustomed to waiting for him, but he was different than usual today. He made no motion to pick up the document I'd placed on the table, nor did he bring up a separate matter. He sat there completely still with his impractically long legs crossed and his gaze lowered.

His expression was as deadpan as ever, but his lashes cast a shadow over his eyes, creating the optical illusion that he was in anguish.

*A shame. It would've made a breathtaking painting. However, think carefully. He may look like a work of art because of his handsome appearance, but he's actually just zoning out. A mass of rationalism like him, lost in absent-minded thought? This must be an omen that a catastrophe is approaching.*

"Chris, let's come back another time," Johan whispered.

I shot a suspicious glance at the king. The creases in his brow, his narrowed eyes, and his pursed lips were all indications that he was in a foul mood. He seemed irritated enough to click his tongue.

Johan always behaved like a respectable prince—there weren't many people who could cause his textbook smile and affable demeanor to crumble away. Rose was a special exception in a good way, while the king was an exception in a bad way.

I, too, wanted to leave, but I kept my desire in check.

"Your Majesty," I said, but he didn't respond.

After some time, the king languidly raised his head.

"We've brought the revised proposal, but shall we reschedule for another day?" I asked.

His gaze lingered on the documents until he finally reached out and lifted the papers, but that was all. He wasn't in the mood to flip through them.

"I'll take this," he said curtly.

A vein bulged on Johan's forehead and he clenched his fists on top of his lap. *"Then say that sooner!"* his expression seemed to scream.

"We shall take our leave then. Chris, let's go," Johan said with an angry smile.

He stood up. I got to my feet to follow after him.

"Wait," murmured the king.

"What is it?" I wasn't being as flagrant as Johan, but my attitude had also taken a dive.

The king didn't seem to care and continued anyway. "I have something to tell you two."

Johan grimaced and sighed. "Please keep it short," he said in a pained tone.

The king tilted his head to the side as though he was carefully deliberating, and then he opened his mouth once more. "That one is pregnant."

"Huh?" Johan and I said in chorus.

After a long, drawn-out silence, I'd accidentally harmonized with Johan. The two of us stood there stock-still in a daze.

The king didn't notice though—he simply stood up with the documents in hand. He turned away from us and walked over to his office desk.

"That will be all. You may leave."

*This is ridiculous.* I couldn't reconcile the gravity of those words with the king's carefree attitude, and my mind plummeted into chaos. He waved his hands at us like he was driving off a dog, and I inadvertently raised my voice.

"Please wait! What did you just say?!"

The king glanced over his shoulder and furrowed his brow. He looked like he wanted to tell me off for being too loud, but I didn't care.

*We wanted you to keep it short, but this isn't what we meant. Of course we*

*wouldn't be satisfied with that sorry excuse of an explanation!*

"I said, 'That one is pregnant.'"

"By 'that one,' you don't possibly mean..."

"Your sister. My daughter."

The shock of the news was too great for Johan—he crumpled to his knees. I didn't have the leeway to offer him a hand up, though.

*Rose... My sister is pregnant. My precious sister is going to be a mother.*

The moment it hit me, an emotion that couldn't be described with one word welled up inside of me. It was a mixture of joy, loneliness, and so many other feelings.

Although I understood she was married, in the corner of my mind, I still considered Rose my adorable little sister. Being forced to recognize anew that she was an adult out of my reach left me with forlorn feelings, but I also felt a certain joy. While I was at a standstill, she had left the nest and begun a family of her own—I was proud of Rose. Also, there was no doubt in my mind that Rose and Leonhart's child would be adorable.

*It doesn't matter if they have a boy or a girl, no matter who their child resembles, they will be a child overflowing with talent. No, Rose can be careless at times, so her child might be surprisingly clumsy. But it doesn't matter what sort of personality they have, who they resemble, or whether they have talent or not. As long as both the mother and child are healthy, that's all that matters.*

I suddenly snapped back to my senses. *How is Rose's health right now? The Prelie Duchy may have a team of brilliant doctors and herbalists, but did they bring them to their town home in the capital?*

"Your Majesty, how is Rose's health? If necessary, we could dispatch the court physician."

Though I was speaking to him, the king didn't give me any kind of response. He placed the documents on his desk and sank into his chair. He was still in a vacant daze.

*What is the matter with him? It can't be... Does he possess the emotional*

*intelligence to feel shocked that his daughter is pregnant? I can't tell whether he's happy or not, but he's definitely behaving strangely.*

I impudently stared at him. He was lost in deep thought, with his cheek resting on his hand. His eyes were pointed in my direction, but there was no focus in them.

