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How I Swapped Places  
with the Villainess,  
Beat Up Her Fiancé,  
and Found True Love



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# How I Swapped Places with the Villainess, Beat Up Her Fiancé, and Found True Love Vol.1

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How I Swapped Places with the Villainess, Beat Up Her Fiancé, and Found True Love Vol.1

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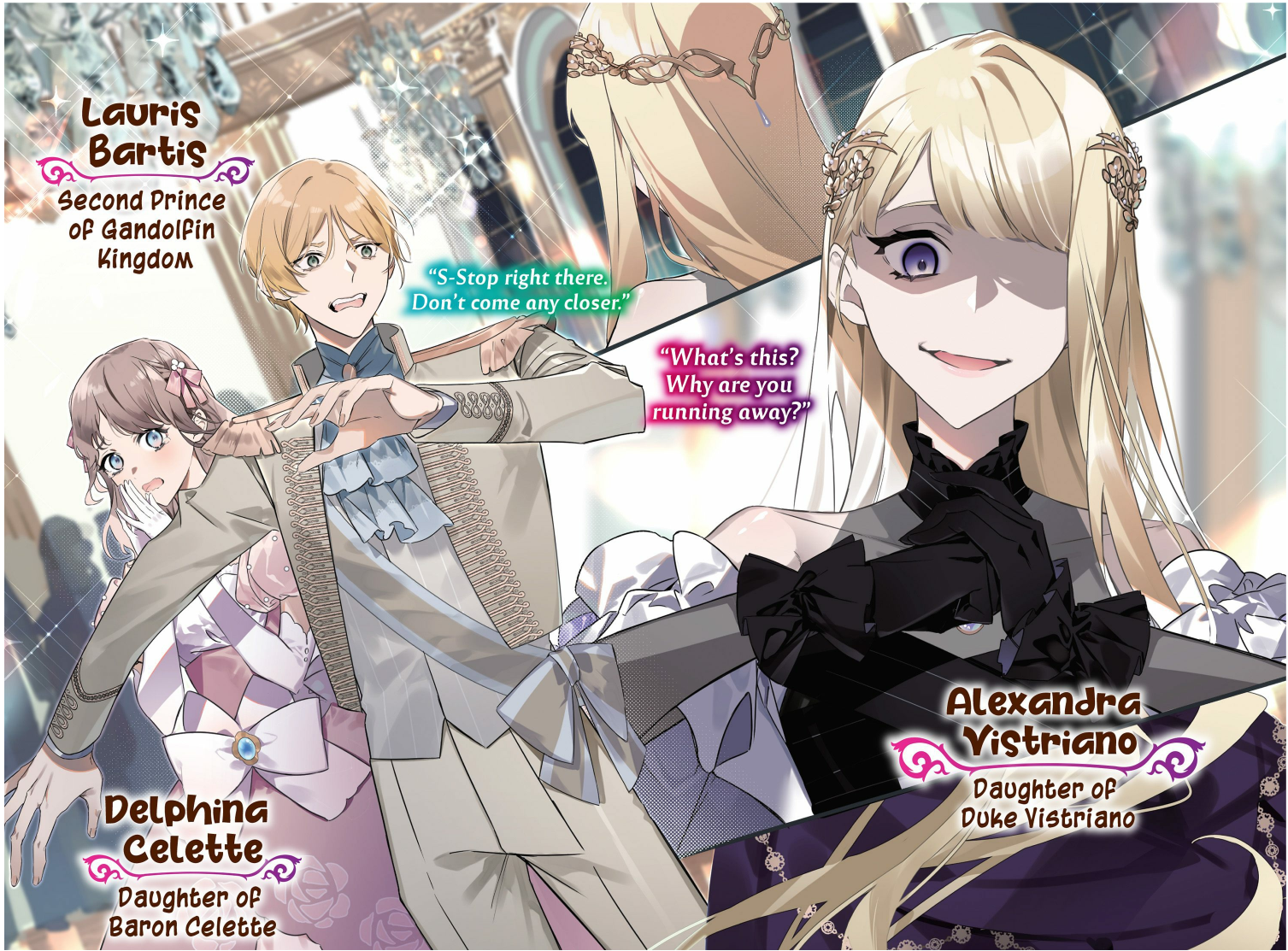
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**Lauris  
Bartis**  
Second Prince  
of Gandolfin  
Kingdom

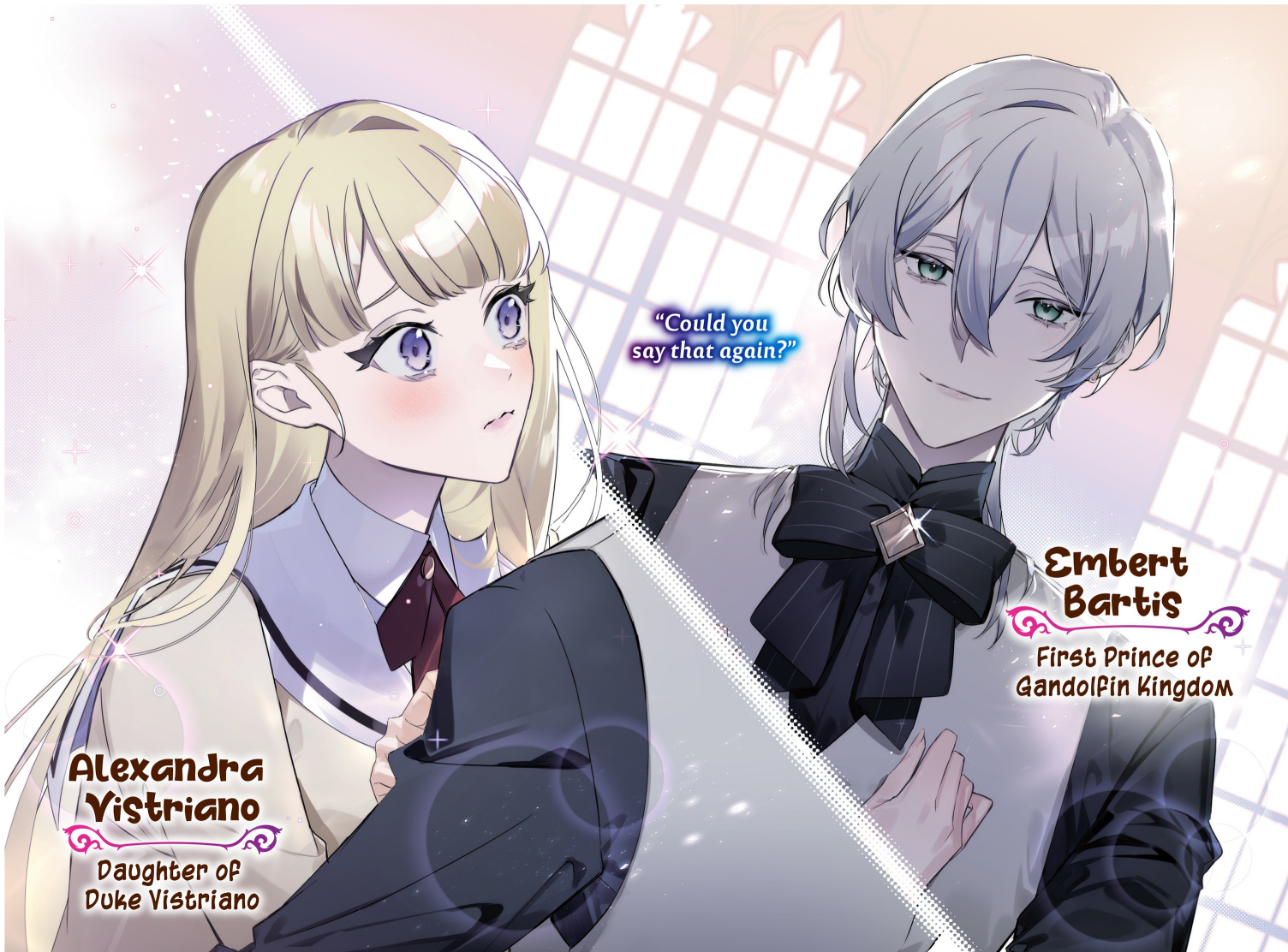
"S-Stop right there.  
Don't come any closer."

"What's this?  
Why are you  
running away?"

**Delphina  
Celette**  
Daughter of  
Baron Celette

**Alexandra  
Vistriano**  
Daughter of  
Duke Vistriano





**Alexandra  
Vistriano**

Daughter of  
Duke Vistriano

"Could you  
say that again?"

**Embert  
Bartis**

First Prince of  
Gandolfin Kingdom



# Prologue

**WHEN** I opened my eyes, an unfamiliar woman was sitting in a chair before me.

“Where am I?” I asked.

*And why am I in this place?*

Looking around, I found nothing but expansive, pure white space. The chair with only two legs filled me with an indescribable sense of unease.

“Um, where am I?” I asked again.

“You might call this a world that exists nowhere,” the unfamiliar woman responded.

“Come again?”

“You were hit by a reckless driver. Do you remember?”

“Huh?” I responded. “Oh, yeah.”

I’d been practicing karate and aikido since early childhood. After starting high school, I’d taken up kickboxing as well. On my way home from a kickboxing lesson, I’d been hit by a reckless driver ignoring a traffic signal.

As I recalled my fate, the woman offered me another chair.

“By rights, you weren’t supposed to die,” she said.

*Oh, it’s coming back to me. I pushed a parent and child out of the way, didn’t I?*

“Let me explain,” the woman continued.

Per her explanation, I wouldn’t be able to enter the cycle of reincarnation, as I hadn’t been fated to die. Apparently, I couldn’t be reborn in my previous world. Thus, she wanted to help me live in *another* world. That was the gist of it, anyway.

“Another world?” I repeated. “Then I won’t be able to see my family ever again?”

The woman furrowed her brow. “Unfortunately, no.”

“How awful,” I said while suppressing a slight urge to cry.

“Forgive me. I’m not all-powerful.”

“Huh? No, I’m not blaming you. But speaking of which, who *are* you?”

Somewhat belatedly, I decided to ask what had been on my mind. The answer didn’t surprise me.

“Me?” the woman asked. “I’m a Goddess.”

*Yeah, what else did I expect?*

“So, about the place you’ll be reincarnated...” the Goddess began.

This divinity didn’t beat around the bush.

The Goddess began feeling around in her clothes. “Um, give me a minute, okay?”

*Sure, do whatever you like. Not like I’ve got anywhere to be.*

Finally, the Goddess took out a large crystal ball and placed it on the ground with a thud. “Take a look,” she instructed.

I peered into the crystal ball. The colorless and transparent sphere merely reflected pure white. After a while, however, images began to appear in the crystal ball. As I squinted to get a better look, vibrant colors engulfed me. A group of men wore suits, and a group of women wore colorful dresses. The ambiance reminded me of a medieval European ball.

As I continued observing the scene, I spotted a beautiful woman. A man was embracing a different, petite woman across from her. Three other men were standing right behind him.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“This is something occurring in a different world from your own,” the Goddess replied. “A mysterious power has caused the woman standing alone to relive her life five times. For some reason, not even I—a Goddess—can resist this

power.”

*Seriously? She’s stuck in a time loop, then?*

“The woman’s name is Alexandra Vistriano,” the Goddess continued. “She is a high-ranking noblewoman—the daughter of a duke. The man embracing the woman across from Alexandra is Lauris Bartis. He is Alexadra’s fiancé and the second prince of this country.”

“Huh?” I asked. “Why is Alexandra’s fiancé proudly embracing another woman?”

*Don’t tell me. Is he one of those rotten-minded guys who thinks it’s normal for royalty to have mistresses?*

“The woman he’s embracing is Delphina Celette,” the Goddess said. “She is a wielder of holy magic.”

“Wait, magic? People in this world can use magic?”

The sudden fantasy twist had me giddy with excitement.

“They can,” the Goddess confirmed. “The common magic elements in this world are earth, wind, fire, water, lightning, and ice. There’s even spatial magic. That said, holy magic is the most rare and valuable element.”

“What is it, exactly?” I asked.

“Precisely what it sounds like. Holy magic users can cast spells of a sacred nature. In this country, that includes healing, purification, and—in rare cases—bewitchment.”

*Healing and purification make sense, but what the heck is bewitchment?*

“Delphina has used bewitchment to enslave the second prince,” the Goddess said. “As well as the three men behind him.”

“Are you kidding me?” I asked. “So, bewitchment is like a love potion? What a dirty trick.”

“Indeed. Yet for some reason, bewitchment isn’t recognized as a function of holy magic in this country. Despite my numerous attempts to intervene, no one ever acknowledges Delphina’s bewitchment.”

*Does that mean power surpassing the Goddess's is at work? That's terrifying beyond words.*

"The black-haired man is Rosario Marchetti," the Goddess said. "The red-haired man is Oreste Rodarte. The white-haired man is Severin Fregolini. All of them are high-ranking noblemen, and all of them have fiancées except for Severin. Alas, all of them began neglecting their fiancées after becoming infatuated with Delphina."

*Seriously? That pisses me off.*

"Alexandra is falsely accused of a crime and condemned in each lifetime," the Goddess said. "Those men place her in a rickety carriage and exile her from this country. Then, she's attacked by bandits and killed before dawn."

*Shouldn't a Goddess be able to do something about this?*

"Can't you help her?" I asked.

"As a Goddess, I'm not allowed to interfere with who lives and who dies. As such, I try to act *before* Alexandra's death, but it never goes according to plan. She's condemned at this party in every loop. By the time the adults learn the truth, it's already too late. Her remains are abandoned deep within the forest, becoming food for wild beasts. In the end, she fades from everyone's memories, as if nothing happened."

"Those guys get off scot-free?" I asked. "Even though they practically murder her?"

"That's right. What's more, Delphina has led happy lives with each of those four men. She's trying to find happiness with someone this time as well."

*For real? The absurdity of this whole situation is making my blood boil.*

"Alexandra's heart is on the verge of breaking," the Goddess said. "During a certain loop, she began living in a state of resignation, seeming to know her fate. She's probably conscious of the time loops. If her heart breaks, she won't be able to enter the cycle of reincarnation. Her soul will completely disappear. I want to avoid that at all costs."

My chest tightened in response to the Goddess's mournful plea. As I observed

Alexandra's sorrowful yet dignified bearing in the crystal ball, my heart ached even more. If I were in her position, I would beat the living daylights out of those guys. While this thought burned in my mind, the Goddess smiled faintly.

"You want to beat those guys to a pulp, don't you?" she asked.

"I sure do."







“You’re jealous of my and Delphina’s relationship, aren’t you?” Prince Lauris asked. “That’s why you’ve been harassing her.”

“Huh?” I muttered to myself. “Did it work?”

I felt around my new body while also examining it. Then, I balled my hands into fists and rolled my shoulders. Apparently, the transfer had been a success.

“All right,” I said. “I’m getting used to this new body.”

“Hey!” Lauris shouted. “Are you listening to me?!”

“But wow, this place is fancy,” I continued mumbling to myself.

The room was spacious enough to contain an entire baseball field. A banner on the front wall read “End-of-Year Celebration Party.” From what I could tell, this seemed to be a room within a school. It was probably what people often called a dance hall.

“They have a party at the end of each year?” I asked under my breath. “What kind of school is this?”

“Are you listening to me?!” Lauris roared.

“Um, Goddess?” I asked, ignoring him. “Can you hear me?”

“I can,” she replied telepathically. “The swap was a success. I have Alexandra’s soul here with me. I’m transporting her back into the cycle of reincarnation, so you’re free to go all out. By the way, Alexandra can use all forms of sorcery except holy magic.”

“Huh? I have no idea how to use magic, y’know?”

“Simply will it to come out of you.”

“Oh, is that all?” I responded. “Kind of a lazy answer, Goddess, don’t you think? Well, whatever. I’ll figure it out as I go.”

“Alexandra!” Lauris roared again. “What are you muttering to yourself? Listen to me!”

“Could you shut up?” I fired back. “I can hear you just fine without all the yelling.”

“Huh?” Lauris asked, his eyes widening at my change in attitude. “Alexandra?”  
*Well, can’t blame the guy.*

“Look,” I said. “You’ve been acting like a pompous jerk and putting me down for a while now. Think about it rationally though. Who’s actually in the wrong here?”

“Wh-What did you just say?” Lauris stammered.

“Must I repeat myself? I’m just stating the facts here.”

I checked the fit of my dress. It was surprisingly heavy. The lace inside the skirt was getting in my way. Could I get rid of it somehow?

“Disappear,” I said.

The stiff lace inside the skirt disappeared with a *whoosh*.

“Whoa, I’m pretty amazing,” I said while checking the dress. The skirt had narrowed quite a bit. “I just used magic all of a sudden.”

*Here we go. This skirt is still getting in my way a bit, but I should be able to move now.*

“Hey!” Lauris shouted.

*Wow, this prince is about to snap.*

“Do you ever shut up?” I asked. “What’s your deal, anyway? Fawning over another woman when you have a fiancée is wrong under any circumstance. Being royalty doesn’t make a lick of difference either. You’re just a despicable person.” Here, I pointed to the black-haired Rosario and the red-haired Oreste. “And the same goes for those two.”

Both of them stiffened. Why wouldn’t they? The young lady who’d been trembling in fear had just stood up for herself. It must have seemed like someone else had possessed her. Well, I suppose that’s exactly what was going on.

“How dare you act so self-righteous while cornering a lone woman?” I asked. “And you call yourselves men?!”

“What did you just say?!” the red-haired man bellowed, moving to grab me.

“Ha!” I laughed. “You resort to violence as soon as the tables turn on you? Despicable. Is it normal to use violence against women in this country?”

Looking around, I found many people shaking their heads.

“You’re the one who picked this fight,” I said. “Keep that in mind, okay?”

Just then, something unexpected occurred.

“What’s this?” a carefree voice asked. “Did I come at a bad time?”

Looking at the door, I spotted a tall man who could only be described as beautiful. He had silver hair and emerald-green eyes. All the women in the dance hall practically swooned.

“What’s going on here?” the beautiful man asked.

Despite his soft tone, the air turned chilly. The red-haired man hastily released his grip on me.

“I don’t know what your justification might be,” the beautiful man said. “But in my opinion, there’s never a good reason to raise your hand against a woman. It doesn’t matter what terrible thing might have occurred.”

*I totally agree with you, but could you stay out of my way right now?*

“And I haven’t forgotten you, Lauris,” the beautiful man continued. “Why are you embracing a woman other than Lady Alexandra?”

“Well, I...” the prince trailed off.

Was he somewhat aware of being in the wrong? In any case, I decided to sum up the situation to avoid complications.

“If he can’t speak, then I will,” I said. “That woman bewitched the prince into her loyal lap dog. She doesn’t even care that he already has a fiancée. The same goes for the black-haired and red-haired men behind him. They were just trying to condemn Alex—I mean, me—with false allegations. I was about to take my revenge on them before you came along. Could you please not get in my way, mister?”

A puzzled expression flashed across the beautiful man’s face. A moment later, however, he broke into a grin. “I see. Very well then—I won’t stand in your way.



Please continue.”

He continued grinning at me, apparently having decided to observe. Just what I wanted.

“Well then, shall we continue?” I asked. “I’ll start with you, ginger.”

“What did you call me?!” the red-haired man shouted.

He tried to grab me again but stopped short. Perhaps he felt anxious raising his hand against me with the beautiful man present.

“What’s this?” I asked. “Lose your nerve because one more person joined the audience?”

“Why you little!” he shouted, grabbing my collar.

“I’m not that little. Still, grabbing any woman by her collar really is despicable.”

I smoothly extended my right arm to his right side. At the same time, I also moved my right foot beside his right foot. With a light twist of my body, he lost his grip on my collar and collapsed to the ground. He seethed with rage, unable to understand what had just occurred.

“Hey, Oreste, that’s enough,” the black-haired man said.

However, the red-haired man ignored his friend’s attempt to stop him. After climbing to his feet, he cocked his fist back to punch me.

“You’re swinging too wide,” I said.

After dodging the red-haired man’s punch, I rotated on my left foot and roundhouse kicked him near the temple. Without delay, I moved behind him diagonally and aimed another roundhouse kick at the back of his neck. With that, I took down my muscular, red-haired opponent. Yet rather than stopping there, I strode towards the black-haired man, grinning all the while. In a flash, I kicked upwards with all my might, striking him on the chin.

Upon seeing me knock his two friends to the floor, the prince began stepping backwards. “S-Stop right there. Don’t come any closer.”

“What’s this?” I asked. “Why are you running away? Shouldn’t you hurry up

and toss me in a carriage? You're planning to exile me, right?"

"S-Stop right—"

I struck the prince in the solar plexus without waiting for him to finish. That single blow caused him to lose consciousness. *Weak, much?*

"And now for the coup de grace," I said. I found a woman sitting next to the prince, her legs having given out. "Say, did I ever harass you?" I asked. "Could you fill me in on the details again? I can't quite remember since I wasn't really paying attention."

Quivering, the woman scooted backwards on her rear. She was desperate to put even the slightest distance between us.

"I-I'm sorry," she said. "That wasn't the truth."

"Huh?" I asked. "What was that? I couldn't hear you."

"L-Like I said, that wasn't the truth."

"Still can't hear you."

"Alexandra never bullied me!" the woman cried loudly enough for the entire dance hall to hear. "I made it all up!"

"Heh," I chuckled. "See—you *can* raise your voice if you try. Well then, I need to give you a reward for telling the truth."

When I grinned, the other woman smiled as well, probably thinking she'd avoided punishment. "By all means," she said with a giggle. "I'll accept whatever you have to offer."

A satisfying snap resounded throughout the hall. At the same time, the woman rolled across the floor several times.

"H-How awful!" she yelped. "You promised to give me a reward!"

"That's what I just did," I replied. "Would you like me to give your other cheek a reward as well?"

"Incredible!" a familiar voice echoed inside my mind. "You're exactly what I was looking for!"

"Goddess?" I asked.

“Oh, hold on a moment. Alexandra’s soul is being guided into the cycle of reincarnation.”

“Really? That’s great!”

“It’s all thanks to you,” the Goddess said. “Her nearly broken heart has returned to normal.”

“Was this really enough? I could’ve done more.”

“That’s quite all right. Anything more would have killed those men.”

I frowned. “You think?”

Sudden laughter interrupted our conversation.

“Thank you,” an unfamiliar voice echoed in my mind.

“Who’s there?” I asked.

“It’s Alexandra. I’ve safely entered the cycle of reincarnation.”

She’d come to thank me before starting her next life.

“Heh, no problem,” I answered with a smile.

A moment later, the ground began to shake. It felt as though a massive earthquake had just struck.

“Huh?” I asked. “What’s going on?”

“Change,” the Goddess replied. “A change has occurred.”

Though I could hear her voice, I didn’t understand anything more. Then, everything faded to black.

# Chapter One: Young Again

I woke to an unfamiliar ceiling.

“What’s this?” I mumbled.

I was lying in a large bed, surrounded by unfamiliar objects. Opulent furniture filled every corner of the high-ceilinged room. Moreover, the room was so large that I couldn’t reach any of the furniture, no matter how far I extended my hand.

“Who needs this much space?” I mumbled again.

My voice surprised me. It sounded childlike and faltering. Without thinking, I looked at my hands. They were small, like those of a young girl.

“Huh?” I asked. “What’s going on?”

I climbed out of bed and walked towards the large mirror in the back of the room.

“Uh, yep, I’m a child.”

I stared at myself while clinging to the mirror. Yes, I appeared to be a child of around four or five years old—no two ways about it. I was quite pretty with soft, golden hair and beautiful eyes of deep purple.

“I look like a mini version of Alexandra,” I noted.

I was, in fact, Alexandra as a young girl.

“Why did this happen?”

As I continued staring at myself in the mirror, I heard the rattle of a doorknob, and someone entered the room.

“Are you awake, Lady Alexandra?” a woman asked.

“Mary,” I answered, uttering her name by instinct. Apparently, I had both Alexandra’s memories and my own.

“I’m so glad you’re awake,” Mary said with a somewhat teary-eyed expression. “I must inform the duchess.”

With that, she left the room. A little while later, she returned with a gorgeous woman with neatly tied golden hair. As I continued inspecting myself in the mirror, the golden-haired woman raced over to me and squeezed me in her arms.

“There you are, Ally!” she cried, tears spilling from her stunning, sapphire-blue eyes. “You’re finally able to get up. I’m so relieved.”

“Mother,” I said.

This beautiful woman was indeed Alexandra’s mother. For some reason, I had remained in Alexandra’s body and returned to her childhood.

“How does your head feel?” Mother asked. “Does it hurt?”

“No ouchie,” I replied.

“How wonderful to hear. What about your stomach? Are you hungry?”

“Tummy rumble-rumble.”

“I see,” Mother answered with a laugh. “Well then, let’s have dinner a bit early. I’ll go ahead and wait while you change, dear.”

“Okie dokie.”

My childish speech made me somewhat uncomfortable, but what could I do about it? At this point, I couldn’t articulate myself like an adult. Simple as that.

“I’ll prepare some hot water,” Mary said before leaving the room.

“What’s going on here?” I mumbled.

As I struggled to grasp my situation, a voice rang out from somewhere. “Alexandra,” it called out to me.

“Who’s there?” I asked.

The voice laughed. “It’s me.”

“Goddess?” I responded after recognizing her. “Hey, do you know why I’m small?”

“It’s due to the change.”

“Oh, right. You mentioned a change when the ground shook.”

“Yes, things have changed significantly thanks to you,” the Goddess said. “The original Alexandra has been reborn and is enjoying a different life. On the other hand, you reverted back to Alexandra’s childhood. The fifth loop has begun.”

“Huh? I’m gonna have to relive all that drama again?”

“No, Alexandra’s life has already changed. You fell off a horse and lost consciousness. That never happened in her previous lives.”

“I fell off a horse?” I repeated.

“Indeed. Headfirst.”

“Yeah, it’s coming back to me now.



“**CAN’T** reach,” I grumbled.

I couldn’t possibly reach the back of a horse as a five-year-old. Thus, I looked around for something to use as a platform. The head chef had given me carrots, and I’d visited the stable to give them to the horse. Afterwards, I’d decided to ride the horse since no one was around to stop me.

“This should work,” I said upon finding an old wooden box in the corner of the stable. Somehow, I managed to carry the somewhat heavy box over to the horse’s belly. Though the horse looked rather uneasy, I completely failed to notice.

“Upsy-daisy,” I said while heaving myself onto the wooden box, which was two-thirds my height. Then, I continued clambering onto the horse’s saddleless back. Along the way, the horse nudged my rear with its nose, allowing me to complete the climb.

“Alrighty,” I said.

Now, I just needed to stand up and straddle the horse’s back. Unfortunately, I had made a grave miscalculation. Children had incredibly heavy heads in proportion to the rest of their bodies. Despite my best efforts to climb onto the

horse, I plunged towards the ground upside down. Powerless to stop myself, I knocked my head against the stable floor and lost consciousness.



**“CHILDREN** sure have some big heads, don’t they?” I mused.

“Indeed,” the Goddess replied. “But thanks to your fall, I can speak to you again.”

“Did I forget about you until now?”

“That’s right. Though we can speak normally for now, this will be our last conversation.”

“Really? Just when we’re finally able to chat again?”

“You’ve already begun your life as Alexandra,” the Goddess said. “You won’t be coming to my realm anymore, and as such, my meddling ends here.”

“That’s sad, but I guess it makes sense.”

“We won’t be able to speak, but I’ll still be watching over you.”

“Thanks,” I said with a laugh.

“Also, I’ve bestowed my divine protection upon you. Your magical abilities should be enhanced compared to Alexandra’s previous lives. Likewise, you can use all elements.”

“Enhanced abilities *and* all elements? Wow, I’m looking forward to using magic. This might be the best part of being reincarnated. I’m so excited.”

“I’m glad you’re happy,” the Goddess responded with a titter. “I enjoyed my time with you as well. Have fun as Alexandra. I’ll be watching over you even if we can’t speak to each other.”

“Got it. Thanks, Goddess.”



**AFTER** I finished getting dressed, Mary took my hand and led me down the stairs. Mother was waiting for us in the dining room, and we began eating a modest meal of porridge. When dinner ended, we retired to the living room for tea, where I sat on Mother’s lap atop the long sofa.



“My, my,” Mother said. “Someone’s being quite clingy today.”

The door opened as we shared a laugh. Before long, Father and my older brother Janus entered the living room. Both of them had just come back from work.

“What’s this?” Father asked, heading straight towards me and lifting me up. “Ally’s acting like the perfect little sweetheart today. You fell from a horse, I heard?”

“Sure did,” I replied with an embarrassed giggle.

Father touched the back of my head. “That’s quite the bump, kiddo. Are you hurting anywhere else?”

“Nope,” I answered with a cheeky grin.

When Father smiled back at me, my breath caught in my chest. He was a dashing man with purple eyes and ice-blue hair. Furthermore, he served as a close aide to the king in the royal castle. He was still incredibly popular with women, often receiving amorous glances.

Incidentally, I had inherited Father’s purple eyes and Mother’s golden hair.

“What’s this?” Janus mumbled while cocking his head.

“Something wrong?” Father asked.

“One moment,” my brother said while staring at me. He then muttered under his breath, “Appraisal.” After finishing this incantation, he finally announced, “Ally’s mana supply has increased.”

“What do you mean?” Father asked with a puzzled expression.

“Ally’s mana supply has risen dramatically,” my brother explained. “Wait, what’s this? Divine protection? All elements?”

Father’s expression grew increasingly stern with each word. “Do you feel any changes in yourself, Ally?” he asked, still holding me.

*No point lying if they already know about my divine protection.*

“Well, you see, I talked to a Goddess,” I said. “She saved me.”

Though I wasn’t telling the whole truth, I wasn’t lying either.

“That’s... incredible,” Father said, sitting down on the sofa and placing me on his lap. “You really spoke with a Goddess?”

“Uh-huh.”

Mother clasped her hands in front of her chest and spoke a prayer. “Thank you for loving our daughter enough to save her, Goddess. We are truly grateful.”

Janus smiled stiffly.

Meanwhile, a complex mix of emotions warred on Father’s face. “I’m beyond delighted that Ally survived, but *every* element? Can you use magic, Ally?”

“Huh?” I tilted my head.

“She’s only five, Father,” Janus interjected. “She can’t use magic when she has yet to learn it.”

*Oh, I see. I need to learn how to actually use magic first.*

Father’s expression hardened with resolve. “In that case, I’ll have Ally start practicing magic at once. If we don’t train her to use concealment, her possession of every element will come to light. Furthermore, it could be problematic if the king learns about her divine protection. He could take an interest in her.”

“The king will?” I asked.

*Is that such a big deal?*

“That’s right,” Janus said while gesturing to me to join him.

After having Father put me down, I sat on my brother’s lap this time.

“In your case, having the king’s interest—or rather, the royal family’s—could mean only one thing,” he said. “You’d be forced to marry into their family.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Almost certainly. Considering your age, you would be betrothed to the second prince.”

*That pompous jerk I beat up? Yuck.*

“There’s a first prince as well,” Janus continued. “However, he already has several fiancée candidates, so marrying him would prove difficult. He’s also quite a bit older than you.”

*Did I ever meet the first prince? Either way, I definitely don’t want to marry the jerk I beat up. Doing so might even lead to the same fate as Alexandra in her previous lives. Well, I can just give him a good thrashing if that happens again. Still, I don’t want anything to do with him. I can’t see myself liking him even a little.*

“Don’t wanna get married,” I said in my childish voice.

“Huh?” Janus asked.

“Wanna be mommy and daddy’s little girl forever. And wouldn’t you be lonely if I left, Janus?”

Everyone burst out laughing.

Janus chuckled while kissing me on the cheek. “You want to stay in this house forever, do you? That sounds nice. We’ll always be together, after all.”

In response, I returned my brother’s kiss on the cheek.

## Chapter Two: A Battlefield Disguised as a Tea Party

**THREE** years had passed since I reverted back to Alexandra's childhood.

I was attending my first ever tea party at the age of eight. Of course, my household hosted tea parties as well. Nevertheless, I hadn't been allowed to appear in public until I could fully control my magic. Without perfect concealment, my powers would eventually come to light. Learning to control an immense mana supply was rather difficult for a young girl like me.

Yet after three years, I *had* learned to control my magic. Now, I was making my formal debut in public. As a result, I'd been oblivious to the truth behind these gatherings. This event was actually a battlefield disguised as a tea party. No wonder Mary had bade me farewell with a worried expression.

"I never expected this to be a group matchmaking event," I muttered to myself.

The royal family was sponsoring this particular tea party. Who would have expected such a gathering to be a group matchmaking event? Or rather, a battlefield? Numerous round tables and chairs had been set up in the castle's large courtyard. Likewise, plentiful sweets had been arranged in the back. Highborn boys and girls of the same age were the only participants. The young noblemen enjoyed the party without reservation, laughing loudly and pretending to be mature gentlemen.

However, the young noblewomen were already on the hunt for eligible bachelors. Their mental maturity far surpassed their male counterparts, after all. The girls were concentrating their attention on four specific boys to a frightening degree. By the time I arrived, the girls had already swarmed around these boys. Consequently, I couldn't see them at the center. Regardless, colorful dresses fluttered all around them.

"How terrifying," I said.

*Women are scary no matter what world you're in.*

As this realization dawned on me, another girl sat down next to me. “No arguments there,” she agreed.

Felicita Camprani was the daughter of a marquis. We’d been friends for as long as I could remember. Currently, she held a plate with sweets piled so high that they threatened to spill over.

“Are you planning on eating those all by yourself, Cita?” I asked.

“Of course not,” she replied. “I brought your portion, too.”

“Heh, I know. Thanks.”

Felicita wore her light beige hair in a half-up, half-down style. She’d gathered the knot of the half-up portion on the right, forming a small bun.

“Oh?” another voice asked. “Did I double up on the sweets?”

Felicia Camprani sat down on my other side, placing another plate filled with sweets on the table. She wore her light beige hair in a style similar to that of her sister. However, she’d gathered the knot of the half-up portion on the left, forming a small bun.

“That’s twins for you,” I said with a laugh. “You even think alike. Thanks. Looks like we’ll be having a feast.”

The three of us immediately dug into the sweets while sipping our tea.

“Speaking of which, what did you mean by ‘no arguments there’?” Cia asked.

“We were talking about the murderous enthusiasm of the young ladies here,” I explained.

Cia nodded in understanding. “I see. Well, tea parties at the royal castle are always like this.”

Apparently, the twins were accustomed to this scene. They’d attended similar functions numerous times.

“Are you two interested in anyone?” I asked.

The twins laughed at the same time.

“Not right now,” Cia responded. “But we’re not seriously looking for anyone either.”

“At the very least, we’re not interested in boys who can’t tell us apart,” Cita added.

“Right?” both of them said simultaneously.

They *did* look very similar, as one might expect from twins. At the same time, their eye colors were different, and they had completely different personalities. Cita had hazelnut eyes, a lively disposition, and was adorably clumsy. Conversely, Cia had peridot eyes, and despite her more relaxed demeanor, she could trounce anyone in an argument. Still, both twins possessed an ephemeral beauty.

“What about you, Ally?” Cita asked. “A lot of the boys have been staring at you for a while now.”

“She’s the prettiest girl here, after all,” Cia said. She then added for emphasis, “On the outside, at least. Who knows what’s going on underneath the surface?”

“Rude, much?” I responded. “But I guess you’re right.”

As my childhood friends, the twins knew all about my mana supply.

“I’m not interested in anyone either,” I said. “For starters, everyone looks exactly the same. Plus, I’ve decided to stay with my family forever. No point fishing for men when I’m never getting married.”

Both twins sighed, as I’d been repeating this declaration for years.

“I *do* understand how you feel,” Cita said. “But I doubt that’ll be possible as a highborn noblewoman.”

“You’ll find someone you love eventually,” Cia added. “I’m certain of it.”

The twins both laughed.

“It’s fine,” I replied. “At the very least, that won’t be right now.”

I began digging into the sweets again, which signaled the end to this conversation about me.

Meanwhile, Cita stuffed her cheeks with petit fours while observing the four groups. “Still, their popularity is unwavering.”

“Unwavering?” I repeated.

“Yes. First is Second Prince Lauris Bartis. Second is Rosario Marchetti—his father is a marquis and the prime minister. Third is Oreste Rodarte—his father is a duke and head of the chivalric order. Last is Severin Fregolini—his father is a marquis and the head of the mage’s order.”

*Wait, what did she just say?*

“Well, what do you expect?” Cia asked in a disinterested tone. “They’re all quite handsome.”

“Hold on,” I said. “Could you repeat their names again?”

“Sure,” Cita responded.

When she finished, I couldn’t help but look up at the sky. What kind of cosmic irony was this? Those were the men I’d beaten up after first arriving in the world.

*Ugh, I want to go home, but these sweets are just too good.*

I had a bad feeling about this. Though I wanted to leave right away, the mouthwatering sweets were keeping me glued to my chair. I couldn’t stop myself from stuffing my face with them.

*Well, they probably don’t remember what happened.*

My heart had already lost to sugary morsels. Thus, I satisfied myself with this conclusion. Yet as the sweets vanished from our plates, several young noblemen visited our table.

“If it’s not too much trouble, would you mind speaking with us?” one boy asked.

While fixing a smile on my face, I forced myself to not say, “Yes, it *is* too much trouble.” I was still a highborn noble, regardless of my youth. I understood my obligation to maintain a pleasant façade. A few minutes later, however, I discovered how naïve my thinking had been. Our table soon resembled the four groups we’d been observing. All at once, boys began pestering me with questions.

“Would you like to walk with me in the garden over yonder, Lady Vistriano?”

“Would you like to select more confections with me, Lady Vistriano?”



“We plan to host a tea party at my manor in the near future as well. I hope to see you there, Lady Vistriano.”

I received a terrifying number of invitations. Perhaps I seemed novel as a first-time participant. My smile began twitching involuntarily, as any girl’s would.

“Boys, you’re startling Alexandra by offering her so many invitations at once,” Cia said. “Do you mind stepping away for a moment?”

Despite her polite attempt to get rid of the boys, they wouldn’t back down. In fact, they started arguing with each other. “I’ll leave if you leave first,” one of them said, leading to even more heated exchanges.

I struggled to come up with a solution, as I definitely couldn’t resort to throwing hands. Just then, I heard a voice from behind us.

“That’s no way to treat a lady, you lot.”

