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## **Prologue: A Tale of Two Sisters**

The Satyrus Delivery Service was the biggest courier company in the Notre Empire. One feature of the company that set it apart is that most of its employees were demi-humans, each of whom filled their downtime between deliveries with other jobs. Some even worked as part-time adventurers. According to the company's policy, the employees could do whatever they liked, so long as their delivery work didn't suffer.

Among such employees, Miach Bastetos—the assistant branch manager of the branch in this city—was well-known as an especially diligent worker. On top of her delivery duties, she juggled multiple part-time jobs, including ad hoc opportunities and anything else that came up. But in her private life, she was rather frugal. None of her friends or colleagues knew why she put in so much effort to earn extra money...



One afternoon, Miach was visiting The Golden City, an enchanted objects shop downtown. It stood some distance away from the high street, but it offered the widest range of high-quality enchanted objects in the town, so there was never a slow day. And of course, the shop was one of the patrons of the Satyrus Delivery Service.

"Hullo there," Miach called out. As usual, she was holding a huge pile of packages as she pushed open the door. "Meow?" She stopped short and widened her eyes in surprise.

From outside, The Golden City looked like a small, ordinary house, but since the rooms inside were made spacious by magic, rows and rows of shelves continued almost endlessly through the shop. There was a counter for the shop's staff right inside the front door. Today, a peculiar meeting was underway there.

A motley group of various ages and species was gathered around a low table and sipping tea. Despite all their differences, the atmosphere was rather laidback. Miach was staring at them when one of the party looked up and waved at her with a warm smile. It was Flora, the witch who owned the shop.

"Oh hello, good to see you, Miach. Thanks for the delivery as always!"

Flora was a tanned woman who appeared to be in her twenties. She was a shrewd businesswoman, running not only The Golden City, but also a thriving chain of ramen shops in multiple locations.

Miach walked over to her and said, "I see you're having the usual gathering... Meow?"

"Hey, it's you...the delivery girl," a man familiar to Miach, but new to the group said.

"Oh? You've met already, Miach and Groh?" Flora asked.

"Glad to see ya too, Flora."

Groh sat next to Flora, and Miach recognized him as the serpent master. He used to be a fairly infamous thug in the city, but ever since Allen had beaten him to a pulp, he'd been living an honest life. The giant serpent wrapped around his neck seemed to be taking a day off; it was completely relaxed, with its eyes closed.

Flora clung to Groh's arm and gave Miach a thumbs-up. "Groh is one of us too," she explained. "We found him just the other day and pulled him into the group!"

"Tch...I don't remember agreeing to join," Groh grumbled.

"Hunh. It's funny to see ya together," Miach remarked, looking at Flora the witch next to Groh, who, despite living a different kind of life these days, still looked like a gang member. And it wasn't just those two; to a stranger, the whole group looked like they had nothing in common. But Miach knew what brought them together. She put a hand to her forehead, looked around at the dozen people around the low table, and sighed in wonder. "Ya got quite a big group now, Flora—you and your reincarnated friends."

"Not just *any* reincarnations. We're all from the isekai Earth, and used to be Japanese!" Flora clarified.

"Why are there so many of us in one place? Doesn't make any sense..." Groh sighed wearily.

They were a group of reincarnated people—in other words, they had memories of their past lives. In this world, reincarnation wasn't such a rare phenomenon. It had been known for centuries that souls were reborn in a cyclical process, just like water or mana. In most cases, people would forget their past lives when they were reborn, but sometimes, they could have vivid recollections of who they'd been before. In some cases, this triggered multiple personalities. Reincarnation was such an ingrained part of common knowledge that there were even laws concerning the rightful ownership of one's property from previous lives.

But when it came to reincarnation from isekai, or alternate worlds, the number of cases was much lower. It was said that countless other worlds existed in the universe, so the chances of encountering two reincarnated souls from the same world were as low as finding a single speck of diamond in a desert.

Yet somehow, Flora had managed to gather this whole group. She laughed proudly. "My tenacity really paid off. I just wanted someone to talk to about my home world so badly!"

"That's terrific, Flora," Miach said. "Who would athought Groh is another one? Ya never brought it up."

"Well, it never came up, I guess... It's not the sort of thing you laugh about over drinks," Groh said bluntly.

Something about the awkward way he said it intrigued Miach. She drew closer and asked, "So tell me, what kind of past life did *you* have, Groh?"

"Huh? Just an average—"

"Listen to this, Miach!" Flora cut in with a grin before Groh could answer. "Groh used to be a delinquent, but one day he jumped in front of a truck to save a child! That's how he died."

"Hey! You promised you wouldn't tell anyone!" Groh looked flustered.

"Another truck story? There's so many of 'em," Miach said with a wry smile.

For some reason, one of the most common causes of death among the reincarnated from Earth was getting run over by something called a "truck." Miach had never seen one before, but apparently it was some sort of steel vehicle. The other members of the group sympathetically jumped into the conversation.

"It was a truck for me too. I was so exhausted from working at an exploitative company that I just staggered out into the road... I feel sorry for that driver."

"I got hit by a train. I was trying to save a high school girl who'd tripped onto the tracks..."

"I'm jealous you all died outdoors... I'd been bedridden ever since I was born."

Everyone in the group lit up when they shared their death stories. Apparently, they'd all drawn a line between their present lives and the past, so there was no hint of sadness, but if a stranger were to overhear their discussion, it would have been spine-chilling.

Miach looked around at the cheerful group, then cocked her head in puzzlement. She'd been wondering about something ever since she walked into the shop, but she hadn't found the right moment to ask. "Anyhoo...what's this table you're all sitting at?"

Everyone was gathered around a kind of low table that she'd never seen before. They sat on some sort of rectangular mat woven from grass, and there was a thick blanket spread out underneath the top of the table. They'd taken off their shoes and stuck their legs into this blanket. She'd never even heard of such an object in her life.

Flora laughed mischievously at the saucer-eyed Miach. "You always do have a sharp eye, Miach. This, my friend...is a kotatsu!"

"A...kotatsu?"

"Just try it, and you'll see. Sit down over here, and stick your feet in—go on."

"Okay, if you insist..." Miach tried sliding in like everyone else. It was comfortably warm inside the blanket. She realized how the table worked immediately. "I see now. It's a table with heating. And the blanket's here to keep the warmth in... Is this also from your past home—Japan, was it?"

"You got it. I made it myself, you see. Here's some satsumas for you too."

"Thankee kindly." Just as Flora prompted her to, Miach ate the satsuma. It was autumn outside, and today was a little chilly. She relished the snug warmth of the kotatsu wrapping around her as well as the fresh, sweet juiciness of the fruit. Just then, she sensed someone watching her closely and looked up. "Meow...? Do I have something on my face, Groh?"

Groh had been staring at her with a rather serious expression, but now he averted his eyes awkwardly. "No, it's nothing," he mumbled. "It's just—you reminded me of the cat I used to live with in my past life... Ah... Tama used to love kotatsu too..." His eyes were brimming with tears.

"Aww, so you were always fond of animals," Flora cooed, pressing a hand to her cheek. The others also looked touched by the heartwarming thought.

"A cat and a kotatsu... It's a classic combination," one of them said dreamily.

"That's the spirit of Japan, isn't it?" Flora said. "Oh Miach, would you like to have these sweets too?"

"Thanks for coming, Miach," another member said. "You really remind us of the old days. Here, take this—it's not much, but just a little something for your time."

"If you like this, I still have a lot of prototype kotatsu left over, so feel free to take one with you!" Flora added.

"Ooh, yes please! I'd be grateful!" Miach beamed brightly as the group offered her more sweets and pocket money. Everyone was so kind and generous, perhaps because they were all on their second go at life. Thanks to that, Miach was a regular at their meetings even though she hadn't been reincarnated. Most of their conversations went right over her head, but she loved their easygoing banter. She was curious what kind of stories she'd get to hear today.

The front door banged open, and a young man tumbled into the room, out of breath and shoulders heaving. He was a member of the group that Miach knew well. "B-Big news, everyone!" he shouted.

"Oh my, is something wrong?" Flora asked.

"Y-You have to come, Flora!" he urged, his face pale. He seemed to have sprinted here—his voice was raspy from the effort, but he pulled himself together to deliver the news. "You know your ramen shop three towns over?! A girl came to eat there... She took one bite and shouted something!"

"I-It can't be...!" The whole group gulped in suspense. Heavy silence fell in the room.

After a few moments, the young man announced, "She said... 'This tastes exactly like Tenkiippin!'"

Everyone rose in excitement. "She's Japanese!!!" they yelled in chorus.

"I really think you should find a better benchmark for sniffing out group members..." Groh grumbled.

Miach didn't get what was going on, so she went on pulling the thin white veins off her satsuma.

"Hey Flora, you're a witch, aren't you?!" Groh complained. "Don't you have...like...a better way of luring out reincarnated people than feeding 'em ramen? You're taking this fantasy world of swords and magic too lightly! Why don't you use a special spell or something instead?!"

"Well, what can I do? The ramen way rakes in more money. The costperformance ratio can't get better than this! We found *you* with the ramen too, Groh. You were raving outside the shop after you ate there."

"Anyone would start raving at that...! I mean, it was like a carbon copy of Tenkiippin's ramen! If we weren't in an isekai, you'd definitely get sued, you know that?!" Groh ranted, but Flora shrugged him off.

In a way, they're a good match, Miach thought as she looked on, munching on the satsuma.

The others were psyched to hear about a potential new member.

"We're all together anyway, so why don't we go to meet her right now?" the young man suggested. "Apparently she's a wandering adventurer, but she's still staying in that town!"

"I'm down, let's go! Wonder which era she's from," another member chimed

in.

"Maybe we could ask her if Haunter x Haunter finished already."

"I wanna ask how many Pokamon there are now. And whether my fave, Garchump, is at the top of the rankings for getting picked in battles..."

With the young man leading the way, the group swarmed out to the street.

"Come with us, Groh," Flora said. "You're looking for a reincarnation of your cat Tama, aren't you? She could be the one!"

"Why would Tama even know what Tenka's ramen tastes like..." Groh scowled, but he still let himself be dragged away by Flora. He nodded at Miach. "Sorry, delivery girl... Can you keep an eye on the shop for her?"

"I'll add a special bonus!" Flora added. "Jill should be here for his shift any minute, so it'll just be for a little while! Pretty please?"

"Course, happy to help. Have fun!" Miach said, seeing them off with a wave. She closed the door behind them with a quiet thump. Left all alone in the shop, Miach heaved a heavy sigh. "Ah, what a nice thing to have... Pals from your hometown."

She sipped on the tea, which had grown cold, and rested her chin on the kotatsu top. She sighed again. "If only...I had someone like that."

 $\Diamond$ 

"Are you sure you want to give this to us...?" Allen asked Miach.

"Oh, I'm sure all right," Miach grinned back at him. It wasn't like him to hesitate.

After Jill showed up to relieve her from her task of minding Flora's shop, Miach had headed to Allen's mansion on the outskirts of the city. She'd already delivered the day's mail to him that morning, but this time she came for something else: to bring over the kotatsu set that Flora had given her.

"Mmm...it's so nice and warm," Charlotte murmured, her face melting into a smile.

"So comfy..." Roo cooed.

"C-Capyyy..." Gosetsu sighed. Both beasts were snug in the kotatsu, with their heads poking out of the blanket. They were already drifting off to dreamland.

This kotatsu was much smaller than the one that Flora and her group had gathered around. This one was just big enough for four adults to squeeze in together. Miach looked around at the cozy, peaceful atmosphere, and nodded in satisfaction.

"My apartment is too cramped, and it's a little too big to keep in the office," Miach explained. "But if ya can keep it here, Dark Lord, I can pop in when I want a break. It'll be purrfect when winter comes around!"

"You always think ahead..." Allen said. "Well, in that case, you can come by anytime. How about some tea?"

"Course! That's what I'm here for!"

With all of them snug in the kotatsu, it was time for a tea party. Since she'd wrapped up all her work for the day already, Miach was ready to unwind, smacking her lips over the tea and sweets that Allen whipped out. Even though she was sitting back, relaxed, her eyes still gleamed. Heh heh heh... You walked right into my trap, Dark Lord. I'm not here just for tea!

After all, Miach had another motive for bringing them the kotatsu. She looked at Allen, who sat across from her. He was just settling down in the kotatsu when he turned to Charlotte, a little startled, and bowed his head.

"S-Sorry. That was an accident," he said.

"I-It's okay..." Charlotte said timidly, blushing a little too.

Miach could tell at a glance what happened: since the kotatsu was so small, his leg must've brushed against hers. With that, her true purpose for the kotatsu was achieved. She did a little fist pump under the blanket so no one would notice.

This is the good stuff! This is what I'm after! I knew it, the small kotatsu is the best for couples! It sets the stage for these little moments of heart-thumping romance when you accidentally brush against each other!

In effect, Miach had given the shy couple a helping hand. Things seemed to be

going according to her plan. Allen, all in a fluster, was pouring cup after cup of tea for himself. Charlotte quietly nibbled at a cookie. The scene of the pure and innocent lovers sated Miach's appetite.

Come to think of it, wouldn't these kotatsu sets be a huge hit if we marketed them to couples like this? I should pitch this to Flora later. Our company can help her with the sales channels and everything... Miach's brain switched to full-on business mode as she rapidly did some mental arithmetic.

Allen cleared his throat. "By the way, Miach, thanks for holding on to our mail while we were away."

"Hm? Oh, no worries," Miach replied with a smile. Allen and the others had been gone for the last two weeks, so Miach had looked after their mail in the meantime. "Where were you all off to, anyhoo?"

"We just had a bit of business to take care of," he said. "Right, Charlotte?"

"Yes..." Charlotte smiled tenderly. "We went to see my little sister."

"Huh?" Miach widened her eyes at the unexpected news. She was well aware of Charlotte's background. These days, the papers didn't mention it anymore, but her scandal had been all over the news, even in this neighboring country. Though the media frenzy had quieted down, that didn't change the fact that Charlotte was a wanted person. And to go see her sister in such a situation...Miach simply didn't understand why she'd take the risk. "Was that...okay? I mean, it must be tricky to go back to Neils Kingdom..."

"Oh, we didn't have to go to Neils," Charlotte clarified. "We found out that my sister is studying at an academy in this country." Charlotte recounted their adventure at the Athena School of Magic. It was a rather topsy-turvy tale...but all's well that ends well. The sisters managed to reunite in the end. "I feel like we're finally true sisters. She said she'll come visit us soon too."

"It was a pain in the neck to get back home, though..." Allen sighed wearily. It had been no mean feat to soothe Natalia, who'd clung to Charlotte and tried to make her stay. They reasoned with her that it wasn't prudent for Charlotte to stay in the public eye for too long, and she reluctantly acquiesced. Charlotte was all smiles at this, but in contrast, Allen didn't hide his fatigue. Apparently, he still had a long way to go until he could earn Natalia's full approval as

Charlotte's partner.

"So that's whatcha were up to..." Miach murmured, dropping her eyes to her own cup. Somehow, her face reflected on the surface of the tea looked dazed, as if she'd lost her spirit. Before Charlotte could notice, though, Miach looked back up with a bright smile. "That's terrific news. I'm sure you'll have lots of fun with your little sister now."

"Yes! I'd love for you to meet her, Miach!"

"Yes please. I'll be lookin' forward to that!" Miach nodded deeply. Charlotte was a precious friend, and the fact that she'd reunited with her family should have been something to celebrate—but Miach couldn't shake off the pain that pricked her heart.

After the tea party at the kotatsu, Miach was invited to stay for dinner too. They enjoyed Charlotte's cooking, which was rapidly improving these days, and chatted some more in the kotatsu. By the time Miach got up to leave, it was already dark outside.

"Well, thankee kindly for the meal!" she said.

"Anytime. Thanks for the kotatsu thing too," Allen said with a generous nod. Since Charlotte and the others were washing up, it was just him seeing her off at the front door. Since the mansion was far from any houses or roads, only the chirring of insects and the rustle of the wind stirred the air. Under the quiet night sky, Allen cleared his throat. "Uh...Miach. Can I ask you something?"

"Yes? What is it?"

"Do you have any siblings?"

"Um... Why do ya think that?"

"You had a weird look on your face when Charlotte told you about her sister. I thought there might be something behind it," he said offhandedly, knitting his brows a little. In tone and in manner, he seemed blunt, but Miach could sense he was deeply worried. "If you don't want to talk about it, then never mind. Forget I ever asked."

"Oh, no. It's nothin' that serious," Miach said, slowly shaking her head. She'd

never told anyone about her past before. But she thought, if it's to Allen, she could be candid. "I *should* have an older sister...a twin, actually."

"What do you mean, 'should have'?"

"We got separated a long, long time ago. So I don't have a clue where she is, or whether she's even alive..." Miach smiled sadly and scratched her cheek. She and her sister were born to a poor family, and they were taken to an orphanage soon after birth. Since they were adopted by different families, Miach had had no way of getting in touch with her sister. A few years ago, she visited the house of the family who had adopted her sister, but they'd moved somewhere else long ago. Now, she didn't even know where to start looking. But still, she wasn't giving up on seeing her sister again. She clenched her fist and thrust it up into the sky. "So I'm gonna save lots of money and go look for her! That's my ambition!"

"So that's why you work so hard," Allen murmured, stroking his chin. Then he flashed her an impish grin. "But you're letting Charlotte go without turning her in. You could've bagged a fair bounty."

"Now you're just being silly, Dark Lord. I could never be happy if I found my sister using dirty money."

"Makes sense. You're honorable like that." Allen grinned, satisfied with her logic.

Miach felt a little bit relieved. She wouldn't have wanted any officious pity from anyone. But what he said next startled her.

"All right, then let me give you a hand."

"Huh?" Miach's eyes went round.

"I'm fairly well-known, and I have connections in the Athena School of Magic too. I'm sure I can find a clue or two about your sister's whereabouts."

"Th-That's real nice of ya...but are ya sure? It's pretty much a wild goose chase."

Her sister could be anywhere in the world. The population of demi-humans like Miach surpassed that of humans, and besides, Miach didn't even know

whether she was still alive. It was as difficult as Flora finding her fellow reincarnated people, just in a different way.

When Miach explained all this, Allen shrugged. "The work won't be such a big deal. You're, well, our neighborhood courier..." He paused, looked away, then mumbled, "And...you know...a friend, sort of."

Miach was silent.

"Hey, don't just stand there. Say something. Come on," Allen demanded, grabbing her shoulders. In the end, he had to say something to wreck the mood.

Though she'd been staring at him with her mouth hanging open, she soon burst out laughing. "Pfft! Who would thought you, of all people, would say something like that—the Dark Lord who used to be shut up in his house, steering clear of everyone. You've really changed, haven't ya? It's all thanks to Charlotte."

"Hmph. Mind your own business. So? What's your answer, then? Do you want me to help or what?"

"Oh yes, yes please. I'll take ya up on your offer. I feel a lot more confident to have ya on my side now!"

"Heh. I know, right?" Allen smirked triumphantly.

Not so long ago, Allen could barely even manage to make small talk with Miach—he really had changed. Miach was contemplating this when Allen whipped out a notepad and pencil.

"First off, what's your sister's name? I'll have a casual look around."

"Okey doke. Her name—" Just as Miach was about to speak the long-cherished name, a shrill voice rang out from a distance.

"There you are!!!"

"Hm?" Allen turned to find Groh hurtling through the woods. His serpent was raising its head restlessly too. "Groh? What are you doing here? You need something from me?"

"No, it's not you I'm here for..." he replied, huffing. "I had to see the delivery girl."

"Me?" Miach pointed to herself in surprise.

Groh nodded, gasping for air. "I looked all over the place for you. Good thing I checked here, just in case."

"Sorry about that... What happened?" Miach asked.

"You won't believe it. You know how we all went to that town with Flora's ramen shop? To meet the reincarnated girl."

"Uh-huh... What about it?" Miach tilted her head, puzzled.

"So that girl we found..." Groh said gravely, "looked exactly like you!"

Miach was speechless for a few moments. "What?"

"And when we told her about you, she said, 'Miach is my little sister; we got separated when we were little,' and things like that. She's waiting for you at The Golden City now. She was looking for you all this time," Groh rattled off excitedly. Then he beamed contentedly. "What a coincidence, huh? Flora's hobby shops do come in handy sometimes... Uh, hey, what's up? Something wrong, Dark Overlord?"

Miach stood frozen in place, too startled to speak.

"Well...uh, what can I say?" Allen gave a light pat on her shoulder. With a complicated expression both awkward and congratulatory, he said, "That's great news, Miach. You can finally see her again."

"This is totally unexpected!!!" Miach cried out.

And so, the sisters happily reunited at Flora's shop. After that, Maiah settled down in their city too, and people often saw the two of them hopping bars together, arm in arm.

# **Chapter 1: A Naughty Eve Party**

The big brouhaha was set off one morning around the end of autumn.

It was the season when mornings were getting rather chilly, and the flora and fauna were starting to prepare for the long winter ahead. The woods around Allen's mansion, too, were covered with a thick carpet of fallen leaves. In the serene hush of the living room, a cheerful humming could be heard.

"Hm. hm-hmmm~√"

"Oh?" Allen looked up from his newspaper and blinked at Charlotte, sitting across from him. She was all smiles, humming a tune as she spread butter on her toast. He couldn't help melting into a smile himself at the sweet view. Folding up the newspaper, he asked, "What's up, Charlotte? You're in a merry mood today."

"Ah, I'm sorry—did I bother you?"

"Of course not. I could listen to you hum forever." He would've liked to keep listening, but he was curious about the reason behind the tune. "I just thought it's a bit rare to see you so excited. Has something nice happened?"

"Um, well...it will, soon. It's just a little personal thing," Charlotte answered shyly.

"Hm, that's the first I've heard of it." Gosetsu looked up from her bowl. She was eating breakfast near the table in her Infernal Capybara form. Though she could transform into a human, she normally stayed in her natural beast shape. Donning her human guise made her shoulders go somewhat stiff. "Are you planning an outing with Miss Miach or Miss Eluka? If so, I will be glad to escort you as your guard." She thumped her pudgy forepaw against her chest.

"Oh no, it's nothing like that. It's just a trivial thing..."

"What is it, Mommy? When you're happy, I'm happy too!" Roo chimed in, snuggling up and putting her chin on Charlotte's lap.

"Hee hee. Thank you, Roo." Charlotte stroked Roo's head. Allen and Gosetsu smiled even more at the heartwarming scene.

Hm, I suppose it's something like the flowers in the garden about to bloom, or young birds almost flying their nest... Small joys like that, Allen thought. However small it might be, happiness was happiness. Before she escaped from home in the spring of this year, relishing such moments of joy would have been impossible for Charlotte. Allen knew that, so seeing her happy like this warmed his heart even more.

However, this heartening atmosphere came to an end the next moment when Charlotte clapped her hands together and said, "Actually...it's my birthday tomorrow. I'm going to turn eighteen."

#### BANG SMACK CRAAASH!!!

Allen toppled over from his chair, and Gosetsu tipped headlong into her bowl of food.

Silence fell in the living room.

Eventually, Roo asked with wide-open eyes, "Uh, what's gotten into you two?"

"Are...are you okay, Allen and Gosetsu?!" Charlotte rushed over to the pair who were sprawled out on the floor.

"Charlotte... Is that really true?" Allen croaked, grabbing her hand. He could feel the blood draining from his face, and shivers ran down his whole body. But he still willed himself to rasp, "Is it really...your birthday tomorrow...?!"

Charlotte was bewildered, but she nodded in reply. "Y-Yes. But what about it...?"

At her words, Allen froze in place, too shocked to speak.

Roo trotted over to them and tugged at Charlotte's sleeve. "Mommy, what's a birthday?"

"It's the anniversary of the day you were born," Charlotte said. "You haven't heard of it, Roo?"

"Nah, Fenrirs live a long time. So we don't think much about years and stuff."

While Charlotte and Roo were having their casual conversation, Gosetsu staggered to her paws, a piece of apple still stuck to her face. Like Allen, she croaked feebly, "It's true, the birthday is a part of human culture that's distant from us magical beasts. However...I have learned in the past that it is a time of celebration for human beings. Is this perhaps an outdated custom now...?"

"No, it's still going strong. It's a big deal," Allen answered firmly.

"Oh, is it?" Charlotte asked, tilting her head quizzically.

In some regions, there were populations who marked the first day of the year as the day when they all grew a year older. But in both this country as well as Charlotte's home country, it was the common custom to have a fairly big celebration for one's birthday. People would send each other gifts, or host a party. When Allen still lived with his parents, they would have an extravagant celebration for him on the anniversary of his adoption. He explained all this to Charlotte, but it didn't seem to click with her.

"When my mother was alive, she used to celebrate with me...but isn't it just for little children, or special people? The Evanses would always have grand birthday parties for people like Natalia or Father."

"But weren't *you* supposed to be the daughter of the duke's family, at least in title...? Didn't they host a party for you, even if just to keep up appearances?" Allen asked.

"Hmm... I don't think so..." Charlotte pondered for a little while, then looked up in surprise. "Oh! There was always a big party around this time of year. But they ordered me to stay in my room and pretend to be too sick to attend... Could...could those parties have been for my birthday?!"

"So that's how it was..." Allen could only bury his head in his hands. They were probably annoyed they had to celebrate an illegitimate daughter, or something like that... The family must have held parties for the occasion, but only used it as an opportunity to cultivate their social standing.

Though Charlotte was now much more assertive and outgoing than she had been—compared with her timidity and lack of self-esteem when Allen had first met her—she still was sometimes rather inexperienced when it came to certain things about the world because she had lived like a slave for so many years.

Allen had been aware of that from time to time, but this discovery about her birthday was completely unexpected.

Her family's conduct grated on Allen, but he stifled it with a heavy sigh. "Well, it's my fault for not asking you earlier... I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, Charlotte."

"Wh-Why are you apologizing?"

"It's not too late, Sir Allen," Gosetsu jumped in, putting a paw on Allen's shoulder. "Why don't we launch an ambush on enemy territory right now? I'll do everything I can to back you up."

"No, wait. Let's concentrate on the most immediate thing for now, all right?" Allen reasoned with a straight face. The idea of making a raid on the enemy was tempting, but he couldn't waste another second of his time. He slowly rose to his feet and declared, his voice rising from the pit of his stomach, "All right! I've decided, Charlotte!"

"Oh? About what?" Charlotte asked, round-eyed.

"Tomorrow, we'll hold a grand celebration for—"

"I'm here, dear sister!" The door behind Allen banged open, and a ball of bloodthirsty animosity flew toward him.

"Whoa?!" Allen spun around and parried the approaching knee kick with his palm, using the momentum to knock the assailant back. His opponent landed lightly on her feet with a click of her tongue.

"Not bad, Dark Overlord. It's tricky to land a blow even when I catch you off guard." The attacker threw him a sharp glare. Of course, it was none other than Natalia. She was still dressed in the uniform of Athena School of Magic, with a big rucksack on her back.

"You little... What do you think you're doing?! You can't just barge in and pounce on your teacher and brother-in-law!" Allen shouted.

"Who are you calling brother-in-law?! I haven't accepted your courtship yet!"

Charlotte's mouth was hanging open at her sister's sudden appearance, but she soon came to herself and greeted her with a bright smile. "Welcome, Natalia!"

"My dear sister!" Natalia flew to Charlotte and hugged her tight, her animosity vanishing instantly. When she was like that, she looked just like an ordinary young girl. She looked up at her older sister with sparkling eyes, apparently forgetting all about how she'd just tried to kill Allen with all her might. "I've come to play with you! Is today a good time to visit?"

"Of course, I'm so happy you're here. But it's not good to quarrel with Allen, you know. I have to tell you, bad girl."

"N-No, that wasn't a quarrel," Natalia mumbled. "It's part of the training. There's a rule that an apprentice can make a sudden attack on their teacher at any time."

"R-Really? Being a teacher is hard work," Charlotte said.

"I'm sure that kick had nothing to do with training... More like something much more malicious..." Allen sighed. He still ruffled Natalia's hair, though. "Anyway, I won't say I'm not welcoming you. So, how did it go with Chris's family? Did you pull it off?"

"Hmph, of course I did." Natalia smacked away Allen's hand with a scoff. Apparently, her big project to save her friend's older sister had ended in success. Since Allen had been giving them lots of advice for their scheme, he was relieved to hear the news. Roo and Gosetsu gathered around Natalia too.

"Good to see you, Natalia. How've you been?" Roo said.

"You too, Roo. You're as shiny and fluffy as ever," Natalia replied.

"You've come a long way, young Natalia. You must be tired from the journey," Gosetsu remarked.

"I'm all right. I had company this time," Natalia said.

"Company?" Allen asked, cocking his head.

"That's me," Eluka said, carrying in a stack of huge boxes. She set them down in the corner of the room with a loud thud. "Phew, that was super heavy. How'd you like riding on the dragon, Natalia?"

"It was very comfortable—just as I'd expect from a dragon raised by Professor Liz." Natalia nodded in mild excitement. "But I'm still surprised we could fly

over here in just a couple of hours."

Allen's mother, Liselotte, was a magic beast specialist. The beasts that she hatched and raised had perfect health and discipline, and she always brought home the top prizes at beast shows. Natalia and Eluka's flight must have been an easy journey with a dragon like that.

But Allen had so many more questions. Tilting his head, he pointed at the pile of boxes. "I get that Natalia wanted to see Charlotte, but what're you doing here, Eluka? And what's all this?"

"Oh, that? Hmm, you go ahead, Natalia—you can give her yours first. I'm happy to wait," Eluka said.

"Well, if you say so..." Natalia exchanged a look with Eluka, then set down her rucksack with a little *oof*. She rummaged in the bag and produced a rectangular box in beautiful wrapping. She held it out to Charlotte with a big smile. "Here you go, dear sister. It's a little early, but it's your birthday present."

"Oh?!" Charlotte stood motionless with wide-open eyes. Then she timidly took the box from Natalia, looking back and forth between her sister and the box. "M-My birthday... This is for me?"

"Yes. Since I couldn't celebrate with you in the past, I wanted to give you something extra special this time. Please open it," Natalia urged.

"O-Okay." Charlotte opened the gift. Inside the box was a mirror. It wasn't just any old mirror. Allen could tell at a glance that it was an enchanted mirror with a special spell.

"It's a magic mirror," Natalia explained. "There's an artificial spirit attached to the mirror, so you can ask it about anything you want to know, and it lets you talk to people who are far away too."

"Wow! It sounds very valuable—are you sure you'd like to give it to me?"

"Of course. I made it myself." Natalia grinned with pride. Then she looked down meekly and fiddled with her fingers. "And if you don't mind...it would be nice if you could call me once in a while. I have the same mirror, so..."

"Really?! I'd love to. Let's call each other often, Natalia."

"Yes! I'd love that!"

The sisters beamed at each other. The recent incidents seemed to have brought them very close together. This should have been a touching scene, but Allen watched them with a grimace.

Ugh, so she knew that it's Charlotte's birthday! It doesn't surprise me...but I'm falling far behind! Charlotte's birthday was an important event for him, but he hadn't been able to prepare anything yet. This was a disgrace as her guardian, let alone her boyfriend. Just as he was getting desperate to make up for the late start, Eluka pulled one of the boxes from the stack.

"And here's a gift from me, Charlotte," Eluka said. "It's a set of cooking utensils."

"What?!" Allen did a double take.

"You too, Eluka?!" Charlotte exclaimed.

The box was full of things like pots and knives. Charlotte peered in with shining eyes as Eluka proudly explained the items.

"They're all enchanted, so it'll be a breeze for you to heat things up or freeze them. And they come with more handy features too. I heard you're practicing your cooking these days? Thought you'd have fun with them."

"They look really useful! Thank you so much!"

"That big box over there, it's a set of textbooks on magic from Papa, and books about beast taming from Mama. They said if there's anything you don't understand, you can ask them any time," Eluka said.

"Ah, there's a present from Chris too," Natalia said. "Some seeds for a rare flower. And an assorted box of sweets from my followers."

"Plus some cute clothes and stuff from Papa and Mama," Eluka added.

"Oh, um...all this?!" Charlotte watched the presents getting piled up in front of her with round eyes. She was soon surrounded by a heap of gifts.

"Wait just a minute!" Allen blurted out. "How do you and everyone else know about Charlotte's birthday?!"

"Huh? What do you mean, 'how'...?" Eluka turned to him with a look that clearly wondered what planet he was on and casually explained, "You know how Charlotte sneaked into our school under an alias? I asked her what her birthday was when we made those fake ID docs."

"I told Chris and the others," Natalia said. "They wanted to thank her because she was good to them."

"Y-You've got to be kidding...!" Allen could accept that Natalia would know about the date before him. But Eluka, Harvey, Liselotte, and even the students at the academy? It was quite a serious shock to him that they were already aware of her birthday. He stood stock-still, as white as a ghost.

Natalia sensed that something was wrong. Her lips twisted into a sneer. "Oh, what's this, Dark Overlord? Don't tell me...you didn't know it's her birthday tomorrow?"

"Ack!"

"I see... And you call yourself her boyfriend, hmm? Is *that* how you live up to your role?"

"Arrrgh..."

They were the very picture of a bridegroom getting bullied by his sister-inlaw. But Natalia's criticism was so valid that Allen couldn't say anything to defend himself.

Gosetsu fell to the ground and groaned as if the world was coming to an end. "Ah... I have failed to prepare a single offering for my dear Lady's fête—what dishonor for a loyal subject! I shall live in shame for the rest of my life...!"

"Are we all giving presents to Mommy? Then count me in! I wanna give her something too!" Roo piped up.

"D-Don't worry," Charlotte said hastily, "I'm happy just with your wishes—"

"It doesn't work like that!" Allen grasped her hands and spoke with earnest determination. "Wait for me, Charlotte. I'll prepare the best present for your birthday!"

"And I shall dedicate a matchless treasure for you!" Gosetsu joined in.

"I'll go ask my mother!"

"Everyone..." Charlotte's eyes grew teary.

Observing the three of them getting fired up, Natalia flashed a confident grin. "Fine. Well then, let's see who can make my dear sister the happiest with their gift... It's a battle!"

"Bring it on!" the trio yelled.

And so, the tumultuous birthday festivities were set in motion. But at that moment, none of them could have predicted that their merrymaking would give rise to a drastic turn of events.

 $\Diamond$ 

A few hours later...

"It's...done...!" Allen murmured with a raspy voice, clenching his fist.

He was in his laboratory in the depths of his mansion, which was off-limits to Charlotte and the others due to the dangerous ingredients he stored there. Usually he'd come down to the lab to brew potions. The room was packed with strange instruments for experiments, flasks, and other various tools around a magic kiln. And right now, these apparatuses were in full operation.

Among the pieces of equipment, the most prominent was the giant cultivation tank made of glass that stood in the center of the room. The chamber was filled with a suspicious lime green liquid, with bubbles rising to the top. A small figure floated inside. Allen gazed at it in satisfaction, then jotted down some notes on his clipboard.

"Right, all that's left now are subtle adjustments..."

"Hmm. Pretty neat handiwork there," a voice behind him mused.

"Whoa?!" Allen whirled around and stared with wide eyes. "D-Dorothea...? You're still alive?!"

Dorothea the dark elf cast him a withering look. "Don't go killin' me off." She was in her usual lazy outfit: a stretched, oversized shirt and bare legs underneath.

Dorothea was the previous owner of Allen's mansion. But since she'd locked herself up in the basement under the garden, everyone had thought she had run off for good, and the mansion was sold to Allen. When she reappeared, there was a brief debate over the ownership of the property, but after various turns of events, she'd been whisked off the premises.

"Phew, I gotta admit, it's good to breathe the outside air again," Dorothea laughed brightly. "I've dealt with my work, y'see. Yoru, my editor, gave me permission to come home—so here I am!"

A look of concern crossed Allen's face. "Uh... Do you intend to live here?"

"'Course I do. Ah, but don't worry 'bout me. I think I'll just be holed up underground. Though I might come up to get a bit o' sun once every few years or so."

"What are you, a cicada?"

Dark elves were a rare species, and they only occasionally appeared in human settlements. It was a unique experience just to be able to speak to one. But somehow, talking with Dorothea didn't make Allen feel any gratitude.

As Allen looked on with a scowl, Dorothea peered into the cultivation tank with curiosity. "By the way, this is a nice piece o' work...but why in the world are you making such a thing?"

"Well, the fact of the matter is—" Allen filled her in briefly: how he and Charlotte were now in a relationship, how he hadn't known it was her birthday tomorrow, and how he was preparing a gift for the celebration.

Once she heard the explanation, Dorothea looked even more puzzled. "You mean to say...that *this* homunculus is your gift for Miss Charlotte?"

"Exactly!" Allen proudly gestured to the small figure in the green culture solution. It looked like a young girl of about ten years in age. Its eyes were closed firmly, fast asleep. Though it looked realistic, it wasn't actually a human. It was a homunculus, a human-shaped creature made with only the most advanced skills of magic and alchemy. To bring it to life, Allen just had to instill in it something similar to a soul, and the doll would become animate, able to take care of easy chores around the house. "I made it to help out Charlotte.

She's caring by nature, so I thought she'd get accustomed to a child-shaped homunculus more easily."

"I think that's fine, but...hmmm." Even compared to Allen's previous creations, this homunculus turned out to be an exceptional work, but Dorothea stared closely at the figure with a frown.

"What is it?" Allen said, knitting his brows. "Think it'll move smoothly? Or did you notice something, as a dark elf?" Dorothea may have been a hopeless misfit, but she was an elf, after all. Her feedback was bound to be useful. He waited for her answer expectantly, but he was startled by her critique.

"Well, it's nothin' to do with me bein' an elf; I think anyone would notice...in general?" Dorothea said hesitantly. "This homunculus...it looks a bit like Miss Charlotte, doesn't it?"

Allen was dumbfounded. "Huh?" At first, he couldn't understand what she meant. He froze for a few seconds, then turned to stare at the homunculus floating in the glass chamber. Studying its childlike face, he had to admit that it looked *exactly* like Charlotte, except for its white hair. If someone told him that this was how she'd looked as a child, he might have believed it. Allen gulped. "It...does...doesn't it...?" he croaked.

"Oh, you weren't aware of it, were you?" Dorothea asked with a nod, as if a light bulb went on in her head. "Thought that's how it went," she added quickly. "I mean, homunculi do turn out in line with the creator's vision, after all. If you make one thinkin' of the person it's meant for, no wonder you end up with somethin' like this. Well well, glad to see you're a lovey-dovey couple! I'd love to hear all about it in good time!" Dorothea squealed in delight, whipping out a notepad. If Allen recalled correctly, she had been in the process of writing a romance novel when they last met.

"Hey...Dorothea," Allen murmured, covering his face with both hands.

"What's up, Master Allen?"

"Suppose a man offered his girlfriend a homunculus that looks exactly like her on her birthday... What would you think?"

"Ohh, lemme think. In all honesty..." Dorothea mulled over it in a suggestive

pause. Then she asserted with a deadpan expression, "It'd be super cringey."

"I knew it!!!" He shrieked and threw his clipboard on the floor. Almost at the same time, a crow cawed to the sky outside, which was dyed in orange by the setting sun.

It was less than six hours to Charlotte's birthday.



"Well well, hope I'm not intrudin'—thanks for havin' me over," Dorothea said.

"You're very welcome here. You came back right in time," Charlotte replied with a warm smile, pouring wine into Dorothea's glass.

Everyone was gathered around the living room table, which was brimming with all kinds of colorful dishes. Though Charlotte's birthday was tomorrow, she had put in a lot of effort for dinner since Natalia and Eluka had joined them.

The two had helped out with the cooking too. But they didn't touch the food. Instead, they whispered to Charlotte with solemn faces.

"When did my bro meet a dark elf?" Eluka asked under her breath. "You never see them anywhere, you know. Even Papa would have a hard time trying to meet one."

"It's actually my first time seeing one in the flesh too..." Natalia murmured. "So this is the dark elf, known as the 'guardian of wisdom.'"

