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*The Frugal  
Priestess  
Becomes a  
Saint*



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The Frugal Priestess Becomes a Saint

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# Prologue

**“CALL** a saint from another world.”

Everyone froze at the king’s short command.

Next to Fiona Everett, the pontiff’s vein throbbed restlessly at his temple, but, of course, the king never noticed. On the slim chance he *had* noticed, he probably wouldn’t have exercised any consideration anyway.

“My liege...are you asking us to perform a summoning?”

Everyone knew well what the monarch had said. The pontiff only asked him deliberately out of a sincere and desperate wish that they’d all misheard his order. Or perhaps it was the man’s roundabout way of saying, “Surely you can’t be serious?” to pressure His Majesty to change his mind. Unfortunately for him, this was the king they were talking about. Though he wasn’t a bad man, he *was* in the prime of his life, prone to daydreaming. So, the likelihood of the king intuiting the pontiff’s intention was nil.

“I am. Apparently, our neighbor, Slava, summoned a Saint of Abundance. Once the black-haired girl appeared, the country’s crop yields skyrocketed. I realize our country failed when it tried to summon a Saint of Sea Bounty ten years ago, but this time, for sure, I am confident we’ll succeed!”

The prime minister nodded vigorously in response to the king’s ringing declaration and raised his fist. “A superb idea, Your Majesty! Our country will flourish even more once the saint is summoned!”

“Oh, good grief,” Fiona couldn’t help uttering, barely above a whisper, at the irresponsible way the prime minister fanned the flames of their king’s delusion. Only the pontiff heard her. When he nudged her in warning with his elbow, she hurriedly straightened her spine and shut her mouth.

In this gathering of the king, his prime minister, and the pontiff—the nation’s leaders—Fiona had no say since she was merely the pontiff’s aide. She stared

beseechingly up at her superior, silently telling him he was their sole ray of hope in this madness. He already seemed half resigned to the inevitable but nevertheless gave her a subtle nod of acknowledgment.

“Begging your pardon, Father, but I don’t think that’s necessary. Our country is wealthy enough as it is.”

The voice that interrupted the king and his chancellor’s excited conversation was beautiful, and its owner even more so. When Linus Gene tilted his head thoughtfully, his silver hair rippled and gleamed with the movement. With his handsome, pleasingly symmetrical features, the crown prince’s beauty was peerless among men and women. His words stopped even the king in his tracks.

“But, Linus, you know a saint’s power means bountiful harvests and bountiful catches. The idea has a certain *je ne sais quoi*, don’t you think?” the king asked his son.

“I’m not sure I agree with running a nation on ‘*je ne sais quoi*,’ sire,” Linus replied.

“Any nation who loses theirs will fall. Mark my words.”

As the king and his son argued in circles over the philosophical concept, all Fiona could do was silently support the latter with her gaze. If she possessed the right to speak here, she would have tried to convince the king that “money is more important than *je ne sais quoi*.” In any case, she needed Linus to do his best and persuade the king to retract his silly plan to summon a saint. Naturally, the pontiff also opposed the king’s course of action, and with Linus, the crown prince, on their side, calmer heads *should* prevail.

However, much to her dismay, Fiona found her prediction upended in a most unexpected manner. As the king listened to Linus’ forceful appeal, he saw the pontiff nodding in agreement, which made the monarch’s cheeks puff in indignation. Yes, you read that correctly, reader. His. Cheeks. Puffed. In. Indignation.

Regardless of how attractive he was, few people would find their hearts going aflutter at the sight of a man in his prime pouting so. Far from it, his behavior was an omen. Before the pontiff even had a chance to stage a strategic temporary retreat, the king shook his head vehemently and shouted.

“At any rate, my mind’s made up! You *will* summon a saint!”

Everyone besides the prime minister exhaled defeatedly. A powerful, mature man prone to flights of fancy was only a nuisance. Fiona’s head started aching, thinking of what would come next, prompting her to massage her temples gently.

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“**AND** there you have it...we’ll be summoning a saint.”

A collective sigh arose at the pontiff’s announcement. The high-ranking clergy members gathered in the room in the Temple wore identical gloomy expressions. For whatever reason, Prince Linus was also attending, so they refrained from saying anything out loud, but their attitudes made their dissatisfaction evident.

“His Majesty is almost always reasonable, a wise ruler who takes his subjects’ opinions into consideration. Aside from occasions like these, that is, when... well, when he’s intoxicated by his whimsies.”

When one of the priests tried and failed to frame his thoughts respectfully, Linus, who sat next to Fiona, chuckled ruefully.

“Don’t mind me. Just pretend I’m not here.” As he spoke, Linus scooped up a lock of Fiona’s black hair and grinned cheerfully.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but what exactly are you doing here, Your Highness? Are you surveilling us under His Majesty’s orders or something?” Fiona questioned the gorgeous crown prince’s intentions. He said nothing for some time and simply played with her hair. Then, his indigo eyes, glittering like jewels, narrowed.

“Of course not,” he insisted. “You wound me by even thinking so. Personally, I see no need to summon a saint anyway.”

The clergy members sighed in relief. But the situation remained unchanged.

“It’s easy for His Majesty to demand the summoning, but we’ll need a vast amount of time just to construct the necessary magical framework. What an absolute thorn in our side.”



The others followed suit when the pontiff exhaled deeply. Even with the crown prince on their side, they couldn't overturn the king's decree.

"What about the attempted summoning a decade ago? Shouldn't there be records of those preparations to help guide you?" Linus asked.

"Yes, but they're not particularly useful, Your Highness. Fiona, tell him."

Fiona spoke at the pontiff's urging, batting away the hand fiddling with her hair even as she locked her eyes with his indigo-colored ones. "To perform a saint's summoning, first, we must connect the space between this world and another by anchoring a door there. Next, we need to find and trace the magic of an individual suitable to be a saint, then pull her in."

Linus listened attentively to her explanation of the protocols outlined in the documents from ten years ago. When he sat there silently like this, he was so beautiful he could easily pass for a finely crafted doll, and a small part of her couldn't help but admire that.

"Since other worlds are always on the move as well," she continued, "there's simply no way a saint is in the same place she was ten years ago."

After all, a saint was still a person. So it was a given that as long as she had a life, she would be living it, which necessitated tracking her down.

"The magic to connect to the space will need to be crafted from scratch, meaning a suspension of almost all duties of the Temple's priests. Next, to secure the path to the door, we'll need magic knights in large numbers to act as a source of magical power."

Accomplishing anything required energy, but in this case, magical power was the necessary driver. The priests didn't have the magical energy to spare to link the path to another world, fix the door in place, and search for the saint while maintaining the door itself to achieve all that. And the magical energy to do all that was *not* a small amount.

Fiona wasn't well acquainted with the magic knights, but based on what she'd gleaned from the record of ten years ago, none of this would work without a full mobilization of their order.

"As there's no guarantee of completing this in a matter of hours, we'll need to

implement a shift system,” she explained. “Priests will have to stay overnight either in the Temple or the royal palace, in which case special allowances will have to be made vis a vis clothing, shelter, and food.”

“We truly need *that* much energy to pull it off?” Linus sounded more appalled than astonished.

The pontiff responded with a long, drawn-out sigh. “If we try to cut corners by saving energy, the whole thing will come apart at the seams... For example, there would be no point in only summoning the saint’s arm.”

“That...is a fair point.”

The pontiff’s statement convinced Linus. Seeing that, Fiona presented the documents from the saint summoning a decade ago to the prince. The thickness of the sheaf of papers attested to the labors of the priests back then.

“These records make it clear that besides priests and magic knights, a great many other components were also involved, such as magic stones,” she said. “Simply gathering everything we need will cost us tremendous time, effort, and money.”

Linus quickly rifled through the documents and then placed them back on top of the table. This time, he whipped out a comb from heaven knows where and started running it through Fiona’s hair. She couldn’t tell whether or not he grasped the gravity of the situation. So she glared sharply at the beautiful prince, who seemed to be enjoying himself as he tended to her tresses.

“Let me ask you this, Your Highness. Knowing the lengths we need to go to in order to perform the summoning, will we still be forced to go through with it?” Fiona knew it was too late to ask Linus that, but she simply could not find it within her to go along with a project she just didn’t agree with.

“My father loves fish, which is why the priests ten years ago carried out the summoning for a Saint of Sea Bounty,” Linus said.

“Wasting money is the downside of a peaceful and prosperous country, isn’t it?” Fiona sighed.

Normally, speaking like that to the crown prince would be the height of disrespect. But they’d known each other for years, and that fact always made

her relaxed in his company, albeit against her will. Besides, Fiona was well aware that Linus wasn't the sort of person to take offense at every little thing she said and punish her. Though she was ambivalent about the man's obsession with her hair, he was fundamentally kind.

"True...but I have to admit, I'm feeling a bit grateful to Father for handing down this decree," Linus said.

"Why? Do you enjoy fish as well, Your Highness?" Fiona raised an eyebrow.

"That's not it. I won't deny he's probably envious of our neighbor's recent abundant harvest, so he thinks a saint will be in our country's best interest, too."

The king's envy over abundant yields was understandable, as was his desire to use a method guaranteed to make it a reality. However, Fiona needed their liege to look at not just the results but the process. Because the ones who ultimately did all the work were always the folks lower in the hierarchy.

"Frankly, the price-to-performance ratio is terrible," she stated.

"In simpler terms?" Linus asked.

"It isn't cost-effective. In short, it isn't worth the time, effort, or money."

Though Linus listened to Fiona's argument, his hand continued sifting through her hair with no signs of stopping anytime soon. The other clergy members held their tongues, but judging by their occasional pointed glances, they seemed concerned about her.

"There are plenty of other methods to produce bountiful crop yields, such as improving farmland and irrigation practices or research into improving seeds and seedlings," Fiona said. "I don't know the effective range or duration of a saint's power, but considering what comes after, it would be better to find a way that doesn't rely on one."

If all it took for bountiful harvests to continue forever were a single visit by a saint, then Fiona, too, would enthusiastically participate in the invocation efforts. Unfortunately, things didn't work out so well in reality. In the past, other countries had conducted their own summonings of saints, yet no records existed of any such long-lasting effect, so she suspected a saint's powers didn't

last indefinitely.

“Besides, generally speaking, isn’t a saint summoned to offer a ray of hope when a country is in crisis?” Fiona asked.

As far as Fiona knew, nothing on the scale of a calamity had occurred in the past decade, and any damage caused by monsters was manageable. Their country wasn’t at war. In fact, it flourished, so she honestly saw no need for a saint.

“Apparently, floods and poor harvests happened every few years in the past. So I guess the fact that there’s been nothing of note these last ten years means things have calmed down.”

When the pontiff nodded in agreement with Linus’ words, it only validated her opinion that their nation wasn’t in dire enough straits for a saint.

“If you understand, then might you ask His Majesty to give up on this project, Your Highness?”

Even though she knew she was complaining and taking out her frustrations at this point, Fiona still couldn’t keep her mouth shut. And since the pontiff didn’t chide her, he almost certainly felt the same way she did.

“I only recently became the crown prince, so it really isn’t in my power to stop my sire’s boyish heart. Not to mention, he has the prime minister’s full backing, which makes it even more difficult. They’re a pain in my hide, you know.”

Despite his aggrieved sigh, Linus continued playing with Fiona’s hair. She wasn’t sure when he started, but he was currently working on a plait. And he was *very* good at it for a prince, unnecessarily good.

“Your Highness, either be serious or take your leave,” she chided. “Again, why are you even here?”

“Because, Fiona, I wanted to touch your hair. What else?”

The priests in the room sighed with a mixture of exasperation and admiration at the crown prince’s beaming, handsome countenance.

“If it’s hair you seek, I suggest you look to your own. It’s a lovely silver color and the length should be plenty to plait to your heart’s content.”