When I turned towards the voice, I found a young boy with blondish-orange hair. Another young boy with red hair stood at his side.

*Those are two of the men I beat up, I thought with a gasp. Their faces are much younger, but there’s no mistaking it. Those boys grew up to condemn the original Alexandra.*

“It’s improper to frighten a lady during her first tea party,” the prince with blondish-orange hair said. “Move away from her table at once, everyone.”

Reluctantly, the young noblemen surrounding me returned to their own tables.

“Are you okay?” the prince asked.

“Yes, thank you very much,” I replied. “I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

His face reddened slightly. “Don’t worry about it. From now on, speak to me if you find yourself in any trouble.”

*He doesn’t seem to remember me. I can’t imagine him offering help if he recalled the thrashing I gave him.*

“My name is Lauris Bartis,” he continued. “I’m the second prince.”

“And my name is Oreste Rodarte,” the red-haired boy said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Seeing as the boys had introduced themselves, I had to reciprocate as a matter of courtesy. “My name is Alexandra Vistriano,” I replied with a modest greeting befitting a young lady. “It’s a pleasure to meet both of you.”

When the prince blushed again, Cita and Cia suppressed a laugh on either side of me.

“Do you mind if we sit here?” the prince asked.

“By all means,” I replied, unable to turn down a request from royalty.

As both boys sat down, I sighed softly enough to go unnoticed. This could turn out to be more troublesome than the previous crowd. That said, Cita and Cia seemed to be enjoying the situation, their curious glances prickling my skin. At the same time, other envious and sorrowful gazes pierced me from all directions. These stares originated from the young noblewomen. Specifically, the ones who’d been surrounding the boys mere minutes ago.

“Is this your first tea party at the castle, Lady Vistriano?” the prince asked.

“Yes, that’s correct,” I replied.

“Is there any reason you haven’t attended one before?”

“I don’t know myself. This is the first time I received an invitation.”

Father had probably dealt with the matter in private. Even so, I couldn’t reveal the true reason for my previous absences.

“I see,” the prince said. “You should participate more often from now on. The royal castle’s tea parties are the best way to make connections.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I responded.

*What if I want to punch him again?*

I had been worrying about this since he arrived. However, the prince turned out to be a small, surprisingly decent gentleman. Had his previous personality been a result of bewitchment?

The prince turned his gaze on Cita and Cia. “You two still look as identical as

ever.”

Though Cia responded with a smile, the humor didn’t reach her eyes. The prince probably said this to them every time.

The red-haired boy cocked his head. “You think they look identical, Your Highness? They look completely different to me.”

“Huh?” Cia asked, her eyes widening as she looked at him.

“Your eye colors are completely different, after all, and you have distinct auras. Also, you seem like the type of girl I wouldn’t want to make angry, Lady Felicia.”

Despite his rather blunt assessment, he’d hit the nail on the head.

Cia flashed a genuine smile. “You have quite the discerning eye, Lord Rodarte.”

“Huh?” the red-haired boy asked. “You think so?”

“Yes. Apart from Ally and her brother, no one else has ever been able to tell us apart.”

“It has been quite a while,” Cita agreed while radiating happiness. “Being seen as my own person really warms my heart.”

The red-haired boy blushed as she smiled at him.

Cia whispered to me suggestively while looking at the pair. “Looks like my sister might find a match before you, Ally.”

“I can tell them apart too,” a new voice said from behind.

Turning around, I found a black-haired boy standing there. He was a younger version of the man I’d kicked in the jaw. Moreover, he was one of the four boys who’d attracted a crowd. The many young ladies lurking behind him was evidence of this.

“You too, Rosario?” the red-haired boy asked with a grin. “Sounds like we’ll be good friends.”

The black-haired boy looked at the prince with genuine curiosity. “You really can’t tell them apart, Your Highness?” he asked without a trace of mockery in

his eyes.

“Wh-Why am I the bad guy here?” the prince asked. “They really look identical to me.”

“You think so? Perhaps people give off different impressions depending on the viewer. To my eyes, Lady Felicita is cute, and Lady Felicia is beautiful.” The black-haired boy spoke this straightforward praise while regarding the twins. Afterwards, he turned his gaze on me, his eye widening for a moment. “Oh, forgive me for not introducing myself. I’m Rosario Marchetti.”

He greeted me as if we were meeting for the first time. This boy didn’t seem to remember the thrashing I gave him either. Still, why had he looked at me with surprise?

“It’s nice to meet you,” I responded cautiously. “My name is Alexandra Vistriano.”

“Ah, I should’ve known,” the black-haired boy said. “You’re Lord Janus’s little sister, aren’t you?”

“Yes. You know my brother?”

The black-haired boy broke into a grin. “Indeed. I’ve learned a lot from Lord Janus. He was officially selected as an aide to the crown prince, correct?”

“That’s right. He received the appointment just a few days ago.”

“Lord Janus is very knowledgeable. I respect him greatly.”

Though Janus and I had different colored eyes and hair, our other features were somewhat similar. The black-haired boy must have regarded me with surprise because of my resemblance to Janus. Similar to the others, the black-haired boy didn’t seem like the type of person to disparage his peers. Bewitchment must have twisted his personality.

“Hearing praise for my brother certainly warms my heart,” I said.

The black-haired boy grinned again. In the blink of an eye, the six of us were sitting around the table. Ironically, all the men I’d beaten up in another life had gathered around me.

“What kind of joke is the universe playing on me?” I muttered under my

breath.

The prince was sitting next to me, having switched seats. “Hm?” he asked while peering at me. “What’s this about a joke?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. This is my first tea party at the castle, and I’m sharing a table with so many wonderful people. It’s so hard to believe that it feels like a joke.”

“Haha,” the prince laughed cheerfully. “You’re rather adorable, Lady Vistriano.”

My excuse seemed to have worked. Was it just my imagination, or were Cita’s shoulders quivering with suppressed laughter?

Honestly, I was enjoying myself with this group. None of these three boys seemed like the type to disdain their fiancées. Bewitchment must have been a terrifying power.

“I’ll go get some more sweets,” the red-haired boy said.

“Oh, I’ll accompany you then,” I replied. “I need to walk after sitting for so long.”

“Well then, the two of us will bring back another heaping serving.”

Thus, the grinning red-haired boy and I got up from our seats. Within just a few steps, however, several young noblewomen tried to stop him.

“I’ll go on ahead,” I offered.

As the red-haired boy waved to me in apology, I continued walking farther back. As I approached a certain table, a young noblewoman stuck her foot out in front of me.

*Time to teach this girl a lesson. I have the eyes of a hawk and the reflexes of a cat.*

Rather than let the opportunity slide, I dug my heel into her foot. “Eek!” the girl squealed, but of course, I pretended not to notice.

“Oh, did I step on something?” I asked with feigned surprise. “No, perhaps it was just my imagination.”

*She probably can’t stand the prince and his friends sitting at my table. I do*

*understand their jealousy, but I won't tolerate cowards who try to trip other people.*

When I arrived at the table lined with sweets, I had trouble deciding what to choose from the generous spread. The royal castle certainly knew how to throw a party.

"Guess I can't criticize the twins for bringing back those enormous plates," I said.

Before I knew it, I had stacked up a veritable mountain of sweets.

After catching up with me, the red-haired boy looked at my plate and laughed. "That's quite the pile."

"I can hardly resist the call of dessert."

"Ha, I know what you mean." The red-haired boy was also holding a plate with a heaping serving in both hands. "I'll head back first and set this plate down. Take your time deciding, Lady Vistriano. I'll come back to help in just a minute."

With that, he sauntered away.

"Bewitchment must have twisted his personality back then," I muttered to myself. "Just like I thought."

Now sure of myself, I let go of my caution towards the three boys. I took my time returning to our table, as the red-haired boy had suggested. Along the way, a foot extended from the same table as before. *Twice is too much*, I thought, stomping on her foot this time.

"Ow!" the young noblewoman cried, glaring at me. "What do you think you're doing, stepping on my foot?!"

"What do you think *you're* doing?" I retorted, grinning from ear to ear. "I wouldn't have done anything if you'd stopped after the first time."

"Huh?! What in the realm are you talking about?"

I continued smiling at the two young noblewomen who insisted on feigning ignorance. "Heh, you think I don't know?" I asked, meeting my harasser's gaze. "You're the same person who tried to trip me a little while ago."

“I-I have no idea what you’re talking about. Do you have any proof?”

The girl was clearly shaken. She might as well have confessed to the crime.

“When a culprit feels cornered, they often demand that you provide evidence,” I said with a laugh. “Excuse me for a moment.”

After borrowing the table to set down my plate, I grabbed the girl’s upper arm and forced her to stand up.

“Hey, that hurts!” she cried.

Ignoring her complaints, I crouched down and lifted up the hem of her dress.

“What are you doing?!” she shrieked.

In response, I forced her head down and asked, “Can you explain this?”

My first footprint still remained on the top of her right foot.

“W-Well...” the girl stammered.

“You’re frustrated that the prince and his friends chose to sit at our table,” I said, looking back and forth between the two girls. “Yes, I understand how you feel, but speak to me directly if you have any grievances. Trying to trip someone is cowardly. If you’d only done it once, I would have brushed it off with a laugh. Twice was too much though. Do you not have eyes? I was holding a plate full of sweets. If I’d fallen, all of them would have needed to be thrown away. Have some respect for the ingredients and the people who made them!”

“Truly,” the prince said, showing up and taking my hand.

Meanwhile, the red-haired boy picked up my plate from the table.

“As Lady Alexandra said, sitting at that table was entirely my decision,” the prince continued. “Speak to me directly if you have any grievances. Also, you might have underestimated Lady Alexandra because you’ve never seen her before. Just so you know, she’s the daughter of Duke Vistriano.”

With that, the prince escorted me away from the scene.

“Was that final threat really necessary?” I asked.

The prince shook his head. “That sort of girl is liable to repeat the same mistake if you don’t make yourself clear.”



“Oh? You’re surprisingly insightful.”

“That aside, I never expected you to be such a stubborn tomboy.”

“Heh,” I chuckled. “Deception *is* my middle name.”

“Yes, you had me completely fooled.”

The two of us burst out laughing while looking at each other.

When we returned to the table, Cita greeted me with admiration. “You’re amazing, Ally. I definitely would have tripped.”

Cia laughed. “They’ll have to try a lot harder to catch Ally off guard.”

The red-haired boy laughed as well. “You have sharp reflexes, Lady Vistriano. You gracefully dodged two attacks, and on top of that, you even stomped on her foot twice.”

“It’s all thanks to my training,” I said with a chuckle. “My eagle eyes and catlike reflexes are far superior to the average man.”

The red-haired boy’s face brightened even more. “That’s awesome. How about sparring with me sometime?”

“I don’t mind, but don’t start blubbering if you lose.”

“Now those are fighting words.”

The black-haired boy sighed softly while listening to our conversation. “Both you and Lord Janus are strong. I can’t put on muscle, no matter how much I train. I envy your strength.”

“Well, I’m not exactly bulging with muscle,” I replied.

“Huh?”

“Have a look,” I urged, rolling up my sleeve to expose my arm. “See? Not a muscle in sight.”

The black-haired boy’s face turned bright red as he stared at my arm.

“Hey!” the prince shouted, grabbing my arm and rolling my sleeve back down. “That’s not very ladylike!”

“It’s just an arm,” I said. “We wear clothes with shorter sleeves during the

warmer seasons, don't we?"

"That's not the problem here," the prince answered with a sigh. "You really are a stubborn tomboy."

The twins burst out laughing at this exchange.

Afterwards, the six of us continued chatting about various things.

"Now that we're all friends, why don't we call each other by our first names?" the prince suggested. "You can call me Lauris. There's no need for all the formalities either."

"We can address you without a title?" I asked.

"Is that something you're concerned about, Miss Tomboy?"

"Kind of. Don't complain about us being disrespectful later, okay?"

"I would never," the prince said with a laugh.

"All right," I responded with a cheerful smile. "Well then, you can call me Ally."

The prince—no, Lauris—heaved a sigh. "I could almost mistake you for a sheltered lady based solely on that smile."

"Indeed," Rosario agreed. "She's stunningly beautiful, after all."

Apparently, he was the sort to give straightforward compliments, just as he'd done with the twins.

"Thank you, Rosario," I said with a smile.

Just then, a knight guarding the courtyard began shouting. "A-Attention, everyone! I've just received word that a rampaging magic horse is running straight towards us! Please evacuate at once under our guidance!"

A few of the young ladies screamed in response to the still-unseen terror. Nevertheless, most of the attendees followed the knights' directions, as one might expect of highborn nobles.

The three boys moved to protect me and the twins. "Ally!" Lauris cried. "Let's get out of here at once! You too, Cita and Cia!"

“Cita and Cia,” I said while heading in the direction of the magic horse. “You two run away with Lauris and the others.”

“Ally!” Cita called out to me.

Lauris grabbed my arm. “What are you blathering about? You need to run away too!”

“Don’t worry about me,” I said while shaking him off. “I’m going to stop the magic horse.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Lauris continued shouting. “You might be the most stubborn tomboy in the world, but there’s no way you can do that!”

Smiling, I shook my head. “Thanks for the concern, but I’ll be fine.” A moment later, I heard the faint sound of hoofbeats in the distance. “It’s close. Everyone, get out of here! Hurry!”

Lauris shouted my name one last time as I began running towards the magic beast. “Ally!”

“Don’t worry about me,” I said. “I’ll be okay—mark my words. Take care of the twins for me.”

Without looking back, I began sprinting in the probable direction of the magic horse. After crossing the courtyard, I raced past a flower garden. There, I could hear the ear-splitting neighs of the creature. A magic horse with a golden mane and a crimson coat was galloping straight towards me.

“What a beautiful creature,” I said.

Farther back, I spotted the faint forms of people chasing the magic horse. Some of them were on horseback themselves. That said, the magic horse was terrifyingly fast. Even the people on horseback wouldn’t be able to catch up with it. Then, someone from the group darted ahead. He was riding another magic horse with a crimson mane and a pure white coat. He began closing in on the rampaging horse with incredible speed. For one moment, I couldn’t help but stare at the rider, whose silver hair fluttered in the wind. His beautiful form as he maneuvered his mount could have been a painting brought to life.

“Young lady!” he cried out in a stern voice, his emerald-green eyes widening

upon seeing me. “Watch out!”

I didn’t intend to move out of the way at this point. The rampaging beast was already right in front of me.

“Right this way!” I shouted.

Upon noticing me, the horse continued galloping straight towards me. Perhaps it intended to knock me aside. After channeling mana into my legs, I leapt high into the air and straddled the horse’s back.

“Be a good boy and calm down,” I said.

My words didn’t seem to reach the overexcited beast. Instead, it began thrashing about in an attempt to shake me off.

“No!” the silver-haired man shouted.

However, I paid him no mind. “You won’t be able to throw me off that easily,” I said, flexing my thighs while clinging to the horse’s mane. Then, I channeled my magic into the beast little by little. “Can you hear me?” I asked. “Be a good boy and come back to your senses. At this rate, you’ll be deemed a threat and put down. Please settle down for me, okay?”

The magic horse gradually calmed down in response to my magic. It became entirely docile in a matter of minutes.

I stroked the side of the horse’s mane while still on its back. “There’s a good boy.”

The silver-haired man finished approaching me on horseback, his expression stern. “Young lady!” he cried while dismounting from his white horse and walking over to me. “Are you injured?!”

He’d seemed handsome even from a distance. Up close, however, he was beautiful enough to give me goosebumps.

“Forgive me for surprising you,” I said. “The horse and I are both fine. He’s completely regained his senses, so please don’t put him down. Here—take a look at this.”

I pointed out the cause of the horse’s rampage, which was near my foot.

“Are these whip markings?” the silver-haired man asked.

Wounds caused by whippings were evident on the horse’s left flank. He’d been lashed in the same place over and over again.

“You must have gone on a rampage because of these,” I said to the horse. “Isn’t that right?”

The horse responded with a short whinny.

“You can understand magic horses?” the silvered-haired man asked.

“Yes, more or less.”

I’d been able to understand animals and other magic creatures for quite some time now.

“That’s amazing,” the silver-haired man said while stroking the nose of his white horse. “Do you understand my magic horse as well?” When I giggled in response, he asked, “Did you learn something?”

“Your horse says he wants to run more. He hasn’t been able to gallop to his heart’s content lately. That left him very dissatisfied.”

The man’s emerald-green eyes widened again. “Incredible,” he said while lifting me down from the magic horse. “Even so,” he continued, bending his knees to meet my gaze. “Do you understand how dangerous your actions were? You could have died if that magic horse had kicked you.”

“Sorry,” I apologized. “I could sense his pain, and I wanted to save him.”

“I see. Well then, I suppose you did the right thing.” The silver-haired man took my hand and kissed the back, as if I were a fully grown noblewoman. “This magic horse will continue to live as a result of your courage. Thank you, young lady.”

A blush crept up my cheeks. I had never been treated like a proper noblewoman before, much less by such a handsome man.

“Y-You’re very welcome,” I replied awkwardly.

The silver-haired man donned a gentle smile. “By the way, where did such a lovely young lady come from? Were you a guest at Lauris’s tea party, perhaps?”

As I took a breath to answer “Yes,” another voice called out to us from behind. “I would prefer you didn’t rush off on your own like that, Prince Embert. It’s reckless.”

I stood on my tiptoes to get a better look at the newcomer, whose voice I recognized. “Is that you, Janus?”

“Huh?” my brother asked. “Is that you, Ally? Were you the one to stop the magic horse?”

*Wait, had Janus just called the silver-haired man “prince?”*

“Yes,” I said. “And my apologies. I didn’t know you were the crown prince... Um, Your Highness.”

The prince laughed at my sudden change in politeness. “I have no need for formalities, adorable young lady. Sorry, but I completely forgot to introduce myself. My name is Embert Bartis, and I’m the crown prince of this country.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Alexandra Vistriano.”

Prince Embert took my hand again. “What a wonderful name. May I also call you Ally, as Janus does?”

“Of course.”

The prince kissed my hand again. “Why thank you,” he said with a laugh.



**PRINCE** Embert escorted me to the large hall where the tea party attendees had evacuated. Janus followed behind us.

“You didn’t have to escort me here yourself, Prince Embert,” I said.

We walked while holding hands due to our height difference. It felt somewhat embarrassing, as if I were in protective custody. Conversely, the prince seemed delighted.

“Do you not like holding my hand?” he asked, stopping to peer at my face. His beautiful features were mere inches away from mine.

“No, but it’s embarrassing,” I replied. “It feels like I’m in your protective custody rather than being escorted.”

“Protective custody?” the prince repeated.

His sudden chuckle turned into raucous laughter. In contrast to his beautiful features, he apparently laughed quite often.

“Haha, forgive me,” he said. “You might not be thrilled, but I’m having the time of my life. I get to escort such a cute young lady, after all.”

“Really?” I asked, my spirits lifting somewhat. “You think of me as an actual lady?”

“Of course. That’s why I’m escorting you like this.”

*By “escort,” do you mean pulling me by the hand?*

We eventually reached the hall while walking and talking. When the prince lifted his hand, a knight opened the door. The tea party was continuing inside, and all eyes focused on me when I arrived with two prominent figures.

Cita and Cia raced over to my side. “Ally!” they cried in unison.

Lauris and his friends came over to me as well.

“Thank goodness,” Cita said, her eyes glistening with tears. “I knew you’d be okay, but I was still worried.”

Cia looked up at the prince and my brother with a mischievous grin. “We weren’t too worried about the magic horse, but this situation is... unexpected.”

The prince turned a charming smile on the twins. “Hello there. You two must be the famous Camprani sisters.”

The twins blushed slightly.

*Yeah, I understand exactly how they feel.*

Not too long ago, I’d experienced what it felt like to have such a beautiful man smile at you.

“I’m Felicita Camprani,” Cita introduced herself.

“And I’m Felicia Camprani,” Cia followed suit.

After introducing himself, the prince asked, “Are these young ladies your friends, Ally?”

“Yes, we’ve been friends since we were really young,” Cia replied.

The prince smiled. “I see. Growing up together must have been delightful.”

For one moment, this unexpected remark left the twins speechless. However, their expressions soon turned joyful. “Yes, it was,” they answered in unison.

Next, Embert ruffled Lauris’s hair. “Sorry for causing a disturbance during your party.”

“No worries,” Lauris responded, suddenly assuming the role of a younger brother. He then asked with a look of concern, “Are *you* okay?”

Embert chuckled. “I’m fine. Ally stopped the magic horse in its tracks.”

The three boys looked at me with astonishment. They must have assumed that Embert had stopped the horse.

“Greetings, everyone,” Prince Embert spoke loudly enough for the entire hall to hear. He sounded somewhat husky, as if his voice were beginning to break. “I sincerely apologize for causing a disturbance due to my negligence. I would be delighted if you continued enjoying the event here.”

Janus was bowing his head behind the prince as well. Upon noticing this, Rosario approached him.

“Did you see Ally stop the magic horse as well, Lord Janus?” Rosario asked.

“Unfortunately, I was too far behind,” Janus replied. “But such a feat is well within Ally’s abilities.”

My brother smiled, brightening his already eye-catching features. The young noblewomen in the hall hadn’t been able to take their eyes off him and Embert this whole time.

Before long, Janus’s expression turned serious again. “We should be leaving soon, Your Highness.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” Embert agreed. “We need to treat the magic horse’s wounds. Well then, Ally, I’ll see you later.”

“See you later,” I replied.

Before leaving, Janus knelt in front of me. “Did you want to return home



together?”

“Yes, if you finish work soon.”

“Understood. I’ll talk to His Highness later about letting me go early.”

Embert laughed. “I can hear you, you know?”

Ignoring the prince’s words, Janus hugged me tightly. “Well then, I’ll see you later,” he said before kissing me on the cheek as usual.

I returned the kiss. “Yeah, see you later.”

“Feel free to come play at our house any time, Cita and Cia,” my brother added.

“Sure thing,” the twins replied in unison.

Having watched the exchange between me and Janus, Prince Embert pointed to his own cheek. “You’re making me jealous, Jan. Why are you the only one who gets a kiss?”

Janus proceeded to push Embert’s back, forcing him out of the hall. After the door shut behind them, we continued gazing at it for a while. Cita was the first person to speak up.

“That was my first time seeing Prince Embert up close,” she said. “He’s as handsome as Jan.”

Her words sparked a conversation about the two dashing men throughout the entire venue. Meanwhile, the twins led me to a new seat by pulling my hands. Just as many sweets as before lined the table. Cia sat next to me and leaned in my direction.

“But all that aside, can you tell us about the magic horse?” she asked, seeming more interested in this topic than handsome men.

“It had a red coat and a golden man,” I said. “It was a gorgeous creature.”

“Really? I’ve never seen a magic horse with a red coat before. So, why did it go on a rampage?”

“It had whip marks on its left flank.”

These whippings had probably been a form of punishment, not training.

Cia's face fell. "Then it was acting out due to pain."

"But it's okay," I said while taking her hand. "The horse calmed down, and according to Prince Embert, it's not going to be put down."

"Thank goodness," Cia replied with a delighted smile. "You really are amazing, Ally."

As I smiled back at her, Lauris—who'd been silent up till now—joined the conversation. "How were you able to stop the magic horse, though?" he asked with a look of keen interest.

"You really want to know?" I responded.

"What? Are you not able to talk about it?"

"Not exactly, but it deals with my tragic backstory."

"Uh, tragic backstory?" Lauris repeated.

*Oops, I accidentally used a term from Japan.*

To deflect, I told the story of my fall from a horse at the age of five.

"Somehow or another, I've been able to communicate with animals since then," I explained.

"She had a huge bump on her head too," Cita added, indicating the size with her hands.

Oreste's eyes widened. "That big?"

"Yes, it was something to behold," Cita replied. "We had plenty of conversations about what Ally would do if it didn't go away."

"Oh, that's right," Cia said, looking at me with a nostalgic smile. "Still, Ally didn't seem to mind herself. 'I'm going to live in my parent's house forever,' she insisted."

"And I still haven't changed my mind," I declared.

"I'm sure you haven't, but I don't think you'll be able to stay daddy's little girl forever."

"Father and Mother are perfectly okay with it," I asserted.

Cia laughed in exasperation. “Aha, your family really is something else.”

*Um, could you please not sound so put out with me?*

“So, Janus isn’t the only one who spoils her rotten?” Lauris asked with a grin.

“It’s her entire family,” Cia replied.

“I see,” Lauris said before cocking his head. “Still, Duke Vistriano always seems cold when he’s at my father’s side. He doesn’t strike me as an indulgent father. Did I get the wrong impression?”

“You didn’t get the wrong impression,” Cita said with a laugh. “As a general rule, he’s pretty impassive.”

Cia laughed as well. “But he casually makes sweet remarks to his wife.”

“That’s right,” Cita agreed with a dreamy look. “He spoils Ally, of course, but he also whispers sweet nothings to Lady Vistriano. He always looks so dashing, and he doesn’t even mind if we’re in earshot. Lady Vistriano practically squirms with delight when she answers as well. It’s clear to everyone how much they love each other. I want a marriage like theirs in the future.”

Both Cita and Cia looked at Oreste without thinking.

“I see,” Oreste said. “Yeah, that sort of marriage definitely sounds nice.”

“Right?” Cita asked, positively beaming. “I’m glad you understand.”

And so, that’s how I made unexpected friends at my first tea party.



### ☆☆Janus’s Point of View☆☆

**AFTER** parting with Ally, Prince Embert and I headed directly to the stables. We now stood in front of the red magic horse that had gone on a rampage.

“Sorry,” Embert apologized while stroking the horse’s nose. “I didn’t notice you were in pain.”

The wound on the horse’s hindquarters had already been treated. Its earlier rampage now seemed like a distant dream. The creature had gone completely docile, after all.

Embert turned around to face the groom standing behind him. “So, have you identified the culprit?”

“Yes, but...”

“It is a difficult person to accuse, perhaps?”

The groom donned an expression of resolve. “Yes. It was the daughter of Count Pollydroad. Several young grooms saw her entering the stable with a whip.”

“I see.”

Lady Pollydroad had been removed from Embert’s fiancée candidate list a few days ago. She’d been harassing another girl of the same rank.

“Honestly,” Embert muttered in an icy tone. “Why do women who dress so elegantly turn out to be so rotten?”

The prince would soon turn fourteen, and he still had no fiancée. The candidates had slowly been narrowed down, but from my perspective, he had no intention of choosing any of them.

“Jan,” Embert said.

I straightened, expecting him to order the punishment of House Pollydroad at once. “Yes, Your Highness?”

However, his next words caused me to slump my shoulders in disbelief.

“Ally—or rather, Alexandra—is quite adorable. She’s still young, but when she reaches my current age, her beauty will stop everyone in their tracks.”

“I wholeheartedly agree, but Ally won’t be your bride. She doesn’t wish to marry.”

“Hah, that’s a shame,” Embert replied in a jesting tone.

I couldn’t hide my astonishment. I’d been serving the prince for over three years, and until now, he’d never shown interest in the opposite sex. However, he was apparently interested in Ally.

“Having her kiss you on the cheek must be nice,” Embert said. “Do you think she’d do the same for me?”

“You’d have to get past me first,” I replied.

“There’s a word for overprotective brothers like you, Jan.”

“Call me whatever you like.”

The prince laughed. “You certainly can be touchy.”

I tried to conceal my soft sigh from the jubilant prince.



### ☆☆Alexandra’s Point of View☆☆

**SINCE** the tea party, our group had started meeting several times a month to strengthen our friendship.

“Lost again,” Oreste grumbled.

“No one can beat Ally in a magic contest,” Cia boasted.

The six of us had gathered in the castle courtyard—the place we’d first met. Today, we were having a magic contest to practice our abilities. We’d placed some reasonably large stones around fifteen feet away. Per the rules of our simple game, we were using magic to blow these stones away.

“Ally can use voiceless incantation,” Cita added.

The twins were elegantly sipping tea while watching the contest.

Meanwhile, I began pointing out areas of improvement for everyone. “Oreste, you need to concentrate a little harder. Rosario, your incantations are too conscientious. Lauris, you’re not bad overall.”

“All right, let’s have another round,” Lauris said.

Personally, I wanted to have tea with the twins.

“Why don’t we take a break?” I suggested.

“After we have our rematch,” Lauris insisted.

“Lame.”

Lauris’s surprisingly competitive nature could be a pain in the butt.

“I wanna eat some sweets too,” Oreste said with a longing glance at the tea

table.

However, Lauris's stance remained unchanged. "We can take a break after one more round."

"Okay, okay," I groaned. "But only one more round, okay?"

After thrashing the boys once again, I was finally able to enjoy my tea.

"Voiceless incantation truly is amazing," Lauris said while sipping his tea.

"Have you practiced it a lot?" Rosario asked.

"My father taught me that magic is all about imagination," I replied.

"Imagination...?" Rosario repeated.

I had played a number of RPGs and action games in my previous life. Thus, I could easily imagine combat scenes. Voiceless incantation didn't even cause me to break a sweat. I could picture everything down to the precise details, after all.

"I understand the concept, but it's still difficult," Lauris said with a grim expression.

"It gets easier with practice," I assured him. "You'll see."

"I admire your positivity."

"Thanks. These sorts of problems are much easier to tackle with a positive mindset."

"I suppose you're right," Lauris agreed with a laugh. "When we first met, you seemed like a sheltered young lady. I could hardly stop my heart from racing, but now I know what a tomboy you are. You're the most skilled of us at magic, and you can pacify a magic horse by leaping on its back. Basically, you're a far cry from a sheltered young lady."

As the boys nodded in agreement, the twins looked at me and laughed.

"The gap between Ally's appearance and personality is incredible," Cita said. "She's been like this since we were little. There's never a lack of excitement with her around."

"Ally's always been our best friend," Cia added. "That will never change."

“Thanks,” I said with a chuckle. “I have the two best friends in the world. No matter what happens, I’ll always protect both of you.” I placed my hands on my hips and puffed out my chest. Everyone laughed and applauded me.

At that moment, shrill laughter echoed in the distance. The piercing sound continued ringing in my ears even after dying down. “What was that?” I asked, looking around to find the source of the noise pollution.

“Ah, that’s right,” Lauris said, seeming to remember something. “Embert mentioned that two of his fiancée candidates would be stopping by today.”

“Oh, wow,” Cita responded with apparent interest. “I want to see them.”

*I kind of want to see them too.*

“Why don’t we go take a quick peek then?” Oreste suggested.

Of course, everyone agreed with him. Before long, our entire group began sneaking towards the source of the voice.

“There they are,” I mumbled.

After exiting the courtyard, we arrived in a vibrant garden with flowers of various colors. Prince Embert and two women sat inside a charming gazebo in the center of the garden.

“They’re both so beautiful,” Cita murmured with an enrapt sigh.

From our eight-year-old perspectives, fourteen and fifteen-year-olds looked like adults.

“They’re both the daughters of counts,” Lauris said.

“You recognize them?” I asked. “That’s amazing.”

“I’ve memorized all of Embert’s fiancée candidates.”

*Is it just me, or is Lauris a little brother-obsessed?*

“Look!” Rosario cried out under his breath, having noticed something strange. “The woman on the left has something in her hand.”

Everyone’s gaze focused on the woman.

“Oh no!” everyone gasped softly at the same time.

The woman on the left poured a few drops of something into Embert's cup. Completely unaware of this, the prince lifted the cup to his lips. At that moment, I forgot that I was supposed to be hiding.

"Stop!" I shouted while racing over to Embert.

"Ally!" all my friends called me.

Ignoring their astonished voices, I continued bounding forward. Even though I crashed into Embert with considerable force, he still caught me with one arm.

"Ally?" he asked.

"Don't drink that, Prince Embert!" I cried.

Embert raised his cup. "You mean this?"

Despite my crashing into him, he hadn't spilled a drop of tea. How good were his reflexes, exactly?

"Embert!" Lauris called while he and everyone else caught up to me. He then pointed to the young noblewoman on the left and said, "Lady Galdera spiked your drink with something."

"I see," Embert replied. "All of you saw this?"

Rosario took a step forward. "Yes, I was the first one to notice."

"If Rosario saw this happen, I have no reason to doubt your claims." Embert's lips quirked into a smile beautiful enough to make everyone present blush. "Well then, do you have any defense against these accusations, Lady Galdera?"

Though Lady Galdera had been blushing as well, the blood immediately drained from her face. "Th-This is absurd!" she cried out in a shrill voice. "I didn't do anything!"

The ear-splitting laughter from earlier must have come from her.

"Really?" Embert asked. "We have so many witnesses though." The prince maintained his beautiful smile, which turned out to be more frightening than anything. He held out his teacup. "Would you mind drinking this then?"

"Not at all," Lady Galdera replied, taking the cup and drinking it without hesitation.



*It must be some kind of love potion, not poison.*

Following my intuition, I cast a simple spell. In response to my magic, several small birds fluttered down and began pecking Lady Galdera.

“Wh-What?” she shrieked. “Ouch! That hurts!”

Meanwhile, a squirrel slid down from her shoulder to her side. After slipping into her skirt, it immediately returned with a small, crystal vial in its hands.

“Thanks, everyone,” I said, taking the vial and handing it to Embert.

The prince looked surprised at first, but upon seeing the vial, he donned a beautiful smile again. “What kind of liquid is this?”

“W-Well...” Lady Galdera trailed off, realizing she could no longer dodge the issue with the evidence in hand. As a result, she started crying. “F-Forgive me. I just so happened to acquire a love potion from a distant country. I truly adore you, Prince Embert, and my failure to become your true fiancée was devastating. So, I hoped to win your heart with this potion.”

I understood her feelings well enough, but it was still wrong to use such a sketchy potion. What would she have done if it had turned out to be a lethal poison?

“Honestly, I knew you were planning something,” Embert said with a sigh. “I even noticed you spiking my drink. My intention was to observe your reaction while I pretended to drink the tea. However, this adorable little hero put a stop to that.”

“Huh?!” Lady Galdera yelped.

*Whoops. Did I get in the way?*

“Sorry,” I apologized, feeling somewhat dejected due to my incompetence.

“It’s all right,” Embert replied with a chuckle. “I was genuinely happy that you came to my rescue.” After patting me on the head, he turned back to Lady Galdera. “You, however, will confess the details to me in a separate room. How unfortunate that you must be removed from my fiancée candidacy like this.”

Lady Galdera had been crying into her hands, but upon hearing this, her head shot up. “You can’t be serious! I only put a love potion in your drink! It wasn’t

poison or anything of the sort!”

The smile disappeared from Embert’s face. An air of tension now hung over the once peaceful gazebo.

“Have you lost your mind?” he asked. “You think it’s permissible to spike my drink so long as it isn’t poisonous? You were trying to bend me—a member of the royal family—to your will, correct? Apparently, you don’t understand the gravity of the situation.”

A chill ran down the spine of everyone present, not just Lady Galdera. A fierce, kingly aura radiated from Embert. We watched in silence as a knight took Lady Galdera away. Embert entrusted the other young lady to a knight as well, ordering him to see her home safely.

“I’ll take my leave here as well,” Embert announced.

His intensity vanished, and he returned to being the beautiful prince.

“Ally,” he said. When I lifted my head, Embert’s face was mere inches away from mine. “Thank you for racing over to save me,” he continued, bending his knees to meet my gaze.

He then kissed me on the cheek, causing me to stiffen. My first kiss from someone other than a family member had startled me.

“What’s this?” Embert asked, peering at me with a mischievous grin. “Are you not going to kiss me back?”

“You’re very welcome,” I responded awkwardly before returning his kiss on the cheek.

The prince chuckled. “Thank you, Ally. I’ll see you soon.”

Afterwards, he departed gracefully, a gentle smile playing on his lips.



A few days later, word spread of Count Galdera being demoted to a baron. There was no greater shame for a noble house than falling in rank. Lady Galdera would no longer be able to approach Embert and have a casual conversation.

Furthermore, the prince made a statement to his fiancée candidates. “Moving

forward, I don't know if I'll choose my future fiancée from the current list of candidates. Feel free to retire from candidacy, as I can't make any promises."

That was the gist of things. From what I heard, no one actually retired though.

That evening, my family was discussing Embert at dinner.

"I feel sorry for Prince Embert," Father said. "If only he could just say, 'I can't choose a fiancée from this group.' Well, political obligations are quite difficult to abandon. Still, the situation would resolve itself immediately if Prince Embert could declare an end to the candidacy."

"That would prove difficult," Janus replied. "But either way, Prince Embert won't choose a fiancée from that group."

My brother's words carried a great deal of weight as the prince's close aide.

Father had apparently gotten a vague sense of this as well. "Can't say I'm too surprised," he replied.

"How many fiancée candidates does Prince Embert have, exactly?" I asked.

"Let's see," Janus responded. "Currently, there are two women from duchies, four women from marquises, and another two women from countships."

In a previous conversation, Janus had told me, "The candidates have been narrowed down considerably."

*But there are still eight women even after being narrowed down, huh? Embert has his work cut out for him.*

"Well, the remaining noblewomen probably won't back down after coming this far," Janus said.

Father nodded. "Indeed. The two young ladies from duchies are particularly desperate. They're not getting any younger, and if they're chosen as Prince Embert's wife, their houses could become the new royal secretaries."

Janus shrugged. "There's nothing appealing about being the royal secretary anyway."

Incidentally, we of House Vistriano were the royal secretaries. This had been the case for generations.

“Being the royal secretary is nothing but a load of trouble,” Father agreed. “I’m prepared to give it away at any time.”

Father had no attachment to the title of royal secretary. In fact, he often spoke of the role as if it were ridiculous.

Janus chuckled. “I don’t need it either.”

“Should we give it to someone else then?” I asked.

Everyone burst out laughing.

“Aha, if only,” Janus replied. “We would’ve given it away a long time ago if possible. I would’ve tied a pretty bow around it and everything.”

I frowned. “Then we can’t give it away?”

“That’s right,” Father replied, the annoyance evident on his face. “His Majesty personally bestowed this role upon us.”

*Sounds like Father has his work cut out for him too.*

“Guess we’ll have to give it away when the king’s not looking,” I said.

Of course, everyone burst out laughing again.

## Chapter Three: Fostering Friendship

I had recently turned fourteen years old.

“Victory!” I exclaimed.

Six years had passed since I became friends with Lauris and the others. For the umpteenth time, I had just beaten Oreste in a sparring contest in the castle courtyard.