"Uh, yeah..." Allen muttered, his mind elsewhere. He couldn't be bothered to explain the full story of how the dark elf came attached to his purchase of the old mansion. Besides, he was still racking his brains for Charlotte's present, which made him even more taciturn. Argh... What am I going to do?! I can't show anyone the homunculus... What should I give her?!

He couldn't bring himself to get rid of the homunculus, so it was still floating in the tank in the laboratory. But there was no way he could offer *that* as a gift. Charlotte would probably be happy with any present, but the other girls would be completely put off. His reputation was already hanging by a thread in Natalia's eyes—he couldn't risk his position even further.

Apparently oblivious to Allen's internal struggles, Dorothea said, "By the

way," and snapped her fingers. A book with a ribbon tied around it fell from thin air. She held it out to Charlotte with a big grin. "Miss Charlotte, I heard your birthday's comin' up on the morrow. Here's a little somethin' from me. It's my latest romance novel."

"Ooh! I can have it?!" Charlotte exclaimed, practically jumping up in excitement. Her face broke into a smile as she hugged the book close. "I found lots of books written by you in the storage room, so I've been reading them bit by bit. They're so romantic, it makes my heart race... I'm so happy to have your new one!"

"Why, you're the one I want to thank. I'm much obliged to you, Miss Charlotte, and Master Allen for this new novel here."

"Oh, wh-what do you mean by that?"

"The protagonists in that book are modeled after you two, y'see. Oh yes, I spun you the sweetest yarn, as sugary as candy floss!" Dorothea beamed from ear to ear and gave a thumbs-up.

"R-Really?!" Charlotte gave a little shriek.

"Huh...?" Allen couldn't let that remark pass and half-rose from his seat. Just as he leaned over to try to check the contents of the book, the door slammed open, and Gosetsu and Roo stormed in.

"We shall not be left behind when it comes to gift-giving!" Gosetsu announced.

"I've got something too!" Roo chirruped.

The pair had been out since the morning, preparing presents for Charlotte. Now, each carried a bundle wrapped in cloth on their backs, and they were covered in leaves from hurrying back home.

Charlotte went over to them and brushed the detritus from their coats. "Welcome back. You're both so dusty—let's take a bath together later."

"That would be a blessing, Lady Charlotte. But first, I shall be grateful if you could receive our gifts."

"Mommy! I brought you a present! Look! Look!"

Charlotte was deeply touched. The two of them took off their bundles and started eagerly unwrapping them in front of her. "Thank you so much...both of you."

"First, if I may be allowed to present my humble offering... In the beginning, I considered seizing a far-off castle in your name, but..."

"I-I would respectfully decline that..."

"I thought that's what you would say, so for now, I brought you this." With her round, pudgy paws, Gosetsu proffered a pendant. A glimmering stone like a diamond hung from a thin chain.

Charlotte took it uncertainly and asked with round eyes, "Is this a jewel? I can't accept such a valuable thing..."

"Oh no, it's not a jewel. We Infernal Capybaras have teeth that can turn into transparent stones if one polishes them thoroughly enough. I did a little work on a tooth and crafted a pendant from it." Gosetsu opened her mouth wide to show the space where one of her straight front teeth was missing. "Fear not, for our teeth grow back in three days. This pendant can be used as a charm to protect you as well."

"I-I see... I'll take it gratefully, then. It has such a lovely sparkle to it—it's beautiful!"

"I am honored to hear that." Gosetsu smiled and purred in her throat as Charlotte stroked her head.

Roo jumped in, impatient for her turn. "Look at my present too, Mommy! I talked to Mother and my siblings, and here's what we came up with... Ta-da!"

"Ooh, a scarf?" What Roo brought was a soft, fluffy scarf woven from threads of gold and silver. Charlotte rubbed her cheek against it, snug and warm.

"Yup," Roo replied happily. "We gathered the fiber from all of our fur, and Mother wove it together for us. Mother can transform into a human like Gosetsu, so she's good with her hands."

"It's so fluffy like a cloud! I'll have to visit your family to thank them."

"Do come! They were all saying they wanna see you again."

"I'd like to pay them a visit too. I am much obliged to Young Roo for her company," Gosetsu said.

The trio chattered cheerily together. At a glance, it was just an ordinary, heartwarming scene—but the others were staring dumbfounded. Eluka and Natalia whispered to each other, their faces twitching in shock.

"Charlotte's getting crazy presents, isn't she...?" Eluka murmured.

"Yes...I wonder how many hundreds of gold coins those gifts alone would be worth..." Natalia replied.

The pendant was an exceptionally rare ornament that an Infernal Capybara would give only to the most trusted of allies—in short, it was the stuff of legends. And as for the scarf, it was woven from the fur of a rare, endangered species. If either item went on the market, collectors of refined taste would pile on an extravagant amount of money with a fervent gleam in their eyes.

Wait a second... Am I in last place? Both beasts had managed to prepare unique, heartfelt presents and had made Charlotte happy. The same went for Dorothea, who gave Charlotte her book. Comparing himself to the others, Allen felt utterly, uncharacteristically dejected.

"I heard a bit o' the tale from Master Allen," Dorothea piped up, sounding a little surprised, "but how in the world did a Fenrir and an Infernal Capybara get so attached to Charlotte? I've lived a thousand years, but I've never seen such a colossal feat."

"Hmm. If a dark elf like you says so, it really must be something special..."

Natalia nodded her head solemnly, stroking her chin. "It could be that the traits of our blood have manifested especially powerfully in my sister."

"Aha, so you come from a special lineage? If you don't mind, could you tell me more?"

"Well, we're from the Evans clan of Neils Kingdom."

"The Evans..." Dorothea snapped her fingers in recognition. "Ah! You mean, the Evans of Saint Lydilia!"

"Saint...?" Allen cocked his head in puzzlement.

"Lydilia Evans. She's the hero who saved Neils Kingdom about three centuries ago," Natalia explained.

Although she lived so long ago, she was still a household name in the kingdom. At only ten years old, she was adept at magic, and even groups of full-grown adults were powerless before her. Her words had the power to move the hearts of even the roughest of people, and she tamed all kinds of magical beasts. When a horde of magical beasts attacked the kingdom, she took them on all by herself, and drove them away without shedding a single drop of blood. That was just one of the achievements that made her famous throughout the kingdom as a savior saint.

Allen had heard of the legend, at least. "I'd never have guessed that she's your ancestor..."

"Not directly. Lydilia died young from a plague, so the current Evans family descends from her younger brother."

The Evans clan had begun as a rather low-ranked family among the nobility. But since the whole kingdom highly praised Lydilia's deeds, they had been able to rise all the way up to dukedom. They continued to uphold their intimate relationship with the royal family and eventually came to secure their high standing that they have now.

"Though we're not directly descended from the saint, we do share the same blood. Rumor has it that every few generations, someone with superhuman powers is born in our family. My sister must be one of them," Natalia said.

"That's a bit of an exaggeration, isn't it? All I can do is talk to Gosetsu and Roo," Charlotte said.

"You might say that, but...I always wondered." Natalia shook her head and asked with a serious expression, "About half a year ago, that stupid, scum-of-the-earth, asshole prince framed you, and you were thrown into the castle prison, weren't you?"

"Y-You shouldn't use bad words, but yes... What about it?"

"Then...how did you actually escape from that prison?"

"Huh?" Charlotte's eyes went round in a quizzical look.

"She told me the story when we met," Allen cut in. "If I remember right, she found an opportunity when the guards weren't looking...?" He paused and cocked his head, doubt arising at his own words. When he'd taken her in in her dire state, she had told him that she'd sneaked out when the guards weren't looking. Allen could see that she was telling the truth, so he'd believed in her completely—but on second thought, this was an odd story. "It was a prison in the royal castle, right...? How would there even be such an opportunity?"

Charlotte had been branded a villain plotting to overthrow the state. There must have been quite a large number of soldiers guarding the cell of such a criminal. It was highly unlikely that Charlotte—who had no one on her side and couldn't even cast a single magic spell back then—could find a way to flee.

"Yeah, that's what I've been wondering about too." Eluka joined in, eager to hear more. "I've been researching your past, Charlotte. But I just can't figure out how you slipped out of that castle. The security must've been pretty tight."

All eyes were on Charlotte.

"U-Um, I just sneaked out when I could, that's all..." Charlotte said as if it was nothing special. "At some point, I noticed that the lock to my cell was open, and all the guards were having a nap...so I slipped away. I was very, very lucky."

"That definitely sounds like more than luck?!" Allen pointed out.

Charlotte recounted how she went on her escape, choosing the paths that seemed safe to her by instinct, but somehow she never came across anyone in the castle. When she safely made it off the grounds, there happened to be a peddler's horse-drawn carriage parked nearby, so she secretly climbed onto it, and it carried her across the border.

The whole story sounded like a load of baloney. If anyone else had told it, Allen would've said, "You're full of it!" But this was Charlotte. Of course, there was no lie in her words. Everyone could sense that she was telling the truth, so they only exchanged solemn looks.

"With a story like that, the mystery only gets deeper," Eluka remarked. "No way things line up like that just by coincidence."

"I heard later that all the soldiers who'd been on watch at that time reported

blacking out all of a sudden."

"It must be hard work being a prison guard... Everyone was sleeping so peacefully," Charlotte said.

"Pretty sure they weren't just sleeping from fatigue, Charlotte," Eluka said.

"There was lots of gossip around then that maybe you used some strange magic...but it seems like you don't remember anything like that," Natalia said.

Natalia and Eluka frowned thoughtfully. Dorothea, who had been munching on the salad all by herself throughout the conversation, stroked her chin and let out a murmur. "Hmm, I see. P'haps Miss Charlotte has some hidden powers no one knows about."

"I'm not so sure..." Charlotte seemed unconvinced, tilting her head to one side.

As Allen watched her, a thought struck him. *Could it be...Charlotte is a* reincarnation *of Lydilia the Saint?* Reincarnation wasn't such an uncommon phenomenon. Allen himself knew a handful of people who had memories of their past lives. And in certain cases, the special powers that they'd possessed in their previous life could awaken in their present life. Judging from everything Charlotte showed herself to be capable of so far, it seemed like a feasible theory. Eluka and Natalia seemed to think the same, and they became lost in thought.

Silence stretched out in the living room, only interrupted by the sound of Dorothea chomping on the salad.

"Ugh! I'm getting bored! Forget about this complicated story, I wanna celebrate Mommy's birthday instead!" Roo cried out, pushing her snout on Charlotte.

Allen let out a laugh. "Roo's right. The big day is tomorrow...but we better have a proper celebration tonight too, to make up for all the previous years."

"I know right? I asked Mother about 'birthdays.' She told me it's an important day too."

"Does your mother know a lot about human beings?" Charlotte asked Roo.

"Yup. She said she had a human friend a long time ago." Roo huffed out of her nose in pride. Allen and Charlotte smiled at her childlike gesture. But the peaceful atmosphere froze over at Roo's cheerful announcement. "And then, she said the male mate gives the bestest present for his female mate's birthday! What did you get from Allen, Mommy? Something yummy?"

"U-Umm..." Charlotte faltered and glanced at Allen. When his eyes met hers, he went stiff as ice.

Ack... What am I doing?! I still haven't decided on a present!!! Forget about saints and reincarnation—that was a trivial issue compared to this. Cold sweat gushed all over his body.

Natalia leaned over and whispered, "We gave you the place of honor, Dark Overlord—your gift is going to be the grand finale. You better make her happy with a proper gift worthy of a boyfriend. Or else."

"Ack...!" Natalia's words pierced the pit of his stomach—he could tell that, despite all her attacks, she did really trust him deep down.

All eyes turned to Allen expectantly. Only Dorothea, who knew his intended gift, threw him uneasy glances as if to say, "Uh, you don't mean to show them that mini-Charlotte homunculus, do you? Or have you got another idea?"

Arrgh...! Think! What's the most valuable thing I can offer right now...?! Other than the homunculus...! Allen's brain whirred into action at the highest speed in his life. He'd given Charlotte a lot of things already: sweets, cake, clothes, a magic wand... Something like that wouldn't feel special enough for this occasion. Out of the cards in his hand, that left only one option.

Allen rose from his chair and walked over to Charlotte. She looked up at him, slightly restless. He took her hand and gently placed an object on her palm.

"Charlotte...this is for you."

"Is this...the key to the mansion?"

"Yes." Allen closed her fingers over the key and went on with a serious expression, "This mansion is the most valuable asset I own at the moment. If you include all the enchanted objects and stock of materials, it'll probably come up to around 10,000 gold coins, at least. I'll give it all to you, so do whatever

you like with it."

Charlotte gave a shrill cry. "I-I can't take this...!"

The rest of the party inwardly shook their heads with the same thought: "This guy is hopeless..."

Nonetheless, the birthday eve party continued, and the night wore on.

Allen sat on the living room sofa, hanging his head in gloom. All the birthday gifts were piled up high on the table in front of them.

"I'm really sorry..." he murmured to Charlotte. "Offering you my property as a birthday present... Even I can see that was off the mark..."

"N-No, I'm sorry I wasn't brave enough to take it." Charlotte, sitting next to him, tried to soothe him the best she could, but her kindness was only salt in the wound.

In the end, Allen hadn't been able to come up with any decent ideas, and he was the only one of the group who hadn't yet managed to give anything to Charlotte. With a heavy sigh, he looked around the room. All the revelry had quieted down. There was no one in sight, and the room was silent.

"Where did everyone go, by the way?" he asked.

"Natalia and Roo went to bed. Eluka went out to town for a second round of partying with Dorothea and Gosetsu."

"They sure do have a lot of energy... It's almost midnight."

He pictured his sister having a drinking party with the dark elf and the Infernal Capybara. It was a rather quirky lineup that packed a strong punch. He glanced at the clock, and sighed again. But then he had a thought. *Hang on... Did they go out so we could be alone together?* He felt the unspoken pressure from everyone to do *something* to make Charlotte happy, and his stomach twisted in pain again.

Just then, Charlotte spoke up, her tone very formal. "Thank you for thinking so much about the gift. But you really don't have to give me anything, Allen. You've given me so much already."

Allen sighed. "That won't do. Besides, I haven't even managed to give you

anything of much value so far." The city's cakes and sweets, clothes and a hair ornament, books and a wand—though his feelings behind those gifts were more immense than a mountain, none of them were that valuable. When he told her that, Charlotte shook her head.

"That's not all you've given me. You've given me something much more wonderful."

"Really...? I don't recall such a gift." Allen cocked his head.

"Maybe that's because it's not an object." Charlotte peered into his face and said with a shy smile, "You gave me...a family, Allen."

Allen blinked in surprise. "A family...?"

"In the past, I never even dreamed of sitting around a table and sharing a meal with so many people. Like tonight's dinner—it felt very warm, kind, and delicious. And there's so much more you've given me."

The joy of learning; the coziness of taking a nap. The thrill of going somewhere new; the pleasure of chitchatting on ordinary days. Happily counting each thing with her fingers, she explained that those were all gifts from Allen.

"Remember what you told me when we met?" Charlotte went on. "'I'll make you say, with pride, that you're the happiest person in the world'—that's what you said." That had been his promise soon after he took her in, when he swore that he would let her taste all kinds of pleasures in this world. With the fingers that she'd just counted her happiness on, she gently took Allen's hand. "I'm already the happiest person in the world. So I don't need anything more. This is enough."

"Charlotte..." Allen looked at her smile and was at a loss for words. She spoke only the truth. He could see that she really did feel happy, from the bottom of her heart. What a transformation this was from the sorrowful, downcast girl from only half a year ago. Allen was deeply moved. But he squeezed Charlotte's hand back and said seriously, "Well, even so, I'll still give you a proper present no matter what."

"S-Sure." Charlotte nodded with a slightly abashed smile. "I thought you

would say that, Allen."

Allen saw with satisfaction that she was well-acquainted with his stubbornness. "You say you're the happiest person in the world, but if you ask me, this is only the beginning. I'll teach you more and more thoroughly about all the naughty pleasures and corrupt you in self-indulgence, so you'd better be ready for that."

Charlotte giggled. "You'll teach me even more? I'm excited."

"Of course I will. I'm prepared to spend the rest of my life on it." Allen grinned. But reality came back to him immediately, and his shoulders slumped down. "Well, I have to think of a good present first, though... Now, what to do..."

"A-Anything would do, really. If it comes from you, I'd be happy with anything."

"That's why I want to think hard about it. I can't make a false move and degrade myself below that crazy misfit elf...!" When even an elf like Dorothea, unused to human society and unlikely to fit in, had managed to celebrate Charlotte's birthday properly and delight her with a present, Allen had to do everything in his power not to lose to her. His pride as a lover was on the line, as well as his human dignity.

"Well, it did surprise me that even Dorothea celebrated with us," Charlotte said. "Though I haven't had a chance to look at her book yet."

"She said she based the characters on us..."

"Yes. Umm, let's see... Oh, here it is." She dug out the book from the heap of presents on the table.

It was a thick tome with a sturdy binding. The blurb on the back cover described the plot about a misanthropic wizard meeting a pure young girl and falling in love.

"I'm so curious how she wrote about us," Charlotte said with sparkling eyes. "Would you like to read a little bit together?"

After a pause, Allen said with a weary nod, "I guess we should see." He

peered at the book open on Charlotte's lap. He was going to find out what kind of content it was, and in the worst case, he was prepared to file a lawsuit against Dorothea. I mean, it's a novel written by that mischievous Dorothea... It's bound to be fishy. In fact, I'd be surprised if it even comes across as a coherent novel.

While Allen made his assumptions, Charlotte eagerly opened the book. And when they saw the first page, they turned into stone.

A heavy silence settled on the room.

It wasn't because they were shocked by crude writing, or because a hypnosis spell was activated when they opened the book—nothing silly like that. What startled them, in fact, was the large illustration that met their eyes on the very first page, in which a man and a woman were kissing. It was a very romantic scene, and the lovers were surrounded by flowers. It didn't matter how cozy they'd been feeling just a moment ago; they couldn't help freezing over at the sight.

Th-That damn elf!!! What does she think she's doing, giving her a present like this?! And...why do the characters look like us?!

The man had black-and-white hair, and was clad in a wizard's robe; the young girl was a delicate beauty with blonde hair. No matter how they looked at it, the pair was meant to be Allen and Charlotte. The drawing looked exactly like them —so much so that should one of their acquaintances see it, they would immediately connect the dots. Allen had a feeling that if he sued Dorothea, he could win.

Th-This is way too awkward...! We haven't done anything like this yet! Allen thought. It had been two months since they started their relationship. Since both of them were so new to romance, they hadn't mustered the courage to take a step in that direction yet. He did think they would get there someday...but he hadn't expected something like this would bring it to the forefront. He swallowed hard and cast a sideways glance at Charlotte.

Charlotte was staring at the page too, her face bright red. But she slowly turned to look at him. With a slight tremor in her lips, she asked in a whisper, "Is this...something naughty...too...?"

"Huh...?" Kissing a young noble lady (who had been previously engaged) before marriage was certainly an immoral and dishonorable act. Compared to the "naughty pleasures" that Allen usually talked about, it crossed over the line into a different genre of "naughty" altogether. "W-Well...yes, it's a naughty thing...the sort of thing that grown-ups do..." he stammered.

"I-I see..." Charlotte nodded thoughtfully. She looked down at the page again and fell quiet for a little while. Then she looked at Allen. A soft blush coloring her cheeks, she said, "I-I'll be eighteen tomorrow... I'm going to be a grown-up..."

"T-True..."

"So...um..." she paused, then looked up shyly at him. "Will you...teach...me...the grown-up kind of naughty things...too...?"

Allen was speechless. Later, when he looked back at how he'd felt in that moment, he would mumble to himself, "That's probably what people mean when they talk about enlightenment..." Utter emptiness came to his mind, and he couldn't think about anything at all. His heart, along with all kinds of organs inside his body, stopped working. He became as rigid as a stone statue.

Charlotte's face burned red, heating up with a little *poof*. "Oh, um, p-please forget what I just said!" she blurted out. "That was very improper of me—"

"Charlotte." Allen placed his hands on her shoulders. As he looked straight into her eyes, her face was as red as a boiled octopus, but he knew his own face was just as red. But he still willed himself to speak, his voice trembling, "Would you mind...if I teach you now?"

A barrage of criticisms came from the calmer part of himself. It was far too impulsive, and it would've been smarter to find a more romantic setting, and besides, who did he think he was, talking about "teaching" her when he'd never kissed anyone himself? Regardless, he couldn't back down now.

For a few moments, Charlotte sat very still, looking back at him with wideopen eyes. But she seemed to sense his determination and whispered, "Yes..." With that one word, she squeezed her eyes shut.

At her earnest response, a self-mocking smile flitted across his face. The first

kiss for a birthday present...talk about pretentious... All the same, it was a gift that only he could give her. When he glanced at the clock, he saw that they were less than a minute away from her birthday.

Allen braced himself. He closed his eyes like Charlotte, and slowly leaned in. Their breathing brushed each other's cheeks as the distance between them grew less and less. She was as painfully nervous as he was. His heart was pounding in his ears. Only a hair's breadth closer, and their lips would touch.

Just as they were about to touch, the clock started striking midnight.

"Know your place, you insolent rogue!!!"

"Huh?! Whoa?!"

Charlotte grabbed the scruff of his neck and threw him to the floor in a perfect arch. The attack came so suddenly that Allen couldn't even prepare himself for the blow, and he fell flat on his back. Even as the impact knocked the wind out of him, Allen's head was full of questions.

What the hell was that?! Did I do something wrong?! He didn't know a thing about how to kiss a girl. So he thought he'd made a blunder—but he realized at once that that wasn't the case. Charlotte was glaring at him as he groaned in agony. Standing tall with her arms crossed, she oozed with confidence and dignity. Who...is this?!

She looked exactly like Charlotte, but she couldn't have been the same person. Allen knew this by intuition. The mysterious figure pointed her index finger straight at the baffled Allen.

"What impudence! How dare you—oh?" She paused and looked around, as if she just realized where she was. Then, nodding in understanding, quasi-Charlotte stroked her chin. "Whoops, not good. It appears I slipped out unawares. Perhaps it was prompted by Charlotte turning a year older."

"S-Slipped out...?! Wh-What does that mean?! What's happening, Charlotte?!"

"I'm afraid this isn't Charlotte you are addressing." Quasi-Charlotte put a hand to her chest and announced in an overly brisk voice, "My name is Lydilia Evans. I am a saint who lived three hundred years ago...and this girl's past-life





"Past-life whatchamacallit?!"

And this was how Allen made the first contact with the former saint at the worst possible time.

## **Chapter 2: The Saint**

The next morning, the atmosphere in the mansion was more tense than ever before. Light footsteps trotted toward the hushed living room.

The door banged open, and Charlotte—or rather, Lydilia in Charlotte's body—stormed into the room. "Morning, fellow denizens!" She glanced back at Roo, who was trailing in after her, looking a little hesitant. "I must say, it has been a very long time since I slept in a bed. And with a Fenrir pup too. You were quite the fluffy companion—I commend you."

"Okay..." Roo mumbled half-heartedly as Lydilia stroked her head. Normally, she would've purred in pleasure to get petted by Charlotte, but today was different. Roo reluctantly tugged at Lydilia's sleeve and said, "Mommy—I mean, Lydilia. You have something to say, right?"

"Oh yes, that's right. Well then—hm?" Lydilia gave a big nod and ensconced herself in the middle of the sofa. She opened her mouth to speak when she paused and squinted at something. Her gaze rested on Natalia, who was rooted to the spot with wide-open eyes, too bewildered to utter anything more than incoherent groans. Lydilia cocked her head to the side. "You must be Charlotte's younger sister. What is that silly, vacant look on your face? I can't talk when you are ogling me like that."

"Whose fault is that...?!" Allen spat. He looked sickly pale and had dark circles under his eyes. Beset with worries, he had been up all night researching the legends of Lydilia the Saint. All the tomes and papers he could find were piled up on the table.

Last night, after Lydilia—in Charlotte's body—had knocked him down, Allen had tried to interrogate her. But Lydilia gave a big yawn, rubbed her eyes, and told him to wait. "I wouldn't mind explaining...but let me sleep first. I'm tired."

"Fat chance! I'll make you spill everything right now!"

"Are you sure? This is still Charlotte's body, you know. Wouldn't lack of sleep

impact her health?"

"Ugh...! Fine, sleep all you want!"

And so, the discussion had been put on hold, and now that it was almost midafternoon, Lydilia finally came out of her bedroom.

In the meantime, Allen had done his research, and when Natalia and Roo woke up in the morning, he'd filled them in on the events of the night. Though they had both listened doubtfully, they seemed convinced now that they could see Lydilia in the flesh.

As for Eluka, Dorothea, and Gosetsu, the trio still hadn't come back from their bar crawl. Allen set that aside for the moment; those three would only complicate things.

Perching on the table, Allen confronted Lydilia on behalf of the others, who were too baffled to speak. "First, let me confirm: are you really Lydilia the Saint?"

"I am." Quasi-Charlotte answered rather majestically. She placed a hand to her chest and announced in a resonant voice, "My name is Lydilia Evans. I was born in the 74th year in the calendar of the Kingdom of Neils. My mother was called Christine, my father Berdot, my younger brother Robert—"

"All right, that's enough." Allen cut off her seemingly endless introduction. He picked up a big pile of papers and flipped through it. Last night, Allen had flown over to the Athena School of Magic and sneaked into the vault of the library to obtain these documents. "Your year of birth and the names of your family match the records. Though that's hardly conclusive..." He turned over a leaf and studied a reproduction of Lydilia's portrait. The young girl with a clever look in her eyes looked exactly like Charlotte. "You're mirror images of each other. I suppose we've got no choice but to believe you."

"Indeed. It pleases me that you catch on quickly—Allen, was it? You have my compliments."

"It feels so weird when you act so haughty, looking like that..." Allen grumbled, pressing a hand to his forehead.

Lydilia leaned back on the sofa and gazed down her nose at Allen. She looked

just like Charlotte; her voice and aura were the same too. But her archaic, dignified manner of speaking and her mannerisms were worlds apart from Charlotte's usual bearing. It was interesting in its own way, but it would take time for him to get used to it.

Natalia, apparently recovering from her shock somewhat, sidled closer to them and peered into Lydilia's face. "So, um, my sister is a reincarnation of you —is that right?"

"Indeed. You are correct."

"Then, are you still Charlotte, my dear sister ...?"

"Not quite," Lydilia replied with a shrug. "A single soul dwells in this body," she explained, ruffling Roo's coat. "That soul belonged to me in the past, and now it is Charlotte's."

"U-Uh, okay...?" Natalia was still confused.

"In other words, two personalities are living in one body," Allen added.

There were roughly three types of rebirth. The first was the "continuity model," in which the personality traits of the previous life are passed on directly to the present life. The second was the "renewal model," in which only the memories of the previous life remain, and the thoughts and emotions belong to the person in the present life. The third was the "partition model," in which the personality traits of the previous life as well as the present life dwell separately in the physical vessel.

"To put it simply, it's like having multiple personalities," Allen explained.

"Though it's an extremely rare case—it probably happens in less than one in a thousand people who've been reincarnated..."

"S-So then, what's happening to my sister now?!"

"Don't fret. She's asleep, but if you wish to speak with her, I shall awaken her," Lydilia said.

"And you'll go to sleep instead?" Allen asked.

"No. I wish to parley with Charlotte as well. Let me see now..." Lydilia looked around the room, and her eyes fell on the heap of birthday presents on the

table. She pulled out a mirror from the pile: the magic mirror for distant communication that Natalia had made. "This will do. There!" With that casual exclamation, Lydilia snapped her fingers. A dazzling light shot out of the mirror. When the light dissipated, Charlotte's face was visible in the glass.

"Huh...?" The Charlotte in the mirror rubbed her eyes in a daze. "When did I fall asleep...? Oh! And there's another me?! Wh-What's happening?!" she cried out.

Lydilia chuckled, waving a hand in response. "Our first time speaking like this."

Watching the scene unfold, Allen and Natalia whispered to each other.

"She analyzed my magic and modified it to her needs, all in a matter of seconds..." Natalia murmured.

"Hmm. As expected, she knows what she's doing," Allen answered. The way she threw him on the floor last night was still fresh in his mind.

Lydilia gave Charlotte a rough rundown of her identity. Though she widened her eyes in surprise, Charlotte seemed to believe her.

"I see... I never even realized," said Charlotte.

"Well, I don't blame you—I never came to the forefront." Lydilia cackled. But she soon stopped and scratched her cheek with an abashed look on her face. "I did borrow your body once in the past, however. I suppose I must apologize for that."

"Oh...! Wh-When was that?" Charlotte asked, flustered.

"Ah, so you never noticed—I suspected as much. You truly are rather gullible." Lydilia gave a wry smile.

"Let me guess," Allen cut in. Even with the little information he had, he could easily conjecture. "You took over when Charlotte was imprisoned, didn't you?"

"Precisely. I awakened myself inside her and made the necessary arrangements for escape."

"What?! Does that mean you saved me, Lydilia?!"

Lydilia explained how she had magicked the soldiers into deep sleep then

searched out a safe escape route. Once she awakened Charlotte, she herself had gone back to sleep. "I have been dormant inside you all along. However, I was dimly aware of what was happening in the outside world. Your predicament then had gone too far... I just couldn't let you suffer. Forgive me for acting without your permission."

"Please don't apologize. If that's true, you saved my life!" Charlotte's face brightened.

"Indeed...? When you put it like that, you make me blush." Lydilia averted her eyes bashfully.

"Now my sister's escape makes sense...hm?" Natalia suddenly frowned and went quiet. She pondered over something for a little while, then she fixed her sharp eyes on Lydilia. "Then...there's one thing I'd like to ask you."

"Fine, you may ask it."

"You said you've been watching the outside world from inside her body."

"Yes, I was vaguely aware of it—it was like walking in a dream."

"That means... That means, you...!" Natalia raised her voice, tinged with tormenting regret. "You must have known how the Evans household was treating her! So you looked on without doing anything to help?!"

"Indeed... That's correct." Lydilia said quietly, nodding.

Natalia caught her breath. Her eyes brimming with tears, she shook the saint's body. "Why didn't you come out back then...?! If you'd come to the surface, it would've been so easy for you to crush rabble like them!"

"Natalia..." Charlotte looked down; her little sister's urgent protest was too painful to watch.

Her failure to save her older sister from her family had always tortured Natalia's conscience. Allen, seeing that regret bursting out of her now, placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"No, Natalia," Allen said softly. Charlotte had been treated like a slave at the Evans house. If the innate powers of the saint had awakened inside her, she would have likely faced much less oppression. However, it certainly wouldn't

have made her life any easier. "Lydilia kept herself hidden on purpose," he said.

"Why...?!" Natalia shouted.

"Let me ask you another question," Allen said, peering into Natalia's face. "A young daughter of the duke, or a young girl who has the powers of a saint. Which one would people deem more useful?" It was a cruel question, but he had to ask it.

Natalia was startled.

On the one hand, Charlotte would have simply been a piece in the political game to further the clan. On the other, they could have the political influence of a reincarnated saint known by everyone in the kingdom. The difference in her value was more than clear. Although Charlotte had been loathed by the family as the child of a mistress, her enemies were merely the people of the household and the prince she had been engaged to. But if people had gotten hold of the fact that she was a saint reborn, she would no doubt have become a target for many more villains.

"In the worst case, they might have tried to wipe out Charlotte's consciousness completely," Allen said.

"Wh-What...?! Even though it's her body?!"

"Because that would make her more valuable," he said. If Charlotte's personality were erased from her body, the saint in her pure form would be reawakened in the present world. For a political ruler, she would have been the perfect symbol to use for their benefit. Natalia paled as this dawned on her. Allen patted her head and turned to look at Lydilia. "So you stayed silent on purpose to protect Charlotte's life. Isn't that right?"

"Hmph... You're quite a sharp one." Lydilia grinned. With a casual wave of her hand, she set off a swirling gust of wind. "I excelled at magic since I was a small child. I was ten when they began to call me a saint."

"So I've read," Allen said.

By the time she was ten, Lydilia had already achieved numerous legendary acts. She developed a new system of magic and quelled a massive natural disaster that had been set off by a record-breaking torrential rain. She

prevented the attack of a horde of magical beasts on the kingdom all by herself. Her name lay claim to more than a score of such deeds.

At the same time, the Kingdom of Neils, which was then a young nation, grew more and more powerful with her successes. Thanks to the saint's achievements, the monarch gained popularity among the people and the kingdom established a significant presence among the surrounding kingdoms. The saint was truly worthy of being called a messiah.

"The king at the time gave me many missions," Lydilia said. "I had to fly around the world to carry them out—indeed, I barely had any time to sleep."

"But thanks to your work, the influence of the Evanses grew exponentially," Allen said.

"Quite right. My clan was one of the poor nobility. My parents and my little brother were both delighted by their change of fortune. Thus I did my very best to fulfill my saintly duties..."

Her hard work, however, had been her downfall. One day, she suddenly fell ill and disappeared from the public. Allen turned over a page in his documents. "You caught a plague and became bedridden," Allen said. "It says you appeared before the people from time to time after that...but unfortunately, the treatment failed, and you passed away at the tender age of eighteen."

"Hm...that is the long and the short of it," Lydilia said vaguely, averting her eyes. She seemed to be disappointed by her own fate.

But Allen sensed something odd in her demeanor. She...lied about something just now. He looked down at the papers and reread the passage about her death. He couldn't find anything contradictory. Allen tilted his head in puzzlement.

Lydilia's tragic tale brought a gloomy silence upon the room.

"I wonder," Charlotte spoke up timidly, "did you really pass away so young, Lydilia? I got the impression you were much older..."

"This manner of speaking was requested of me, for it sounded more saintly. Now, try as I might, I cannot shake off the habit." Lydilia chuckled cheerily.

"So..." Natalia said, clenching her fists, "You were protecting my sister by staying hidden?"

"You could say so," Lydilia answered with a deep nod. She glanced at Charlotte in the mirror and went on, "I knew of Charlotte's situation. However, she still had a future promised to her as the wife of the second prince. I supposed it was a matter of time until her circumstances would improve...but that conspiracy was the last straw." She slowly shook her head, apparently referring to the false charges levied against her by the prince, her ex-fiancé.

Lydilia let out a heavy sigh. "If I hadn't intervened, Charlotte would have been killed in a matter of days."

"Th-They did imprison me, but isn't there usually a trial for things like that...?" Charlotte asked.

"Of course, they wouldn't have let it go to trial. The food and water they brought to your cell were all laced with poison, you see," Lydilia explained.

"Poison...?!"

"So you hadn't noticed—I thought as much." Lydilia scoffed ironically. "It's easy to accuse you, but when it comes to a trial, they wouldn't be able to stop you from blabbering about things they didn't want the public to hear. Hence it was in their best interests to silence you before it got to that point."

"That prince was just going to assassinate her...?!" Natalia spat out.

"That's crazy! How can they do that to Mommy!" Roo barked furiously.

Lydilia turned to Allen with an amused look. "You don't seem surprised."

"Not really." Allen nodded in agreement with a scowl. He'd had a vague hunch that that might be the case, and now it proved to be true. So if Lydilia hadn't stepped in, I would've read about Charlotte's death in the papers...

A villainous woman who caused a scandal in the neighboring kingdom, poisoned in her prison cell. It was just the kind of headline that would spread like wildfire. Allen imagined the very possible scenario of reading such an article in the paper one morning, then folding it up indifferently, as the story already faded into oblivion. He shuddered at the thought. It certainly was no laughing

matter.

"Come to think of it...I remember they gave me a meal in the prison, but I fell asleep before I could touch it," Charlotte said, color draining from her face.

"That was me." Lydilia chuckled deep in her throat. "You made me nervous when I saw your complete lack of caution."

"Lydilia...tell me one thing," Allen said. There was one more point he wanted her to clarify. "Why didn't you take over Charlotte's body completely?"

"What?" Lydilia asked.

"In fact, that wasn't the only time you could've done that. You must have had plenty of opportunities. If you took over Charlotte's body and escaped...you could have been free."

It was exceedingly rare among cases of reincarnation that two personalities—that of the previous life and that of the present—would coexist separately in one body. And why was that? Because if the two personalities clashed, one side would consume the other. For a powerful character like Lydilia, it should have been smooth sailing for her to subsume Charlotte's consciousness completely and take full control of her body.

"Why didn't you take control?" Allen asked again. "It would've been a chance to do over your life that ended too soon."

"Don't be ridiculous. A second chance at life is the last thing I need." Lydilia shook her head decisively. "I did everything I could as a saint three centuries ago. However...all that I gained for my efforts was my own death," she sighed. Her face was shadowed by a deep shade of resignation. She looked straight into Allen's eyes and, with a hand to her chest, declared, "I am weary of being a saint. Now, I only wish to rest in peace. That is my sole desire."

"Is that...what you really wanted to talk about?" Allen asked.

"Correct." Lydilia nodded generously. "I must have slipped out like this for a reason. Allen, was it? A wizard as powerful as yourself must know a spell to put me to rest permanently. Will you do that for me?"

"I do know a spell, but...you'd cease to exist completely. Is that really what

you want?"

When two individual personalities from past and present reside in one body, it gives rise to numerous problems, including power struggles to take control of the body, a volatile mental state, and so on. Under the current law, the one who was entitled to hold the main agency was the personality of the present life. As a result, there was a rather specific spell for eliminating the personality of the past life if it got in the way—a spell that couldn't be used for any other purpose. But Allen had only read about it in an article a long time ago and hadn't learned it himself. If he dug up the article and made his own improvements to the spell, though, it would be a simple matter for him to erase even a consciousness as dominant as Lydilia's forever.

But he was reluctant. Lydilia was one half of Charlotte, and on top of that, she had saved Charlotte's life. He didn't want to do anything so cruel. But Lydilia continued with cool composure.

"No matter. I have no reason to remain in this world."

"You're rather cynical for a saint..." Allen murmured.

"Why, who wouldn't become cynical after leading the life I have? Ever since I was a small child, I have been used as a tool in politics. I have seen more than enough of the ugly side of society," Lydilia said nonchalantly.

Though Allen had noticed something doubtful in her words before, now she spoke nothing but truth. In other words, utter oblivion was what she truly desired. Still, he hedged at her request. "But...it's a difficult decision."

Natalia and Roo remained quiet, awkwardly exchanging glances. There was no guarantee that Lydilia wouldn't change her mind later on. It wasn't impossible that she would decide to take over Charlotte's body. Considering that risk, Allen was well aware that the prudent thing to do would be to eliminate her now. Even so, he couldn't commit himself to it, so he decided to leave the decision up to someone else.

"What do you think, Charlotte?" he asked.

"Of course...that would be horrible!" Charlotte asserted, clenching her fists.

"Well, thought you'd say that." Allen smiled a little at her predictable answer.

"We've finally met after all this time. I haven't even had a chance to thank her properly... It would be too sad to say goodbye already!"

"I do not require any thanks. I only wish to depart from this worthless world."

"That's where you're wrong!" Charlotte sounded more determined than ever.

Lydilia narrowed her eyes at Charlotte. "Hm...? What do you mean?" Charlotte's outburst seemed to have tugged at her curiosity.

Charlotte looked straight at Lydilia. "It's true, there are many cruel, painful things in this world. But more than that...there are so many things that are fun, joyous, and wonderful! This world is not 'worthless' at all!"

"Hmph, you amuse me." Lydilia let out a little chuckle. With a bold smile playing on her lips, she declared in a lilting voice, "You say that this world is wonderful. But I have been worshipped as a saint. I have drunk my fill of all the luxuries and indulgences this life has to offer." In her lifetime, people often gave her offerings of extravagant full-course meals made from a rich array of rare ingredients, robes woven of the finest silk, treasures forged of gold and silver, and much more. "None of those offerings moved my heart in the slightest. Thus I abandoned any expectations I had of the world."

"Living in luxury isn't the only way to enjoy life! There's so much more than that!"