Seemingly spun from moonlight, Linus' silver hair was in a ponytail at the nape of his neck. She didn't understand why he had to fuss with her hair when he could easily run his fingers through his own and braid it however he pleased. She was sure that style would suit his beautiful visage too, so she wished he would leave her be.

The prince remained unfazed by her peevishness. On the contrary, for some strange reason, he had a broad, happy smile.

"Fiona, I am overjoyed that you think me lovely. But I want to touch these beautiful raven strands." So saying, Linus lifted a hank to his face and pressed his lips softly against it. She stared at him in unwitting fascination, enthralled by the beautiful picture he made. As for the priests around them, they looked more weary than surprised.

And why wouldn't they? The crown prince doing things like touching Fiona's hair and kissing had long since become commonplace to them. Not so much for the ordinary clergy members who had never seen him behave like this, but as the pontiff's aide, Fiona came into constant contact with the high priests in the room, who *were* used to witnessing such a sight on a daily basis.

She snatched her hair back from Linus' hand and scowled at him. "Begging your pardon, Your *Highness*, but no matter how rare black hair is in this country, you really must do something about this obsession of yours." Then, her gaze suddenly shifted down to the strands in her grasp. Fiona's hair was jet-black. An incredibly uncommon hair color in this country, dominated by light shades. "Black hair...it certainly *is* an unusual color, hm?" she said thoughtfully.

"It is indeed," Linus agreed. "At the very least, I hardly see it here or in neighboring nations, so I can't help but be fascinated."

Is that why Linus was so interested in it? In any case, now wasn't the time to think about it.

"And the saint this country's neighbor summoned also has black hair, doesn't she?" Fiona continued her questioning.

"I believe she does."

"And as the pontiff, you're a powerful man, aren't you, Your Holiness? As

well, Your Highness, despite everything, you *are* the crown prince, aren't you?"

"Well, that's putting me in my place... Wait, what are you up to?" Linus had been grinning until halfway through their exchange when Fiona's serious expression made his own stiffen in suspicion.

She paused before answering. "I propose that I become the saint."

"Fiona, where is this harebrained idea coming from?" asked the pontiff.

"Consider what's at stake here, Your Holiness—the energy, stamina, magic, employee benefits, special allowances, and normal duties of the priests *and* the magic knights. I firmly believe this is the only way to protect all of that. Moreover, the budget we'll receive for the saint's summoning can be put to where it's actually needed."

The king might not be aware of the priests' everyday tasks, but in addition to temple maintenance and rituals, they also provided healing magic to the general public. Their ability to heal minor injuries allowed them to accept enough patients to reduce the burden on the physicians in towns and cities. If the doctors had to deal with *all* the wounded and infirm, they would be quickly overwhelmed. Then, there were the prayers priests offered across the nation as wards against monster invasions. The damage would be unimaginable if they couldn't perform this task.

Anyhow, on their own, the clergy's regular duty might seem trivial, but they were surprisingly important. So, calling an indefinite halt to such activities was outrageous. Fiona acknowledged the possibility of nothing bad happening and finishing the invocation unexpectedly fast.

However, the risks were too great in the attempt itself.

"Well, yes, but..."

She understood the pontiff's hesitation. Going through with her plan meant they would have no rebuttal to offer if anyone accused them of breaching the king's trust. Even so, she could *not* obey the royal decree because their ruler was "envious of their neighbor's bountiful yield."

"I can maneuver things so that you lot are in charge of the saint-related budget," Linus offered. "If my father says yes, even the prime minister won't



defy him then.”

“That isn’t what I meant, though... In any case, are you certain about this, Your Highness?”

Linus smiled wryly in response to the pontiff’s question and sifted his fingers through Fiona’s black hair. “It’s a problem we’ll have to face eventually, so we might as well be proactive, don’t you think? Fiona, are *you* all right with that?”

The unspoken implication of his words was whether or not she was prepared to go through with it. Even if there were extenuating circumstances and even with the crown prince’s approval, they would ultimately be disobeying a direct order from the king.

Fiona stared directly into Linus’ indigo eyes and nodded firmly. “Yes. Should the worst happen, please tell His Majesty I deceived you. I don’t mind if you throw me to the wolves.”

Setting aside the crown prince, it would be a shame if the punishment extended to the rest of the clergy. She wasn’t sure how much of the burden she could shoulder alone, but when the time came, she would be more than happy to be used as a sacrificial pawn. But even that wouldn’t be enough to repay the debt she owed to Linus and the pontiff.

Linus’ eyes widened. He exchanged a meaningful glance with the pontiff, then slumped his shoulders.

“As if I could or would do something like that.”

Just when Fiona thought he was going to pat her gently on the head, his single-minded obsession proved her wrong. Instead, he picked up another lock of her hair and kissed it. The sight should have been familiar to her by now, but for some reason, this particular instance felt like a sacred rite.

She could only be in awe that those with extraordinary beauty could look picturesque no matter what they did.

“I’ll help if that’s what you want, Fiona. The question, however, is *what* kind of saint to make you.”

A decade ago, their country failed to summon a Saint of Sea Bounty, while

their neighbor succeeded recently in invoking a Saint of Abundance. In essence, then, they needed to think of a saint who blessed them with something good.

“I have just the thing, actually. One who cuts waste and protects budgets and working conditions—I’ll become the Saint of Cost Performance!”

# Chapter 1: The Gorgeous Crown Prince Loves Black Hair

“‘**THE** Saint of Cost Performance’?”

In the audience chamber, the king blinked repeatedly at Fiona after hearing the explanation.

“But isn’t the girl a priestess?” he asked. “If I recall, she’s the pontiff’s adopted daughter.”

Only a few days ago had Fiona been present at the meeting as the pontiff’s aide, but evidently, the monarch remembered her. Though she hadn’t said a single word in front of him, she had made a strong impression because of her black hair.

“My name is Fiona Everett. I had the privilege of being raised by the pontiff, and for a few years, I have worked as a member of the clergy. I am pleased to announce that through the help of the pontiff and the Temple, as well as His Royal Highness, my being houses a saint’s soul.”

The king had been staring intently at her as she spoke solemnly when her last word made his head cock in confusion.

“...Soul?”

*Of course. Of course, he got stuck on that.*

Fiona took a deep breath, her chest expanding, to light a fire under herself for what came next. “Yes, that’s correct. Summoning a soul is significantly less dangerous than summoning an entire person. Incidentally, it’s also very cost-effective.”

“T-Truly?”

Of course not. But it was crucial that she overwhelm him with momentum right here and now. Once she’d decided to deceive the king, the only thing left to do was tackle the challenge with all her might. The first step involved appealing to the heart of this fanciful man in his prime.

So Fiona did her utmost to bestow a saintly, refined smile.

“This black hair is the proof.”

The king gasped in wonder, but it only baffled her how he could be convinced by her words when he’d literally seen her exactly as she was only a few days ago. Though she was grateful for his naivete at the moment, she nevertheless worried for their country’s future.

“Black hair is indeed rare,” he said. “I did hear that Slava’s saint is a black-haired young girl, too. I see, I see. Your hair is that color because you’re a vessel for a saint’s soul!”

Despite being both perplexed by and grateful for his acceptance of such flimsy reasoning, she returned his smile with one of her own. Fiona wanted to believe that the king’s assumption didn’t fall under the category of her sin.

“That doesn’t sound right.”

The prime minister stared at her skeptically, and his suspicion was very much on the mark. However, she couldn’t back down, not now. Because on her shoulders rested the fate of a hefty budget and the working conditions of many.

“The Temple’s highest priests, including the pontiff himself, as well as His Royal Highness, watched it happen with their own eyes, so there is no cause for concern,” Fiona said.

“Beads of magical light wrapped around her and illuminated her brilliantly. The sight was truly the height of divine beauty.” The subtle sensuality in Linus’ aura, as he spoke in a spellbound murmur, stole everyone’s attention. While she was grateful to him for supporting her story, Fiona was less sure about his dramatic retelling of the fake event.

“Oh, well then, in that case, how fortunate for our country that a pontiff’s aide is capable of housing a saint’s soul.” The prime minister nodded. “I hear the Slava’s saint is causing problems on account of her knowledge and customs are so different from theirs.”

When the prime minister’s expression changed, Fiona found herself feeling sympathetic toward the young woman. Clearly, the true saint was having a hard time in myriad ways. That, in turn, made Fiona wonder how bad the problems

were if rumors escaped Slava's borders to other locales... On second thought, she'd rather not know.

"Indeed, indeed. In that respect, it's perfect for a young woman who's also an outstanding priestess to become a saint," the king said. "Now, child, tell me what a 'Saint of Cost Performance' actually does."

Thanks to the other saint's problematic behavior and Linus' quick wit, the king's interest in Fiona...no, the Saint of Cost Performance, was piqued. This was her chance.

"I will cut waste, protect the national budget, and by extension, the country itself," she replied.

"Huh... Frankly, I don't understand what you said. So, for now, I'm giving the saint control over the funds set aside for any expenses related to the summoning."

"Your Majesty!"

The king curbed the prime minister's protest by raising a hand imperiously. In moments like these, he was the epitome of a commanding monarch, which was exactly why she wished he wouldn't rely on silly notions like saints.

"Right then, Saint of Cost Performance, don't disappoint me."

Fiona bowed her head deeply to conceal her displeasure and relief.

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**FIONA'S** audience with the king ended shortly thereafter, and she was led to a room, the crown prince's office, in the palace. There, she sat on a sofa alongside the space's master, Linus, and the pontiff. On the table was a draft budget for the saint's invocation. The document was so thick it almost made one dizzy simply looking at it.

"Charles, why are you here too?"

Linus said the pontiff's name so easily because they'd been friends for a long time. The age gap made them look more like brothers, but regardless, there was no doubting their close relationship.

"Because I don't want unsavory rumors to crop up by leaving you two alone in

your office, Your *Highness*. Not to mention, the staff here at the palace aren't used to the way you act with Fiona. And above all else, I won't have my daughter in danger thanks to the likes of you, you scoundrel."

"The most important thing right now is this stack, which I need your help with. Reading through documents like these is part of your job as well," Fiona said.

As the pontiff's aide, Fiona primarily dealt with paperwork instead of the practical applications of her role. However, even she had never managed a budget this expansive before. It would take a great deal of time trying to figure out what it all entailed.

"I'd like a specialist to help us with this, so is it possible to ask for a government official knowledgeable about finances?"

"Right, of course, Fiona. I'll get on that straight away. Someone who's good at their job, tight-lipped, and doesn't chase every woman in sight."

The first two requirements made sense to her, but she wondered how the last factored into budget management.

Linus stood up, pushed the pontiff aside, and sat next to Fiona. Then he lifted a lock of her hair to his lips. Though she was used to his antics, his flowing movements and overflowing sensuality made her catch her breath in amazement today as well.

"You really do like black hair, hm, Your Highness?"

"I really, really do. I like *your* hair, Fiona."

"It was useful on this occasion since it's akin to a saintly symbol. Don't you agree?"

"Fiona...while I think you're amazing for brushing aside his outrageous behavior, I also worry about you, my dear."

She heard the pontiff mutter something, but with Linus sitting between them, she couldn't hear her father's words properly.

"I'll verify the details with the official, but the price of this vegetable is too exorbitant," Fiona said. "However high quality, it's strange to charge this



amount. And then there's the alcohol expense. Summoning a saint is only a trial of one's strength, so drinking spirits will put one out of commission for the work itself. What's more, this is too much alcohol, nothing more than an excuse to host a banquet at the country's expense."

"That probably actually *is* for a banquet. I'm almost positive my father planned on hosting a ball."

When Linus pointed that out, Fiona checked the pages before and after and he wound up being correct. The budget should have been strictly for the summoning, but why did it assume that the invocation would be successful, going so far as to host a ball for the saint? The haphazardness of the estimates irritated her.