Oreste furrowed his brow, rubbing his back where I’d slammed him on the ground. “I’m never going to win a match against you,” he said with a sigh.

When Oreste challenged me to a sparring contest in the middle of a tea party, he was always serious. The red-haired boy had developed a muscular build since beginning sword training. In fact, he’d exploded in height and strength over these last few years. He was a great deal larger than Lauris and Rosario. His muscles strained against his shirt, hinting that he might have grown even larger as of late.

“I would definitely lose if you got me in a hold,” I said. “That’s why I strike before you can grab me. Hit first and ask questions later.”

Oreste brushed the dust from his pants and readjusted his shirt. “But you always escape my holds in an instant when I manage to grab you.”

The way he pursed his lips wasn’t the slightest bit cute.

“That’s because you’re grabbing me without any technique,” I said. “If you pinned me or got me in a chokehold, I would be in real danger.”

Oreste was at least twice my size. He could kill me in an instant if he got me in a real hold.

“What are you trying to achieve, Ally?” Rosario asked as I sat down for tea.

“Nothing in particular,” I replied. “But maybe I should start sword training and become a knight.”

Oreste groaned in response to my casual remark. "Please don't. The stress of us training together might kill me."

"Rude, much?"

"Ally, stop bullying Oreste," Cita upbraided me from the side.

*Me becoming a knight is bullying Oreste?*

"Cita doesn't love me anymore," I whined, throwing my arms around her twin sister.

Cita and Oreste were now an officially recognized couple. They would probably get engaged before starting school. At times, I wondered if Oreste had been engaged to Cita during our first encounter. Regardless, I stopped dwelling on that matter for now, as I wouldn't find an answer.

"Of course I still love you," Cita said while throwing her arms around me.

"I was just kidding," I replied with a chuckle. "You two are my best friends forever. The three of us will still be having tea together even when we're old grannies."

Cia laughed. "That sounds absolutely wonderful."

Her sister laughed as well.

I would be delighted if my vision of the future turned out to be true. Both twins were my precious friends, after all.

"Will we be included in that group?" Lauris asked flatly.

"I don't mind if you join us," I said. "But would your wives allow it?"

I didn't expect their future wives to permit them to have tea parties with other women. It didn't matter how strong our friendships were now.

Oreste grinned. "No need to worry about me. I'll be with Cita, after all."

"I'd like to participate as well," Rosario said. "And preferably with Cia."

*Whoa, did he just take advantage of the confusion to profess his feelings?*

Everyone's gaze focused on Rosario.

"Truly?" Cia asked with the loveliest of smiles. "I would be delighted."

Her smile was beautiful enough to make my heart race, despite us both being girls.

Rosario knelt in front of Cia. “I’ve thought you were beautiful since the first time we met, Felicia.” His icy blue eyes sparkled, and his black hair shone with a glossy luster beneath the sunlight. “Would you be my fiancée and marry me when we grow up?”

“Thank you, Rosario,” Cia responded. Her light beige hair fluttered in the wind, and her peridot eyes gleamed in the sunlight. “I’ve always loved you for being able to tell me and my sister apart.”

The two of them looked radiant together.

Reality struck me on the head in the middle of all this happiness. “Wait, are Lauris and I the only ones who are doomed to be forever alone?”

“Please don’t phrase it like that,” Lauris said. “You’re making me depressed.”

“Yeah. I wanted to cry as soon as the words left my mouth.”

As the two of us slumped our shoulders, Cia—who’d begun holding hands with Rosario—smiled at us. “Then why don’t the two of you become a couple?”

Lauris and I exchanged glances.

“Not a chance,” he said. “Being married to a tomboy sounds like a handful.”

I huffed. “Well, I’d prefer a husband who’s stronger than me.”

The two of us burst out laughing.

I liked Lauris as a friend, but in my heart of hearts, I didn’t want a romantic relationship with him. What if us getting engaged led to a future where I had to beat everyone up again? Like any sane person, I didn’t want to hurt my friends.

As I considered this, a bird appeared above my head, flapping its wings and chirping. After circling me a few times, the bird let out an even louder chirp and flew off in a certain direction. Was it trying to tell me something?

“Oh, it’s Janus!” I cried, standing up from my seat and looking at the bird’s flight trajectory.

Cita squinted to look into the distance. “Is that really Janus? Has he returned

from the neighboring country?”

For the past year, Janus had been accompanying Prince Embert while he studied abroad in a neighboring country. This had also served as diplomatic training. In any case, Janus had recently sent me a letter saying he would be home soon. The surrounding animals must have known how eagerly I'd been counting the days. As I strained my eyes, I saw my brother's gorgeous, icy blue hair swaying in the wind.

“Janus!” I called out at the top of my lungs, not caring what anyone might think.

Upon hearing my voice, Janus looked around in search of me. As soon as he found me, his face split in a wide grin. “Ally!”

I was already running by the time he called my name. “You're back!” I cried, leaping into his arms without hesitation. “Welcome home,” I said as we embraced each other.

“It's good to be back,” Janus replied. “I missed you, Ally. I've only been gone a year, but you've grown up so much. You look beautiful.”

“Thanks,” I said with a laugh. “You're as dashing as ever, Janus. How was the neighboring country?”

After letting go of our embrace, we gazed into one another's eyes while holding hands.

“It was quite fascinating,” Janus replied. “I would like to go back with you if the opportunity ever arises.”

He then kissed me on the forehead. Naturally, I kissed him back on the cheek.

“You two look like reunited lovers,” a familiar voice said from behind.

As the prince's slightly overgrown, silver hair fluttered in the wind, he gazed at me with his emerald-green eyes.

“Prince Embert,” I greeted him.

“It's been too long, Ally,” he responded with a charming smile. “Would you let me experience the joy of our reunion as well?”



He then spread out his arms. Apparently, I didn't have a choice.

"Welcome home, Prince Embert," I said while entering his embrace. "I'm glad you're safe."

As he wrapped his arms around me, my cheek pressed against his now solid chest, causing my heart to skip a beat.

"But I must say..." the prince began, his words echoing from above. The breath of his gentle, baritone voice grazed my neck. As this light stimulus caused my heart to flutter, he looked down at me with a smile. "...you've grown quite beautiful, even though we've only been apart for a year."

"Huh?" I asked.

"You were still young when I left, but now you're a true lady."

My heart began to race in response to his straightforward compliment and emerald gaze. As my cheeks began to burn, he stroked my face with a fingertip.

"As I said, it's been too long, Ally," Embert said.

When he stopped touching my face, I felt soft lips brush my cheek. My heart hammered against my chest. Embert had kissed my cheek numerous times in the past, but for some reason, this one shook me to my core. He tilted his head as he observed me frozen in place.

"Are you not going to return the favor?" he asked.

My heart nearly leapt from my chest as I admired his smile from up close. No, it had probably broken free of my chest already.

"R-Return the favor?" I asked.

*What does that mean again?*

I perceived his words as sound but couldn't understand their meaning.

"Prince Embert," Janus said in a tone of reproof. "Please stop trying to woo my sister immediately after returning home."

"I'm hardly wooing her," Embert defended himself with a delighted laugh. "I'm genuinely delighted to reunite with her." He turned to look at me again, his brow furrowed. "So, are you not going to return the favor, Ally? You're going to

break my heart.”

“Oh, right,” I replied, finally making sense of my racing thoughts. “Yes, I can do that.”

I ignored my still-pounding heart and kissed Embert on the cheek.

“It feels like I’ve truly come home now,” he said with a slightly mischievous chuckle. His expression caused my heart to skip yet another beat.

“Embert!” Lauris exclaimed.

After he and the others caught up, everyone expressed their delight at the group’s homecoming. Meanwhile, I stared at everyone absentmindedly, my brain not working at full capacity.



**WHEN** I returned home, my brain still refused to function. I soon fell into a daze. After dinner, I returned to my room, where Mary began brushing my hair.

“What’s wrong, Lady Alexandra?” she asked.

“I feel a little weird,” I admitted.

“How so?”

“Well,” I began with a soft sigh. “Prince Embert returned from studying abroad, right? When he embraced me during our reunion, my heart wouldn’t stop racing.”

My heart began pounding again as I recalled the memory.

“Prince Embert caused your heart to race?” Mary asked, her eyes widening slightly. “Not Prince Lauris?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

Mary smiled at me, her wide eyes softening into a fond expression. “Is talking about Prince Embert causing your heart to race right now?”

“Yes. I feel like it’s about to burst.”

Mary stopped brushing my hair and knelt down in front of me. “Please treasure those feelings, Lady Alexandra. They will be your first step towards

happiness.”

“Really?”

“Indeed. If you continue to hold onto those feelings, you will certainly find happiness.”

For some reason, Mary looked like she might cry while speaking to me in her gentle voice. Without thinking, I gripped her hand. “Did something happen, Mary?” I asked. “Are you okay?”

For one moment, Mary’s eyes widened, but then she smiled at me again. “Yes, I’m okay. It’s just overwhelming to see you steadily moving towards adulthood.”

I wrapped my arms around Mary—the woman who’d been with me since my childhood. “Listen,” I said. “I’m going to stay in this house forever, so we’ll always be together, okay?”

Mary laughed while hugging me back softly. “You really are precious, Lady Alexandra. I’ll take care of you forever, of course.”

The two of us shared a long laugh while embracing each other.



### ☆☆Janus’s Point of View☆☆

**PRINCE** Embert had been in a good mood since our reunion with Ally and the others. As we delivered our homecoming report, the king and my father—His Majesty’s close aide—observed Embert’s dopey grin with uncomfortable expressions. That said, Embert himself didn’t show the slightest hint of concern.

“Jan,” Embert said immediately after entering his office.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Do you remember what I said a long time ago?”

“What are you referring to, exactly?”

It was probably about Ally, but I decided to feign ignorance for now.

“Don’t play dumb with me,” Embert said. “Ally’s newfound beauty has surpassed my expectations. She must have been practicing martial arts. She

looked gorgeous even in trousers and light makeup. I can't imagine how breathtaking she must be when dressed up."

"Yes, she's quite stunning," I answered with a sigh.

Ally's beauty came as no surprise, as our parents were quite stunning as well.

"Indeed," Embert said. "The Vistriano family is frighteningly beautiful. That includes you, Jan."

I sighed again. "You're also one of the most dashing men in the kingdom, Your Highness. Don't forget that."

Embert didn't seem to recognize his own magnificent beauty, perhaps due to his lack of vanity. However, women had flocked around him even at the academy in the neighboring country. His royal status played a role in his popularity, of course, but he was still handsome. Furthermore, he was stylish and gentle-mannered. Altogether, he was the very portrait of what a prince should be.

"Ally has truly grown into her beauty," Embert said. "She felt soft in my arms, and her embarrassed flush was adorable."

He spoke the undeniable truth, but for some reason, I didn't want to agree with him.

"My heart nearly burst when she kissed me on the cheek," Embert continued with a lascivious gleam in his eyes.

*Please spare me the details,* I thought, resisting the urge to cover my ears. *You're talking about my little sister here.*

Embert chuckled. "Don't frown too hard, Jan. Your face is going to stick like that."

"Can you blame me?" I asked. "It might be different if we were still students, but who wants to hear a grown man gush about his love life? And to make matters worse, you're talking about Ally. It feels like I'm trapped in a nightmare."

"And who can blame *me* for being elated?" Embert muttered under his breath. "I've been waiting a long time for this, after all."

“Did you say something?” I asked, having been unable to hear him.

“It’s nothing. But more importantly...”

“What is it?”

Embert grinned. “I have a favor to ask of you, Jan.”

*Oh, for the love of God. I have a bad feeling about this.*



### ☆☆ **Alexandra’s Point of View** ☆☆

I had recently turned fifteen years old. In about two months, I would start attending the Micheli Royal Academy of Magic. I would be somewhat far from home, as the academy was on the outskirts of the capital, and the Vistriano estate was near the castle. Moreover, I would be living in the dorms, as Janus had done. Hopefully, I wouldn’t be too lonely since Mary would be with me. Likewise, I could return home on the weekends.

“Is this everything, Mary?” I asked.

We’d gone into town to buy items necessary for dorm life. I hardly looked like a noblewoman in my simple, unadorned dress.

“Yes, that should suffice,” Mary replied. “I think we’ve picked up everything you’ll need.”

After paying for the items, I stored them in a pocket dimension using spatial magic. Conveniently, I could share my storage with anyone who had my permission. Not too long ago, I had allowed the servants setting up my dorm to access my storage. Thus, I could have items delivered to my room immediately after purchasing them.

“Phew, I’m exhausted,” I said.

With our shopping done, Mary and I decided to take a breather in a nearby café.

“By the way,” Mary responded, seeming to remember something. “Why don’t you make protective amulets for everyone, Lady Alexandra?”

“Like charms?”

“Yes. Your friends are all royalty or highborn nobles. What if you all get wrapped up in something dreadful by some twist of fate? You shouldn’t let your guard down because you’re at school.”

“Yeah, that does make sense,” I said. “All right, I’ll make everyone amulets then. But how, exactly?”

This conversation reminded me of the charms given out at shrines in Japan. Still, how did you make amulets in this world?

“You must imbue your magic into a gemstone,” Mary explained as if it were a matter of course. “Meanwhile, imagine what powers you want the amulet to have.”

“Wow, you really know your stuff,” I said.

“I’m a former secret agent, after all.”

“Oh, really? Well, that explains things. But gemstones, huh? Does it matter what kind I use?”

“It simply needs to be a precious stone,” Mary replied. “And since you’re going to the trouble, why not make amulets your friends can wear at all times?”

“In that case, maybe I should make them accessories of some kind.”

After finishing our tea, Mary and I began walking around town again.



A few days later, our friend group was having tea in the castle courtyard as usual.

“Not too long until we start school,” Lauris said with a cup of tea in his hand.

“It sure snuck up on us,” Cita answered with a grin. “I’m so glad we’re all in the same class.”

Oreste shrugged in a slightly playful manner. “Good thing I actually hit the books.”

Though any noble could enroll at Micheli Academy, an entrance exam determined class placement.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Lauris said. “Apparently, there’s going to be a student

who can use holy magic in our class this year.”

“Holy magic is quite the rarity,” Rosario noted.

“So, will this person become a saint or holy woman?” Cia asked.

“From what I’ve heard, she’s the daughter of a baron, so she would become a holy woman,” Lauris answered. “Even so, whether she becomes a holy woman is her decision. I don’t know what choice she’ll make.”

“Neat,” I responded apathetically, not at all interested in this conversation.

Everyone knew how rare holy magic was. However, most people assumed that it only specialized in healing and purification. My friends seemed to hold this same view. Not many events requiring holy magic occurred here, as we were a peaceful nation with few monsters. Plus, there were quite a few people who could use healing magic to some extent. As a result, our kingdom didn’t revere holy women too highly. That said, it was still a rare magical element.

“Oh, almost forgot,” I said, withdrawing what I wanted from my spatial storage. “Here you go, everyone.”

A small box now sat in front of each of my five friends.

“What’s this?” Cita asked, picking up the box in front of her. When she took out a pinky ring, her face lit up. “Wow, this is so cute.”

“I have the same thing,” Cia said, holding up her pinky ring to the light.

“Mine’s an earring,” Lauris added.

I’d given all three boys earrings with gemstones matching their eye colors.

“What’s the reason for the gifts?” Cia asked.

“These are actually amulets I made for everyone,” I replied.

Cia cocked her head. “As in protective charms?”

“Exactly,” I answered with a nod. “The six of us are going to be living in the dorms, right? We can’t be completely certain that nothing bad will happen while we’re away from home. That’s why I made these amulets. I’m wearing one too, see?”

I showed off my pinky ring, which formed a matching set with the twins.

“How cute,” Cita said while putting on her own ring.

Cia followed suit. “It fits perfectly. Thank you, Ally.”

“These amulets should reduce physical damage and completely protect against mental attacks,” I explained.

“Heh, no need for the sales pitch,” Lauris said while he and the other boys put on their earrings. “Thanks. These are nice.”

Oreste grinned. “It feels like we’re a real group of friends now.”

As everyone blushed slightly at his words, a familiar voice called to us from behind.

“Why the red faces, everyone?” Embert asked. Janus stood beside him.

Lauris and I both greeted our brothers. Incidentally, Embert had officially become the crown prince just a few days ago.

“Aren’t you supposed to be working right now, Embert?” Lauris asked.

Embert laughed. “I’m just taking a break.”

“Oh,” Janus said with a smile upon noticing the presents. “You already gave them to everyone.”

Embert furrowed his brow. “Gave what to everyone?”

Janus tucked his icy blue hair behind his ear to reveal his earring. “Take a look.”

“An earring?” Embert asked.

“Yes. Apparently, it’s an amulet.”

Everyone else showed the prince their hands and ears.

When Embert fell silent, I tilted my head in confusion.

“Ally,” he said in a voice overflowing with sorrow. “You even made one for Jan but not me?”

Was it just my imagination, or were his emerald-green eyes starting to water? Either way, I quickly withdrew a small box from my spatial storage. I had tied a ribbon the same color as Embert’s eyes around it.



“Here you go,” I said, placing the box on Embert’s open palm.

The prince’s expression brightened. “Thank you,” he said, taking the earring from the box and putting it on. “I’m delighted to receive this. There seems to be an enchantment placed on it though. Did you do this, Ally?”

“Yes,” I replied. “I added enchantments for physical damage reduction and complete protection against mental attacks.”

“...I see. That’s incredible. I’m truly grateful, Ally.”

Embert then kissed me on the cheek as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Though my heart began pounding in my chest, I somehow managed to return the kiss.

“You’ll all be starting school soon,” Embert said. “Are you looking forward to it?”

“Yes,” we all replied in unison.

Embert chuckled. “I’m looking forward to it as well.”

With that, he walked away with a grin on his face.

“Prince Embert is looking forward to it as well?” I asked. “What did he mean by that?”

“Who knows?” Lauris responded.

Question marks popped up above all our heads.



### ☆☆Janus’s Point of View☆☆

**THE** prince was walking a short distance ahead of me as we returned to his office.

“Did you know about this, Jan?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“And were you planning on keeping it a secret from me?”

I had to suppress a laugh at his sulky tone. “Of course not. After all, I knew Ally had made an amulet for you too.”

“I see...”

Embert came to a sudden halt, his expression transforming into a serious one. I braced myself for whatever might come next.

He turned to face me while touching his new earring. “Ally hasn’t realized it herself, has she?”

“No one knows about it,” I replied. “Least of all Ally.”

“Ha, is that so?” Embert asked while beginning to walk again. “Why do you think she decided to make these amulets?”

“Her handmaid actually suggested it.”

“And she listened?”

A knight opened the door for us. After sitting down in his office chair, Embert looked up at me.

“That’s right,” I said. “Mary has served as Ally’s handmaid and bodyguard since her childhood. She’s a very capable woman with a wealth of experience as a secret agent.”

“Fascinating. This Mary might have realized it then.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.”

After brewing some tea, I handed a cup to Embert, who wore a pensive expression.

“I’ve certainly caught glimpses of it,” the prince said. “Being able to communicate with animals isn’t normal, after all, no matter how powerful someone’s magic is.”

“You make a fair point.”

“That aside...” After taking a sip of tea, Embert withdrew the box from his pocket, a wide grin splitting his face. “Take a look at this box.”

*What is he trying to say here, exactly?*

“My box is the only one with a ribbon,” Embert said.

“Yes, that certainly is a ribbon,” I replied blankly.

“Do you think this means she’s fond of me? I’m certain of it myself. How positively adorable.”

Embert’s feelings for Ally were becoming a cause for concern. That lascivious gleam in his eyes was back. I had to stop myself from quipping, “Something on your mind there, Prince?”

“I have no doubt Ally will be popular when she starts school,” Embert said. “That worries me. I hope she doesn’t become the target of unsavory men.”

“You needn’t worry,” I replied. “Ally has an amulet too, and as you know, she’s quite strong.”

“In martial arts, you mean?”

“Yes. Even Mary—Ally’s bodyguard—loses to her in sparring matches more often than not.”

“The former secret agent?” Embert asked.

“Correct.”

Embert chuckled and muttered under his breath, “Ally is strong indeed.”

“What was that?” I asked, having been unable to hear him.

The prince continued playing with the ribbon while grinning from ear to ear. I heaved a deep sigh, not even trying to hide it.

## Chapter Four: Micheli Royal Academy of Magic

**“DON’T** fall asleep,” Lauris said while nudging my side.

“Oh shoot,” I mumbled. “Didn’t mean to.”

I’d dozed off in the middle of the entrance ceremony. The headmaster had been droning on for quite a while.

“And don’t drool on your uniform on the first day of school,” Lauris chastised me. “The speech will be over soon. Have a little patience.”

“Okay, okay.”

The new students sat in lines of chairs across the large auditorium. The girls wore ivory boleros and skirts. The boleros sported black trimming, and we wore white shirts underneath them. Red ribbons stood out adorably around the collars of our shirts. On the other hand, the boys wore black blazers and trousers. Their blazers sported white trimming, and they wore ribbon neckties that resembled red string. The boys tied their ribbons in various styles, and Lauris opted for a typical bow. As freshmen on our first day of school, our uniforms were all pristine and unwrinkled. I would die before getting drool on my outfit.

Oreste was nodding off in front of us and off to the side. Cita pulled him to lean on her with a huge grin on her face.

I turned a look of protest on Lauris. “What about that?”

“They’re out of my hands,” he replied.

Oreste and Cita had gotten engaged before starting school. Rosario and Cia had followed suit not long afterwards. This second couple was sitting beside Lauris, holding hands while listening to the headmaster’s speech. Lauris clucked his tongue at the happy lovebirds.

“Don’t pout because you’re jealous,” I remarked.

“Oh, pipe down,” Lauris shot back.

The two of us were still as single as ever. Though we both had admirers, neither of us had found our soulmates. As for me, I couldn't get Prince Embert off my mind. Everything reminded me of him. Unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to see him as often once I began living in the dorms. The more I contemplated this, the more I found myself daydreaming about the prince.

*Why am I thinking about him so much?*

As this thought crossed my mind, a cheer rose from the crowd.

"What's going on?!" I cried.

When I looked at Lauris, I found him staring at the stage with a witless expression, his mouth agape. I looked up at the stage while helping him close his mouth with my hand.

"Huh?" I asked.

What was going on? A very familiar person was standing on the stage. He waved in my direction upon noticing me, and I reflexively waved back. Lauris also waved back, his expression still vacant.

"Why is my brother here?" Lauris asked.

"How should I know?" I responded.

Prince Embert was waving to us with a dazzling smile. The young ladies in the front rows were on the verge of swooning, his smile hitting them with critical damage.

"First, allow me to introduce myself," he said. "I am Crown Prince Embert Bartis."

A shrill cheer erupted from the crowd. My poor ears.

"I will be teaching at this school for one year as part of my leadership studies," Embert continued. "That said, I'm merely here to support the other teachers. There might be many areas in which I fall short, but I look forward to spending this year with you all."

This time, Embert smiled bashfully. Would any of the young ladies in the front be spared from his deadly charm?

“Teaching as part of his leadership studies?” I asked. “Is that required of a crown prince?”

“I have no idea,” Lauris replied.

I then recalled Embert’s words from a few days ago. “Is this what he meant when he said, ‘I’m looking forward to it as well’?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Lauris and I had complicated feelings on the matter. We weren’t sure whether to be happy or not.



**WHEN** the ceremony ended, we moved to our classroom. Small clusters of students had already formed here and there. These groups must have arrived together earlier, as we didn’t seem to have assigned seating. The six of us found open window seats in the back. We formed two rows of three, and as I looked around, the size of the class surprised me. There were easily more than thirty students. The classroom resembled a university lecture hall with tiered seating. Of course, the back seats were the most elevated, providing a good view of the entire room.

We made small talk while waiting for our teacher to arrive. The classroom immediately began to stir when Prince Embert arrived with the teacher.

Lauris—who was sitting to my right—sighed. “Of all the classes, why this one?”

Rosario—who was sitting in front of me and to my left—observed the prince skeptically. “It feels rather intentional.”

Oreste and Cita—who were sitting in front of me—seemed to be enjoying the situation.

“Personally, I can’t wait to see how this turns out,” Oreste said.

“Me neither,” Cita added with a laugh.

Cia—who was sitting to my left—couldn’t hide her grin either.

“Wipe that creepy smile off your face,” I said, narrowing my eyes at Cia.

She responded with a genuinely warm smile. “How come? I was just thinking about what a fun year it’s going to be.”

“Well then, shall we begin with introductions?” Embert asked, his voice ringing out from the dais in front of the classroom.

The man who should have been in charge of our class stood farther back, observing the scene with a grin on his face.

“Allow me to begin,” Embert continued. “As I said earlier, I’m Embert Bartis, and I’ll be assisting your homeroom teacher for the next year. Once again, I look forward to spending this time with you all.”

The classroom fell into pandemonium, the girls all squealing with delight.

“You three were supposed to be the most popular boys in class,” I said over the shrill cries. “Looks like Embert’s stolen your thunder from you.”

Lauris grinned. “I don’t mind. He’s my big brother, after all.”

“Brother obsessed, much?”

“You’re one to talk.”

As Lauris and I continued whispering to each other, it came time for us to introduce ourselves. Lauris stood up first, his expression stiff, and began speaking. “I’m Lauris Bartis. I look forward to spending the year with you all.”

The young noblewomen gazed at him with sparkling eyes. Apparently, there was still enough popularity to go around.

I stood up next. “My name is Alexandra Vistriano. I’m very much looking forward to spending this year with you all.”

When I casually glanced at Embert, our eyes met. He winked at me and grinned. My face started to boil as I suppressed a squeal, and I shot back down into my chair.

“What’s wrong?” Lauris asked, seeming worried by my unusual behavior.

“Nothing,” I replied.

I fanned myself with a hand, desperate to cool down. Embert wasn’t looking at me anymore, was he? When I glanced in the prince’s direction, I found him—

yeah, you guessed it—still looking at me. Oh, and he still had a huge grin on his face. Would I be able to survive this for an entire year?

Meanwhile, the introductions continued. An adorable young noblewoman was the last student to stand up. She had dark blue eyes and wavy, light brown hair. Furthermore, she was the petite sort who inspired a protective instinct in men. In any case, she looked familiar. When and where had I seen her before? As I contemplated this, the young lady began introducing herself.

“My name is Delphina Celette. I’m a holy magic user. The sheer number of high-ranking individuals in this class makes me a bit nervous, but I hope we can get along. I look forward to spending this year with you all.”

A sigh escaped from all the boys as she smiled and bowed her head.

*Wait, that’s her!*

In multiple past lives, Celette had bewitched Lauris and his friends into loyal lap dogs. She’d also done quite a number on the original Alexandra. When I whipped my head around to look at Lauris, I found him staring at Delphina in a daze.

“What’s wrong, Lauris?” I asked. “Wait, don’t tell me you’ve fallen in love at first sight!”

“No, but—”

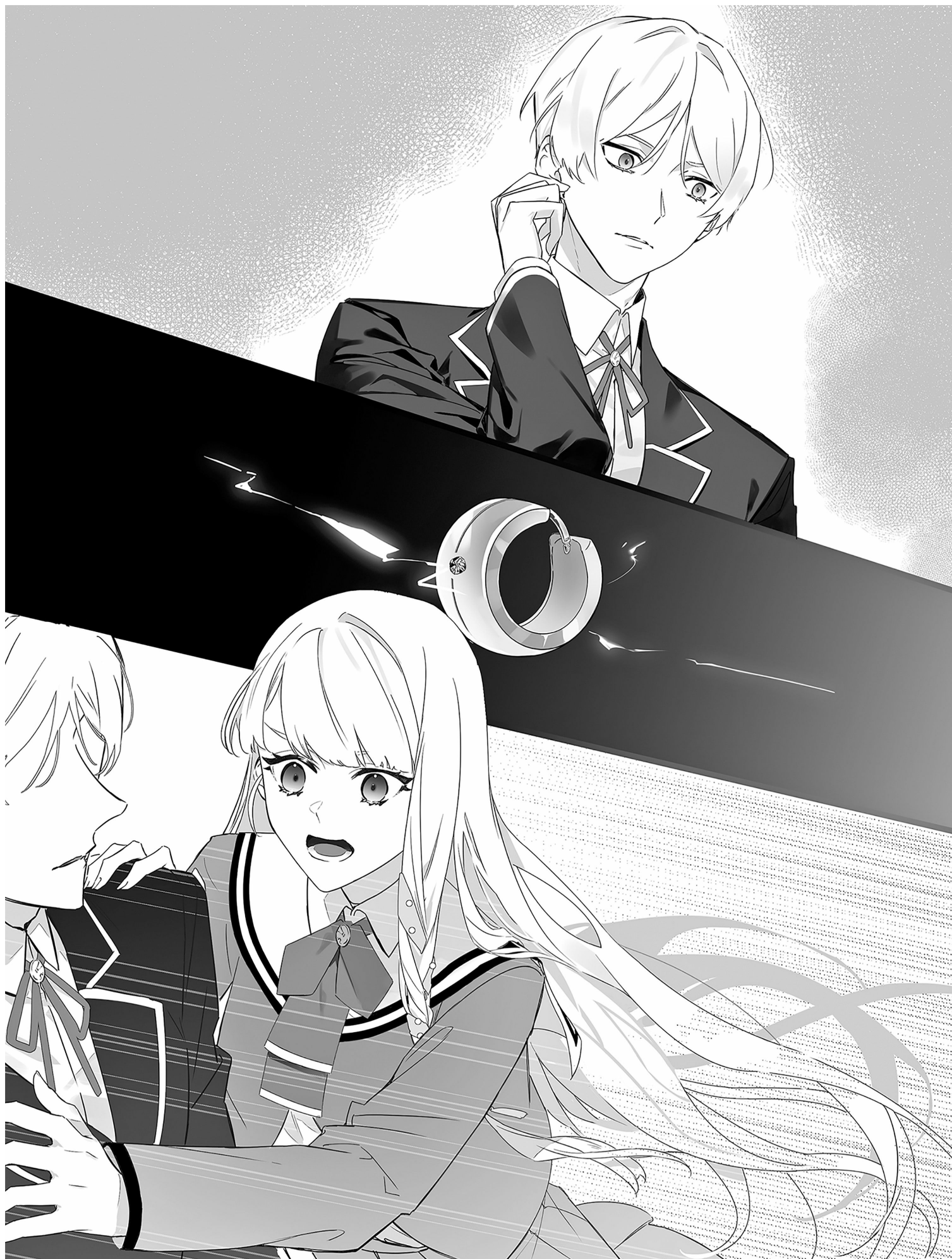
Had Celette already enchanted him? I grabbed Lauris by the shoulders and began shaking him, desperate to snap him out of it. “Pull yourself together!” I cried while shaking him even harder. “Please, Lauris!”

“Calm down!” he shouted, the vein in his temple throbbing as he grabbed both my hands. “It’s not what you think. The earring you gave me felt warm for a second.”

“It did?”







Oreste and Rosario were also touching their earrings with puzzled expressions. Cita and Cia were staring at their rings as well. When I glanced at Embert, he was wearing a stern expression that I'd never seen before. He must have felt the heat along with everyone else.

After introductions, the teacher explained how classes would proceed from tomorrow onward. Once finished, he dismissed us for the day. I casually glanced at Celette before leaving. Several students had surrounded her and were making pleasant conversation.

"Do you all want to head straight back to our dorms?" Lauris asked. "Or do you want to grab a bite to eat first?"

Thus, we began heading towards the school cafeteria.



**THOUGH** the dining hall was called a "cafeteria," we were still attending a royal academy. As such, numerous chairs and tables had been set up throughout the spacious area. Sofas and low tables had been furnished in the back as well. As our group of six sat down on the sofas, I admired the cafeteria's extravagant design.

"What happened back there?" Oreste asked, his brow furrowed.

Cia cocked her head. "I have no idea. It only lasted for a moment."

"If everyone felt that heat, our amulets must have reacted to something," Lauris said.

Everyone nodded in agreement with him as we ate our meals.

"It happened as that young lady named Celette was giving her introduction, correct?" Rosario asked.

"That's right," Cita answered.

I kept silent as Rosario and Cita contemplated the matter seriously.

"Um, about that..." I trailed off.

"Hm?" Cita asked, tilting her head as she looked at me. "Something wrong, Ally?"

Everyone's attention focused on me.

"Do you have any idea what caused the heat?" Lauris asked, his gaze boring into me.

Celette's bewitchment had probably caused the heat, but I couldn't be one hundred percent certain.

"Sorry, but no," I said. "It's just... I didn't feel the heat myself."

"Huh?" everyone asked in perfect unison.

"You didn't feel *any* heat?" Cita pressed.

"Nope, not in the slightest," I responded.

Honestly, I hadn't felt anything, much less heat. Even so, I still couldn't conclude that Celette had used bewitchment.

"Perhaps it's because you're the one who made the amulets," Rosario said.

"Or maybe she's just dense," Lauris quipped, completely spoiling Rosario's support.

I huffed. "Wow, way to be a jerk."

At that moment, I heard footsteps approaching our sofa.

"Embert," Lauris said, his face brightening as he turned around.

*What's going on? How did Lauris know it was Embert approaching? From his footsteps? Can Lauris seriously recognize Embert by his footsteps? How brother-obsessed is this guy? Not even I can recognize Janus just by his footsteps.*

As quips raced through my mind, Embert joined us on the couch as if he belonged to our group. "Did I surprise you all?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Definitely," I replied. "I never expected you to start acting like a teacher. Lauris was so slack-jawed that I thought his mouth would never close again."

"Looks like my surprise was a success," Embert said with a brisk smile. However, his expression soon turned serious. "But more importantly, how long will this earring remain effective, Ally?"

"Oh, um, until the wearer dies."

Embert's serious expression fell away to disbelief. "You can't be serious."

"I'm completely serious. My handmaid Mary told me to make the amulets that way."

"Hm, I see..." Embert trailed off. He then closed his mouth, as if considering something.

"Embert," Lauris said, interrupting his brother's contemplation. "Did your earring also feel warm for a second?"

"Yes, it did."

"So, does that make Ally the only dullard here?" Cia asked.

"Twist the knife in deeper, why don't you?" I deadpanned.

Sure, my emotions might have been dull, but I had keen senses.

In response to Cia's remark, Embert shook his head with a serious expression. "In all likelihood, no magic was cast on Ally specifically."

*Come again? Why would I be the only person left out?*

"How do you know?" I asked.

Embert met the gaze of each person on the sofas. "I can sense other people's magic. As such, I felt it when Delphina cast her spell. Her magic completely evaded Ally and no one else."

"My brother has an immense mana supply," Lauris said proudly.

He continued to assert himself as the paragon of brother obsession.

That aside, Delphina's spell must have been bewitchment if she cast it on everyone but me. Was she trying to exile me again? Why was she so obsessed with me? Or rather, the original Alexandra? Did we have some sort of past connection?

As I considered this, someone began patting my head. "You needn't worry," Embert assured me with a beautiful smile. "I'll protect you no matter what happens, Ally."

My whole body started boiling. At the same time, I squirmed beneath everyone's considerate gazes.

“Slight change of subject, but could you make another amulet, Ally?” Embert asked.

I turned my head in his direction, still feverishly delirious. “Another amulet?” I repeated.

“That’s right. Could you make another one?”

“I could, but I would need an object to use as a medium.”

“Would any object suffice?” Embert pressed.

“It just needs to be something with a gemstone attached. I don’t think the size of the stone or any other factors matter.”

“In that case, would you make me an amulet if I gave you the materials?”

“Embert?” Lauris asked in a puzzled voice. “Do you want Ally to make this for someone in particular?”

“Indeed,” Embert responded with a grin. “It’s going to be for a very special girl.”

“Huh?” I asked, an unpleasant ache spreading through my chest.

“I need to give her an amulet too, as I can’t let any harm befall her,” Embert continued speaking with a gentle expression. “Is that okay, Ally?”

I couldn’t muster a response.

“Ally?” Embert asked.

“Um, yeah...” I finally managed to answer. “That’s okay.”

Embert must have noticed me acting strangely, as everyone else did. Even so, he continued speaking without showing any concern.

“Should we use something she already owns?” he asked. “Or would it be better to prepare something new? I’ll need to find something right away if it’s the latter. Which would you prefer, Ally?”

“...Either one is fine,” I replied, practically wringing out the words.

I didn’t participate in the conversation after that.



I don't know how I made it back to my dorm. When I came to my senses, I was sitting on my bed.

"Lady Alexandra?" Mary asked. "Did you make it home?"

When Mary saw me sitting alone in a pitch-black room, her eyes widened, and she raced over to me. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"Mary..." I whimpered, tears spilling down my cheeks. "My chest hurts..."

"I'm here for you, sweet girl," Mary replied, wrapping me in a tight embrace.

I began sobbing, unable to bear the pain any longer.



### ☆☆ Embert's Point of View ☆☆

**CLANG!**

The sound of metal clashing together rang out behind me.

"She's here," I muttered to myself.

Though I hadn't doubted myself, I still breathed a sigh of relief at having fended off the attack. It was a little before midnight, and I was on the highest floor of the teachers' dormitory. I'd been working in my office when the window suddenly opened.

"You're strong indeed," I said while looking directly at my black-clad visitor. "I would have perished if not for my shadow."

"You did this all on purpose?" the woman in black asked.

"That's correct."

"Was your goal to lure me here? Then why not use those shadows of yours to summon me? Was it necessary to hurt Lady Alexandra that deeply?"

Hostility radiated from the woman in black.

"I feel sorry for what I did to Ally," I admitted. "But I don't think you would have met with me if I hadn't gone that far. I intend to apologize and explain myself to her first thing in the morning."

"How naïve of you," the woman responded with a sneer.

“What?”

“No, never mind. So, what business do you have with me, exactly?”

My skin grew cold. The woman continued to radiate hostility despite her composed expression. Nevertheless, I needed her to achieve my goal.

“Why don’t we form an alliance?” I asked.

“Come again?”

“It was you who told Ally to make the amulets, correct?”

The woman fell silent.

“You know about her abilities, don’t you?” I pressed.

The woman remained silent. Apparently, she had no intention of answering me.

“I just want to protect Ally,” I said.

Again, no response.

“Our amulets immediately proved useful today,” I explained. “However, Ally’s was the only one that didn’t activate. In other words, she was the only person who didn’t have magic cast on her.”