"Well then, give me examples. Teach me those joys."

"Um, I-I can't just list them on the spot...umm...!" Charlotte faltered, her eyes wandering. But she soon realized something and gestured at Allen. "That's right! Allen can teach you!"

"That's quite a curveball you're throwing at me," Allen mumbled. He knew it was coming, but he couldn't help himself.

"Oh, I-I'm sorry..." Charlotte shrank apologetically.

Lydilia shrugged, unconvinced. "So this Allen here is going to teach me, is he? What do you call it again—'naughty pleasures'?"

"Uh, you know about that?" Allen asked.

"Naturally. I had my eye on what was happening to some extent," Lydilia said

coolly.

That means she knows everything that's happened between Charlotte and me...right...? Like what almost happened last night. Allen felt somewhat tired out just thinking about it, but what Lydilia said next made him forget everything else.

"Such childish games—they're not going to work on me."

"What did you say...?" A vein in Allen's temple throbbed a little.

Whether she noticed his anger or not, Lydilia sneered mockingly at him. "Of course, you will *never* move my heart. You may have some skill in magic, but to be persuaded by a fool such as yourself? One must be utterly naive or overwhelmingly charitable—or perhaps just as much of a fool—to be influenced by the likes of you."

"I won't approve of you insulting my dear sister...but, well, your assessment of the Dark Overlord is pretty accurate," Natalia said in agreement.

"But I mean, isn't it obvious to anyone that Allen's an idiot?" Roo added.

"Quiet, you two! Which side are you on?!" Allen shouted. He glared at Lydilia head-on. "Fine, you cheeky saint! I swear I'll teach you some naughty pleasures!"

"Hah, prove your mettle if you can!"

"N-No quarreling, though! You have to be friends!" Charlotte cut in.

Lydilia and Allen glared at each other, furious sparks flying between them. And so, they opened fire in their ruthless battle. Allen was determined to show the saint what naughty pleasures were all about and to stir her glacial heart.

Of course, he thought he had a good chance of winning. He hadn't spent all his time in the last six months thinking up naughty lessons for Charlotte for nothing. This time, his target was a saint who'd died at the age that Charlotte was currently. He figured he could likely entice her using similar methods. He could take her out to a meal of dishes from her homeland, indulge her with sweets, let her play with animals...he had plenty of ideas.

But things didn't pan out as he'd expected.

After polishing off the meal at the restaurant in the city—the same one that Allen had brought Charlotte to on their first date, well known for their cuisine from Neils Kingdom—Lydilia elegantly wiped her lips with a napkin and said coolly, "Hm. I admit it was a good meal."

"That's all you have to say?!" Allen had hoped the nostalgic flavors would tug at her heartstrings.

She called the chef who was standing nearby, waiting for their comments. "Although they were all familiar dishes..." she said, "compared to my time, the flavors and cooking methods seem to have changed much."

The chef shrank. "I-I do apologize... Recipes from three hundred years ago are difficult to recreate..."

"No need to fret." Lydilia smiled generously. "It was a valuable experience to taste the change over the eras. I commend your work, chef."

"Th-Thank you so much! Who would've thought I'd have a chance to serve my dishes to the legendary Saint Lydilia... It's such an honor!"

"Glad to hear it," she said.

The chef, who was from Neils Kingdom, of course knew the legends of Lydilia the Saint. When Allen had told him a brief summary of their situation, the chef put everything he had into entertaining them. Every dish he'd brought out was a first-rate creation in Allen's view—but apparently, even a feast like that wasn't enough to melt Lydilia's icy heart.

"Oh, if I may, could I please have your autograph?" the chef asked, holding out a square autograph board. "I'd like to put it up in the restaurant!"

"Well...it's supposed to be a secret that I have come back to life." After a moment's hesitation, Lydilia shook her head. "I must not leave my name here," she said, smiling softly. "Will you keep it as a memory in your own heart alone?"

"I understand...! Please forgive me for making a crass request!"

Even the way she declined was refined. But it was clear that the cuisine from her homeland hadn't affected her much. Allen watched the scene from another table at a distance and clicked his tongue in frustration.

"Tch...so the first move failed." He opened his notebook and crossed out a line. His opponent was rather formidable. But he couldn't back down now. This is a battle for my pride...! I'll show her what I've got, no matter what!!! Whenever someone picked a fight with him, Allen fought back with a grin. That was his motto. He was possessed by a childish desire to startle Lydilia with his ingenuity and move her to tears, to watch her weep with a triumphant smirk on his face. While such trivial thoughts were running through his head, the others at the table whispered amongst each other.

"Hunh. So it's really just like bro said," Eluka remarked.

"She's a clear case of reincarnation," Dorothea said.

"It's so odd to see her like that," Miach said thoughtfully. "A haughty Charlotte... Now you don't see that every day!"

Gosetsu hugged the mirror with Charlotte inside, and gnashed her teeth with tears streaming down her face. "Oh...please forgive me, Lady Charlotte... How could I let something like this happen to you in my absence...?! I am ashamed as your servant!"

"D-Don't worry, Gosetsu. I'm all right." Charlotte tried to comfort her.

"Easy, Granny. It's okay," Roo joined in, soothing Gosetsu.

Eluka, Dorothea, and Gosetsu had been having an all-night drinking party when Miach joined them after work. Their festivities had been wild and fun all the way until now. None of them had slept a wink, but they were so tough that they didn't give off a hint of fatigue.

Natalia looked around at them quizzically. "You don't seem so surprised at the news?"

"Well, it was a surprise, but still," Eluka replied casually.

"Stuff like this happens all the time, y'see. In fact, this explains everythin'. Generally speakin', people with past lives tend to have a tumultuous time of it, and they often inherit abilities that can sort of cheat the system," Dorothea said.

They'd heard many stories of someone's past-life personality reawakening

and causing a commotion. The chances of that happening were higher than winning big with a lottery.

"My big sis is one of those reincarnated folks too," Miach said, munching on some fries she'd ordered with her mug of ale. "But it's a lot of trouble for ya, Charlotte."

"No, I was surprised at first, but there's nothing especially troubling about it," Charlotte replied.

"Meow? Really? It's your birthday, though. What a shame ya had to get dragged into this topsy-turvy affair," Miach said.

"Oh."

"Oh...!" Allen, who had been scribbling in his notebook, stopped writing.

Charlotte's face brightened up. "I forgot! It's my birthday! I'm eighteen now!"

"Congrats, Charlotte," Eluka said. "My birthday's coming up in a couple of months, so you're older than me till then."

"Welcome to the world of grown-ups," Miach chimed in. "I got something for ya!"

"Ooh, gloves! They're shaped like kitten paws—so cute!" Charlotte squealed in delight.

Allen broke out in cold sweat. That's right...her birthday present! Thanks to Lydilia, I left it hanging in the air!

The others noticed Allen's ashen face and threw him cold looks.

"So...what did you give her, bro? The big finale," Eluka asked.

"Don't tell me you haven't found her a gift yet?" Dorothea jabbed.

"So much for our effort to give you some privacy... Shall I announce my candidacy for the seat of Lady Charlotte's life companion?" Gosetsu grumbled.

"No, wait! I was about to give her a present, but then things happened...!" Allen explained, flustered at the women's below freezing stares.

Natalia's face softened a little in relief. "Phew, at least you thought of something. Well, what were you about to give her, Dark Overlord?"

"Huh?! U-Uh, well, you know...!" He choked to see Natalia's expectant eyes. Argh, it's no good! No way I can say I was about to kiss her as a birthday gift...! He'd rather die than say that out loud and sound like a pretentious poser. He knew that would only earn him even sharper looks from the women, and in the worst case, Natalia would snap and pounce on him in rage. He had to avoid that at all costs.

Still, it was an unavoidable fact that it was Charlotte's birthday. He had to settle everything by the end of the day. I have twelve hours left...! Before the time's up, I have to resolve the problem with Lydilia, and kiss Charlotte... Talk about mission impossible! Both of his missions were a lot to take on, and he didn't have a moment to lose.

Lydilia scoffed at the shuddering Allen. "So, Allen, is that all your 'naughty pleasures' have to offer?"

"D-Don't be stupid! We're only getting started!" He faced her obvious provocation. It was a heavy load, but he had to get it done. Spurring himself on, he pointed straight at the saint and bellowed, "I'll go all out from now on! I'll bombard you with naughty lessons, and win you over! Get ready to be defeated!"

The fierce battle raged on. Allen hurled all his ideas at Lydilia, one after the other.

When he bought her a set of clothes at a trendy shop:

"You may dress me up all you like...but this body belongs to Charlotte, so I can only comment on how it flatters *her* figure," Lydilia said.

"True...!" Allen murmured.

Since her native cuisine didn't impress her, he gave her some modern junk food:

"Hm, it *is* delicious...but what is the purpose of dyeing cheese in seven different colors?"

"Sorry...I don't really get it either."

As the afternoon wore on, he made her try napping:

"Mmm, I slept well. And? What's 'naughty' about having a nap?"

With this and that, hours went by...

"Ack...!"

"Crap...it's sunset already, and I'm out of ideas!" Allen buried his face in his hands. In front of him was his notebook, filled with lists of crossed out items.

"A-Allen, are you okay?" Charlotte asked anxiously.

They were at a bar facing the main street of the city. Both the selection on the menu and the prices were down-to-earth, and this was where Eluka, Dorothea, and Gosetsu had drunk all night. Allen had dropped by with Magus and the others a few times too. Though it was a familiar place with a good range of drinks, he was in no mood to enjoy a stiff drink now. He took a swig of water, which calmed him down a little. However, it was immediately followed by a triumphant sneer that came from the seat right next to him, dispersing any relief he might've felt.

"Isn't it high time you admitted defeat?" Lydilia cackled, elegantly tilting a glass of juice to her lips. Flanked by Roo and Gosetsu, she patted their heads in turn. Allen's double-fluffy attack had also ended in failure. She seemed fairly pleased by the two beasts' fluffiness, but it hadn't been enough to move her. As she cast a sarcastic look at Allen, Lydilia's lips twisted like a crescent moon. "You said you would teach me the pleasures of this world, but...what, did you mean you will show me your disgraceful humiliation and let me laugh as much as I like? Is that what you had in store?"

"D-Damn you...!" Allen groaned, a vein popping out on his forehead. A thin crack ran through the glass in his hand.

From the mirror on the table, Charlotte looked out in low spirits. "I'm sorry, Allen... It's my fault for pushing it onto you, and giving you so much trouble."

"Hm...? What are you saying?" Allen smiled gently at her. "Nothing is trouble when it comes to you. I won't spare any effort to make any wish you have come true."

"Allen..."

"Besides..." A thin smile flitted across his lips. He pointed straight at Lydilia and said, "Now that we've come this far, I just have to stick to it! I can't rest till I make this insufferable saint cry!"

"You are one obstinate fellow," Lydilia murmured with a slight frown. Her face betrayed bemusement and a little bit of fatigue. A heavy sigh escaped her. "Why don't you surrender already and blot me out of existence?"

"Never! I won't let you get away!" Allen opened his notebook and thrust it forward in front of the wretched saint. When he turned the page, there were two more pages packed with writing. "Look at my notebook! It's a list of naughty pleasures that I've stored up to teach Charlotte! There's a whole lot more where that came from!"

"Oh Allen, you've thought so much about me..." Charlotte blushed.

"Mommy, this is where you shake your head 'cause he's so crazy," Roo sighed.

"Indeed, it isn't quite the time for your heart to melt," Gosetsu agreed.

Allen withstood the withering looks from the two beasts and observed Lydilia's reaction. What appeared to be a last-ditch attempt at intimidation was actually part of his strategy, which would lead to the next move. All my ideas so far came to nothing...but if I show her my whole list, there has to be something that catches her attention! It's a sneaky trick, but if I can get even a hint of what she'd like, I'd be lucky!

The open notebook was full of all kinds of naughty pleasures. He figured that if he could follow Lydilia's eyes and find out which item they rested on, he could guess the most likely item to please her. However—

"I have no interest in such foolish gibberish. Put it away." Lydilia scowled, pushing away the notebook.

"Hm, all right." Allen had no choice but to put it aside at her curt reply. He flipped through the notebook, slightly puzzled. Her eyes didn't rest on anything... Does that mean she's equally indifferent to all of them? But something didn't sit right with that theory. While he was mulling over this question, Lydilia downed her juice and threw a glance behind her.

"In any case...what are those fellows doing there?" she asked.

It was not yet evening, still a little too early for a bar to fill up. Yet, most of the tables were packed with people. The usual suspects were all gathered there—Magus and Groh, Miach and Eluka, plus Dorothea. They all wore serious expressions, putting their heads together in a clamorous discussion.

"Hmm...feasts don't work, and neither does treasure or riches... If it was up to us, that and some grog would be better than anything, though," Magus said.

"And we obviously can't give her alcohol," Groh said. "Man, imagine being a saint when you're just a ten-year-old kid... When I was ten, I used to goof off when I was supposed to be looking after the family shop—my pops used to scold me all the time."

"As for me, I loved playing with dolls around that age. My adoptive siblings used to keep me company," Miach said.

"I was studying magic all the time, with bro. Plus, watching Mama and Papa work, I guess?" Eluka said.

"Ten years old..." Dorothea sighed. "It's a long, long time ago for me. Back then, my Ma was the guardian deity of the forest I grew up in..."

Of course, Magus and Groh's henchmen were with them, so the whole bar was bustling. Lydilia observed them for a little while, then tilted her head in confusion. "What in the world are they here for...?"

"Oh, them. Apparently, they're also trying to think of a naughty pleasure to throw at you."

"What? Resorting to borrowing the wisdom of others, are you? You've sunk low."

"Don't be stupid, I didn't ask them to. I just told them what's happening, and they said they want to lend me a hand." Though Allen had been clear that he didn't need their help, Eluka and the others were eager to stick their noses in. As for Magus and his group, they'd happened to run into the rest of them on their way back from a dungeon. The large group of adventurers looked intimidating at a glance, but they were all peacefully discussing how to make the saint happy. Since they'd heard the story that Lydilia was already being worshipped as a saint when she was only ten years old, they were all excitedly

swapping nostalgic stories from their childhoods.

When Allen explained all this to Lydilia, she looked the other way as if she was bored, sipping her juice. "Humph... I'm surprised there are even more fellows who have too much time on their hands."

Allen was puzzled by her aloof manner. *Hm? I thought she would scorn them more, but looks like I was wrong...* Far from mocking them, Lydilia was apparently trying to avoid looking at them directly. Allen had the feeling that the answer to winning over Lydilia lay somewhere hidden in this reaction. *Hmm, is she actually shy with strangers? Or is she not used to people fussing over her? Which is it...?* Allen pondered over it, holding his chin.

Meanwhile, Charlotte spoke up from the mirror, smiling at Lydilia. "It really is amazing you could use magic like that at such a young age. I've only just started practicing."

"'Tis nothing to boast of," Lydilia said bluntly, still sulky. "You've inherited my talent. With a little training, you should grow strong enough to win any quarrels with Allen."

"B-But...I'll never quarrel with Allen," Charlotte said with a shy smile.

"Is that so?" Lydilia tilted her head, her innocent eyes widening in surprise.

"But you and Allen were glaring at each other at such close quarters last night. I was sure you were having a fight—so what was it, then?"

"…"

Both Allen and Charlotte fell silent, averting their eyes uneasily. As Allen had feared, Lydilia had witnessed their attempted kiss.

Roo was intrigued. "Oh, what's going on? Did you have a fight, Mommy and Allen? You better make up."

"Not to worry, Young Roo. The two of them love each other deeply," Gosetsu said.

"But why would they glare if they like each other? It's weird."

"Human life is complicated, you see." Gosetsu seemed to have sensed

something, and she spoke to Roo with a wise look on her face.

Speechless, Allen wished he could go hide in a hole. At least Lydilia hasn't figured out what it was... I suppose as a saint, she's distant from things that happen between ordinary people—hm? A thought struck him. Startled, he stared closely at Lydilia's face. "Are you actually...?"

"Wh-What is it? Are you challenging me to a fight as well? I shall take you on." She held up her fists in front of her, on guard and ready to fight.

Allen merely stared at her, speechless for a whole new reason.



In a large open field on the outskirts of town, the air was taut with tension. Innumerable logs carved into crude human shapes were erected all over the field. A single demi-human stood still amidst them. She had long, cobalt green hair, tied in a loose ponytail at her waist, and feline ears of the same color sprouting from the top of her head. Her long tail had a kink in it. She was clad in a light outfit suited for a nimble warrior: clearly an adventurer, if there ever was one.

The demi-human—who looked just like Miach—brought her hands to her hips, slowly swayed into a fighting stance, then announced calmly, "Now...I will begin." As soon as the words left her lips, she leaped high into the air. Letting out a short breath, she swung her arms.

## THWACK THWACK THWACK!

Countless knives shot out from her hands, lodging deep into all the human-shaped logs' hearts. The fighter landed lightly on the ground, with a casual *phew*. She looked around at the group watching her and held out her knife. "Here, it's your turn," she said, stone-faced. "Please try it. It's fun."

"Who's gonna do that?!" the spectators shouted in chorus.

The girl cocked her head in puzzlement. "Why don't you? You asked me to show you what I had fun doing when I was little, so that's what I've done."

"Uh, most kids wouldn't do stuff like that. I mean, they couldn't if they tried," Magus said, shaking his head. "You can't either, right, Miss Saint?"

"Well, hm... I do think it's a splendid skill, but I wouldn't know where to start..." Lydilia replied with a shrug, still applauding casually.

"Sorry, everyone," Miach added, scratching her cheek. "My sister Maiah grew up in a family of street performers or something, so she knows all these wacky tricks."

"Practicing this technique was my favorite pastime when I was little. Papa can hit many more targets without even taking a fighting stance."

"I just can't shake off the feeling that they're a family of assassins..." Miach remarked. "I'll have to pop by sometime to give them a proper greeting."

"You're welcome anytime, Miach." Maiah nodded. In contrast to her younger sister, Maiah seemed to have a quiet personality, with little facial expression. Still, a faint smile played on her lips, perhaps because she was happy to have finally reunited with her twin sister after being separated since childhood.

"Sisters, eh...?" A small sigh escaped Lydilia as she looked at Miach and Maiah.

In any case, the next presenter stepped up to bat. Magus lifted up a huge boulder in high spirits.

"All right! It's my turn! I'll show you the rock game I played with my older brothers when I was a kid! You throw your piece against the opponent's, and the one who destroys their opponent's piece is the winner!"

"Is that supposed to be...fun?" Lydilia screwed up her eyes. "But why are you all trying to teach me your childhood games now?"

"Isn't it obvious? You were called a saint since you were ten years old, weren't you?" Magus said, looking around at the group. "So we figured you probably didn't get a chance to play around like a kid back then. Not bad to tap into that inner child once in a while, right?"

"You're stepping over the line..." Lydilia muttered, her face twisting into a sulky scowl.

"Huh? Didja say something?" Magus said.

Allen, who was watching the scene from a little distance, put a hand to his

chin and groaned, "Hmm...none of them are hitting the mark."

"It seems so..." Still in the mirror, Charlotte let out a sigh.

Since they came to the field, the whole group had been taking turns demonstrating things that they thought might delight the saint. But none of them had the desired effect on Lydilia—in fact, she was growing more and more disgruntled.

"What shall we do?" Gosetsu whispered. "Continuing further may only exasperate her. In the worst case, she might get so irritated that she would lock herself up in Lady Charlotte's body."

"That's certainly probable," Allen replied. Tired of their intervention, Lydilia might go back into hiding inside Charlotte again, just like before. There would be ways of drawing her back out, but if Allen resorted to such aggressive methods, she would become even more resentful. *Hm, what to do...?* 

Gosetsu narrowed her eyes and, lowering her voice so that only Allen could hear her, murmured, "However, that may be for the best, in the end."

"What do you mean ...?"

"She claims not to have any interest in life...but there is no guarantee that she won't change her mind in the future and take over Lady Charlotte's body completely." She threw a glance at Lydilia, her eyes gleaming like a sword. "She certainly spells trouble; she has the potential to harm Lady Charlotte. Doesn't it stand to reason that we should confine or eliminate her before she does any damage?"

"You've got a point, but still..." Allen agreed that if he wanted to make sure Charlotte stayed safe, the best option was to go right ahead and annihilate Lydilia. She was a ghost of the past, after all. There was no need to think about her happiness. But he waved his hand in dissent. "That won't do. It goes against my principles."

"Too stubborn to yield? If it's for the sake of the woman you love, isn't it far more honorable to cast aside your own will?"

"Being stubborn is a part of it, but there's a bigger reason." Once he made up his mind to do something, he would see it through to the very end—that was

Allen's motto. But this time, he had another important reason to keep going. He hearkened back to the oath he'd made to Charlotte when he'd taken her in. "I once promised Charlotte that I'll make her say, with pride, that she's the happiest person in the world."

"It's just the kind of line you would deliver shamelessly. And? What of it?"

"When I made that promise, Lydilia was inside Charlotte. That means I promised Lydilia too." He had sworn to make them happy. "So I have to make her happy as well, not just Charlotte. That's the biggest reason."

"Ah...you never change. It's all a matter of your stubbornness." Gosetsu shrugged, shaking her head. She looked like she was at a loss as to what to do with him, but at the same time, the menacing glint in her eyes dimmed. Chuckling, she went on, this time in a louder voice, "Well, I wouldn't trust my master with anyone less self-assured or thick-skinned. If using force is out of the question, we must find a way to thaw her frozen heart... Have you a plan of action? She is not an easy opponent."

"Don't worry, I'll make it happen. I think I've found a way in."

"Hm? You can entice even that world-weary saint, you say? Well, Sir Allen, you are living up to your title of Dark Lord indeed."

"I told you, it's Dark *Over*lord... You called me the wrong name on purpose because you know I don't like it, didn't you?" Allen glared at Gosetsu, but she merely looked back at him with a smirk.

Just then, Natalia burst into the crowd with a shout. "I'm back!" She carried a big, bulging rucksack on her back and large paper bags in both hands. Despite her heavy load, she was grinning proudly.

Allen had noticed Natalia flittering off before the group got to the field. "Natalia? Where've you been?"

"I was preparing something naughty, of course! I had to buy a few things." She laughed through her nose, as if she was already sure of her success. She turned to Lydilia and the group with a *hmph*, brushing back her hair with one hand. Though she was always confident, she was positively glowing with pride now, like a brave warrior returning in triumph.

Groh's eyes widened at her. "So you're the famous little sister. We hear you're a clever one."

"Hmph. Of course I am—I'm Charlotte's younger sister, after all."

"That means this little kid is related to the saint too," one of the henchmen whispered.

"If you ask me, this girl's more like the saint than our dear goddess is..." another one murmured back.

With a sideways look at Natalia, Lydilia rolled over one of the human-shaped logs that Maiah had struck and sat down on it. She sighed, leaning one elbow on her knee. She was clearly losing her patience. "So, are you next? I would rather make this the last one. I am growing weary," she grumbled.

"That's fine. I'm sure we won't have to have any more rounds after my turn."

"Hm... You seem rather confident."

"Naturally. This naughty pleasure that I've thought up with my brilliant brain will surely make you swoon, saint or not!"

Sparks flew as Natalia and Lydilia locked eyes head-on. A cold gust of wind swept over the field, stirring up a foreboding air for the stormy battle to come.

"Hey, Dark Overlord," Magus whispered to Allen. "Don't you think you should reconsider how you teach morals to that little girl?"

"I'll give it some thought..." Allen dismissed most criticism with a laugh, but he had to admit the way she talked was a little problematic.

As the grown-ups averted their eyes with grave expressions on their faces, Charlotte gripped her fists in nervous anticipation. "She sounds so confident... I wonder what she could have in mind."

"There's only one thing she'd come up with." Allen shrugged. Though her upbringing made her wild, Natalia still had childlike sensibilities too. No doubt she would bring up her most cherished memory to confront Lydilia.

Just as Allen expected, Natalia dug into her big rucksack and pulled out her precious items one after another. "Here, choose whichever picture book you like! As a special treat, I'll read it aloud for you!"

"A...picture book?" Lydilia growled, her eyebrow twitching in irritation.

What Natalia brought were picture books of all genres. From simple ones for learning letters to stories with adorable animals and classic folk tales, there was a wide range of books to tempt any reader's tastes.

"Ooh...that's a pretty good idea," Eluka said. "It does bring back memories."

"I still have my old picture books back at my parents' house," Miach said.

"Yep, I had my favorites too."

Eluka, Miach, and the others were all chattering to each other excitedly now. It was surprisingly a blind spot for everyone, so they were impressed by Natalia's choice. Lydilia, however, wasn't amused. She scowled in disgust and pushed away the picture books that Natalia offered.

"I am not interested in such infantile books. Take them away," she ordered.

"Hmph, you know you want to," Natalia countered. "Think of it as getting back in touch with your inner child." A seven-year-old girl talking about becoming a child again—it was a peculiar scene, but Natalia herself was utterly serious. She didn't give up even when Lydilia shoved back the books. "My favorite memory," she said with a hint of pride, "is my dear sister reading me picture books. You might remember this because you were inside her, but..." She scratched her cheek a little bashfully and went on, "You lost your life at a young age. People would call your life tragic. But even someone like you...must have a memory or two that warms your heart, like your family reading you a picture book?"

"Wh-What—?!" Lydilia blurted out, clenching her fists. Her whole body trembled, and she pierced Natalia with a furious glare. Like an explosion, she shouted, "That has nothing to do with me!"

"Huh?"

Just as Natalia's eyes went round in surprise, a violent blast ripped through the field. Its searing hot breath would have scorched the lungs of anyone in the vicinity, and a direct hit would have turned all into ashes, no matter how sturdy a species. But the blast died down in a moment. "Well, you're a real handful of a student," Allen said.

"Oh...D-Dark Overlord..." Natalia blinked a few times in Allen's arms. Since he'd rushed out and snatched her away in a split second, she had no burns. The others were also saved by a hair's breadth, protected by the magic barriers cast by Eluka and Gosetsu. But the human-shaped logs that Maiah had used were charred black. The blast had been powerful and far-reaching.

She's not a legendary saint for nothing... Allen was secretly impressed, but he glared sharply at Lydilia. "Watch it, Lydilia!"

"Eep!"

"You've crossed a line! You could've hurt Natalia! Apologize to her right now!"

Anyone would have agreed that Lydilia was at fault. But she shook her head petulantly. Her airy, cynical tone vanished, and she even started stomping her feet. "Oh shut up shut up shut up shut up!!! It's...it's not my fault... I haven't done anything wrong!"

Light flooded out of Lydilia's body.

"Hey, wait!" Allen warned.

But the glow soon faded away, leaving behind Lydilia—or rather, Charlotte—blinking in confusion. She glanced all around her. "U-Um...? What happened?"

"Lydilia went into hiding inside you. Do you feel any different than usual?" Allen asked.

"No... I'm fine, but..." Charlotte was downcast. "Oh!"

"Dear sister!" Natalia flung herself onto Charlotte, wiping her eyes in between sniffles. "I... I was so scared... Why did she get so angry at me?"

"Don't worry, Natalia," she said, giving her little sister a hug. "Allen, thank you for protecting her."

"It's nothing. I just did as a teacher should." With a wry smile, he ruffled Natalia's hair as she sobbed. "And you acted like a true student of mine. Poking precisely at the opponent's weak spot."

"Did she...hate picture books that much?" Natalia asked.

Allen nodded slowly. "Well, I'll explain later." Every small detail that had been puzzling him had now been arranged into a clear picture.

"Lydilia..." Charlotte murmured anxiously, knitting her brows a little. "Do you think she's okay?"

"Hm. Did you notice something too, Charlotte?"

"I could feel her emotions..." She squeezed her hands over her heart as if she was in pain and looked down at her toes. "She was very, very sad. Like her heart was being torn apart..."

"Oh... D-Did I say something that cruel?" Natalia blurted out in a panic. "What should I do, Dark Overlord...?"

"Don't worry about it—she got even with you." Allen patted her head. He cast his eyes over the whole group. "As you can see, that's how things stand. Sorry to send you away after you've all gathered to help, but I'll deal with her myself."

"Well, I could see that coming..." Groh and the other men murmured to each other.

"We can't handle someone like that."

"But what the hell was that outburst...?"

They all seemed startled by the saint's sudden fury, and none of them had any clue what had triggered it.

Meanwhile, Roo tugged at Allen's sleeve with a low snarl. "So, what's the plan? More naughty lessons?"

"Of course. Something so wicked that it goes against the very reason of this world." The corners of Allen's lips curled up in a mischievous grin. "All right, it's time to go home and get ready for a party."

## **Chapter 3: The Saint's Wish**

Several hours later, the preparations were complete. The sun had long since dipped below the horizon, and darkness enshrouded the forest around the mansion. In contrast, the living room where everyone was gathered was aglow with bright light.

"Good, everything looks ready now," Allen remarked.

"Perfect, bro," Eluka said with a thumbs-up.

"Well, we did everything as you asked, but..." Natalia furrowed her brows and tilted her head in puzzlement. She looked around the transformed living room, which was much more lively than usual. The walls were covered with decorations they'd made from paper, and vibrant dishes crowded the table. At the place of honor in the middle, of course, was a whole family-sized cake. They were ready for a cozy house party. It wasn't anything extravagant—just the casual dinner party of an ordinary family.

"Are you really sure you can sway the saint with something like this?" Natalia asked doubtfully. "I did help out...but these are all average, homely dishes—nothing special."

"That's why it's perfect. Anyway, you know the plan. I'm counting on you all," Allen said.

"Well, if you say so, Dark Overlord... I'll stick to it."

"And so shall we," Gosetsu followed.

"Me too," Roo joined in, nodding eagerly.

As she stroked each of the beasts on their heads, Charlotte scratched her cheek with a sheepish smile. "I went a little overboard with the cooking... I hope she'll enjoy it, though."

"Everything is perfect. I guarantee it," Allen replied.

"Hee hee, I'll trust you, Allen."

The party was a small one: just the usual group of Allen, Charlotte, Natalia, and Eluka, along with the two beast companions. In other words, it was an intimate family gathering. And now, they were about to invite someone else to join them.

"All right, Charlotte. Would you mind? It's meant to be your birthday party, so it's a bit ridiculous that the main guest has to be pushed aside..."

"I don't mind at all. I've had plenty of celebrating since yesterday." Charlotte smiled softly and gave a little bow. "Please take good care of Lydilia."

"I will." Allen placed a hand on Charlotte's shoulder and cast a simple spell. Then she began to nod off. He snapped his finger next to her ear. "Wake up, Lydilia."

With a gasp, Charlotte's eyes opened. She slowly looked around, then her face twisted into a disgusted grimace as Lydilia's personality took over. She glared at Allen and growled in a low voice, "What, you awakened me? Why don't you leave me alone?"

"Don't say that. I've got a bit of business with you," Allen said.

"Hmph, I am never going to apologize for what I did earlier, if that's what you're after." Lydilia crossed her arms and looked away. She didn't forget to throw a glance at Natalia with a scoff. "I don't care what you say. That girl is to blame. I haven't done *anything* wrong."

"Grr...! It's even more frustrating when she's speaking from my dear sister's mouth!" Natalia complained.

"N-Natalia, please stay calm..." Charlotte tried to soothe her from inside the mirror.

Gosetsu and Roo exchanged glances in silence. Although everyone was tense, Allen was suppressing a grin.

Hm. It's going well. He could see it clearly: Lydilia was changing. She still talked like an old sage, but every gesture she made was now rather childish. Though she was putting on a bold front, there was a hint of uncertainty in her furtive glances at Natalia. It was proof that she was feeling cornered. To Allen, it presented the perfect conditions for putting pressure on the opponent. Trying

to hide his scheming as much as possible, he said nonchalantly, "That's something we have to sort out too, but more importantly, I called you out to give you another naughty lesson."

"Then you still haven't given up...?" Lydilia heaved a dramatic sigh and said despondently, "I'm sick of everything now. Just erase me from this world—I do not wish to remain another second. After everything that happened today, it's clear to me. As I expected, there's nothing...not a single thing in this world that would bring comfort to my heart."

"Hmph. You won't keep playing the part of a pessimist for long," Allen said with a bold grin. "This is the last shot. On the off chance that I can't move you with this, I'll back down and make you disappear."

Lydilia squinted at him. "Do you swear...?"

"Yes. I tend to keep my promises." Allen nodded firmly.

"Fine...then." Lydilia caught her breath a little, then gave a small nod. A complicated tangle of emotions—both bracing herself for death and feeling relieved at the same time—swirled in her downcast eyes. "Understood. I shall see it through to the end. Hurry up, then."

"Good, that's settled. Well..." Allen placed a hand on Lydilia's shoulder and gestured at the table with his chin. "First, you'll have dinner. With all of us."

"Huh...?" Lydilia blinked in confusion. But when she saw the many dishes on the table and the decorations on the wall, she scowled. "This must be...Charlotte's birthday party?"

"That's right," Allen replied, "and you're invited."

"Then I shall leave. This body belongs to Charlotte. What's the point of a birthday party without the birthday girl?"

"That's a different story. Go on, sit down already."

"I don't want to. This has nothing to do with me."

No matter how much he tried to persuade her, Lydilia didn't budge. Allen flashed a fearless grin. "Hmph, in that case, I'll use my last resort."

It had been a while since he used that spell. He intoned a short spell and snapped his fingers. An ominous symbol appeared over his clothes around his heart. He pressed a hand to the spot and declared, "I've just cast a death curse on myself!"

"Huh?"

"If you don't agree to join in the dinner party, I won't undo the curse. So what's your answer, Lydilia? Surely even you would be pained if an ordinary, innocent citizen died because of you. Hurry up and say—"

"Why would I care? Feel free to die, I won't stop you," Lydilia snapped at him with a frosty look.

"Hm...?" Allen went still for a moment. She was indifferent, and she didn't cry out to try to stop him. Her reaction was the complete opposite of what he'd expected. But he pulled himself together and pressed her further. "Don't you see my life is on the line?! If a good citizen loses his life because of you, even a snide saint like you would feel guilty, wouldn't you?!"

"A 'good citizen'? Who do you mean? What concern is it to me that a fool like you puts his own life in danger?"

"Ack... This threat worked so much better with Charlotte...!"

Natalia glowered at him threateningly, almost ready to shoot him. "Are you saying you've used this trick on my dear sister before, Dark Overlord?"

"Uh, well, I just—!" He couldn't exactly say he hadn't, so he stopped short. Charlotte jumped in to help him.

"Th-There there, Natalia. At first I was surprised...but Allen hasn't done it as often recently, so it's all right."

"'As often'...? 'Recently'...? Dark Overlord, I'll need a word with you later. And you will spill all the details of just how much of a headache you've been for my dear sister."

"W-Wait a second... I feel like I'm going to pass out... Ah..." Allen crumpled to his knees.

"A-Allen?! Are you okay?!" Charlotte cried out, the only person in the room

who was actually worried about him. The others watched calmly, eyeing him coldly as if to say, "He's being as stupid as ever."

Natalia shrugged with a sigh. "Anyway. I'll grill him about his misbehavior later, but for now... Come, please sit down, Lydilia. Before dinner gets cold."

"Yeah, go on," Eluka chimed in. "We all worked hard on it, you know."

"Wh-What, now you're all pushing me too?" Nudged forward by the two of them, Lydilia found herself seated at the table. But she was still restless, and she turned to Charlotte in the mirror. "This is *your* party, isn't it...? I am sure it's not my place to eat anything here..."

"I can eat later, so please don't worry about me," Charlotte assured her with a big smile. "I'd like to thank you for rescuing me too. It would make me happy if you had some."

"W-Well, if you insist...I'll try a little."

"Yes please! There's dessert too. And you too, Allen...um, are you well enough to eat?"

Allen was forced to undo the curse himself, and he staggered back to his feet. "I... I'm all right..." he rasped in between hacking coughs.

He'd ended up making himself look ridiculous, but at least he'd succeeded in making Lydilia join them at the table. Now the whole family was sitting down together. Roo and Gosetsu were ready for the feast too, their food bowls placed right near the table.

"Well then, let's dig in!" Eluka said brightly.

"Bon appétit," Natalia chimed in.

"Th-Thank you..." Lydilia put her palms together, looking somewhat nervous.

And so, a small but lively dinner party began. It was a family style meal, where each of them was meant to take helpings of whatever dish they wanted from big plates in the middle.

"I hope you like it..." Charlotte anxiously said to Lydilia from the mirror, which was propped up on the table. "I'm sure you're used to more refined cooking..."

"W-Well, it's not a problem. I'm not a picky eater. Anything will do—"

"Oh, how about this, then? It's really yum, try it," Eluka said, scooping one of the side dishes onto Lydilia's plate.

"I'd recommend these deep-fried shrimp. My sister made them for us." Natalia heaped some shrimp on Lydilia's plate too. Soon, her plate was loaded to the brim.

Lydilia hesitantly picked up a fork. Since the whole group was looking at her expectantly, she resigned herself to the fact that there was no way out. "Mrr... You're all rather pushy... I suppose I have no choice. I'll try some of these."

She reached for a fried shrimp. With the tail a little singed, it wasn't a perfect specimen by any means. She nervously put the shrimp in her mouth. The next moment, her scowl softened. "It's...nice," she murmured.

"Really?" Charlotte brightened up. "If there's any other dish you like, please let me know. I'll make it for you anytime!"

"B-But, I..." Lydilia mumbled, averting her eyes. She wanted to say, "There won't be a next time," but Charlotte looked so happy that she couldn't let her down.

Allen chuckled at her fluster—he could read her like a book now. "So, you prefer simple, straightforward cooking like this over a luxurious full-course meal, huh?"

"Th-That's not what I meant! It's only because I'm not as familiar with the meals of commoners—"

"Hey, Natalia, want some of this salad?" Eluka piped up.

"Yes please," Natalia replied. "What about you, Coach Gosetsu and Roo?"

"Yes, I shall be glad to partake of it."

"Me too! I love tomatoes! What about you, Lydilia? What's your favorite?"

"Eh? W-Well, umm...f-fried shrimp...I suppose?" Though Lydilia had been glaring at Allen, she was soon swept along in conversation with the others.

For a while, the dinner went on with noisy chatter and laughter. Lydilia was

shrinking in her seat awkwardly—but eventually, she heaved a great sigh and hunched down her shoulders, turning to Allen. "Enough. Tell me, Allen. What exactly are you scheming?"

"It's simple," Allen said, spreading his arms as wide as the table where they all sat together. "This is it—this is your naughty lesson, Lydilia. I'm giving you...this whole scene."

"This scene...you say?" Lydilia's brows furrowed dubiously.

"Exactly. What I mean is..." Allen paused with a sneaky smirk. There was only one thing that Lydilia, the saint who died young and scorned society, could desire. "From now on, we're your new family!"

Lydilia drew a sharp breath, and color drained from her face. "M-My new...family...?!" she squeezed out the words in a trembling voice, as her face became distorted in pure rage. She slammed her fists down on the table and bellowed, "Don't make me laugh! I... I don't need a thing like that!"

Allen shrugged calmly. "Are you sure?" He took out some bound papers from his breast pocket and began to read out loud. "You awakened your powers at the tender age of ten, and due to an illness...you died young at eighteen." The tale of her life as a saint was short—but it was full of details of her glorious achievements and her benevolent, picture-perfect family. "You've left behind countless legends, but your family is known for their remarkable deeds too. I found so many stories about them."

"I've heard those as well..." Natalia put down her knife and fork, and crossed her arms, looking sullen. Apparently, she was reluctant to talk about her family —she talked as if they were someone else's ancestors. "I was told that Lydilia's parents were both admirable people, and her younger brother, who became head of the family after them, worked hard to help the people and the society at large. At the mansion, there's still a portrait of the happy family all together, hanging on the wall."

"Hm. 'Happy family,' eh? Is that truly how it appeared to you?" Lydilia mumbled.