"Are my eyes playing tricks on me? 'Replacement wigs for those who lose theirs or have them fall off during the ball.' Is this a joke?" she groaned. "Firstly, why is the assumption that the wig will fall off at all, and secondly, why is the palace going to compensate in the event it does? People should be looking after their own blasted wigs."

It confounded her that the national budget was being spent on such unimportant things, yet *apparently*, there wasn't enough to use on important issues, like mending bridges at the royal capital's entrance or temples.

"Who is it? *Who* approved this bizarre budget?" she asked.

"My guess is the prime minister," Linus replied.

"Right...and may I ask what precisely *you* are doing, Your Highness?"

"Combing your hair and massaging it with perfumed oil, Fiona."

Just as he said, a lovely scent wafted from her tresses, but she should really know better than to have this conversation at a critical juncture like this.

"Why?"

"Because I want to."

"Please, *please*, don't tell me that oil is part of the budget for summoning." She asked him, dreading the answer after what she'd seen in the documents. Chuckling, Linus put the comb down.

“Never fear; I paid for it out of my own funds. I had a feeling it would bother you otherwise.”

“That’s neither here nor there. But, using your own funds is also ridiculous.”

“I *have* to tend to your hair, though. It would be a waste not to when it’s so pretty.” So saying, the man had the nerve to kiss her hair like it was the finishing touch to his grooming.

“How many times a day must you kiss my hair before you’re satisfied?”

“Infinity times.”

Fiona had intended to air out her grievances with her rhetorical question, but for whatever reason, she received a mysterious declaration in response. Confused, she looked at the pontiff, but he shook his head in disapproval.

“We are in the royal palace, Your Highness. Kindly think of your station,” he cautioned.

“You know what? You’re absolutely right.”

When Linus nodded like he’d finally seen the light, hope flared briefly in her chest. Instead, he took her hand and deftly pressed his lips to the back of it. He moved so quickly that all she could do was watch.

“*What...*do you think you’re doing?”

“Well, if your hair is a no, then your hand is fine, yes? This is how ladies and gentlemen greet each other, you know.”

“I’m not a lady.”

As the crown prince, *Linus* might be used to kissing women’s hands on a daily basis, but Fiona was just the pontiff’s aide, so as a commoner, *she* had never received such a greeting.

“You’re a saint now, Fiona. That places you above a lady, and in a way, it makes you a being close to God meant to be revered. Naturally, as both the crown prince *and* a man, it’s my duty to worship you.”

As he spoke, Linus moved his lips down to her fingers and stared intently at her. She sighed at the beauty of his indigo eyes, then shook her hand free from

his grip.

“I’ve now learned that Your Highness is surprisingly meticulous about adhering to the script we have created. While I appreciate that, I cannot do my job if my hands are otherwise occupied.”

“That’s good to know.”

Utterly unfazed by her rebuke, Linus brushed his fingers through her hair, then moved close to press his lips there. She glared at him because she certainly didn’t remember giving him permission to kiss her hair either, but he returned her scowl with a beautiful smile.

“What? I’m not blocking your hands.”

“I suppose you’re right. *Technically.*”

Fiona had essentially told him not to hinder her hands so she could work; strictly speaking, he met her demand. Harping on every little thing would only be an annoyance at this point, so she decided to return to the documents. She’d rather not waste any more time, thank you very much.

“In any case, this expense for replacement wigs is unnecessary. In fact, let’s just cancel the whole ball,” she said. “Please inform the relevant officials that extravagant spending will reduce the power of the Saint of Cost Performance. Or whatever reasonable excuse you can think of. What else...”

“Fiona...I really *am* worried you can accept this situation without batting an eyelash,” the pontiff said.

“Please speak up, Your Holiness.”

Since she was busy flipping through the pages, she needed him to speak clearly. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be able to follow the conversation.

“I may be a bachelor, but I’m still a father at heart. *Your* father.”

“Yes, and I think of you as exactly that, Your Holiness. Both you and His Highness are important to me, you for raising me, and him for protecting me.”

Fiona had no memories of her childhood. Linus discovered her like that one day and took her into his protection. And the one who adopted her as his daughter and raised her as his own child was the pontiff, Charles Everett. Ten

years had passed since then, and even at the age of twenty now, she could never forget the debt she owed them.

“Right, I know, but that’s not quite what I...”

“Cheer up, Father.”

“Your Highness, I’d appreciate it if *you* didn’t call me that.”

Linus was completely unbothered by Charles’ glare.

“Someday, I *will* call you that, even if you hate it.”

“I know you will. Moments like these, I wonder if I made the wrong decision back then.” Charles’ deep sigh conveyed displeasure from the bottom of his heart. In response, Linus clapped him on the shoulder with a grin.

“No matter how many times I find myself in the same situation, I’ll never change.”

“God’s honest truth, that... Bah, c’est la vie. I shall protect Fiona until the day she no longer needs it. Anyway, for the love of all that is holy, *please* don’t do anything inappropriate without her consent,” Charles said.

“How long have you known me, man? As if I’d do something so moronic. Right, Fiona?”

“Argh! Stop talking to me already. I keep losing track of the numbers.”

Charles awkwardly chuckled when she traced her finger back to the beginning and began counting again. “Right, at least I don’t have to worry about anything for some time yet. As much as I’d like to offer you other options...I don’t think that will be possible, eh?”

Linus only smiled at Charles’ exhale.

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“**FIONA**, these are the two budget officials I’m assigning to you. The man is Budget, and the woman is Management.”

The two individuals bowed their heads politely when Linus introduced them to her the next day in his office in the royal palace.

“Do you come from a venerable family whose ancestors have been in the

business of budget management for generations?” When Fiona tentatively asked them about their names in a roundabout way, the woman burst out laughing, and the man’s shoulders drooped dejectedly.

“They’re fake names,” Linus answered her with a blinding smile. She was relieved to hear the truth but also confused about the need to use aliases in the first place.

“Perhaps this is a way to protect your identities in case our scheme is found out? If so, I sincerely appreciate your consideration,” she said.

“Even should the worst happen, I would never abandon you, Fiona,” Linus insisted. “No, there’s a different reason I had them use pseudonyms. Because I’d be green with envy if you said theirs constantly.”

“Excuse me?”

Did he really make such a confounding statement with his dulcet voice, or was it simply her imagination?

“I did think about letting the woman keep her real name, but ultimately, I decided to treat them equally.”

For the sake of fairness, both of them had taken on aliases. However, the reason they even existed continued to baffle her.

“Do they have the kind of names that bring misfortune on people when said aloud?” Fiona inquired.

“As if I would ever let anyone like that near you, Fiona.”

“Well, it would make more sense if there were no such names.” Fiona glanced surreptitiously at the two government officials, but they responded by shaking their heads as if telling her not to talk to them. “At any rate, let’s get to work, shall we?”

Though she still didn’t understand, they couldn’t afford to waste time. When she sat down on one of the sofas, Budget and Management seated themselves on the other across from her.

“There was originally a proposal to repair the bridge at the royal capital’s entrance.” So saying, Budget presented a bundle of documents to Fiona. As she

leafed through the pages, she saw any requests related to the bridge, notes on necessary repairs, and the estimated costs for all of it. “Unfortunately, the prime minister requisitioned all the funds for the saint summoning budget, so the work couldn’t proceed.”

“Will this much be enough then?” Fiona handed over the draft budget that had initially been set aside for the “Ball to Celebrate the Saint’s Summoning,” which, incidentally, had officially been canceled. Budget quickly read through the data.

“Absolutely. I believe we’ll even have some left over. However, are you certain it’s all right to use this amount?”

“If the Saint of Cost Performance squanders money, her power will decrease. So, for the sake of the country’s citizens, let’s ensure the money is utilized effectively.”

When she heard a honeyed voice chuckling from next to her, Fiona turned her head to see Linus combing her hair as he laughed. She returned her gaze to the documents since it was business as usual with the crown prince. Budget pointed out how much of a surplus would remain.

“I recommend that the levees around the bridge also be serviced. A few areas have collapsed, which makes it dangerous.”

“You’re quite familiar with the issues, hm? We did, in fact, receive many requests to shore up the embankments.”

The fact that Management sounded so surprised by Fiona’s knowledge made her suspect the other woman was a noble. No wonder, too, since Linus wouldn’t recruit anyone but the best in budget management into his office.

“It’s difficult to notice the crumbling portions from a carriage but very easy to spot on foot. The bridge is vital for transporting goods into the royal capital, so any issues with it could cause significant disruptions to people’s daily lives. For now, we’ll prioritize the repairs to the bridge and levees. May I leave the arrangements of builders and materials to you?” Fiona asked.

“Of course.”

With those issues settled, Fiona moved on to the repairs for the lake’s sluice



gate and maintenance for the highways. Numerous requests had been sent in for those as well.

“The lake is one of the water sources for the capital, yes? However, it’s unclear to me where on the priority list we should place the sluice gate. Is it far from here?” Fiona asked.

“I’d say an hour’s ride on a coach moving at a leisurely pace.”

Which equated to an easy day trip if departing on foot early in the morning.

“Then I shall visit it tomorrow,” Fiona decided.

“Alone, Lady Saint? That’s dangerous.”

“Well, I *have* been put in charge of the budget, so I must work to earn my keep.”

Particularly because Fiona was a false saint. If she didn’t do her job right, it would be unfortunate for the budget she obtained through lying. Then, a hand from next to her stretched toward her head and patted it gently. When she turned her head, she found a gorgeous face and indigo eyes glittering like jewels beside her as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Never fear, ladies and gent, for I’ll be traveling too.”

“And where might you be going, Your Highness?”

“Why with you, of course, dear Fiona.”

Her premonition turned out to be correct. Linus intended to accompany her to inspect the lake. If Charles were her father, then Linus was like an older brother. Regardless, they both worried too much about her.

“A large entourage, including guards, is a waste. I’ll go alone,” she said.

“No.”

He didn’t even hesitate to deny her. That told her he would fret endlessly should she make the trip alone. In the same vein that Charles said the heart of a father beat in his chest, Linus, too, possessed strong brotherly instincts. His protectiveness was one thing when she was ten. But she was already a full-fledged adult of twenty, so she wished he would just trust in her independence

by now.

“Then I’ll ask one of the priests to go with me.”

“That’s even worse. No times two.”

“Why?”

Even though Fiona had acknowledged his concern and compromised with an alternative, he had still rejected her suggestion, and she didn’t understand why.

“A priest is a man, right?”

“Yes.”

“Not a chance in hell I’ll let you be alone with one.”

“Then a priestess would be acceptable?”

A part of Fiona understood that she likely didn’t even need Linus’ permission, but she was in too deep now and was committed to persuading him. An obstinacy that made her very much human.

“A priestess and a saint traveling together? You’re basically begging villains to abduct you.”

Aha, clearly, Linus was worried about her from a perspective of law and order. The highway from the royal capital to the lake was large, so she’d assumed it would be highly unlikely for a kidnapping to occur in broad daylight. However, his objections made her think perhaps he knew something she didn’t about the situation.

“I’ll be fine, Your Highness. One of the priestesses is reassuringly strong, strong enough to break boulders. She’s like an older sister to me.”

“Boulders...” Budget and Management muttered in unison while Linus remained unyielding.

“I’m going, and that’s that. It won’t take long via coach and shouldn’t be interfering with the clergy members’ work either.”

“Hm, you make a good point. But aren’t you busy as well, Your Highness?”

Sometimes, Fiona almost forgot that Linus was the crown prince. He must have had myriad official duties to attend to, so he shouldn’t have the kind of

free time to chaperone her easily.

“I don’t have any work more pressing than you, Fiona.”

“And yet, I know very well your schedule should be packed. Please do your job properly.”

Having known him for so long, she knew his tells when he lied. He most certainly did *not* have the time to loaf around with something like this, which meant her only option was to decline his offer to go with her.

“But—”

“No buts. I repeat. Please do your job.”