The woman in black still didn’t answer, but she seemed to be listening to me.

“Ally seems to be on edge due to this event,” I continued. “Something similar will probably happen in the future as well. Should that happen, I can’t imagine the result will bode well for Ally. You believe the same thing, correct? Or rather, you’re certain of it, aren’t you?”

“...What do you want from me?” the woman asked.

“I want us to form an alliance and protect Ally with all our might.”

The woman refused to answer me yet again.

“How about it?” I asked.

In response, the woman radiated even greater hostility than before. I could hardly breathe due to the bloodlust filling the room.

“The hearts of women are far more complicated than you seem to believe,



Prince Embert,” the woman replied. “Hmph. Well then, here’s my offer. I’ll consider your proposal when—and only when—you’re able to earn Lady Alexandra’s forgiveness.”

With that, the woman in black disappeared.



**THE** next day, I noticed Ally’s absence immediately after entering the classroom.

“What’s this?” I asked Lauris and his friends. “Where’s Ally... I mean, Lady Vistriano?”

“She’s going to be a bit late since she’s not feeling well,” Lady Felicia answered. “She’s still coming to class though.”

Was it just my imagination, or did she sound colder than usual?

*Come to think of it, everyone still has the wrong impression. I need to explain myself later.*

Regardless, I hadn’t given this enough thought. I’d expected to see Ally immediately, as we were in the same school, and I was her assistant teacher.

Lauris caught up with me after homeroom. “Were you able to prepare a medium for the amulet, Professor Embert?”

“Huh?” I asked. “Oh, yes, I had one entrusted to me. I would like to give it to Ally directly.”

“Seriously? I’m not letting you anywhere near Ally. Think about how she must feel.”

Even my little brother was giving me the cold shoulder.

“Lauris?” I asked.

“What?” he responded.

Yes, he was more brusque than usual. Unsure what else to do, I handed him the necklace I’d been entrusted with.

“You’ve got the wrong idea,” I said.

“Great. So what though?”

“Huh?”

Lauris turned around with the necklace in hand. “So what if it was a misunderstanding? It doesn’t change the fact that you hurt Ally.”

“Yes, the way I spoke invited misunderstanding,” I admitted. “I had my reasons though.”

Lauris heaved a sigh. My adorable little brother sure could be intimidating.

“Embert,” he said while glaring at me. “You probably didn’t consider what happened to be that big of a deal. After all, you’re an adult with a decent amount of experience. The same isn’t true of Ally though.”

With that, he strode back into the classroom.

“I’ve been completely made into the villain,” I mumbled.

For some reason, I wasn’t able to meet up with Ally after that. She disappeared like mist whenever I thought I’d found her. Worse still, animals began to block me in certain locations.

“Ally might never talk to me again at this rate,” I muttered to myself.

Panic seized my chest. I was beginning to realize the depth of my own stupidity.



**AFTER** a few days of being unable to see Ally, I returned to the castle for my official duties. Janus was waiting for me with murder in his eyes.

“Welcome home, Your Highness,” he said while handing me the necklace. “Ally asked me to give this to you. Oh, and I heard the whole story from Mary. Could you be any denser? If you had spoken to me, I would have arranged a meeting with Mary immediately. Let me be clear: I won’t cooperate with you until Ally decides to face you again. Keep that in mind.”

Janus rubbed even more salt into my wounds with each word.

“Could you please not kick a man while he’s down?” I asked. “I more than regret my actions, but I was panicking back then. After all, I couldn’t ask Ally to

set up a meeting with Mary directly. I thought making Ally angry would be the best way to meet Mary. How could I have predicted the lengths Ally would take to avoid me? I can't seem to catch her, no matter how well I sense her presence. What should I do?"

Janus heaved a deep sigh. "How much do you like Ally, exactly?"

"Huh?"

"Have you not realized your feelings yet? Well, you've never been perceptive when it comes to yourself. You're normally two steps ahead of everyone, meticulously calculating your every action behind a feigned smile. However, your calculations get sloppy whenever Ally is involved. Honestly, I'm in awe of my little sister. You've been impervious to the advances of so many women, yet she has you in the palm of her hand."

"You think I'm at her mercy?" I asked.

"Have you not realized that either? Well, it's clear to me. The panic of being unable to see Ally is exhausting you, isn't it?"

I fell silent. Certainly, my heart had been drawn to Ally since the moment we met. My whole body had trembled with delight when I'd first found her. On that fateful day, she'd easily pacified a wild magic horse. The recklessness of this adorable girl had stunned me. When we'd reunited after a year apart, her newfound beauty had far surpassed my expectations. My heart swelled with joy whenever she blushed, laughed, or directed any manner of emotion at me.

"Do I love Ally?" I muttered to myself.

## Chapter Five: New Meetings and Missed Connections

**THANKS** to everyone's help, I avoided any direct encounters with Embert. I stopped attending homeroom, and whenever Embert found me, I cast concealment magic on myself and fled. Furthermore, animals naturally cooperated with me whenever I was outside. At this point, our entire group was playing a game of tag. Or would hide-and-seek be a better description?

Near the end of homeroom on a certain day, I was walking down the corridor to class. Normally, I didn't cross paths with anyone during this time, but today proved different. I noticed someone walking towards me from the opposite direction. He must have been a student, as he was wearing a uniform.

*He looks familiar, but I can't quite place my finger on it.*

As I approached him, I tilted my head at this slight sense of déjà vu. Just as we were about to cross paths, he grabbed my arm.

"What the?!" I yelled, startled by this sudden turn of events.

I glared at the boy. The sun filtered through his pure white hair, causing it to sparkle. At the same time, a certain nostalgia overcame me as I stared into his obsidian eyes.

"Excuse me," the boy said.

He was only a little taller than me, slender, and androgynous. Perhaps because of this, his deep voice took me by surprise. Meanwhile, he stared at my hand, seeming unperturbed by my reaction.

"What is this pinky ring?" he asked.

His grip on my upper arm slid down to my hand, his fingers grazing my skin.

"I don't think it has anything to do with you," I replied.

I tried to escape his grasp and failed. In fact, his grip tightened, causing a twinge of pain.

"You're hurting me," I complained.

"Sorry," the boy replied. "I unconsciously enhanced my physical strength."

Despite the apology, he still didn't let go of my hand. Instead, he continued staring at my amulet.

"So?" he asked. "What is this?"

"Who are *you*, exactly?" I fired back.

Why would I tell a boy who'd grabbed my arm during our first meeting about my amulet? The boy looked back and forth between my face and his hand, which was still grabbing my hand.

"Forgive me," he said with a laugh, his gaze still locked on my amulet. "I lost my presence of mind after noticing such unusual magic. My name is Severin Fregolini. This may come as a surprise, but I work for the mage's order."

"Huh? You're not a student?"

*Could he be a teacher even though he's wearing a uniform?*

"No, I'm a third-year student," Severin clarified. "My father is the head of the mage's order. I'm allowed to serve in the order even as a student since my abilities have been deemed sufficient."

"Wow, that's pretty impressive," I replied. Then, I muttered to myself, "Hold on a second here..."

Something clicked in my mind.

"I don't mean to boast, but I have the largest mana supply in my year," Severin continued, interrupting my thoughts. "It pales in comparison to yours though."

"Oh, really?"

"You're genuinely surprised? Have you never measured your magic before?"

I shook my head. "Nope."

No lies here. I'd never measured my magic, as Father had said it wasn't necessary. Even so, I knew I possessed an immense mana supply.

“I see,” Severin replied. “It’s unusual for a noble to be unaware of their mana supply.”

“My father said there was no need to measure it.”

“Fascinating. He probably didn’t want it to become public knowledge. Well, that’s a topic for another day. In any case, would you mind telling me your name?”

My guard began to relax thanks to his friendly demeanor. “I’m Alexandra Vistriano.”

“What a lovely name. I’m Severin, but you can call me Sev.”

Smiling, he drew even closer to me. Strangely, however, it didn’t feel the least bit uncomfortable.

“I go by Alexandra or Ally,” I responded.

“Well then, I’ll call you Ally. I’ll speak to you again soon since classes are about to start. I would love for you to tell me about that ring over tea.”

After speaking everything on his mind, Severin let go of my hand and strode away.

“What was that about?” I mumbled while watching his back fade into the distance.

Severin had come and gone like a whirlwind. Though he seemed familiar, I couldn’t remember where I’d seen him before. I continued staring down the now-empty corridor even after he disappeared from sight.

“I’ve definitely seen him somewhere before,” I muttered to myself.

At that moment, the bell rang, and I hurried off to class.



“**YOU** met someone new?” Cia asked.

I proceeded to tell everyone about this morning’s events during lunchtime.

“So anyway, I met someone new,” I said. “But nothing in particular will come from it.”

"You're sure?" Cita asked.

I nodded. "Yes, I'm sure. Still, he seemed familiar for some reason."

Cia laughed. "Of course he did. You saw him a long time ago, remember?"

"Huh?"

"Has it slipped your mind? During the castle tea parties, the girls would gather around one boy other than Lauris, Rosario, and Oreste."

I turned my memories of those tea parties over in my mind. Yes, there had been four groups of girls.

"Oh, I remember now," I said.

"That's where you know Lord Fregolini from," Cia replied. "The last group of girls was always surrounding his table."

"...He does have a handsome face, I suppose."

Honestly, I didn't remember his features very well, as I'd been focused on him grabbing my arm. At the same time, his obsidian eyes and sparkling white hair stood out in my mind.

"So?" Lauris asked, taking a bite of the hamburger in his hands. "What did this guy say to you?"

Oreste was digging into his hamburger in a similar fashion.

"He wanted to know about my ring," I replied. "Apparently, he was interested in its unusual magic... Ugh, I want to eat this hamburger with my hands too!"

Eating a burger with a knife and fork was complete nonsense.

"I want to try it, too," Cita agreed.

"Go for it then," Oreste said with a laugh. "This place isn't particularly formal or anything."

"Exactly," Lauris added. "I don't think anyone would mind. It's just the school cafeteria."

After setting aside my knife and fork, I picked up the rather large burger in both hands. "Here I go!"

I opened my mouth as wide as possible and took a bite. Lauris and the others burst out laughing.

“You practically unhinged your jaw, and you still couldn’t reach the patty,” Lauris noted with a snicker.

He was right. Despite my and Cita’s best efforts, we had only bitten into the buns.

“Pipe down—I’ll reach the patty next time,” I retorted. Thus, I opened my mouth wide and took another bite, which produced a light crunch. “Well, I reached the lettuce at least.”

“Well, *lettuce* hope you do better next time,” Lauris quipped.

The table burst out laughing again. Even Rosario and Cia joined in.

In any case, it took two more bites to reach the patty.

“That’s so good!” I exclaimed.

Nothing beats digging into a burger with both hands. At long last, I was able to fully enjoy it.

“It really is,” Cita replied with a satisfied expression. “Eating with your hands makes it so much tastier than using a knife and fork.”

Other young ladies began eating their burgers with both hands, perhaps inspired by us. From then on out, it became customary to eat burgers with your hands in the cafeteria.



A few days had passed since I met Severin. According to a notice, Embert would be arriving at school partway through the day due to his official duties. As such, I arrived in class during homeroom for the first time in a while. Then, something unexpected happened during the short break between homeroom and first period.

“Over here, Ally!” a voice called out to me.

I turned to face the door, having recognized this deep voice. An androgynous young man was waving to me.



“Severin?” I asked.

I hadn’t seen him since he stopped me in the corridor.

Severin grinned. “Would you like to have lunch with me today?”

The young ladies in the class began to stir. He was incredibly handsome, after all.

“Sounds good,” I agreed. “Should we meet up in front of the cafeteria during lunchtime?”

“That would be perfect,” Severin replied, favoring me with another wide grin before leaving.

After witnessing this entire exchange, Lauris spoke up. “He seems quite attached to you.”

“Attached?” I repeated. “He’s not a cat or a dog.”

“Are you sure about that?” Cia chimed in. “I practically saw him sprouting big ears and a tail.”

I shook my head. “He’s probably excited to ask about my ring, not spend time with me.”

His intentions had been clear since our first meeting.

“But love could blossom from there,” Cita said.

I groaned. “Not you too.”

At the very least, I wouldn’t be able to fall in love again until I got over Embert. Speaking of which, had he been able to give the amulet to his “special girl?” Lauris had given me a pendant to enchant some days ago. It had sported a sparkling, green tourmaline in its center.

*It was the same color as Embert’s eyes.*

My chest ached as I recalled this. Yes, it would still take me a little while to get over him.

When I arrived in the cafeteria during lunch break, Severin was already waiting for me.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting,” I said.

Smiling, Severin shook his head. “No need to apologize. I was looking forward to it, so I came early.”

We began discussing my ring while eating.

“Wow,” Severin remarked while looking at the ring from various angles. “It responds to both physical *and* mental attacks? That’s incredible.”

I took a bite of my grilled chicken before responding. “Creating an amulet isn’t that difficult, but it does deplete quite a bit of mana.”

“Fascinating,” Severin replied, handing the ring back to me. “Do you think I could make one too?” He then took his last bite of steak. He was a surprisingly fast eater.

“You should be able to if your magic is strong enough,” I said.

Severin’s black eyes sparkled. “Could you teach me how?”

“There’s not much to teach. You just hold the ring and pray.”

Like I said, creating an amulet wasn’t that difficult. It just drained your mana like crazy.

Severin took off his own masculinely stylized ring, which sported an aquamarine in the center. “All right, I’ll give it a try then.”

I watched in silence as he concentrated wordlessly.

“...I can’t do it,” he finally admitted.

For some reason, his enchantment didn’t seem to be working.

“What could the problem be?” I asked. “The size of the gemstone?” When I poked the aquamarine, my mana supply plummeted. “Huh? What just happened?”

As I cocked my head, Severin looked between me and the ring in his hand. “How did you do that?” he asked.

“H-Huh? Do what?”

Apparently, I had just enchanted the ring without meaning to.

Severin furrowed his brow. “I have no idea how you did that.”

I didn’t have a clue either.

Regardless, Severin began smiling again. “You should come hang out with me in the mage’s order next time.”

“Okay,” I agreed without much thought. “I might take you up on that offer.”

Honestly, I enjoyed talking about magic with Severin. Plus, I was interested in seeing the mage’s order.



### ☆☆ Embert’s Point of View ☆☆

I was determined to find Ally today. First, I headed to the cafeteria, as Lauris had told me she often went there for lunch. In the end, I barely had to look before finding her. The amount of effort I’d poured into searching for her previously now seemed like a bad joke. Her silky, golden hair swayed each time she moved. I headed towards her seat, attempting to catch her before she noticed me. However, I halted partway there. Though she normally had lunch with Lauris and his friends, they were seated two tables away from her.

In any case, I slid into a chair at Lauris’s table, still trying to hide from Ally. “I would appreciate it if someone told me what’s going on.”

Lady Felicita seemed none too surprised by my presence. “Whatever do you mean?” she asked.

Lady Felicia chimed in next. “She’s simply met someone new.”

A chill radiated from both twins. Neither of them had forgiven me yet.

“As I’ve said a hundred times, this is all a misunderstanding,” I grumbled.

I couldn’t hide my irritation as I watched Ally laughing with another man.

“You have no right to be angry,” Lauris said.

“I know, but—!” I began shouting. However, I clapped a hand over my mouth to interrupt myself. My indignation surprised even me.

“Isn’t it about time we give Prince Embert a chance to explain himself?” Rosario asked.

Lady Felicita shook her head. “That’s for Ally to decide, not us.”

My anger transformed into despair. “What do you expect me to do? I can’t even find an opportunity to talk to her.”

Lauris sighed. “I’ll talk to Ally and find out whether she wants to hear you out.”

“Thank you...”

“Don’t get too excited. The decision is still up to Ally.”

“I understand, and I’m truly grateful,” I said. “But that aside, what’s going on with her and that boy?”

My irritation swelled into hostility as I noticed Ally smiling at him. What could possibly be so amusing?

“Calm down, Prince Embert,” Rosario said, having sensed my hostility. “Severin is simply talking to her because he’s interested in her amulets.”

I should have expected such composure from the son of the prime minister. That aside, I recognized the name Severin. He was the high mage’s son. Apparently, he’d joined the mage’s order before graduating owing to his powerful magic. Even so, why were he and Ally eating lunch by themselves? I hadn’t even been given that privilege yet.

Lady Felicia suddenly giggled at me. “How unexpected. You like Ally more than I imagined.”

First Jan, and now her? Why did everyone keep saying that?

“I only realized it a little while ago myself,” I replied.

Lady Felicia nodded. “I see. Well then, I suppose I forgive you.”

“...Thanks.”

“You’re oh so very welcome.”

Perhaps a glimmer of hope still remained if I had Lady Felicia’s support. As this thought crossed my mind, I noticed Lady Felicita casting a wary glance at Ally and Severin.



## ☆☆Alexandra's Point of View☆☆

“**LOOK** behind you,” Severin said while peering over my shoulder. “Is that girl ill?”

I turned around to see for myself. “Lady Celette?”

Delphina Celette was walking in our direction, somewhat unsteady on her feet. She would pass by our table in just a few moments. As such, I began standing up to help her. At that moment, however, she collapsed right next to our table with a loud crash.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

Meanwhile, Severin and I helped her back up.

“I’m so sorry,” Celette replied, her entire body shaking. “I’ve ruined your meal...”

Her fall had completely scattered our food across the floor.

“Don’t worry about that,” I said. “More importantly, I think you should go to the infirmary.”

Celette continued trembling as if frightened. I could feel the gazes of the entire cafeteria on us.

“No, I must apologize,” Celette insisted. “You come from a duchy, Lady Alexandra, and I ruined your meal.”

What was she trying to say here? I had no reason to be angry at an accidental fall. Did I really seem that petty to her?

“Don’t worry about our meal,” I said. “No one should prioritize food when someone collapses due to ill health. We need to get you to the infirmary immediately.”

“I’ll take her there,” Severin added. “Lady Celette might be small, but it would still be difficult for another woman to carry her.”

After nodding in agreement, I headed to the infirmary first to inform the doctor of the situation.



**AFTER** bringing Celette to the infirmary, the doctor laid her down on a bed.

“I can’t find any particular abnormality,” he said after a quick exam. “She could be somewhat tired though. In any event, I believe she’ll be okay if we let her rest for a little while. There’s no need for concern.”

“How wonderful,” I replied. “Thank you so much, doctor.”

The doctor appeared to be in his early thirties. He had a gentle aura that put me at ease. Yet in the next moment, I felt like I’d been doused with cold water.

The doctor chuckled. “This is nothing compared to the bump you suffered in the past.”

“Huh?” I responded.

Such words should never have been uttered.

“Do you not remember?” the doctor asked. “I’m the one who examined your head when you fell off a horse.”

“W-Wow, what a coincidence.”

No, I hadn’t recognized him. Still, having my tragic backstory unearthed unexpectedly caused me to flush. In response, I covered my face with both hands.

“You fell off a horse?” Severin asked with a grin, latching onto this information. “When was this?”

The doctor continued speaking, seeming amused. “Lady Alexandra must have been five years old at the time. She snuck into the stables when no groom was around and climbed on a horse. Before she could adjust her posture, she fell headfirst from the horse’s back. Children have proportionally large heads that affect their balance, you know? I’d never heard of a noble acting so recklessly, much less a high-ranking young lady. For that reason alone, this memory has stayed with me all these years.”

“Lalala,” I sang while covering my ears. “I can’t hear you.”

In reality, I *could* hear him, but I had no choice but to pretend otherwise.

“It was an unbelievably large bump,” the doctor said with another chuckle.

“At the time, I worried it might be permanent. Thank goodness I was wrong.”

“Did you really have to tell the whole story...?” I grumbled.

As I slumped my shoulders, Severin approached me and touched the back of my head. “It’s true. You don’t have a bump anymore.”

“Of course I don’t,” I replied. “How many years ago do you think this happened?”

Someone knocked on the door during this exchange.

“Come in,” the doctor said.

An unexpected person entered the infirmary.

“Prince Embert...” I mumbled, unable to stop myself.

“Ally,” he replied.

I hadn’t heard his voice in some time. My chest tightened simply because he called my name.

“I’ve come to check on one of my students,” Embert said. “I heard she was taken to the infirmary.”

After listening to the doctor’s explanation, Embert turned to Severin. “Your name is Severin Fregolini, correct?” the prince asked. “And you brought Lady Celette here?”

“Yes, sir,” Severin confirmed.

“You have my thanks. I’ve heard how exceptional you are for your age. Balancing school and the mage’s order must be difficult, but please keep up the good work.”

Severin’s obsidian eyes started gleaming. Presumably, having Embert’s recognition had caused him to swell with emotion.

“Thank you so much,” Severin said. “I won’t let you down.”

He then left the infirmary while grinning from ear to ear. I could just imagine him skipping down the corridor.

Then, Embert turned towards me. “Lady Alexandra.”

“...Yes?” I responded.

“Shall we return to class together?”

In contrast to Severin, my emotions plummeted. I couldn't use concealment magic on myself at this point. In other words, our game of hide-and-seek ended here.



**EMBERT** led me to a room with a soothing ambiance rather than the classroom.

“Where are we?” I asked, glancing around nervously.

The prince urged me to sit on the sofa. “This is the office I normally use. I can't stay in the staff room all the time, as I sometimes bring work related to my official duties here.”

“I see.”

Honestly, I wanted to stand up and race to the door. I wanted to escape from this room even if I knew it was impossible. After all this time, I still hadn't prepared myself to face the prince. My every instinct urged me to flee. Nevertheless, I struggled to think up a topic of conversation. Now of all times, however, only topics I wanted to avoid sprang to mind.

“So, um, were you able to give it to her?” I asked.

“Huh?” Embert responded.

“The pendant I enchanted into an amulet. You wanted to give it to a special girl, right?”

“Oh, yes, I gave it to her.”

My chest ached. I couldn't take back the question, no matter how much I regretted asking it. Obviously, I couldn't squeeze the part of my chest that throbbed with pain. That would have been indecent. Unsure what else to do, I gripped my clothes over my aching heart instead.

“I-I'm glad to hear it,” I said. “The girl you love will be safe now. Well then, I need to get back to class.”



As I tried heading towards the door, Embert threw his arms around me from behind. “Wait!”

“Let go of me!” I yelled.

Though I struggled with all my might, he didn’t budge. In fact, he embraced me even more tightly.

“Ally, please wait,” Embert insisted. “I’m begging you to hear me out.”

“Hear you out? I’ve already done that. Let me go back to class. I don’t want to spend another moment with you!”

I couldn’t stay calm. The tears I’d been holding back poured down my cheeks.

“I’m sorry!” Embert shouted. “I’m sorry. I’ll apologize as much as you like, Ally, but I’m begging you to hear me out.”

“No! What more do you want to tell me? I made an amulet for the girl you love, and you gave it to her. I don’t need to hear anything else! You two can ride off into the sunset together for all I care! Just let go of me!”

“Alexandra!”

When Embert shouted my name at the top of his lungs, I began trembling. A moment later, my emotions exploded, and I started bawling my eyes out.

“I hate you, Embert!” I yelled.





When the prince's hold on me loosened, I fled the room. I couldn't return to my dorm or classroom in this state. On impulse, I headed towards the small courtyard located on the farthest reaches of the school grounds.



**THERE** were no people in the courtyard, as I'd hoped. The entire area consisted of a small pond, a large tree, and two benches. I sat down on one of the benches and began bawling my eyes out. As I lost track of time, I felt something touch my shoulder.

"Chirp, chirp."

A fluffy, white bird was peering at me from my shoulder.

"How cute," I said with a laugh.

In the blink of an eye, an entire flock of birds filled the courtyard.

"Did you all come to comfort me?" I asked.

In response, the birds of various colors chirped in unison.

"Thank you, everyone," I said. "I feel a bit better now."

The birds joined together in song, despite being a diverse array of species. The volume of their grand chorus surprised me. I felt as though the birds were encouraging me rather than consoling me.

"I can't keep dragging my feet forever," I said.

The birds continued their choral song in agreement.



### ☆☆ Embert's Point of View ☆☆

**I'D** made Ally cry. When she hadn't listened to my explanation, I'd inadvertently raised my voice.

"Why does nothing ever go according to plan?" I asked myself.

Janus had been right. I lost my ability to think straight when it came to Ally. For some reason, I couldn't maintain my composure. The warmth that had been in my arms mere moments ago turned frigid.

“Ally,” I mumbled.

Without a doubt, our game of hide-and-seek would begin again. I probably wouldn’t be able to catch her unawares a second time. Panic and despair washed over me in a wave.

“I love you, Ally.”

My profession dissipated throughout the room, reaching no one’s ears.



“...**SHE’S** here,” I muttered to myself.

Ally showed up for class during homeroom the next day. I hadn’t expected her to be here at all. The mere sight of her caused my heart to race with joy, even though she refused to meet my gaze.

Alas, she continued to vanish like mist whenever I tried to approach her. Eventually, Lauris gave me a message from Ally. She wanted me to wait until she’d prepared herself to hear my explanation. Thus, I decided to wait patiently. Ally’s mere presence filled me with joy. Would she forgive me for unconsciously following her with my gaze?



**SOMETHING** unexpected occurred a few days later. As students left for their next class after homeroom, Lady Celette approached me.

“Um, may I have a moment of your time, Professor Embert?” she asked.

Her cheerful smile put me on high alert. Nevertheless, I returned the smile and responded, “What can I help you with?”

She gazed at me with upturned eyes, flushing slightly. “Are you feeling unwell, Professor Embert?”

“Huh? Why do you ask?”

“I’ve been very concerned with how tired you’ve seemed lately. If my holy magic could make you feel any better, I would love to help.”

Lady Celette’s appearance inspired a protective instinct in men. As a result, most men would completely fall for her charm if she expressed concern for

them.

“Tired?” I repeated. “In that case, you needn’t worry. I’m simply lovesick.”

“Come again?”

“Does that sound strange coming from an adult? No matter how old one grows, matters of the heart remain difficult.”

I stood from my seat, leaving Lady Celette behind with her mouth agape.

“Impressive,” I muttered to myself with a soft chuckle. “She’s not playing around anymore.”

I brushed my earring, which had grown warm. I then thought of Ally—the girl who’d given me this amulet. She appeared as an elegant, white lily on the outside. On the inside, however, she was a vibrant sunflower. On the other hand, Lady Celette appeared as a demure carnation on the outside. On the inside, however, she was a deceitful foxglove.

“And I unquestionably prefer sunflowers,” I continued muttering to myself.

I longed for that sunflower to bloom by my side as soon as possible.



### ☆☆Alexandra’s Point of View☆☆

**AFTER** school, I knocked on the door to Embert’s private office, which I’d visited previously. The urge to turn around and flee overcame me. Where had all my resolve gone?

*I can’t run away! I decided to hear him out and move on!*

As I stood my ground and waited for a response, I heard a voice almost at once.

“Yes, who is it?” Embert asked, his voice as deep and gentle as usual.

“...It’s me,” I replied. “Alexandra.”

After a brief pause, the door swung open, nearly flying off the hinges. “Ally,” Embert said, smiling at me awkwardly. He seemed to be on the verge of tears.

“I’ve come to hear you out,” I responded.

“Of course. Come in.”

I sat down on the sofa, as I’d done before.

“Do you mind waiting for a minute?” Embert asked. “I’ll brew us some tea.”

“Seriously?”

“I’m here by myself. I can at least brew my own tea.”

A little while later, the refreshing scent of tea filled the room.

“Here you go,” Embert said, setting a teacup in front of me.

An herbal aroma tickled my nostrils. “...It’s delicious,” I replied after tasting the tea. The slight bitterness suited my current mood.

“Thank you for hearing me out,” Embert said.

“No, I’m sorry for running away without listening to you.”

Embert shook his head. “It’s fine. I was the one at fault. Please forgive me for raising my voice.”

He sat next to me and turned in my direction. Steeling myself, I turned to face him as well. As our knees touched, he gripped my hand gently. I nearly burst into tears, as I hadn’t felt the warmth of his touch in quite some time.

“I’m truly sorry, Ally,” Embert apologized. “I lied to you. I didn’t give the amulet to a girl I love. When I called her a ‘very special girl,’ I was being misleading.”

“...What?”

“Let me explain. She *is* a very special girl, but she’s not special to *me*.”

I furrowed my brow at this confusing explanation. This was very different from what I’d expected to hear. In any case, Embert touched my cheek with his free hand. My expression was probably a mask of puzzlement.

“Would you listen to the story of the most foolish man in the world?” Embert asked. After taking a deep breath, he continued, “The second princess of our neighboring country is studying abroad here. Were you aware of this?”

“Yes.”

I recalled hearing her introduction on the first day.

“The foreign princess is currently under the care of our royal family,” Embert explained.

“I see.”

“In any case, she’s the ‘very special girl’ I was referring to. Certainly, she’s precious to the kingdom, but she’s not precious to *me*.”

“Um, okay...?” I answered dully, unsure how else to respond.

“Lady Celette was the catalyst to all this. She tried to cast a spell on all of us, remember?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t jump to any conclusions, as I’m not completely certain what kind of spell she cast,” Embert said. “I can’t take immediate action either since I haven’t noticed the other students acting strangely. However, you’re the only person Lady Celette *didn’t* cast a spell on. That worries me the most, and it’s continued to eat away at me.” Embert’s grip on my hand tightened. “Based on all this, I had a terrible premonition. If my assumptions about Lady Celette’s magic are correct, her intent might be to torment you or lure you into a trap.”

Embert’s discernment impressed me. After all, he’d arrived at the correct conclusion with very little information. The original Alexandra had suffered that exact fate.

“Here’s where I made a grave error,” Embert continued. “After reaching this conclusion, I wanted a powerful ally. Someone to help protect you. By chance, I’d heard about your handmaid Mary from Jan. Of course, I immediately sought to win her over as an ally. At the same time, I didn’t want you to know about my concerns. Foolishly, I decided that making you sad or angry would be the best way to lure Mary out.”

Realization dawned on me. “And that’s why you misled me about the amulet?”

“However, I only realized how grave my error was when you began hiding from me.” Here, Embert brought my hand to his cheek. “I thought you would



forgive me immediately after hearing my explanation. Unfortunately, I didn't take the matter seriously enough. I couldn't foresee the depth of your sadness. When you disappeared from my sight, I became keenly aware of my own foolishness. All the while, everyone refused to help me because of how deeply I hurt you."

Embert seemed like a shadow of the radiant prince due to his pathetic expression. On a sudden whim, I pinched his cheek with the hand he was cradling.

"Ouch, that hurt," he complained.

"But now you're forgiven," I answered with a laugh.

At that moment, Embert wrapped me in his arms. "Thank you, Ally. I'm truly sorry."

I wrapped my arms around him as well. "I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have run away from you this whole time."

"I missed you so much," Embert said, tightening his embrace. "For the first time in my life, I realized how deathly painful it is to be apart from someone."

"Yeah."

"What about you? Did you miss me even a little bit?"

"Well..." I trailed off.

At the time, I'd kept running from Embert because I didn't want to see him. I'd wanted to move on as fast as possible.

When I said nothing, Embert seemed to intuit my feelings. "How wonderful that I didn't lose you," he whispered in my ear, his embrace tightening even more.

"You're squeezing too tight, Prince Embert."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize my own strength."

Embert loosened his embrace and stared into my eyes. Part of me wished he would stop. Being stared at so intently was embarrassing.

"Ally," he said. "Would you stop calling me Prince Embert?"

“Huh?”

“Call me Em instead. I want you to be the only one who calls me by that name.”

My heart raced as I looked at the beautiful face in front of me. I’d been so stupid to think I could move on from him. No, I would never be able to forget him.

“Would you please call me Em?” the prince asked me with even greater insistence.

I took a deep breath to prepare myself. “...Em,” I finally said.

“Ally,” he responded while embracing me again. “I love you, Ally. Therefore, I want you to take your time and fall in love with me as well.”

The prince’s heartrending voice pierced my chest. “Em,” I said, unable to stop myself from speaking his name.

“Yes?”

His embrace loosened again. Though I could feel his gaze on my skin, I couldn’t bring myself to lift my eyes. Even so, I continued speaking. “I...”

“Yes?”

“I love you too.”

“What?” Embert asked.

*Did he not hear me? Should I say it again?*

As these thoughts crossed my mind, I glanced at the prince’s face. “Huh?” I mumbled. Embert’s face had changed to one of surprise in just a few moments. His formally pathetic expression had vanished, and his emerald eyes twinkled.

“Could you say that again?” he asked.

I gasped upon seeing his beguiling smile so up close. “No, I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ll die of embarrassment.”

Embert laughed. With that, the two of us had made up and professed our

feelings to each other.



**WHEN** I came to class the next morning, an adorable young lady called out to me. “Pardon me,” she said.

Her name was Julietta Cotarini—the second princess of our neighboring country.

“Hello, Your Highness,” I greeted her.

The princess fidgeted as she spoke. “Um, excuse me for the sudden interruption, but... I’ve wanted to thank you for a long time.”

Her petite frame and strawberry-blonde hair were adorable. As I waited for her next words, she turned her brown eyes on me, seeming to have mustered her courage. Despite being royalty, she bowed her head and continued, “Thank you for the amulet.”

“Please raise your head, Your Highness.”

“But I was saved thanks to your enchantment.”

Her voice grew even louder, perhaps due to excitement. Other students in the classroom began looking in our direction.

“If it’s all right with you, why don’t we chat over tea in the café?” I suggested.

Julietta beamed. “Okay!”

*I don’t know what’s going on, but she’s adorable.*

Thus, we headed to the café while I marveled at her cuteness. The café wasn’t as large as the cafeteria, but it was the perfect-sized space to relax in.

“I started feeling sluggish after introductions on the first day,” Julietta explained as we sipped our tea. “I tried to ignore it by convincing myself it was just fatigue. However, it never improved. Then, I noticed it getting slightly worse when I spent time with a specific group. This frightened me a bit, so I consulted with Prince Embert.”

Apparently, this group was Celette’s clique of about six girls. Julietta only felt ill on the days she spent with them.

“Actually, Prince Embert asked me if I was feeling unwell on the first day,” Julietta continued. “I didn’t say anything at the time since I thought it was just fatigue. But as time passed, the sluggishness kept growing more and more painful. Thankfully, I felt completely reinvigorated after putting on your amulet.”

Julietta folded her hands in front of her chest. She looked unbearably cute, like a squirrel or hamster. Without thinking, I pinched my nose.

“Is something wrong?” Julietta asked with a look of concern.

“No, it’s nothing,” I replied.

I definitely couldn’t say, “Your cuteness is about to give me a nosebleed.”

“In any case, I’m glad you’re feeling better,” I said.

When I smiled at the princess in an attempt to contain my nosebleed, she beamed back at me. “I’ve wanted to talk to you for a long time, Lady Vistriano. Prince Embert brought you up all the time while he was studying abroad in my country. He would brag about your martial arts prowess, how you pacified a rampaging magic horse, and so on. I’ve admired you all these years because of his stories. That’s why I decided to study abroad at this school.”

“Oh, wow. Thank you.”

I hadn’t known about Embert telling stories of me while abroad. Julietta had even decided to enroll here because of those anecdotes. I stared at the princess slack-jawed, too surprised to react in any other way.

Meanwhile, Julietta continued speaking while looking at me from the corner of her eye. “When I first saw you during introductions, your beauty took my breath away. Honestly, I wanted to introduce myself immediately, but I always felt embarrassed in your presence. I’m sorry for taking so long.”

Julietta bowed her head again. Of course, I also had to pinch my nose again.

“I’m sorry too,” I said. “I should have followed up with you after having the amulet delivered.”

At the time, I’d completely ignored the situation, not wanting to meet Embert’s “special girl.”

“Please don’t apologize,” Julietta said. She then lifted the pendant from her neck to show it to me. “I was so happy to receive this amulet. My father gave me this pendant before I left our country.”

“Really?” I asked. “You were okay with me enchanting something so valuable?”

“Yes, of course. It’s become a lifelong treasure of mine. I plan to wear it forever.”

Julietta laughed while tilting her head, her cuteness nearly knocking me unconscious.

“Also...” she continued, fidgeting again. “I would love for us to be friends, Lady Vistriano!”

My heart skipped a beat. Could I please just die and ascend to Heaven?

## Chapter Six: The Power of Bewitchment

“**WHY** are us girls taking dance lessons while the boys have sword training?” I asked.

A few days had passed since Embert and I had communicated our feelings. Today’s classes were separated by gender. The boys were practicing swordsmanship on the training grounds. Meanwhile, the girls had gathered for class in a small dance hall opposite the training grounds. Our colorful dresses lit up the room.

“I would have preferred sword training myself,” I complained, gripping the skirt of my dress.

Cia rolled her eyes. “Of course you would, but you’re the only woman who would prefer sword fighting to dancing.”

“You think?” Cita asked. “I wanted to try sword fighting as well.”

“Oreste would flip his lid if he heard you say that,” Cia responded with a haughty smile. “He wouldn’t want you doing anything dangerous.”

“True enough.”

To my surprise, Oreste had turned out to be quite overprotective. Despite his own devil-may-care attitude, he was astonishingly overprotective of Cita. “Concerned fiancé” had a nice ring to it, but he always stopped Cita from doing anything even the least bit dangerous. Regardless, Cita seemed happy with their dynamic, so who was I to judge? Personally, however, I would find that sort of relationship stifling.

Julietta turned her sparkling, brown eyes on me. “If you’re going to join the sword fighting class, I want to try it too.”

The princess and I had become good friends since our first meeting.

“Yeah, forget I said anything,” I replied. “Let’s just be quiet and dance.”

Julietta's blind admiration for me was heartwarming. Still, the idea of anything happening to her worried me sick. Wait, was I being just as overprotective?

During this conversation, the dance professor entered the hall.

"Oh," I mumbled.

Embert stood behind the professor. "I'll also be serving as a dance partner today," he said. "Let's make the most of our time."

The voltage in the hall spiked as the young ladies gasped with delight.

Cia smirked at me. "Looks like everyone's going to be vying for Prince Embert."

"Sorry, but I won't be getting involved in that drama," I responded.

"Seriously?! What a bore!"

Excitement versus dullness had nothing to do with it. Embert and I were still keeping our relationship a secret from outsiders. "I would advise against making your relationship public this school year," Mary had said, and Embert had agreed. Undoubtedly, Mary knew something. She'd also encouraged me to make the amulets, after all. That said, she probably wanted to keep her secrets under wraps, as she hadn't divulged anything to me yet. Either way, I would wait until she was ready to confide in me.