"Their duchy has doctors. If they need further assistance, we can send the physician, but now is not the time to disturb her. Fussing excessively can result in anxiety for a pregnant woman."

"Understood," I said after a long stretch of silence. *I'm surprised your dictionary contains an entry for "consideration."* The words almost made it out of my throat, but I barely managed to contain them. I continued to feign composure.

"So, in consideration for her health, shouldn't we invite her to stay in the detached palace?" Johan interjected. I hadn't noticed him get back on his feet.

*Given how much he depends on Rose, he did a splendid job recovering so quickly.* Tears welled up in the corners of my eyes. *His concern for her outweighed the shock, and he's collected himself.*

"I understand that the standard of care is high in the Prelier Duchy, but the conditions in their town house may not be so perfect. It would be better for her to be attended by the court physician in the palace until the child is born... No, until the child can walk."

*I retract my previous statement—he's not calm at all. How many years does Johan intend to lock Rose up in the castle for? He'll start by insisting she should stay until her child can walk, next he'll say they should stay until the child can talk, and then it'll be until the child can protect themselves—he'll keep giving reasons to extend their stay.* A chill ran down my spine.

"Do you really think that tomboy would consent?" the king said in an exasperated tone and snorted. "She will refrain from long carriage rides for now, but once she enters her stable period, she'll return to her domain."

"No..." Johan turned pale and hung his head.

I sympathized with him; a certain hopelessness filled me at the thought of

being so far away from Rose, and I disliked that I couldn't immediately run to her side. If anything ever happened to her, I wanted to be able to jump to her assistance. However, the Prelier Duchy was probably most prepared for the medical necessities of childbirth out of anywhere in the whole nation... Nay, in the whole world.

I patted Johan on the back. "We can go to her," I said.

He returned with a reproachful glare. "The entire royal family cannot leave the capital at the same time. Someone will get the short end of the stick."

I fell silent. *That's true. We can't leave the capital unmanned. We could take turns going on a holiday, but that would need to be on days we don't have any official functions and during a period when there's relatively little work. In all likelihood, our vacations would overlap.*

*I would gladly yield to Johan for anything else, but not for this. I want to see Rose too. I want to meet her face-to-face and congratulate her.*

Johan and I stared at each other. We didn't need to say anything for us to understand what was going through the other's mind. After a moment, we nodded together and directed our gazes toward the king.

"As long as this country's sun, His Majesty the King, is present, that would be more than enough, right?" I said.

"Please leave checking up on her health to young folk like us," Johan added.

*We can't exclude my stepmother. I'm sure she'd like to go too, and Rose would want her there as well. And I want to be there too if possible. Johan is no different, since he dotes on our sister. By process of elimination, that leaves only one person.*

Displeased, the king narrowed his light-blue eyes. "The sun? You say things you don't mean."

I pasted a smile on my face and refused to elaborate. The corners of his lips lifted ever so slightly—it looked like he was actually smiling for once. My eyes widened in surprise.

"My position is not so essential. Unlike the sun, I can be replaced," he said.



“For example, you for me.”

I was stunned speechless. *I have never even imagined him cracking a joke before. We're not on such friendly terms, nor do I want that sort of relationship with him. But right now, I dearly hope he's joking.*

“You jest,” I said weakly. Though I tried to put on a bold smile, it was easy to tell I was bluffing from my tone.

The king said nothing and simply narrowed his eyes suggestively, making my impatience grow.

*A man who sees no value in the throne wants to use the birth of his grandchild as an excuse to abdicate? Someone please laugh and tell me it's out of the question.*

# Her Majesty the Queen Reminisces

It was rare for my husband, the king, to summon me to his office. Thinking it would concern prospective spouses for our two sons, who showed no intention of getting married, I waved aside my annoyance and went to hear him out. However, I was met with a completely different topic.

“What...did you say just now?” I asked, staring intently at my husband.

His expression didn’t change in the slightest. He calmly took in my sharp gaze. “That one is pregnant.”

“That one...would be...?” The question came out in a trembling voice.

He let out a small sigh. Though he looked annoyed, it was loathsome how he was still so beautiful.

“Our daughter.”

I inferred from the way he threw the statement out like an offhand comment that my sons—who had left the room just as I’d arrived—had already experienced a similar frustrating conversation with the king.