"Well, yes...happier than my family, at least. Oh, but—" Natalia put her hand on her chin, lost in thought. "There was only one portrait of Saint Lydilia. The

one that was painted when she was very young. I wonder if they didn't want posterity to remember her as an invalid."

"No, that's not why. There's a reason they couldn't have another portrait." Allen took out another bundle of papers from his breast pocket—these papers were so ancient they looked like they might crumble into dust any second. But they held crucial records about the saint. "The truth is, you were only ten years old when you died. Isn't that right, Lydilia?"

"Wha... Ten years old?!" Natalia blurted out.

"Sh-She was even younger than me?!" Charlotte gasped.

In contrast, Lydilia hardly reacted. She stared at Allen, her face fixed in a grim expression. "What makes you think so?"

"The first clue was when I realized your secret." Allen tossed the bundle of papers at Lydilia. Her face clouded over in an instant. He knew that gloom wasn't due to what was written there. "You can't read, can you?"

Lydilia said nothing.

"It's a strange story, isn't it? The saint who saved her kingdom, but doesn't know how to read. So I looked into your history again."

He'd tried to continue his research using the materials he sneaked out from the Athena School of Magic, but as she had lived in a different country three centuries ago, there was a limit to the information he could dig up. He'd tried asking Gosetsu too, but since she had been living on a different continent in that era, she barely had any recollection of the saint. So he turned to an acquaintance of another species known for their longevity: Dorothea, the dark elf. He hadn't had high hopes, but she'd turned out to be a jackpot.

"So you did hear any rumors about the saint's death...?" Allen had asked her.

"Oh yes, it was a common piece of gossip at the time," Dorothea had said. Like Natalia, she had disappeared somewhere in the midst of the battle of naughty lessons against Lydilia, but Allen tracked her down to a streetside café, elegantly sipping some black tea. She pressed a finger to her temple and traced back her distant memory. "Hmm, lemme see... If I recall, Saint Lydilia must've been born out of wedlock, between a prostitute and the then lord of the Evans

family. I heard somethin' or other about him givin' into temptation when he visited a countryside village for inspection, and that's how she came about."

"A textbook case of a pathetic nobleman, I see..."

"And just like the pathetic nobleman he was, he turned a blind eye to the woman and his child."

Lydilia lived in the brothel where her mother worked, doing menial work, until she turned seven. But as soon as her miraculous powers of magic were discovered, the head of the Evans family bought her for a handsome sum of money. This was the birth of the ten-year-old saint. She then quickly disappeared from the public eye. Officially, she was supposed to be convalescing from her illness, but that wasn't the whole story.

"Rumor had it that her family was tellin' everyone a big fat lie—that the saint was already dead from usin' up too much of her power too fast. No one knew for sure, but everybody talked about it like it was true," Dorothea had explained.

"As for the accounts of her reappearing in public once in a while, was that a dummy or a double?" Allen had asked.

"Yup, that's what the word was. I heard she kept most of her face hidden when she came outside."

At that time, the Kingdom of Neils was gathering strength, mostly thanks to Lydilia. Alliances were being struck up between other powerful states, so the upper echelons must have deemed her presence necessary as the symbol of the kingdom. They had to keep her alive somehow.

Allen got the overall picture, so he'd raised a hand and gave his thanks. "I owe you one, Dorothea. Even you can be useful sometimes."

"Not at all, not at all. Anyhoo, how 'bout a cuppa, Master Allen? Care to stay for tea with me? Everythin' on their menu is fantastic, y'know!"

"No thanks. I have to go straight back, obviously. And I don't want to keep you from your work either."

A slight panic came into Dorothea's eyes. "B-But you're more than welcome! I

want you to stay! Or else, I'll be thrown back into the manuscript-writing prison in hyperspace with nothin' else to do—"

"That'll be five minutes. Visiting time is over." The man in a black suit who had been standing behind her cut her off.

"Nooo! It can't have been more than three minutes?! What about my human rights, or elf rights?! Gyahhhh!!!"

With a snap of the man's fingers, a gaping hole appeared in midair, and Dorothea was sucked right into it. The hole vanished in another instant.

Allen thanked the man too—he was Yoru, Dorothea's editor. "Sorry to interrupt when you're so busy."

"It's true that there isn't a hair's breadth of spare time in her schedule. However, I can always squeeze out some interview time if it's a request from you, Mr. Allen." Yoru bowed to Allen respectfully without moving a muscle in his face. Apparently, Dorothea had been lying earlier when she'd said she'd finished up her work. She had actually sneaked out when Yoru had let his guard down, and he had hunted her down to capture her again. He pressed a hand to his chest and said, stone-faced, "Her new romance novel based on you, Mr. Allen, is flying off the shelves. I have been thinking that I must pay you a visit to thank you formally. We are very grateful for your cooperation."

"That ludicrous book is selling...?"

"Yes. It's the biggest hit the publisher has had in the last hundred years. In fact, many of our own staff are avid fans, and they are eagerly awaiting the sequel," Yoru said calmly with a nod.

The story of Allen's own romance getting published without his knowledge, and flying off the shelves into the hands of thousands of readers—he felt tempted to blow up in a fit of rage, but managed to stifle it.

Yoru took out his business card from his suit jacket and said in a cool, monotonous voice, "Apologies for not introducing myself earlier. My name is Yoru Darkhorn, and I manage the publishing department of the Elders Alliance. I am pleased to make your acquaintance, and I hope we will continue to work together for a long time."

"Wait, you two are part of the alliance of long-living species...?"

The Elders Alliance was an underground organization consisting of all kinds of species with longevity, such as elves, dragons, spirits, vampires, and so on. It was said that if one could come into contact with even a few members of the alliance, it would be easy to change the world. For a connection that came from buying a secondhand mansion, it was an extraordinarily good deal.

Now, back to the dinner party.

Lydilia was still glaring at Allen, not even trying to hide her irritation. "What...are you suggesting?"

"It doesn't matter how tough you act...you're a little child who was used up and thrown away. That's the true story of the saint," Allen said calmly.

"And what about it?!" she barked. There was no hint of aloofness in her manner now. Her agitated power made the plates clatter on the table, and her hair rippled in the air like snakes. Though she hadn't unleashed it yet, the force of her magic was far stronger now than it had been when she lashed out at Natalia.

Finally, I've peeled away her mask... Allen snickered inwardly at his success.

Oblivious to his reaction, Lydilia kept shouting. "Yes, I died when I was young! I barely had an education, and all they wanted of me was to behave like a saint!" Big drops of tears welled up in her eyes. As one of them rolled down her cheek, her emotions overflowed. "I wanted to know what it was like to be loved! That's why...that's why I worked so hard...but no one ever loved me!!!"

Lydilia's birth mother, the prostitute, had never wanted her. After selling off her daughter for a big sum, she had disappeared from Lydilia's life for good. That made Lydilia fulfill her duties with the Evans family ever more diligently, for the sake of those people who needed her—the kingdom and her family—even if that meant sacrificing her own health. And yet what everyone wanted was her *achievements*, not Lydilia herself.

"No one has ever *hugged* me! Let alone read me a picture book...! Even as I lay dying...they were all too busy talking about how to hide my death!"

"That's what I thought," Allen said.

After her death, Lydilia's body was cremated, despite the fact that the most common custom in the kingdom was to bury the dead. Likely, they didn't want to leave any evidence of her death. It wasn't hard to imagine how much this must have made the saint despair—the little girl whose only wish had been to be loved.

"I keep telling you... I'm sick and tired of this world... Why don't you get it?!" As Lydilia howled, a gust of magic wind assaulted Allen. "Die, you fool!"

## BOOM!!!

A thunderous rumble shook the mansion. Thick plumes of smoke rose in the living room, and there was a large hole in the wall facing the garden. Caressed by the chilly breeze blowing in from the hole, Lydilia breathed hard, her shoulders heaving. Allen grasped her shoulders from behind.

"Not a bad move. But in the end, it's only a child's trick," he said.

"Wha—wh-when did you—?!" Lydilia widened her eyes in shock.

"Listen, Lydilia. The days of everyone fawning over you as the saint were no less than three hundred years ago. Of course, there's been much progress in magic technology during all that time. Now, in the modern age...there's no way an old-fashioned saint can hope to match up to this Dark Overlord!" Before Lydilia could move, Allen attacked.

"Eek?!" Lydilia flinched back. But eventually, she timidly raised her face when she realized that he hadn't used any magic. "What the...oh, what is this?!" Her eyes went round at the large, thick collar that hung around her neck. The leather belt was held by an ostentatious lock. Despite its chunky aesthetic, it was much lighter than it looked.

"Hmph, that's something that didn't exist in your day. We can call it the gift of modern technological progress." Allen scoffed and pointed a finger straight at Lydilia. "It's a special enchanted object. Believe it or not, it's a cursed item that can absorb ninety-nine percent of the wearer's power...and make it impossible for them to use magic!"

"Th-That's ridiculous...! There! There! Come on!!!" Lydilia waved her fingers desperately at Allen. Normally, bursts of wind, or fire, or ice would have shot

out from them, but now, she could only generate a gentle breeze.

Such magic harnesses were usually used in prisons. Before the party began, Allen had whipped one up himself. For the Dark Overlord, this level of magic was easy as pie.

"Without your magic power, a saint is as good as a baby! See, try and hit me. You're helpless against the Dark Overlord!"

"Grrr... It doesn't matter. I can beat you up even without magic! There, there...!"

"Mwa ha ha ha! What's this? Are you trying to tickle me? You think you can beat me with those flimsy punches?"

"Mrrrrr...!" She pummeled Allen feverishly, but he was completely unaffected. As she grew more and more frustrated, tears again brimmed in the corners of her eyes, and her punches became even more feeble.

On the surface, she still looked like Charlotte, so it pained him to do this, but Allen steeled himself and kept on taunting Lydilia. It must have looked utterly unseemly to the others watching from the sidelines. The group was already eyeing him coldly.

"Ugh... Grow up, bro," Eluka complained.

"I dunno, that just looks wrong to me," Roo joined in.

"Well, I approve of his idea of making her powerless without harming my sister's body...but I have to say his awful personality shows through," Natalia commented.

"Even I am slightly mortified by this, and I'm a beast," Gosetsu said.

"Shut up!" Allen snapped back at the four of them. "This is the way I teach!"

But Charlotte frowned from the mirror in Natalia's arms. "It's not nice to bully her so much, Allen. If that story is true...Lydilia is only a little girl, after all."

"Oh! But, uh, this isn't bullying; this is teaching her discipline..." Allen's defense trailed off.

"It's still not nice. Don't be a meanie, Allen."

"Okay..." Allen hung his head in shame.

"Y-You're ridiculously tame..." Lydilia pierced him with a withering look even as she tried to fight back her tears.

He pulled himself together and cleared his throat. "Exactly. Charlotte has tamed me. But...I'm so much stronger than a little kid like you!" Pointing his thumb at himself, he declared, "Unlike those grown-ups around you three hundred years ago, I would never, ever use you. You know why? It's far more efficient to do everything myself than rely on an ordinary child!"

"Me...an ordinary child?" Lydilia stared at Allen, dumbfounded. "Do you...really mean that?"

"Of course. As far as I'm concerned, most people are mediocre anyway." He crouched down in front of Lydilia and peered into her miserable face with a grin. "I can treat you like a normal kid. And I can love you like a normal kid."

"I...!" Lydilia choked up. Her face slowly crumpled, and the big teardrops returned. She couldn't stop weeping now. "I'm sick of it all...! Even if I can bring myself to hope for something better, I know I'm going to be betrayed sooner or later! That's why...that's why I wanted to end it all... Why do you start spouting platitudes that make me hope again?!"

"Well...I can't just watch you suffer, that's all." Allen gently stroked Lydilia's head as she wailed. The way she cried was just like a child, abandoning herself to her emotions. These must be the true feelings that she had been hiding for so long. "If you're afraid of betrayal...how about we do it like this?" Allen casually snapped his fingers. A pattern of symbols glowed around his own neck; the same pattern appeared on Lydilia's index finger. "I just cast a death curse on myself," he announced.

"Huh...?"

"Unlike the curse I used before, it's a spell I can't lift on my own!" he explained. "The moment you feel that you have been betrayed by me...my heart will stop beating!"

"Whaaat?!" Lydilia stopped crying and let out a high-pitched shriek. "A-Are you in your right mind...?! That's such a vague trigger—what kind of wizard

curses himself like that?!"

In contrast to Lydilia, who blanched in shock, Charlotte, Natalia, and the rest nodded to each other in agreement.

"Well, that's the way he is, after all..."

"Wouldn't put it past the Dark Overlord..."

"All I have to do is keep you satisfied, right? Easy." Allen shrugged nonchalantly. He peered into Lydilia's face and grinned mischievously. "First, I'll teach you how to read. And I'll read aloud all the picture books you want."

"Really...?"

"Uh-huh. I'll read them over and over again until you get bored." Once the weather got a little warmer, they could go on trips too. They could bring a packed lunch to have picnics outside, go visit the zoo of magical beasts, or amble aimlessly around the city. "And ordinary, uneventful days can be fun too, you know. You wake up, eat, play, study...then take a bath and go to sleep. I promise to give you days like that that would make you yawn."

Allen held out his hand to Lydilia—to save a girl in tears, just like the time he saved Charlotte when she was ensnared in a nightmare. "Let's become a family, Lydilia! I'll make sure you never feel lonely again. I promise!"

"Allen..." Lydilia held her breath, her eyes brimming with tears.

The icy, hardened wall around her heart was beginning to crack. It was palpable to Allen. Just then, he had a peculiar sense of déjà vu. *Hm...?* 

He had a feeling that he'd heard that line before. Those words he had just uttered—someone, somewhere, had told him the same thing in the past. His memory of it was vague and elusive, but he couldn't shake off the feeling. Was it Uncle...? Maybe, but it could've been someone else... Anyway, that's neither here nor there. The moment passed, and he turned his thoughts back to the matter at hand as Lydilia slowly shook her head.

"No...that's one thing I can't do," she said.

"Don't be stubborn, Lydilia. I must've swayed you a little, haven't I?"

"Even if that was true...this body belongs to Charlotte." Lydilia pressed a hand

to her heart with a sigh. "If my consciousness stays in this body, I'll be a nuisance to Charlotte. I don't want to step over the rights of the living just so I can live again..."

"That's nothing to worry about." Allen patted her slumped shoulders with a smirk. Such concerns were trivial to him, of course. "When I set my mind on something, I see it through to the very end. Just leave it to me."

 $\Diamond$ 

As the world outside the window slipped into darkness, Allen was wrapping up his work in the laboratory.

"All right. How do you feel? Does the body fit?" he asked.

"Mmm..." The figure in front of him gave a small nod, clenching and unclenching her hands. The little girl, about ten years old in appearance, had translucent silver hair and vivid, scarlet eyes. But aside from those features, she looked exactly like a younger version of Charlotte. Since he didn't have any children's clothes at hand, one of his shirts hung over her frame like a baggy dress. Though she looked like a dainty girl that anyone would want to protect with their life, there was a sharp gleam in her eyes as she gazed up at Allen. "This body is a homunculus, isn't it...? Did you make it from scratch just so I can have another vessel?"

"O-Of course I did! Why else would I make a thing like this?!"

"Why did that question make you flustered...?" The girl—Lydilia—squinted at him with even more suspicion.

Allen had separated Lydilia's consciousness from Charlotte's soul and transferred it to the body of the homunculus. Though it sounded like a straightforward procedure, it did require advanced skills that could trip up even intermediate wizards. For Allen the Dark Overlord, however, the whole thing had been easy as pie.

Who would've guessed this unsettling gift I made for Charlotte's birthday could come in handy like this...? It was a stroke of good luck that he had stored it away.

He gave Lydilia a quick rundown of what to watch out for. "It's a homunculus,

but it also grows like a human child—you can also get sick or hurt. And keep in mind that your magic power is roughly one tenth of what it used to be. Depending on how you train, your magic could grow stronger, but until you get used to it, be aware of that."

"That sounds doable." Lydilia nodded confidently. But she looked down at her feet and fiddled with her fingers. "More importantly, though... Let me ask again. Are you really sure you—"

A quiet knock on the door interrupted Lydilia.

"Are you finished, Allen?" Charlotte asked from the other side.

"Yes. Come in," Allen called out.

The door opened slowly, and Charlotte peered into the room. At first her brows were furrowed anxiously, but her face brightened up as soon as she saw Lydilia. "Ooh, how adorable!"

"Eep!" Startled by everyone suddenly piling into the room and crowding her, Lydilia hid behind Allen.

"Pretty impressive, bro," Eluka commented. "Whipping up a homunculus this quickly? Way to go."

"Hm, I like the fact that she's a little shorter than me. There there, good girl," Natalia said, petting Lydilia's head along with Eluka.

"H-Hey! Don't do that! Who do you think I am—ack?!" Lydilia screeched and tried to get away, but she backed into Roo and Gosetsu. She was completely surrounded.

"Aww, she's so tinyyy! She might be small enough for me to swallow her whole!" Roo piped up.

Gosetsu chuckled. "You ought to keep yourself in check, Young Roo. If you're going to eat her, it's much more prudent to wait until she's bigger."

"Eek?! H-Help me, Allen!" Lydilia shrank back from the beasts and clung to Allen's legs.

Allen raised an eyebrow dubiously. "You weren't scared of them before. What happened?"

"They look a lot bigger now! It's scary! Besides, that Infernal Capybara definitely doesn't like me...!"

"Well, it's true that you stirred up trouble for Lady Charlotte, but I also appreciate that you saved her from her imprisonment. Remember, be a good girl—if you don't behave, I shall gobble you up," Gosetsu threatened her with eyes wide as saucers.

"Ack...I can't take her death stare!" The body seemed to shape the spirit, as they say, and Lydilia seemed to have grown younger to match her new vessel. She acted like a ten-year-old should.

"It's much more natural and wholesome for you to act like this than pretend to be a grown-up," Allen remarked, gazing down at Lydilia and thoughtfully stroking his chin. "Looks like I did make the right judgment."

"Enough rambling, hurry up and help me!" Lydilia cried. "I just got this body, but my life's already in danger!!!"

The two beasts were edging closer to Lydilia, but Charlotte patted their heads with a troubled smile. "Oh, you two...be nice to Lydilia. Starting today, you're family, so I hope you'll get along."

"I know. I'll take good care of her!" Roo barked.

"Your wish is my command, Lady Charlotte," Gosetsu replied cheerfully.

"Family, huh..." Lydilia's expression grew somber again. She tilted her head a little and meekly glanced up at Allen. "Um, is it really okay...?" she asked anxiously. "Doesn't it go against the laws of nature for someone like me—who died centuries ago—to get another chance like this?"

Allen cocked his head. "What do you mean? There's plenty of precedent for cases like this." It wasn't uncommon for someone to have all the memories from their past life. There were tales of wizards and witches who kept creating new bodies for themselves to live a thousand years. On the magical beast side, there was also the phoenix, which rose anew as a fledgling bird from its own ashes. Death didn't always signify the end in this world. "Your life is yours, and yours alone. Do with it as you like."

"I'm not so sure that's how it works..."

"Besides, see this?" Allen showed her a piece of paper. "I've already registered you as a resident of the city. You can't back out now."

"Wh-When did you—?!" Lydilia stared at the document with wide-open eyes. It was a proof of her identity issued by the local government. With a simple background check, anyone could register as a resident, regardless of their nationality or species.

"So you see, you have to accept your fate. Do whatever you want to do."

"Whatever I want...?" Lydilia's gaze wandered around the room, then she sucked in a breath. She stared hard at the piece of paper that Allen held out. "It was always my dream to learn how to read... I didn't even know how to write my own name in my past life."

"That's a good goal. I'm sure you'll be able to read documents like these in no time."

"H-Hm. Is that my name there?" She pointed at a line.

"Yes," he replied.

Natalia peered in from the side and asked, surprised, "Oh, she's not registered as Lydilia?" The name on the document was Lydie Crawford.

"I changed it just to be safe. If she has the same name as the saint, there might be some problems down the line." If Lydilia grew up to be a full-fledged witch, her name might lead to comparisons to the saint of legends. People might even try to pry into her connection to the Evans clan, which would be troublesome. "If you don't like 'Lydie,' you can pick another name. Feel free to go back to your old one too, if that's what you want."

"No...I'll keep it. I like Lydie." Lydilia—now Lydie—nodded slowly. Holding up her index finger, she chanted a spell. A small flame kindled. Though there was no hint of the overpowering magic that she'd used to attack Natalia, her face brightened up. She stared straight up at Allen and gulped. "The saint is dead. The one who's here now...is an ordinary child who can do a bit of magic. That's the way it is—right?"

"Exactly." Allen smirked. He pulled out a book from his breast pocket and handed it to her. "Here, the tried-and-true way to learn how to read is to look

at a simple picture book. You can use this one to study."

Lydie opened the book, and her eyes sparkled in excitement. "Ooh...it's packed with letters...!"

Allen pointed over his shoulder and said, "That's one of the books Natalia got to read aloud for you. You can thank her if you like it."

"N-Natalia..." Lydie knitted her brows, looking abashed. She hid her face behind the picture book, glanced at Natalia, and hesitated for a little while...but she eventually bit her lip as if to brace herself and gave a bow. "Um, I'm sorry for what I did back there... I didn't mean to hurt you... Will you forgive me?"

"N-Never mind about that. I mean, I could've blocked a blow like that even if the Dark Overlord hadn't stepped in." Natalia humphed proudly. She eyed the book in Lydie's hands and said brusquely, "By the way...if you want to learn how to read, I wouldn't mind teaching you. I often help my followers with their schoolwork, so I'm used to it."

"I'm supposed to be ten, though... I'm not sure I would be comfortable with asking someone younger than me to teach me..."

"Forget about little details. Age has nothing to do with learning," Natalia said.

"M-Mrr... Is that so? Well then, could you teach me?"

Natalia swaggered, smiling from ear to ear. "I suppose I have no choice. It's getting late today for a full lesson, but I'll read to you later." Apparently, she was pleased to have someone to look after like a little sister—she wasn't the smallest one anymore.

"Good for you, bro. It all turned out well in the end," Eluka said, patting Allen's shoulder. "Papa's gonna be so surprised when he finds out."

"Right, there's no way around it, is there? I can already imagine all the jabbering I'm going to get from him," Allen said, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah, you gotta let him know." Eluka tried to hide her smirk from him, but she was clearly amused to no end. "Who would've thought you'd turn into a dad? *You* of all people, bro."

Lydie froze at the words. "What...?" She awkwardly turned to Allen with wide

eyes, completely baffled. "'Dad'...? Who do you mean...?"

"Me, of course," Allen replied with a shrug. "You needed a guarantor to be registered. The paperwork is simpler if I'm officially your father." He could have made her Harvey's adopted child, but then they would have had to go all the way to the Athena School of Magic every time they needed his signature for some administrative procedure. So, Allen thought he might as well become her guardian both on paper and in reality, and casually signed the papers, making him her father.

Even after this brief summary, Lydie was still gaping in shock.

Allen's brows furrowed. "What's so surprising about it? I told you we'll be family."

"Uh, you know, you're just...quite a far cry from the 'fatherly' type..."

"Well, I can't deny that." Allen nodded deeply. Not even a year ago, he would never have even thought about becoming a parent. Crouching down, he peered into Lydie's face and ruffled the top of her head. "That means you and I are both beginners: a new dad and a new child. Why don't we take it slow and grow together?"

"Mrr..." Lydie pursed her lips and stared at Allen. "Are you..." she finally squeezed out in a hoarse whisper, "Are you...going to be my father forever?"

"Of course. I have the curse on me, so I won't let you get away no matter what." Allen grinned roguishly.

This whole affair had gone in a totally different direction from what he had expected, but these days, everything in his life was like that. Still, he tackled it all with everything he had, and somehow managed to stay afloat. He'd approach fatherhood the same way; he would just give his all to fulfill his new role.

Besides, he wouldn't be doing it alone. Allen glanced at Charlotte beside him. "What do you say, Charlotte?"

"Y-Yes. I'll do my best." Charlotte nodded with a serious expression.

"Huh?" Lydie's eyes went round again, as if to ask what they were talking

about.

"U-Um, there might be lots of things I don't know how to do..." Charlotte clenched her fists in firm resolve. "But I'll do everything I can to be a good mother!"

"Mother...? You, Charlotte...?"

"Yes." Charlotte nodded. She pressed a hand to her chest and said with a shy smile, "Allen gave me a family. So this time...I'd love to be your family, Lydie."

Lydie was speechless.

"W-Well, at first I thought I might be your big sister, but if Allen's becoming your father, that makes me—oh, um, Lydie?" Noticing Lydie's silence, Charlotte looked down sadly. "I-I guess you'd rather have a more dependable mother, wouldn't you...?"

"Of course not!" Lydie flung herself onto Charlotte and hugged her tight around her waist. The smile on her face was shining more brightly than ever before.



Lydie pointed at Allen and declared, "You're infinitely better than *that* rogue! In fact, I couldn't have thought of a better mother myself."

"R-Rogue...? You shouldn't talk like that about him, Lydie. Allen's your father now." Though she chided Lydie, Charlotte was all smiles. She seemed relieved that Lydie had accepted her.

"Hey, that's not fair, Lydie!" Natalia said, flinging her arms around Charlotte and squeezing her tight. "She's my dear sister! You can't have her all to yourself."

"Hmph, she's my dear Maman!"

"M-Maman...?! B-Be nice to each other, both of you!" Charlotte fretted over the two girls squealing at each other. As a mother (level 1), it seemed she was going to face a rocky road ahead.

Smirking, Eluka nudged Allen with her elbow. "You're pretty smooth sometimes, bro. How does it feel to become a dad before you even get married?"

"I-It just happened. What else could I have done?" Allen mumbled, clearing his throat. *Although...on paper, Charlotte isn't named as Lydie's guardian.* Of course, since Charlotte was still wanted as a criminal, he couldn't put her name on the registration papers. It was just some paperwork, but still—her life would only begin afresh when she could write her own name in situations like that, without hiding from authorities.

As Allen was pondering such things, the others were getting more excited.

Roo stood right in front of Lydie and proudly huffed through her snout. "So that means, you're my little sis, Lydie. You can call me big sis!"

"Mrr, I suppose it *is* true you were Charlotte's first daughter... Fine. I shall call you Big Sister Roo."

"And you may call me Esteemed Sister Gosetsu."

"Understood, Grand-maman."

"Oh dear, feeling rebellious already, are we? All the more reason to teach you some manners..." Gosetsu said ominously.

"Eep!" Lydie flinched. She somehow mustered up her fighting spirit and drew herself up to her full height. "T-Try it, I dare you! With dear Maman on my side, I have nothing to fear!"

"Be nice, Lydie," Charlotte said gently. "You and Gosetsu should be friends too."

"Urgh...b-but Maman, she makes me shiver...!" Lydie went back to clinging to Charlotte in the end.

They may have been teasing the former saint, but everyone had welcomed her in as part of the family. Perhaps Lydie could sense this in the air—her expression had certainly softened.

Finally, the case was settled. At least for now.

Allen covered his face with his hand and heaved a lengthy sigh, steeling himself to confront the final, most formidable adversary.

It looks like everything's going to be all right with Lydie. Now, all that's left to do is...give Charlotte her birthday present.

The final test was none other than the first kiss that he had promised her.

 $\Diamond$ 

A few hours later, as the hour approached midnight, Allen was slumped lifelessly over the living room sofa. "I-I'm spent..." he groaned.

Just a short while ago, the mansion had been lively with chatter, but now silence fell over the mansion. Allen sat in the living room, surrounded by the scattered remains of gift boxes and paper bags of various sizes. The plates they'd used for dinner were still on the table, the telltale traces of a hearty party. The room was filled with the special hush that comes after a jovial celebration.

With a sigh, he looked down at his lap, where Lydie lay sleeping peacefully, her soft, regular breathing audible in the silence, her hands clutching his clothes.

"Never knew...being a dad was this tiring..."

There was a very good reason they ended up like this tonight. With Lydie

starting her new life at the mansion, the newly formed family naturally found that they needed to buy all kinds of things—like a change of clothes, stationery for studying, picture books, and various daily necessities. Though there was enough stock in the house to cover some of those needs, he obviously hadn't had any clothes for children at hand.

At first, he thought they could go shopping in the city the next day, but Charlotte proclaimed with much enthusiasm, "Time to go shopping! If we set out now, we can get to Flora's Golden City before they close!"

"Ooh, good thinking! Come on, let's go, bro!"

"Uh, okay...?"

Since everyone was up for it, they all went out to the city then and there. Charlotte and Eluka led the way, buying clothes and whatnot for Lydie. Allen stood by at a little distance, watching them absentmindedly.

"You're so cute, Lydie! Could you try this one on next?" Charlotte said.

"You have excellent taste, dear sister. I'd like the same one in a different color too," Natalia chimed in.

"Hmm. But isn't this all a bit too extravagant...? Isn't Allen the one footing the bill?" Lydie said.

"What's that?" Allen's fighting spirit flared at Lydie's reluctance. "Don't be stupid. Our finances are much better than you think. Going on a spending spree for a little kid like you wouldn't even make a dent!" He turned to Flora, the owner of the shop. "All right! I want all the preschool education books here—everything on the shelves!"

"Thank you very much, as always!" Flora sang in response.

"Would you like me to call Miach? I think you'll need another pair of hands to carry everything back..." Jill, the part-time shop attendant, suggested.

Since Flora and Jill extended their opening hours for Allen's unrestrained shopping, he wound up purchasing as much as he wanted, to his heart's content.

"So..." Lydie whispered to Gosetsu, eyeing the mountain of things at the

checkout counter. "It's just like I suspected—he's the type to ruin himself for a woman, isn't he?"

"You certainly do not need to be as long-lived as me to see that," Gosetsu observed under her breath.

Allen was in a generous mood, so he decided to let their comments pass.

When they got back home, it was time to open everything they purchased. The whole process was punctuated by a fashion show featuring the new outfits. Eventually, Charlotte said, "Lydie, it's time to go to bed."

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"Mrr...I'm...not sleepy..."
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"You're practically nodding off," Allen pointed out, but Lydie refused to get off his lap. Earlier, she had been hugging a picture book, looking at him like she wanted to say something. Without any further prompting, he had taken her up on his lap and read her the book again and again.

But now, despite Lydie's obvious sleepiness, she wouldn't budge, no matter how much Charlotte tried to put her to bed. She clung to Allen's shirt and shook her head. "Allen said he'll read to me...so, just one more time..." she mumbled drowsily.

"Don't worry, he'll read for you tomorrow too. Won't you, Allen?" Charlotte said.

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"O-Of course. So go to bed, Lydie."
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"Nooo, I don't wanna... I wanna stay here with Papa..."

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"P-Papa...?!"
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As Lydie wouldn't listen, Allen had no other choice but to pat her on her back until she fell asleep. He was glad that whatever Lydie might say, she was really getting attached to him.

"Shall we go to bed too?" Natalia asked Charlotte with a big yawn.

"Yeah, you had a long day today, Mommy. You should get some rest," Roo added.

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"Y-Yes... Um, can I leave Lydie with you, Allen...?"
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"Ah, uh-huh...I'll take care of her..."

Charlotte and Natalia retired to their bedroom, Eluka had gone out for a latenight snack with Jill after his shift was over, and Gosetsu had gone out for a drink once again. Those who were free of responsibilities were as energetic as ever. And so, Allen found himself left all alone, holding the sleeping Lydie.

He looked up at the clock and buried his head in his hands. The darkness outside the window was growing deeper and deeper.

"Come on, it's less than an hour till the end of her birthday...! What do I do? Should I go to her room right now...?!"

But Natalia and Roo were sharing Charlotte's room. They should have fallen asleep by now, but what if they were still awake? If they caught him coming to Charlotte's room, they would surely glare at him suspiciously. Tactless daredevil as he was, he was neither so strong nor so shameless that he could tell them to give him and Charlotte some space because he wanted to flirt with her. Besides, he couldn't move because Lydie might wake up.

Mulling over his predicament, he realized something. "Wait, does Charlotte even remember what happened last night...?"

A kiss for her birthday. He was about to kiss her just a day ago, but so much had happened in the space of twenty-four hours. It wouldn't be surprising if Charlotte had forgotten all about it by now.

"If she doesn't remember...wouldn't I end up looking like a guy who gets turned on at the weirdest time?!"

A boyfriend who tries to get a kiss on the very night they become parents. Looking at the bare facts, he had to admit he would come off as overkeen. Even Charlotte, whose heart was as big as the sea, would be put off by that. If he tried to kiss her and got a gentle rejection instead, he would simply have to end his life.

Blood draining from his face, he pressed a hand to his head. It would be easy to give up here. He could always think of another present for her tomorrow. But that was one thing he didn't want to do, no matter what.

"Argh... But now that I've come so far... I just wish I could kiss her, if only just

this once...!"

The birthday present was turning into an excuse now. Since he had been thinking about kissing his love all day long—of course, he really had been thinking about Lydie's situation too, but the other matter had always been at the back of his mind—his desire had grown more and more. But he couldn't see a way to make it happen.

"You must be tired, Allen."

Someone called to him from behind, and he jumped. He spun around to find Charlotte standing there in her pajamas. She peered into Lydie's face—who was still curled up in his lap—and smiled gently.

"She's fast asleep. I'm glad."

"H-Hm..." Even though he had been dying to see her, he was tongue-tied. Before he could say anything, Charlotte drew closer to him softly. With a faint blush, she tilted her head to one side.

"Natalia and Roo are asleep too... Um, can I sit next to you?"

After a moment, Allen managed to say, "Sure," with a stiff nod. She quietly sat down beside him.

Last night, they had been sitting side by side like this too. They'd talked easily last night, but now, they were both silent. A hush descended on the room, thicker than when he had been alone.

What now what now? What do I say...?! Allen had no clue how to act in a situation like this. He turned as rigid as a rock.

Suddenly, Charlotte turned to face him. With a soft smile, she said, "Thank you, Allen."

"Hm...?" Allen was dumbstruck by her unexpected words. All the desires and struggles that had been whirling around his head vanished in an instant, and pure puzzlement took its place. He cocked his head and wondered what she was thanking him for, but he had no idea. "You mean...for putting Lydie to sleep?"

"Well, that too..." Charlotte giggled. "But I've been thinking all day...what

would have happened to me if I hadn't met you?"

"Hmm..." Allen thought about it. One day early in the spring, he had found her collapsed in front of his mansion and had taken her in. But what if she had been able to cross through the woods and never saw him? "I guess Lydie would've come out to help you if you got in a pinch...and maybe you would've lived quietly in some town somewhere until Natalia came to find you?"

Lydie had been secretly watching over Charlotte from inside her. And Natalia was honing her skills at the Athena School of Magic, intent on locating her sister. Somehow, Allen had the feeling that Charlotte would have been all right even if she hadn't crossed his path.

When he told her so, she said with a nod, "That might be true. But if things had gone like that...I don't think the three of us could've laughed together the way we do now. It's thanks to you, Allen, that Natalia, Lydie, and I could connect with each other so deeply."

"Well, I won't deny those two aren't easy to handle." Lydie would have probably stayed a cranky cynic, and Natalia would have been burdened by her guilt for all the years when she couldn't help her sister. "But it might have been just a matter of time for all that to be resolved."

"Still, I don't think we could've laughed so freely like this." Charlotte shook her head, then turned her gaze to somewhere distant. "Remember what I said last night? That you gave me family. But actually...you didn't just make *me* smile. You made everyone smile, together."

"What are you saying? I just did whatever I wanted, that's all."

"Even if that's true..." With a gentle touch, Charlotte took Allen's hand. She held it close to her heart and turned to him with a radiant smile. "I'm glad I met you, Allen."

"Charlotte..." Allen couldn't speak. A thought came to him. And what about me? What would I be doing now...if I never met Charlotte? Very likely, he would still be living alone in this mansion—staying away from people, whiling away uneventful, monotonous days. He imagined a life like that without a speck of interest. But he felt a conviction that that wasn't the real answer. If I'd never met Charlotte...I wouldn't be here at all? He couldn't make sense of it, but he

felt sure of that. Something bothered him—a slight snag, a strange sensation that spread in his mind. Because of that, he didn't notice until the last moment that Charlotte was leaning closer to him.

"So, um...Allen!"

"Oh." When he snapped out of it, Charlotte's face was right in front of him. Before he could even blink, he felt something soft touch his lips. In that instant, Allen's heart stopped completely. All he was aware of was how soft it felt, the whiff of sweet scent, the caress of her hair that brushed against his cheeks, the fiery heat of her hands that still held his...

A few seconds was enough for such sensations to be forever engraved in his brain.

Charlotte gently pulled away, turning bright red. Only Allen's stupefied face was reflected in her eyes, which were misty with embarrassment. "You're always giving to everyone else, so...let me give you a present once in a while too," she said, her voice slightly tense. The next moment, she sprung to her feet, picked up Lydie in her arms, and gave a little bow. "W-Well, good night! See you tomorrow...!"

Before Allen could react, she pattered out of the living room. Even after she was gone, he was frozen in place on the sofa. He couldn't move a muscle. Only the hand of the clock ticked away the seconds, and the darkness outside gradually paled. Eventually, when the light of dawn spilled into the room and birdsong came from the forest, someone banged open the front door with a boisterous greeting and bounced into the room. "Master Allen!"

It was Dorothea. She came straight over to Allen on the sofa and started babbling at him. "I heard you've had quite a time of it with the saint and all that, but I'm actually in a pretty pickle myself just now, with my manuscript... I can't think of a good story for the life o' me, and if I dawdle any longer Yoru's dragon breath will burn me for sure... So I wondered if I could ask you a favor, Master Allen... Uh, hello?" With a quizzical look, Dorothea peered into Allen's face. "What's gotten into you, Master Allen? Your face is bright red. Oh! Is this another rom-com moment? Did something lovey-dovey happen with Miss Charlotte?! Tell me more—"

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"Wahhhhhhhhh?!"
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"Eep?!"

With an earsplitting scream, Allen jumped up and charged right through the window, tumbling out into the garden. He kept on running at full speed all around the forest and didn't return until half a day later.

Needless to say, Charlotte was very concerned about him, but when he came back, the others only cast him withering looks that said, "What the hell are you doing?" And Lydie scolded him, "I was gonna ask you to read me a picture book!" On the first day after he'd become a father, Allen felt all too clearly his volatile position in the family's hierarchy.

Putting that aside—when Dorothea had been knocked to the floor in surprise by Allen's outburst, she gazed at the shattered window and let out a sigh. "Well well... I knew he wouldn't be the sort to tell me outright. I reckon I'll have to whip up the rom-com scenes myself!"

With a mischievous grin, she pulled out an envelope from her breast pocket. It was a simple, ordinary envelope. On it was the label: *A Special Invitation to Ryugukyo*.

## **Chapter 4: A Naughty Family Trip**

The entire day after Charlotte's birthday, Allen—in utter shock—ran helter-skelter all around the forest, stormed through some nearby dungeons, slugged down glass after glass of strong liquor in town, and returned home to his mansion around sunset.

"I'm home..." he said as he stepped into the living room.

"Oh, Allen—there you are!" Charlotte rushed over to greet him, a worried look knitting her brows. "Dorothea told me you ran out of the house all of a sudden. I've been worried about you."

"Uh, well..." Allen couldn't look her straight in the face. He averted his eyes and said in a small voice, "I was surprised, so...I went to blow off steam."

"Is that because of...what I did yesterday? Maybe you didn't like it?"

"Of course I did!!!" he blurted out, unable to stop himself. He grabbed Charlotte's hands and squeezed them tight. Looking into her eyes, he tried to tell her everything he felt. "I, um... I was really happy! Thank you, Charlotte!"

"O-Oh...you're welcome..." she mumbled, her face turning bright red. Allen could feel his own face burning up too.

Lydie looked at the couple and tilted her head in puzzlement. "What're Maman and Allen talking about?"

"Young Lydie. 'Tis the duty of children to turn a blind eye to such things," Gosetsu said with a light pat on Lydie's shoulder.