As I pondered these matters, the professor began speaking. "Some of you might be ballroom dancing for the first time," he said. "As such, let's take this opportunity to showcase what a proper dance should look like. Would you like to do the honors, Crown Prince Embert?"

"Glady," Embert answered with a grin. "May I also choose my partner?"

"By all means."

Embert headed straight towards me without the slightest hesitation. After stopping right in front of me, he invited me to dance with a graceful bow and flourish of his hand. "May I have the honor of this dance?"

Once again, the young ladies in the hall gasped at Embert's beauty.

“You may, my lord,” I replied, placing my hand atop his extended palm.

When he kissed the back of my hand, the other girls squealed with delight.

“Well then, let’s begin,” the professor said. “Cue the music.”

As music filled the hall, Embert and I began sliding across the dance floor.

“You’re a good dancer,” the prince said, leading with a twinkle in his eye. “I should have expected as much.”

“I am the eldest daughter of a duke, after all. You’re a good dancer too. I suppose that’s required of a prince.”

Embert chuckled. “I have to wait until next year to dance with you officially. Even so, I desperately wanted to share this experience with you before then. I would even kiss you if everyone wasn’t watching.”

“That’s too bad,” I said with a laugh. When Embert grinned back at me, I continued, “Personally, I wouldn’t mind if you kissed me even with everyone watching.”

Embert’s eyes widened.

I couldn’t help but giggle. “Just kidding.”

“You’re too much.”

The song ended all too soon, and the two of us struck our final pose. The audience burst into applause.

“What a fantastic dance,” the professor said. “I shouldn’t have expected any less. Let’s practice our hardest, everyone. That way, you can all dance in a similar fashion at next year’s debutante ball.”



**CIA** performed a dance step while watching the other girls earnestly engage in the lesson. “It looks like your and Embert’s dance inspired everyone.”

I was helping out anyone who wanted a partner, as I could perform the man’s part as well. While holding Cia’s hand, I turned and began transitioning into the next step. At that moment, something unexpected happened.

“Ouch!” Cia yelped, coming to a stop.



Cita and Julietta reacted in a similar fashion. I still felt nothing, yet suddenly, I heard a collective sigh from the other side of the hall. Then, the girls began talking among themselves.

“How wonderful.”

“It’s like a beautiful painting come to life.”

“They’re the perfect match.”

“What’s going on?” I asked, turning in the direction of the voices.

There, I found Embert teaching Celette how to dance. The smile disappeared from Embert’s face. Presumably, he’d felt the heat as well. Even so, the surrounding girls continued praising them, not noticing Embert’s change in expression.

“Lady Celette might become a holy woman,” one girl said. “She’s more compassionate and beautiful than anyone else. Do you think she’ll marry Crown Prince Embert?”

“I think so,” another girl agreed. “I’ve never seen such a perfect match. How could they not get married?”

I heard a number of voices praising Celette.

Cita furrowed her brow. “What in the realm is going on?”

Cia frowned as well. “Since when did everyone become loyal disciples of Lady Celette?”

Julietta clutched her chest where her pendant was probably located. “That was the hottest my amulet has felt so far.”

“This must be the work of magic,” I said.

In all likelihood, Celette had seized control of our classmates using bewitchment. There was no better proof than the behavior of the enchanted girls. A chill ran down my spine as I witnessed this enigmatic power manipulating their minds so easily.



“**WHAT** in the realm is going on?” Lauris asked with a sigh.

After the dance lesson, a certain section of the class continued to talk about Celette excitedly. “Lady Celette might become a holy woman,” they gossiped. “And once she does, Prince Embert will take her as his princess.” Even now, many young ladies were surrounding Celette and giving her their blessings. For her part, Celette didn’t seem perplexed in the least. “Oh, stop—you’re making me blush,” she kept repeating. Yet at the same time, she thanked everyone with a shrewd smile.

“Where does she get off thanking everyone?” Lauris asked, scowling in irritation. “There’s no way my brother wants Lady Celette as a wife.”

In the end, the girls in our class continued buzzing about this topic for the rest of the day.



### ☆☆ Embert’s Point of View ☆☆

**NIGHT** had fallen, and a knock came at my door as I lounged on my office sofa.

“Come in,” I said.

After receiving my permission, the visitor entered my office, her footsteps completely silent.

“Forgive me for summoning you so late,” I apologized.

Mary stood in front of the door, wearing her handmaid uniform. “This actually worked out perfectly,” she replied. “Lady Alexandra went to bed late tonight.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle, as her tone was significantly more polite than before. “Wonderful,” I said. “That aside, do you have a good grasp of the situation?”

“I do,” Mary answered curtly.

“In other words, Lady Celette must have used bewitchment, correct?”

Only bewitchment could explain that sudden shower of praise. Certainly, Lady Celette could be classified as beautiful, but she didn’t hold a candle to Ally.

“So, what do you think we should do moving forward?” I asked.

“Good question,” Mary responded without changing her expression. “I can’t say anything for certain since this is completely different from the outline I know. However, it might be wise to maintain the current state of affairs.”

“Could that put Ally in danger?” I asked with a serious expression.

Mary shook her head. “It shouldn’t. Celette has no reason to harm Lady Alexandra right now.”

“I see.”

Before, Mary had advised me and Ally not to publicize our relationship. This must have been her reason.

“Is there anyone else we should give an amulet to?” I asked.

After pondering this for a moment, Mary looked up at me. “I can’t think of anyone in particular. At first, I was concerned about Lord Severin Fregolini, but he should be safe. Apparently, Lady Alexandra enchanted one of his belongings.”

I ignored the pang of irritation in my chest. Now wasn’t the time for jealousy.

“In that case, we’ll just keep an eye on things for a while,” I said.

“Yes, so long as nothing major occurs,” Mary agreed.

I nodded. “Understood. Thank you.”

With that, Mary left the room, her footsteps just as silent as before. After sighing once, I moved to my chambers and threw myself onto the bed.

“A holy woman who uses bewitchment is unprecedented,” I muttered to myself. “Lady Celette is the last person who should be given that title.”



### ☆☆Alexandra’s Point of View☆☆

**WE** were attending a horse-riding class today. The riding grounds were a short distance from the back of the school building.

“A surprising number of people chose to take this class,” I said.

Horse-riding was an elective subject. Those who’d chosen not to take this

class had to attend supplementary magic lessons instead.

“Still, it seems like we’re the only girls who seriously want to ride horses,” I noted.

The boys were all dressed in their personal riding attire. However, the girls were all dressed in their uniforms, apart from me, the twins, and Julietta. In other words, the other girls had no intention of taking this seriously.

“It’s honestly a shame,” I continued. “They’ll never know the joy of galloping on the back of a horse.”

Cita—who also liked riding horses—nodded in agreement. “True. It’s easy to get hooked on that feeling of exhilaration.”

Meanwhile, Cia smiled at Julietta. “The two of us are novices, though. Let’s not get too carried away, shall we?”

Julietta smiled back at her.

When class officially started, the professor brought several horses to the riding grounds.

“Oh!” I gasped.

Embert was riding towards us on a magic horse with a crimson mane and white coat. He’d been riding the same horse when we first met. Another magic horse with a golden mane and crimson coat trotted beside him. This was the horse I’d subdued as a young girl. It seemed completely docile now. In any case, both horses were beautiful.

“We’ll focus on interacting with the horses today,” Embert said. “However, please don’t approach the ones with me carelessly. These two are magic horses, which some of you might be seeing for the first time. Riders need to undergo the appropriate training before mounting them, as they can run much farther than normal horses. They might throw you off, or in the worst-case scenario, you may have difficulty breathing. I brought these magic horses with me today to show you the differences between them and normal horses. Allow me to repeat myself. Please don’t approach the ones with me carelessly.”

I squirmed with excitement during Embert’s lecture. Was it just my

imagination, or were the magic horses looking at me?

“Well then, I’ll answer any questions about the magic horses,” Embert continued. “The regular horses will be with the professor.”

Everyone started moving at once. I began walking towards the magic horses as well. As I passed Celette and her friends, their conversation reached my ears. I couldn’t help but eavesdrop as Celette’s entourage began singing her praises.

“I expect even the magic horses to open up to you immediately, Lady Celette.”

“Indeed. It’s said that animals adore holy women. You’ll probably become friends with the magic horses in no time.”

Despite feigning discomfiture, Celette couldn’t hide her grin. “You needn’t treat me with such reverence. I’m not a holy woman yet.”

“What are you talking about?” one of the girls asked. “As the only person here who can use holy magic, you’ll almost certainly become a holy woman, right?”

I continued heading towards the magic horses while ignoring their dry conversation. However, Celette’s next words brought me to another halt.

“Well then, shall we try getting a little closer to the magic horses?” she suggested.

“Huh?” I asked, unable to stop myself.

Celette looked at me with a puzzled expression. “Is something the matter, Lady Vistriano?”

“I accidentally overheard your conversation,” I replied. “Um, you should be careful. Magic horses really are dangerous.”

“My, what a silly thing to say,” one member of the entourage responded. “Lady Celette is a holy magic user. She’ll have the magic horses eating from her hand in no time.”

“That’s right,” another girl agreed. “Oh, dear. Are you envious because you can’t use holy magic, perhaps?”

*I try to offer a friendly warning, and this is how they respond to me?*

As a highborn noblewoman, I had a duty to suppress my irritation.

“That’s enough, everyone,” Celette interjected. She then looked at me and continued, “Thank you for the warning, Lady Vistriano, but I’ll be okay. You really needn’t worry.”

Celette spoke these words with an enormous smile, but on what basis would she be okay, exactly? The magic horses really were dangerous.

“Um, I’m being serious,” I said.

Nevertheless, Celette and her friends continued striding over to the magic horses, ignoring my attempts to stop them.

“What was that about?” Julietta asked in a huff. “They have no right to speak to you like that.”

*Does she ever stop being so adorable?*

Cia grinned deviously. “They’re going to get kicked in the face by the magic horses if we leave them be.”

“Let’s go have a look,” Cita said.

*Both of you are out for blood, huh?*

“On that note, why don’t we go listen to Embert?” I suggested.

After approaching the magic horses, we found a crowd of students gathered in front of Embert. He was answering everyone’s questions with the same level of conscientiousness. Lauris and the other boys were standing at the back of the crowd as well. As I looked around for Celette and her entourage, I found them—to my dismay—approaching the crimson horse.

“That’s a good boy,” Celette said while approaching the creature. “You’ll let me pet you, right?”

Of course, the magic horse didn’t remain docile. Its ears pinned backwards, signaling its anger. That said, Celette and her entourage seemed oblivious to this. “He looks like he’s in a good mood, no?” one of the girls asked at complete odds with reality.

Someone must have pointed out the situation to Embert, as he turned towards the magic horses. At that moment, the furious horse stuck out its head and attempted to bite Celette. Upon noticing this, a few young ladies screamed.

“Stop!” I shouted at the magic horse instinctively.

The creature halted in response to my command, its ears perking up. My voice had reached it without issue. A moment later, Embert raced over to the girls, his face a mask of anger.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” he bellowed.

I’d never heard him speak in such a low and imposing voice. For one moment, I stiffened, thinking he might have been scolding me. Celette and her entourage looked surprised as well.

“Did you not listen to me?!” Embert continued shouting. “I told everyone not to approach the magic horses carelessly! These creatures are a species of monster, no matter how much they resemble horses!” The prince heaved a sigh as he regarded Celette and her entourage, all of whom had huddled together in fright. “All of you need to leave the riding grounds immediately. These magic horses will never open up to you again. Furthermore, when a magic horse rejects someone, it affects the other horses as well. In all likelihood, none of these horses will ever let you ride them. There’s no longer a reason for any of you to take this class.”

With that, Embert turned his back on the girls.

“Ouch!” Oreste exclaimed, and at the same time, Embert’s face twisted. Celette had cast bewitchment on them again. At once, the two magic horses grew restive, having sensed the magic. Though both of them were expressing their anger towards Celette, the white horse seemed particularly furious. He raised his hind legs to kick Celette, attempting to remove the source of his distress.

“Eek!”

As Celette and her entourage screamed, I ran out in front of them. “Stop!” I shouted at the white horse. “Please!”

After stiffening for a moment, the white horse clopped its front hooves on the

ground. Then, it finally calmed down.

“Good boy,” I said while extending a hand.

The white horse lowered its head to nuzzle my hand. Embert also stroked the horse’s nose to help calm it down.

“Thank you very much, Lady Alexandra,” he said.

“Think nothing of it,” I replied.

The crimson horse stuck its nose at us from the side as well.

“Oh, do you remember me?” I asked with a laugh.

The crimson horse responded with a snort. It must have been quite clever to remember something from so long ago. In any event, the horse seemed to enjoy being petted. It nuzzled its nose against my hand, pestering me for more.

Somehow, Celette had avoided getting injured. Even so, she was forbidden from ever approaching one of the academy’s horses again.



**STRANGE** rumors about me began circulating the next day. According to the gossip, I’d been able to pacify the magic horses thanks to my “powers of darkness.” As a result, I started feeling piercing stares wherever I went. To make matters worse, girls I didn’t know would yelp whenever we crossed paths.

Our group of seven was sitting on the cafeteria sofas, which was slowly becoming our regular spot.

“Ally,” Lauris said, smirking at me over his cup of tea. “Have you been hiding dark powers from us this whole time?”

“Dark powers, huh?” I responded through a mouthful of fruit tart. “Am I supposed to be the demon queen or something?”

Cia—who was sitting beside me—threw her arms around me. “I would love you even if you were the demon queen.”

Julietta stared at me from the opposite sofa, her brown eyes sparkling. “Me too!” she cried, folding her hands in front of her chest as if in prayer. “I would still love you even if you were the demon queen!”



“Why wasn’t I born a man?” I grumbled to myself.

I had to pinch my nose in front of the adorable, little creature that was Julietta. I couldn’t start bleeding all over the sofa, right?

“That aside, what *are* powers of darkness, exactly?” Cia asked.

Rosario frowned. “At the very least, I’ve never heard of them.”

Lauris chuckled in response. “I’ve never heard of dark powers either, but I wouldn’t be surprised if Ally had them.”

*Wait, seriously? He’s never heard of them?*

“Hold on,” I said while cocking my head. “Do powers of darkness not actually exist?”

Everyone furrowed their brows while pondering my question.

“What would dark powers even be capable of in the first place?” Lauris asked.

“How should I know?” I responded.

Finally, Oreste chimed in with a decent answer. “Maybe you could control monsters or something.”

“In other words, I might be able to tame monsters other than magic horses?” I asked.

Oreste gaped at me. “You can do that?”

*Again, how should I know? I’m the one asking the question here.*

Rosario wore a contemplative expression. “Magic wolves are another species of monster you could test the theory on.”

Our country had few monsters to begin with. A pack of wolves might have a single magic one at most.

“There’s also the dragon that resides in our country,” Rosario added.

A dragon lived within a volcano on our kingdom’s northernmost edge. Despite being categorized as monsters, few details were known about dragons, as they were so scarce. Some people even referred to them as sacred beasts rather than monsters. Accordingly, fire-wielding dragons were revered in our kingdom.

“Dragons, huh?” I asked. “I’d like to meet one.”

I’d transcended space and time to live in a fantasy world. How could I resist seeing a dragon with my own eyes?

“Just call one here with your powers of darkness,” Lauris quipped.

“Ugh,” I groaned. “Give it a rest already, why don’t you?”

I didn’t perceive the rumors as serious, thinking they would die down immediately. The gossip was vague enough that we could laugh it off for now. Contrary to my expectations, however, the rumors didn’t die down. In fact, they continued spreading among low-ranking noble houses, not just our academy.



**THE** next day, our group of seven was lounging on the cafeteria sofas again.

“This must be how urban legends spread,” I muttered to myself.

“What are urban legends?” Rosario asked.

Did the concept not exist in this world?

“It’s a phrase for when frightening but groundless rumors spread as if they’re true,” I replied. “Eventually, these rumors reach legendary status.”

Oreste laughed. “That describes what’s happening to you perfectly.”

“You might have no choice but to summon a dragon now,” Lauris said. “Just to give the rumors some credibility.”

Both Oreste and Lauris smirked at me.

“Do you think I could?” I asked, considering the matter somewhat seriously. “Does anyone here know how to summon a dragon?”

Lauris rolled his eyes. “How in the world would any of us know that?”

As our group shared a laugh, Celette and her entourage approached us from the tables.

“Pardon me, Lady Vistriano,” Celette said.

“What is it?” I asked.

Celette donned a troubled expression. “Personally, I don’t believe the rumors

in the slightest, but everyone is calling you a witch or a demon. The other students don't seem to think well of you at all."

"Um, okay?"

*This is the first time I've heard anyone call me those names. Speaking of which, who's this "everyone" she's talking about?*

"Have you considered taking a break from school until the rumors die down?" Celette inquired. "As your classmates, we're worried about you. The idea of extremists trying to eliminate you terrifies me."

Julietta was the first person to react. "What, pray tell, did you just say?" she asked, radiating a royal aura. She assumed a resolute attitude, her small animal vibe completely vanishing. For the first time, she seemed like a true princess.

"Are you trying to drive Lady Alexandra away with groundless rumors?" Julietta pressed. "I can't imagine anything more ridiculous."

Lauris stood up next. "I completely agree."

Immediately after speaking, he grimaced. Celette had probably tried to bewitch him again. Regardless, his expression returned to normal after only a second.

"Powers of darkness?" Lauris asked, continuing to speak as if nothing had occurred. "I've never even heard of such a thing, and now you're calling her a witch and a demon? How dare you disdain our friend and the daughter of a duke."

Lauris spoke in a much lower voice than usual while glowering at Celette. Though a few members of her entourage paled, Celette didn't back down.

"But Your Highness," she said. "We witnessed Lady Alexandra pacify a magic horse before our very eyes. Magic horses don't often warm up to people, and they have wild temperaments. Even so, Lady Vistriano calmed one down in an instant."

Celette's entourage nodded in agreement.

Lauris burst out laughing. "Ha! You're accusing Lady Alexandra of having dark powers over that? You're quite the comedian."

His sudden laughter caused Celette and her entourage to stiffen in surprise.

Rosario stood up and laughed as well. “Haha! How dare you spread rumors about Lady Alexandra for such an absurd reason!”

Even Oreste stood up and began laughing. “Hahaha! That’s right. The magic horses were acting friendly with Prince Embert as well, not just Lady Alexandra. Did you fail to notice that?”

After a round of mocking laughter, Lauris heaved a deep sigh and began speaking. “I can’t blame any of you for being ignorant. However, high-ranking nobles are all aware of this. Those two magic horses belong to the castle. My brother has taken care of the white horse since he was a child, and it loves him more than anyone else. A long time ago, the crimson horse went on a rampage, which Lady Alexandra brought to a complete stop. Ever since then, the crimson horse has trusted her with all its heart.”

“The highborn nobles who know Lady Alexandra will never believe your lies,” Rosario added with a sneer. “No matter how much drama you try to stir up in your ignorance. That said, it might be interesting if Lady Alexandra *did* have dark powers.”

*Okay, I’ll have to give Rosario a stern talking-to later. I was on the verge of being moved to tears, and he just ruined it.*

Oreste chuckled. “Yeah, Ally would be unstoppable if she had dark powers.”

*Et tu, Oreste?*

“And I love Ally no matter what powers she might have,” Julietta declared.

*Ah, my darling princess!*

Lauris shook his head. “You idolize Ally too much, Julietta. She’s really not that great.”

*I’m gonna knock your teeth out later, Lauris.*

“Ally could beat anyone in a fight even without dark powers,” Cita said.

“That’s right,” Cia agreed.

*Yep, I can always count on the twins to have my back. On the other hand,*

*everyone else made some fairly questionable remarks. In fact, pretty much everything they said was kinda rude, huh? Still, they completely came to my defense. What a great group of friends I have.*

I moved from the back of the group to the front. “So, um, that’s the gist of things. Are you convinced that I don’t have dark powers, Lady Celette?” I then smiled at her and her entourage. “Or do you still think I should take a break from school?”

Celette and her entourage all shifted awkwardly.

“Y-Yes, I’m convinced,” Celette replied. “It’s a relief to know you don’t possess such powers.”

Despite being shaken, Celette still held my gaze as she spoke. Perhaps she was gutsier than I gave her credit for. In any case, she began leading her entourage away from us. At a certain point, however, she stopped and turned around, seeming to remember something.

“Oh, I forgot to ask you something, Lady Vistriano,” she said.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Are familiar with the term *akuyaku reijou*?”

Wait, had she just spoken Japanese? *Akuyaku reijo* meant villainous young lady in my native language. Still, I’d never heard those words used as a term.

“*Akuyaku reijo*?” I repeated while furrowing my brow. “No, I’m not familiar with that term. What does it mean?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Celette replied. “Sorry for bothering you.”

With that, she and her entourage hastily departed the cafeteria.

“What was that about?” I murmured.

Afterwards, the rumors persisted for a while longer, but people stopped approaching me with comments.



**THAT** night, I told Mary about today’s events as she brushed my hair. Though she remained silent the whole time, I could see how serious her expression was

in the mirror.

“May I ask you a question, Lady Alexandra?” she inquired.

For some reason, her tone caused me to tense slightly. “Of course,” I replied while straightening my back and turning to face her.

“You’ve been reincarnated, haven’t you?”

The sudden and unexpected question rendered me speechless.

“Huh?” I asked.

“Forgive me for prying,” Mary apologized. “But according to your family, you spoke to the Goddess after falling off a horse.”

*That’s right. After Mary left to prepare some hot water, I spoke to the Goddess for the first and only time as a child.*

“Truthfully, I’ve experienced multiple loops in this world,” Mary said. “To be precise, I’ve looped five times, but for some reason, the fifth timeline disappeared partway through.”

*That’s because I destroyed the fifth timeline in the middle of your life.*

As this thought crossed my mind, I noticed Mary staring at me.

“You were betrothed to Prince Lauris in all five timelines,” she continued. “Sadly, you had to witness his change of heart when starting school each time. In past timelines, you and Prince Lauris met at the castle tea party at the tender age of eight. He fell in love with you at first sight, which led to an engagement. You two were, beyond any doubt, a happy couple until starting school. However, as soon as Prince Lauris met Lady Celette, his affections shifted to her.”

Mary’s expression twisted in anguish. My chest ached, as I had never seen her in so much pain before.

“Apparently, only you and I were aware of the time loops,” Mary said. “At first, you were overcome with sorrow, but at some point, you began trying all possible means of changing the future. Yet nothing ever turned out differently, no matter what you did. Similarly, Prince Lauris always became enchanted by Lady Celette, no matter what you did. And so, you fell in love with the same

man five times, only to watch him change before your very eyes in each life. How painful it must have been.”

Tears spilled down Mary’s cheeks as she spoke.

“Worst of all, Lady Celette accused you of viciously harassing her in each timeline,” she continued. “Even though you never committed such a crime, you were always condemned in front of a large crowd. No matter how much you pleaded your innocence, no one ever listened to you. In the end, a group of four men led by Prince Lauris forced you into a carriage and exiled you.”

Without any warning, I began crying as well. I’d never experienced these events myself. Nevertheless, the scenes appeared in my mind’s eye, as if I’d personally witnessed them.

“I tried to save you as well,” Mary said. “Yet by some twist of fate, I never could. My body refused to listen to me even when I reached the scene of the crime. I became as immobile as a statue in each loop. Thus, I could only watch as you drove away in that carriage. For some strange reason, I always forgot about you and went about my daily life as usual. Then, in the blink of an eye, I would travel back in time to your childhood and be your handmaid again.”

Mary gazed at me with her icy blue eyes, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“The same thing happened in the fifth timeline,” she continued. “Even though I arrived at the venue, I couldn’t move as you bore those false accusations. Partway through, however, your actions changed, and the timeline shattered. When I woke in the next timeline, I was convinced that something would change this time around. That said, things have changed more than I ever anticipated. It’s quite startling, to be honest.”

As Mary smiled through her tears, I met her gaze this time.

“I swapped places with the real Alexandra right before the fifth timeline shattered,” I explained. “You could tell what was going on even back then?”

“Yes.”

Guilt washed over me. I hadn’t intended to deceive anyone, but the end result remained the same. I’d kept the full truth to myself.

“I instantly knew that you’d become someone else,” Mary said. “I don’t know why, but I was also certain that the real Lady Alexandra had been saved.”

Mary had cherished Alexandra with all her heart. As newfound respect for Mary welled within my chest, a sense of remorse overcame me as well.

“I’m sorry for keeping quiet,” I apologized. “The real Alexandra entered the cycle of reincarnation with the Goddess’s help. She’s already been reborn in another world.”

Though Mary had stopped crying for a short while, her tears began flowing again. “How wonderful. I was so worried about her. Thank you, Lady Alexandra.”

“No, thank you,” I replied while hanging my head. “And I’m sorry. I must be quite different from the real Alexandra.”

Mary cupped my cheeks in her hands and shook her head. “What are you saying? Yes, I loved the original Alexandra, but I love you just as much.”

This time, Mary’s words caused *me* to burst into tears.



**WHEN** we finished crying our eyes out, Mary compared the past timelines to the current one.

“The outline has changed quite a bit,” I said. “Particularly where it concerns me.”

“Indeed,” Mary replied. “The biggest difference is that you’re not engaged to Prince Lauris. I couldn’t avoid this development in the past, no matter what I tried.”

“I see. Additionally, Celette hasn’t bewitched any of my friends thanks to the amulets.”

“That’s right. Similar to the past timelines, Felicia is engaged to Rosario, and Felicita is engaged to Oreste. However, their relationships appear to be stable.”

*Wait a second.*

“Did those exact same couples always form in the past?” I asked.



“Yes, but they broke up after starting school in each timeline. Your friendship with Felicia and Felicita always came to an end as well. Even so, the three of you were always the best of friends since childhood. Until the twins were bewitched, at least.”

*Just as I suspected, the same couples always formed in past timelines.*

“So, the twins abandoned the original Alexandra as well?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, they did. Alexandra always wound up completely isolated within the academy.”

*In other words, Celette has never bewitched me because she’s trying to isolate me. Yeah, that makes sense.*

“What an underhanded thing to do,” I spat.

My blood boiled. After arriving in this world, I’d gone easy on Celette because she was a woman. I should have given her the thrashing of a lifetime. She was as tenacious and as cunning as a fox, after all.

“But thanks to your advice, I didn’t wind up isolated this time,” I noted.

“I appreciate your saying that,” Mary replied.

The two of us smiled at each other. Celette failing to bewitch my friends had significantly impacted this timeline. Rather than being isolated, I had a group of reliable companions by my side. Of course, that included Mary.

“I cherish you just as much as the original Alexandra,” Mary said. “I don’t want misfortune to befall you ever again, no matter what happens.”

Warmth spread throughout my chest. Perhaps fragments of Alexandra’s feelings remained deep within my heart.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “This time, I’ll find true happiness along with everyone else.”

*There’s no reason to be anxious. I won’t lose to anyone or anything.*

I spoke these words inwardly, hoping to convince Mary and my original self.

# Chapter Seven: The Father of the Demon Princess is the Demon King

“A tea party?” I asked.

A little while after the social season had started, I received an invitation to a tea party from a certain duchy. Normally, these invitations would be addressed to my mother or me *and* my mother. On this specific occasion, however, it had been addressed only to me.

Mother nodded. “Apparently, these young ladies want to deepen the bonds between the daughters of dukes.”

I tried to recall how many of us existed in our kingdom. While there were six duchies, only three of them—including ours—had young daughters.

“Mom,” I said. “That means it’ll just be me and Prince Embert’s two fiancée candidates.”

Currently, the only remaining candidates were the two other daughters of dukes. The other young ladies had given up recently, not wanting to pass marriageable age.

After thinking for a moment, Mother replied, “I suppose you’re right.”

Only Mary, Mother, Janus, and my friends knew about my relationship with Embert. In other words, the other candidates probably weren’t scheming to break us up. That said, going to this tea party still sounded like an enormous hassle.

Mother smiled mischievously. “Good luck acting as a buffer once the claws come out.”

*Yep, I’m the referee. What else did I expect?*



I squirmed in my seat.

“I visited the castle a few days ago to see Prince Embert,” the first noblewoman said with a giggle. “He came out to meet me at the gate like the perfect gentleman.”

“Is that so?” the second noblewoman asked. “Well, he came all the way out to our manor recently. When I told him about the splendid horse we had just procured, he expressed interest in seeing it. Not long afterwards, he made time to visit our stables, despite his busy schedule.”

I focused on drinking my tea as the two noblewomen tried to one-up each other. The three of us were seated in the reception room of House Anegio. As for me, I’d been invited to sit between Ladies Anegio and Palagani.

Lady Anegio turned in my direction. “Speaking of which, you’re currently attending Micheli Academy, correct?”

She had wavy brunette hair and a beauty mark on the corner of her mouth.

Lady Palagani turned in my direction as well. “Oh, that’s right. Do you know what Prince Embert is like as a teacher?”

She had straight, honey-colored hair and striking, somewhat feline eyes.

“Yes,” I replied. “He’s actually serving as the assistant teacher in my and Lauris’s class.”

The two noblewomen beamed with delight. This must have been their reason for inviting me.

*Ugh, I just want to go home.*

“So?” Lady Anegio asked. “What is Prince Embert like at school?”

“Let’s see,” I replied. “He acts like a proper teacher, and he’s popular with the students. Many of the girls adore him.”

Lady Anegio giggled. “Of course they do. Prince Embert is indescribably beautiful, after all.”

“I concur,” Lady Palagani chimed in. “No matter how many times I see Prince Embert, his beauty always mesmerizes me.”

They were strangely agreeable on this single point.

“Is there anything else you can tell us?” Lady Anegio asked.

I frowned. “Let me think about that.”

Though I considered the question for a while, everything I could recall involved me in some way. Even so, I had a sense these girls would rip me to shreds if I didn’t share some anecdote.

“Oh, here’s something,” I finally said. “My friends and I were playing tag the other day.”

“Tag?” Lady Anegio asked.

*That’s right. The concept of tag doesn’t exist in this world.*

“It’s a game I thought up,” I explained. “One person is chosen as being ‘it,’ and they have to chase everyone else. The ‘it’ person wins when they catch everyone. Then, the person who was caught first becomes ‘it’ for the next round.”



**WE’D** suddenly been given a self-study period. Thus, we decided to play in the rear garden since none of us wanted to stay in the classroom.

“All right, let’s choose the first person to be ‘it,’” I said. “If a girl is ‘it,’ we’ll narrow the playing field. If a boy is ‘it,’ he has to catch the girls twice. Does that sound fair?”

I added handicaps to the game. Me and Cita aside, Julietta and Cia would be at a disadvantage otherwise. If Oreste was ‘it,’ the girls would be out in the blink of an eye.

“That sounds fair,” Lauris agreed, surprisingly enthusiastic. “I’ll be ‘it’ first.”

“Sounds good,” I responded. “Count to ten slowly and then start chasing us.”

When Lauris began his count, everyone dashed off in different directions. For the time being, I decided to hide behind a tree to assess the situation.

“Nine... Ten,” Lauris finished counting.

He then looked around the area slowly. At that moment, the bushes opposite me rustled.

“There you are!” Lauris shouted, racing towards the bushes.

“Oh crap!” Oreste exclaimed, shooting out of the thicket.

The two of them proceeded to race around at incredible speeds.

“Yeah, I want no part of that,” I muttered.

Not even I would be able to escape Lauris. The two boys continued chasing and dodging as if their lives depended on it. After running for about two minutes, Oreste escaped somehow, putting an end to the pursuit.

“I should probably change locations,” I muttered to myself again.

After emerging from the shadow of the tree, I began moving on tiptoes. However, Lauris spotted me much sooner than expected.

“Found you!” he shouted while charging in my direction.

Overcome with fearful excitement, I couldn’t help but scream, “Oh no!”

As I turned my back on Lauris and dashed away, a magic circle appeared on the ground in front of me.

“Ally!” Embert cried as he emerged from the magic circle.

“What the?” I asked, coming to a sudden halt.

Embert embraced me and examined our surroundings warily. “Are you okay?!” He then locked eyes with Lauris, who was still running towards us. “Lauris,” he growled. “If you’ve hurt Ally in any way...”

“Huh?” Lauris and I responded in unison.

“What are you talking about?” Lauris asked. “More importantly, why are you even here?”

“Because I heard Ally scream,” Embert replied. “Obviously.”

My jaw dropped. “Uh, seriously?”

“I modified my earring,” Embert admitted, swelling with pride as he continued to embrace me. “It allows me to teleport to your side instantly.”

*He makes it sound completely normal, but should I be scared?*

Lauris sighed in exasperation. “How overprotective can you get? We’re

playing tag right now, so please don't get in the way."

"Tag?" Embert repeated. "What's that?"

I gave a simple explanation of the rules again.

"Oh, that sounds like fun," Embert said. "May I join?"

"Yeah, that's fine," Lauris replied. "Get a head start while you can. I'm 'it' right now."

After nodding with a huge grin on his face, Embert pulled my hand and started running.

"Everyone has to run in different directions," Lauris said with another sigh.

Reluctantly, Embert let go of my hand and raced off in a different direction.

Lauris nodded at me. "You too, Ally. I'm going to count to ten again, so get a head start while you can."

The game resumed, and Lauris caught Embert almost immediately. After everyone else had been caught, a new round started with Embert being 'it.'

"All right, Ally, I'm coming for you," Embert declared, still grinning from ear to ear. Wait, had he let himself be caught first just so he could chase me around?

*I have a bad feeling about what might happen if he catches me.*

So of course, I ran with all my might. Embert chased after me with athleticism I wouldn't expect from someone six years older. The way in which he sprinted like a madman—calling my name all the while—could have been ripped straight from a horror film.



**WHEN** we returned to the classroom, Cia sat face down at her desk. "How long is a game of tag supposed to last?"

"Yeah, I forgot how to bring it to an end," I admitted.

Meanwhile, Julietta wiped her sweat with a handkerchief. "I've run enough for an entire year."

"Even I'm a little beat," Oreste admitted.

Only Embert's expression remained composed. "That was fun," he said. "I'd love to do it again sometime."

He then left briskly, as he had to prepare for his next class.

"Lauris," I said, watching Embert's back as he departed. "Is your brother some kind of monster?"

Lauris nodded while leaning back in his chair. "You might be onto something. That was the first time I've ever been scared of him."



**"SO** anyway, that's what happened," I concluded.

That said, I'd omitted some parts about myself.

Lady Anegio giggled. "Pince Embert has superhuman stamina, doesn't he? I've never met anyone else like him."

"I'd like to play tag with him as well," Lady Palagani added.

*If Embert had chased them around, I doubt they would sound half as amused.*

"Yes, it was quite fun," was all I managed to say.

The ladies continued talking about how wonderful Embert was and what they found most attractive about him.

After finishing her tea, Lady Anegio sighed, her expression contemplative. "According to my father, Prince Embert will officially announce his fiancée when his term as a teacher ends."

My face grew warm. To be honest, I'd already heard this news from Embert himself. "If we manage to get through this year without incident, let's get married right away," he'd suggested.

"Oh my, is something wrong?" Lady Anegio asked. "Your face is bright red."

"No, it's just a little warm," I replied, attempting to gloss over the issue. "I'm fine."

Lady Palagani smiled triumphantly. "I heard the news as well. Prince Embert is finally ready to announce his decision, it would seem."

“Based on your tone, you’re assuming he’ll choose you,” Lady Anegio responded, acid dripping from her words. “Is that correct?”

Lady Palagani smiled even wider, seeming not the least bit fazed. “I believe it’s a safe assumption. I have faith in Prince Embert that he’ll choose me.”

“My condolences then,” Lady Anegio responded with an equally confident smirk. “Those suffering from delusions must be treated with compassion.”

*Sounds like round two has started.*

I had no choice but to roll my eyes and weather this storm.



**THE** grueling tea party finally came to an end. By the time I climbed into my carriage, I was completely exhausted.

“I’ve never been this mentally drained before,” I grumbled.

After plopping down on the cushions, I closed my eyes for a bit.



### ☆☆ Embert’s Point of View ☆☆

I was visiting Vistriano Manor to borrow a book from Janus.

“My apologies, Your Highness,” Duchess Vistriano said. “Ally isn’t home right now. She and Lady Palagani were invited to Anegio Manor. The three young ladies are having a tea party there right now.”

My eyes widened slightly. “Do you think Ally will be okay?”

What purpose did this event serve? I couldn’t help but worry, even if the other ladies knew nothing of my and Ally’s relationship. They were clinging desperately to their fiancée candidacy, after all.

Duchess Vistriano’s pleasant laughter rang out like a bell. “Thank you for your concern, but my daughter can handle herself just fine.”

*Her smile is just like Ally’s.*

As I considered this absentmindedly, Janus arrived.

“Sorry for the wait,” he said while handing me a book. “This is the one you



wanted, right?”

“Yes, that’s the one,” I confirmed. “Thank you. I look forward to reading it.”

“No problem. So, what do you want to do? Ally will probably be home soon.”

“I’ll go home after seeing her, of course.”

The butler arrived during this conversation. “Lady Alexandra has returned, but she’s sleeping soundly,” he said. “What would you like me to do?”

“She must be tired,” the duchess replied. “Would you mind carrying Ally to her room?”

“Excuse me,” I interjected, “but would you mind if I carried her instead?”

“Oh, you don’t mind? Then by all means.”

After receiving the duchess’s permission, I turned to Janus. “Well then, let’s go fetch Ally. Do you mind leading me to her room?”

“Not at all,” Janus agreed.

Upon arriving at the carriage, we found Ally sleeping soundly in a nest of cushions. As her overwhelming cuteness rendered me speechless, Janus smirked at me.

“Isn’t my sister adorable?” he asked.

“Beyond words,” I answered honestly.

Janus threw back his head and laughed. “Good heavens. What was going on with you until now, Your Highness? Did Ally bewitch you and only you, perhaps?”

“If so, I wouldn’t object to it. I want her to keep bewitching me for the rest of our lives.”

I picked up Ally gently to ensure she didn’t rock too much. She must have been quite tired, as she showed no signs of waking. As I carried her to her room, an indescribable love for her swelled in my chest.





Mary was already waiting for us in Ally's room.