*If you find my piddling questions bothersome, then use her name instead of referring to her by a demonstrative adjective in the first place! Never mind, that’s not important right now.*

*Rose is pregnant. My adorable daughter is going to have a child...which means I’ll soon have an adorable grandchild! What joyful news! I don’t have the time to deal with my husband’s catastrophically awful conversation skills.*

“I would like to go on a holiday today and tomorrow... No, for a whole week,” I said.

“Calm down.” He looked at me with a gaze that said, “*Not you too.*”

The way he displayed his exasperation through his expression and voice secretly irritated me.

“You may be her mother, but she’ll have no choice but to courteously receive

you as an esteemed guest if you go. Leave her alone for the time being.”

It was honestly humiliating that my husband was lecturing *me* on common sense. *You always act like you're the law itself, so why do you act like you're a sensible person during times like this?* Though it vexed me, what he was saying was reasonable, and I had no counterargument, so I could only grit my teeth.

*Even if I visit Rose as her mother, it doesn't change the fact that I'm this country's queen. I want to stay by my daughter's side and help her, but it would only result in the opposite. She would need to ensure my security and give me a warm reception—I would only be giving her trouble.*

After I swallowed back my displeasure, a wave of ennui washed over me. I leaned back onto the sofa. “I would like to give this position to someone else forthwith,” I mumbled to myself with a sigh.

My parents—especially my mother—believed that being the queen was the highest form of happiness for any lady, but I did not agree. They thought this position allowed a woman to use people and money as much as she liked, but that was merely a fantasy. On the surface, I was waited on hand and foot, but people tried to sabotage me with the most trivial excuses, and if I erred in my usage of the budget, I would be attacked from all sides.

My responsibilities and restrictions only ever increased—it was an extremely constricting position. Then again, I hadn't realized this fact until over ten years had passed after our wedding.

*My parents married for political reasons and they were already on bad terms by the time I became cognizant. Although they acted like we were a loving family in public to maintain the facade that we were a venerable marquisate, in reality, we were more distant than strangers.*

*Work was father's number one priority and he never concerned himself with the household, while my mother was adamant about her daughter's education—it was as if she was trying to get back at him. She repeated over and over to me that marrying into a good family was a woman's happiness, and she became even more warped when the previous queen passed away from illness. She must have seen it as an opportunity to marry her daughter off as the king's second wife so she could become a maternal relative to royalty.*

*At the time, I didn't realize how repulsive my mother was for delighting in a person's death rather than grieving... Not to mention the fact that this was the death of our nation's queen. I'm equally as inhumane as my parents. I obeyed my mother's expectations and became the queen, but the position was too much for a foolish young girl like me.*

*I was desperate to catch the attention of my husband, and when I failed, I found fault with the servants. Instead of comforting my stepson, who had only just lost his mother, I mistreated him. Even my own children whom I gave birth to... I locked them away when they didn't turn out the way I wanted.*

*I was like a witch from a fairy tale, and I'm disgusted with myself. I can't even excuse myself by blaming my parents for being awful role models. After all, didn't my daughter grow up splendidly? I don't recall ever showing her any love—and I daresay my husband did the same—but she matured into a fine young woman.*

"I wonder what that one is."

A hushed voice broke the silence that had blanketed the room and brought me back to my senses. My head shot up.

My husband was leaning all the way back in his office chair, gazing up at empty space in a daze. His fingers were laced together on top of his stomach, and his long legs were stretched out—his posture made him look exhausted. If his eyes hadn't been open, I would've suspected he was asleep.

Though I was surprised by that uncharacteristic posture, I replied in turn. "She is our daughter. She grew up splendidly and doesn't carry the flaws of her parents. She is our precious child."

"Indeed she is," he replied succinctly. He didn't even lose his temper.

I had never pried into my husband's past, but he had likely grown up without knowing parental affection, just like I had. His mother had passed away young from an epidemic, and I'd heard that his father—the previous king—had been a stern man. It was clear as day when I looked at my husband that he had been raised strictly as the heir to the throne.

Neither of us knew the first thing about family. We were parents in name

only, and we didn't know how to love or raise our children. We had assumed we would produce the same defective products that we were.

However, the end result was different from our expectations. Christoph—who had possessed his father's cold eyes growing up—had become able to smile gently before I knew it. Johan possessed a hysterical side that resembled me, but he'd learned to contain those urges by engaging his rationality, and he could now interact with Christoph, whom he used to avoid.