Of course, the whole family was gathered in the living room to witness the couple's flustering. Everyone except Lydie cast them lukewarm looks, but both Allen and Charlotte only had eyes for each other.

So, we finally k-kissed... Allen gulped as the soft touch of her lips crossed his mind again. He would never have guessed that Charlotte would make the first move. But the more time passed, the more his surprise turned into joy. "You've

come a long way, to catch me off guard..." he said thoughtfully, still holding her hands.

"W-Well, you're always the one to take the lead, so...I thought, once in a while, I can muster up my courage to do something new." Charlotte smiled shyly.

Her boldness would've been unthinkable back when they had first met. Allen was gladdened by this change in her, and he brought his face closer to hers with a grin. "But if I stay passive, it'll be a stain on my dignity as the Dark Overlord. Next time, I'll be the one to make a move, so you better be ready, Charlotte."

Charlotte squealed a little and scurried away from him, hiding behind Eluka. Eluka eyed him coldly.

"Hey bro. It's cool you two are getting on so well, but aren't you going too fast?"

"No, this is just the right speed. Otherwise, I'd lose."

"What kind of competition are you having?" Eluka grumbled, then shook her head. "Anyway, Dorothea said she wants to talk to you about something."

"Huh?"

"Hullo hullo," Dorothea chirped, holding up a hand. She had been sipping tea in a corner of the room. She gave him a rough overview and handed him a white envelope. Allen turned it over, inspecting it from all sides.

"An invitation to Ryugukyo...?"

"Exactly!" Dorothea nodded vigorously.

Allen noticed that Eluka's brow twitched when she heard the name. He wondered what caught her attention, but the conversation moved on before he got a chance to ask.

"Ryugukyo? I have a feeling I've heard of it..." Natalia said, cocking her head.

"The name means 'the land of the dragon palace.' Basically, it's a secluded resort," Allen explained. "The facilities stretch over a whole mountain and its surrounding area, and only visitors who have made an authentic reservation can enter the grounds. The owner has put up a special barrier that

encompasses it to enforce that exclusivity."

"Yup. So...VIPs like to use it for traveling incognito and having secret meetings," Eluka added. Her face looked somewhat tense as she looked at Charlotte, Natalia, and Lydie in turn. "You can reserve a cottage just for yourself—then you can be sure you wouldn't run into anyone else while you're there. Perfect place to chill without worrying about being seen."

"You know a lot about it, Eluka," Charlotte remarked. "Have you been there?"

"WellIII. I guess I sorta have...like, every now and then?" Eluka hedged the question with a noncommittal smile.

Allen was puzzled. I'm pretty sure it's not the kind of place she'd go that often... If he remembered correctly, he had been there once on a family trip with the Crawfords. But that was only once or twice in the past—no more than that. Although Eluka did fly around the world in search of materials for enchanted objects, Ryugukyo was a snow-covered mountain all year round. It wasn't exactly rich in resources. Could it be...something to do with that investigation?

A while back, Allen had asked her to look into the conspiracy that Charlotte had been dragged into. Perhaps Eluka had managed to dig up some secret concerning the prince or the Evans family. After all, just as she pointed out, Ryugukyo was the ideal spot for clandestine meetings. Allen was staring at Eluka when she glanced at him furtively as if to say, "I'll fill you in later."

For now, he decided to let it be and glared at Dorothea instead. "What's this really about, then? Is this some compensation for writing that book based on us?"

"Course, I myself have one goal and one goal only!" Dorothea thumped her chest with a fist and proclaimed, "I want you to let loose on a holiday and flirt away with Miss Charlotte! I'll sneak a peek at you lovebirds from my hidin' place, and I'll whip up a rom-com sequel inspired by your antics—oof?!"

Allen smacked the ticket envelope right back on Dorothea's face. "Who in their right mind would want to go on a trip like that?" He turned away with a *hmph*. He had gratefully accepted the townspeople's gift of a holiday before, but this was a whole different story. "Why would I take up your offer knowing

we're going to be used for your crummy pulp fiction?"

"Ouch... Aww, but I booked a five-star cottage just for you, y'know. *And* I'll cover all the expenses! You'll be missin' out on a fine deal if you turn it down."

"Enough. You can't grab me with a hook like that."

"Oh, come onnn... Are you sure you don't wanna? Take a look at them, over there." Dorothea pointed to the other side of the room with a cheeky smirk.

"Hm?" Allen casually turned to look. He was surprised to see Charlotte already poring over the pamphlet for Ryugukyo.

"W-Wow! I thought the resort Allen took me to was big, but this is even bigger...!" Charlotte said.

"Hmm, fancy sweets in an all-you-can-eat restaurant and spacious hot springs... Not bad," Natalia said.

"Ooh, there's snow?!" Roo piped up. "I've never seen snow before! Is it really true that it's cold and fluffy?"

"Ah, so this is what Ryugukyo looks like now. It has changed much in the passing decades," Gosetsu joined in, peering over the pictures.

With a flamboyant gesture at the group huddled around the pamphlet, Dorothea said, "Seems to me like your whole family's raring to go." She fluttered the envelope in front of Allen's face. "Are you sure you want to decline my invitation?"

"Ack... Arrrgh...!" Allen went bright red in the face, but he didn't have a choice now. He snatched the envelope from the elf, pointed straight at her face, and declared, "Fine! I'll take it! But I don't care if I have to scrape the bottom of the barrel of your savings; I'm going to indulge in luxury as much as I can!"

"Woo-hoo! Righto!" Dorothea replied with a fist pump. "I dare you to use up all the money I've uselessly saved up over several centuries!"

While Allen and Dorothea were getting fired up by this silly challenge, Charlotte smiled at Lydie. "It'll be the first family trip with you, Lydie. I hope you'll have lots of fun—Lydie? Is something wrong?"

"Huh...? N-No...it's nothing. Yes, looking forward to it," Lydie mumbled,

averting her eyes.

As for Eluka, she was quietly observing everyone else, apparently lost in thought.

And so, their family trip to winterland was set in motion, each of them with their own expectations and motives.

 $\Diamond$ 

A week later, they departed on their journey. Ryugukyo was nestled deep in the mountains in the northern tip of the continent. From Allen's mansion, it would've taken half a day even riding on a dragon's back. However, they arrived at their destination with just a ten-minute walk.

"All right, we're here," Allen said.

"Wow! How...?!" Charlotte looked around, her face brightening up. She was bundled up in a thick coat and scarf. "That was so quick! Magic really is amazing."

The moment they stepped into the magic circle engraved on the ground, they were enwreathed by a radiant glow, and the next thing she knew, a gleaming, snow-covered landscape stretched out before her as far as the eye could see. Tall buildings stood in a row, surrounded by gentle slopes, lively with many people playing in the snow.

"They have portals like this all over the world. Lucky for us, there was one close to our town," Allen said.

Most regions had a secret gate into the resort, which only allowed passage to those with an invite card. In other words, it was a quick trip to Ryugukyo from virtually anywhere in the world. Both in terms of the magic power and the effort required for its upkeep, this system of portals was no small feat—but the owner of the resort expertly maintained everything all by themselves.

"By the way, Natalia," Allen said, "you're taking time off from school again, aren't you? You're not neglecting your studies, are you?"

"Hmph. What a stupid question, Dark Overlord." Natalia, wrapped in a warm, chunky coat and a winter hat, flashed a V sign with a triumphant grin. "I knew

an opportunity like this might come up, so I've already completed ninety percent of all the credits I'll need to graduate. *And* I've finished my major research project too! Anything to spend quality time with my dear sister without a worry!"

"You know, your dedication to put your sister above everything else—it's actually impressive when you take it that far," Allen said. Allen himself held the current record for the youngest graduate from the Athena School of Magic. He had completed his studies at twelve years old. At this rate, Natalia would easily strip him of his record.

"You've been studying so hard, Natalia," Charlotte said, smiling softly at her little sister. Then she tilted her head quizzically. "But I wonder where Eluka is... And I don't see Dorothea anywhere either."

"Don't know about Dorothea," Allen replied with a shrug. "Eluka said she'll come late, though."

Before they had set off from home, Eluka had whispered into Allen's ear, "Hey bro. I have a little favor to ask." She'd pulled him away from the group for a moment and glanced at Charlotte before continuing with a serious expression. "I'm gonna catch up later. Could you go ahead and wait for me there? I'll try to be quick."

"Sure, I don't mind...but what are you scheming?"

"Heh heh heh, it's a secret. But get ready, it's gonna blow your pants off." Eluka winked, her lips curling up. "We're all gonna be there, in the right place at the right time. It'll be the perfect chance for me to fill y'all in on everything... Anyway, I'll tell you the rest once we're there."

"All right..." Allen didn't probe, and they parted from Eluka in front of his mansion. *I don't know what it is, but something big is going to happen.* He had a hunch, but it didn't worry him at all.

He casually balled his fists, strengthening his resolve. "Well, whatever comes our way, I'll just tackle it head-on and—bfft?!"

A huge wave of snow crashed right into his face.

"Are you okay, Allen?!" Charlotte cried out.

Roo had dived into the snow and was frolicking all around them. "Snowww!"

Woop woop! It's snowww!"

"Mrr... Snow, huh." Looking at Roo, Lydie kicked up a little bit of snow with the tips of her shoes. Powdery, glistening snow whirled up in front of her, but her eyes didn't reflect the light. She was staring blankly into the distance.

"Oho, it warms the cockles to see young'uns at play... Hm?" Gosetsu, who was smiling fondly at the girls, noticed something peculiar with a twitch of her nose.

Before she could act, someone called out to Allen and Co.

"Welcome! You must be the party with the reservation under 'Mr. Crawford'?"

Allen brushed the snow off his face and looked up. "Yes, thanks—hm?" He blinked in surprise.

Charlotte's eyes went round too. "Oh? U-Um, aren't you the mermaid we met in Yunoha?"

The greeter smiled affectionately—she was the very same concierge who had looked after them when Charlotte and Allen had visited the hot springs resort. "Hee hee, it's a pleasure to see you again, Miss Charlotte."

"But, um...aren't you a...mermaid?" Charlotte slowly looked down at the concierge's feet.

"Ah, we can grow feet when needed," the mermaid explained, taking springy steps to display her slender legs. With a mischievous smile, she turned to Allen, who was still dumbstruck. "I work here, you see—in fact, this is my main workplace. The hotel in Yunoha is part of our resort group, so I was only there to help out with the launch."

"That's a large-scale enterprise..." Allen said.

"I'm glad I can surprise you," she said with a chuckle. "I saw your name in our list of reservations, so I came out to greet you here." She effortlessly picked up their luggage and gestured to the hotel. "A warm welcome to our Ryugukyo. I will be more than happy to escort you."

And so, the party checked in at the front desk and followed the mermaid to

their cottage. Just like when they arrived, all they had to do was to step into the magic portal in the main building, and they were transported to the cottage in no time.

Their "cottage" was as luxurious as expected from Ryugukyo's reputation. It was several times more spacious than Allen's mansion, with multiple guest rooms and even a big hot spring bath. Their meals would be served here too. The amenities and services left nothing to be desired.

Allen looked down at the magic portal right in front of the cottage with a nod. "I see. So you can go anywhere you like in Ryugukyo using that portal."

"Yes. Anywhere except the other cottages—only the guests staying there and the staff of the hotel can go to each cottage." The concierge gestured to the snowcapped mountains stretching out into the distance. "The cottages dot these mountain ranges, with plenty of space around each one, so our guests can enjoy a quiet, relaxing time. If you'd like, you can also register to have this portal connect directly to the gate near your own home."

"The more I hear, the more I'm impressed by how sophisticated the system is... Everything from maintaining a registry of individuals to keeping track of their locations... Hmm..." The high level of magic that must have been involved piqued his curiosity, and Allen couldn't help but stare closely at the concierge.

Meanwhile, the mermaid smiled at Charlotte and the others. "There's still time before dinner. How about you all go out to play in the snow? It's still a beautiful time of day for that."

"Ooh! Yes please. Let's go, dear sister!" Natalia cheered.

"Yes, let's all go together." Charlotte nodded, smiling broadly.

"Woo-hoo! I'm gonna go all out!" Roo chimed in. Her tail thumped wildly as her excitement rose to the max.

At a little distance from the lively group, Gosetsu glanced at Allen. "So...yet another peculiar friendship you've formed," she said, shaking her head with a sigh.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, it's nothing. I was only thinking out loud." Gosetsu didn't elaborate.

Cocking his head in puzzlement, Allen noticed that Lydie was strangely quiet in contrast to the others. "Hey Lydie, what's up?" he asked. "Don't you want to go out with them too?"

"Oh! I...um..." Lydie's eyes wavered, then she laughed awkwardly. "I'm a little —tired... I think I'll rest for now."

"Oh no! Are you okay?" Charlotte gasped and rushed over to Lydie. Peering into her face, she said anxiously, "Then I'll stay with you—"

"No, you go ahead with Natalia and the others, Maman. I can look after myself, easy as pie," Lydie said decisively.

"Um, a-are you sure...?" Charlotte still looked worried, but she didn't press Lydie further, nor did she insist on staying behind.

After putting together what they needed, the rest of them headed out, the mermaid leading the way. Lydie waved to them from the entrance to the cottage, then let out a sigh. "Hm... Now, what shall I do?"

"Do what?"

"Ahh!"

Allen had sneaked up on her from behind. Lydie jolted like a startled cat. She spun around with big, round eyes. "Wh-What are you doing here?! Why didn't you go with them?!"

"Charlotte asked me to look after you. Besides, I was wondering what's been on your mind," Allen said casually. He crouched down to her eye level and pointed at the portal that the others had just stepped through. "You sure you don't want to go play with them?"

"Hmph. I don't mind." Lydie turned away, jutting out her chin. Then she pulled out a picture book—the one she often asked him to read these days. "I'm going to practice reading. I'm happy to wait here for everyone to come back."

"Hm, is that so?" Allen smirked. He poked Lydie's cheek and whispered, "Want me to guess what's really going on? The fact is...you don't know how to have fun on a trip, do you?"

Lydie's face stiffened in surprise. She tried to keep a confident veneer, but her face gave away her concern. After a moment of hesitation, she hung her head, hugging the picture book close. "Well, how can I help it...? Whenever I traveled, it was only to carry out my saintly duties." In her experience, trips went like this: she would either use her powers to solve a problem at the request of other people, or she would meet with some influential figure in some faraway place and eat some fancy meal she didn't know what to make of, while smiling politely all the time. "I just don't know what to do on a holiday like this. And I've never played in the snow either..."

Allen ruffled Lydie's hair. "If you don't know how to do something, just ask us. What do you think we're here for?"

"But...I'm scared."

"Scared?"

Lydie gave a small nod. "Going on holiday, playing in the snow... 'Normal' children would no doubt have fun with it all, wouldn't they? But what if I can't enjoy it? Wouldn't that mean I've failed to be a normal child?"

"I get where you're coming from," Allen murmured, putting a hand on his chin. Lydie had no experience of going on a carefree holiday or horsing around as kids do—so she shrank from that uncharted territory. Though he could understand how she felt, he gave her a cool look. "Are you an idiot?"

At first, Lydie stared at him in surprise, but she soon lunged at him. "Wh—what did you call me?!" she yelled angrily. "Is that what you have to say to your anxious daughter?! How can you be so heartless?!"

"Whoa, hold on!" He held her back by the scruff of her neck, then swept her up into his arms. "Listen up," he said in a leisurely voice to the pouting girl, "only you can find out what's fun for you. It could be that you try ninety-nine different things, and finally find one thing that you're excited about. All you've got to do is keep at it—just be greedy, keep trying out anything new, and don't give up until you find that one thing."

"Anything...?" Lydie said thoughtfully.

"Uh-huh. Now, this is the perfect opportunity." Allen pointed at the snowy

mountains soaring all around them. "I'll teach you some naughty pleasures. It's a lesson from your great father—watch and learn!"

 $\Diamond$ 

Ten minutes later, Charlotte and Natalia were building snowmen at a flat, open field used as a playground near Ryugukyo's ski slopes. Children were having snowball fights, sledding down the gentle hill, and frolicking about in the happy, peaceful atmosphere.

The two of them suddenly noticed something by their feet. "Oh?"

On the ground was a little snowman with a head too big for its body and a lopsided face made of pebbles and sticks. It slowly trekked past them, swaying from side to side. When it was gone, another one came hopping along through the snow. The other kids noticed the peculiar parade and let out whoops.

Natalia tilted her head, puzzled. "What do you think they are?"

"Oh, look! There's Allen and Lydie," Charlotte said, pointing to the other side of the field.

There, Lydie was absorbed in building a snowman as Allen watched next to her. Like the others, this snowman was also clumsily shaped, but Allen gave her an encouraging thumbs-up.



"Well done! This time, you can try casting the spell."

"R-Right. Umm... Awake!" Lydie held out her hand over the snowman and intoned the spell. A faint light cocooned the snowman, and it soon began to hop around like the others. She brightened up at the sight. "Ooh, it moved! Look at it go!"

"Of course it did. I'm a good teacher." Allen laughed, patting her head.

The snowmen leaped and tumbled, moving about freely around the field. The other children squealed in delight. Her face shining, Lydie gazed at them for a while. But then she sighed and hunched her shoulders.

"I can use magic all right...but making the snowmen is still tricky. I never knew it was so difficult."

"What do you mean? They're looking great for someone who's never made one before."

"Y-You think so?" Lydie's face creased into a smile. "Hee hee...well, if Papa approves, they must be—hm?" Someone tugged at her sleeve. She turned around to find a group of children gathered around her. They all looked at her with stars in their eyes and piped up all at once.

"Hi! Could you make my snowman come to life too?"

"Mine too! Pretty please!"

"Huh?! O-One moment—be patient! One at a time!" Lydie was a bit overwhelmed, but she looked much happier than she had been earlier.

"Hmph. She's taken a step forward," Allen said to himself with a satisfied nod.

Charlotte walked over to him and smiled at Lydie and the children. "Lydie's so popular already. I'm so glad I asked you to look after her."

"Oh, it's not like I've done anything much. Where's Roo and Gosetsu, though? I don't see them with you..."

"They went to compete in the magical beast race at the foot of this mountain. They heard that the prize for the winner is some prime meat."

"All right, then we're having steak for dinner, I suppose." He was sure that

those two—the rare Fenrir and the relatively infamous Infernal Capybara—would leave everyone else in the dust. They were probably racing neck and neck with each other for first place by now. "Hm, I bet it's quite a sight—uh, Natalia. What's up?"

Natalia was staring intently at the hopping snowmen. After a little while, she snapped out of it and started tugging at Allen's mantle with a rather serious expression. "Dark Overlord! Teach me that spell too! I want to build a big one and make it move!"

"Ask Lydie to teach you. If you work together, you can make a humongous snowman in no time."

"Of course! Let's team up, Lydie!" With a whirl of her coat, she dashed off exuberantly to join Lydie.

"Agreed! Having you on my team is like having a hundred more people!"

The crowd of children grew more and more animated. Big cheers went up every time another snowman came to life.

Watching the snowmen bouncing around her feet, Charlotte smiled softly. "You really can do anything, Allen. Even make snowmen move around."

"It's a spell I made up when I was a kid." Allen picked up one of Lydie's snowmen and gazed at it. Though it was lopsided, it flapped its limbs energetically with a life of its own. Lydie's magic power was less than a tenth of what it had been when she lived as a saint. But her technique was something special. Memories of childhood came back to him, and he smiled wistfully. "Whenever there was snow, I used to make snowmen move like this. Sometimes I used them as my army to challenge the biggest beast of the mountain; sometimes I made them carry the pieces of ore that I'd dug up."

"I'm not surprised, but you were such a mischievous boy... I thought you might have played in the snow with Eluka, though."

"Ah, we did that too. One time, we each made a hundred snowmen and waged war on each other."

"You two were as mischievous as ever..." With a solemn expression, Charlotte became lost in thought. After a moment, she clenched her hands as if to steel

herself. "Lydie looks like she'll take after you, Allen...so I'll have to step up and be a strong mother."

"No need to get so worked up about it. If she makes trouble, I'll teach her discipline."

"I'll really have to be strong more than ever..."

"Why does that make you look even more grave?" Cocking his head in puzzlement, he gave her a light pat on the shoulder. "Anyway, don't worry about it. What you should think about, first and foremost, is basking in the naughty pleasures that I present you with!"

"Do you mean...something naughty we can only enjoy in winter?"

"Exactly! I've asked the concierge to get something ready!" He snapped his fingers high in the air, and just as they'd prearranged, the mermaid appeared, pulling a wagon equipped with sleigh runners instead of wheels.

"Yoo-hoo, here you are!" The mermaid set everything up in a matter of seconds and held out a mug for Charlotte. "There, that's for you. It's piping hot, so be careful."

"Ooh! Hot chocolate!" Charlotte cried out, her eyes sparkling.

The mug was brimming with the steaming hot drink, which filled the air around them with a sweet aroma.

Allen grinned at Charlotte. "It's not just any old hot chocolate. To put the finishing touch... *Immortal Fire.*" A glow surrounded the mug, and more steam wafted up. His improvised spell was a success. "Now it'll stay warm until you finish the drink!"

Charlotte grew even more excited. "It's like the spell you used on the ice cream at the hot springs... Amazing, Allen!" The people around them noticed what was happening—grown-ups and children alike gulped, looking at the enticing drink. They must have been feeling warm enough from playing in the snow, but having a cup of hot chocolate in the wintry outdoors was delicious like nothing else.

The mermaid's hand shot up as she said, "Mr. Crawford! Could you please

teach me that spell too?!"

"Of course, I wouldn't mind! In fact, I'll treat everyone here to a cup of hot chocolate while I'm at it!"

"Oh! I'd love one!" one of the guests said.

"Thanks, Mr. Wizard!" a child piped up.

People crowded around the wagon, beaming from ear to ear. Natalia and Lydie watched from a little way off, then exchanged looks.

"That spell..." Natalia said thoughtfully, "it estimates the perfect temperature for each person and maintains it while they drink, then once they sip the last drop, it deactivates... It seems simple, but it's a complex mechanism that requires much skill. But he's made all that into such a simple spell. Once again, we see what the Dark Overlord is capable of."

"The spell for the snowmen was highly optimized as well..." Lydie observed. "That rogue may not act like it, but I suppose he is a genius...even with his ridiculous ways..."

"Yes. I'm not quite sure how, but we can't deny that..."

"Hey. I can hear you, you know." Allen glared at the pair talking behind his back. He flaunted the mugs he held in the air. "No hot chocolate for bad kids. Too bad, guess you won't get to enjoy it with the big dollop of whipped cream."

"I-I didn't say I didn't want one! Come on Lydie, let's go get one before it's gone!"

"O-Oh, yes! Wait for me—hm?" Lydie started trotting after Natalia, but she stopped after a few steps, looking around with a dubious expression. However, there was nothing but snowmen and lofty mountains around her. Allen couldn't see anything strange either.

"Anything wrong, Lydie?" he asked.

"Hmm... It's nothing." She walked over to him, still looking puzzled. After that, they all enjoyed plenty of hot chocolate and the snow, but Lydie would still glance around from time to time.

Over the next few days, Allen and Co had the time of their lives at the snowy

resort. They tried skiing, watched magical beast races, and soaked peacefully in the hot spring bath at their cottage. On the third day of their trip, they went to the zoo of magical beasts at the foot of the mountain, where they saw fluffy, chunky beasts that were only native to wintry regions.

That night after their day at the zoo, a lavish hotpot of wild game was served for dinner. The soup gleamed golden with the melted fat from the carefully prepared meat of wild boar. Of course, everyone ate their fill, and not a single drop of soup was left in the big pot.

Leaning back on the sofa, Natalia looked up at the ceiling. "I'm so full..."

"I ate loads too!" Roo chimed in.

"And I forgot my age and stuffed myself to the brim," Gosetsu murmured.

Roo and Gosetsu were both sprawled belly-up on the carpet. The logs in the fireplace crackled, and the living room was warm and cozy, making everyone drowsy. Allen and Charlotte were putting away the dishes when she remembered something. "Oh, I almost forgot—we have ice cream for dessert. I'll get it ready."

"Want help?" Allen asked.

"It's fine, you just finish cleaning up. I have a little idea."

"An idea...?"

Charlotte smiled mischievously and went off into the kitchen. Though Allen wondered what she had in mind, he focused on the cleaning since she asked him to. All he really had to do was pile up the dirty dishes, and the hotel's staff would come to retrieve them later.

He looked around, holding a bunch of forks. "Hmm, where does the cutlery go again?"

"Mmm." Lydie stood behind him and held out a small basket.

"Ah, good job, Lydie."

When the two of them worked together, they finished clearing everything faster than expected. Lydie climbed onto a chair and wiped the table.

"Thanks for helping out," Allen said, patting her head. "So, how's the holiday so far? Are you finding ways to have fun?"

"Mm-hmm. I-I think so..." Lydie nodded stiffly.

Ever since Allen took her out to play in the snow, her gestures and actions had grown much more childlike, though she still talked in the same sage-like way. The whole family had accepted this youthful change wholeheartedly, and Lydie herself was even starting to get used to it. Though her smile was still somewhat awkward, it came straight from her heart.

Lydie looked at the clean table and let out a small sigh. "Back when I was a saint, I couldn't even taste what I was eating, but...it feels so nice and warm when we all share a meal together. I don't know how to put it—I feel like I'm alive for the first time in my life."

"You're starting to get it." Allen grinned. "So you never ate with your family in the past?"

Lydie shook her head. "I didn't even spend that much time with the Evans family to begin with... Oh, but Robert was different." A distant look came into Lydie's eyes. "My younger brother—my father's son and heir—liked to chat with me. I suppose he was excited to see my magic. He asked me to show him all kinds of spells. Well...that was one thing that made me a little bit happy."

"I see..." Allen couldn't ask her anything else. He thought that if she was able to find a tiny piece of beauty in her past life of suffering, her future would be filled with brightness going forward. The others were quietly listening in on their conversation too as time strolled slowly by in the after-dinner lull of the room. "Anyway, you're our child now. If anything's troubling you, just let us know. I've noticed you've been glancing around lately, like something's there that you can't see."

"Oh, that—I'm all right." Lydie shook her head and stared intently at a corner of the room which should have been empty. "I've been sensing an odd presence hovering around me...but I think I figured out the source of it, so I don't mind anymore."

"Ah, so that's what it was." Everything clicked for Allen. He stalked over to the corner of the room where Lydie's gaze had fallen. "Is it this creep's fault?" he

asked, grabbing at the empty air.

There was a sharp yelp.

"D-Dorothea?!" Natalia cried out, jolted from her stupor.

Dorothea had appeared out of nowhere. The intruder fell on her butt and stammered, "H-Hello there..." She waved at everyone with a weak smile.

Looking down at her, Allen spread out the cloak that he had snatched away from her. The soft, white fabric was embroidered with intricate patterns.

"You were hiding yourself under this cloak and following us around. I couldn't be bothered to uncover you, so I just ignored you."

"Well, what else could I do? I gave you this holiday so that you and Miss Charlotte could flirt with each other to your hearts' content! And what better way to watch some melty lovey-dovey scenes than concealin' myself?!"

"You're so dedicated it's scary..." Natalia murmured. "By the way, is that an enchanted object?"

"Yup. Just put it on and it lets you blend into the background. You can even choose how transparent you want to be. Quite handy!"

"What a waste to use a thing like that for pervy voyeurism. It should be used for spying instead," Allen muttered with a frown, pinching the cloak. Both the material and the spell cast on it were first-rate. No doubt a celebrated craftsman had made it—the market price must be astronomical. You could probably buy a small island with that kind of money.

Roo sniffed at the air, confused. "Hunh... I didn't notice her at all. So it wipes away the smell too?"

"Oho, I was aware of her, of course," Gosetsu said. "But as she seemed harmless enough, I let her be."

Just then, Charlotte came back from the kitchen. "Time for dessert—oh? Dorothea's here?" At first her eyes went round at finding Dorothea, but a quick explanation sufficed to get her back on track. Apparently, she was so used to bizarre happenings that hardly anything surprised her now. She lined up mugs for everyone on the table and poured hot chocolate into each one.

"That's our dessert?" Allen asked, puzzled.

"No, that's not all. I'm going to put a scoop of ice cream on top, and..." She took out a frozen box of ice cream, scooped some out with a spoon, and carefully dropped it on top of the drink. Normally, the ice cream would melt before long, and the drink would get lukewarm—but she held out the cup to Allen and asked, "Now, could you cast your spells, Allen?"

"Aha, gotcha...here you go." Allen snapped his fingers. A faint glow surrounded the mug, and more steam rose from the hot chocolate. The ice cream stopped melting. He had cast two spells at once: one for keeping the drink warm, and one for keeping the ice cream cold.

And that was exactly what Charlotte had had in mind. She showed the cup to Natalia with a broad smile. "See? This way, we can enjoy both at once!"

"Wow! Excellent idea, my dear sister!"

"Ooh, I want one too, Maman!" Lydie chirped.

"Of course, yours is next. Could you help me, Allen?"

"Go on, I'm ready."

The two little girls peered into their cups with shining eyes. Charlotte tasted a spoonful of ice cream and smiled. "I knew it—it's even yummier this way. Thank you so much, Allen."

"A combo, huh... Good thinking." He had shown her a spell to keep ice cream from melting at the hot springs before; now she'd had the idea of combining it with his spell for the hot chocolate. For Allen, who wasn't so interested in sweets, it was a surprising blind spot. When he told her so, Charlotte hid her lips with the cup and giggled.

"Hee hee, it's thanks to you, Allen. You've turned me into a naughty girl."

"Oho, listen to the lovebirds, so smitten with each other," Gosetsu teased with a chuckle.

"Th-This is just normal, Gosetsu," Charlotte said, blushing. "Anyway, there's fruit for you and Roo." She brought out a massive plate and plonked it down in front of them. Clearly, she was trying to cover up her embarrassment.

"Yippee! I always have space for dessert!"	



Watching Charlotte closely, Dorothea sipped from her mug and scribbled down notes on her notepad. "Lemme see, the hapless heroine starts takin' her own steps forward... Brilliant! I'm gonna use that arc!"

"All I did was put ice cream in a mug of hot chocolate—it's just a little thing." Charlotte smiled shyly.

"Compared to what you were like in the very beginning, you've made great strides," Allen said with a grin. "At this rate, I'll have to work hard to keep up too... I'll widen my horizons and look for more naughty pleasures to teach you."

"D-Don't get so serious about something like that." Charlotte was flustered at Allen's intense resolve.

Meanwhile, Dorothea downed the hot chocolate, her grin stretching even more. "By the by, Master Allen. If you want somethin' naughty to teach Miss Charlotte...I've got an idea that's better than anythin'. How about makin' a big splash here?"

"An idea? From you? It's not even worth listening to. I'll pass."

"Come on, don't be shy. There's only one thing that's on the horizon now that the heroine has grown, y'know." Dorothea snapped up her pen like an index finger. "And that, my friends, is sortin' out the problem at the bottom of it all. How 'bout challengin' the enemy in Neils Kingdom?"

A hush fell over the whole group as they stared at Dorothea. Only the crackling of the logs and the creaking of the window panes as the wind blew against them could be heard in the silence.

Allen heaved a great sigh. "Didn't expect you'd know what was going on... You're pretty well informed for a hermit elf."

"Well, you were talkin' about the Evans family the other day, weren't cha? I just did a little diggin', that's all," Dorothea said casually, then pointed her pen at Charlotte. "So, how 'bout it, Miss Charlotte? How do *you* feel?"

"I..." Charlotte swallowed hard. But there was no hint of sorrow on her face.
"Um, I do feel angry, and I think they were cruel to me." She uttered each word slowly like someone treading cautiously through a mountain path shrouded in

mist. "I do want to prove my innocence too. But..."

"But?"

"At the same time, I feel...it's only because I had to flee that I met Allen...so I'm also glad that it happened," Charlotte said, her cheeks turning pink as she looked down a little. But she looked up right away and clenched her fists. "Oh, but I really am mad at them! If I came face-to-face with the prince now...I think I'd be able to scold him, 'Bad boy!'"

"'Bad boy'...? Don't you have anythin' stronger to say? He was plottin' your murder, y'know." Dorothea laughed dryly, scratching her cheek. "Oh well, perhaps that's just like you, Miss Charlotte—uh, what's up, Master Allen?"

"Charlotte..." Allen staggered forward and slowly approached Charlotte. Grasping her shoulders, he shouted, "You've come so far, Charlotte—now you're properly angry at them! I'm proud of you for transforming so much...!"

"U-Um, are you okay, Allen?" Charlotte handed a handkerchief to the weeping Allen.

Dorothea shook her head at the spectacle, murmuring, "More like an overbearing parent than a lover..."

Out of context, Allen might have appeared melodramatic. But because he knew what Charlotte was like before, when she couldn't come to terms with her own feelings, this growth moved him to no end.

Allen roughly wiped his eyes and said with a small sigh, "To tell you the truth...I asked Eluka to investigate a while ago."

"You mean, look into the prince...? Did she find out anything?" Charlotte asked anxiously.

"I haven't heard the details yet," he replied, shaking his head. "I'm too impatient to hear a bit at a time, so she was probably waiting till she could tell me the whole story." A sickening tale was better heard all in one go to get it over with. That was why he hadn't pressed Eluka for intel before it was time—but finally, Eluka seemed to be ready to reveal everything. "Eluka told me she's going to explain it all here. She must be wrapping up her research now. As for what's to come next, let's think about that once we've heard everything. Like I

said before..." Allen paused and looked straight into Charlotte's eyes. "I'll respect your wishes, Charlotte. Anything you decide to do...I'll support you no matter what."

"Yes please!" Charlotte nodded with a big smile. Her face looked clear—there was no trace of fear for moving forward or hesitation for dragging Allen into her troubles. Instead, her eyes showed firm determination.

Getting teary again, Allen turned to glare at the other side of the room, where two girls and two beasts were huddled together around a sheet of paper with words like "murder" and "destruction" scrawled on it. There was also a stick figure with his head chopped off. They were obviously bloodthirsty.

"So...Natalia, Lydie, Roo, Gosetsu," he said with a sigh. "Don't go making plans for extermination without Charlotte's consent. This is her fight, you know."

"Ack...but, Dark Overlord! I want to pummel that prince to the ground right now!" Natalia spat, gripping the pen. "And not just the prince. I want to round up everyone in the Evans family who abused my sister and show them hell...!"

"I'm on Maman's side too!" Lydie yelled. "No mercy for evil!"

"Me too! Anyone who hurts Mommy is my snack!" Roo barked.

"After patiently biding my time these past several months...the moment to strike has finally come..." Gosetsu chuckled ominously.

"All right, all right, we know how you feel," Allen said. "Charlotte, you try. Can you calm them down?"

"Y-Yes. How about we enjoy some cookies together, everyone? See, they're yummy." She held out a tray of cookies to soothe them.

At first glance, the four of them looked like a cute bunch, but in reality, they were as vicious as a pack of rabid dogs.

Allen pressed a hand to his forehead and groaned. "I bet it's going to be more of a headache to keep them under control than it will be to scheme the actual revenge..."

"Well well, those fellows in Neils Kingdom are up against quite a formidable pack." Dorothea cackled. But soon she knitted her brows and lowered her

voice. "But it's an odd story, isn't it? Ever since she was taken in by the Evans family, Miss Charlotte was treated cruelly by her stepmother—isn't that right?"

"You did a lot of research... Where did you hear all that?" Allen asked.

"Oh, it's simple. Tracked down some peddlers who'd frequent their estate, and former servants of theirs—made them honest with a little bit of magic and asked them to spill it," Dorothea explained nonchalantly. Her methods sounded barely legal. Allen decided not to comment on it. She went on, "I can imagine a handful of reasons for the prince scrappin' the engagement...but I just don't get what the Evans family wanted to do at all. Would they abuse someone just because she's an illegitimate child? I mean, she's engaged to a prince, after all. It's plain as day what would have happened if the story got out in the open."

"That's the thing..." Allen cocked his head.

What Dorothea pointed out was something he had been thinking about for a long time now. He could see how the prince might have scorned an illegitimate daughter and plotted to nullify their engagement—that much was understandable. But he didn't get why the Evans family had kept abusing Charlotte all those years and didn't try to protect her reputation even for their own sake. If they'd been found out, it could tarnish the whole clan's position among the nobility. In fact, they were already so cornered that they'd had to send off Natalia to a distant boarding school.

It's as if they want the family to be destroyed... he thought. It wasn't impossible—nevertheless, he just couldn't see their motive. He mulled it over, but eventually shook his head with a sigh. "Either way, we'll find out soon enough. It's no use speculating when we have so little to go on—hm?"

A soft knocking came from the door of the cottage. When he opened the door, Eluka tumbled in with the frosty wind.

"Hey, how's it going? Sorry to keep y'all waiting."

"Hi, Eluka—oh!" Charlotte's face stiffened when she saw Eluka by the door. She immediately grabbed a blanket nearby, dashed across the room, and wrapped her up. The sight of Eluka in her typical scanty outfit seemed to have given her a shock. "Are you okay, Eluka?! You must be freezing!"

"What, me? Nah, I'm good. This outfit is enchanted, actually—it's a lot warmer than it looks."

"Why take so much trouble to expose yourself...?" Allen cast a withering look at his sister, who thought fit to turn up at a snowy mountain in a crop top and a mini skirt. Even knowing it was enchanted, it still made him shiver just to look at her. Setting that aside, Allen cleared his throat. "You came right in time, Eluka. We were just talking about that investigation you were doing."

"Oh yeah? Perfect, we can get right down to it, then." Eluka looked around at the group gathered around her. They waited in taut anticipation for her next words, but to their surprise, she pointed to the dark night outside the window and said with a smile, "Let's get going. Y'all up for a super fun walk?"

"Huh...?" Allen stared at her, completely nonplussed.



Ryugukyo—a holiday resort in the deep north—was located beyond the glaciers that isolated it from the continent. Its roots lay in the hot springs that were created for recreation by the God of the Sea that presided over the glaciers. If not for that deity, the area would have remained too cold for any organism to inhabit. But by the Sea God's protection, comfortable conditions are maintained there to this day.

Since it was made to be accessible from anywhere in the world, the resort was a popular destination for those who were lucky enough to secure an invitation. Dignitaries were especially fond of the cottages that dotted its premises. There were cottages of various classes, but all of them were usually booked up. The secret to their popularity lay in their anonymity.

Visitors could not only come to Ryugukyo from across the world, but also rendezvous away from prying eyes. And thanks to the God of the Sea, security was impenetrable. These features of the resort made it an ideal place for clandestine meetings. It was even whispered among those in the know that the history of the world could shift in Ryugukyo.

Tonight, in one such cottage, there was another secret meeting underway. Under the white moon, a figure stole up to the front door and knocked. The visitor was carefully covered from head to toe, bundled up in a thick fur coat

with a hood. "It's me," she murmured.

Footsteps sounded in the cottage at once, and the door flew open. A young man with auburn hair and a refined face greeted the woman. Though he was slightly out of breath, he was grinning from ear to ear. He pulled her into an embrace and kissed her ardently.

The air around them was so icy that their breath seemed to freeze as it escaped their lips. Even so, they held each other close on the doorstep, basking in the heat of one another. Eventually, the young man pulled away from the woman and lifted her hood, revealing a face as beautiful as a thorned rose, framed in lush, violet hair. They gazed into each other's eyes in the moonlight and called each other's name in tender whispers.

"You came, Cordelia. I missed you, my love."

"I missed you too, Prince Cecil."

A secret meeting between Cecil, the second prince of Neils Kingdom, and Cordelia, the wife of Duke Evans—it was a scandalous affair that, if exposed to the public, would have shaken the whole kingdom.

Cecil drew Cordelia into the cottage. A fire was already burning in the living room, filling the space with a warm glow. Cecil led her to the fireplace, then looked behind him.

"Keep guard outside," he commanded the several heavily armed warriors gathered with them in the cabin. "Don't let anyone in—not even the Ryugukyo staff. Got it?"