"Thank you," Mary said, her expression as placid as ever. "Please lay her down on the bed."

After gently lowering Ally onto the bed, I caressed her cheek with my thumb. Everything in me resisted leaving her side.

"Keep your hands to yourself," Janus said half-jokingly.

For just a moment, I could feel the hostility radiating from Mary.

"Of course," I replied.

Even so, I wanted to continue looking at her sleeping face.

"Would you two please leave the room?" Mary asked in a sharp tone. "I'm going to change Ally's clothes."

Smiling wryly, I left the room with painful reluctance. Then, I heaved a deep sigh as I closed the door behind me.

Janus peered at my face. "What's wrong?"

"I love Ally so much that it hurts," I mumbled in response.

I felt as though he'd already seen through me, after all.

"It hurts?" Janus asked.

"Yes. I want to see Ally every day and spend every possible moment with her. Seeing her laugh with Lauris and her other friends at school warms my heart. Yet at the same time, I feel envious. What kind of man is jealous of his younger brother? My love for Ally continues to grow with each passing day. I fear it will soon burst out of me and rupture the heavens."

Janus gaped at me for a moment. He then began to chuckle, which soon turned into uproarious laughter.

"Are you positively certain Ally didn't bewitch you?" he asked.

Once his laughter had died down, he regarded me with kind eyes. It was reminiscent of how one might look at a younger brother.

"In any case, I'm glad to know you're a flesh-and-blood man," Janus

continued. “Your love for Ally is wonderfully human.”

Janus knew how I’d gone through life with an affected smile. As a prince, I could only trust a select few. Furthermore, I couldn’t express my true feelings without due consideration. This was the proper way for a prince to act. After all this time, I still held to that conviction. Nevertheless, something deep within my heart had changed when compared to the past.

“I agree,” I said. “I like who I am now.”

Janus laughed. “Wonderful. Well then, what would you like to do? Shall we have tea again until Ally wakes?”

“That sounds ideal.”

Waiting for Ally to wake up sounded like a pleasant way to spend my time.



### ☆☆ Alexandra’s Point of View ☆☆

**WHEN** I went to school the next day, Cia was waiting for me.

“How did the tea party at Anegio Manor go?” she asked.

Based on her expression, she was waiting for me to regale her with an amusing anecdote.

“It was quite an ordeal,” I responded with a bemused smile. “I had to play referee while two young ladies tried to one-up each other.”

“Well, what else did you expect?”

The usual suspects gathered around us as we chatted in the classroom.

“They spent the whole time arguing about who has the more intimate relationship with Embert,” I said. “Eventually, they started grilling me about how he acts at school. I’m going to have nightmares about their interrogation.”

“Neither of them has anything to brag about anyway,” Lauris said. He never had anything but sharp words for the fiancée candidates.

“That must have been exhausting,” Julietta chimed in. Her few words of sympathy were enough to melt my heart.

“Yeah, it was exhausting,” I replied. “But thankfully, it ended with a whimper rather than a bang. The real trouble came afterwards.”

Sighing, I began to recount what had occurred after returning to my own manor.



“**CROWN** Prince Embert carried you from the carriage to your bed,” Mary explained.

“Wait, seriously?” I asked. “Uh, does that mean he got a front-row seat to my sleeping face?”

“Yes. In fact, he had the best seat in the house.”

“I didn’t snore or anything, right?”

Mary fell silent. *Hold on, did I actually snore?* As I fell into a small panic, Mary laughed.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “You neither snored nor drooled.”

“Oh, wow, thank the Goddess.”

“Apparently, His Highness is downstairs waiting for you to wake.”

“Really?” I asked. “I need to get ready straight away then.”

“Indeed. Let’s pretty you up nice and quick.”

When I finished getting ready and went downstairs, I found Embert waiting for me in the reception room. “I applaud you for surviving the tea party,” he said while grinning from ear to ear. He then stood up and escorted me to the seat next to his. “Those two are quite the characters, aren’t they?”

I evaded the question with a smile.

“I’ve told them countless times that I won’t choose them,” Embert continued. “Unfortunately, they refuse to listen. They both insist that, based on their social standing, they’re the most suited to be my wife.”

“That makes sense,” I responded, able to imagine these exchanges all too clearly. “Neither of them is ready to give up on you just yet.”

“Huh?”

Embert’s puzzled expression made my heart skip a beat. Could he stop being so dashing for just one minute?

“In my opinion, both of them genuinely love you,” I clarified. “Neither of them could stop talking about you the whole time. At the very least, I don’t think they’re simply chasing royal status.”

I recounted the day’s events to him.

“Hmm,” Embert said. “From what I gather, they’re more interested in my appearance than my character.”

“Well, do you have anything going for you other than good looks?” Janus responded with a laugh.

Embert brushed aside my brother’s scathing remark. “Well, I haven’t spent much time with either of them. Neither lady means anything to me, after all. I would much rather spend all my free time with you, Ally.”

My heart nearly leapt out of my chest at his unexpected words. Was this the end for me?

“I want us to get engaged as soon as possible,” Embert continued. “Even better, why don’t we skip the engagement and get married right away?”

Instinctively, I hid my face in my hands, as my cheeks were about to explode from the heat.

“You’re cute when you blush,” Embert teased me.

*Please stop. Are you trying to kill me?*

“You truly are loved, Ally,” Mother said with a carefree laugh. She then adopted a mischievous expression. “However, you still have one difficult hurdle to clear, Your Highness.”

Embert’s expression turned serious. “What’s that, my lady?”

Mother laughed again. “It will be your first and greatest hurdle. I can’t say anything more. In any case, we’re about to have dinner. Would you like to join us?”

“Oh?” Embert asked, his lips quirking into a grin. “Are you sure that’s okay?”

Though the prince seemed to be enjoying himself, I was completely lost. What was the connection between dinner and this hurdle?

“Of course,” Mother replied with a smile.

Embert’s grin widened even further. “Thank you very much. I’ll gladly accept the invitation then.”

I cocked my head at their peculiar exchange. Meanwhile, Janus laughed and said, “I’m looking forward to this.”

At that moment, Father walked through the front door. “I’m home,” he announced.

“Welcome back,” I greeted him.

Father embraced me and kissed me on the cheek. “It’s good to see you, my sweet Ally.”

He then embraced Mother and kissed her on the lips.

As usual, Father had returned home in high spirits. However, he immediately raised his hackles upon seeing Embert.

“What is the crown prince doing here?” he asked.



**EVERYONE** who’d been quietly listening to my story let out a sigh.

“And so, a showdown between the demon lord and the hero begins,” Cia said.

The whole group laughed.

Julietta tilted her head. “Who’s the hero in this case?”

“Ally’s father would definitely be the demon lord based on appearances,” Lauris replied.

“Is your father scary, Ally?” Julietta asked.

“Well, he’s formidable at work, but that’s not what Lauris meant,” I responded. “He has a chilling beauty that verges on frightening. According to my mother, women would swoon at the mere sight of my father during his



youth.”

Julietta threw her arms around me. “Oh, I see. That must be why you’re so gorgeous.”

*Could I please adopt this adorable kitten?*

“So, what happened next?” Rosario urged me to continue.



**EMBERT** smiled. “Pardon my intrusion, Duke Vistriano.”

“Why are you here at this hour?” Father asked, his expression impassive.

Sparks flew between the two men as they stared each other down.

“I came to borrow a book from Janus, and Her Grace invited me to stay for dinner,” Embert explained.

Father smiled back at him just as graciously. “I see. In that case, you’ll be leaving immediately after dinner, yes?”

“Of course,” Embert said, his smile widening even further. “If you give your blessing to my and Ally’s engagement.”

Embert dove into the main topic with guns blazing. I could see the vein in Father’s temple twitch for just a moment.

“I wondered what sort of nonsense you might spout,” Father replied with a snort. “Of course I won’t give you my blessing. Ally is going to live with us in Vistriano Manor forever, after all.”

I felt sick to my stomach. Regardless, the two men ignored me and continued their verbal sparring.

“That might be a problem,” Embert said. “Ally and I have already professed our feelings for each other. Do you intend to pull apart two people who love each other?”

“It’s just puppy love,” Father responded with a laugh. “Ally will come to her senses soon enough and move on.”

Embert laughed as well. “At the very least, I won’t move on. I’ve been searching for Ally my entire life, and I finally found her.

Despite the situation, Embert's words still caused my face to heat up.

Father sneered. "I'll grant that you have a discerning eye but nothing else."

Embert looked momentarily taken aback, but then he burst out laughing. "Ha! I appreciate the compliment. How splendid it would be if you also granted your blessing."

"Surely, you jest," Father answered with a chuckle.

Once again, sparks flew between the two men as they glowered at each other.



"**IN** the end, neither of them could reach an agreement," I concluded. "They'll probably continue the argument some other time."

Cia's eyes glittered. "What an exciting dinner that must have been."

Lauris smirked. "Well, you won't be able to get engaged for a while even with your father's blessing. I'll keep watching how this plays out for my own amusement."

*One day, I'm going to wipe that smug grin off his face.*

Oreste nodded. "Me too. I can't wait to see what happens next."

"And I'm here to support you no matter what happens," Julietta said with a sincere expression.

Lauris smiled at her. "Let's support Ally together then."

Was it just my imagination, or did Julietta blush slightly?



**DURING** winter break, our group visited the frozen lake behind the castle. Quite a few people had gathered there, as skating on the thick ice was a popular activity among nobles.

"The mage's order strengthens the ice," Lauris said. "It won't break unless someone uses a special kind of magic. So, what happens if someone *does* try to break it? Well, they'll fall into a trap that causes only the ice around their feet to crack."

Something clicked in my mind.

“Does that mean someone broke the ice with malicious intent in the past?” I asked.

“That’s right,” Lauris replied. “Back in the day, my mother was the king’s leading fiancée candidate. Someone from a rival candidate’s house cracked the ice in an attempt to murder her. Apparently, my father saved my mother just as she was about to fall into the freezing water.”

“How romantic. So, that’s how their love story began?”

Lauris grimaced. “Let me stop you right there. I don’t even want to think about my parents like that.”

We enjoyed skating while having this conversation. It was more exciting than I’d anticipated. Thanks to the magic, the ice remained smooth no matter how much we skated. Thus, we could glide across the lake stress-free for as long as we wanted.

“Embert said he would come join us soon,” Lauris noted.

“Oh, I wonder if Janus will be with him,” I replied.

I was pulling Julietta by the hand since it was her first time ice skating.

“I’ll pull her now,” Lauris said, taking her hand from me.

I smiled at Julietta, who looked uneasy. “Don’t worry. Lauris is an expert.”

My legs were starting to ache somewhat from skating for so long. As I glided to the side of the lake for a short rest, a skulk of foxes approached me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Are you hungry?”

Shaking their heads, the foxes surrounded me and attempted to nudge me away.

“Wh-What’s going on?” I pressed. “Are you saying I shouldn’t be here?”

The foxes lifted their forepaws to express their agreement. At that moment, the ice around me began to crack. My eyes widened, and I couldn’t suppress a scream. Then, a familiar magic circle appeared on the icy lake.

“Ally!” Embert shouted as he appeared before my eyes.

He seemed to grasp the situation in an instant. After scooping me into his arms, he leapt to the shore. That said, the ice in our previous location didn't crack any further. Instead, the cries of a boy on the other side of the lake reached my ears.

"Someone fell into the water!" Oreste shouted. As the first person to notice, he tried approaching the floundering boy. However, Janus grabbed Oreste by the shoulder to stop him.

"Don't get any closer," Janus warned. "He might pull you in accidentally if you try helping him out."

Janus used wind magic to raise the boy into the air. After moving him above the shore, my brother dispelled the wind. Of course, the boy fell from the air, his back striking the ground. Both Embert and Janus approached the fallen boy with terrifying smiles on their faces.

"You're the son of a count, aren't you?" Janus asked. "Did you not know about the trap placed on the lake?"

The boy was shaking like a leaf. Was it due to the cold or the imposing presence of Embert and Janus?

"Look over there!" Cita cried. "It's Lady Celette and her friends!"

I looked in the direction Cita was glaring. A group of young ladies was fleeing the scene of the crime.

Lauris watched the group escape as well. "Yeah, that's definitely them."

Meanwhile, Embert clapped his hands. "In any case, we'll question this young man thoroughly at the castle. Try not to freeze to death until then, would you?"

As the boy continued shivering, Embert leveled a terrifying smile at him again. Just seeing it sent a shiver down our spines as well.



### ☆☆ Embert's Point of View ☆☆

"SO, you used magic in an attempt to plunge Ally into the water," I said. "Just as I expected."

The young man who Janus and I were interrogating was the son of Count Galiel. Fortunately, he answered our questions with complete honesty.

“But why did you do it in the first place?” I asked.

Apparently, he’d come to skate with Lady Celette and her friends. Upon seeing Ally, he’d felt compelled to plunge her into the water. For some reason, he hadn’t doubted the correctness of this action at all. As a result, he’d acted on his compulsion.

“Bewitchment isn’t something to be trifled with,” I said. “It can even make someone believe an evil act is good.”

Unfortunately, we still had no proof that Lady Celette could use bewitchment. In the end, we could only punish the perpetrator who’d attempted to harm Ally. In this case, that person was Count Galiel’s son.

The vein in Janus’s temple throbbed. “So, Lady Celette has finally launched a direct assault on Ally.”

I could empathize with his fury. Seeing the lake split around Ally’s feet had terrified me, despite knowing it was magically reinforced. The loud cracking of ice still lingered in my ears.

“It’s time we take drastic measures against Lady Celette as well,” I declared.



### ☆☆Alexandra’s Point of View☆☆

**WINTER** break had ended, and school had started again.

“Listen up, everyone,” Lauris said. “Let’s be extremely cautious of Lady Celette and her entourage. I know you’re strong, Ally, but you’re still reluctant to hit another girl, right? Let’s keep a healthy distance from them to make sure that need never arises.”

Our group had gathered in Lauris’s dorm room. We were all seated on the long sofa in his living room. Everyone was on high alert after the attempt on my life.

Rosario—who was sitting next to me—grabbed my shoulder. “A situation might arise in which even you are powerless. You should avoid Lady Celette for

your own safety.”

I could only nod in response to his grave expression.

Julietta—who was sitting across from me—clenched both hands into fists to hype herself up. “I won’t leave your side, Ally,” she said, her nostrils flared.

She was cute enough to alleviate all my tension.

Oreste—who was sitting in a sofa chair—struck the same pose. “I’ll stay as close as possible too.”

*Yeah, it’s not nearly as cute when he does it.*

“Thank you, everyone,” I said. “Your support means the world to me. Still, I don’t want anyone putting themselves in danger for my sake. Also, I have no problem beating up anyone who’s evil.” Here, my face split into a wide grin. “It doesn’t matter if she’s a delicate girl.”

Lauris nudged the back of my head. “Don’t say that with a smile on your face, dork.”

“But it’s the truth. If any of you gets hurt while protecting me, I’ll blow the perpetrator to kingdom come.”

Cia’s eyes sparkled deviously. “Heh, I like the sound of that.”

This coaxed a laugh from everyone else.



**WHEN** we arrived in class the next day, Celette’s entourage was radiating a bizarre aura. During winter break, this group of barons and viscounts had completely fallen under her bewitchment. Their eyes were as lifeless as a zombie’s. None of our other classmates approached Celette’s entourage, having noticed their oddness as well. As usual, however, Celette continued to smile at the center of her group.

Shuddering, Oreste rubbed his arms fervently. “This is creepy.”

Indeed, a chill had permeated the entire classroom.

Without our noticing, Embert had joined us. “Everyone’s unease has intensified because of that group,” he said. “Their negative emotions are now

filling the classroom.”

Suddenly, Embert took my hand and kissed my fingertips, a charming smile playing on his lips.

“Huh?!” I yelped, heat surging through my face like a volcanic eruption. “Wh-What are you doing?!”

Embert’s smile widened, and he brought his face closer to mine. “I simply had an irresistible urge to touch you.”

Other girls in the classroom squealed with delight.

“N-N-Not here,” I stammered.

How could Embert act so intimate in front of so many people? I feared I might die of embarrassment. As I fell into a panic, I unconsciously released a wave of magic.

Cia reacted almost at once. “Huh? The atmosphere feels lighter all of a sudden.”

Julietta stopped rubbing her arms. “You’re right. It’s not cold anymore.”

“Well done,” Embert said with a chuckle.

He then kissed my cheek, as he usually did. The squeals of delight were even shriller than before.

“Are you trying to kill me?!” I exclaimed. “Can’t you see everyone watching?!”

Embert’s face fell in response to my complaints. “Are you not going to kiss me back?”

“Huh?”

“Right here,” Embert replied while pointing to his cheek. “Like you always do.”

*Is this guy for real?!*

A million questions raced through my mind. Upon seeing me freeze up, Embert turned to leave. “I suppose you’re not,” he said in a despondent voice.

“Okay, I’ll do it!” I cried out in desperation. “Just stop making those sad puppy

dog eyes at me!”

Embert’s face brightened, and he stooped down in front of me again. As I kissed his cheek with a light smack, the squeals of delight rang out for a third time. How I longed to cover my ears.

For his part, Embert smiled delightedly. “Thank you,” he said with a chuckle before returning to the teaching dais.

“How are you able to do that in front of everyone?” Lauris asked, having watched everything from beside me. “It was cute and playful when you were a child, but you’re about to be an adult. Hats off to your lack of shame.”

My eyes filled with tears as he delivered this finishing blow. “Tell that to your brother, not me!” I exclaimed. “I took critical damage from that embarrassment. I barely have any HP left!”

Lauris regarded me piteously, unable to understand my babbling. “Have you lost your mind? What the heck is *HP*?”

Cia giggled. “What’s the problem? After all, the atmosphere here lightened thanks to Ally’s suffering.”

*Could you wipe that smirk off your face before coming to my defense, please?*

Julietta placed a hand over her chest. “E-Even my heart skipped a beat.”

“Mine too,” Cita agreed. “I thought my heart might stop when I saw Prince Embert’s parting smile.”

“What do you mean?” Oreste asked in a panicked tone, grabbing Cita’s hands. “Have you fallen for Prince Embert?”

“Hardly,” Cita responded with a smile. “I just thought the way Prince Embert smiled at Ally was incredibly dashing. I fell for you a long time ago, Oreste. No one else can have my heart.”

“Cita...” Oreste trailed off.

Thus, Cita and Oreste lovingly stared into each other’s eyes.

“I might not be in any position to say this, but could you two lovebirds hold off for a while?” Embert asked. “I’ll wrap up homeroom as fast as possible.”



The class burst out laughing at his quip.



**AFTER** homeroom, the other girls interrogated me about my relationship with Embert. Explaining myself was a herculean task. “Prince Embert and I have greeted each other with a kiss on the cheek since I was a child,” I said. “It’s basically a ritual at this point.” Unfortunately, no one wanted to believe this. By the time I managed to convince everyone, my weary mind was on the brink of shutting down.

“Gah, I’m exhausted,” I complained.

Our group had gathered in the cafeteria for lunch. As I took a bite of pancake slathered in maple syrup, Lauris pulled my ear.

“Whadda?!” I slurred through a mouthful of food.

Lauris pointed in a specific direction.

“Oh?” I asked.

I spotted the table where Celette and her entourage were sitting. I recognized a familiar person in their midst.

“I haven’t seen him in a while,” I said.

Severin Fregolini—the third-year student—was sitting with them.

“Oh no,” Cia said. “Could he have been enchanted?”

*No. So long as he’s wearing the ring, Celette shouldn’t have been able to bewitch him.*

Their group had already finished eating. After leaving their seats, they began walking in our direction, with Severin escorting Celette. As the group passed us, Severin and I made eye contact.

“Well, if it isn’t Ally,” he greeted me.

“Severin,” I responded. “It’s good to see you.”

I felt somewhat shaken, as I hadn’t expected him to speak to me.

“I didn’t know you and Lady Celette were acquaintances,” I said.

Celette tightened the arm she had locked around Severin's. She then leaned into him, staring down at me with a triumphant smile. I was starting to find her constant hostility somewhat comical.

"Lady Celette and I became friends recently," Severin replied. "I'm interested in her holy magic."

"Oh, is that right?" I asked.

"Indeed. Well then, we're heading off. I'll see you later, Ally."

Celette's entourage then left at Severin's urging.

*What's going on here?*

Based on a quick look, the ring still remained tight around his finger. Perhaps he was genuinely interested in Celette's holy magic. After all, he'd shown interest in my amulets as well.

Over the next few days, I began spotting Severin and Celette together on a frequent basis. Rumors about them dating started circulating among the students. Certainly, they were a good-looking couple. At a glance, Celette possessed an ephemeral beauty. Likewise, Severin was androgynously handsome.

*If this helps Celette calm down, I'm all for it.*

I wasn't in the wrong for having this hope, right?



**CLOSE** to a month had passed since Severin began spending time with Celette's entourage. As usual, she continued to periodically cast magic on my friends. That said, she didn't do anything else in particular. As such, the days passed in peace.

Today, we were having magic class in the courtyard, as we would be casting actual spells.

"For today's class, I want you to make something using two or more types of elements," Embert said. "It can be something that disappears almost instantly or something that remains tangible. Don't worry, those of you who can only use one element. Do your best to make something like the others."

Everyone began racking their brains for ideas.

“Professor,” a young lady said. “What should we do if we can only use wind magic?”

“Good question,” Embert responded with a smile. “Try creating some sort of visual by making leaves or flowers dance in the wind. That sounds quite wonderful.”

The girl’s face turned bright red when she received Embert’s attention.

After mulling over the assignment for a little while, the class began to unveil their creations one at a time.

First up was Lauris. He created a dragon out of flames and made it soar across the courtyard using wind. It was impressively realistic.

Next up was Oreste. First, he made water spears fall like rain. Then, he shot earth spears from the ground like fireworks. The two types of spears clashed together and dissipated.

Third was Rosario. He built an earthen, three-story tower in the blink of an eye. He then used wind to slice it into pieces.

“You’re all amazing,” one of our classmates said, completely awestruck.

Rosario laughed. “We’ve been training with Ally since we were children. It’s all thanks to her pushing us so hard.”

Oreste laughed as well. “You’re right about that.”

Lauris nodded. “I started practicing magic in secret because I couldn’t stand losing to Ally back then.”

From my perspective, he still hated losing even after all these years.

Cita created a rabbit from ice and an adorable crate from earth. Afterwards, Cia created a large tree from earth and decorated it with ice flowers in full bloom. This earned a sigh of appreciation from the girls in our class. Finally, Julietta created water butterflies that danced high in the sky. Similarly, this elicited cheers from the class.

I was captivated by my friends’ magic. All their creations were so wonderful,

after all.

*I can't let them show me up.*

With this in mind, I decided to create two horses. The first was bright red and made of flames. Then, I crafted the second, pure white horse from ice and snow. Embert's emerald-green eyes sparkled as he observed the creatures. After circling him twice, the horses unfurled wings of lightning and raced towards the heavens.

The magic professor began clapping so vigorously that I worried about his hands. "What a marvelous display."

Embert—who was standing next to the professor—applauded with the same vigor. "Indeed. I'm trembling with awe."

The rest of the class joined in the applause, simultaneously offering words of admiration. Afterwards, the remaining students unveiled their creations while relying on our performances for inspiration.

Celette was the last person to go.

"I can't create anything in particular, as I can only use holy magic," she said. "Though my magic is invisible to the eye, I would like everyone to feel it on their skin."

Despite these words, I had no trouble seeing her unleash an enormous wave of magic. Embert's eyes widened, and he touched his earring. He must have seen the magic as well.

"What's going on, everyone?!" I cried.

Beside me, I also spotted smoke rising from Julietta's chest.

"Ouch, that's hot!" she exclaimed in a near scream.

Her amulet had taken the brunt of the magic due to its large size. The pendant was searing her skin like a branding iron. At this rate, it would scar her chest permanently.

"No!" I shouted, unleashing a wave of magic that far surpassed Celette's. "Not on my watch!"

My magic continued growing in power. I had made a mistake in controlling it due to panic. At that moment, however, a cast of nearby falcons began circling everyone's heads. Before long, my magic began to descend thanks to the air currents created by the birds. They seemed to be diffusing it equally among the students.

In any case, my mana transformed into sparkling light and rained down on everyone. My friends gaped in astonishment as they were suddenly freed from the heat. As Julietta clutched her pendant, the others touched their rings and earrings. Meanwhile, the other students seemed to enjoy gazing at the mysterious, glittering light.

"Did the heat die down, everyone?!" I cried out in a choked voice.

Julietta smiled gently. "I don't feel anything, much less heat. We're okay thanks to you, Ally."

"How's your chest?!"

"Absolutely fine. It didn't even leave a mark."

"Is everyone else okay too?!" I cried again, still panicked.

Lauris and others nodded with grins on their faces.

"Th-Thank goodness," I said with a deep sigh of relief.

Without warning, my legs gave out. I plopped on my backside like a puppet with its strings cut.

Cita bent down and peered into my face. "Are *you* okay, Ally?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I replied with a laugh. "As soon as the relief hit me, all the strength left my legs."

Even Lauris squatted beside me. "I could feel your magic on my skin," he said while patting my head. "Thanks—I owe you one."

As I narrowed my eyes at Lauris, Cita looked puzzled as well. "Lauris," she said. "Are you under some sort of spell, by any chance?"

Lauris furrowed his brow. "Why do you ask?"

"It's just strange to hear you genuinely thanking Ally rather than being

sarcastic.”

“Wow. Rude, much?”

Despite Lauris’s protest, everyone else probably had the same thought.

Before long, all my friends had crouched down in front of me to meet my eyes. We must have looked like those hoodlums who often squatted in front of convenience stores in Japan. As this thought crossed my mind, I heard a familiar voice from behind.

“I’m glad you’re all having so much fun,” Embert said with a smile. “However, I need to take care of that young lady whose legs gave out.”

Rosario stood up to make space. “Of course. We were just enjoying the spectacle. You don’t get to see Ally fall on her backside very often, you know?”

*Is it just my imagination, or is Rosario being pretty rude too?*

Cia smirked. “Make sure Prince Embert takes *really* good care of you, okay?”

Embert’s lips twisted into a mischievous smile as well. “Don’t worry. She’ll be in the best of hands.”

“Huh?” Julietta asked, shivering before Embert’s devious expression. “What’s going on here? Is Ally going to be safe?”

*Honestly, she’s too cute.*

Lauris placed a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry. She might not be *entirely* safe, but she’s in no danger of being hurt. If anything, she’s just going to vomit sugar from too much sweetness.”

Julietta cocked her head. “Vomit sugar?”

How I longed for a clear view of her expression. It was probably adorable enough to induce cardiac arrest. I glared at Lauris, who was hogging Julietta’s cuteness all to himself.

*Yep, his ears are bright red.*

Embert lifted me in his arms effortlessly. “Well then, let’s get you to the infirmary.”

Of course, the surrounding girls all squealed a storm of delight.

“Wait, seriously?” I asked. “This is embarrassing.”

“But you can’t walk, right?” Embert responded. “What other choice do I have?”

His composed expression rubbed me the wrong way. A sudden urge to wipe that smug grin off his face overcame me. Thus, I wrapped my arms around his neck and whispered in his ear, “Thank you, Em.” I then peered at his face to see how his expression had changed. To my great satisfaction, his cheeks were bright red.

“Don’t catch me off guard like that,” he said. “You’ll rob me of my ability to think straight.”

His words caused my face to erupt in heat as well.

A moment later, I heard Cia’s faint laughter in the distance. “It’s always so amusing to watch Prince Embert around Ally,” she said.

When we reached the infirmary, Embert gently seated me on a bed.

“Ally,” he said while embracing me. “We avoided the worst-case scenario, thank you. I’m in your debt.”

As I wrapped my arms around him as well, he squeezed me even tighter. We held each other in silence for a long while until Embert kissed me on the temple. He then kissed me on my cheek, my brow, my eyelids, and the tip of my nose. In short, he showered my entire face in kisses. My pulse quickened as I melted into him. Finally, he kissed me on the corner of my mouth, causing my heart to leap out of my chest.

Embert chuckled while looking at my face. I must have looked like a woman on the verge of death due to how quickly my pulse was racing.

“You’re adorable,” he said.

“My heart,” I responded while gasping for air. “I seriously think I’m going to die.”

Embert placed a gentle hand on my cheek. “Take deep breaths.”

As instructed, I inhaled a lungful of air. After repeating this several times, I regained a modicum of composure.

“How’s that?” Embert asked. “Do you feel any better?”

I managed to smile at him. “Yes, I do.”

“This might be risky,” Embert mumbled while caressing my cheek.

“How so?”

“I’m about to give into temptation.”

“What temptation?” I asked.

Embert cupped my face in his hands and pressed his soft lips against mine. For a moment, he kissed me hungrily. However, our lips soon parted with a gentle smack.

“Unfortunately, I have to stop here,” he said. “If we go any further, I’ll lose every inhibition to which I’m clinging.”

I nearly caved in under his warm and alluring smile. The gentle smack of lips lingered in my ears, rendering me powerless. Just like that, my consciousness faded like a dove soaring into the air.



**AT** the same time, something occurred in the northernmost edge of the kingdom. An enormous shadow stirred in the mountains extending from the large volcano. Having sensed something, the shadow turned in a certain direction and extended its neck.



**AROUND** two months had passed since the incident in magic class. Celette hadn’t received any punishment in particular. Rather, she’d gotten off with a stern warning. “I simply wanted to heal everyone with holy magic,” she’d insisted. Afterwards, she hadn’t been interrogated any further.

*Innocent until proven guilty, I suppose.*

As I walked down the corridor during break time, an unexpected voice called out to me.

“Ally,” Severin said.

“Oh, look who it is,” I replied.



Severin laughed. "It's been too long."

I couldn't help but go bug-eyed in the face of his unwavering, androgynous beauty.

"They're not with me," he said with a chuckle.

"Who?" I asked.

"I'm talking about Lady Celette and her friends."

"Oh, right."

Severin had been spending a lot of time with them lately. It was strange to see him without Celette and her entourage.

"Are you alone today?" I asked.

Severin nodded. "Starting now, I'm a lone wolf."

"Did you get into an argument with Celette or something?"

Had Severin been conducting some shady experiment using Celette's magic? I could totally see him doing something like that.

"Nothing of the sort," Severin answered with another laugh. "I no longer have any reason to spend time with Lady Celette. That's all."

I furrowed my brow rather than respond. He no longer had any reason to spend time with her? What did that mean? Was he ditching her after finishing the experiment? As my imagination ran wild, Severin laughed at my perplexed expression.

"I've thought this for a while, but you don't act like the daughter of a duke," he said.

"Really?" I asked.

I thought, at this point, my status as a highborn noblewoman had been deeply ingrained in me.

Severin chuckled. "Your face is an open book, after all."

"Oh no," I said, placing my hands on my face. "Is it that bad?"

Severin responded with yet another bout of childish laughter. "Haha, see?

That's exactly what I'm talking about."

*Is he really two years older than me? I'm starting to have my doubts.*

"Would you like to be friends again starting now?" Severin asked.

I tilted my head. "I never thought that we stopped being friends. If anything, we haven't spoken because you've been so busy with Lady Celette and her group."

Severin furrowed his brow, seemingly caught off guard by my answer. Then, he burst out laughing again. "Aha! You really are wonderful. Both your magic and your train of thought are fascinating. I hope we stay friends for a long time. You could easily join the mage's order with your magical ability. Would you like to become a sorcerer with me?"

His sudden invitation stunned me for a moment.

"We can be friends, of course, but I'll have to decline your offer," I replied. "Joining the mage's guild seems like a dangerous prospect. I don't want to wind up as your guinea pig, after all."

"Oh, are you some sort of mind reader now?"

"You're too much."

The two of us shared a laugh over this light banter.



**IN** the blink of an eye, rumors began circulating about Severin's falling out with Celette. Gossipy noblewomen could spread information at an alarmingly fast rate.

"Lord Fregolini grew tired of the girls in Lady Celette's group fighting over him."

"No, he ditched them after hearing about Lady Celette casting dangerous spells in magic class."

These were just two of the many rumors circulating around the school. Despite conflicting details, the rumors all agreed on one point: Severin had turned his back on Lady Celette and her friends.

“The girls at the center of the gossip must be furious,” Lauris said.

I nodded. “Definitely. For some reason, the only consensus is that Severin ditched them. They must be fuming.”

“Have you heard?” Cita asked. “According to some rumors, you caused Severin’s change of heart, Ally.”

*No, I hadn’t even thought of that. What a bombshell.*

“Anyway, a lot of people think Severin ditched Celette because he fell for you instead,” Cita continued. “It’s a hot topic right now.”

“Why are people spreading such groundless rumors?” I asked.

*And why does it always have to be about me?* I wondered with a sigh.

“Apparently, one of Lady Celette’s friends saw you and Severin having a friendly conversation,” Julietta answered.

Was she talking about our conversation in the corridor the other day? Certainly, we’d been having an amicable chat, but only as friends. There was no romantic tension between us.

Cia looked at me with a composed expression. “So, does this mean Celette’s group has decided to direct their anger at you?”

“I believe they have,” Rosario responded with a placid nod. “Well, they were already directing their grievances at Ally, but it’s probably going to get worse.”

“What in the kingdom are they going to do next?” Oreste asked.

I sighed again. “Why is it always *me*?”



### ☆☆ Embert’s Point of View ☆☆

**CLASSES** had ended, and my duties as a teacher were over. As I headed towards my school office, I heard someone sobbing from a staircase landing. Curious, I headed towards the voice and found Lady Celette.

*How did she know I would pass through here?*

She’d probably used bewitchment to investigate my schedule. I desperately

wanted to ignore her and continue onwards. Alas, I couldn't disregard a crying student as a teacher.

"Is that you, Lady Celette?" I asked. "What are you doing here?"

In all likelihood, she'd been waiting for me to call out to her. Tears glistened in her big, blue eyes as she looked up at me. At the same time, my earring grew warm. I almost burst out laughing at her tenacity. When would she give up on trying to bewitch me?

"Professor Embert," she said, her voice choked with sobs. "I..."

Unable to finish her sentence, she began bawling even harder. Then, she stood up from the bench on the landing and raced towards me. When I stepped out of the way, she ran past me, stopped, and crouched on the ground. After collecting myself, I placed a hand on her shoulder.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Why are you crying so much? Your beautiful, blue eyes are getting bloodshot."

"Professor!"

When Celette tried to throw her arms around me again, I grabbed her shoulder. I had no intention of comforting a woman who was trying to hurt Ally. Whether or not this was an act didn't matter to me. In any case, she seemed to give up on embracing me.

"I..." she began speaking through sobs. "I was dating Severin. We even discussed getting married in the future. However, he suddenly had a change of heart, and now he won't see me."

"I'm very sorry to hear that."

"Thank you. What's more, he broke up with me for Lady Alexandra. I can't compete with her."

"He broke up with you for Lady Alexandra?" I repeated.

"That's right." When Celette looked at me with tear-stained eyes, my earring grew warm again. "I'm so brokenhearted, Professor."

I had to turn away for a moment to stop myself from laughing. It took a great deal of effort to keep my shoulders from trembling.

“Forget about Severin if you’re so brokenhearted,” I said. “You’ll find a better man soon enough.”

Somehow, I contained my laughter and smiled at Celette. Her cheeks flushed as she gazed back at me. Irritation spiked in my chest as my earring grew warm again.

“Professor,” Celette said while reaching for me. “The truth is, I have feelings for—”

“Embert,” a familiar voice cut in.

At that moment, Lauris appeared from behind.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he continued. “Were you in the middle of something?”

“Not at all,” I replied. “What’s going on?”

“I had something to discuss with you regarding the castle, but...” Lauris trailed off, glancing at Celette.

“Oh, um, I’ll excuse myself then,” Celette said.

After giving me a smile, she dashed away. Lauris and I watched her go.

“Should I not have interrupted?” Lauris asked with a mischievous grin.

I flicked him on the forehead. “Don’t be absurd. You’re a lifesaver, to be honest. Everything in me wanted to slap her hand away.”

Lauris chuckled in a somewhat exasperated manner. “Brutal.”

“Can you blame me? Think about it. Could you be friends with someone who wanted to harm Princess Julietta? I doubt it.”

Lauris’s face turned bright red. “Wh-Why are you bringing up Julietta?”

“Oh, am I mistaken?”

“...I guess not, but how did you know I like her?”

I chuckled. “Because I know everything about my adorable little brother.” As Lauris hung his head, his cheeks still red, I ruffled his hair. “I support you wholeheartedly. Princess Julietta is a wonderful, very sincere girl.” When Lauris lifted his head and grinned, I winked at him. “Plus, she’ll get along swimmingly

with my future wife.”

I laughed as Lauris’s jaw dropped.

*Thank the Goddess he chose Princess Julietta. I have no intention of giving up Ally at this point.*

I invited Lauris into my office, his mouth still hanging open. Afterwards, I personally brewed him tea to help him wake from his daze.

## Chapter Eight: Sacred Beast

**THE** entire class had gathered in the small dance hall for lessons. We were forming actual pairs with the boys today. Excluding me, all my friends partnered up with each other in the blink of an eye.

“Looks like I’m the odd one out,” I said.

As I stood stock-still, petrified by shock, a number of boys appeared in front of me. All of them held out their hands.

“Would you please be my partner, Lady Vistriano?” one of them asked.

*Yep, I should’ve expected this. The loner always gets her hot girl summer.*

The sudden abundance of choices overwhelmed me. At that moment, I sensed something reaching out to me from behind.

*What?*

It turned out to be someone’s arm, which wrapped around my waist.

“Excuse me, everyone, but would you mind if I had this dance?” a familiar voice asked.

The newcomer took my right hand and wrapped his left hand around my waist. The other boys dispersed immediately.

“Is my hot girl summer over already?” I asked.

Embert’s smile didn’t reach his eyes as he looked down at me. “And what, pray tell, is a hot girl summer?”

“Oh, um, it’s nothing.”

“Nothing? Was it just my imagination, or were you disappointed that your ‘hot girl summer’ came to an end?”

Laughing haughtily, I spoke like a pompous noblewoman to hide my discomposure. “Your mind is surely playing tricks on you, Your Highness.”

The music began playing once everyone had partnered up. Thus, everyone started dancing at the same time.