When my husband and I had abandoned our duties as parents, our young daughter had taken up the role herself. She'd filled in the hole we'd left. Christoph and Johan had grown up into fine young men because Rose had been there.

And that child hadn't stopped there—she had even changed me. She had not turned her back on her foolish, incompetent mother, but instead, she'd given me the chance to start over.

"I have not given her anything. Love, fatherly remarks, nothing." There was no regret in my husband's voice; it was as indifferent as always. And yet... Perhaps the guilt I harbored was coloring my perception of reality, but I thought he sounded ever so slightly forlorn.

"She should've gone through the same experiences that I did with my own parents. And somehow, for some reason, she grew into an unexpected creature." A sigh of admiration spilled out of his lips. "She took her brothers' hands and led them into the sunlight, but that wasn't enough for her. She even extended her hand to us... And now here we are."

He pressed his palm against his chest—directly on top of his heart—and closed his eyes. He looked like a pious believer, as beautiful as a church sculpture and so breathtaking that it made you hesitant to touch him. Not that my husband had ever asked for a god's salvation.

"She barged in and planted emotions where my heart was once hollow. Her selfishness knows no bounds." The gentleness in his mien was surely no illusion.

"Why don't you honestly admit that you're happy?"

My husband sat up from his chair and the corners of his lips arched up. *He can*

*smile now?* I felt deeply moved.

The Wise King Randolph von Velfalt—his name was well-known throughout the entire continent. He ruled Nevel with brilliant acumen and overwhelming charisma, and though he was respected and adored by his vassals and people alike, he was also feared in turn.

There was a certain intensity and solemnity to him that was unbefitting of his age, and that, combined with his stone-faced attractive looks, made people hesitate to approach him. His relatives and close aides who had been serving him for many years were no exception. The domain around my husband was one that no one could step into.

It needn't be said, but that also applied to me, his wife. When I had desperately clung to him, I'd been met with only a single icy gaze that could freeze flames. My heart had shattered without him even needing to tell me to stay away.

Back then, I had thought, *This man will never let anyone into his heart until the day he dies.* However, someone had boldly marched into that inviolable domain. That person was my daughter. Undaunted by the fact that even grown men quailed before my husband's frigid gaze, Rose had confronted him head-on and piqued his interest.

However, though she had caught his eye, my husband hadn't shown her kindness. He would not be lenient with anyone, even if they were a child—if she'd failed, he would've mercilessly discarded her. My husband was the man he was today because Rose had continued to challenge him, even though she was always put under the nerve-racking tension of one walking on a tightrope.

"I never tried to be a father or a husband, but now, I'm suddenly forced to become a grandfather. You never know what life will have in store for you."

I gazed at his uncharacteristically tender expression, silently agreeing on the inside. *You truly never know what life will have in store for you.*

"I look forward to it," I said. The corners of my lips quirked up.

"Indeed."

I felt like for the first time since our marriage, my husband and I had reached

a mutual understanding. *I had given up on ever comprehending him, but maybe, just maybe... Even if we can never be like an ordinary couple, perhaps someday we will be like old friends.*

*If the old me had heard that, she would've instantly rejected the idea as impossible. But when I see my husband lost in deep thought like this, I don't think it's such a preposterous dream anymore.*





## Side Story: The Doctor in Training's Shock

*My name is Irma Holland.*

I was born and raised in a rural town on the western edge of the Kingdom of Nevel near the border we shared with the Kingdom of Vint. My father was the sole doctor of that sleepy village, and as his daughter, I had assisted him since I was a child. From there, it was only natural that I became interested in medical work.

However, my father had no intention of letting me follow in his footsteps. He'd assumed I would become like my mother: I would wed a doctor and help with my husband's work when I had a spare moment from housekeeping.

I loved and greatly respected my mother, but I did not want to live the same life she had led. I didn't want to be the wife of a doctor—I wanted to *be* a doctor.

Right around when I began harboring such gloomy feelings, I heard about Prelier's medical facility plan from a traveler who stopped by our town. After that, the facility was all I could think about. I found out that my father's old friend would be working there, so I pleaded with him to take me along as his assistant.

I was on cloud nine when I was somehow hired.

When my work began, I was so busy that my eyes were spinning. There was a mountain of tasks to tackle and information to memorize, and every day seemed to end in the blink of an eye. Despite that, each day was fulfilling and brought me great joy. I never once wanted to return to my hometown.