Fiona stated the words bluntly without ever taking her eyes off the documents. Linus discerned that pushing her would be meaningless at this point, so he stood up abruptly.

“Fine. I’ll go and finish it all now. Then tomorrow, you and I are going on a date.”

“Correction—we are going on an *inspection*. First though, your work.”

“Oh, how I hate to part with thee! But since it’s for tomorrow, I’ll endure our separation.”

Just when she thought he would pat her head again, she felt a lock of her hair being tugged. Reluctantly, she shifted her gaze and almost instantly saw Linus pressing his lips to her black tresses. His face was an almost literal hairsbreadth from hers. His flowing silver hair and beauty that upstaged even the most lovely woman stared at her from right before her very eyes. He was much closer than she’d expected, and that startled her enough that her eyes locked with his.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Fiona.”

“...Should you find yourself unable to finish your work in time, please contact me as soon as possible.”

“Oh, trust me, I’ll finish on time. You can count on it.”

Linus waved casually at her and left the room. Once he was gone, she felt a bit drained for some reason. Perhaps viewing such exceptional beauty from up

close sapped her strength.

She exhaled, then returned her attention to the documents at hand. When she did, Fiona sensed curious eyes on her. Budget and Management stared at her with frowns, which made her wonder if some problem had occurred.

“Is something the matter?”

“No, not quite. We’re just wondering if...you and His Highness are in love with each other, Lady Saint?”

“Perish the thought. Why would you even ask that?”

“Well, for one, you’re very comfortable in each other’s presence.”

Oh, so that’s what it was. Certainly, it must seem peculiar to nobles to have the crown prince conversing with a person who, although a saint, was a mere commoner.

“I have been in his debt since I was a child,” she said. “He’s akin to an elder brother, you see.”

“Even so, he was quite concerned about your safety.”

“Because His Highness is a kind man, that’s why. I’m also a saint, so it’s only natural he would be extra considerate.”

Despite being a fraud, she insisted on calling herself a saint, and he was likely treating her like he was to keep up appearances as one of the people supporting her scheme. However, Budget and Management’s expressions remained mystified.

“There’s also your hair...”

“Oh, yes, about *that*. Evidently, he likes black hair because it’s a rare color,” Fiona explained. “I personally think his silver hair is much more beautiful... Regardless, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, hm?”

“Perhaps, but I’m not sure it’s normal to touch and kiss hair like that in front of others.” Management offered her opinion nervously, which made Fiona fall into a thoughtful silence. The other woman had a point. Even if he was the crown prince and they were in the royal palace, it might be a tad unnatural to fiddle with someone’s hair in mixed company.

“Then that means...”

“Yes, exactly! Now, do you understand why we asked?!”

“...he doesn’t just like black hair but *loves* it.”

“I...what?”

Until now, whenever Linus had a free moment, he would touch her hair, comb it, play with it, *etc.* Though Fiona had understood his pleasure in her locks, perhaps she had severely underestimated his powerful obsession with her black hair.

“I wonder if his fascination with my hair stems from the fact that the color is the exact opposite of his own.”

The thought brought to mind the saying, “Asking for the moon.” Despite how blessed he’d been in the looks department, it surprised her to learn that even Linus pined for what he didn’t have.

“Ummm, if I may ask for clarification, does His Highness always touch you in such a manner, Lady Saint?”

“A good question. Let me think.” Fiona pondered it. “He’s been busy the last few years with his transition to crown prince, so we haven’t had much contact. But when we met again after so long, he seemed much the same as before.”

“I-I see.”

“That aside, I’d like to confirm a few details before tomorrow’s inspection.” As she flipped through the document, searching for the right pages about the lake, she vaguely heard the other two sitting across from her whispering to each other.

“With all due respect, I feel so sorry for His Highness.”

“I agree.”

Fiona didn’t hear their sighs, masked by the papers rustling.

## Chapter 2: Slow and Steady Wins the Race, Hm?

**FIONA** was the adopted child of Charles Everett, the Central Temple's pontiff. While clergy members often lived together in temple housing, he owned a house away from temple grounds. Though it wasn't much compared to a noble's residence, it was splendid enough for a commoner's home. There, the two lived along with their servant, Ada.

She was technically an employee, but in reality, Ada was like Fiona's mother. If she factored in the age difference between the older woman and Charles, her father, perhaps it would be more accurate to call Ada her grandmother. Yet her cheeriness and youthful spirit far surpassed Fiona's, making her an important pillar supporting the Everett household.

It went without saying that she ate all her meals with the father and daughter. But when Fiona informed them at the dining table about the upcoming inspection at the lake, both Charles and Ada stopped eating, their hands frozen.

"His Highness is...accompanying you? He must be so busy. Well, knowing him, he'll do whatever is necessary to go anyway." Ada sighed softly, then resumed eating, carrying the spoon filled with meat to her mouth. Tonight's dinner was slow-cooked stew. Both the meat and vegetables were tender, and the flavor was above reproach. The more one ate of the exquisite dish, the more revitalized one felt.

Charles' expression was clouded as he stared at Fiona, full of happiness and food. "Don't tell me you two are going alone?"

"Any move he makes automatically means the protection of his guards. Not to mention the coachman, so I very much doubt it will be just the two of us," Fiona reasoned.

"But you *will* be alone with him *inside* the carriage. Ada, what do you think?"

While Charles and Ada discussed the situation with troubled looks, Fiona

emptied her bowl of stew.

“At the very least, he has some degree of self-control. Put another way, it’s possible that she won’t have to endure more than the bare minimum.”

“You’re right!”

Charles suddenly raised his glass triumphantly at Ada’s comment, though Fiona wondered what exactly he was toasting. When Fiona sat down again at the table after refilling her bowl with more stew from the pot, he sighed heavily.

“As it is, they haven’t seen much of each other in recent years since he was so busy becoming the crown prince and all.”

“Based on hearsay, his attitude lately is bordering on sexual harass— I mean, *extreme*.”

“He looks like the perfect, gentlemanly heir to the throne on the surface, so anyone who doesn’t know the truth has no cause to be wary of him. And Fiona, the one who *should* have her guard impregnable against the man, is, well, the way she is. Besides, she’s at the age where we should start thinking about her marriage.”

Ada glanced covertly at Charles, but he couldn’t reply on account of the bread stuffed in his mouth. In fact, she doubted he heard her at all, seeing how immersed he was in eating. Who could blame Fiona or Charles, though, when Ada’s stew was just too darn delicious?

“Right then. The only option here is for me to join you both,” Charles decided.

“Don’t you have meetings scheduled with priests from all over the country?”

Charles froze when Fiona pointed that out. Since she was originally the pontiff’s aide, she knew his entire schedule top to bottom, front to back. And he had *numerous* meetings tomorrow, making it absurd for the pontiff to be absent.

“Gah! I’m a pathetic excuse for a father when I can’t even protect you properly, Fiona. There’s no helping it, then. Here, take this.” He reached into his breast pocket, took out a small sphere, and put it on her palm.

“What is this?”

“Keep it with you in case of emergency. If something happens, throw it. With all your might. Show *no* mercy whatsoever.” Charles’ eyes, glassy with anger, scared Fiona a touch, but more than that, she wondered what exactly he expected to happen.

“Are there bears at the lake?” she asked.

“No. A silver-tongued creature with fast hands who’s much more dangerous than a bear.”

“I see.”

Though she still didn’t understand what he meant, she knew Charles believed every word he said. So, if such a terrifying creature appeared, she would hurl the ball with all her might. In which case, it would be best to keep it somewhere easily accessible.

“Fiona, let me ask you something... What do you think of His Highness?” Charles asked.

Another puzzling topic, but Charles’ gaze was earnest.

“Hm, a very good question,” Fiona replied. “I’d like him to stop sneaking away at the first opportunity and do his job properly. Recently, anytime I visit the palace, he’ll come to see me without fail, which makes me wonder when he even gets any work done.”

While she didn’t know what exactly being a crown prince entailed, no matter how she thought about it, there was simply no way he could have so much time on his hands. And yet, he found her whenever she was in the palace. He combed her hair and fiddled with it relentlessly, enjoying himself. He was loafing around too much, in her opinion.

“That does sound like a problem, eh? Although you’ll be surprised to learn that His Highness doesn’t make any mistakes when it comes to his work,” Charles pointed out.

“Interesting. Oh, another thing is that he’s been much too close lately, physically speaking.”



“Ahhh! Right, right, yes. Well, at the very least, I’m glad you noticed! I wasn’t sure you did.” Charles almost clapped from delight, but why remained a mystery to Fiona. She hadn’t said anything to deserve that over-the-top reaction. “Now, tell us how you *feel* about him. Does he make you happy? Do you dislike him? Does he disgust you? Do you want him to stop once and for all? Be honest.”

After listing mostly negative things, he stared raptly at Fiona, waiting for her answer. She privately thought he should eat his stew, which he’d been neglecting for a while, before it grew cold.

“Well, there *are* times he can be a nuisance,” she said. “Anytime I’m reviewing documents, and he holds my hands, my efficiency plummets.”

“What else?”

“I find it difficult to concentrate when he stares intently at me with a smile.”

“Keep going.”

“I don’t think he needs to sit next to me every time we meet. When he does, even large sofas feel cramped, which annoys me.”

“So...that’s the lay of the land.” Charles’ shoulders drooped. He took a bite of the stew then put his spoon down again. “Ahem. Then, do you hate it when His Highness touches you?”

“No. Both Your Holiness and His Highness are my saviors. You are like a parent to me, and he’s like an older brother, so I don’t dislike him touching me.”

“Hold it right there, Fiona.”

Charles’ sharp tone startled her into looking closely at him. When she did, his eyes shone with more solemnity than they had all day.

“You know I want you to call me ‘Father’ and not ‘Your Holiness’ at home.”

“Oh... Um... Father.”

Once she obediently did as he demanded, Charles clutched his head with both hands and slumped on the table.

“A-Are you all right, Father?”

“Aaarrggghhh! That’s it! I’m going with you tomorrow, Fiona!”

“For goodness sake, please stop making me remind you have a job to do!”

When they started arguing about him accompanying her, Ada sighed softly. “In the end, both the pontiff and the crown prince are birds of a feather.” Having finished her own helping of stew, Ada rolled up her sleeves and set about washing the dishes, a rueful smile on her face.

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“**MORNING**, Fiona.”

Linus was in a good mood when he came to pick her up early the next morning. She remembered something Ada had once said about his beautiful smile. “*Its destructive power can evaporate a mass of ice instantly.*” Now, she understood what the woman had meant. If confronted by something this beautiful, ice might burn up in a flash from shyness.

Fiona knew it was just an allegory, but a part of her wanted to conduct an actual experiment. Did the ice generate the heat because of its shyness? Or did the heat come from the beautiful smile itself and thereby cause the ice to melt?

Now, she *really* wanted to have Linus stand in front of a block of ice and test her theory. However, it would be difficult to acquire one in this season. She made a mental note to ask the priests next time if they knew anyone capable of using magic to produce an enormous ice floe.

“Heed me well, Your Highness. Keep it in moderation. Understood? Mod-er-a-tion. I’m begging you.”

“Quit nagging me, will you, Charles? You know damn well I always control myself.”

“While you seem to be hanging on by a thread in the present, I simply can’t afford to drop my guard considering what I’ve seen of your recent behavior.”

The next thing she knew, the two were having some kind of heated conversation. What did her father even mean by Linus “hanging on by a thread”?

“Your lack of faith in me hurts, Charles,” Linus said. “Sad. Anyway, you know

I'll do my damndest to protect her. After all, Fiona is special to me, hm?"

Did he mean because of her black hair? They were simply going on a work trip to the lake, yet, for whatever reason, he needed to talk about protecting her hair or what have you. Gracious, how important *was* black hair to him?