"Understood, sir." Several warriors gave a nod in response. They were evidently the cream of the crop—their bearing showed not the slightest excess movement. The men bowed to Cecil and left the room without a sound.

Cordelia glared at the men as they left. "Private soldiers? Can we trust them?"

"Not to worry, I've paid them a considerable sum. Besides, I can't bring along the kingdom's soldiers to a secret meeting with you," Cecil replied with a shrug. He uncorked a bottle and handed Cordelia a glass of wine, but she merely frowned.

"Don't expect me to drink something so cheap. Isn't there something more tolerable? It's been a while since I traveled to Ryugukyo—I'd rather make it worthwhile."

"Unfortunately, this cottage is one of the lower classes, so its amenities are vulgar. A merchant I often work with secured it for me."

"Hmph, a third-rate merchant, I'm sure. I suggest you rethink your acquaintances."

"Of course, that's what I mean to do." He casually tossed the cork into the garbage can and took her hand. Kissing her gently on the back of her hand, he grinned. "But I can't complain—I get to be with you like this, without worrying about being seen. Was everything all right on your end? It might raise eyebrows if a duke's wife went out for a late-night stroll all by herself."

"No problem. I've made the servants swear to secrecy, like I always do. And I left a dummy behind just in case." Cordelia scoffed. "The duke is away, as usual —off to who knows where. That insufferable old man... What could he be up to, casting aside his own wife?"

"Hmph, visiting his mistress, I shouldn't wonder. After all, he has a history of putting his hands on his own maid."

"Well, if that's the case...so much the better." The corners of her lips curled up into a sneer at Cecil's insult. She took his hand and whispered in a saccharine voice, "Why don't we do away with him next? It's about time. After his daughter stirred up such a scandal, it should be easy to concoct some reason or another, no?"

"Oh yes, I'm already on it. The day is nearing when the Evans clan will be stripped of their status," Cecil said casually, as if they were talking about the weather. His smile broadened as he peered into Cordelia's face. "They have to take responsibility for their villainous daughter, Charlotte, who unsettled the whole kingdom. And if the duke's own conduct is suspicious, to top it off...the family's past glory and reputation will be of no consequence. The Evanses are on the brink of collapse now—they'll be snuffed out like a candle."

"Ah...! I'm thrilled, Cecil! Finally, I'll be free!" Cordelia gushed and threw her arms around Cecil's neck. With a rapturous smile on her face, she looked like a

young, innocent girl. "We can be together at last..." she whispered into his ear. "Ever since I laid eyes on you six years ago, at that ball at the castle, I knew it. I knew that the one I'm meant to be with isn't Duke Evans, but you."

"I feel just the same, Cordelia. You're the only one who suits me—with your perfect pedigree and elegance." He gave a light nod, but his brows furrowed. "But if that girl is alive by some fluke, it'll mean trouble. Some of the palace wizards and witches have used detection magic and claimed that she's still alive, though they couldn't trace her..."

"And? What's the trouble with that?" Cordelia's lips twisted up in a scornful laugh. "Even if she's still alive, what could that doormat do? I tormented her over many years, but she never had the guts to defy me—not once."

"Hmph, you're a cruel woman, aren't you? How often did you take things out on her?"

"How could I help it? I couldn't stand that she was your fiancée."

"Neither could I. Something about her didn't sit well with me from the start. And when I found out about her lowly birth, I knew why."

"I'm glad the love of my life has good taste." The couple snickered.

Eventually, Cecil sighed and looked out the window. "Well, I agree with you for the most part...but you never know what she might do. We still don't know how she managed to slip out of the prison either." He gazed at the gusts of snow whirling outside, his eyes as cold as ice. But when he let out a small sigh and smiled, he looked convinced of his own victory. "Starting tomorrow, I'll hike up her bounty even higher, and send out more search parties. And this time I'll present her corpse before your very eyes, I promise you."

"Hee hee, I can hardly wait. She might even come back as a pitiful little ghost to haunt us." Cordelia cackled in delight.

Cecil wasn't the only one who heard her laughter. The blazing logs in the fireplace were listening, and—someone else too.

In a snowy field far away from Cecil and Cordelia's cottage, inside a large igloo, Allen and Co were gathered around a mirror. It was the Mirror of Nostalgia, an enchanted object that could show a scene unfolding from a

distance. If the mirror was close enough to the view it was displaying, one could even hear the sounds. They had used it before at the Athena School of Magic, when they sneaked a peek at Natalia and her followers. And now, framed in the mirror were Prince Cecil and Cordelia.

"All right, let's stay calm and take a vote," Allen said, flipping up his index finger. His eyes were fixed on the intimate couple. "What do you all think is the best option? Do we bury them under the mountain, sink them in the sea, or tear them into pieces right here?"

"All three, for a start," Natalia replied.

"Y-You all aren't staying calm at all," Charlotte stammered. She was the only one in a fluster among the group; the rest were obviously raring to do something bloodthirsty.

About an hour ago, led by Eluka, they had crept silently over the mountain and arrived near the cottage. They had been recovering from the cold in the igloo and waiting for an explanation from Eluka when the furtive visitor arrived at the door. Recognizing Cordelia's face, Charlotte and Natalia caught their breath. At the same time, Eluka handed them the Mirror of Nostalgia. Apparently, she had set everything up so that they could watch what went on in the cottage through the mirror.



Eluka looked around at the others, whose eyes were fiery with animosity, and let out a sigh. "So, now you see how it is."

"All too clearly..." Allen heaved a deep sigh. He had to remind himself to keep breathing. And to restrain himself by focusing on planting his feet firmly on the ground—if he let himself go even a little, he would have stormed into the cottage. He scratched his head vigorously and glared at the mirror. "So the prince and the stepmother were linked... Things make sense now."

The prince had persecuted Charlotte and smeared her name with false accusations. The stepmother had abused Charlotte over many years. Allen had assumed they were separate enemies, each acting on their own motives, but as it turned out, the whole scandal was a setup so they could be together, and the years of abuse were only the result of Cordelia's jealousy.

Allen tried to calm his anger for a moment and pressed a hand to his forehead with a groan. "Actually, it's a rather simple plot."

"Oh yes, you're exactly right!" Natalia raised her voice. Although the igloo was soundproofed by wind magic, her voice was so loud that it made the igloo shake, fissures running through the ice. Trembling, she spoke in a voice dripping with resentment. "Th-That horrible harpy! She abused my dear sister for a stupid reason like that?! I always thought it was because she didn't like how her own daughter was the second one...!"

"That reminds me—she never showed much interest in you, did she?" Allen asked, staring thoughtfully at the woman in the mirror. Now that he was looking for it, he did see the resemblance between them, especially their willful, unyielding expression. But they looked more like sisters than mother and daughter. "How old is she anyway? She's rather young to be Natalia's mother."

"She's twenty-five now. The prince is twenty-two," Eluka said.

"Ah, I get it. She must've gone along with the marriage that her parents arranged, but then she later met the 'love of her life'—is that the story?"

"Bingo. Wow, bro, you're starting to get how people's feelings work," she teased.

"Cut it out. That sort of thing happens all the time with noble families."

Cordelia must have come from an impressive lineage to be chosen as the duke's wife. She had accepted the arranged engagement and given birth to a baby according to others' wishes, but she ended up falling for someone else. And the same went for Prince Cecil. They were still young and close to each other in age, so it was no wonder.

"If she was in love, she should've thrown away her status and honor and everything, and just gone off with him!" Natalia spat. "She only wanted to save herself—at my sister's expense! That disgusting, dirty woman, I'm going to crush her for real! I'll tear her into pieces along with the evil, rotten prince!!!"

"Um, Natalia... She's still kind of your mother, so maybe you shouldn't call her names like that..." Charlotte said timidly.

"My only family is you, my dear sister! So there!!!" Natalia shouted, red with trembling rage.

When Cordelia found her true love in Cecil, her own child—the daughter she'd had with a man she couldn't care less about—must have turned into a mere nuisance. But for better or worse, she had treated Natalia with apathy, not aggression, because she already had Charlotte, her rival, as a target.

Sighing, Eluka shrugged. "When I went into hiding in Neils Kingdom to spy on them, I stumbled onto one of their secret meetings early on. I thought I better get some physical evidence, so I've been tracking them."

"Well, they don't look very cautious..." Allen said. "You got this cottage for them, didn't you? That couldn't have been easy—aren't these places booked up years in advance?"

Eluka winked. "I got Papa to pull some strings for me, of course. What's the use of having connections if you don't use them, right?"

Meanwhile, Charlotte had been stroking Natalia's head to calm her down a little. Now, Natalia tilted her head in confusion and said, "But I don't get it... I would've thought they'd easily get caught in an affair like this. How did they keep their plot a secret all this time?"

"Simple," Allen said, giving her shoulder a light pat. "If something stinks, you sweep it under the rug. For some, that's one of the basics of getting along in

life. If word got out that the prince and the wife of a duke conspired to stir up trouble in the kingdom, there'd be consequences for other authorities too. They'd rather sacrifice an innocent girl, if that means less trouble for them."

"Ugh... Dirty grown-ups!" Natalia gnashed her teeth, her hatred flaring up even more.

"Mrr...I had no idea about *them*," Lydie muttered. "Grown-ups are hard to figure out..."

"It's not something children should understand..." Charlotte said with a sad smile, gently caressing Lydie's head.

Despite her attempts to comfort Lydie and Natalia, Charlotte seemed to be reliving her painful past. Roo snuggled up to her and peered into her face anxiously. "Are you okay, Mommy? You look pale."

"No wonder she is. To think that my Lady Charlotte was made to suffer for such a shameful, wicked plot... It makes my blood boil." Gosetsu huffed through her nostrils as she sat by Charlotte's side.

A heavy silence hung in the air. They were all deep in thought, their faces grim.

"So...what's the duke doing right now, anyway?" Allen asked Eluka. "His clan is about to collapse."

"Oh, for some reason, he's roaming around all over the place. Looks like he's spending tons of money collecting enchanted objects."

"Hmm... It's not an unusual hobby for the rich, but..." Allen had often heard of aristocrats with too much time and money on their hands getting hooked on collecting enchanted objects. Since there was a wide range of objects—from those that were useful in daily life to those with a broader mystical power—once one stepped in, such a hobby could be bottomless. But how can he be so uninterested in the crisis of his family...? That's a weird story in itself.

In any case, it was pointless to wonder about the head of the house at present. Allen clapped his hands as if to dispel the tense, gloomy mood.

"All right, now we have all the info," he said. He looked at Charlotte and asked

gently, "What do you want to do? It's your decision."

"Y-Yes. The time has come, hasn't it?" Charlotte let out a small breath, which seemed to reach the corners of the igloo. Everyone awaited her answer with bated breath. She glanced at the Mirror of Nostalgia, which still showed Cordelia and Cecil, then turned to Allen with a troubled smile. "Now I know how it feels to wish to be with the one you love—I can understand that feeling so much that it hurts. For that, at least...I can't blame them."

"Then...do you want to do the bare minimum to take revenge? Like prosecute them in court?" Allen asked. That was certainly one option. They could gather various pieces of evidence and charge them with crimes through official means. It would take time, but Charlotte would be able to clear her name. When he explained this to her, she knitted her brows in thought.

"That sounds like a good idea too...but can I ask you something?"

He crouched in front of Charlotte. "Of course. I'll do my best to answer."

With a determined nod, she asked a question he hadn't even expected. "How do you have a fight with someone?"

"Huh...?" He blinked. The others looked at each other in silence.

"W-Well," she added hastily, "when you're in a situation like this, Allen, you can fight it out with your opponent yourself, and really let them have it."

"Uh-huh, that's right..." he replied, still confused.

"I've never done something like that before...so I think this is a good chance to try!" She clenched her fists and looked at him, unwavering. Determination colored her pure, shining eyes. "I want to settle things with my own hands. Like you do, Allen!"

"Charlotte..." Allen stared at her in admiration, forgetting how to speak. When they first met, she hadn't even been able to voice her anger. Now, she had grown so much as an individual. It almost moved him to tears, but Natalia looked at him coldly.

"Dark Overlord...aren't you too much of a bad influence on my sister?"

"Oh, I'd love it if you could teach me later too, Natalia. You're good at

fighting, aren't you?" Charlotte said.

Natalia staggered back in shock. "Is that how you see me, dear sister...?!" "I'd say it's a reasonable view," Allen said.

Charlotte giggled at that, then looked around at the group. "It's thanks to Allen and you, everyone, that I can muster up my courage like this. I want to show those two how I've changed. So, um..." She turned back to Allen and smiled broadly. "Will you teach me? How you have a fight."

"Hmph. That's my area of expertise." Allen smirked. He held out a hand to her and proclaimed, "That's settled, then! Today's naughty lesson is...how to have the fight of your life!"

"Yes please!" Charlotte took his hand with a big smile. And so, an allied army was formed between the Dark Overlord and the "wicked" noble lady.

But her face clouded over for a moment. "Oh, but I don't want to do anything that would hurt them badly. I'd like to frighten them a little and hopefully make them regret what they did. Could you make it a fight like that?"

"Hm, in that case...Dorothea!"

"Who, me?" Dorothea said, wide-eyed. She had been sitting in the corner, scribbling down notes the whole time. She knew she was an outsider to their story, so she had stayed out of it completely. Now she was startled that Allen had turned to her.

"Lend us a hand!" Allen said, pointing straight at her. "If you help us...I'll give you permission to write about us all you want!"

"Whoop whoop! You can count on me!"

Now that they'd easily recruited another member for their squad, they got to work whipping up an offensive strategy as fast as possible.

## **Chapter 5: Naughty Mischief Extravaganza**

Night deepened in Ryugukyo.

Cecil stood up and extended a hand to Cordelia. "Well, enough talk. The night's still young. How about we enjoy ourselves?"

"Sure. I've waited too long to have a night with you... Oh?" She was about to take his hand when she paused, frowning. Wind blew in from somewhere and snuffed out one of the candles in the room without a sound. "A draft? That's why I don't like staying at cheap lodgings."

Cecil furrowed his brows suspiciously and walked over to the windows. "It can't be... All the windows should be closed." Every one of them were locked securely, and all the doors were closed too. He inspected the walls and ceiling, but he couldn't find any gap that might let in air. "That's odd. Where did it come from—hm?"

There was another gust of wind. This time, it blew out most of the candles and even the fire in the hearth. The warm glow that had filled the room vanished at once, plunging them into a chilly darkness.

Even Cordelia was startled by this. With a little scream, she dashed to Cecil's side. "Wh-What is this?"

"Don't worry, it's just wind. Nothing to be frightened of—oh, actually..." He paused and sneered teasingly. "Maybe...it's that girl's curse. She might have died in some ditch, and now she's come back to haunt us."

She clung to him in fear. "D-Don't be silly. You think *she* has what it takes to haunt anyone?"

The prince chortled. "Even if this was a ghost's trick, there's nothing to worry about. I'll protect you." Clearly, he only saw the wind as something to spice up their rendezvous. He called to the guards outside the door. "Hey, the fire's gone out. Come light a new one. Chop chop."

The mercenary should have been standing right outside. But no one answered

him. He waited for some time, but only silence filled the air. Cecil clicked his tongue and banged open the door.

"Seriously, what do I have to do to get—huh?!" He stopped short, speechless.

"What is it—eek!" Cordelia peeked around him and let out a shriek.

Unlike their room, the corridor was ice-cold. A row of small candles lit up the path, illuminating the men slumped down on the floor. All the warriors Cecil had hired were lying motionless. They didn't have any conspicuous wounds, but they didn't move an inch.

Color drained from Cordelia's face even more. "Wh-What's happening?! Are they dead?!"

"How should I know?! Guards! Is anyone there?!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. There were shouts and footsteps from the room next door and above. Apparently, some of them were safe. He relaxed a little, but his face was still tense. With Cordelia behind him, he pulled out his short sword from the hilt on his waist. "Is it an ambush...? But how did they find us—?"

"C-Cecil...! L-Look...there!" Cordelia whimpered, pointing at the end of the corridor.

Something was moving in the deep shadow where the candles lighting the hall didn't reach. The darkness swayed to and fro, and it slowly took the shape of a humanlike figure, creeping forward with faltering steps. Finally, it stepped into the candlelight.

A scream pierced the air. Whether it came from Cecil or Cordelia, no one could tell. In the same moment, the whole cottage creaked threateningly. The pair froze in horror.

The shadow slowly advanced toward them, taking one step at a time. "I...hate...you..." it murmured in a low voice.

Now they could see that the thing had the shape of a young girl. Her head hung low, her eyes on the floor. Her face, partly covered by a curtain of long, golden locks, looked dreadfully gaunt. A ragged dress hung over her frame, and her whole body was smeared in dark red blood. She was half transparent, but they recognized her immediately—she was unmistakably Charlotte.

Every time this shadowy girl uttered a sound, chilly wind swept through the corridor.

Cordelia shrieked again. "It can't be...is it really her ghost...?! Wh-Why here?!"

"Hmph, did she want to catch us together...?" Cecil scoffed. In contrast to Cordelia, he was completely calm. With a mocking sneer, he shouted at the ghost slowly drawing closer to them. "So, you're here! Saves me the trouble of hunting you down. Men, come forward! It's time for an exorcism!"

"Yes, sir!" Burly men leaped out from the other rooms and down the stairs in response. Unfazed by the sight of the ghost, they held their weapons at the ready. "They can follow you to a remote place like this, huh?" one of them remarked.

Ghosts were almost like natural phenomena. It was understood that ghosts came into being when lingering traces of thought that belonged to humans and other such creatures became entwined, by chance, with mana that abounded in the natural world. Physical attacks didn't work on ghosts, but for those who had a bit of skill in magic, ghosts were easy prey, which was why Cecil's men didn't seem concerned at all.

But in rare cases, ghosts weren't so easy to handle.

"All right, let's wipe you out—" One of the men tried to cast a bit of exorcism magic, but in that instant, the ghost girl pointed a finger at him.

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"I...hate..."
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The man's body flew across the room and slammed against the wall. He slid to the floor, where he remained motionless.

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"Wha-?!"
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Everyone, including Cecil, stared at the man in shock. But these men had lived through many battles and were quick to recover and react.

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"Ugh, you sneaky ghost...!"
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"I'll put an end to you!"

Some of the men wielded enchanted swords; others began muttering

incantations. They all flung themselves at the ghost.

"Please stay out of my way..."

"Ack?!" A light wave of the girl's hand sent some of them flying. Some froze in place, and some were struck by lightning. A variety of attacks knocked them down. Heaps of limp bodies filled the corridor. The ghost girl kept advancing slowly through the bodies as if she was walking up the aisle of a church for her wedding.

Cordelia clung to Cecil in a panic. "How can a ghost be so strong...?!"

"Her grudge against us must be intense..." Cecil replied.

Normally, ghosts were paltry enemies. But once in a while, someone who died with profound regret or bitter grudges could return as a vengeful spirit wielding astonishing powers. There were records in history of such ghosts wreaking havoc, even to the point of destroying a whole nation.

Cecil and Cordelia shuddered in terror. However...this particular case was yet another kind of rarity.

All right, great acting, Charlotte! You're outdoing the best of the best! Allen, who was crouched in his hiding place in the corridor, gave her a thumbs-up.

Charlotte noticed his encouragement and brightened up for a second, but she slipped back into character immediately. She seemed a little too lively for a ghost, but Cecil and Cordelia didn't notice in their distress.

"I...hate...you..."

"Eeek!"

The ghost's mutters were monotonous simply because Charlotte wasn't used to acting, but it had excellent dramatic effect anyway.

Natalia, squatting next to Allen, was more than satisfied too. "Heh heh heh, I wondered how my sister would lead a 'fight'...but this was a clever idea, Dark Overlord. Borrowing Dorothea's enchanted cloak," she whispered.

"My motto is: Use anyone and anything to my advantage, even an elf," Allen replied under his breath.

Charlotte was wearing the enchanted object that Dorothea had used to become a voyeur on their holiday. It could erase the wearer's presence completely, and depending on how it was set, it could make one's body slightly transparent, like Charlotte was doing now. Allen had borrowed enough cloaks for all of them to stay undercover.

The strategy for their surprise attack was simple; they each had a clear task. Charlotte would appear as a ghost to scare them out of their wits, while Allen and the others in hiding took care of the guards.

"Just like I taught you back at the academy—a battle doesn't have to be physical," Allen whispered to Natalia. "It's always worth learning about all kinds of strategies."

"Hmph, you don't have to tell me that. I'm already learning everyday— Hey! Leave some for me, Lydie!"

"Mwa ha ha, they're all mine! They're not even good enough for a warm-up!" One of the mercenaries had whipped out a hidden weapon, but Lydie flicked him away mercilessly with her wind magic. Even Allen was impressed by her efficient, deft use of magic.

"Hmm. She's going to grow a lot stronger. You better watch out or she'll outdo you in no time, Natalia."

"Hmph, I wouldn't mind having a competent rival. I'll get them too!" Natalia leaped out and kicked over an enemy.

With even more men knocked out on the ground, it became tricky for Charlotte to wade through the corridor.

"Ugh...guards, I'll leave you to deal with the ghost! Cordelia, let's go!" Cecil shouted, deciding it was best to escape while they still had the chance.

"G-Go?! Where?"

He grabbed her hand and they fled outside. Of course, this was all part of Allen's plan.

Good. Now we can switch to formation number two. As soon as Allen snapped his fingers, a ball of wind swept over his head.

It was Roo and Gosetsu. The two of them sprinted to Charlotte's side, knocking over the rest of the men who had lunged at her. Gosetsu struck a pose with a thumbs-up. "It's time to retaliate. Let us pursue them at an appropriate speed, Young Roo."

"Okey dokey! The basic rule of a good hunt is to tire out your prey! Climb on my back, Mommy!"

"O-Okay!"

Gosetsu led the charge, and Roo carried Charlotte. Their teamwork was perfect. The trio hurtled down the corridor in a flash.

"D-Don't let them go! Get them—ack!" The remaining men tried to chase them, but every single one got knocked down in a matter of seconds.

The corridor fell silent. Allen took off his enchanted cloak and brushed away the dust on his hands. "Phew. That takes care of the small fries."

"Oh! Look over there, Dark Overlord!" Natalia pointed outside the window.

In the swirling wind, they saw Cecil and Cordelia getting sucked into the magic portal drawn on the ground. Charlotte and the beasts disappeared after them. The portal was linked to various places in Ryugukyo, but it could also transport them to any number of places around the world.

Natalia blanched. "What if they fled back to Neils Kingdom...?! There'll be so many soldiers ready to protect that asshole prince!"

"Ah...that would probably end in disaster... In the sense that we never know what Gosetsu will do when she's triggered," Allen said.

Lydie looked grim too. Charlotte was still a wanted criminal in the kingdom. If she turned up in a place like that, no doubt there would be an uproar.

But Allen merely laughed triumphantly. "But that's only if that portal links to Neils Kingdom, of course. Come, follow me." He led the tiny tots to the portal at a leisurely gait. On the intricate pattern of shapes and letters in the magic circle, there were some lines and writing added in red. "I tweaked it beforehand. Now this portal leads to the neighborhood near home."

"You don't miss anything, do you...? I sure am glad you're on my side," Natalia

said.

"Mwa ha ha, don't flatter me so much. Watch and learn."

"Well, I do want that bad personality of yours to rub off on me a little," she mumbled with a sigh.

Lydie rolled up her sleeves and braced herself for the leap. "All righty, I'll go first—"

"Wait!" Just as Lydie was about to jump into the portal, Allen scooped her up in his arms.

A split second later, bullets of light showered the portal. The light scattered away to reveal solid ice covering the magic circle. An army of creatures—demihumans, therianthropes, dragonoids, and elves—all dressed in the uniform of Ryugukyo descended upon them from the sky. They were all armed, and they were glaring at Allen. The three of them stared at the assembly, holding their breath.

"Valued guests... Please explain what is happening here," one of the staff asked threateningly.

"Sorry, bro. They broke through my barrier." Eluka, dragged along by the security group, put her hands together in a casual apology.

Allen cast an eye over the assembly to gauge their numbers, stepping in front of Natalia and Lydie to protect them. *Hm... The security here is tighter than I expected*.

Though she didn't measure up to Allen, Eluka's skill in magic was considerable. It was no mean feat to break through her barrier and seize her like that. Someone among the staff must have been quite a formidable fighter.

In any case, he was in too much of a hurry to let them detain him here. Scanning their formation to determine where to aim his first attack, he lowered his center of gravity just a little and got ready to spring into action.

"Unfortunately, I'm in a rush. If you stop me—"

"Oh, is that you, Mr. Crawford?"

"Huh?!" His fighting spirit vanished at once. The familiar face of a mermaid

appeared as she made her way through the assembly. It was the same concierge that had taken such good care of them both in the Yunoha hot springs and at this resort.

She walked up to Allen and tilted her head with a troubled look. "Are you the one behind the attack on this cottage, Mr. Crawford?"

"Uh...I can't say." Allen couldn't say any more—he had no intention of hurting the staff to begin with. Should he cast a brainwashing spell on them and shoo them away? Or should he make them all fall asleep? Either way, he would have to handle them roughly, and he wanted to avoid doing something like that to an acquaintance if he could help it. Having mulled over his options, he bowed deeply to the mermaid. "I don't want to make things difficult with you. Please, let us go without any questions."

The concierge thought over it as the other staff stood motionless, awaiting her decision. "It seems...you have some good reasons for this..." Eventually, she breathed a small sigh, and the others lowered their weapons all at once. "I understand. I'll let you pass freely," she said with a broad smile. When she pointed at the magic circle, the ice melted away in an instant.

Allen was taken aback by how easily she was persuaded. "A-Are you sure? Won't you get in trouble with the owner here...?"

"Please, have no fear. I can assure you that that will never happen." The mermaid let out a chuckle. She respectfully placed a hand to her chest and continued, "Well then, please take care on your journey. And let me, Vynos Dagormyos, wish you a safe return. We will welcome you anytime."

For a moment, Allen stared at her in surprise. Then he said, "Thanks, I owe you one!" and leaped into the portal with Natalia and Lydie.

Just like when they had been transported to Ryugukyo, a faint light surrounded them, and as soon as it faded away, they found themselves in the familiar forest. Though it was dipped in the darkness of night, they could see the lights of the city in the distance.

Natalia glanced back at the magic circle and knitted her brows anxiously. "Do you think she'll really be all right...? She'd be held responsible for letting us go."

"Should be fine. After all, she's the owner of Ryugukyo."

"Huh?" Natalia's eyes went round.

Just then, the portal glowed again, and Eluka jumped out of it. Scratching her cheek, she said with a sheepish smile, "Here I am... Vynos said I can go with you too. Really, bro, you've struck up friendships with the strangest people since you met Charlotte."

"It's starting to scare me at this point," Allen said with a sigh. Would the owner of such a resort attend to guests that casually? Surely they wouldn't if they were normal. That mermaid must really love her work. "By the way, where's Dorothea?"

"She's watching through the Mirror of Nostalgia. Looked like she got a spark of inspiration—she said something about storming through her manuscripts."

"Wonder if I should burn those papers later... I don't even want to see what she comes up with," he muttered wearily.

An air-rending scream shot through the air. It sounded like things were coming to a head.

"We should hurry! Come on!" Allen bolted ahead of them.

"Let's go!" Natalia and Eluka followed suit.

They started sprinting at full speed through the dark forest, their eyes trained on the lights of the city, but Lydie stopped in her tracks. She stared at the town, tilting her head thoughtfully.

"Hm...?"

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When they stepped out of the magic portal, Cecil and Cordelia should have emerged in a park near the capital of Neils Kingdom—but they didn't.

"Wha—?! Where is this...?!" Cecil was startled as soon as they emerged. He had never seen this place before. Before them stretched a plain dirt road bordered with a thick forest on both sides. Spots of artificial light glimmered up ahead.

Cordelia's face had gone white, and her voice quivered. "Wh-What happened...?! I thought that portal went to Neils Kingdom!"

"How should I know?! Damn, of all the times it could've gone wrong—" He caught his breath when the magic circle began to glow again. A faint silhouette of a young girl appeared in the light. He grabbed Cordelia's hand and made a run for it. "Run! Let's get to that town! We might find help!"

"Oh...I can't run anymore!"

"Quit complaining! We can't handle an ultra-demonic poltergeist like that by ourselves!" As he dragged her away from the portal, he slipped a hand into his breast pocket. With a gloomy click of his tongue, he muttered, "I'll have to use this in the worst case...but it's the last resort."

"Cecil! Look behind us! There's more!" Cordelia screeched.

It wasn't just the ghost girl that had followed them through the magic circle. A Fenrir and an Infernal Capybara leaped out, their eyes gleaming menacingly in the dark night. The magic beasts closed in on them, the Fenrir carrying Charlotte on its back.

"I... I hate...you..." the ghost murmured.

"Grrrrr!"

"Capyyy!"

"Aieee! Did she summon her familiars?!" Cordelia forgot her fatigue and started fleeing for her life. Cecil ran after her, and they nearly stumbled over each other as they scampered toward the town.

Charlotte, Gosetsu, and Roo pursued them at an easy pace. Cecil and Cordelia felt like their enemies were hot on their heels, never even realizing that the beasts weren't even attempting their full speed.

At long last, the pair passed through the city gate. Since it was well after midnight, there was hardly anyone in the main street. Not many of the windows were lit either.

"O-Over here! Let's look for someone who can help!" Cecil yelled, leading Cordelia through the streets.

Sprinting pell-mell, they turned many corners in search of people. They quickly hit their limits and crumpled to the ground. They found themselves in a somewhat desolate alley, where many of the buildings looked abandoned, with broken or boarded up windows. But for some reason, there were flowers planted along the path and the place looked clean overall, as if the neighborhood couldn't decide whether it was supposed to be safe or sketchy.

Finally, Cecil and Cordelia came upon a few dozen adventurers having a raucous drinking party.

"Hah hah! Down it! Drink it all up!" they whooped.

Most of them were human, but there were also Rock People and demihumans mixed in. They were all armored—perhaps just back from a dungeon but they were a red-faced, tipsy, jovial bunch.

"W-We're saved... Let's use them." Cecil sneered, panting.

"They're clearly inferior. Do you suppose these men stand a chance against them?" Cordelia said.

"Silly, we'll just use them as a distraction, that's all. Even drunk losers are good for something," he replied, picking up some dirt and smearing it over himself. Pretending to be a poor citizen being chased by aggressors, he staggered over to the group of adventurers.

Of course, Cecil had no clue where he was, but this alley was in a place called the Maerd District. It used to be like a slum where thugs loitered about, but Allen and Charlotte had taken control of it with their carrot-and-stick approach. Now, those "thugs" were thoroughly reformed, and they all hung out together in a friendly atmosphere.

"Hey, did you guys read this book already? It's a love story; everyone's talking about it these days," one of them was saying, holding up a novel.

"I did...and I'm pretty sure it's based on the Dark Overlord and our dear goddess..."

"If only I could have a love story like that..." another one murmured with a wistful look in his eyes.

"Ahh...our dear goddess! Why did she have to fall for that jerk...!" yet another wept, falling to his knees.

"You still going on about that...?"

"I get how you feel...but you gotta admit, it's only the Dark Overlord who can make her the happiest."

"Let's just drink! Drink away our sorrows!" They huddled around the heartbroken man, trying to cheer him up.

It didn't matter which adventuring party they belonged to. They had a bond that surpassed such boundaries now.

Cecil ran into their midst, yelling at the top of his lungs. "Thank goodness I found you...! Please...help us...!"

"Huh? What's going on?" A giant of the Rock People cocked his head quizzically. The others stopped drinking and looked at each other.

Making sure that he had everyone's attention, Cecil pulled out a leather pouch with trembling hands and held it out to the giant. The giant looked taken aback, but he opened the bag. He was troubled to see that it was packed with gold coins.

"H-Hey. What's all this for?" he asked.

"We're being chased by awful beasts...! We have money! Can we hire you?" Cecil implored.

"Hm...? Interesting." A young man with a massive snake around his neck snickered at the turn of events. "It's your lucky day, then. Fine, we'll help you out. Right, Magus?"

"Ha ha ha, you're in the mood for a fight, huh? All right, we'll do it—can't let you guys have all the fun." The giant laughed, and the others cheered.

For the adventurers who were in high spirits from drinking, this gig came as an amusing diversion. As Cecil tried to hide his dark, scheming sneer, he heard the padding footsteps of beasts coming behind him, and Cordelia ran to his side. He clasped her in his arms and shouted to the men, "Th-They're here! Please save us!"

"All right, all right. Let's have at it." The few dozen men slowly got to their feet with their weapons at the ready. A taut silence filled the alley.

As they edged away from the group, Cecil whispered into Cordelia's ear. "We'll get farther away while they're fighting! Even an evil spirit that strong should get weaker with sunrise!"

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"L-Let's...!"
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Just as they were about to break into a run, the vengeful ghost and her familiars met their hired mercenaries.

"Oh, hello everyone. Are you having a party, all together?" The ghost(?) greeted the group in a friendly manner.

"Huh...?" The whole gang froze in place. None of them brandished their weapons, and those who had been about to cast a spell broke off their incantations. The ghost(?) and the adventurers stared at each other in silence for a while.

Cecil lost his patience and shouted, "What are you doing?! Why don't you attack that monster?!"

"What did you say?!" Every single adventurer turned around to face Cecil.

"Eep!"

The rage on their faces was unmistakable. Their ominous glares were certainly not what Cecil would expect from hired men looking at their employer. Instead of advancing toward the ghost(?), the adventurers pressed closer to him.

"Hey, you scamp! Who do you think you are, calling our dear goddess a monster!" one of the men roared.

"Wh-What, that bloody ghost is a goddess?! Are you mad?!" Cecil cried.

"No, you're mad! Our goddess would never chase anyone around unless she had a good reason to!"

"Which means...you must be in the wrong."

"That's it, go get 'im!"

"H-How—? Why—gyahhh!"

"Eeek! Cecil!"

One of the men landed an impressive punch on Cecil, and Cordelia's shriek pierced the air. Cecil toppled over with a groan, and Cordelia rushed over to help him. The rest of the party was about to follow up on the attack, but Charlotte the ghost interrupted them.

"P-Please stop! Don't hurt them anymore, everyone!"

"But, dear goddess, he's a bad guy, right?"

"Oh, um, well...yes."

"Did he...do something to you?" Groh asked.

"Umm..." Charlotte laughed weakly to hedge his question. She might as well have said "yes."

In an instant, the whole group's outrage shot through the roof.

"Kill him! Anyone who hurts our goddess is our mortal enemy!" Groh bellowed.

"Yeah!!!"

"What?! W-Wait everyone, please calm down!" Charlotte tried to stop them, but it was too late. Roo and Gosetsu only looked at each other.

"You're calling *me*...a bad guy...?" Cecil muttered, wiping the blood from the side of his mouth and pushing Cordelia aside to stand up. A dark flame of indignant fury blazed in his eyes.

"Wh-What are you doing, Cecil?" Cordelia asked, but he ignored her.

"How dare you!!!" he barked. Without a moment of hesitation, he took a crystal ball from his breast pocket and threw it on the ground, setting off a blinding spark of light and ringing sound.

"Grrrr..." A monstrous shadow emerged. It revealed a jet-black dragon, rearing its head slowly under the moonlight. It was so massive that its head seemed to reach the stars, and its body was covered in scars from lacerations both old and new. "Grrrrrr...rawrrrr!!!"

The dragon unfurled its wings and lifted off into the sky. It sent off a gust of

wind that flattened some of the buildings below it. Thick clouds of dust rose all around.

"What the—?! Where'd this dragon come from?!" Groh screamed, backing away.

"It must've been summoned with an enchanted object! What kinda nut job would let it loose in the middle of the city?!" Magus shouted, staggering back with him.

Charlotte blanched and turned to Gosetsu and Roo. "Oh no! What should we do, Gosetsu...?!"

"Ah, we shall simply sit back and watch." Gosetsu was oddly cheerful in the face of this chaos.

"Yup, that's the way to go," Roo said casually, looking up at the sky.

Cecil was standing on the dragon's shoulder. Looking down at Charlotte, he shouted, "All I wanted was to be with the one I love! What's so bad about that?!"

"You want to know what's so bad?"

"Huh?!" Cecil gasped and spun around. He locked eyes with Allen, who was standing on a partly crumbled roof. A hint of confusion flickered in Cecil's eyes. Of course, he had no idea who Allen was. But for Allen, Cecil was the archenemy, the one he had sworn to bring down. And now, this was his moment. Allen kicked against the roof, leaping into the air.

"If I had to name one reason...your methods were bad!"

"Gwrrr?!"

"Gyahhh?!"

Allen put everything he had into his fist and thwacked the side of the dragon's face. One blow was enough. The dragon toppled over, crushing the buildings underneath, and Cecil helplessly went down with it.

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And so, in the alley in the Maerd District, the matter was settled for the time

being.

Eluka rummaged around in the rubble, picking up the pieces of the shattered crystal ball that Cecil had used to summon the dragon. Illuminating it with magic light, she closely examined the fragments. "Whoa, this is like, a major treasure from Neils Kingdom. They trapped the black dragon that wreaked havoc there in ancient times. Pretty sure he's not supposed to just whip it out like that."

"He must have been carrying it around as a last resort. My my, what foolish measures some stoop to." Gosetsu chuckled, then glanced at the dragon next to her. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"G-Gwrr..." the dragon whimpered in response. Perhaps from the shock of Allen's punch, or cowering in fear under the Infernal Capybara's glare, the dragon had made itself appear as small as possible, curled up in a tight ball. It didn't seem likely to go on a rampage anytime soon.

"Phew, step one is done," Allen observed.

"Ugh...!" Cecil and Cordelia were held captive now. They were both miserably dirty, tied round and round with ropes as if they had been assailed by burglars. When the dragon fell, they had both been knocked unconscious by the impact and they'd just woken up a few minutes ago. Allen had already revealed the secret to their ghost trick.

Cecil glowered at Allen. "Who would've thought a man like *you* was in cahoots with Charlotte."

"Ah, does it surprise you?"

"Hah... I'd say so." The corner of Cecil's lips twisted into a mocking sneer, and he leered at Charlotte. "Never thought that shameless hussy next to you would have enough charm or skill to con a man. I only saw her as a useless peasant."

"Hmm. I see you haven't learned how to keep your mouth shut." Allen cracked his knuckles threateningly.

"Prince Cecil," Charlotte cut in. She looked straight at the prince and slowly opened her mouth. "I used to be scared of you. Not just you. The Evans family, the parties in the royal castle—everything frightened me." She uttered every

word thoughtfully, recalling the painful memories from those days. But then her face softened into a smile. "But I'm not scared at all anymore. Because now...I have a big family—family I never imagined I could have."

"Charlotte..." Allen murmured, lowering his fists. She had settled her fight with her own words. Cecil widened his eyes, taken aback.

Charlotte turned to Cordelia and gave a little bow. "I didn't know that you two wanted to be together. I'm sorry I got in the way."

"Charlotte! If only you weren't there, I—!" Cordelia spat in rage, but then she gasped when she noticed Natalia a little distance away. "Natalia?! What are you doing here...?!"

"Yes...?" Natalia, who had been helping to clear up the rubble, turned to her mother moodily.

Cordelia was startled to find Natalia here, of all places, when she should have been at the Athena School of Magic. After a few moments, tears came to Cordelia's eyes, and she cried out, "Help me, Natalia! Call the local soldiers!"

"Tch..."

That sound and Natalia's scowl were enough to stop Cordelia's crocodile tears. "What...?"

Natalia stomped up to her mother and looked down at her, crossing her arms. "That idiot next to you seems to be the mastermind, but you were an accomplice in his plot. You should atone for your crimes. I refuse to help you," she snapped coldly.

"Wha—are you really...Natalia...?! That child would never defy me!"

"You really don't know when to shut up, do you? Do you have a piece of cloth I can use, Groh? Let's gag her and leave her here in the dirt."