Two months after I arrived in the Prelier Duchy, the busy period finally abated. I was now used to my work—I could operate with efficiency. I respected my boss, and my colleagues were all good people. I was blessed to be able to work here. I had also become accustomed to the climate and cuisine of Prelier, and it was generally quite pleasant.

However, there was one thing I had not become accustomed to in the two months I'd spent here.

"That's a heavy load you've got there. Let me help you."

I had been engrossed in my thoughts when a voice called out to me from behind. Surprised, I froze, and in that time, the four thick books I was holding disappeared from my arms.

"Huh?! N-No, you can't!" I cried as I ran after her in a panic.

"It's fine, it's fine. Shall I carry these to the office?" she said, brushing my protests aside.

*Your arms are so thin! I worry they'll snap under all that weight!*

"Lady Rosemary, please allow me." Her knight plucked the books out of her—Lady Rosemary's—hands.

She frowned, but I let out a quiet sigh of relief. How could I not? The lady before my eyes was of nobility. She was Lady Rosemary von Prelier, the eldest daughter of the current king of Nevel, and the duchess regnant of Prelier. Furthermore, she was the originator of this medical facility project.

*I can't let such an esteemed lady carry my things! That would be absurd! It would cause an outrage that couldn't be resolved with the single head of a nobody like me.*

It was discourteous enough that I existed in the same building, but for some odd reason, Lady Rosemary insisted on helping us work. Even low-ranking noblewomen loathed the idea of speaking to commoners, so why on earth was an ex-princess, who was exalted by all, speaking to me so amiably?

I was more bewildered than happy. I didn't suspect that there was something dark lurking beneath her kind smile. However, when I imagined the terrible things that could befall me—not to mention my parents too—if a single scratch marred her royal flesh, I was too terrified to even go near her.

Many of the other employees felt similarly, and Lady Rosemary seemed to intuit our distress because she never used force to get close to us. That delicate relationship persisted for three months until a turning point came.

Among the observation group from the Kingdom of Grundt, there was an extremely arrogant man.

He was in his late fifties. He had dull gray hair and eyes of the same color. He was of medium build, but the excess flab on his stomach stood out, painting him the stereotypical image of a middle-aged man. He wasn't ugly, but the shape of his lips was crooked from many years of smiling in a peculiar manner. His nose and cheeks were red, indicating that his liver might have been in poor shape. He looked like the old men who would frequently go drinking in the neighborhood.

That man didn't listen to a single thing the guide said. I had a bad feeling when he first turned away and yawned, but he exceeded my expectations.

"Sir, please! I clearly told you in the beginning that you cannot enter that area!"

After the facility tour began, it only took a few minutes for the haughty man's poor behavior to become evident. He broke away from the guide and walked wherever he pleased.

"Are you hiding something that you can't tell people? Having a place that's off-limits is the same thing as declaring you have something to be guilty of." The man snorted and proceeded farther in.

The guide frantically tried to stop him, but her strength was no match for a man's. The people in the observation group who were also from Grundt merely dithered about and were completely unhelpful.

I was present as an assistant, and I wanted to do something, so I blocked his path. "Of course not. That is the inpatient ward, so please be quiet."

"Patients?! There are invalids here?! And you tried to force me that way?! What were you thinking?!" The man blanched and covered his mouth with a handkerchief, his brows furrowed.

*You're the one who tried to march in! The gall of you!* However, I held my tongue—he'd already caused enough of a racket and the patients needed peace and quiet.

“Good grief, what a repulsive place! Guide, do your job and take us to a more useful location!”

“We shall continue the tour, so please come this way.” The guide bit her lip. It only took her a few seconds to hide her irritation and switch gears.

*She’s a very rational person.*

“Oh, that’s right. Where are you developing your new medicine?” he demanded.

“I have already told you that the research building is not fully operational yet, so I cannot show you that area.”

“I want to see it. Take me there.”

“I cannot do that.”

“You... I’m a duke! How dare you speak to me like that.” He glared daggers at the guide.

Sensing that we were at a tipping point, the other members of the observation group recognized that this was turning into an unpleasant predicament and began to panic.

Because of all his shouting, a few employees peeked out from the surrounding rooms. “*Do you need help?*” their gazes asked.

*What should I say? Personally, I want to throw this man out of here, but he said he’s a duke. He may be a noble from another country, but we won’t get away unscathed if we defy someone who could potentially come into royal power.*

*This world is unfair. It doesn’t matter how many wrongs this man has committed, or if our reasons are justified—all of it is meaningless. Justice lies with power.*

“No matter what you demand, I cannot do what cannot be done.” The guide, pale-faced and trembling, rejected his demand.