She had heard salt wind wasn't good for hair, so perhaps a similar natural phenomenon occurred at lakes, too. Then, was that the reason for Linus' stubborn insistence on accompanying her? Yes, that had to be why. Her reasoning satisfied her. Then Ada gently thumped her on the shoulder.

"Ignore those two nitwits and just come home safely, hm? I'm sure you'll be fine with His Highness by your side... Well, never mind that in another way, you're the least safe with him, Fiona."

"What?" Fiona tilted her head to the side.

"In any case, I'm confident everything will work out just fine."

"If you say so...? I guess I'll be going now."

After waving goodbye to Charles with his thunderous expression and Ada with her wry smile, Fiona boarded the waiting coach. She still found it strange that Crown Prince Linus was accompanying her on a simple inspection, and, what's more, they were ensconced together in the vehicle. The carriage wasn't up to the standards he was used to, but from the perspective of a commoner like Fiona, she found it quite well-made. She hardly ever had the opportunity to ride in one anyway, so there was a certain novelty to the experience, and she gazed intently out the window.

"The road is more paved with flagstones than I imagined," she commented.

"That's because this highway sees a lot of traffic since it connects the capital to the lake," Linus explained.

"Oh, yes, I see. Viewed in that light then, perhaps there's room to widen it more."

Despite being properly set with flagstones, the road was only wide enough for a single carriage to traverse it. The highway was wider near the capital, but it likely wouldn't hurt to expand it more the further one traveled away from the

city.

Fiona shifted her eyes from the view out the window to the documents in her hands. She wondered precisely how much the lake's sluice gate had deteriorated. Replacing the whole thing would cost a fair amount of money and require re-examining their budgetary priorities.

"Fiona."

Her head jerked up at his voice so close to her ears. When she did, he stuffed something into her mouth. Round and sweet, it tasted like candy. He could have simply given it to her like a normal person instead of catching her off guard like this.

"It's a waste of your adorable face if you scowl like that," he said.

"I'm not adorable."

She wasn't being humble. She was simply stating the truth. It wasn't that she was particularly ugly or anything, but next to Linus, she might as well be a pebble lying on the roadside.

"All right, then, how about this? Scowls are wasted on your *lovely* face."

"I believe the word 'lovely' more aptly describes a countenance like yours, Your Highness."

That was also the truth. For whatever reason, though, Linus looked at her in surprise.

"Fiona, do you really think my face is lovely?"

"I do. Without a doubt."

"Huh. Then perhaps I'll have you study it carefully and thoroughly."

As soon as he spoke, he moved to sit beside her and leaned in so close she felt his breath on her face.

"What do you think?"

"That you're so beautiful you may no longer be human." While Fiona only expressed her honest opinion, it made Linus tilt his head thoughtfully.

"That...isn't what I expected. Huh."

“Really? What *did* you expect then?” she asked.

“Don’t worry about it. Now tell me what you like about my face, Fiona.”

Even if he asked her that, everything about his features was perfect. Still, she knew in a situation like this, it would be best to emphasize one thing.

“I suppose...your eyes? They glitter like jewels.”

Just those words heightened the brilliant sparkle of his indigo eyes, and she almost wondered if they really *were* gems.

“I see. I must say, your compliments make me happy. Incidentally, the thing I like most about you, Fiona, is—”

“My hair, yes?”

She didn’t even need to ask. Her black hair was the only option. So she answered based on that assumption, but for some reason, Linus responded with a strained laugh.

“Well, you’re not wrong. It’s beautiful and has the luster of silk. But I love your caramel-colored eyes too and your velvety cheeks.”

“My eyes are brown, plain brown... Stop! That tickles!”

As he spoke, he ran his fingers through her hair and brushed them against her cheek. Fiona unconsciously drew back when it became too much. Linus smiled cheerfully, pulling his hand back when she pushed him away.

“Your Highness. Correct me if I’m wrong, but haven’t you been touching me more than you used to?”

“Are you sure about that? I think it’s been fairly normal.”

“For you, perhaps. However, the other clergy members most certainly don’t touch me like this or at all, really.”

If Linus’ behavior was considered normal, then in comparison, the priests and priestesses were practically aloof, even though that wasn’t the case at all.

“Of course they don’t. Neither Charles nor I would allow them to do so.”

“Why are we suddenly discussing His Holiness? Wait, does this mean the clergymen and women hate me so much they would rather not have *any*

physical contact with me?” Fiona gasped.

On top of having raven black hair, she was also Charles’ adopted daughter and his aide in the Temple. Fiona had done her best in her own way until now and had only recently been promoted to her position. Without preferential treatment, either. Despite her efforts, then, could there be people unhappy about her presence?

The thought made her a bit sad, and her head hung dejectedly. She heard Linus move, then his hand gently rubbed her crown.

“Not at all, Fiona. You’re charming and work hard at your job as a priestess. It’s not that they dislike you; they’re simply being careful not to approach you carelessly. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

His gentle voice and smile almost convinced her, but something about his phrasing niggled at the back of her mind.

“In that case, why don’t you as well consider restraining yourself when it comes to touching me, Your Highness?”

“The rules don’t apply to me.”

First, he said touching was normal. Then, he said he refused to allow others to touch her. After that, he said he didn’t need to be careful about touching. Linus’ words were neither coherent nor to the point.

“You may think so, but the pontiff mentioned you, too, are at the age to start thinking of marriage,” she pointed out.

“I suppose I am.”

“So then it would be unfortunate if such behavior on your part causes misunderstandings with your prospective spouse.”

Though he treated her like she was his younger sister, other women might not be pleased by his actions. That is to say, whoever he married would be their country’s future queen, so it would not do to offend her.

“Fiona...who do *you* think I’m going to marry?”

“Well, since she’ll be your queen consort someday, I would wager the daughter of an influential aristocratic family. Although I can’t give you a name.”

She was a mere priestess, so naturally, Fiona had no ties to high society, meaning she didn't know much about the nobility's pedigrees or their daughters.

Linus sighed quietly. "That is the typical way to choose a bride, I guess."

His clouded expression implied his lack of interest in the idea. In his position as the crown prince, he shouldered the burden of the country, so he couldn't possibly choose a wife on his own. Those who stood above others had their fair share of hardships.

"And what about you, Fiona? You're an 'adult' now that you're twenty, hm?"

In this nation, young aristocratic women made their high society debut at seventeen, marking their first step to adulthood. Commoners also deemed their daughters adults when they reached around that age. But since she was young, Fiona had firmly insisted that she would become an adult at twenty.

Though she herself didn't understand why she said such a thing, Linus evidently remembered a child's nonsensical mutterings.

"I...don't think I'll marry," she admitted.

It was none other than Linus who protected Fiona when she lost her memory ten years ago. She had been frightened and confused at the time, and he had held her hand tightly, encouraging her with the words, "I'll protect you, Fiona, so in exchange, stay by my side." To her, he was like a kind older brother.

He had also been the one to give her the name Fiona and later introduced her to Charles, her adoptive father. Her gratitude toward the two of them knew no bounds, and she knew she could never repay them for the debt she owed them.

"I'm exceedingly thankful to you, Your Highness, for taking me into your protection a decade ago," she said. "And to the pontiff as well for raising me. I know I caused you both a great deal of trouble, so I'd like to make up for it by dedicating myself wholly to my professional duties as a priestess."

As he listened attentively, a slight frown wrinkled Linus' brow. Then, a melancholy smile touched his lips. "I see... Oh, look, we're here."

They disembarked from the carriage and gazed upon a vast lake, light

reflecting picturesquely off its surface. Despite knowing it was a water source for the capital, the lake was much larger than she had ever imagined. Fiona gasped unconsciously in wonder.

“Incredible. It’s so beautiful, isn’t it?”

The largest body of water she had ever seen was a pond, but this was on a different scale entirely. The enormous reserve of clear water sparkled like jewels.

“Because this lake is fed by both spring water and water from the mountain. Its clarity is unlike any other lake’s.”

“I’m not surprised to learn this.” She nodded admiringly in response to Linus’ explanation. Not a moment later, several men approached them.

“To think that both the Lady Saint and His Royal Highness would grace us on this day! We are ever so grateful.”

Fiona found herself frowning a little at the deep emotion in their words reflected on their faces as they welcomed her and Linus.

“How did you know I’m the saint?” she asked.

The ball to announce the Saint of Cost Performance had been canceled, and no public announcement should have been made. Even so, wasn’t the spread of information too quick when it had been only a few days since she started calling herself a saint?

“We received a message that the saint would be coming to inspect the sluice gate since the repairs had been postponed for so long.”

While she had requested the lake staff be informed, she certainly didn’t remember mentioning anything about a saint. When Fiona peeked up at Linus, she found him grinning down at her.

“What can I say? This is your first inspection as a saint, Fiona. Though I’m not keen on having a ton of people see you, I also can’t deny a need to show you off.”

It was impossible to decipher everything he said, but she did understand that Linus was to blame.



“Wouldn’t it be more prudent not to reveal too much about the saint’s existence?” she asked.

After all, she was a fake saint, and her primary goal in taking on the mantle was to put a stop to the summoning. She would do her job because she’d been entrusted with control over the budget, but once things calmed down, she fully intended to return to her normal duties as a priestess. So Fiona thought it would be better for her future if the bombastic title of “saint” was kept away from public knowledge as much as possible.

Linus reacted to her whispered question with a troubled frown, then he gently patted her head. “This is a good opportunity. Besides, I can’t keep it a secret forever.”

“Oh, you’re right.”

It made sense when he said it out loud. Despite the ball being canceled, in addition to the king and the prime minister, others in the palace also knew that a saint had appeared. Fundamentally, the existence of a saint was something to celebrate, so there was nothing they could have done about the news leaking.

In short, this now boiled down to “Pretend to be a saint and be prepared for anything because it’s too late to escape stealthily.” Since she’d dragged Linus into her mess and didn’t want to cause him any more trouble, Fiona had no choice but to play the part of a saint to the hilt.

“I’ll be careful. And I’ll do my best.”

“Hmmm, I have a feeling you and I aren’t quite on the same page, Fiona. Regardless, don’t overdo it. No need for that.”

He narrowed his eyes at her newfound determination. That simple, beautiful movement caused a collective sigh of admiration to ripple from the people surrounding them at a distance. The village headman in charge of the lake led them to the sluice gate, and the droves followed them, lagging behind. Clearly, they were deeply invested in the problem. Either that or they had gathered to catch a glimpse of the arresting crown prince.

Whatever the reason, Fiona was currently a saint, and she needed to do her job properly.

“It’s this sluice gate.”

The man pointed at a sluice gate with a thick wooden plank inlaid on a stone foundation. Even from this distance, she could tell the wooden plank was rotting. She was glad the incredibly clear water made it so easy to see.

“The plank is old, but I can’t spot any other issues,” Fiona said. “Is that correct?”

She’d asked for the gate to be opened and shut to determine whether it functioned properly. When she saw it did, she realized replacing the plank was the only thing necessary to solve the problem.

“Indeed. Though it isn’t broken, the wood that dams the water is in bad shape.”

“Understood. I’ll have my staff arrange for an artisan posthaste. Better to have an expert deal with it in case they can discern issues we laymen can’t.”

As she listened closely to the village headman’s detailed request for the repairs, before she knew it, the crowd had swelled and clustered around them. Most people hardly ever had the chance to gaze upon the gorgeous crown prince, so it wasn’t like she didn’t understand their motivation.

Just as the thought ran through her mind, pushed by the crowd, a little boy fell and started crying. When she rushed over to check on him, she saw blood oozing from his cute, tiny knee.

“Please wait a moment.”

Fiona held her hand over his knee and focused intently. Healing magic was fundamental for the clergy. Any of its members could easily heal scratches.

When she visualized the wound healing, particles of magical light appeared and shone around the affected area. The bleeding stopped almost immediately, the wound closed, and the pain faded, too, judging by the fact the boy no longer cried.

“You’re fine now,” she assured.