Embert's expression turned serious. "Ally," he said while dancing gracefully. "Something just occurred to me. I hadn't known this about myself until mere moments ago."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Apparently, I'm a very jealous man."

"Oh?"

"I can tolerate you spending time with Lauris and the others because they're your friends," Embert said. "However, I can't stand the sight of you with other men. Seeing them ask you to dance just now made my blood boil."

Though Embert spoke with a smile, his words caused me to shudder.

"Forgive me, but I don't want to let anyone else touch you," he continued.

Blood rushed to my cheeks. Sure, Embert sounded one step away from a stalker. At the same time, every part of my body he was touching erupted with heat, not just my face.

"Sh-Should you be saying that right now?" I asked.

"If not now, when should I say it?"

"Ugh..."

Embert tightened his grip around my waist. Naturally, this drew us closer together, and his lips brushed my hair. "Ally," he whispered. "I wouldn't let you escape from me even if you wanted to."

My whole body shuddered. In fact, my heart had been pounding in my ears for several minutes now. Even so, I took a deep breath and stood my ground.

"Em," I said while glaring up at him. "I-I feel the same way. I wouldn't leave your side even if you told me to."

The prince's cheeks flushed. "You've grown bold, Ally. Would you mind if I kissed you right now?"

"Of course I would!"



When the song ended, an exultant Embert strode back to the dance professor's side. Afterwards, I went to join my friends on unsteady feet.

"What's wrong, Ally?" Lauris asked with a smirk. "I can practically see the steam rising from your head."

"Your brother really did a number on me," I replied.

Cia smirked in her usual manner as well. "Oh my, it sounds like the lady has fallen helplessly in love."

"Yes, with you," I replied.

Cia furrowed her brow for a moment before laughing. "Aha! You're learning how to dish it back out."

*Was what I said really that funny?*

"Well, it's easier to get the better of you than Embert," I admitted.

Cia giggled. "So long as you're happy, I'm happy."

"I feel the same way."

This time, we both looked at each other and laughed.



### ☆☆ Embert's Point of View ☆☆

**DURING** today's lesson, the students were pairing up and dancing as they would at a real ball. Of course, I planned on dancing with Ally. When the professor instructed everyone to partner up, Lauris invited Princess Julietta to dance. Based on how her cheeks flushed with delight, I would be hearing good news about them in the near future.

Many young ladies appealed to me with their eyes, hoping I would ask them to dance. The sheer number of glances I received was humbling. Lady Celette, in particular, stared at me with remarkable intensity. Though she feigned bashfulness, my ear had been prickling with heat for the last few minutes.

I had no intention of dancing with anyone but Ally. Outside of official events, I only wanted to dance with the girl I loved. Thus, I headed towards her at a leisurely pace. Partway there, I passed by Lady Celette. She looked at me with

an affected smile, seeming certain of something. Nevertheless, I passed by her without sparing her a glance.

When I spotted Ally, a number of men were holding out their hands to her. My composure vanished entirely upon witnessing this scene, and I raced to her side.



### ☆☆ Alexandra's Point of View ☆☆

“**KNOCK**, knock,” I said to Lauris. “Is anyone home?”

“Huh?” he responded, his pen scratching against paper as he took notes. “Are you plotting something sinister again?”

“What do you mean *again*? No, never mind. When did you and Julietta become a couple?”

The professor had left during class to retrieve some materials. As such, I seized the opportunity to tease Lauris a bit. Upon hearing my question, the tip of his pen snapped.

“Wh-Wh-Wha?” he stammered, his face turning bright red.

I smirked. “Looks like I caught you off guard.”

“Oh, shut your trap, dork.”

*Who knew teasing your friends could be so fun?*

“So?” I prompted him to continue. “What happened? And what did she say?”

“Well, we were dancing, and... Wait, you think I’m going to tell you? Don’t be an idiot.”

*I mean, you were just about to spill the beans, right?*

“Aww, are you blushing?” I teased. “I couldn’t be happier to see two of my best friends become a couple. You’re going to get married in the future, right? That way, we won’t have to part ways with Julietta.”

It would be heartbreaking to say goodbye when she finished studying abroad.

“That’s the plan,” Lauris said. “I’m going to visit her country during the next

long break.”

Unable to help myself, I ruffled his hair. For some reason, seeing him act so masculine filled me with delight. At the same time, all my remaining worries vanished. I had fallen in love with Embert, and Lauris had fallen in love with Julietta. The past loops wouldn’t repeat themselves. I could be confident of that now.

“Heh, we’re all going to live happily ever after,” I said.

Lauris smiled in response to my unabashed honesty. “Yeah, I guess so.”

My heart filled with joy as the end of the year approached.



“**GIVE** me back my joy,” Celette said.

After final period, one of her friends had summoned me to the rooftop of the old school building. There were plans to reconstruct this building during the next long break due to its deterioration. As such, we were forbidden from entering it without permission. The fence surrounding the roof had fallen into visible disrepair as well.

“Why spin a lie just to bring me here?” I asked.

Three young ladies, including Celette, were standing in front of me. One of those young ladies had deceived me into coming here.

Celette giggled triumphantly. “I knew for certain you would come if you heard an animal was in danger.”

I felt a small spike of irritation. That said, didn’t Celette have a lot more sycophants a few months ago?

“Your entourage has shrunk quite a bit,” I noted. “Did you have a falling out?”

Celette burst into tears. “What a horrible thing to say when it’s all your fault.”

“Huh? My fault? What in the world are you talking about? I don’t remember doing anything.”

I was being completely honest. When I cocked my head, one of the other girls bristled. “Where do you get off?!” she shouted. “It’s because of that weird

glitter you scattered everywhere!”

“Weird glitter?” I repeated.

Was she talking about the magic class from a while ago? Still, what did that have to do with anything?

“Everyone else stopped hanging out with me when you showered them in that glitter,” Celette said. “In other words, it’s *your* fault.”

“But how do you know the glitter was at fault?” I asked.

Something else entirely could have caused their falling out.

“Because only dark magic can defeat my holy magic,” Celette replied.

“But I can’t even use dark magic,” I countered. “Think about it for a minute. Dark power wouldn’t glitter, right?”

The girl who’d brought me here looked half-convinced. “Now that you mention it—”

However, the other girl elbowed her in the side to cut her off.

“See?” Celette asked in a choked voice. “You’re trying to rip me and my friends apart again.”

Despite her best attempts to fake cry, I didn’t glimpse a single tear in her eyes.

In any case, Celette continued speaking while covering her face with her hands. “I’ve been thinking about how best to counteract your dark magic.”

Apparently, she’d already made up her mind about my supposed *dark* magic. Wait, was she trying to set me up as the “villainess,” as she’d mentioned before?

“I didn’t do anything different this time,” Celette said. “I’ve used the same method every other time, after all.”

When she lifted her head, she wasn’t crying, just as I’d suspected. In fact, her sinister grin could have been ripped straight from a horror film.

“I knew events would play out differently on a hidden character route,” Celette continued. “Looks like I need to change my approach.”

*What the heck is a hidden character route?*

“I’ve been focusing solely on isolating you,” Celette said, closing the distance between us in a flash. Her lips twisted into a creepy smile before my very eyes. Not a hint of cuteness remained in her features. “When my usual plan didn’t work out, I realized that this time must be different. So, what if I did something unprecedented and manipulated *you*?”

Celette’s mana swelled around her.

“Ouch, that’s hot!” I exclaimed.

Heat flared through the pinky ring on my left hand. Apparently, Celette had tried to bewitch me. On instinct, I unleashed a small burst of magic.

*This is hotter than I expected.*

The thought of everyone enduring this heat astonished me.

*I should probably improve everyone’s amulets.*

As this thought crossed my mind, Celette’s magic vanished.

“Well?” she asked with a satisfied smile. “How does it feel to be my puppet?”

Someone really needed to tell this girl how creepy she looked.

“...I don’t feel any different,” I replied while moving my arms and legs. “Nothing out of the ordinary here.”

Celette’s expression twisted even further.

Then, a terrifying voice echoed from somewhere unseen. “...It’s not working on you, either?”

The two other girls and I looked around nervously.

“Why?” the terrifying voice echoed in front of me. “Why isn’t my magic working on any of the main characters?!”

*Where is that voice coming from, exactly? Celette?*

“I’ve cast this spell numerous times, but it never works,” she said. “Why the hell isn’t it working?!”

Celette’s madness sent a shiver down my spine.

“To begin with, why aren’t you engaged to Prince Lauris?” she demanded.

“Huh?” I asked. “No real reason. The topic never even came up between us.”

“And I’m asking why it didn’t, okay?!”

*Whoa, she’s getting scarier by the second. She’s starting to look like an old hag.*

“I was trying to romance Prince Embert this time,” Celette continued. “I stan him harder than anyone, but no matter how much I bewitch him, he doesn’t show the slightest interest in me! It’s infuriating...”

I couldn’t make out what she was saying due to all the mumbling.

“You’ve been reincarnated, haven’t you?” Celette asked.

“Huh?” I asked, feigning ignorance. “Me?”

“You know about this otome game, right?” she insisted.

I frowned. “What’s that?”

Otome meant “maiden” in Japanese, but I’d never heard the word used as a genre. That aside, did Celette think this world was a game?

“How bizarre,” she continued mumbling. “This route isn’t going according to plan because you’re not playing the role of villainess. Everything has always worked out fine until now. Even so, the very fact that you’re not engaged to Prince Lauris is bizarre.”

*She’s giving me the creeps.*

“Speaking of which, why are you so close to Prince Embert?” Celette asked. “You two are supposed to be no more than acquaintances.”

*I see. Were those our roles in this game she’s talking about?*

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I said. “Embert and I have been close since I was a young girl. My brother is his personal aide, after all. Still, we initially became friends after I stopped a rampaging magic horse.”

“Yes, this is definitely bizarre,” Celette replied. “Too many irregularities have occurred. I’ve had enough of this. How can I restore this route to normal?”

She was completely absorbed in her own world. Could I just go home at this point? I wasn't sure what to do.

Celette sighed. "Since it's come to this, I suppose I have no other choice." She then met my gaze, seeming to have reached a conclusion. "Well then, would you please die for me, Lady Alexandra?"

"Say what?" I asked.

"It's a long shot, but this route might return to normal if you die."

Despite the outrageous statement, she spoke with a pleasant smile.

"Um, I don't plan on dying any time soon," I said.

Though Celette had been smiling a moment ago, her eyes darkened with fury. "Why not?!"

"Do you even have to ask? What kind of person would agree to die just because you told them to?"

"Okay then," Celette said, her expression turning pouty. She then proceeded to say the most outrageous thing yet. "If you won't kill yourself, I'll lend a helping hand." Here, she looked at her two sycophants with a smug expression, apparently thinking she'd come up with an ingenious plan. "Grab hold of Lady Alexandra, you two."

However, the girl who hadn't brought me here remained motionless. "Lady Delphina," she said while hanging her head. "You're taking this way too far."

After lifting her head, the girl placed a hand on Celette's shoulder in an attempt to stop her.

"Oh, shut up," Celette responded, shaking off the girl's hand. "Are you betraying me too?! You can die first if you're just going to get in my way!"

Then, Celette shoved the girl's shoulders.

"Eek!" the girl screamed, stumbling back and losing her balance. Though she grabbed hold of the fence, it couldn't withstand even her slight impact. As it collapsed, she began teetering on the edge of the roof. Without thinking, I raced towards her, the clatter of the breaking fence still echoing in my ears. Right before the girl fell, I reached out and pulled her up with all my might. As a

result of the recoil, I switched places with her. Thus, I began falling towards the ground alongside the broken fence. I slapped both hands over my mouth as a scream tried to escape my lips.

*No, I have to stay quiet. If I scream, Em will teleport here to save me. If that happens, both of us will fall.*

I tried to remain calm and stop my fall using magic. Unfortunately, I couldn't imagine the spell due to panic.

*The ground! I can see the ground!*

The absurd thought of splattering all over the surface raced through my mind. Then, I fell onto something none too soft as the wind roared in my ears.

"What?" I asked. "That didn't hurt at all."

After opening my eyes, which I'd closed on reflex, I could still see the sky. At the same time, I could feel myself steadily ascending upwards.

"Wait, am I already going to Heaven?" I asked.

A chuckle reached my ears. "Holy woman," an unfamiliar voice spoke to me telepathically. "You are interesting indeed."

"Whoa, are you speaking directly into my head? You don't sound like the Goddess though. She didn't have such a low voice."

"Fascinating. You've spoken with the Goddess, have you?"

"Yeah, we go way back," I replied while sitting up straight.

"That must be why you have her divine protection."

"You can tell?"

"Yes," the unfamiliar voice confirmed. "I'm a sacred beast, after all."

"A sacred beast? Where are you, exactly?"

The voice chuckled again. "You're riding on my back."

"Seriously?"

I better scrutinized what I was riding. Were those black scales? Upon closer inspection, the scales shimmered iridescently in the sunlight. What a strange



sort of black. Furthermore, large wings extended on either side of my mount. Apparently, I was sitting on this creature's back. Golden irises sparkled beyond its thick neck.

"You remind me of a dragon," I said.

"That's because I *am* a dragon."

"Oh, I see... Wait, for real?!"

"For real," the creature replied.

"Aren't you supposed to live in the northernmost volcano?"

I remembered hearing this from Rosario.

"That's right," the dragon said. "However, I descended from the mountain after sensing a holy woman's magic."

"Wow, that's amazing. So, who's this holy woman?"

"That would be you."

When I fell silent, the dragon didn't continue.

"Um, who do you mean by 'you'?" I finally asked.

"Why, I'm talking about you, of course."

"...I'm a holy woman?"

"You have the Goddess's divine protection, after all."

I fell silent again. Come to think of it, however, the Goddess had alluded to this all those years ago.

*"Also, I've bestowed my divine protection upon you," she'd told me. "Your magical abilities should be enhanced compared to Alexandra's previous lives. Likewise, you can use all elements."*

"I remember now," I said. "But can I seriously use every element, including holy magic? Did the Goddess give me some sort of cheat skill?"

"She did indeed. That's why you're a holy woman."

*He understood the phrase 'cheat skill?' What kind of creature is this dragon?*

“Like I said, I’m a sacred beast,” he responded.

“Oh no. You can read my thoughts too?”

The dragon chuckled again. “More or less. Now then, what should we do? The girl who caused your fall needs to be punished properly.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I can’t keep letting these things slide.”

“Shall I burn her to a crisp?”

“That’s going a little too far,” I replied.

*Wow, sacred beasts are scary. Is it because he’s a dragon?*

“Anyway, do you know what’s happening on the roof right now?” I asked.

First, I needed to get a clear view of the situation.

“One girl is looking down over the side with a blank expression,” the dragon answered. “The second girl is crying about this being her fault. The third girl is mumbling about the route being restored to normal.”

“Huh? Can they not see you?”

*Even though he’s so big?*

“I’ve cast a concealment spell on us,” the dragon explained. “Those girls can’t see us right now. Oh, and please call me Custode.”

“Got it,” I replied. “Your name’s Custode, huh? Mine’s Alexandra, but you can call me Ally. Anyway, let’s ditch those girls and go see Em for now.”

“The crown prince?”

“Wow! You know that much about our kingdom?”

Custode chuckled. “I’ve heard a thing or two.”

“All right then. Our first course of action is to go see Em.”

“Understood.”

We arrived at the castle in the blink of an eye. Well, what else did I expect from a dragon? In any case, Embert had returned to the castle today to wrap up some official duties in the early morning. We landed in the courtyard where my friends and I always had tea. Touching down in the front could have caused a

commotion, after all.

“How do we get Em to come see us now that we’re here?” I asked.

I didn’t want to enter the castle in my school uniform.

“Why not march right in?” Custode asked.

“That’s one way of doing things, but I don’t want to make a scene. If only Janus would come out to meet us.”

“Your brother is up there.”

Following Custode’s gaze, I spotted Janus having tea on the terrace. He seemed to be on break.

“Janus!” I called out to him from below.

“Ally?” he responded upon noticing me. When he spotted Custode, his jaw dropped.

“What’s going on, Custode?” I asked. “Aren’t you casting concealment?”

“I am,” the dragon replied. “But apparently, he can see me. Perhaps it’s due to his magic being similar to yours.”

*Are all dragons this carefree?*

A moment later, Embert leaned over the terrace to look at us. His eyes widened in astonishment as well.

“Is your concealment really weak or something?” I asked.

Custode’s golden eyes began to water. “I made myself visible.”

*Oops, did I hurt his feelings?*

“Oh no,” I said. “I’m really, really sorry.”

In response to my sincere apology, Custode thumped his thick tail against the ground. His face then split into what appeared to be a grin.

*Wait, was he teasing me? This dragon might have a nasty sense of humor.*

As I pondered this, Janus and Embert raced over to me.

“This is clearly a dragon, no matter how you look at it,” Embert said. “Where

in the world did you find him?”

*Uh, find him? Dragons aren't something you pick up off the side of the road.*

“It would be difficult to keep him at our house,” Janus added, not making any sense either. “He’s just too big.”

“I didn’t find him, and I’m not going to keep him at our house,” I said. “This dragon saved my life.”

I proceeded to explain the situation to them.

“That woman purposefully made her move when I wasn’t around,” Embert said.

“She doesn’t even care about the lives of her sycophants,” Janus added. “We can’t turn a blind eye any longer.”

Both handsome men wore hostile smiles. The very air prickled my skin.

“By the way...” Embert said, still grinning as he looked at me.

Without thinking, I clung to one of Custode’s legs, a chill running down my spine.

“Why didn’t you call for my help when you were falling?” Embert asked.

“Huh?” I responded. “Well...”

As I trailed off, Embert cupped my face in his hands, his emerald-green eyes staring straight at me.

“If you’d called for help, I could’ve teleported to your rescue,” he said. “I’ve done so twice now. You didn’t forget, did you?”

“Of course I didn’t!” I cried, unable to keep my voice down. “That’s why I kept my mouth shut. I was falling from a building upside down. If I’d called for help, you would’ve fallen too. I couldn’t let that happen.”

Embert froze, his emerald-green eyes widening. Perhaps he hadn’t expected my response. “Ally...” he mumbled, removing his hands from my face. The next moment, he wrapped his arms around me. “How deeply will you make me fall in love with you?” he asked, his voice trembling. “You didn’t call for help out of concern for me? I’m flattered, but please don’t keep silent ever again. I will

always come to your aid if called, no matter what peril awaits me. Making decisions on the fly is one of my greatest strengths, after all.”

After releasing me from his embrace, Embert cupped my face again. I could see my astonished features reflected in his emerald-green eyes.

“This is an earnest request,” he continued, seeming close to tears. “Call for me if you ever find yourself in peril. Let me save you.”

I shook my head. “But if something happened to you instead of me, I would never forgive myself.”

Embert smiled, the sadness disappearing from his features. “Don’t worry. I would never leave you behind and allow harm to befall me.”

He sounded a touch overconfident, but for some reason, I believed him.

“...Okay,” I said. “I’ll call for you next time.”

“Thank you, Ally.”

Beaming, Embert kissed me on the cheek. Of course, I returned the kiss.

“I’m feeling thirsty now that things have calmed down,” I said with a laugh. “Should we have some tea?”

Thus, we gathered around a table in the courtyard for an impromptu tea party. Embert gave instructions to a nearby servant to prepare the refreshments. Meanwhile, I picked up Custode, who’d shrunk himself to be slightly larger than a small dog.

“I decided to keep quiet in front of His Highness,” Janus whispered in my ear. “However, I’m always here to protect you as well. Even now, I’m suppressing my urge to race over and eliminate Celette.”

He spoke this outrageous statement with a charming smile. I was too scared to ask if “eliminate” was a euphemism for something more sinister.

“I understand,” I said. “But please restrain yourself for now.”

“Of course,” Janus responded with a grin.

Custode laughed as he examined my brother. While everyone else drank tea, he gobbled down sweets from his place on my lap. “These confections are

delightful. I'll need to go on regular walks if I keep eating so much sugar."

"You don't have to stay in the volcano at all times?" I asked.

"The volcano is my dwelling, but there's no particular reason I *must* remain there."

"Oh, I see. I just assumed that you were preventing it from erupting."

"My presence doesn't prevent eruptions," Custode said. "In fact, small eruptions happen quite frequently, which prevents larger ones from occurring."

"Really? In that case, you should visit me as much as possible."

Custode chuckled. "I'll take you up on that offer."

"You two seem to be having a friendly chat," Embert said with an icy smile. "But perhaps we should move onto the main topic of conversation."

Custode and I clung to each other in response to his chilly aura.

"Your name is Custode, correct?" Embert asked. "And you've been speaking to Ally telepathically this whole time? As a sacred beast, you should have the ability to communicate with us as well. Even more importantly, why are you sitting on Ally's lap?"

The mighty dragon let out a squeal in response to Embert's threatening smile. Ultimately, it was Janus who wiped that smile from the prince's face.

"That's quite enough, Your Highness," my brother said. "Are you even jealous of a dragon now? You're going to earn Ally's disfavor."

Janus winked at me in such a way that Embert wouldn't notice.

"Have you grown tired of me, Ally...?" the prince asked.

"Um," I responded. "I might have to reconsider things if you bully Custode."

Embert furrowed his brow so deeply that I worried about his face sticking. *Scary, much?* In any case, this must have been a bitter pill for him to swallow.

"Understood," he finally said, his expression unchanging. He then pointed firmly at Custode and exclaimed, "However! If you wish to be friends with Ally, you must learn to speak with us too. I won't tolerate these private conversations."

Custode nodded. "...Okay then," he said with a sigh.

I shared some of my own dessert with him. "Sorry about that."

"Don't worry about it. Your knight is quite a jealous fellow. At the same time, he seems like an impeccable statesman."

"Really? That's wonderful."

"I'm afraid we might continue butting heads," Custode said. "Still, I'm interested to see what the future holds."

I couldn't help but laugh. Watching Custode nimbly eat his sweets with tiny dragon hands was adorable.







## Chapter Nine: The Holy Woman and Her False Counterpart

**THE** next day, I came to class wearing my best poker face. Celette and her two friends looked at me as if I were a ghost. Nevertheless, one of the girls ran up to me and prostrated herself at my feet.

“Lady Vistriano,” she said. “Th-Thank you so much for saving me from falling yesterday. I can’t believe you survived. Either way, I sincerely apologize for everything I’ve done up till now. You saved my life despite the countless times I slighted you. I’m forever in your debt. Even so, I won’t ask you to forgive me. Rather, punish me however you see fit.”

The entire class watched as the young lady spoke at a blisteringly fast pace.

“Ally,” Lauris said. “Are you finally outing yourself as the demon queen?”

“Incredible,” Oreste added. “Who knew powers of darkness could change someone’s heart like that?”

The two boys teased me despite being well aware of the situation.

“She’s already summoned the first of her loyal retainers from the far north,” Rosario chimed in. “Her dark reign is inevitable.”

*I thought you were better than them, Rosario!*

“You guys are having way too much fun with this,” I said.

Lauris smirked. “Can you blame us?”

Oreste grinned as well. “Yeah, why pass up on a chance to laugh?”

“I fully agree,” Rosario added with a composed expression.

*You guys are gonna regret this later.*

“You’ve got this, Ally!” Julietta cheered.

*Yes, lavish me with encouragement, my adorable princess. Your words give me*

*the strength to press on.*

Ignoring the idiots, I knelt in front of the prostrated girl. "I'm not bothered by anything you might have done. Me falling wasn't your fault, and I rescued you because I wanted to. Please don't let this weigh on your conscience. At the same time, people do need to atone for any sins they've committed." Here, I stood up and stared straight at the ringleader. "Isn't that right, Lady Celette?" I asked with a grin. "Oh my, did the blood just drain from your face? Surprised to see me bursting with energy when you thought I was dead? Did I disappoint you, perhaps? Sorry about that."

"O-Of course I'm not disappointed," Celette replied. "I'm so glad you're safe."

She couldn't hurl abuse at me in front of our classmates, as she'd done yesterday. Even so, I would have her remove that mask soon enough.

"What's this?" I asked. "Your attitude's done a one-eighty since yesterday. Do you not remember throwing a tantrum on the roof?" Though I wanted to burst out laughing, I continued speaking with a pleasant smile. "You spoke down to me, called the situation infuriating, and even asked me to die. Well, I'm still here because I refuse to go down without a fight."

Celette's face stiffened for everyone to see.

"I also got a taste of your magic for the first time," I said.

In response, Celette's shoulders twitched.

"That said, the spell didn't have much of an effect on me," I continued. "You asked me how it felt to become your puppet, right? Sorry, but I can't give you my thoughts or impressions. Not a single part of me is under your control, after all."

"What do you mean by 'puppet'?" Lauris asked, stepping in to back me up. "Only the forbidden practice of bewitchment can manipulate other people."

The entire class stirred. I feigned surprise as well, pretending to have heard this for the first time.

"Oh, that's right," I said. "Still, I never expected anyone to use bewitchment in this school."

“There’s no possible way I could use bewitchment,” Celette argued, tears forming in her eyes. “I only possess holy magic, remember?”

Despite her tears, I continued my verbal assault. “Heh, true enough. Want to know something else though? Some holy magic users can also use bewitchment.”

Celette’s face went from pale to ghostly white. “I-I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

The entire class furrowed their brows at this. At any rate, this event had never occurred in past timelines, no matter how much the Goddess intervened. However, the deity’s meddling had finally borne fruit in this latest timeline.

At that moment, Embert and Janus entered the classroom.

“I can’t blame anyone for not knowing,” Embert said. “We only discovered this recently.”

“Embert!” Lauris cried.

“Janus!” I exclaimed.

Both of us overly attached siblings called out our brothers’ names. Barely a moment later, the classroom erupted in shrill cries.

“I shouted my brother’s name first,” Lauris said with a smug expression.

“It’s a matter of love, not speed,” I replied, refusing to be outdone.

Lauris snorted at me. “Sounds like the grumblings of a sore loser to me.”

“What did you say?!”

As sparks began flying between us, someone’s hands struck us both atop the head.

“Ouch!” we both cried out in unison.

Our assailant was Rosario. “Now isn’t the time to fight, children,” he said, his icy blue eyes gleaming coldly.

“We’re very sorry,” Lauris and I responded simultaneously.

Both our brothers’ shoulders trembled with suppressed laughter.

“Sorry about that, adorable little siblings,” Embert said.

When he smiled, a few girls in the front row swooned.

“Forgive us, my Alexandra,” Janus added with an equally beautiful smile.

A few more girls swooned. Would any of the young ladies in the front survive?

“Let’s get back on track, shall we?” Embert suggested, regaining his composure. “I received a document from a church priest. According to this text, not all holy magic users are righteous. Furthermore, there can be only one holy woman per generation, no matter how many holy magic users exist.”

“In that case, the holy woman would still be Lady Celette, right?” a certain student asked.

Yes, this was the most pertinent question.

“The document provided more information on this matter,” Embert said. “Apparently, holy magic users capable of becoming holy women can’t use bewitchment. After all, bewitchment users aren’t loved by animals or monsters. Only holy magic users who receive the Goddess’s divine protection can become holy women.”

A handful of students reacted to Embert’s statement.

“Come to think of it, the magic horses really hated Lady Celette,” someone said. “On the other hand, they really warmed up to...”

As everyone’s gazes focused on me, a couple more people spoke their minds.

“Lady Vistriano often plays with little birds, doesn’t she?”

“And I saw her talking to foxes while ice skating.”

*Oh, wow. I’ve been busy, huh?*

“But I’ve never heard of Lady Vistriano possessing holy magic!” Celette cried.

*Yeah, I didn’t know about it until recently either.*

“Just because you haven’t heard about her powers doesn’t mean she doesn’t possess them,” Embert said. “Isn’t that right, Mary?”

The door opened, and Mary entered the classroom.

“Mary?” I asked.

“Lady Alexandra,” she replied. “My heart is bursting with joy. This is my first time seeing you in class.”

When Mary smiled, a few boys swooned as well. She was a knockout, after all.

“Something happened to Lady Alexandra at five years old that led to her receiving the Goddess’s divine protection,” Mary continued. “The Goddess increased her mana supply and allowed her to use all elements. In fact, Lady Alexandra created amulets for all her close friends before coming to this school. These amulets reduce physical damage and completely protect against mental assaults. What’s more, the amulets remain effective until the wearer’s death. Only a holy magic user could create such an artifact.”

Cita stared down at her pinky ring. “I had no idea these were so amazing.”

“Truly,” I replied. “I was just as surprised.”

I hadn’t been the slightest bit aware of how incredible my amulets were. After all, I’d just made them according to Mary’s instructions.

“You’re surprised by your own invention?” Oreste asked. “Not your brightest moment, Ally.”

“Cita,” I whined. “Oreste just called me dumb.”

“How awful,” Cita responded. “Bad Oreste. No head pats for you.”

*That’s it?*

As the conversation got derailed on our end, Embert continued speaking. “Do you understand what Mary just said, Lady Celette? These amulets protect against mental attacks, not just physical ones. Nine people in this school are wearing them, including me.”

Celette gasped. “So that’s why...” she mumbled.

“Do you understand now?” Embert asked. “That’s why none of us fell prey to your bewitchment.”

“How many times must I repeat myself?!” Celette shouted. “I can’t use bewitchment!”

Embert chuckled. “I expected you to deny these allegations. After receiving this document from the church, I immediately petitioned the mage’s order to create a tool that could prove someone’s use of bewitchment. Many exceptional people work for the mage’s order. You know one of them very well, in fact.”

When the door opened again, I spotted many onlookers standing in the outside corridor. Then, an unexpected person entered the classroom.

“Severin?” I asked.

“Hey there, Ally,” he responded with a wave.

I waved back at him without thinking.

“Lady Celette,” Embert continued with a smile. “I knew from the start that you would continue to lie about using bewitchment. That’s why I had Severin accompany you for a short while. I asked him to establish proof for me.”

Severin strode towards me while holding a crystal ball. “Do you know what this is, Lady Celette?” he asked, smiling just as briskly. “This crystal ball records images in response to bewitchment. My father and his subordinates spent three sleepless nights crafting this artifact. Simply recalling my father’s enthusiasm brings a smile to my lips. That aside, can we set this up so that everyone can see it?”

“Oh, good idea,” I said. “Can you turn off the lights, Janus?”

My brother did as I asked. When that wasn’t enough, he magically altered the windows to depict a nighttime landscape as well.

“Severin,” I said. “Do you have some sort of pedestal to place the crystal ball in? One with a basin would be preferable.”

“Oh, yes. Give me just a moment.”

Before long, Severin had created an ice pedestal from magic. The crystal ball fit perfectly in the hollowed-out basin.

“That’s wonderful,” I said. “Now once we light it from the bottom...”

The crystal ball projected its image onto the ceiling when lit from the bottom. It depicted a magic video of Celette and a few of her sycophants.

“Look closely,” Severin said. “This red aura is emitted whenever Lady Celette casts bewitchment.”

Indeed, a red aura spread out to envelop whoever she targeted with bewitchment. In this particular scene, the aura only dissipated around Severin.

“It didn’t affect you at all,” I said. “Just like we discussed.”

Severin stared down at his ring. “Yes, this amulet is truly amazing.”

The video continued during our conversation. I couldn’t stop myself from laughing coldly when I saw what came next. In the second scene, the red aura attempted to envelop Embert in a certain corridor. However, it soon dissipated, just as it had with Severin. Many of the following scenes were centered around Embert as well. Our assumptions had proved correct. Celette had been primarily targeting Embert.

*Still, watching the whole class stare up at the ceiling is a pretty amusing sight. It reminds me of a stargazing party. Or a planetarium, maybe?*

As this useless thought crossed my mind, the video suddenly vanished.

“Oh no!” I cried.

Celette had grabbed the crystal ball while everyone was looking up. She then tossed it towards one of the windows with all her might. As the glass shattered, the ball fell outside.

“Custode!” I shouted.

“Understood,” the dragon replied telepathically.

A moment later, darkness obscured the sunlight pouring through the broken window. Girls screamed in terror at the unknown entity. I approached the window alone as everyone else scrambled away from it.

“Nice catch,” I said.

“Of course,” Custode responded.

The dark mass was too large to fit through the window. Nevertheless, nimble hands passed the small crystal ball to me.

“See what I mean!” Celette cried out in a delighted voice. “Lady Alexandra



obviously has powers of darkness! How else could she summon that shadowy creature?! She's not using holy magic!"

Fear rippled throughout the classroom. Embert sighed loudly in response, which disrupted the tension. "Your actions are truly reprehensible, Lady Celette," he said while feigning horror.

I shuddered in mock terror as well. "That's right. You're being incredibly rude."

When I snapped my fingers, the nighttime landscape vanished from the windows. Thus, midday returned to the classroom. Each time Custode moved, he shimmered iridescently beneath the sunlight. Poetically, he looked like an aurora. Prosaically, he looked like oil on asphalt after rainfall. I would never say the latter out loud though.

"Is that a dragon?!" someone cried.

The entire class began to stir. However, silence fell over the room when Embert lifted his hand.

"That is indeed a dragon," he said. "Dragons are revered as sacred beasts in our country. Strictly speaking, however, they're divine beasts rather than sacred beasts."

Several girls began speaking among themselves, entranced by Custode's glittering scales.

"How beautiful."

"Gorgeous even. Who would call such a lovely dragon a servant of darkness? Lady Celette is awful."

"I fully agree."

"She's reprehensible, just like Prince Embert said."

Apparently, we'd won the majority of girls over to our side.

While basking in the attention, Custode began addressing the entire classroom telepathically. "I am the dragon that resides in the northernmost volcano. A divine presence drew me to this school. When I followed that presence, I found a girl with the Goddess's divine protection falling from the

roof. Instinctively, I saved her and vowed to protect her henceforth.”

Not a single person could tear their eyes away from the beautiful dragon.

“Ladies Celette and Alexandra were just talking about that, weren’t they?” someone asked.

Others began speaking fervently as well.

“Did Lady Celette try to kill Lady Vistriano because she’s the real holy woman?”

“Lady Celette must have seen her as a hindrance.”

At once, all eyes turned on Celette.

“This is ludicrous,” she said while shaking her head. “I never tried to kill any —”

“There’s no point lying now,” I interrupted Celette while barring her path. “The time for you to come clean has long passed. We have all the evidence. You can’t weasel out of this one.”

“Th-This can’t be. I’m the heroine of this story.” Here, Celette’s eyes darkened, and she began mumbling to herself. “Yes, I’m the *heroine*. I’m the main character of this world. I cleared every route in the proper order. I’ve been looking forward to Embert’s story this whole time, and when I finally reach it, this happens? You’ve got to be kidding me!”

Celette’s mana swelled around her.

“Ouch, that’s hot!” my friends cried out in unison, their expressions twisting in anguish.

“Are you all okay?!” I shouted while racing towards them.

At that moment, something flew towards me. “Whoa!” I exclaimed, bending backwards to avoid the projectile. It turned out to be a fountain pen. When I looked around to see where it had come from, I found nearly everyone without an amulet glaring at me. Apparently, Celette had cast a very powerful bewitchment spell. Many of my classmates, regardless of gender, stood up and began lumbering towards me like zombies. Meanwhile, some of the girls had passed out, unable to withstand the powerful spell.

“This is bad,” I said. “I have to fight all these people at once?”

My three male friends had crouched down and were covering their ears. Their amulets must have felt like they were on fire. Though Embert and Janus seemed less fazed by the heat, I couldn’t count on them for backup. They were helping the fallen girls back to their feet, after all.

One corner of my mouth quirked into a grin. “Heh, looks like I’ll have to handle this on my own.”

My classmates continued staggering towards me.

“It’s been a while since my last real fight,” I said. “What should I do?”

When I finished coming up with a rough strategy, the fight began. One by one, I took down the girls who were lumbering towards me. On top of being weak, they also seemed unable to think. I could subdue each of them with a single karate chop, as they merely staggered towards me without any plan of attack.

However, there were a number of opponents that I couldn’t take down with a single strike. Four boys were carrying wooden swords, which they’d acquired from Goddess knows where.

“Where the heck did you get those?” I asked, my crooked grin widening even further. “Oh well. Looks like it’s time for me to flex on these boys.”

First, I subdued a boy who was swinging his wooden sword without any form. Then, the three other boys surrounded me. Apparently, they were able to think more clearly than the others. In any case, they all swung their swords at me in unison.

“Whoa, watch it!” I cried.

After dodging blows on all sides, I kicked the sword of the boy in front of me, sending it flying. Without missing a beat, I aimed another kick at the boy, whose eyes were locked on his sword tumbling through the air. My foot connected with his jaw, bringing him down. Meanwhile, another boy had circled around to my blind spot and lashed out with his sword. I sidestepped the attack, grabbed his shoulders, and kned him in the stomach.

“You’ve got this, Ally!” Embert called to me in a carefree voice.

When I glanced in his direction, I found him waving at me. Evidently, he had no intention of joining the fray.

“Well, at least no one will get in my way,” I muttered to myself.

A wave of hostility crashed into me from behind. Without turning around, I used the shoulders of the boy I’d just knocked down to do a handstand. After hearing the whoosh of a wooden sword behind me, I began dropping back down to my feet. Partway through this motion, I brought my foot down on the boy’s arm that had swung the sword. Unable to withstand the pain, the boy dropped his sword and continued stumbling past me. His back was now completely defenseless. I seized this opportunity to hammer the back of his neck with my folded hands. He collapsed instantly.

The final boy stood rooted to the ground with sword in hand. “*Aaaaah!*” he shouted in a garbled voice, swinging his sword at me wildly.

“Yeah, you have no chance of hitting me,” I said.

I dodged the sword easily, slipped into his guard, and crouched down. Then, I sprung back up and drove my palm into his jaw.

“Oh?” I asked. “Is it over already?”

Celette and I were the only ones left standing. At some point, my male friends had regained consciousness and were looking at me with exasperation.

“So, she was a demon queen all along,” Lauris said.

“To be sure,” Rosario agreed. “That didn’t even take five minutes.”

“I wanted to fight too,” Oreste pouted.

“That’s our Ally for you,” Cita chimed in.

The twins were both grinning. Julietta smiled alongside them, her brown eyes sparkling.

“My goodness, Ally, that was amazing!” Embert cheered. “My fair warrior maiden!”

He and Janus applauded for me with incredible vigor. Even Mary followed suit. Nevertheless, I ignored the three of them and approached Celette instead.

She was rooted to the ground, trembling like a leaf all by her lonesome.