“Hah! Fascinating! Then I’ll do as you wish! You’ll find out firsthand what happens when you go against me!”

Seeing the duke roar with laughter made me despair over my own helplessness. *What kind of doctor forsakes her own colleague? Such a person is not qualified to save others.* I castigated my quivering legs, and I was about to run over to the guide's side when it happened.

A regal voice rang through the air. "What is all this fuss about?"

A peerless beauty suddenly appeared, and everyone forgot the situation for a moment; the observation group—including the duke—was entranced by her entrance. Her face was as dignified as her voice, and I unwittingly gawked at her.

"I'm certain that we informed you that you must be quiet in the hospital." The gorgeous woman—Lady Rosemary—unhappily furrowed her shapely brows.

"W-Well... Um..."

The observation group members turned as white as sheets. They dripped with sweat as they exchanged glances. However, the duke was unperturbed.

"That guide of yours was rude to me first. Shouldn't you be apologizing?" he arrogantly asserted.

"I heard from my informants that *you* were the one who violated the terms first."

One of my coworkers must have gone to call Lady Rosemary to explain the situation.

"That's a load of hogwash. Do you have any proof of that?"

The duke could take on such a brazen attitude because he didn't believe he was at fault whatsoever. I hated it, but I didn't feel like we had him cornered. However, Lady Rosemary was undaunted.

"This is the inpatient ward, which is off-limits to visitors. The fact that you are here is proof in itself," she countered in a matter-of-fact tone, shutting the duke up. She glanced at the petrified man and then turned to the other members of his group. "To those of you in the Grundt observation group..." she began.

"Yes...?"

"Unfortunately, your tour will be canceled. All of you are forbidden from

entering the medical facility for the time being.”

“Surely not...?”

“The exit is that way. Please take care.”

Lady Rosemary’s frosty demeanor made their shoulders droop. Their reaction was understandable. On top of causing trouble in another country, they had lost an opportunity to study medicine.

“Y-You...!” The duke snapped out of his stupor and flew into a red-faced rage. “How can you be so impudent to me, a duke! This will turn into an international issue!”

Lady Rosemary’s blue eyes narrowed coldly. The duke and the rest of the inspection group froze from her disdainful gaze.

“Yes, you’re right. This *is* an international issue.” The corners of her lips curved into a sweet smile.

Overwhelmed by her eerily beautiful smile, the duke was a beat slow to respond. He quickly realized she was looking down on him though—he opened his mouth to yell, but the other members in his group clamped their hands over his face.

The rest of them understood that any further folly on their end would negatively affect the Kingdom of Grundt’s good name. All of them held back the struggling duke and fled the premises.

“L-Lady Rosemary... My apolo—”

“Are you all right?!”

“Huh?”

“I’m sorry I came so late. You must’ve been terrified.”

Lady Rosemary hugged the guide before she could finish her apology.

“I... I...” the girl stuttered and began to cry in her embrace.

“I heard you did a splendid job.” Lady Rosemary rubbed her back to soothe her. Then, she addressed me—I was standing nearby. “I didn’t think this would happen. It was an oversight on my part... You must’ve been frightened as well.”

“No, I couldn’t do a thing...” I said darkly.

“That’s not true. Thank you for stopping him in my place earlier,” the guide chimed in.

I was so scared and happy that I started tearing up too. Lady Rosemary watched over us, her eyes full of compassion.

After that incident, our relationship with Lady Rosemary changed a little. Having said that, we couldn’t treat the duchess the same way we did our colleagues. We were still courteous to her, but we stopped fearing her for no reason and purposefully keeping our distance.

*Lady Rosemary is different from that high-handed duke. She doesn’t use her authority to diminish others. She only exercises her power to protect those of lower status like us. I wholeheartedly believe that.*

“Oh my, you’ve got quite a load there again. I’ll help you.”

Lady Rosemary tried to take the entire stack of books from my hands, as she had done once before, but I suggested something else instead.

“Then how about you take half instead?”

Caught off guard, her eyes widened for a split second and then they softened into a gentle smile.

“Yes, of course.” She beamed at me happily as she held the two books in her arms.

Her knight moved to snatch them out of her hands again, but she angled away to stop him. She sulkily knit her brows together and sent him a small glare.

“They are mine to carry,” she said.

*I am truly blessed to be able to work under such a lovely duchess.*









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Volume 9

by Bisu

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