"Uh, I feel like you're turning into a mini Dark Overlord..." Groh muttered in concern as he watched Natalia expertly put a gag in Cordelia's mouth.

Meanwhile, the sky was steadily paling. Soon, the action-packed night would come to an end, and a new day would begin.

Eluka trotted over to Allen and slapped his shoulder. "Good work, bro. Guess

we can call it case closed?"

"No way. Nothing's closed yet." Sure, they had taken their revenge for the most part, but there was more to take care of. "We have to do everything we can to expose their wicked schemes and prove Charlotte's innocence to the whole world. It's not 'mission accomplished' until Charlotte's free."

Cecil humphed. He snickered derisively at Allen. "I don't know what cards you're planning to play, but I'll quash your move with all the powers under my thumb in Neils Kingdom. And I won't stop there—it's a fact that you injured a member of the royal family. As soon as I get home, I'm going to charge you and Charlotte. If you think you'll get away with this without a scratch, think again."

"Hah, what a pathetic attempt at a threat."

"What ... ?!"

Allen pointed straight at Cecil's face. The first rays of sunlight were illuminating the horizon. Allen stood tall with the sunrise on his back and, with a big grin, he declared war. "Anyone who knows me will tell you that whenever someone attacks me, I fight back till the very end—that's just the way I am. I'll hunt you two down to the ends of the earth and make sure your lives are a living hell. You can look forward to that."

Cecil went pale, realizing that Allen was dead serious.

"Allen..." Charlotte held her hands together over her chest. She looked a little relieved to hear Allen swat away Cecil's threat.

Allen knew they would be up against an entire kingdom next—a big fight if there ever was one. It might take time, but he was determined. "I made a promise. I swore that I'd make Charlotte the happiest person in the world. So "

He was about to declare, "So I won't let anyone get in the way," but a frivolous, carefree voice rang out in the tense air.

"Oh, there you are, Master Allen! I've been lookin' for you!"

Someone was pattering over to him—needless to say, it was Dorothea.

"Why now?! We're a bit busy!" It didn't seem like he could just ignore her, so

Allen reluctantly turned around. "What do you want, Dorothea? You better make it quick—"

"Here, take this. I just finished up my manuscript. And here's my new book baby, fresh off the press!"

"How does that even work?!" He was so startled that he forgot his snark. The book that she shoved into his hands had a solid, proper binding, not a slapdash, last-minute creation. Plus, it was thick. As he'd feared, the cover art depicted a wizard with half-white, half-black hair and a young girl with golden locks standing together.

"So...you wrote about us again...?" Allen grumbled.

"Course. You told me I could," Dorothea said breezily.

"I didn't get a chance to burn the manuscript..." His shoulders slumped dejectedly. Even more of their love story would be circulated around the world now. "Anyway, can you hang on to it for now, Charlotte?"

"S-Sure...I-I wonder what's in it this time..." Charlotte took the book from Allen. Though she was blushing, curiosity got the better of her, and she flipped it open. Her face went bright red and steam rose from her head with a *poof*.



Dorothea's last novel began with the couple's kiss. Judging from that, Allen was sure this one couldn't be any better than the last. *I bet it's another good-for-nothing book...* he thought, heaving a great sigh.

Magus was carrying a pile of rubble, but he stopped in his tracks and let out a yelp. "Whoa! Aren't you Professor Dorothea?! I read your book! I've been wondering, is that story based on the Dark Overlord?!"

"Aha, that's right! I'm a bit surprised I have a reader among the Rock People."

"Well, my sis—my family's a fan. Would you mind signing my copy?"

"Gladly! I'm a popular writer with a big heart, after all!"

"Oh, I want an autograph too!" The other men who had read her novel crowded around her excitedly.

The dramatic tension of the scene completely deflated into a merry meet and greet. Allen tried to shoo away the bubbly group. "Ugh, you're ruining the serious mood...! Go away, Dorothea! We're dealing with important matters here!"

"Aww, but I gave you a hand too! Aren't you forgettin' something? A word of thanks, perhaps?!"

"I'll return all the enchanted cloaks we borrowed later! For now—"

"Oh no, I don't mean those. You can keep them for all I care." Dorothea waved her hand casually and whipped out another copy of the new novel from thin air. "I'm talkin' about my brand new book. I've spread the word on Charlotte's innocence, y'see."

"Huh...? What's your pulp fiction got to do with that?" Allen cocked his head, confused.

"O-Oh? Umm..." Charlotte blinked. She slowly turned another leaf and gulped. "Dorothea... You...really wrote about *us.*"

"Course I did. Master Allen gave me permission, remember? He said I can write anything I want!"

"I did say that, but...did you really—?!" Struck by understanding, Allen caught

his breath and grabbed the book from the elf. He rifled through the pages, ignoring the illustrations depicting a couple and running his eyes over the text. Familiar words jumped out at him: "the Kingdom of Neils," "Cecil, the second prince," "the Evans Family," "Stepmother Cordelia," so on and so forth... "Wait... You wrote all about the stupid prince's plot without changing anyone's names?!"

"Well, you did give me the go-ahead," Dorothea said nonchalantly.

"What...?" Cecil, who had been wriggling on the ground, trying to loosen the rope around him, froze in place. Cordelia, still gagged, had the same reaction. Eluka and Natalia peered at the book.

"Whoa! You even clarified that it's nonfiction," Eluka remarked. "This is basically a love story slash tell-all."

"It's very bold—no sign of walking on eggshells at all. You did an amazing job, Dorothea," Natalia said.

"Heh heh, thought it'd be interestin' to write a book in this genre too. By the way, it's got worldwide distribution startin' today!"

"What the—?!" Cecil somehow grew even paler, but he tried to pull himself together, twisting his face into an awkward sneer. "H-Hmph... The print run for a stupid book like that won't be much to speak of. I bet it won't change a thing \_\_"

"Actually, the first run is a million copies. I'm sure all book shops all over Neils Kingdom are gonna stock it. From what I've heard, both ordinary folk and aristocrats have been lookin' forward to my new book—can't wait to hear what they think!"

"How—?! Hey, you elf! Do you want my kingdom to turn on you?!"

"Sure, why not? Human nations can't scare me. I mean, they're all gonna collapse before my lifetime is up anyway. Feel free to sue me, if you'd like? Though I don't know if that's gonna help sway public opinion once they've read it! Ah ha ha!" Dorothea chortled.

"Arrrrgh...!" Cecil's face rapidly changed color from stark white to red to purple. Cordelia was sweating bullets too, eyes swimming in a panic.

Allen flapped the book shut and asked Dorothea the most important question. "So this means...the whole world will know within a day that Charlotte is innocent?"

"Yup, that's about it," Dorothea said airily.

"Oh...just like that...really?" Charlotte looked like she didn't know what to think.

Since Allen had just been strengthening his resolve to fight it out to the end, he felt like someone had pulled the rug from under him. In any case, he bowed to Charlotte. "Sorry. I wanted to deal with everything with my own hands, but...looks like we already have a happy ending without much effort."

"D-Don't be sorry," Charlotte said hastily, shaking her head. "It's thanks to you that we're friends with Dorothea in the first place." She squeezed his hands and gave him a warm smile. "Thank you so much, Allen. I'm glad I met you."

The same words she had told him on her birthday brought a gentle warmth to his heart. "Me too..." he murmured. As they gazed into each other's eyes, holding each other's hands, Cecil started to shriek.

"Arrgh! A little scandal can't touch me! I'm the prince! Hey, wizard! I'll make you pay for this—gah?!"

"Allen?!"

That was the final straw, and Allen punched Cecil straight in the face. Though he held back just enough so he wouldn't kill Cecil, the blow was enough to let him take out all his pent-up anger. Cecil blacked out, so his annoying screeches stopped, and Allen managed to blow off steam—two birds with one stone.

Allen breathed a sigh of relief, and then he realized something. There was one person missing from the crowd of people passing around the book and chatting excitedly.

"Hm...? Where's Lydie, anyway?"

 $\Diamond$ 

While the hullabaloo was happening in the Maerd District, Lydie was walking down a narrow back alley a little ways away. She had slipped away without

anyone noticing as Allen and Co had run after Charlotte. The setting moon hung above her, and the sky was a vivid shade of lapis lazuli. But there was still some time till dawn; the dilapidated alley was sunken in gloom. It certainly wasn't the sort of place for a little child to walk by herself. She shouldn't have had any business in such an alley to begin with.

Still, there Lydie was. She stopped in her tracks and let out a small sigh. "I thought I felt a strange presence... I've sensed it for a while now..." Apparently, she was talking to herself. But as soon as she spoke, a shadow swayed ever so slightly behind her. She felt it, yet she didn't turn around. She went on slowly in a low voice, "At first I thought you were someone else. But Allen and the others didn't seem to detect your presence...so I realized you were someone only I was attuned to." Lydie paused. She shook her head as if to dispel her hesitation. With another sigh, she murmured, "It's been a long time...my little brother Robert."

The hidden presence took in a sharp breath in the deep darkness. Finally, he emerged from the shadows treading gingerly. Moonlight fell on an older man with a beard. Some shoots of gray mingled in his hair; he was dressed in elegant attire, and his carriage exuded an air of refinement. But his face was rather gaunt, and dark shadows fell around his sharp, gleaming eyes. His appearance gave a strange impression.

"A-Ah..." The man staggered forward. He seemed to be on the verge of collapse. Drawing closer to Lydie, he crumpled to his knees in front of her. In a quivering voice, he spoke to Lydie, who was watching him without any sign of emotion. "It has been too long, my dear sister...!"

"You were reincarnated too, Robert?" Lydie stared intently at the man.

Three hundred years ago, there were two children in the Evans clan: Lydilia, who was celebrated as a saint, and Robert, the younger brother who later became head of the family. Although they had been apart for centuries, Lydie could see the resemblance between the aging man in front of her and the Robert she knew.

Then she tutted quietly. "That body of yours... It belongs to the current head of the Evans house, doesn't it—your descendant? It seems two separate

personalities, yours and the present duke's, dwell in that body."

"Y-Yes, that's right." The man's face snapped up. Though tears streamed down his face, he was smiling from ear to ear, as if his emotions didn't match his outward expressions. Words gushed out of him like a broken dam. "This fellow has a rather stubborn mind, actually. For many years, he clung to this body and didn't let me have full control. He even went so far as to go see a wizard doctor to try to banish me from the body—me, his venerable ancestor... However, over the last several years, I've managed to wear him down, and now I have control over this body the majority of the time. For so long, I've always—ah, forgive me."

The man cut himself off and shook his head. He twisted his smile into a regretful frown. "No, this isn't it. It wasn't my wish to bore you with such trifling details."

"Hm, what did you wish to tell me, then?"

"My dear sister...I longed to see you again," he murmured in a quivering voice. He stretched out his hands imploringly toward Lydie. When she touched his hand, he clasped hers between his. "Ever since I inherited the house, I have been haunted by regret. *You*, the noble saint, should have been the one in my place—*you* were fit to succeed to the head of the house, not me."

In Lydilia's lifetime, Robert had been too young to realize her true greatness, the splendid legends she left behind in her short years. As he grew older, he came to understand and fully appreciate her achievements. He became convinced that he was unfit to rule as the head of the family, for he was certainly no match for his elder sister.

"My regrets must have brought me back to life, and I made up my mind. I decided that this time, I will do everything I can to hand over the Evans clan to you. I tried everything I could to reincarnate you into the present!"

"Don't tell me...you fathered a child just so she could be my vessel?"

"No, the first daughter was this man's doing—Frank's." Robert sighed bitterly. "He began to notice my presence inside him, so he sent away his mistress and daughter to protect them... In the later years, though, I was able to manipulate him into bringing the girl back. But both she and the second daughter were a

disappointment. They lacked the qualities that would have made them worthy to be a vessel for you, my dear sister."

"Hm, I see." Lydie gave a small nod and looked closely at the soul of her brother. Apparently, he had failed to notice the talent for magic and Lydie's presence lying dormant inside Charlotte's body.

"I explored every avenue. I hunted down all sorts of enchanted objects that could summon souls from the dead, but I couldn't call you back."

"Are you not aware that the Evans family is in a crisis even as we speak...?"

"Nothing but a trivial scandal—it may tarnish our name temporarily, but if *you* return to us, your great deeds will wash everything away. Wicked schemes are nothing before your greatness," he said with composure. Then he raised his head again adoringly, overcome by emotions. "I have been trying to find you for so long...and finally, the other day, I felt your presence. So I hurried over here in search of you—"

"I understand now," Lydie interrupted him. She gently cast aside his hands and placed a palm on his shoulder. "Thank you, Robert—for caring for me so much."

"Of course, it's only natural that I—"

"That's why...I'm sorry."

The moment Lydie shook her head, the man let out a muffled cry. Invisible strings unfurled in the air and pulled him up off his feet. Robert pressed both hands against his neck and kicked frantically, gasping for air.

"S-Sister! What are you—?!"

"The saint is dead. The one you're speaking to now is only a young girl named Lydie."

With a resolute face, she looked up at the sky where the man hung. Dawn was approaching; the sky grew paler as she watched. A new day would shine upon them soon. It was time for the old spirit to depart.

"The dead shouldn't menace the lives of the living. What you have been doing...is a grave crime indeed. It would be best if you freed this man now."

Lydie intoned a brief spell. A slight tremor ran through the chilly air of the back alley, and the man's face grew more and more contorted. When she finished uttering the spell, she let its magic take effect, to wipe out the personality of the previous life from the living body. "Farewell, Robert. I... I'm sorry I couldn't become a family with you."

"Sist-?!"

The man's eyes went blank. He hung motionless in the air. His limp body descended silently. Lydie watched as the body landed on the ground, and the man let out a muffled groan. He slowly lifted his eyelids, sat up, and looked around in a bemused daze.

"Wh-Where...am I...?"

"Have you returned to yourself?" Lydie asked.

As soon as she spoke, the man widened his eyes. He jumped to his feet and staggered back, away from her. With fear and dread in his eyes, he shouted in a trembling voice, "Run... Stay away from me...! And if you can, could you call an adult for help? I don't know what I'll do next—"

"Don't worry." Lydie trotted over to him with a spring in her step. Smiling broadly, she said, "Nice to meet you, Grand-papa!"

"Huh...?"

## **Chapter 6: A Lost Memory**

About one month after the showdown, Allen and Charlotte were visiting a hamlet in the southwest region of the Kingdom of Neils—far away from the royal capital and other big cities. Small houses dotted the gentle slopes of the mountain valley; here and there, there were sheep grazing on the meadows. Pillars of smoke rose among the mountains from charcoal making, bright streaks of white against the clear blue sky. Though it was winter, the weather was mild and too warm for snow. Just putting on a coat was enough to be comfortable walking in the gentle breeze. It was a peaceful sort of place—so much so it might make you yawn.

And this was also Charlotte's birthplace.

"Ooh...!" Charlotte stood beside Allen at the foot of the mountain and gazed up at the village in front of her. With a radiant smile, she said to him, "I-It's wonderful! It hasn't changed at all since I lived here with my mother!"

"Good, I'm glad to hear it." Allen smiled back at her, holding their luggage. He was happy that Charlotte was excited to revisit the village. Though it was out of character, he felt a sense of relief to see the idyllic place.

Looking up at a few birds crossing the sky to and fro, Charlotte let out a sigh. "I never dreamed...I could come back here again."

"Oh, I can bring you here anytime. Just let me know when you feel the call." "Okay!" she smiled broadly.

It wasn't just the two of them who were glad to be here. Roo was happily wagging her tail too. "So this is your hometown, Mommy? Looks like mine! Ooh, can I go run around a bit?"

"You can...but don't go too far, all right?" Allen replied.

"Not to worry, I shall accompany Young Roo," Gosetsu said, stepping forward. "Since you have to fulfill an important duty, we shan't get in your way. Go forth and conquer, Sir Allen."

Allen's eyebrow twitched. "I don't need you to tell me that. Remember, don't do anything to stand out too much."

"Understood. Young Roo, do go easy on this doddering old beast, will you?"

"Oh, puh-lease! You left me in the dust when we ran in that snow race! I'll beat you this time!" The two bantered in high spirits as they bounded up the mountain.

"Well then—" Allen was about to start on their way when a voice called to them.

"Well I'll be. Have we got visitors?"

Charlotte flinched, and Allen slowly turned around. It was an old man. He was holding a chair and a newspaper, apparently looking for a nice spot to sit in the sun. With a big, friendly smile, he approached.

"Welcome—you must've come a long way to get to the sticks like this. Are you on a long journey?"

"No, we're just visiting the graveyard. See?" Allen shrugged, holding up the bucket full of flowers to show him. He and Charlotte had picked them on their way to the hamlet.

"Well, that's even more unusual. Who in the world did you come here to see —hm...?" The old man broke off and stared at Charlotte—who was hiding behind Allen—then let out a gasp. "Is that you, little Charlotte?! The little girl who used to live here with her mother?!"

"Oh! Are you the grandpa who lived behind—um, n-no! I'm not Charlotte!" Though her face brightened up for a moment, she tried to cover it up. She glanced at Allen as if to ask for help, but he merely looked on. He could see there was no harm done.

The old man grasped her hands and cried out, "We always knew you were innocent!"

Charlotte blinked. "What ...?"

"When you were taken away so soon after Maria's death, we were all worried sick, you know...but we never imagined we'd see your name in the papers, as a

'wicked woman' who was a menace to the kingdom," the old man rattled off excitedly.

"Oh...I-I'm sorry for making trouble."

"No need for *you* to apologize, my dear Charlotte!" he said firmly, opening up the newspaper he was holding. "It's the prince and your stepmother who are the villains! They're rotten to the core, that's what they are!"

The scandal that had caused quite a stir throughout Neils Kingdom was splashed across the newspaper: how the innocent noble lady Charlotte had been framed. It recounted the whole story about how Cecil, the second prince and her former fiancé, had fallen in forbidden love with Cordelia, the wife of Duke Evans, and how they had plotted together to dispose of an obstacle to their love: Charlotte. On top of their evil scheme, the prince's conduct—squandering the kingdom's tax money, buying out soldiers for his personal gain, trading illegal goods on the black market, and so on—were coming to light one after another. The journalists were quite severely condemning the royal family. The whole affair was snowballing into a great upheaval that was shaking the nation.

"Those scumbags up at the capital must be blind, calling you a wicked woman like that!" the old man went on exuberantly. "Some soldiers came looking for you a few times, but we didn't like any of them!"

Charlotte's eyes widened. "Really?! They came all the way here too...?"

"Oh yes! We chased them away with our hoes!" He roared with laughter, his chest swelling with pride. He smiled wistfully and squeezed Charlotte's hands again. "We remember how you used to help your mother all the time. And when I had a bad back, you came to ask me how I was... Everyone in this village always knew you're a good girl at heart, no matter what they say."

"I..." Charlotte's voice quivered. She wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes and turned to smile gently at Allen. "I didn't know...there were people in this country on my side too, all along."

"Now we know." Allen nodded firmly in response. He had also assumed that Charlotte's enemies had stripped her dignity and everything away from her, forcing her to flee the country. But there were people like this old man who had

never lost faith in her innocence. The neighbor's words moved him deeply.

The old man seemed to remember Allen's presence now and turned to squint at him. "Hm? And are *you* the wizard they're writing about in the papers? The one from the Notre Empire who's madly in love with Charlotte and valiantly caught the foolish prince?"

"Well, that sounds about right."

"M-Madly in love..." Charlotte's face went bright red. Since it was the truth, Allen readily concurred.

About a month had passed since that day—the day of the hullabaloo with Prince Cecil and Cordelia. Since then, Charlotte's situation had changed dramatically. The newspapers flipped their rhetoric completely and reported on the tragic story of the noble lady, exposing the prince's crimes.

It turned out that Dorothea's tell-all was really effective. It was widely distributed across the world, and everyone who read it turned a suspicious eye on Neils Kingdom. At first the royal family feigned ignorance, but mountains of evidence spread like wildfire in all kinds of media, and now, they found themselves in the midst of a scandalous firestorm.

Allen and Charlotte, on the other hand, were living in perfect peace. He had been prepared to drive away journalists if they came to interview her, but strangely enough, no such journalist had come to date. When Allen asked Dorothea about this, she gave him a thumbs-up and said, "Our legal department's takin' care of all that! Don't worry about a thing, Master Allen! What you can do is flirt away with Miss Charlotte to help me with my sequel!"

"Hunh... So the Elders Alliance even has a legal department."

According to Dorothea, her new book was flying off the shelves, so the Alliance was happy to protect the privacy of the featured couple.

As for Prince Cecil and Cordelia, they had already been handed over to Neils Kingdom. They were likely with the royal family now, but no doubt they must've felt like lying on a bed of nails. If the prince were to get off easy, he might lose the right to inherit the throne. In the worst case, he might be exiled from the kingdom.

Well, they're a couple in love, after all—they should be able to get through any hardships together. If they dared to devise yet another plot to take revenge, all Allen had to do was knock them down again. He strengthened his resolve to do just that.

"Anyhow, you better make Charlotte happy, young man!" the old neighbor said, pointing at Allen. "If you make her cry, no one in this village will let you get away with it!"

"Oh!" Charlotte was flustered by the neighbor's sudden challenge. But Allen took it head-on and grinned triumphantly.

"Don't worry. I came here to pay my respects and swear to Charlotte's mother that I'll make her happy."

"Hrm...is that so." The old man's face creased into a smile, and he pointed down the path. "If that's what you're here for, go on, don't let me keep you. Say hello to Maria for me, Charlotte."

"Yes, thank you very much. Let's go, Allen!" said Charlotte.

"All right. Well, if you'll excuse us," Allen said to the neighbor.

"Take your time. If you can, come by the village later. We'll give you a proper welcome."

The couple parted from the old man, who waved at them with a smile, and went on down the path. After the turn around a giant tree, they came to their destination: a cozy graveyard. Though there weren't many grave posts, each one of them was well cared for. Allen and Charlotte were the only ones there.

With a slow tread, Charlotte walked through the quiet graveyard. Allen followed a few steps behind her. They stopped in front of a small gravestone in the corner. The name engraved on it read: *Maria Evans*.

Charlotte drew in a small breath and murmured, in a trembling voice, "I'm home, Mom."

Allen stepped up next to Charlotte and bowed deeply to the gravestone. "Nice to meet you, Mother."

After that, they went to work cleaning up the patch of earth around the

stone. There wasn't much to do, though—the villagers seemed to have tended to it when they visited their own family's graves, so there were hardly any weeds. The couple placed the bouquet of flowers they'd brought, and Charlotte crouched down in front of the stone.

"Um...first, I want to give you this," she said, taking out a thick envelope from her breast pocket. The white envelope was pristine, and it was sealed with beeswax. It was almost bursting with the sheets of paper packed into it. Just the weight of it told volumes about the powerful emotions and determination of the writer. "It's a letter that Father wanted me to give you. He'll be here soon to see you too." Charlotte gently placed the envelope next to the flowers. Her voice perked up as a smile played on her lips. "I have so many things I want to tell you, Mom. Would you like to hear them?"

Charlotte told her story to the gravestone—about what happened with the Evans family, about all the people she'd met, and about Allen, who was standing next to her now. Her voice was the only sound in the quiet graveyard, blown by a pleasant breeze. As he listened, Allen closed his eyes. He was recalling something that had happened about a week ago when everyone who had been involved with Prince Cecil's arrest gathered at Allen's mansion.

A man was shown into the living room, and as soon as he saw Charlotte, he took in a sharp breath. "Charlotte...!"

He was a well-dressed gentleman. His hair was graying, but his mustached face had good, handsome features, and his blue eyes were full of deep wisdom. He staggered toward Charlotte.

"Father..." she murmured.

"Who's this? Is he a bad guy...?" Roo snarled, getting ready to pounce on the stranger.

Allen stopped her with a hand. "Wait, Roo."

With wavering steps, the gentleman finally reached Charlotte. He grasped her hands and sobbed, "I'm so glad you're safe! Thank heavens...!"

"Father, you already told me that the other day..." Charlotte said, unsure of what to do. She gave him a handkerchief to try to soothe him, but that only

made him weep even more.

"What a kindhearted girl she is...!" he gushed. Once he calmed down a little, he gave her a deep bow. "I'm sorry to break down like this... It's just that I still can't believe what's happened."

"That's my line," Natalia said in a disgruntled tone. She was eyeing the man coldly from a distance. She asked ruthlessly, "Are you really our father...Frank Evans?"

"It's hard for me to prove that myself..." Frank murmured, hanging his head. He was the very picture of sorrow. Even Natalia was quieted by his pained expression.

"He really is the man himself," Harvey, who had followed Frank into the room, replied on his behalf. Holding Lydie in his arms, he dexterously flipped through a bundle of papers. "I've managed to track down the records of his visits with a wizard doctor too. And there's plenty of evidence that matches Lydie's testimony... All in all, it's a classic case of reincarnation syndrome."

The personalities of the past life and present life had existed independently of each other inside one body, fighting to gain control over it. The circumstances were slightly different from the case of Charlotte and Lydie, but it was a similar phenomenon. Harvey explained that for the last ten years, at the very least, Frank's consciousness had barely ever risen to the surface.

"Normally, the patient's family and friends would notice the inconsistencies in the words and actions between the personalities...but in this case, Robert's spirit managed to go unnoticed. Even if some *had* noticed, they might not have been able to say anything because of Frank's high rank."

"Does that mean he didn't even know I was born?" Natalia asked.

"Well, I was aware of that, at least," Frank replied with a thin smile. "Though I didn't have control over my own body, I was conscious of things around me. I had a grasp of what was happening."

"That's...more cruel than not knowing," Natalia murmured.

For ten long years, Frank had been a prisoner in his own body. He could only watch helplessly as a stranger did as he pleased in his place.

A heavy silence fell over the room.

Lydie hopped down from Harvey's arms and said with a shrug, "Well well, what a troublesome condition, eh? Not that I can talk."

"Look who's talking, indeed." Allen ruffled Lydie's head. "But well done, Lydie. You must be tired from the whole investigation."

"Hee hee, it was a breeze for me." Lydie laughed, holding up her head with pride. "And I had a lot of fun at the Athena School of Magic!"

"That's good to hear," Allen said.

After his diagnosis, Frank stayed at Athena for his medical treatment. Lydie had gone with him as a witness to what had happened to him, so she had been gone for the last few weeks.

"You didn't feel conflicted?" Allen asked quietly. "The one who was inside Frank—he was your younger brother, wasn't he?"

Lydie flashed him a bold grin. "It's *because* he was my brother that I could do what I did... I felt I had to settle the matter by my own hands."

When Lydie had turned up with Frank right after Allen and Co had sorted out everything with Cecil and Cordelia, everyone was startled. But Lydie had maintained her aloof composure as she explained the story to them, as cool as she was now. Allen sensed a dark shadow hidden underneath her calm veneer, and he stroked her head reassuringly.

"Well, the responsibility lies with me too, as your guardian. Don't bear the burden all by yourself," he said.

"Mm-hmm." Lydie gave a small nod. As if to shake off the gloom, she pointed straight at Allen's face. "In any case, this means I've broken with the Evans family in every sense! Be prepared to support my new life all the way, Allen!"

"Now that you say it, it's almost spring..." Allen put a hand to his chin and thought over it, then his face cracked into a mischievous grin. "I know. What do you think about attending a school in town?"

"Huh?! A-A school...you say?"

"Uh-huh. It's a place where you can study and have fun with kids your age."

"D-Don't tease me! I know that!" Lydie swatted Allen's hand, turning away her face in a huff. But she couldn't hide the smile that tugged at her lips, and she started fidgeting in excitement. "A school, eh...? N-Not a bad idea. I'm allowed to go to school? Wow..."

Apparently, Allen's suggestion was much to her liking.

Looking at Lydie, Frank laughed weakly. "Who would've thought the legendary saint that my ancestor was searching for was such an adorable little girl? I would never have guessed while he was controlling my body."

"Father..." Charlotte looked at her father's face pitifully. Trying to sound cheerful, she said, "But I'm so glad you're here now. You're back to your real self."

"It's too late now..." Frank's head drooped again. He slumped down on a chair nearby and squeezed out his words in a trembling voice. "The first time I noticed something odd was before you were born, Charlotte..."

Frank had fallen in love with one of the maids. He knew a union between a nobleman and a servant would never be celebrated, but he was planning to marry her at any cost. However, he began to notice that there was a stranger within him.

"I became frightened of myself... I let Maria escape far away so that she wouldn't come to any harm...but where did that get us? I couldn't even be with her as she was dying, let alone bring her back home—and I was powerless to do anything as my own daughter suffered." He buried his face in his hands, grieving for all that he had lost. A small teardrop fell between his fingers. "I've done something irreparable. How can I ever make amends?"

"I've often wondered..." Charlotte said quietly, "When Mom was still alive, she always told me how kindhearted my father was. But when I actually met you, you only looked at me coldly..."

When Charlotte paused, Frank raised his tear-streaked face. The father and the daughter stared at each other.

Eventually, Charlotte whispered, "Father... Do you still...love my mother?"

"Of course. I've never forgotten her, not for a single moment..."

"Just knowing that makes me very glad." Charlotte squeezed her father's hands. Shaking her head slowly, she gave him a bright smile. "You don't need to make amends at all. I just want to ask you to do one thing... Could you please go see Mom someday?"

"What right do I have to go there? Would she even want to see me...?"

"Of course. She was always missing you, so I'm sure it would make her happy."

Frank choked back tears at her words. He pondered over it for a little while, then quickly wiped away the tears at the corners of his eyes. He gave a deep nod as if to muster up the courage. "All right. I promise to visit her soon. If you don't mind me asking...could you please come with me when I do, Charlotte?"

"Yes. I'd love to." Charlotte nodded with a warm smile.

Allen cleared his throat. "Duke Evans. Reincarnation syndrome is a medical condition that's officially recognized across the world. The ten years you've lost is a long time...but well, what I mean is..." He paused, not knowing how best to put it, but in the end, he went straight to the point. "If you want to make a fresh start, I'll give you a hand. So don't despair so much."

"Thank you...Mr. Allen." Frank bowed deeply to him. When he raised his face again, he looked more cheerful. "I'm glad a young man like you was close by Charlotte's side. I feel easy knowing you're always there to protect her."

"O-Of course. I'd give my life for her." Allen nodded stiffly.

"Oh, F-Father..." Charlotte's cheeks turned pink. Though they hadn't planned on it, the crucial meeting between the parent and the boyfriend was a success. Next to the sweet, fresh couple, Natalia, Lydie, and Gosetsu exchanged looks with sour faces.

"I see... Father isn't such a good judge of character," Natalia said.

"What a sneaky move to win over a man in dire straits," Lydie said. "I approve —I wouldn't expect any less from my own Papa."

"The man is Lady Charlotte's sire, after all. Sir Allen knows he has much to gain from winning him over," Gosetsu said.

"Hey. I can hear you, you know," Allen grumbled at them.

And so, Duke Evans took a step forward in his brand new life. However, since his treatment and recovery were not complete, he was to return to Athena for a bit longer.

Natalia thumped her chest and declared, "I'll make sure to keep an eye on Father from now on. I'll send word if anything happens, so don't worry about him."

"Oh, Natalia, you've grown so strong too...! It's really true that children can grow up to be so admirable even when they don't have parents to guide them..." Frank started getting emotional again.

"N-No more crying, please! How do you think I feel looking after you? Here, take this handkerchief!" Natalia muttered, but she still took care of him. Though they were only just getting used to being a father and daughter, they seemed to be a good match.

Lydie tugged at Allen's sleeve. "I wonder, can I go back to Athena with them too?"

"Sure, but you've finished your testimony, haven't you?"

"I want to go back to the school dungeons. Natalia and I are in the middle of conquering each one! We still have to defeat the final boss—until I do that, I feel so restless I can't even have a good nap!"

"Oh, by the way, Allen," Harvey cut in, "I'm happy to arrange Lydie's enrollment anytime."

"Can we start with the normal school in town first and see how that goes...?" Allen replied, but he let Lydie tag along for now.

The lively group went off to the school together, and tranquil, ordinary days returned to Allen's mansion. That was why Allen had invited Charlotte to go back to her hometown to visit her mother's grave.

Come to think of it, it took us a long time to get to this point... Finally, I have a chance to take her back, Allen thought.

Charlotte's innocence was proven, but nevertheless, she was at the center of

a big scandal causing an upheaval in the country. To avoid curious eyes, they had to make this trip in secret—so they had asked Vynos, the owner of Ryugukyo, for help.

Soon after the incident with the prince and Cordelia, they went back to Ryugukyo to thank Vynos. By then, she had already heard a general account of the scandal through the network of long-living species, so she welcomed them back with open arms.

"I knew you were a good man, Mr. Crawford! My eyes didn't deceive me! I hope you'll keep teaching me those useful magic spells of yours!"

"Well...with your powers, aren't those spells for ice cream and hot chocolate basically child's play?" Allen asked.

"Oh, thinking up those small pieces of magic isn't my strong suit, you see...
I'm only good at washing away continents, freezing over the Earth, and things like that," she said with a sheepish smile.

Allen didn't know what to say. "Your scale is...off..."

In any case, with her permission, they used one of the magic portals that linked to places all over the world. Since they had stepped through the portal near Allen's mansion straight to the forest near Charlotte's village, they hadn't met anyone except the old neighbor.

At the moment, Charlotte still had to be secretive when she traveled. But soon, the public would forget about this scandal. *Next time we come here...we might be able to manage without the shortcut*, Allen mused. While he was lost in thought, Charlotte's story for her mother was coming to a close.

"There were a lot of hard times. But I hope you won't worry about me, Mom." Still crouched in front of the grave, Charlotte looked up at Allen, and with a soft smile, she said proudly, "Now, I'm...the happiest in the world."

"Charlotte..." Something squeezed Allen's heart. He knelt on one knee before the grave and said earnestly, "I promise, I'll do everything in my power to make Charlotte happy for as long as I live. So please watch over us, Mother."

"Allen...thank you so much."

Kneeling side by side, the two of them were silent in prayer for a while.

Eventually, Charlotte peered into his face with a shy, mischievous smile. "Well then, I'll have to make *you* happy next, Allen. Otherwise, it won't be even."

"What are you saying? That happened a long time ago." Allen grinned. Meeting Charlotte had changed his life dramatically. When he thought back to all the years he'd spent learning magic since he was adopted by the Crawfords, he wouldn't call it boring. But still, there was a spark in his everyday life now that had never been there before. "I'm already happy. Ever since I fell in love with you."

"Allen..."

That was his honest truth. A chilly wind swept through the graveyard, but the warm glow that kindled between them never wavered in the slightest. From the bottom of his heart, Allen hoped that this moment would last forever.

"Hm...?" A slight ache pounded in his head.

"Is something wrong, Allen?"

"No, it's nothing. I just felt a bit dizzy, that's all." Allen shook his head. The pain lasted only for a split second, and he didn't feel anything wrong with his body. Though it was puzzling, he decided it must be the weather. If they lingered here too long, Charlotte might catch a cold. He straightened up and pointed to the way they came. "Do you want to get going? It's getting windy."

"Yes. See you next time, Mom—I'll come back with Father." Charlotte gave a little bow.

As soon as they left the graveyard, sounds flooded into their ears—the birds chirping, the stream clucking—the wind felt stronger than before too. Charlotte looked back at the graveyard one more time, then smiled gently at Allen.

"Thank you so much for bringing me here," she said.

"Oh, don't mention it. I was thinking of coming here with you as soon as things settled down," Allen replied in a leisurely tone. And it was true. Ever since their relationship became official, he'd felt a duty to visit her mother's grave and introduce himself. He even felt relieved that he'd managed to make it

happen. "You know, I barely remember anything about my life before I got adopted by the Crawfords. I don't remember my biological parents, and I don't even know where I was born."

"I-I see, I didn't know that..." Charlotte went quiet for a little while, then asked softly, "Do you want to find out...? About your real parents?"

"Not anymore. Besides, Uncle doesn't seem to want to tell me much." He had asked Harvey once before just out of curiosity, but his foster father only hedged the question. Likely, he didn't have anything good to say about Allen's real parents. Either that, or they were already dead. So Allen had lost interest completely. He grinned mischievously at Charlotte, who still looked solemn. "So you see, it's the first time I get to 'go back home' like this. Let me enjoy it to the fullest too."

"Yes! I'll give you as much of a tour as I can. I used to live over there."

"Let's take a walk, then. It'll probably take a while before Roo and Gosetsu come back anyway."

They walked down the country lane, the tranquil mountain valley stretching out before them. The sky was a deep blue as far as the eye could see, and clouds like tufts of cotton floated idly by. Charlotte's face broke into a smile when she spotted small flowers growing on the bank of the stream.

"Hee hee, brings me back to the old days. I used to play by myself a lot, picking flowers."

"There weren't other kids around your age?"

"Well, this hamlet is so isolated, and not many people move here, so... Oh, but Harvey said he's been here, didn't he?"

"Yes...he did say that." When Duke Evans came to Allen's mansion, they had talked about Charlotte's hometown with Harvey. That was one of the things that gave Allen the idea to visit her mother's grave now. "But...he was acting weird," he said, cocking his head in puzzlement.

It should have been a pleasant, harmless topic of conversation. But when Harvey'd heard the name of the place, his eyes had widened a little in surprise. "Hunh, you were born around there, Charlotte? I've been there once before, a

long time ago," he said.

"Really? Were you on a trip with Liselotte?" Charlotte asked.

"No, I got targeted by an assassin."

"What...?" She blinked, round-eyed.

"I was in a town nearby for work, and I was attacked by a practiced assassin. It was easy for me to strike back, but the murderer got away. So I went looking for him all over the place. Ah, brings back memories."

"Like father, like son..." she said thoughtfully.

"Don't bunch us together," Allen complained. It was awkward to correct her when she said things without any ill will. Setting that aside, he pressed a hand to his forehead. "It's the first time I've heard that story, though. It's not like you to let an enemy get away, Uncle."

"Well, it was a tricky situation—hm?" Harvey's smile froze. He stared at Allen and Charlotte in turn, and asked hesitantly, "Did you say...you lived there over ten years ago, Charlotte?"

"Y-Yes, that's right... Is anything wrong?"

"You look pale, Uncle."

Harvey jumped up with a gasp, knocking back his chair. "I-I just remembered some urgent business I have to attend to! Must be going now!"

"U-Uh, okay. Take care...?" Harvey was in such a rush that Allen, along with everyone else, saw him off without any questions.

Looking back now, Allen thought there was definitely something fishy about that. He pressed a hand to his chin and fell into deep thought. "Maybe that story about the assassin was all made up, and maybe he actually used to have a lover around here... Let's look into it later."

"W-We shouldn't. What if your parents get into a fight?" Charlotte hastily tried to stop him. But then she brightened up with an idea. "Or maybe your hometown is somewhere nearby, Allen? That might be why Harvey got so flustered."

"Hm...I didn't think of that."

Allen looked around with this new perspective. It was an ordinary mountain valley. He had no recollection of ever seeing those gentle slopes, nor the flowers and plants growing in the meadows. At least, he shouldn't have.

I've never seen this place before...have I?

For some reason, he couldn't say for sure. He felt somewhat uneasy—as if he was going about his life with the buttons of his shirt done up wrong, or with an itch on the bottom of his feet that he couldn't quite get at.

"Ooh, look, Allen." Charlotte pointed at the bank on the other side of the stream, covered with thick clumps of weeds. "It's withered now, but just there, there used to be—"

"Wild strawberries...?" The words came out of his mouth before he knew it, and he himself was more surprised to hear it than Charlotte. She looked at him with sparkling eyes.

"You can tell just from looking! You know so many things, Allen."

"No, that's not..." If he had studied the nature of the soil and the surrounding environment, he would have been able to conjecture what used to grow there. But he hadn't gone through such a thought process to arrive at this answer. A vivid image of wild strawberries, red dotting the lush green, had flashed in his mind, even though he had never seen this stream before—or so he thought, at least.