The little boy nodded vigorously, and his eyes sparkled so brilliantly that no one would have thought he’d been crying until just seconds ago.

“Lady Saint, thank you so much. You really didn’t have to heal him.”

She was a little stumped by the village headman’s awe since any priest or priestess could take care of something as simple as a scratch. So perhaps his attitude had less to do with the healing than the fact that a saint herself took action.

In short, the power of the word “saint” proved to be distressing for an imposter.

“Since I’ve told you all you need to know about the problem with the sluice gate, if you have time after this, we would love to host you...”

Fiona had a hunch this was the same kind of hospitality people extended to her when she did her job as a priestess. She straightened her spine and smiled.

“Thank you for the kind offer, but I only came here today for the inspection, so I’ll be excusing myself now that it’s over.”

“Please, won’t you at least stay for lunch?”

The smile she had tempered in her role as clergy didn’t work on the village headman. She suspected the power of the saint was at play again. All the more reason she couldn’t give in and let herself be treated to a meal.

“I am the Saint of Cost Performance.”

“Cost...performance, you say?”

“While I appreciate the sentiment, as a saint who protects our national budget by eliminating waste, I must return immediately to the capital and my duties.”

“O-Oh...I see.”

“Waste degrades the power of the Saint of Cost Performance,” Linus added. “Of course, the saint herself isn’t the one who makes the judgment; the heavens do. I know it’s absurd that a meal offered with good intentions would weaken a saint. Regrettably, we must decline today.”

“I had no idea your circumstances were so complicated. I, too, apologize for my discourtesy then.”

While the village headman nodded in understanding of Linus' explanation, the coach practically slid to a stop in front of them with perfect timing. Hastily saying goodbye, Fiona boarded the vehicle. Linus entered a moment later, and as soon as he sat down, it started moving.

Through the window, the view of the lake grew smaller and smaller until it disappeared. After some time on the road, she heard a soft sigh from the seat across hers.

"Care to tell me what put that expression on your face?" The voice sounded more worried than questioning, and its owner smiled gently at her.

"What sort of expression am I making?" she asked.

"I would describe it as 'apologetic.'"

"Quite astute of you, Your Highness."

"I better be, considering I've always been watching you, Fiona."

He had indeed looked after her these past ten years despite his royal status. Even after he became the crown prince, Linus remained the same kind person who didn't treat her any differently. Knowing how she felt then, he had stepped in with his supplementary explanation to the village headman. Her head drooped despondently without her volition when she realized how much more trouble she'd caused him.

Instantly, Linus moved to sit by her side and stroked her hair.

"Right now, I'm the Saint of Cost Performance."

"You are."

"I only wanted to reduce the burden on the clergy because I was so fed up with His Majesty's unreasonable request. Thus, I decided to become the saint myself."

"You did."

His hand remained gentle even as he commented to let her know he was listening to her. His understanding and lack of judgment gave her the push she needed to keep talking.

“I chose this path because of the things I wanted to protect, so I don’t regret it. But. But even though I’m not a real saint...hearing others thank an imposter like me...makes me feel ashamed.”

She knew she shouldn’t be telling Linus any of this in the first place. If she was going to complain, she never should have declared herself a saint. What’s more, making the *crown prince* listen to her whining was strange, too.

Yet under the gentle gaze watching over her, the gloomy feelings in her heart escaped through her lips. The fact that she had only taken his kindness this last decade without giving anything in return was another source of guilt for Fiona.

“Charles and I were the ones who advised the king to accept you as the saint, Fiona. You have nothing to worry about.”

Then his hand rubbing the top of her head stopped when Linus peered into her face.

“On top of that, you’re working just like I’d imagine a real Saint of Cost Performance would. Budget management isn’t even part of your real job, but here you are, learning the ropes by consulting with experts and reference materials. I know the definition of a saint depends on each country, but if one definition is a being of pure heart who does everything she can for the sake of others...then you’re unmistakably a saint, Fiona.”

“Even if I eliminated the budget for replacement wigs?”

For some reason, she felt restless under his fierce indigo stare, so her eyes slid away from his. Even so, she sensed Linus’ smile.

“Even then. At least for me, you are unquestionably a saint.”

Unable to resist his powerful words, she faced him again. And just as she expected...he wore a smile even more gentle than she imagined.

Linus was always like this, nestling close as he listened to her woes. However, she couldn’t allow herself to be spoiled forever by an individual who carried the weight of an entire country on his shoulders.

At the moment, the only way she could return the favor to him and her father was to fulfill her role as a saint. A thought suddenly struck her then.

“The world would still be at peace even without a saint, yes?”

“That’s right. I don’t think we need to go out of our way to worship one.”

No saint had appeared in this country since the failed summoning ten years ago. Yet no terrible disasters or wars had occurred and everyone lived quiet lives. Of course, it would be wonderful if a saint’s power gave them bountiful harvests and catches. But even without a saint, their people hadn’t suffered.

“You know, Fiona...if it’s too much, you’re more than welcome to quit this farce.”

Though his tone was light, his eyes were serious. If she said, “I want to stop,” she knew Linus would accept without question. And that was exactly why she shook her head.

“No. I started this, so I’ll finish it.”

No matter the advantages of her choice or having the crown prince as an ally, the reality was that she was deceiving the king. So, for the sake of the people she dragged into her scheme, she wanted to fulfill her obligations properly.

Linus’ intent expression softened. The change felt like snow melting in spring, and watching it happen next to him was a truly beautiful sight.

“Good. That’s the Fiona I love. But I repeat, don’t overdo it.”

“Your Highness, you’re too kind and keep trying to pamper me. This can’t continue.”

“Why? I’m only telling you the truth.”

And with that, he started stroking her hair once more.

“We hardly saw each other these past few years, right?” he said.

“Indeed. I was told you were busy preparing to become the crown prince.”

Linus was the second prince of the Gene royal family. Originally, his older brother, with whom he was quite far apart in age, had been the heir to the throne. But not too long ago, Linus officially became the crown prince.

Even Fiona had heard the unsavory rumors about his brother, but in truth, she didn’t know exactly why Linus had been chosen as the next in line instead. He

might tell her if she asked. Except he was a royal. And not just any royal, but the future king.

Besides, she genuinely admired him for his resolve to take on a position with such responsibility. It would be too crass for an ordinary person like her to ask him something to satisfy her curiosity.

“Well, I won’t deny I faced my fair share of challenges. But it was all worth it for my dearest wish, one I’ve had for many, long years.”

How unexpected. Fiona had assumed that the king or perhaps Linus himself had made this decision because his problematic brother couldn’t be trusted with the fate of the country. So, it surprised her to learn that he had actually *wanted* to become the crown prince. For reasons of his own, no less.

“At long last, I’m finally the heir to the throne. You also turned twenty and made your debut in public as a saint. I think it’s high time I graduate from the role of older brother, hm?”

His words made sense to her. After all, he was in an exalted position as the crown prince. He must also be incredibly busy with his duties. Plus, Fiona herself was an adult now, too. She couldn’t continue being a child, needing to be taken care of like she had been until now.

“I *will* do everything I can. To repay the kindness I’ve received.”

When she looked into his indigo eyes and made her determination clear, for some mysterious reason, he laughed, though it really sounded a bit like a groan.

“I knew it. You and I are definitely not on the same page, Fiona... But it’s fine. Slow and steady wins the race, hm?”

Then he glided a hand down her hair, picked up a lock, and softly pressed his lips to it.

## Chapter 3: Apparently, Gentlemen Don't Drop Kisses on One's Hair

“**THE** repairs on the bridge leading to the royal capital are complete. The work on the levee will take a bit longer. As for the lake's sluice gate, replacing the wood should solve the problem. We received communication that the artisan did the work and a thorough inspection and arrived at that conclusion.”

“Servicing the highway will most certainly take some time. First, the work will begin around major cities linked by the highway. It will be gradually expanded as the flagstones are inspected.”

At Budget and Management's reports, Fiona paused while flipping through documents. She was familiar with all the information since they were the first projects she commenced after receiving control of the saint-related budget, but she was thrilled to hear they were all proceeding well. Just the fact that the bridge and the sluice gate's repairs hadn't been postponed even further due to the ball made becoming a saint worthwhile.

“I hope we can be just as effective when we start on repairs and maintenance at the orphanages. Now, let's see what new requests came in for the budget allocation...”

Fiona also received any new requests to use the saint's budget. However, the rate at which strange ones came in was alarmingly high, so she had to remain vigilant.

“Why? Why is there another estimate for replacement wigs? How many wigs do people plan on losing?”

This time, it was related to the saint greeting the public. Regardless of the occasion, it didn't change the fact that the wigs were unnecessary. Moreover, why was there a plan for wigs when there wasn't even a plan yet for an actual event?

“Rejected. One's wig is one's own responsibility.”



When she dumped the application into the “rejected” box, Budget and Management smiled ruefully.

“Let’s see what’s next. An invitation to a ball for the saint?”

Though Fiona had canceled the ball to celebrate the saint’s successful summoning, evidently, she couldn’t avoid *all* social functions like it forever.

“Cancel any arrangements made for the saint, such as the dress and accessories. As for the ball itself, I’ll discuss it with His Highness.”

“Then you don’t think the ball is a waste?”

Budget sounded surprised, but truthfully, it was a tricky situation.

“In my personal opinion, it’s unnecessary. If it was simply held for the saint, then I would recommend canceling it. Unfortunately, nobles have their own circumstances, yes? I don’t feel it’s my place to interfere in matters outside of clear instances of waste.”

From a commoner’s perspective, the aristocrats’ balls and other such social functions seemed the height of waste. However, many individuals worked hard to host them, and a great deal of money was spent on them, too. They were likely vital for economic development, so it was difficult to determine where the extravagance began and ended. In this case, she definitely needed Linus’ counsel since he was intimately acquainted with things like that.

“Though His Majesty granted me control over the saint’s budget, once things settle down, I plan to return it. Until then, please lend me your aid.”

No matter how much authority one receives or how much one studies, one will never be as accomplished as the experts in the field. The successful repairs of the bridge and sluice gate could be directly attributed to the efforts of Budget, Management, other officials, and craftspeople.

When Fiona bowed her head in thanks, Budget and Management smiled awkwardly.

“Please, raise your head. This is a good opportunity to reexamine what we have been letting slip through the cracks because of ridiculous ‘precedents.’ So let’s cut waste thoroughly, Saint of Cost Performance.”

A knock sounded on the door as the three chuckled, then a servant entered the room.

“His Royal Majesty requests the presence of the Saint of Cost Performance. Please make your way to the audience chamber at once.”

Those words immediately brought a chill to Fiona’s spine. Perhaps he had discovered her fraud and would denounce her. And she certainly wouldn’t be let off with a light punishment, considering she had deceived the king himself.

She walked nervously to the audience chamber. When she arrived, several people were there already.

The king sat on his throne, flanked by Linus on one side and the prime minister on the other. It was too late to turn back now, so she steeled herself as she stood in front of the king and bowed her head deeply.

“Forgive me for the sudden summons, Saint of Cost Performance.”

As much as he was a daydreaming man in his prime, he was still the king. She could feel her face stiffening because one word from him and it would be off with her head.

“I have only one thing to say... Superb!”

“Eep!”

His unexpectedly booming voice made her shriek in surprise. She hurriedly pressed a hand to her mouth to contain the small sound.

“The other day, rain fell in a deluge on the mountains, and though the river rose high, unlike before, there was no flooding in the settlements downstream. No casualties or damage either, the crops are safe as well, and I hear tax revenue is up. All thanks to you, Saint. What a truly wondrous thing cost performance is!”

The king’s good-humored compliment only made Fiona want to tilt her head in confusion. In terms of outcome, she had just realized that all the structural repairs she’d asked to be implemented didn’t result only in preventing disasters and reducing damage. No, there was an additional effect. Without damage, the crops grew, and good yields produced higher tax revenues.