“You’re a truly fearsome woman,” I said. “Just how powerful was that bewitchment you cast? It was terrifying how much everyone resembled zombies.”

“I’m the heroine,” Celette replied. “It’s only natural for everyone to sacrifice themselves for me.”

She glowered at me despite continuing to tremble. Though her words infuriated me, I had to admire her willpower.

“Huh?” I asked. “What in the world are you saying? And who the hell do you think you are? You’re not the only heroine. Everyone is a hero or heroine in their own right. Why do you think you’re the only special one?”

“Because!” Celette shouted, stamping on the ground like a child throwing a tantrum. “This world exists for my sake! It was designed to make me happy!”

“Um, are you all right in the head?”

“Are you calling me stupid?!” Celette shrieked, steam practically rising from her ears. “I’ve lived multiple lives in this world! Lauris, Oreste, Rosario, and even Severin... All of them fell head over heels for me when I bewitched them! I cleared all their routes one by one. Only Embert’s hidden route was left. I’ve been fighting tooth and nail to reach the true ending with him.”

I was the one who started fuming this time. Specifically, the words “fighting tooth and nail” triggered my anger.

“Are you for real?!” I shouted. “How many people have been sacrificed for your fragile little ego?! After bewitching everyone, you stole the past Alexandra’s fiancé and isolated her. In the end, you even had her exiled for some bogus crime. I’ve had it up to here with you!”

“Ally,” Embert interrupted, attempting to quell my fury. That said, I had no intention of stopping.

“Would you please not butt in here, Em?” I asked.

After gazing at me in wonderment for a brief moment, Embert’s expression softened into a warm smile. “Yes, of course,” he replied. “I won’t get in your

way.” Thus, he fell silent, a smile still playing on his lips.

Meanwhile, I turned back to Celette. “Do you understand how Alexandra must have felt after being devastated five times? Her heart was on the verge of being destroyed. She fell in love with Lauris as a young girl, and everyone knew them as a loving couple until they started school. Then, their relationship crumbled in an instant because of your absurd bewitchment. Have you ever considered how she must have felt? Her beloved fiancé was stolen five times by the woman who bewitched him. Worse, this happened before her very eyes. She suffered countless cruelties, and in the end, you even isolated her. Can you imagine how painful that must have been?”

Before I realized it, tears were spilling down my cheeks.

“You know what happened to Alexandra following her exile, right?” I asked. “After being thrown inside a rickety carriage, she was killed by bandits before reaching the border. Then, her remains were devoured by wild animals in the forest. You know all this, right?!” I shouted through tears as I thought about myself who wasn’t myself. “Despite knowing all this, you killed Alexandra multiple times! All for your petty desires!”

“Ally!” Embert and Janus cried out in unison.

“Lady Alexandra!” Mary wailed.

“The Goddess told me that Alexandra wouldn’t be able to enter the cycle of reincarnation if her heart broke,” I said. “Do you know what happens to souls that don’t enter the cycle of reincarnation? They cease to exist. You understand what that means, right? Alexandra’s soul was in that precarious of a situation. I... I couldn’t tolerate that happening to a girl who’d done nothing wrong.”

My tears fell onto the floor one drop at a time.

“That’s why I beat everyone to a pulp in the fifth timeline,” I continued. “I did it for Alexandra. Honestly, I wanted to thrash them even more, but the Goddess stopped me. And you know what? I heard Alexandra laughing back then. She thanked me too, even though I did so little for her. She was a truly kind girl. When I heard that she was enjoying a completely different life, my heart leapt with joy.”

Mary began crying even harder. Tears spilled down my brother's cheeks as well.

"Honestly, I forgave everyone when I heard Alexandra's voice," I said. "The boys weren't at fault for going crazy due to bewitchment. I even decided to forgive you, so long as you didn't do anything stupid." Here, I glared at Celette, seething with rage again. "But you're beyond redemption. I continued suppressing my anger even when you tried to bewitch my friends in this timeline. We'd still avoided the worst-case scenario, after all. I never felt actual rage until you tried to plunge me into that icy lake. That's when my fury got the best of me."

Celette snorted. "I never did anything of the sort."

"How can you say that?" I asked, balling my hands into fists. "You bewitched that boy into doing your bidding, and then you abandoned him. Same goes for the girl who tried to stop you from murdering me. Were they nothing more than pawns to you? Did the possibility of their deaths never bother you? How can you throw away the lives of people who adore you?" At that moment, I had a sudden flash of insight. "Not too long ago, you asked me if I was familiar with the term *akuyaku reijo*. Have you ever wondered if you're the true villainess?"

"What?!" Celette shrieked, her face reddening with fury. "Don't be ridiculous! I'm the heroine, remember?! You're the villainess!"

I couldn't help but laugh as the vein in her temple throbbed. "Oh, really? If this were a play, no one would mistake you for the heroine. Everything you've done is so villainous, after all."

Celette glowered at me while trembling with fury. "What did you say?!"

"Why did you never try finding love on your own?" I asked while approaching her. "You're beautiful enough that you don't need bewitchment. Deep down, you know the truth, right? None of us exists to be characters in your dating simulator. Not your sycophants, not the boy you framed, and not even the past Alexandra. You're a failure of a person who couldn't build a genuine, loving relationship. Maybe you should start over from the beginning. But don't worry. This world won't collapse without you."

I truly felt like the demon queen as I spoke these words with a smile.

“Sh-Shut up!” Celette cried. “This is my world. It’s all a game. Why would I care if anyone else dies? If worse comes to worst, I can just reset it!”

With a resounding *thwack*, Celette went rolling across the floor. Needless to say, I’d hit her. With the back of my fist too.

“Want to try resetting it now?” I asked with a chuckle.

“That hurt!” Celette shouted. “All right then, you asked for it! I’ll prove this world belongs to me! Reset! Let me do everything over from the beginning! Reset now!”

As Celette screamed at the empty ceiling, her words echoed hollowly throughout the classroom.

*Incredible. How is she not embarrassed?*

The entire class cringed while looking at her. A few people who I’d subdued woke up and looked at her with astonishment.

“What’s wrong?” I asked with feigned puzzlement. “Nothing’s happening.”

“Hey, is anyone there?!” Celette cried. “There must be someone in charge around here! You can see me, right?! Hurry up and reset the game!”

Of course, nothing happened.

“Well, that’s curtains for you,” I said with a laugh. “See? It looks like everything will be fine without you. Now you can rest easy and atone for your crimes.”

When I grinned, Celette snorted again. “What are you talking about?” she asked. “I’m a holy woman. No one will accuse me of any crime.”

“Heh, this is too much. What are *you* talking about? You’re obviously no *holy* woman.”

At this point, no one would defend Celette. In fact, many people were glaring at her furiously. None of them were pleased with having been bewitched. Even so, Celette still didn’t back down.

“Again, what are *you* talking about?” she asked, her nostrils flared. “I’m the protagonist of this game. The setting itself dictates that everyone adores me—



the holy woman. No one can change that!”

“You’re hilariously stupid,” I said with a chuckle. “Do you see anyone that adores you right now?”

“Of course,” Celette replied with a smug grin. “Everyone here loves me. You’re the only one who doesn’t.”

*Whoa, she’s still clinging to that delusion? In a certain sense, that’s pretty impressive.*

“Well then, why don’t we ask everyone?” I suggested.

After shooting me a mocking glance, Celette looked around the classroom. “Listen closely, everyone. I’m going to become this world’s one and only holy woman. I’ll heal everyone with the magic that only I possess. You all adore me for this, don’t you?”

Everyone gaped at her, unable to respond. Where did the audacity to spew that nonsense come from? I’d never encountered anyone so delusional in my life. When this thought occurred to me, the entire situation seemed utterly ridiculous.

“Have you calmed down, Ally?” Embert asked.

Apparently, he’d picked up on my mental state.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” I replied. “Thank you.”

“Think of nothing of it. I’m thrilled to see you again.”

I cocked my head. We saw each other all the time, didn’t we?

“Haven’t put it together yet, have you?” Embert asked with a chuckle. “We’ll save that conversation for later. First things first, we need to have Lady Celette escorted to the dungeons.”

When Embert snapped his fingers, the door swung open again, and several knights entered the room.

“Why?!” Celette cried. “I didn’t do anything wrong!”

Despite her shrill protest, the knights forced her onto her knees. Afterwards, they placed magic-sealing handcuffs around her wrists.

“This can’t be happening!” Celette continued shouting. “I’m the heroine!”

As she continued to struggle, I knelt before her and donned the smile of a demon queen. “You’re no heroine or holy woman. Heh, welcome to the world of the villainess.”

Her vigor from moments ago had completely disappeared. The knights carried her away without resistance as my words left her dumbstruck.

“That was brutal,” Cita said with a mixture of exasperation and amazement.

Julietta threw her arms around me. “That was so cool, Ally.” When I hugged her back, she continued, “I never doubted you for a second.

“So, everyone enjoyed the show?” I asked.

Cia threw her arms around me as well. “Very much so,” she responded with a giggle. “You really are amazing, my beloved Ally.”

Next, Cita joined the group hug. “Hey, share some love with me too.”

The three boys stood behind us with sheepish expressions.

*Oh, that’s right. Celette brought them up ever so kindly during her delusional monologue.*

I took a deep breath and looked at the boys. “Listen. The previous Alexandra and I are the same and yet different. The past timelines don’t matter to me as Ally. Like I said, I forgive you all. None of you had any choice in the matter. Plus, I gave all of you the thrashing of a lifetime.”

The boys smiled awkwardly when I winked at them.

“Yeah,” Oreste said, managing a proper grin. “No matter what, you’ll always be Ally to us.”

Rosario sighed softly. “I agree.”

“All right then,” Lauris said in a somewhat resigned tone. “Let’s hug it out.”

With that, the boys joined our group hug.

“I’m suffocating,” Cita complained.

Cia laughed. “And I’m dying of heat.”

“Hold up,” I said. “Who’s tickling me?”

As everyone laughed at my quip, we all hugged each other even tighter.

However, a chill ran down my spine in the midst of this lively conversation. Everyone else seemed to feel it too. Thus, we broke apart to look for the source of our anxiety. Before long, we found Embert glaring at us.

“Is hug time over?” he asked, his face tense. “If so, could you please give Ally back to me?”

Everyone nodded and nudged me over to Embert. I had no choice but to smile. For his part, Embert wrapped his arms around me without saying a word. He squeezed me so hard that I struggled to breathe.

“I understand that it’s perfectly normal for friends to hug,” he said. “Even so, I can’t suppress my jealousy. Forgive me, but I can be quite petty at times.”

“Well, at least he’s honest,” Lauris mumbled with a look of exasperation.

“It’s kind of surprising though,” Cita chimed in. “Prince Embert always struck me as the sort of person with no interest in romance.”

“Like they say, love is blind,” Cia replied.

As my friends gossiped about us openly, I noticed something. Everyone else had left the classroom. That included Mary, Janus, and the other students.

“Where did everyone go?” I asked.

“Jan and Severin returned to the castle with the knights,” Embert responded. “Mary returned to your dorm room, and the students were allowed to go home for the day. Tomorrow, the castle doctor will examine them for after-effects of bewitchment. Oh, and Custode returned to the volcano for the time being. I’ve asked him to teleport directly to the castle courtyard from now on.”

“Oh, I see. Thanks, I suppose?”

“Um... May we go back to our dorms now?” Lauris asked.

Perhaps he was being considerate of me and Embert, but frankly, I didn’t want to be left alone right now. Regardless, Embert allowed them to go.

“Well then, everyone, take care on your way back,” he said.

Lauris then led everyone out of the classroom.

*Uh, seriously? Am I being abandoned while trapped in Embert's arms?*

The quiet classroom felt unduly large.

"Um... Em," I said. "All this empty space is making me feel uneasy. Could we go somewhere more relaxed?"

"Understood," Embert replied, nodding in agreement. When he snapped his fingers, a magic circle appeared beneath his feet. A moment later, we were sitting on the sofa in his school office. For some reason, I was situated on Embert's lap.

"Um... Em?" I asked as he remained motionless.

"Ally," he responded. "Do you dislike men as petty as me?"

*He's still worried about that?*

"Not exactly," I said. "I told you before, right? I wouldn't leave your side even if you told me to."

Embert's usual smile returned to his face. "Thank you, Ally." Once again, he squeezed me in his arms. "I've been waiting to see you again for so, so long."

"Come again?" I asked, completely baffled by this statement.

"I first met you on the day you swapped places with the real Alexandra."

"Back when I beat everyone to a pulp?"

Embert nodded. "That's right. When Oreste grabbed your arm, you glared at him defiantly rather than back down."

At that moment, he'd given me an excuse to strike back, after all.

"I considered intervening to help," Embert said. "However, the very person I was trying to save stopped me. What's more, you treated me like a total stranger."

*Well, you were a total stranger to me.*

"At that moment, I knew you were someone other than Alexandra," Embert continued. "I thought you might be a Goddess who'd assumed Alexandra's form

to deliver the hammer of justice.”

*Is this guy for real? That makes me sound super cringe.*

“I fell in love with her at first sight,” Embert said, staring at me while continuing to embrace me. “The woman who looked like Alexandra but was someone different on the inside. That woman stole my heart. You were so beautiful and magnificent as you dispensed justice on everyone. Yet when everything ended, the world collapsed around me. At that moment, I prayed to the Goddess, ‘Let me meet this woman in my next life. And if possible, let me be the one to capture her heart.’” Here, Embert brushed my hair back and kissed me on the forehead. “At long last, we were finally able to meet again.”

Embert’s emerald-green eyes sparkled throughout this monologue.

*Still, he fell in love with me at first sight as I was beating everyone up? It’s okay if I cringe a little, right? Far be it from me to say this, but that’s kind of strange, don’t you think?*

I forced myself to keep my face from twitching. Meanwhile, Embert continued speaking, paying my expression no heed.

“Almost immediately, I realized that we were repeating the same life. However, I seemed to be the only one aware of this peculiarity. ‘This must be a pretext for me to meet the other version of Alexandra,’ I thought. When you stopped the magic horse, I instantly knew that you were her. Furthermore, Lauris hadn’t yet fallen in love with you. I was so grateful that my prayer had reached the Goddess.”

*Whoa, he’s smiling like crazy. Was he really that happy?*

“That’s why I worried for your safety when Celette tried to bewitch everyone but you,” Embert said. “At that time, I vowed in my heart to protect you with all my strength.”

Once again, he sounded one step away from a stalker. Even so, his love for me was genuine, and he sincerely wanted to protect me.

I gazed into Embert’s eyes, my stiff smile transforming into a natural one. “Thank you, Em.”

“You’re truly welcome. How wonderful that we met again and made it through this year alive.” When Embert squeezed me against his chest again, I wrapped my arms around his back. “Lady Celette will probably face execution,” he continued. “Bewitchment is forbidden magic. Moreover, she tried to cast it on me, Lauris, and even Princess Julietta. All of us are royalty. This is inexcusable under any circumstances.”

After Celette’s attempts to manipulate royalty, what other outcome could there be? The kingdom couldn’t forgive such a serious crime. In any case, Embert and I settled into silence while embracing each other. Eventually, he broke the silence with a question.

“Would you mind telling me about your past life?”

“You’re curious about that?” I responded.

Embert released his embrace and cupped my hands in his. “Indeed. I want to know everything about you.”

I had to suppress a laugh. *Stalker, much?* That aside, I strained to recall my past life, which had become slightly distant as of late.

“I was a normal student with black hair and dark brown eyes,” I said. “Actually, normal might be the wrong word. My father was the CEO of a large corporation. Wait, that probably doesn’t make any sense to you, huh? Basically, he employed a lot of people. Inevitably, I became the target of kidnappers and other bad actors. In order to protect myself, I began learning martial arts with my older brothers.”

“I see,” Embert replied. “That’s why you were so strong.”

“Heh, I guess so. Anyway, I was hit by a speeding car while coming home from a martial arts lesson. Oh, a car is similar to a carriage, but it’s not pulled by a horse. It uses something called an engine to move instead of magic. Long story short, this car came barreling towards us pedestrians. Completely on instinct, I pushed a parent and child out of the way. As a result, the car ran me over.”

As I reminisced about my past life, my chest tightened slightly. Was this homesickness?

“After dying, I met the Goddess, and she showed me this world,” I continued.

“Watching Alexandra being accused of a false crime without defense filled me with frustration and anger. I felt so sorry for her. And so, I took her place.”

“Thank you for sharing your story,” Embert said while embracing me from behind. “I’m so glad I met you.”

“Me too,” I answered with a laugh. “I won’t see my family in my former world ever again, but I love my family here just as much. Plus, I’m happy to have made so many close friends in this world, and using magic is a blast.” Here, I stared into Embert’s eyes. “And last but not least, I found the love of my life.”

When I finished speaking these words with a smile, Embert showered me with kisses. All the while, I continued speaking.

“When I think about Alexandra’s soul living joyfully in another world, I know I have to be happy too.”

As I laughed, Embert stopped kissing me and embraced me again.

“I’ll make you happy,” he said, his emerald-green eyes glittering like stars. “I swear on the name of the Goddess who granted you divine protection. So, Ally, will you marry me?”

“Of course,” I replied with a gentle smile. “I’ll make you happy too, Em.”

This time, he kissed me ever so softly.

*I’m sure you’ve found happiness in some distant world, Alexandra. Just so you know, I’m very happy too.*

I spoke these words inwardly as Embert continued to kiss me.







## Epilogue

A banner with the words “End-of-Year Celebration Party” hung on the wall. Men in formal attire and women in colorful dresses mingled in the large, lavishly decorated hall. The same scene as when I’d swapped places with Alexandra unfolded before my eyes. However, I wasn’t standing alone. That was the most notable difference. Instead, my friends and I stood in a circle near the middle of the hall.

“This year feels like it flew by,” Cita said wistfully.

Cia nodded in agreement. “Truly. There was never a dull moment either.”

Julietta beamed while looking around at everyone. “I had so much fun this year. It was wonderful becoming friends with you all.”

Certainly, this had been an eventful year, but at the same time, it had been a happy one. A sentimental mood came over me as I prayed for this happiness to reach Alexandra, wherever she was. Hearing my name brought me back to reality.

“Well, it all revolved around Ally,” Lauris said.

“Me?” I asked while cocking my head.

Oreste grinned. “You’re right about that, Lauris.”

Rosario chuckled as well. “Indeed. Ally was always roaring with laughter in the eye of the storm.”

“Um, excuse me?” I protested. “I don’t *roar* with laughter.”

Cia giggled. “It’s just a figure of speech.”

She and Rosario were as happy as ever. The same was true for Cita and Oreste. Apparently, Lauris would be visiting the neighboring country during the long break to secure his own future with Julietta.

*And we all lived happily ever after,* I thought with a satisfied smile.

“We’ll have our high society debuts during our sophomore year,” Cita said. “This next year should be just as fun as the last.”

“Do you think your queenly education will start soon, Ally?” Julietta asked.

I sighed. “Ugh, don’t remind me,” I responded half-jokingly. “That sounds like such a chore.”

Julietta looked taken aback. “Huh?” she asked, brown eyes watering as she looked up at me. “We’re not going to be sisters-in-law?”

Apparently, she’d misunderstood my joke. I didn’t dread becoming queen—just the preparation it entailed.

“No, no, of course we’ll be sisters-in-law,” I said. “In fact, I’ll become queen solely for you, Julietta!” As I punched my fist into the air, someone grabbed my wrist. “Wha?!”

Startled, I turned around to find Embert. Where on earth had he come from?

“I’m delighted to hear that you’ll become my queen,” he said with a devious smile. “However, I’m not as happy about your motives.”

*Oops, did he overhear everything?*

“We were just joking around as friends,” I said. “No need to take it so seriously, y’know?”

Embert’s smile didn’t falter, and he continued gripping my wrist.

“Uh, Em?” I asked.

“Yes?” he responded.

“Could you let go of my wrist?”

He shook his head. “Not until I hear an answer that satisfies me.”

“Right now?”

Embert’s unfaltering smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Yes, right now.”

“Um, all my classmates will overhear me.”

Embert’s grin widened. “Wonderful. They’ll all be witnesses.”

“But this is embarrassing,” I protested as everyone in the hall stared at us.

Nevertheless, Embert's expression remained composed. *"I'm perfectly fine."*

*"Ugh..."*

*This is bad. He won't let go until I give the right answer.*

"Okay," I said before taking a deep breath.

*Just say the words. It can't be that hard, right?*

"I love you," I announced. "That's why I want to become your bride."

Embert's face flushed crimson, as if I'd flipped a switch. Wait, did he not think I would say it?

*Heh, looks like the victory goes to me.*

As I basked in self-satisfaction, Embert's emerald-green eyes sparkled in front of me.

"Huh?" I asked.

Embert kissed me a moment later, rendering me speechless. Shrill cries and excited murmurs echoed throughout the hall. As Embert's lips parted from mine with a light smack, his mouth glistened with saliva. My heart threatened to explode.

Embert chuckled. "You've made your vow, Lady Alexandra. As I said before, I wouldn't let you escape from me even if you wanted to."

Cita rubbed my back as I struggled to breathe.

Lauris sighed in exasperation. "Is this guy seriously my brother?"

Shrugging, Rosario sighed as well. Meanwhile, Oreste and Cia grinned at me. Finally, Julietta and Cita trembled with suppressed laughter, their cheeks rosy. As everyone reacted in their own unique ways, I finally managed to catch my breath. Then, Embert dropped another bombshell on me.

"I'll remain discreet, but in the near future, I'll gather everyone necessary to announce our engagement. It should be fun, don't you think?" Embert grinned. He certainly seemed to be enjoying himself.

*This sounds more brutal than swapping places with the villainess.*

I wasn't in the wrong for thinking that, right?

Embert took my hand gently, his expression softening. "But first, let's enjoy this party, shall we?"

I gripped his hand back firmly. "Yes, that sounds wonderful."

Thus, we both smiled while gazing into each other's eyes.

# Side Story 1: The Undersurface of a Now Beautiful World

## ☆☆ Embert's Point of View ☆☆

**DELPHINA** Celette continued screaming about being the heroine and the main character of this world until moments before her execution. Of all things, the loathsome woman shouted abuse at Ally, threatening to curse her.

Janus and I had visited Celette before her execution. This had been three days after her imprisonment. It had also been our final conversation with her.



**“YOU** don’t seem the slightest bit remorseful,” I said when we arrived in the dungeon. “Your incessant demands to see me had the guards in tears.”

Celette smiled. “You finally came, Prince Embert. The world must have fallen into chaos without me, correct? I’m the heroine, after all. You must be in dire straits without the main character.”

Had she called me down here just to spew this nonsense? I stared at her incredulously. How did she exude such confidence while locked behind bars? The word *dumbfounded* must have originated to describe this sort of occasion.

“Actually, the world remains just as beautiful without you,” I said. “Sorry, I misspoke. It would be better to say, ‘The world is growing evermore beautiful without your presence.’”

Fuming, Celette grabbed the bars, their metallic rattle echoing throughout the dungeon. “That can’t be! You’re just feigning composure. Release me from this cell at once. Mark my words: this world will cease to exist if you execute me!”

“How comical,” I responded with a laugh. “Well then, I look forward to seeing what happens when you disappear. Will this world vanish alongside you? Let’s place a bet on it. Of course, I favor the world not disappearing.”

Celette glared at me. I saw no trace of her former beauty, which had once

inspired protective instincts in men.

“I pity you,” she said. “That woman has you completely whipped. She’s the villainess, you know? Obviously, the world will collapse if you allow evil free rein. I know the truth. You were always a proudly aloof man who didn’t trust other people. That’s why I tried to stand by your side as the holy—”

“Silence,” I interrupted, unable to tolerate her delusional ramblings any longer. After donning a smile, I continued, “You’re severely lacking comprehension skills. As I’ve said numerous times, you aren’t the holy woman. Lady Alexandra is the one with healing magic and the Goddess’s divine protection. *She* is the true holy woman, not a vile temptress such as yourself.”

I forced myself to think of Ally’s myriad expressions. That alone brought me peace of mind. My mental state had grown hostile during this conversation.

“What did you call me?!” Celette shrieked, rattling the bars again.

*I’ve had enough of this*, I thought while turning my back on her. Nothing would come of continuing this conversation. As I tried to leave, Celette continued hurling abuse at me. That said, I wouldn’t suffer listening to each and every one of her insults. Thus, I took a step forward while treating her ramblings as incoherent noise. Unfortunately, her final words reached my ears. Magic swelled around me in a fit of rage, and flames ignited in my clenched fist.

“Do you mind repeating yourself?” I asked. “I might have misheard you.”

I then hurled a fireball at her hands, which were still gripping the bars. Afterwards, Celette glared at me, cradling her burned left hand in her right.

“I’ll say it a thousand times!” she screamed like a madwoman. “I’ll curse that useless, interfering woman to death!”

The sound of metal slicing through the air rang out, and the stench of burnt hair filled the dungeon. Celette didn’t seem to understand what Janus and I had just done. She stared at us slack-jawed, apparently having forgotten the pain in her left hand. Even so, both sides of her hair painted a clear picture of what had occurred. Janus had drawn his sword and sliced off the right side of her hair. At the same time, my fireball had burned off the left side of her hair. A few seconds later, a thin red line welled up on her left cheek.

Jan wore a devious smile, his sword already back in its scabbard. "Apologies. My hand slipped due to anger."

"Huh?" Celette asked. "What's going on?"

Ignoring her, I turned to praise Jan instead. "No, that was splendid. You had to slice between the bars, after all."

"Thank you," Jan responded with a charming smile.

Celette's rage ignited once more in response to me ignoring her. "Hey, you!" she shouted at Janus. "What the hell did you just do to me?!"

Her shrill cries grated on my ears. I didn't want to spend another moment in this dungeon.

"Let's be on our way," I urged Janus.

With that, we both turned our backs on Celette. Though she continued shouting from her cell, we both left the dungeon, never turning around.



## Side Story 2: Something Other Than Zombies Suddenly Appeared at the Mage's Headquarters

### ☆☆ Alexandra's Point of View ☆☆

**OUR** school had a short break between finals and the end-of-year party. As such, I was going to spend time at the headquarters of the mage's order, as I'd promised Severin. The building was located northeast of the castle. Janus and I rode to the usual carriage lot of the castle together. After saying our goodbyes, I boarded another carriage that had been provided by the mage's order. My eyes widened when I saw the vehicle being pulled by giant frogs. Later, my jaw dropped when I saw the outside of the mage's headquarters.

"Why does it look like a haunted house?" I asked Severin, who was riding with me.

"Our headquarters were built by the first grand mage," he replied with a grin. "Perhaps this suited his tastes. Plenty of mages are eccentric, after all."

A western-style mansion ripped straight from a horror game had appeared in the middle of the woods. I could imagine zombies flooding out the front door at any moment.

"Um... It's not haunted, right?" I asked.

The mere thought of being chased by zombies made me want to cry. Ghosts were out of the question too. Any attacks would pass straight through them. As I considered this matter seriously, Severin laughed.

"Are you afraid of ghosts?" he asked. "That's a surprise. Don't worry—this place isn't haunted."

As we entered the mansion, I glared lightly at Severin, who was still laughing. A beautiful chandelier hung from the high ceiling of the grand foyer. Crimson carpet stretched from the entrance hall to the staircase. Candelabrum flames flickered here and there, casting eerie shadows. I had no words to describe this

place other than “terrifying.”

“You’re *sure* no zombies are going to attack us?” I asked.

Severin chuckled. “Still not convinced, eh? Like I said, there’s no need to worry. This is the only area with this ambiance.”

As I recoiled in fear, Severin took my hand and led me through a door on the right. Beyond the door was a long and foreboding corridor that... Oh, wait. It was actually a bright and spacious dining hall. There were several small rooms in the back that appeared to be rest areas. When we returned to the grand foyer and opened the door on the left, we found several magic laboratories. On the second floor, Severin showed me offices, meeting rooms, and the grand mage’s private study.

“There’s even a practice area where you can test magic out back,” he said. “See? Nothing frightening here.”

We were currently in a room lined with magical instruments.

“Anyone would be scared after seeing the exterior of this building,” I insisted.

I found the crystal ball used to condemn Celette while looking around the instruments.

“This was truly difficult to create,” Severin said. “Capturing temporary images is easy enough, but recording them permanently is much more difficult. My father and several other mages spent many sleepless nights mulling over this problem.”

Severin had mentioned something similar when we confronted Celette. The mages must have struggled a great deal.

“Even so, their hard work saved everyone,” I said. “The mages accomplished something truly remarkable.”

“I suppose so,” Severin answered with a smile.

He proceeded to show me various other magical instruments. Afterwards, we headed to the dining hall to quench our thirst.



**WHILE** sipping lemonade, we discussed the magic circles enclosed within magic instruments. During this conversation, Severin seemed to have a flash of insight.

“Is there some sort of magic instrument that you wish existed?” he asked. “Someone as clever as you might suggest something beyond our current imagination.”

His obsidian eyes twinkled as he observed me. He looked like a grade schooler brimming with curiosity.

“Magic instruments that I wished existed, huh?” I repeated.

I pondered Severin’s question while finding his demeanor quite charming. Was there anything I wanted? In my past life, all sorts of technology had been at my fingertips. Even so, I didn’t find the lack of technology here inconvenient. Perhaps I’d grown accustomed to this world.

“Oh,” I said.

Severin leaned forward eagerly from the other side of the table. “Did you think of something?”

“Wouldn’t it be nice to speak directly with a faraway person?”

Severin cocked his head. In this world, most houses contained one or more magic instruments that could transfer letters. However, this transfer was only possible where the instrument was located. Conversely, I wanted a device that allowed communication anytime and anywhere. Of course, smart phones were still a distant dream at this point. That said, I could make do with something like an old flip phone.

“Direct communication, huh?” Severin asked. “That does sound fascinating.”

He began considering the matter earnestly, showing genuine interest. Though he usually appeared androgynous, his serious expression exuded masculinity. As I observed him while sipping my lemonade, lively chatter echoed from the entrance of the dining hall. The new arrivals noticed us and approached our table.

“What’s going on, Severin?” one of them asked. “You on a date?”

“Jealous?” Severin responded with a chuckle.

Though he didn’t deny being on a date, I guess it didn’t matter. We both knew he was joking.

Meanwhile, I ignored their banter and stood up. “Hello, everyone. I’m Alexandra Vistriano.”

“Oh, you’re Duke Vistriano’s daughter?” someone asked.

Thus, everyone greeted me somewhat formally.

“I have a question for you old-timers,” Severin said. “Ally and I want to create a magic instrument that allows for direct communication over long distances. Do you lot have any suggestions?”

Everyone sat down at our table, immediately turning us into a lively gathering. All the men began speaking at once.

“Direct communication?”

“Over long distances?”

“Not through letters?”

“I’ve never thought about it.”

They seemed intrigued. As such, I decided to give a few examples of how we might use such a device.

“Don’t you think it would be wonderful if such a device existed?” I asked. “It wouldn’t need to be solely for emergencies either. We all have friends and family members who we rarely see because they live so far away. Plus, there are times when we suddenly want to see or hear the voices of our significant others. What if we had a magic device that allowed for direct communication on those occasions?”

The entire group resonated with my explanation.

“I know exactly what you mean!” one of the men cried. “My little girl has been learning to speak recently. I would love to hear her voice while I’m working.”

The table erupted in conversation as the men started discussing specifics.

“It would be nice if the device was small enough to carry around.”

“And while we’re at it, let’s think of ways to display the other person’s face.”

“Okay, but how should we construct the magic circles to turn this into a reality?”

After moving to sit down beside me, Severin looked at me with an excited expression. “It looks like they’re really going to make this.”

“I guess so,” I replied with a laugh. “I’m glad I suggested it.”

“You thought of this yourself, Lady Vistriano?” one of the mages asked.

“That’s right,” I responded.

At once, the other mages began enthusiastically hounding me for more suggestions.

“Let’s see,” I said. “I’d like something that rains hot water from above while bathing. The pressure should be stronger than rainfall, and ideally, you could adjust the device to produce a flow like a thin waterfall.”

“When would you use that?” Severin asked on behalf of the group.

“While rinsing your hair or washing away soap bubbles. Also, it would feel nice to have the waterfall hit the tense areas of your body, such as your neck and shoulders.”

After I finished explaining my idea in detail, the excitement reached an all-time high.

“That’s incredible!” one mage cried. “You’re a genius, Lady Vistriano!”

“You’re the Goddess of invention in human form!” another mage cheered.

The group began hounding me with even more questions.

*What did he mean by “the Goddess of invention in human form?”*

I tried to calm everyone down as this thought crossed my mind, but their excitement was irrepressible. Several of the mages leaned forward on the table, causing it to creak ominously. At that moment, something unexpected happened. The door swung open with a loud bang, which prompted everyone to look in its direction. A moment later, the entire group stiffened.

“Huh?” one mage asked.

“Why is he here?” another inquired.

Question marks popped up over everyone’s heads. Who could blame them? Crown Prince Embert was standing in front of us with a stern expression.

“Em?” I asked.

As I called his name, he marched over to me like a speedwalker. The mages retreated in response to his terrifying aura, their chairs rattling as they scattered. Only Severin and I were left at the table.

“Why are you here...?” I asked, the words slipping out of my mouth.

I hadn’t told Embert that I was visiting the mage’s headquarters today. He was preoccupied with our engagement and dealing with Celette, after all. In any case, he reached my side in the blink of an eye and squeezed my hand.

“I should be the one asking why *you’re* here,” he replied. “Why are you surrounded by men in a place like this?”

When Embert smiled darkly, the mages paled.

On the other hand, Severin laughed carefreely. “Looks like he found us.”

*He’s used to this by now.*

“You’ve finished your business with Ally, correct?” Embert asked Severin. “In that case, you won’t mind if I take her back, right?”

Embert pulled me to my feet as he spoke. He’d already decided to take me away.

Severin laughed again. “Of course not,” he said while waving goodbye. “Thanks for everything today. Let’s hang out again sometime. I’ll contact you when the magic devices are finished.”

As Embert pulled me by the hand, I turned around and waved my free hand at Severin. “No, thank you. I had fun too. See you next time.”

When we exited the building, Embert snapped his fingers, and a magic circle appeared beneath his feet. However, we teleported to a place other than his office.

“Where are we?” I asked.

We were in a chic room with uniform black furniture. Despite its imposing atmosphere, I felt strangely at ease.

“These are my private chambers,” Embert responded.

As I jumped in fright and tried to race over to the door, he hugged me from behind.

“Um, Em...” I mumbled. “We might be engaged, but we still haven’t made an announcement to the entire kingdom. It might be a little early for this, don’t you think?”

Though I tried to free myself from Embert’s restrictive embrace, I couldn’t budge an inch. In fact, he tightened his grip on me.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “The bedroom is actually next door, and I haven’t completely lost my senses.”

*Um, did he say next door? And he hasn’t completely lost his senses? Doesn’t that imply he’s not fully in his right mind?*

I flailed about in vain, feeling concerned for my safety. Nevertheless, Embert sat down on the long living room sofa while holding me in a gentle embrace. Once again, I found myself on his lap. Upon realizing that I couldn’t flee, I stiffened as silence hung over us for a short while.

“Um... Em,” I said, unable to bear the silence any longer.

“Yes?” he responded curtly.

I shouldn’t have gone to the mage’s headquarters without telling him. Doing so had completely soured his mood.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

In response to my heartfelt apology, I could feel Embert shaking his head behind me. “It’s fine,” he said. “You should be able to spend time with your friends.”

With that, he sank into silence again. As I wondered what to do, he spoke up again a little while later.

“Actually, it’s not okay,” he said. “My whole body was burning with jealousy. The idea of you meeting up with another man without my knowledge nearly drove me insane.”

His sulky tone coaxed a laugh from me. “Heh, I know. Honestly, I’m really sorry. I promised to visit the mage’s headquarters with Severin a long time ago. Plus, I know how busy you are right now. I planned to stop by here on the way back since I was still on the castle grounds.”

Embert’s features softened to his normal expression. My words seemed to have improved his mood.

I furrowed my brow as something occurred to me. “Still, how did you know where I was?”

His answer was, if I may say so myself, absolutely bonkers.

“I placed a tracking spell on your amulet,” Embert revealed.

*Uh, come again? What did he just say? Do I need to clean out my ears?*

“You put a *tracking spell* on my amulet?” I asked, not bothering to hide my bewilderment.

Embert responded with the most charming of smiles. “Indeed. I never know when you might be faced with danger. As such, I need to know where you are at all times.”

*Wowzers. I’m here to report a stalker, officer. This is way beyond overprotective.*

“You never call for help, no matter how dire the situation,” Embert said. “There’s no telling what kind of danger you’ll face when our engagement becomes public knowledge. You might be kidnapped or targeted by assassins. Even so, you’ll still try to resolve those situations by yourself. Well, you can probably take down any criminal with one hand tied behind your back, considering how strong you are. Regardless, I still want to be the sort of man who can save the woman he loves.”

*Gah, you’re going to make my heart melt. This man is just too much.*

When I turned to face Embert, he kissed my shoulder, which his head had



been resting on.

“Thank you for worrying about me,” I said.

I suppose I could overlook his borderline stalker tendencies. He might have been overprotective, but that was the man I’d fallen in love with. Embert looked momentarily puzzled by my words of gratitude. A second later, however, he beamed at me.

“Think nothing of it,” he said before kissing me on the temple. “It’s what any man should do.”

When I closed my eyes and leaned into his kiss, he proceeded to kiss me on the lips. “Ally,” he said when our lips had parted. His sensual voice caused my heart to skip a beat.

“Yes?” I asked.

“I can’t control myself much longer.”

“Uh, what?”

My pulse quickened for an entirely different reason. Embert had made this carefree statement with a wide grin on his face. As I stared at him dumbfoundedly, he continued speaking, his smile unfaltering.

“My bedroom is just next door...”

*Yes, yes, I’m very aware of that fact. You just said so just a few minutes ago, remember?*

“No, not yet,” I said, giving a firm rejection.

*We obviously can’t do that yet. I would die of embarrassment.*

“Ally,” Embert whined, looking at me like an abandoned puppy.

“Ugh...”

*Don’t look at me with those big, watery eyes. You’re going to break my heart.*

“N-No, not yet,” I repeated. “And stop looking at me like that.”

“But Ally—”

“Still no.”

This back and forth continued until I finally summoned Custode.





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