Could it be that I really am from around here...? Allen became even more lost in thought, but Charlotte didn't notice. She skipped a few steps ahead of him, excited to see her familiar haunts again. As she turned the corner around a giant tree, she said, "And on the other side of the tree—oh!" She stopped, rooted to the spot. Allen walked up next to her.

There it was—a small house stood beyond the tree. It was a simple cottage. Perhaps it had been vacant for a long time; there were cracks in the outer wall, and the clearing around it was overgrown with weeds. Several more years, and it might become buried in nature.

Gazing at the empty house, Charlotte pressed a hand to her lips. "Th-This is

where I lived with Mom... I didn't think it would still be here."

She kept staring at the house, lost for words. She seemed overcome with emotions as memories of her mother came flooding back.

Allen couldn't say anything to her—but not because he didn't want to intrude. It was because he stopped breathing in shock, as if he was struck by lightning.

"H-Hey...!" At the sight of the small house, he was gripped with conviction. *I...* I know this place...! I'm sure of it! The moment he realized this, he went weak in the knees.

"Huh...?! A-Allen?! What's wrong, Allen?!"

"Oh..."

Charlotte was screaming something. He was dimly aware of that, but he couldn't bring himself to say anything as he crumpled to the ground. Something irresistible lured him into closing his eyes, and he sank into sleep as deep and heavy as quicksand.

 $\Diamond$ 

One chilly morning, a little girl opened the window to see a shining white world. From the garden to the forest path and all the way to the mountains that soared in the distance, everything was pure, spotless white.

"Wow!" She was swept up in the excitement of seeing a snow-covered scene for the first time in her life. "Look, Mommy! Snow!"

"Oh my, it snowed quite a lot." Her mother peered outside and smiled warmly at her. But she soon hunched over and started coughing quietly. The girl hastily stroked her mother's back.

"A-Are you okay, Mommy?"

"I'm fine... I just got a little chilly, that's all." The mother smiled faintly and caressed the girl's head. "Come, let's have some breakfast. Would you like to go see the snow outside before that?"

"Is it okay...if I touch the snow?"

"Of course, dear. But don't forget your mittens."

"Okay!"

The girl put on the scarf and mittens that her mother had knitted for her and pattered out the door. A thick blanket of snow covered the garden, and every step she took left a small footprint. She felt like she was drawing on a brand new sheet of paper, as free as a bird. In her delight, she forgot all about the freezing cold.

"Hee hee... Oh?" The girl stopped in her tracks and tilted her head. She thought she was the very first one to walk through the snow, but she found another trail of footprints across the garden and into the little forest path. Curious, she traced the marks. Without meeting anyone on the way, she eventually reached the stream. The footprints finally led into a thicket covered in snow.

"Hmm...?" The girl braced herself and peered into the thicket. She caught her breath. "Wh-Who are you...?"

"Tch..." The stranger clicked his tongue. He was a young boy with unusual hair —white on one side, black on the other—and his clothes looked dirty. He was slightly older than her.

He glared at her and said bluntly, "Leave me alone. Go away."

"B-But..."

"Shut up. Get out of my sight." The boy threatened her with his sharp eyes.

"Eep...!" The girl let out a little cry and backed out of the thicket. He looked like he might lash out at her any second. She ran away a few steps, but then she stopped. Panting, she turned to look behind her. There was no sign that the boy might come out of the bushes.

"What should I do...?" Should she go back home and tell her mother that she found a strange boy in the woods? Or...

Still staring at the thicket, the girl hesitated. The snow around her was trampled with her own footprints now, obscuring the tracks left by the boy.

"Excuse me." A voice called to her from behind.

The girl whirled around to find a man she had never seen before. Clad in a

black robe, he gave her a gentle smile. He knelt to match her eye level, looked into her eyes, and broadened his smile to a grin. "Good morning, little lady. May I ask you something?"

"Wh-What is it...?"

"Did you see a boy anywhere? He's a young boy with black-and-white hair, split in the middle like this..." The man's description matched the boy she had seen exactly.

She made a split-second decision and slowly shook her head. "N-No, I didn't. There aren't any boys in this village."

"I see... Well, if you come across him, please tell someone—a grown-up." The man bowed lightly and hurried away.

When he disappeared from view, the girl finally let out a breath. "Th-That was scary..."

"Hey, kid."

"Eek?!" Another voice came from behind, and she turned around timidly. The boy was glaring at her with a sinister look.

"Why'd you cover for me? What's your motive? Spill it."

"B-Because..." Tears brimmed at the corner of her eyes. With a trembling finger, she pointed at the boy's knee. Some blood was smeared over it, and it pained her even just to look. "You're hurt..."

"Huh...?" The boy's eyes went round, baffled. A heavy silence fell between them for a little while. A fish splashed in the stream. As if the small sound was some kind of cue, the boy turned his face away from her. "You're a weirdo..."

"Hee hee." The girl giggled, scratching her cheek. Though he was still brusque, she wasn't frightened of him anymore.

They were all alone in a pure white world that seemed to stretch on endlessly. For the girl, this felt like something special. Her excitement got the better of her, and she peered closely at the boy's face. "U-Um, my name is Charlotte. What's yours?"

After a pause, the boy answered in a small voice.



# **Chapter 7: What You Taught Me**

These days, it was Charlotte's habit to get ready to go out into the woods straight after breakfast.

"I'm heading out!" she said, scurrying to the door. But before she could dash off, her mother stopped her.

"Wait a moment, Charlotte." Her mother smiled warmly as Charlotte squirmed. "Could you show me what you're bringing with you?"

"U-Umm...okay." She hesitantly held out a piece of bread wrapped in a handkerchief. It was leftovers from her breakfast—she had barely touched it, just a tiny bite on the edge. Since her mother looked closely at it, she hastily made up excuses. "It's a nice day, so I wanted to eat it outside. Can I...?"

"You can..." With a kind smile, the mother caressed her daughter's head. She opened the cupboard and took out a bright red apple. "If that's what you have in mind, take this too."

"Oh! Really?"

"Of course. You'll get hungry with just that piece of bread." Her mother wrapped the bread and the apple in a fresh, clean cloth, then handed it to Charlotte. "So, you made a new friend? What color?" she asked with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Umm... White...and black?"

"Ah, a spotted one. Must be an adorable little friend." Her mother smiled broadly and saw Charlotte out the door. "I hope you'll introduce me sometime. Oh, careful not to go too far, dear."

"How come?"

"I heard there was some sort of incident in one of the nearby towns. So if you see anyone strange, don't go near them. Okay?"

"Okay!" Charlotte waved to her mother as she ran off toward the stream. Just

like the other day, the woods were empty. Glancing around her, Charlotte took a deep breath and called out his name. "Allen! I'm here!"

"Ugh...you're so loud." The bushes by the stream rustled a little, and the boy poked out with a sullen face. For the past week or so, this had been their morning routine. She sat down next to him in the bushes like she always did. When she gave him the bread and apple, Allen hesitated, but soon started eating.

Since that snowy day, Allen had been hiding in the woods around here, and his wounds were completely healed now. Delivering food to him had become Charlotte's daily custom. It was also part of her custom to sit by his side, all smiles, and watch him gobble up whatever she brought. When she told him what her mother had said that morning, he frowned mid-bite.

"I bet she thinks I'm a dog or a cat..."

"You think so?" Charlotte's eyes went round, and Allen heaved a great sigh. She tilted her head quizzically. "Are you sure I can't tell Mom about you, Allen?"

He squeezed out his reply with a scowl. "Don't tell any grown-ups. Ever." He bit into the apple in silence and gazed at the stream, his face too grim for a child's. It was the same look he wore when they'd met and he'd tried to shoo her away.

He had frightened her that time, but now Charlotte thought, *He looks...sad...* Even after a week, he hardly told her anything about himself. With each passing day, he spoke a little more, but still, the only thing she knew about him was his name. *I should be kind to people who're in trouble. That's what Mommy always says!* She wanted to help him somehow.

So she nodded solemnly in response. "I won't tell anyone about you. I promise."

"Hmph, we'll see about that." The corners of his lips curled sarcastically. He wolfed down the rest of the apple, then tossed the leftover scrap in the air. Pointing his finger straight at it, he cast a spell. "Flare."

Fire consumed the scrap, and by the time it fell on the ground, it had already turned to black ashes. The wind swept it away.

"Wow!"

Allen turned to Charlotte and said menacingly, "Listen. I can do *that* to you anytime I want. So don't you dare—"

"You're a wizard, Allen?!" She cut him off and leaned close to him.

Allen was stunned to silence. When she squeezed his hand, his face turned bright red. She didn't notice, though. She just looked at him with sparkling eyes.

"That's so cool! What other spells can you do?!"

"Just as I thought...you're a weirdo," Allen muttered offhandedly. He shook off her hands and flumped back on the grass. Stretching out his hand to the sky, he narrowed his eyes as if the sun was too bright for him. "My magic is nothing to go wild about," he said absentmindedly. "There's plenty of people around the world who're a lot stronger than me."

"But it's still amazing! You can use magic even though you're so little."

"I'm nine. I'm not little. I'm four years older than you, you little shrimp."

"I'm not a shrimp, I'm Charlotte."

"Whatever, shrimp."

"Mrrr..."

He rolled over on his side so that his back was turned to her. Charlotte tilted her head quizzically. "Doesn't your mom say you're amazing when you do stuff with magic?"

If Charlotte could cast a spell, her mother's eyes would go round in surprise, and she would pet her head and sing her praises. Her mother always said her father is a kind man, so she had a feeling he would cheer for her too. In her world, that was simply what parents did.

Still keeping his back to her, Allen murmured, "I...don't have any parents."

"Oh!" Charlotte blinked.

"No parents, no family, no one. I don't have a place to go back to anymore either... Uh, hold on." He noticed something when he turned back to look at her. What he saw made him grimace. "Why are you crying?"

Big teardrops rolled down her face. "B-Because...!" She was imagining how she would feel if she ever lost her mother, or her father never came to get them, and she was left all by herself. She couldn't bear it. Her heart tightened to think of how Allen must feel.

She wiped away her tears and made up her mind. "I-I know!"

"Know what?"

"I'll be your family, Allen!"

"Huh...?" His eyes widened at her declaration.

As soon as she said it out loud, her idea seemed wonderful to her. "If I'm your family, you won't be lonely anymore! So I'm your family now!"

"Meh... I'm not lonely or anything," he said curtly, turning away from her.

The way he talked was cold, but she could sense that he was just hiding how he really felt. Squeezing his hand, she smiled warmly. "Now that we're family, we'll do lots of fun things, every day! And we'll be together, whatever we do!"

"Fun...things...?" Allen looked puzzled, as if he'd never encountered such an idea before. His eyes swam, and his shoulders slumped a little. "I don't know what that is. I've never felt like anything was 'fun'... Uh, you're crying again?!"

"I-I'm not crying!" Her eyes stung, and despite her protests it was hard to stop her tears. For Charlotte, every day was brimming with fun things—singing, picking flowers, chatting with her mother. It seemed like a sad waste that he'd never had such shining moments in his life. Tears streaming down her face, she voiced her firm resolve. "I know what I'm gonna do. I'll teach you lots of fun things! That's what family does!"

"I never said I'd be your family—hey! Don't pull me!"

After that, Charlotte took Allen all over the woods. She led him to a secret spot that one of her elderly neighbors had shown her, and they picked some wild strawberries. They went to a blooming meadow on the outskirts of the village and made crowns out of flowers. They sang, danced, whirled round and round for no reason, and sprawled out on their backs on the grassy field. She made him do anything and everything fun that she could think of.

By the time she thought she'd covered everything, a tinge of red was starting to color the sky. Right above them, birds crossed the field to return to their nests. Charlotte was thoroughly satisfied that they had had a very meaningful day.

But Allen, with the flower crown still on his head, looked puzzled. "What's fun about all this...?"

"What?!" She couldn't help but cry out in shock. She stopped making the second crown. "You didn't think it was fun...?"

"I dunno... It just felt sort of busy."

"Really?!" She was so shocked it felt like the world had turned upside down. She hung her head in disappointment and caught sight of the flower crown she'd been making. Her mother was so good at weaving them, but her tiny hands were too clumsy to shape them properly. This saddened her, especially now. I thought I could make him smile... Charlotte fell silent, still downcast.

Allen let out a deep sigh. "But, well... Plantmake."

"Oh!"

At his short spell, her incomplete crown hopped off her lap and flew toward him. By the time it landed in his hand, it was already finished. It was much bigger and more finely crafted than the one Charlotte had made. He gently placed it on her head. When she looked up at him in surprise, his face softened.

"It wasn't so bad to watch you, though," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I dunno, don't ask me. Never felt like this before." Allen ruffled her hair. It wasn't the tender strokes that her mother always gave her, but a bit rough, and her hair got tousled immediately. Somehow it felt sweet in a ticklish kind of way, and it made Charlotte happy.

"Hee hee... You finally smiled, Allen."

"I did not. Weirdo."

"I'm not 'weirdo,' call me Charlotte."

"Whatever. Weirdo's good enough for a weirdo," he retorted, but his face broke into a bigger grin, and he laughed boldly. "Hmph, if what you showed me today is called 'fun,' looks like it's a piece of cake. I have a feeling I can come up with even more fun stuff—something bigger."

"Then next time, you can teach me!"

"Me...?"

"Yes!" Charlotte stood up and squeezed his hands. He was an amazing wizard. Whatever fun things *he* would come up with were bound to be incredible. With sparkling eyes, she said, "Someday, you can teach me all the fun things you've found, Allen. That way, we'll have double the fun together!"

"Together, huh...?" Allen murmured thoughtfully, a shadow falling on his face. But he soon nodded firmly and squeezed her hands right back. In the fiery glow of sunset, he looked determined. "All right. I'll find lots of stuff, and I'll teach you for sure. I promise."

"Hee hee, that's a promise." Charlotte gave him a radiant smile.

The sky to the east was darkening into indigo. Allen gazed at the snowcapped mountains in the distance, then turned back to Charlotte. "It'll get dark soon. Let's go back."

"Okay!"

Still holding hands, they began walking back side by side. His hand felt warm in hers, and it made her smile without thinking.

"Would you like to come home with me, Allen?" she said, repeating the invitation once again. She'd lost count how many times she had asked him now. "I'm sure Mommy would be happy to meet a nice boy like you."

"Nice boy...right." He chuckled, twisting his lips into a self-deprecating smile. She felt a stab in her chest—he looked like he might start crying. But what he said next shocked her even more. "I can't go to your place. I'm thinking of going away soon."

"What...?" She stopped in her tracks. He stopped too. The two of them stood in the field in the light of the setting sun, looking at each other with pained

expressions. "You're leaving, Allen...?"

"There's something I have to do. I want to take responsibility for what I've done."

"Respon...sibility...?" She had never heard the word before. Even though she didn't know what it meant, she could feel the full weight of his resolve. It must be something very, very important to him. So she bit her lip and stopped herself from saying, *Don't go*. Instead, she murmured a wish. "Will we...meet again?"

"Silly. I made a promise, didn't I?" He smirked. His eyes looked a little misty. She could tell that he was holding back his tears, just like her. With a determined nod, he went on, "Next time, I'll teach you everyth—watch out!"

Allen shoved her away, and just as she cried out in surprise, a fierce gust of wind hurled him through the air, slamming him against the ground on the far side of the field.

"A-Allen—!" she screamed, forgetting her own pain.

"Well well, we've finally tracked you down!" A thunderous bellow shook the air. A group of strangers emerged from the dense trees on the edge of the field. They looked harsh and dangerous, their eyes gleaming ominously, and were armed with short swords and other weapons. They trampled on the flower crowns as they advanced toward him.

"Eek...!" Charlotte let out a little shriek, trembling. She couldn't move from where she fell. *They know Allen...? But he said he doesn't have anyone...* 

Allen staggered to his feet and wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth. He glowered at the men. "You got here quick..."

"The master has to track down his lost dog, after all." One of the men stepped out from the group. The man with a scar on his face cast a cold gaze on Allen. "I'll let you off the hook for botching your job. We underestimated our target this time. But why didn't you come right back?"

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"[…"
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<sup>&</sup>quot;You were going to make a run for it, weren't you?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;No, that's not—ack!"

The man kicked him off the ground without so much as a blink. With a dull, horrifying thud, Allen's small body fell on the ground again. Charlotte couldn't even utter a sound. As she watched frozen in shock, the man kept on battering Allen mercilessly.

"Who do you think picked you up when your parents sold you off, huh?! You ungrateful whelp... You want to get chained in a cage and eat pig food again?!"

Allen didn't fight back with magic, and the others didn't stop the man either. They only looked on, smirking and laughing.

Allen...he'll die...! Charlotte caught her breath at the chilling thought. Her scraped knee hurt, and the men were scary—but she couldn't bear to think of losing Allen. "Stop!!!" she screamed.

"Huh...?" The man was distracted by the sound and his barrage on Allen paused.

Charlotte mustered up her courage and dashed to Allen's side. Planting her feet firmly and spreading her arms as wide as she could, she confronted the man. "P-Please stop! Don't bully him...!"

"What the hell? Where'd this kid come from?"

"No...! Run, Charlotte!" Allen shouted desperately. He finally called her name for the first time. Before she could feel glad about it, the man reached out and grabbed her by the hair.

Looking closely at her face, he said, "Hmm, you're pretty cute for a brat in the sticks. When you're grown, you're sure to attract customers."

"Eep...I-let me go! I don't—"

"Shut up. Sleep."

"Oh..." The man's spell made her unconscious, and she crumpled to the ground. Allen's eyes widened at the sight.

The man chuckled deeply. "What luck, you brought us new merchandise. You're starting to learn how to pay for your mist—arrrgh?!" He howled midsentence and staggered back, gripping his bloodstained arm. The henchmen's faces changed color too. "Allen, you little...! What do you think

you're doing?!"

"Don't touch her with your dirty hands...!" Allen slowly rose to his feet. He was smeared in blood, and his body ached from the blows he'd taken. His face was swollen too; he could barely open one of his eyes. Still, he fixed the men with a glare, head-on. It was his turn to protect her. "This girl saved my life! If you hurt her, I...I won't hold back!"

"Hah... Are you serious?" The man cast a brief spell, and the wound on his arm began to seal itself. In a matter of seconds, his arm was as good as new. Flaunting it in front of Allen, the man laughed derisively. "You might use a bit of magic, but you're still just a little kid. Do you really think you can beat all of us?"

"I don't care! You only came here to kill me in the first place!" Allen barked, spitting out blood. He was up against a dozen men, all carrying weapons. On top of that, some of them knew some magic too. It was clear as day that Allen was at a disadvantage. But he scoffed. "There's no future for a slave like me anyway... I might as well die protecting her!" he roared ferociously, ready to throw down his life.

The men edged closer to him. The whole field seemed to hold its breath in the taut silence—but the silence was suddenly broken by a lilting, easygoing voice.

"I wonder, aren't you a little too young to give up on life?"

"Wha-?!"

The men's cries were quickly cut off as a freezing cold wind thrashed through the field. Allen couldn't help but squeeze his eyes shut. When he opened them, all the men were trapped in large pillars of ice. None of them moved an inch, frozen with their faces contorted in astonishment. And right next to the pillars stood a young man in a black robe.

Allen drew in a sharp breath. "Harvey Crawford...?!"

"Well hello there, my little hit man." Harvey sketched a slight bow with a cordial smile that completely contrasted the situation. With a light tread, he waltzed right up to Allen, then shrugged with a sigh. "My my, what an adversary you are, at your age. Not only did you take me off guard, but you also gave me a pretty serious wound *and* threw me off your scent. You're too exceptional to

waste away under some small-time criminals."

"But...you found me in the end."

"Not from any fault of yours. These useless idiots were so overtly suspicious." Harvey grinned at him. "So, what will you do?" he asked, though he seemed to guess Allen's answer already. "If you'd like to fight, I can oblige you."

After a pause, Allen shook his head and slumped down on the ground. "No. I was going to go to you and tell you everything anyway—who's pulling the strings and all that. You saved me the trouble."

"Oh, is that so? That's good news. As an educator, it would have pained me to nip young talent in the bud."

Harvey was all smiles. Even though he was speaking to someone who had once tried to murder him, he didn't seem at all wary. Allen let out a little sigh and extended a hand to Charlotte, who was lying on the ground. She was fast asleep, her eyes closed.

"I'm so glad she's safe..." Allen murmured. He felt a rush of relief to see her peaceful face. He gently stroked her head, then looked up. "Harvey Crawford... Before you take me with you, I have one thing to ask."

"What is it? Mercy?"

"I don't need a thing like that." Allen bowed down, supplicating to him without any hesitation. "A powerful wizard like you...you should know how to use magic to change people's memories. Can you do a spell like that to make her forget about me?"

Harvey was doubtful. "Are you sure...? She means a great deal to you, doesn't she?"

Allen nodded slowly. "Yes, but I'm sure." He looked down a little, and for the first time, a single tear fell from his eyes. "This scared her... I don't want her to remember a feeling like that—not her."

"Hm." For a while, Harvey was quiet. A slight breeze swayed the grass and flowers in the field between them. Eventually, he crouched down and studied Allen's swollen face, then flashed a wide smile. "You know, you're a completely

different person from the one who attacked me."

"Really ...?"

"Oh yes. You have very gentle eyes now. Perhaps thanks to her." Harvey looked at Charlotte and gave a light nod. "I understand. I'll grant your earnest wish."

"Y-You will?!"

"Yes, and if I may ask a favor in return... Could you answer a few questions for me?"

"I'll tell you anything. You want to know what these guys do?"

"Oh, I know all about their background. They're part of the human trafficking ring that I was trying to destroy, aren't they? I've already captured their head," Harvey said casually. He held up three fingers. "There are just three things I want to ask you. What's your name and age?"

"Huh...? Allen, and I'm nine..."

"And would you like to see your parents again?"

"I...don't even want to see their faces. I hope they suffer and die."

"Perfect, how convenient! You passed the test!" Harvey cheered and grasped Allen's shoulders. With a big smile, Harvey said, "From now on, you're my son."

"Huh...?!" Allen was baffled. All strength left his body. He fell to the ground next to Charlotte, who was still sound asleep, and glared at the man in front of him. "You...you just used *De Lusion* on me...?!"

"Indeed I did. And an especially powerful one at that," Harvey said without a trace of guilt, then stroked Allen's head gently. "Don't worry about the little girl either. I'll erase her memory and take her back home. So don't worry about anything—relax and go to sleep."

"Why...did you...?"

"You made me curious to see how you'll change, and who you'll grow up to be. You are far too promising to rot away as a gang's underling."

"That's...ridicu..." Allen's eyelids drooped shut, and sleep was pulling him in.

Just before he blacked out, he heard the voice of the man who was to become his father.

"Forget all the painful memories, and start over from scratch. I'm sure you'll become a good wizard."

 $\Diamond$ 

As soon as he regained consciousness, Allen sprang up with a gasp. He was breathing hard, as if he'd just been running at full speed, and his heart was racing wildly. He seemed to have sweated a lot, and he felt clammy all over. He wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead in one rough stroke and looked around.

He was in an unfamiliar house. It was sparsely furnished and dusty. He had been sleeping in an old bed in the corner of the room. It creaked every time he moved—apparently, it had been left unused for a long time.

"Where...?"

The door opened, and Charlotte looked in. "Oh, Allen!" As soon as she saw him, she hurried to the bed. "I'm so glad you're awake! How are you feeling? Do you feel any pain?!"

"N-No... I'm fine."

"Really? Are you sure...? You look kind of dazed." She touched his forehead and cheeks, checking for fever. Her face was full of concern.

Allen gazed at her. A feeling gradually welled up from the depths of his heart.

Charlotte sighed, knitting her brows anxiously. "You collapsed all of a sudden. I was so worried...but it was really lucky the house was still here—"

The feeling overflowed and overtook him. He grasped her shoulders and pressed his lips on hers. She jumped a little in surprise, but he didn't let her go. When he drew her close, she readily yielded to him. This made him happier than anything else.

He felt her softness in his arms, a sensation he would always keep in his heart. Then he remembered his own declaration that next time they kissed, he would make the move. He hadn't planned to, but he had succeeded in taking his

revenge. Eventually, he gently freed her lips.

Charlotte was flushing bright red. "U-Um, why..." she stammered, "so sudden \_\_"

"Charlotte," Allen cut her off.

Ever since he'd found her near his mansion and took her in, he had thought only about making her happy. Until now, he'd thought it was love at first sight. But he was wrong. The real truth was much more simple. I just...wanted to keep that promise I made to her. Now that he remembered, he understood everything.

"Did I manage to teach you fun things?" he asked.

"Huh?" Charlotte's eyes went round. But her face soon broke into a glowing smile. "Yes. You've taught me so much."

For a moment, Allen couldn't speak. "Thank you..."

"Oh!"

He couldn't stop himself, and he pulled her into another tight embrace. She got flustered again, but Allen squeezed her close. Then he told her the words he never got the chance to tell her when they had first met.

"Thank you, Charlotte. I'm glad I met you."

"Oh...u-um, Allen...?" Though she was confused, she still put her arms around him timidly.



For a while, they held each other close in silence. The warmth from their bodies melted into each other until they couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. Allen felt perfectly content from the bottom of his heart.

I really am...one lucky guy. Just when he was basking in happiness, he heard a weary sigh.

"Well well, I feel drunk with all the love in the air."

"Hm?" Allen looked up to find Gosetsu standing just outside the open door, with Roo plopped down beside her. He froze at their unwavering stare. "Wait...how long have you been there?"

"Since the very beginning. Young Roo and I have been helping Lady Charlotte look after you," Gosetsu reported dispassionately, her nose twitching.

Roo got up and peered into the couple's faces, full of curiosity. "So humans boop noses to say hi too. Never knew that!"

"You mustn't tell anyone about this, Young Roo. Sir Allen may be fine, but it will only worry Lady Charlotte."

"Oh, really? Is it a secret boop? Hey, Mommy, what's it for?"

"Umm...!" Charlotte couldn't bear Roo's innocent gaze anymore, and she jumped away. "A-Anyway, Allen, you fainted all of a sudden!" she said rapidly to change the subject. "You should get checked by a doctor!"

"Uh-huh..." Allen pondered over his next step. He came to a conclusion immediately. "All right," he announced, "let's head to the Athena School of Magic."

"Y-Yes, good idea. Harvey can take a look at you—"

"And I'll punch him in the face. Can you watch me do it, Charlotte?"

"Why would you start a fight?!" Charlotte cried out. Gosetsu and Roo looked bemused too.

"Now I have a reason for punching that asshole. Don't worry, I'm sure Uncle will happily take it. It's a hit from his precious son, after all."

"I-I don't know what you have in mind...but punching is a no-no!" Charlotte

was all in a fluster, but she raised her finger and said sternly, "Fighting isn't a naughty thing; it's a *bad* thing! Understood?"

#### **Afterword**

Hello, this is Same.

Thank you so much for reading *Crash Course in Naughtiness: Volume 3*. We've finally arrived at the third volume of this naughty rom-com!

This marks the end to one part of the story—the "in your face" part, you could say. When I started publishing this story online, I was planning to beat up the prince and Cordelia around the climax of the first volume, but more and more scenarios popped up in my head, so it ended up like this.

I started writing this story online in summer 2019, which means I've been working on it for about a year and a half. It was a slow pace, since I was writing other works too...but in any case, I'm relieved that I've come this far.

Still, it's only the beginning of Allen and Charlotte's relationship. By the time this volume is out, I think I'll be writing a sequel online. I'm planning to delve more into the other characters too. There are so many ideas already, I'll never run out...!

This story is the first of my works to turn into a book, so I am extremely attached to it. Thanks to Allen and Charlotte, I have so many wonderful memories now—the moment when I saw the character designs by the illustrator, Sakura Miwabe-sensei; the time when Ichiho Katsura-sensei turned the first chapter into a manga; and all the comments from my readers. I'd like to thank the couple—Allen and Charlotte—along with everyone who helped to make this project come true and the readers who supported me.

Lastly, I have a piece of news. The third volume of the manga series will come out at the same time as this one. It covers the events in the first volume of the original light novel version: from the latter half of Charlotte's day out by herself to the end of their trip to the zoo.

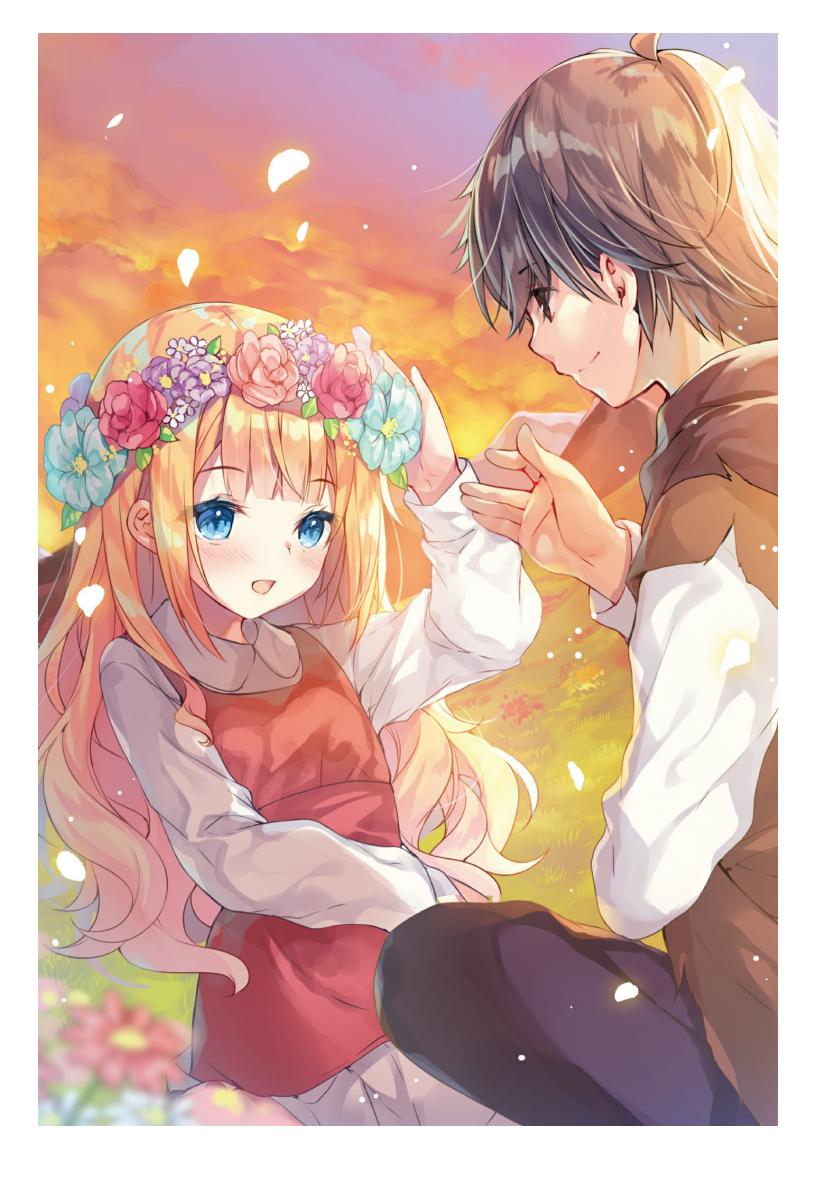
I hope you'll enjoy seeing Allen acting totally suspicious as he slowly comes to realize his own feelings for Charlotte. Every time I looked at the manuscripts, it

made me laugh. Plus, you'll get to see Charlotte wearing cat ears! It's definitely worth picking up a copy.

Also, I have some different books coming out from other publishers—I hope you'll take a look at them too. For more details, you can find me on the *Shosetsuka ni Naro* website or Twitter!

Well then, I will be looking forward to the next time we meet.

Greetings from Same.





# **Bonus Short Story**

## **A Naughty Drink**

Now that her birthday had passed, Charlotte was officially eighteen years old.

In Notre Empire, where Allen lived, when people turned eighteen, they were free to do all kinds of things they weren't allowed to before. For example, if they were an adventurer, they could get official missions from the guild, or they could get married, if that was something they wanted. And one of the outstanding things that opened up to people of age was the opportunity to drink alcohol.

As the veil of night fell around Allen's mansion, a little party was being held in the living room.

Charlotte held up the glass filled with a pink drink, looking at it with sparkling eyes. "S-So, this is it...!"

Allen grinned at her childlike reaction. "Hmph, is it that special?"

Gosetsu, who also held a glass, smiled warmly too. Tonight, she wasn't in her usual shape of an Infernal Capybara; instead, she was in her "alluring beauty" mode, looking on-point in a stunning evening dress. "What a blessing to share a drink with my master. I am so grateful for your invitation, my Lady," she said, gracefully crossing her legs and swirling her glass.

"No, thank you for keeping me company." Charlotte smiled brightly.

It was only the three of them in the room. The children, Lydie and Roo, were already fast asleep.

"Who would've thought you'd want to try alcohol? I didn't expect you'd be interested," Allen said.

"Hee hee... I got a bit brave."

Although it had been a while since her eighteenth birthday, the days leading

up to it, as well as the days that followed, had been rather chaotic. Now that things had calmed down, she had come up to him with this furtive request.

Charlotte put a hand to her cheek with a shy smile. "Sometimes, when I happen to wake up late at night, I see you and Gosetsu drinking together. I thought you both looked so grown-up and cool...so I always wanted to try joining in."

"Ah...yes, we've done that occasionally," Allen said, nodding rigidly.

"Indeed we have." Gosetsu nodded in the same way.

They could never reveal to her what went on during those frequent nights. It was more like a boasting contest than a drinking party, where a blazing battle of one-upmanship unfolded between them—Gosetsu would boast, "Oho, Lady Charlotte shampooed me today. Just take a look at this glossy hair! Even her brushing is pure perfection!" and Allen would counter with "Heh, well I went on a walk with her, holding hands! You'll never be more than a pet, in the end. It's only my privilege to accompany her as her partner, side by side!"

But even these two were capable of feeling a bit of shame, so they kept their mouths shut about those details.

In any case, upon Charlotte's request, they decided to have a mini drinking party. They clinked their glasses, and Charlotte cautiously brought hers to her lips. When she took a small gulp, her eyes went round.

"Mmm! It tastes like juice."

"I picked one out for you that's easier to drink. It's not that strong, but careful not to go too fast. Tonight, we'll check how much you can handle without getting too tipsy."

"Please give me a command when you feel drowsy. I shall escort you to the bedchamber," Gosetsu said.

"I-I'm okay for now. I want to stay up with you two!"

"My girlfriend is so adorable..."

"My master is so adorable..."

"Are you both getting tipsy already?" Charlotte asked, round-eyed. Despite

their swooning, Allen and Gosetsu both drank like fish, so they were still sober.

The party went on. Just as Allen had guessed, Charlotte liked the sweet drink. All smiles, she sipped from her glass bit by bit. As a result...

"Hee hee hee, this is so much fuuun." Before long, she turned into a mellow, melty Charlotte. Her cheeks were slightly flushed pink, and she swayed from side to side. Apparently, only one glass had been enough to get her completely drunk.

Allen picked up the bottle and checked the label, just to double-check. The alcohol content was so low that it was basically just juice.

"She's unbelievably lightweight... Good thing I tested the water with this drink first."

"Well, I did imagine such an outcome." Gosetsu shrugged and drained her glass. "It's fortunate I am here to protect her. There's no knowing what *you* would do to Lady Charlotte in this state."

"Quit yapping. If you have time to talk nonsense, go and put her to bed."

"Yes, yes, I'll take her." Gosetsu peered into Charlotte's face with a tender smile. "Lady Charlotte, it's time for you to rest. Let me escort you."

"Mrrr... I don't wanna..." Charlotte shook her head.

"Hmph, it's not like her to complain—hm?" Allen was taking a sip from his own glass, feeling amused by the heartwarming scene, but he widened his eyes in surprise when Charlotte stood up and came tottering toward him.

"I want...to be with Allen a little longerrr..."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and clung to him. On top of that, she started rubbing her cheek against him, as if asking him for cuddles. At her unexpected move, he spewed out all the wine from his mouth.

Her body felt cozy and warm from the drink, and she kept pressing herself on him. The sweet scent of the drink on her breath tickled his senses, making him dizzy. Gosetsu clicked her tongue at Allen, who had frozen in place, blushing deep crimson.

"Tch. Rub it in my face, why don't you?"

"I haven't done anything...!" Allen protested, still bright scarlet.

"Charlotte...?" he murmured in a gentle voice to soothe her. "Come on, you're almost falling asleep. Don't tire yourself out."

"I'm not tired at all... I wanna be here!"

"Huh?! W-Wait—!!!" Despite Allen's attempt at coaxing her away, Charlotte moved on to her next attack. Instead of leaving, she sat down on Allen's lap as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Sitting sideways, she threw her arms around his neck again. He was at his limits. "Charlotte?!"

"Hee hee... You're so warrrm..."

They were hugging so closely now that practically every part of their body was touching. Though they had embraced each other in the past, Charlotte had never been so bold before.

Gosetsu put a hand to her chin and let out a thoughtful groan. "Hmm. They do say alcohol can free one's suppressed desires... Could it be that Lady Charlotte wishes to cling to you more?"

"I'd lose my head if she went on like this all the time!"

"But it may be what Lady Charlotte desires. As her suitor, you must respond in kind. Otherwise, disgrace shall come upon you."

"You think this is so funny, don't you...?!" Allen grumbled. But Gosetsu did have a point. Even if Charlotte really did want to cuddle with him more, she was shy by nature—he doubted whether she could express herself so freely when sober. All right, if that's the case...!'ll take her on!

Bracing himself, Allen hesitantly lifted his hand and stroked Charlotte's head. "Th-There there...?"

"Aww...!" In that instant, Charlotte jumped as if she was struck by lightning.

Did I do something wrong? Allen panicked, but quickly realized he needn't have worried. Charlotte's face brightened up and she peered at him. In such close quarters. His heart stopped beating completely. But the next moment, she squeezed him tight once again, so it jolted back into motion.

"That's so lovely... Please do it again..."

"L-Like...this...?"

"Hee hee hee... I'm sooo happyyy..." Her dreamy, singsong voice, along with her breath, tickled his ear. The sensation sent a sweet shiver running down his spine. But then he was assailed by yet another shock.

"You too, Allen. There there! ≡" Now she was caressing his head in return.

"Agh...?!" His heart was stopping one moment, beating wildly the next. His face was bright crimson, and he felt like he saw everything through a pink lens.

"If you're suffering so much, I could willingly swap places with you?" Gosetsu said coolly.

"Don't be ridiculous! This is my privilege...!"

"Ooh... Look at your neck, Allen... So manly..."

"Aggghhh?!"

Charlotte started poking at his Adam's apple, rumpling his hair, and doing all kinds of things to drive him over the edge. For a while, she went on happily playing with him, but eventually, she fell sound asleep, and her regular breathing could be heard.

"Oh dear, my master can be surprisingly coquettish." Gosetsu gently lifted Charlotte up in her arms. She chuckled at Allen, who was slumped on the chair, his head hanging lifelessly. "You did well to endure it, Sir Allen—ah, but you can't hear me."

Allen was completely unconscious. However, his face was glowing with contentment, so Gosetsu decided to leave him be and carried Charlotte off to her room.



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I'm Giving the Disgraced Noble Lady I Rescued a Crash Course in Naughtiness: I'll Spoil Her with Delicacies and Style to Make Her the Happiest Woman in the World! Volume 3

by Fukada Sametarou

Translated by Yui Kajita Edited by Emlyn Dornemann

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"KONYAKU HAKI SARETA REIJO WO HIROTTA ORE GA IKENAIKOTO WO OSHIEKOMU *OISHI MONO WO TABESASETE OSHARE WO SASETE SEKAIICHI SIAWASE NA SHOJO NI PRODUCE!*" 3

by Fukada Sametarou

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Original Japanese edition published by SHUFU-TO-SEIKATSU SHA CO., LTD. Tokyo This English edition is published by arrangement with SHUFU-TO-SEIKATSU SHA CO., LTD. Tokyo English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: February 2024

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