It felt like cost-effectiveness was no longer directly in play, but the king was so happy she couldn't voice her concerns. Besides, Linus must be well aware of that, so why didn't he say anything?

"And that is why I'd like to give you control over other budgets too, Saint of Cost Performance."

"What?!"

The prime minister shouted the word in unison with Fiona.

"But, Your Majesty! She may be a saint, but she's a novice in budget management. I really must object to your granting her more authority than she currently possesses."

The king's expression remained unchanged despite the prime minister's extremely reasonable opinion.

"This is just the natural course of action in light of what she's already achieved as a saint. We must believe in the saint's power, Prime Minister."

The sparkle in the king's eyes, unbecoming for a man his age, undoubtedly stemmed from whatever dream he saw in the saint's power. Clearly, this country was willing to surrender its entire budget to an amateur if it meant bringing flights of fancy to life. As a citizen, Fiona couldn't help but wish dearly for Linus' early accession to the throne.

"Well, I suppose I can't rightly oppose considering the saint's accomplishments... However, if she loses her saintly powers, then financial control will return to us, yes?"

"That's a given."

Fiona, who shuddered in fear of the combined might of the king in a good mood and the intangible power of *je ne sais quoi*, took no notice of the prime minister's words. Even if she had heard, she wouldn't have cared. And yet, one among them *did* pay attention. Smiling thinly, Linus stared fixedly at the prime minister.

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"HELLO, Lady Saint."

When Fiona entered the palace, Management walked briskly over to her with a smile as she carried several books. Originally, the relationship between herself and the government officials had been strictly professional. But the more time she, Budget, and Management had spent together going over the country's finances, the friendlier they had become. Now, she was at ease with them.

"We don't have any meetings scheduled today, so can I assume you're here to do research?"

"Yes. Since we received authority over other budgets, we can address the issues at the orphanages. However, I'm unfamiliar with the situation, so I thought I should start by researching their circumstances."

Though they had multiple requests related to the orphanages, including repairing the buildings, she couldn't approve them without question. She needed to look at the numbers and scale of the requests and then determine what was actually necessary. Fiona didn't agree with the loudest voices winning while those who couldn't speak up were left to their own devices.

As she walked through the palace with Management, she heard lively voices. When she turned her head toward the source, a throng of people was a short distance away. Their vividly colored dresses told her they were noblewomen, but what exactly were they doing?

"Miss Management, what's happening over there?"

Fiona asked her on account of Management's long employment in the palace. The other woman glanced at the gaggle of women and nodded.

"Oh, that. His Highness is likely training the knights."

Though her answer was dismissive, Fiona felt like she'd heard something bizarre.

"His Highness is training the knights... Does that mean he can use a sword?"

Even if he could, the knights were the ones who should be protecting Linus since he was the crown prince. So it made no sense that *he* was training *them*.

"You didn't know, Lady Saint? Then, would you like to take a look?"

No meetings today meant Fiona wasn't pressed for time. Above all else, she

simply couldn't reconcile the idea of the kind Linus she knew wielding a blade. So she and Management headed to observe the training.

Many knights were clashing swords with each other in a large, fenced-in area. The aristocratic women in their flamboyant dresses gathered in one corner outside of it. When Fiona looked in the direction they stared, she found their attention focused on one person. Likely Linus. But everyone on the training ground wore the same helmet and breastplate, so she couldn't tell if it was actually him.

"It's not possible to differentiate between them like this."

One of the young ladies who heard her strode imperiously toward Fiona. Flaxen-haired and wearing a deep crimson dress, she glared at Fiona and sighed dramatically.

*"Please* tell me you're joking when you say such words?"

"Huh? I am not, in fact. They're all wearing the same armor."

When she answered honestly, she received a deep exhale in response.

"Those sublime movements, the aura of nobility emanating from him, the glimpses of lustrous silver hair through his helmet. A glance is enough to tell *anyone* that is His Highness, yes?"

In the face of such an exasperated remark, Fiona turned and looked again. Sure enough, she caught a flash of silver hair through one of the individuals' helmets.

"I don't believe I've ever seen you before. Based on your attire, I'm guessing you're a priestess? Let me tell you there is no greater happiness than watching His Highness wield his sword."

The young lady informed her proudly. Though her self-satisfied attitude perplexed her, Fiona wondered if all of the noblewomen had come here for the express purpose of watching Linus. Shrieks of excitement echoed around her. The battle they had focused on ended, and the person, probably Linus, sheathed his sword.

"His Highness never ceases to amaze. Another string of sweeping victories

today.”

In contrast to the spellbound young lady in front of her, all the other aristocratic women clustered around Linus. Fiona made a surprised sound seeing roughly twenty women line up eagerly to hand him towels, drinks, and all manner of things.

“Goodness, he’s very popular, isn’t he?”

To have so many noblewomen dress up in their finery this early in the morning to observe him, squealing merrily the whole time. The beautiful crown prince was more popular than Fiona had imagined, and she couldn’t help but be impressed.

“Of course he is. His Highness cuts a dashing figure, his background is flawless, he’s kind and gentlemanly, *and* he excels with the sword. Not only is he beyond reproach, he is *also* unattached and without a fiancée to boot, which literally makes him the perfect man.”

“I-I see?”

Although Fiona found the girl’s impassioned speech a bit off-putting, she more or less understood what she meant.

“You’re not going to join them?”

The young lady smiled smugly in answer.

“Of course I am. However, it is beneath me to behave so uncouthly like *them*. Once they calm down, I’ll make my move, which should give me a chance to speak to His Highness as well.”

Fascinating. It seemed a variety of tactics existed. Impressed again, Fiona looked in Linus’ direction.

Black hair was unusual in this country for good reason, that being the fact that a majority of the people here had hair in light shades. Yet Linus’ silver hair stood out even amongst such hues. The way the sun reflected brilliantly off it, combined with his natural beauty, created a truly lovely sight.

No wonder the daughters of nobility lost their heads over him. Fiona nodded in understanding.

“Um, right then. Shall we go?”

She addressed Management after bowing politely to the young lady, whose eyes bounced back and forth between her and Linus in surprise.

“What? You’re not going to speak to him?”

“There’s quite a long line of ladies waiting to speak to him, not to mention I don’t have any documents for him that require his immediate attention.”

“I didn’t mean work...”

“Fiona!”

Before she even had a chance to register the dulcet voice projecting smoothly from a distance, Linus jogged over to her. Though he had taken his helmet off, he still seemed like a stranger to her in his unfamiliar knight’s armor.

“What are you doing here? I thought we didn’t have any meetings today?”

“We don’t. I just wanted to look through some reference materials.”

“Is that right? Then let’s go together.”

The smile Linus gave her was overpowered by the noblewomen behind him staring daggers at her.

“Your Highness, perhaps an introduction is in order...?”

He finally noticed the young lady, her expression stiff. Linus, being Linus, was also unfazed.

“Oh, right, none of you know each other. This is the saint, Fiona Everett. Fiona, meet the various daughters of the aristocracy, including Prime Minister Mulligan’s.”

At the word “saint,” the noblewomen’s gazes transformed from hostile to baffled.

“Did he just say ‘saint’...?”

“Impossible. The real thing?”

“And there you have it, ladies. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to show the saint around.”

That last part rekindled the enmity sharply in their eyes. It brought to mind the phrase “a bed of nails,” except all Fiona could think was that a band of said beds was about to attack her.

“I’m fine, thank you. Please tend to your guests, who have been waiting so long.”

Panicked, Fiona pleaded with him, which only made him smile forlornly.

“Ahhh...how cold the saint is to me.”

He wound his fingers around a lock of her hair and brought it to his lips. As soon as he did, shrill screams erupted all around them. A few dropped the things they held while others covered their mouths in shock. Even the young lady who’d spoken to her stared in dumbfounded amazement.

He had only kissed her hair like usual, so why was everyone reacting so strongly? Fiona didn’t know what to do. As she grappled with the conundrum, Linus, the source of the chaos, gently tugged her hand and held it in his.

“Off we go then.”

All smiles, and the *only* one smiling, he led her away. She couldn’t resist him when he was like this. So Fiona left with him.

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“**TWO** orphanages submitted applications requesting repairs. This one is primarily concerned with the deterioration of the outer wall...”

As soon as they reached the office, Linus left, telling her he would return after changing into a fresh set of clothes. So, despite her and Management in the room, not a word from the woman’s explanation stuck in her brain.

“Um, excuse me, but I have a question.”

“Of course. Is it about the material the wall is made of?”

“No.”

“Then are you inquiring about the ongoing highway infrastructure maintenance?”

It was only natural she’d ask Fiona about these topics since they discussed



them often, but none of it was on her mind. If anything, she found it odd that Management wasn't bothered.

"No, about what happened earlier."

"Ah, I see. You're referring to how you didn't know the degree of His Highness' popularity, Lady Saint?"

"That's part of it. What I want to know is why everyone was so shocked."

Until now, Management had been poring through the documents while answering Fiona's questions. Now, she froze. A beat later, she ever so slowly raised her head to look at Fiona. The halting speed reminded her of a rusted, unused machine coming back to life.

"Please...don't tell me you haven't noticed at *all*?"

Fiona only stared at her in blank confusion, not knowing what she was referring to. So Management put down the documents on the table and sighed quietly.

"First, please confirm something for me. Are you and His Highness lovers?"

"No."

Management sighed again at Fiona's immediate reply.

"Obviously, it goes without saying that His Highness is a gentleman to his bones. He behaves courteously toward all his subjects, women included."

Aware of that, Fiona nodded in agreement.

"Despite being the crown prince, he doesn't misuse the authority of his position and treats everyone equally. A gentleman who doesn't discriminate against anyone."

Though she wondered why Management said the same thing twice, albeit phrased differently, she only spoke the truth, so Fiona nodded again.

"Now, with that established, let me pose a question to you. Would a gentleman place his lips on a woman's hair?"

"Huh?"

While the sudden question surprised Fiona, Management's serious expression

forced her to think about it diligently.

“Gentleman.”

A gentleman was a man of social standing who was sincere, knew his manners, and behaved impeccably. So, would a gentleman touch a woman’s hair and kiss it...

“H-He wouldn’t...?”

Based on the direction their conversation was going, a gentleman wouldn’t press his lips to a woman’s hair, which would mean Linus wasn’t a gentleman. However, Management had repeatedly emphasized that he *was* a gentleman. In short, that might signal Fiona’s misunderstanding of the concept of “gentleman,” yet when she thought about it properly, no other men she knew, including Charles, behaved like Linus.

Even so, she still felt like his peculiar actions didn’t *not* make him a gentleman.

“Wait, what? Huh?”

When her mind became confused about what constituted a gentleman and non-gentleman, Management stared at her sympathetically as if she understood.

“Lady Saint, if I may be so bold as to ask. Have you had a paramour until now?”

“No.”

“I knew it!”

Management nodded much more vigorously than Fiona’s answer warranted. It made her wonder if people really thought her prospects for love affairs were so low.

“Then tell me about the men in your life.”

“The pontiff, His Highness, the priests... I’d say that’s about it.”

“And does His Highness kiss your hair in front of them?”

“He...does.”

“I knew it!”

Management exclaimed again, almost cutting Fiona off in her excitement. Then, she rested her hand on her chin and looked down thoughtfully.

“Hm, hm, I see. Through his actions, he not only eliminated potential rivals but also discouraged them. A very logical strategy indeed.”

“Then...am I correct in thinking that it *isn't* normal to be kissed on the hair?”

At Fiona's timid question, Management slowly lifted her face and stared at her.

“It's one thing for lovers to fawn over each other in private. But seldom would they do such a thing brazenly in public. To say nothing of the fact that this is the crown prince we're discussing. A single word from him, a glance, is enough to make a noblewoman swing from hope to despair.”

“But he's done the same thing, even in this room—”

He touched and kissed her hair even in his office. Though it wasn't a public space, Budget and Management had nevertheless been in the room with them.

“Indeed. An unbelievable sight before our very eyes. To think that His Highness, the epitome of a gentleman, would sexually hara...I mean, flaunt his sexual allure... No, scratch that, express his love. And since you accepted his behavior like it was the most natural thing in the world, we frankly assumed you two were lovers.”

“He's always been like that, though, which is why I thought it was normal.”

She had no idea it wasn't normal to touch someone's hair, much less kiss it. What a shocking truth.

“What precisely do you mean by ‘always’?”

“Since we met ten years ago.”

“He's acted in such a fashion with you for a decade, yet you aren't lovers. Come now, Lady Saint, doesn't that strike you as bizarre?”

“Well, now that you mention it...”

Fiona had never thought about it before. But now, as she compared his

behavior against what society at large deemed normal, she was forced to accept the reality.

“Then this means—”

“I wonder what we’re talking about, hm? Might I join?”

The door opened, and the man with the marvelously melodious voice entered, heading directly to Fiona’s side, where he sat down. He looked just as dignified in his princely raiment as in the knight’s armor he’d worn earlier. The deep green of his jacket enhanced the silver of his hair, giving him a doll-like beauty.

“I learned how popular you are, Your Highness.”

Linus’ eyes widened a bit at Fiona’s announcement. Then, just as quickly, a smile bloomed on his face.

“Well, part and parcel of being the crown prince, eh? Now, Fiona, tell me what *you* think of my popularity.”

“In a word, amazing.”

When she answered him excitedly, he watched her with an indulgent expression.

“Oh, I also learned that it isn’t normal to kiss another’s hair.”

“Did you, now...? Isn’t that...*fascinating*?”

Still smiling, Linus turned his eyes to Management, who let out a small scream and hurriedly corrected her posture.

“P-Please forgive me! I had no ill intentions whatsoever.”

His smile didn’t waver as he nodded, then he focused on Fiona again.

“Well, it’s true. Normally, you wouldn’t do something like that in mixed company.”

“Learn something new every day, hm?”

“Indeed. But I’ll keep doing it to you, Fiona.”

“Why?”

Just when she thought the problem was resolved, he threw her for a loop and confused her once more. If social convention dictated that “gentlemen don’t kiss one’s hair,” then the matter was settled, wasn’t it?

Linus chuckled wryly at Fiona’s perplexed frown. Then he scooped a skein of her hair and planted his lips on it. Management swallowed her excited shriek at his natural flowing movement and aura teeming with sensuality.

“Guess the answer, Fiona.”

Fiona blinked several times under the intensity of his gorgeous indigo eyes.

“All right. Because the people of this country love black hair for its rarity!”

He grinned in amusement when she informed him proudly.

That was the conclusion she’d drawn based on her conversation with Management. Linus was a gentleman. Gentlemen didn’t kiss people’s hair, but he did. That meant he loved black hair far, far more than everyone in this country combined.

All Linus could do in the face of Fiona’s confidence was chuckle dryly and shrug.

“I guess you’re not wrong. I *do* love your raven tresses, Fiona.”

“In my opinion, your silver hair is much more beautiful, Your Highness.”

Earlier in the training ground, the sun reflecting off his strands made his hair sparkle brilliantly. And even now, in this room, it looked bewitching, like gleaming silver thread. It wasn’t that Fiona hated her hair; it was simply that she thought the luster of his made it overwhelmingly more beautiful than hers.

“Would you like to touch it?”

Linus grabbed a handful of his hair and presented it to Fiona, who nodded. Opportunities like this to study it were few and far between, so she jumped on the chance. When she stroked with her fingers, the strands were velvety soft, a real pleasure to touch. Now she understood why he constantly toyed with hers.

“It’s so smooth and feels wonderful, hm?”

“Not as nice as yours, though, Fiona.”

“That’s because you’re always applying scented oils to my hair, Your Highness. But I always thought yours was naturally better than mine, and I was right.”

“He applies oil to her hair...”

She heard Management mutter something to herself, sounding somewhat dismayed, and Fiona vaguely wondered why.

“Not at all. This black stuff is incredibly lovely.”

Just as a smiling Linus kissed her hair again, the door opened.

“Pardon the intrusion! I’ll come back later!”

The man opened his mouth so wide she feared he would unhinge his jaw. While shouting the words, he scrambled frantically to shut the door.

“Or you could just state your business now.”

“As you wish, Your Highness!”

The man released the handle and bowed his head deeply.

“We received a report of an abnormality at the lake. The Lady Saint’s presence is requested immediately.”

“What exactly happened?”

“A part of the water has turned an unnatural color.”

The beautiful clear water they’d seen? How? She needed to check it right away; otherwise, it would be a disaster if the water became unusable since the lake was an important source of the liquid.

“Understood.”

“Fiona, wait.”

She stood up at once to make the necessary preparations, but Linus wrapped his hand around hers and pulled her back onto the sofa.

“While I agree that the change in the lake is a problem, we can dispatch someone from the Temple to deal with it.”

“About that, Your Highness... We received this missive asking specifically for

the saint.”

A slight frown marred Linus’ brow as he read the paper the man gave him.

“Huh... Interesting.”

Linus’ voice was unusually cold. Flustered by it, Fiona turned toward him.

“Your Highness, I too am a member of the clergy and therefore capable of purification. I should be able to handle it myself.”

“If it’s something a neighborhood priest or priestess can deal with, it begs the question why they’re specifically requesting the saint. Hm... Fiona, what do you think?”

“I’ll go, of course. Even should we discover that my power alone won’t be enough, we’ll at least be able to determine how many people are necessary to solve the issue.”

Though Fiona lacked experience in the field, as an administrator in the Temple, she was quite well-versed in sending out personnel. In any case, right now, they needed to prioritize investigating and solving the abnormality.

Linus sighed and put the piece of paper down on the table.

“Fine, we’ll do it your way. Prepare the horses.”

The man bowed sharply, turned on his heel, and left the room.

“Horses? Your Highness, don’t tell me you’re going too?”

“Since time is of the essence, a horse will be faster than a carriage. Besides, you don’t know how to ride, do you, Fiona?”

Just as he said, she had no experience with riding, and it would be too difficult to learn now, so Linus’ suggestion was correct in this emergency.

“But it doesn’t need to be you, Your Highness.”

“No.”

“You must be terribly busy, so I can ask someone else.”

“Absolutely not. I forbid it.”

The steel in his voice didn’t suit the gentle smile on his face. Nevertheless, she

gave in because she couldn't think of any other argument. Accepting her defeat, Linus softly squeezed her hand.

"Now that that's settled, let's get a move on."

"Um... Yes, of course."

Either way, they were going to the lake, so she might as well be gracious and accept Linus' offer of a horse to take them.

"If not lovers, then what in the world *is* your relationship..." With Management's mumble trailing after them, Fiona and Linus left his office.



## Chapter 4: I Crushed the Source

**WHEN** she exited the palace, four horses were out front, with three already bearing riders who looked like knights. Sitting astride a white horse sporting a beautifully groomed mane, Linus was every inch a prince from a storybook. Just as Fiona admired the fact that a beautiful person remained beautiful no matter what they did, she noticed the sword hanging from his waist. Despite the three knights accompanying them, she wondered if he needed to carry a weapon as well.

“For caution’s sake.”

Linus told her with a smile, noticing where her gaze rested. Fair enough. No harm in being careful, even though they were traveling in broad daylight.

He beckoned for her to come closer, and she obeyed, stepping on the footstool below the white horse. She tried to mount the horse in one go, but the distance to the horse’s back was unexpectedly far, and she struggled to climb up. She felt embarrassed, considering how gallantly Linus had straddled the animal.

Just as Fiona was about to make another attempt, he reached down, lifted her, and sat her in front of him. When she jerked her head up in surprise, her eyes met his, and he smiled at her.

“Th-Thank you very much.”

“You’re very welcome.”

His physical strength wasn’t a surprise since swordsmanship required it. She simply hadn’t expected him to swing her up like she weighed nothing. Moreover, she’d never been held like this before, which probably explained why his arms enveloping her as he held the reins felt strange.

“And we’re off. Do exactly as I instruct on the road and at our destination. Don’t drop your guard.”

“Yes, sir!”

The knights responded in unison to Linus’ sharp, commanding voice. Fiona thought this level of security was a bit much for a simple investigation of the abnormality at the lake. Then again, perhaps this was normal. Though they’d gone by coach last time, it was possible she just hadn’t seen the knights then.

Once the horse started walking, she swayed more than she anticipated. She sat firmly in the saddle and held on tightly to it, but even then, she had a difficult time holding her posture straight. When the horse picked up its speed to a trot, she leaned dramatically to one side and would have fallen off if not for a hand reaching up to grab her shoulder and support her.

“Are you all right? It’s tough if you’re not used to it, hm? Fair warning: I’m going to spur the horse to go faster now. Hold on to me.”

So saying, Linus wrapped an arm around Fiona’s waist and pulled her snugly into the cradle of his body. Now that she essentially had a backrest in the form of, well, him, the rocking subsided, and sitting astride became markedly easier.

“Thank you very much, Your Highness.”

“If you get scared or tired, tell me. Don’t keep it in.”

“I will. But don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

If anyone was having a rough go of things, it was Linus because he had to deal with the baggage that was her. She was determined to try her best to remain upright in the saddle under her own power. Focusing, she straightened her spine.

“...Good girl.”

Fiona didn’t even have time to wonder if he was laughing behind her before something pressed against her crown. She suspected he had kissed her hair as usual. Even though they were outside with his knights. More proof of his passionate obsession with black hair.

When she snuck a glance at their escorts, confusion filled their eyes. That told her Linus, the gentleman, was behaving most ungentlemanly. Though she disapproved because he was the crown prince, she decided to let sleeping dogs

lie as their top priority right now was reaching the lake.

Just like he'd warned her, the horse broke into a gallop, which shook Fiona in the saddle. In the beginning, she had endured it to the best of her ability through muscle strength, but now her energy was flagging from bracing herself using an unfamiliar method. Whenever she bumped into Linus, he would help her regain her posture with his hand supporting her shoulder. They repeated that several times before she heard a small sigh above her head.

"It's dangerous for both of us if you keep squirming like this, so hold on to my arm."

"But—"

But wasn't it more dangerous if she clung to his arm holding the reins, restricting his freedom of movement? Having said that, at this rate, in the not-too-distant future, she would definitely fall off, which would cause even more trouble for him.

While she dithered, Linus curled his left arm around her waist and pulled her tightly against him.

"I'm worried about you, so let me hold you like this."

When he murmured directly into her ear from behind, his breath tickled, making her shoulders twitch involuntarily.

"But won't this tire you out, Your Highness?"

The ride was easy for Fiona, with her backrest using his arm as a safety belt. Not so for Linus, however. He held onto the reins with one hand even as he supported her with his other arm.

"I'm fine. Being with you isn't tiring at all. In fact, it's quite fun. So much so I'd love to stay like this forever."

"Ah, I see now. It's because you love riding, hm, Your Highness?"

Why wasn't she surprised to learn he enjoyed long rides, even troublesome ones like this? It made sense in hindsight, considering how seldom he had the chance to leave the royal palace because he was busy as the crown prince. She felt sorry for the knights forced to accompany them on this occasion, but she

hoped they would forgive the two of them.

Their escorts' eyes were so narrowed that they looked almost closed. Fiona wondered if that was because their attention was focused on the road ahead. Impressed, she realized trained knights truly were a different breed.

"Captain, uh, about..."

"Don't look, don't listen. Pretend they're an illusion. One wrong slip of the tongue, and we'll all lose our heads."

She saw them discussing something, though she couldn't hear them properly because of the hoofbeats as the horses raced through. They were likely having a meeting of some sort about their duties.

Thanks to the Linus safety belt, her ride on the horse became quite stable, and before long, the lake came into view. The sunlight sparkled blindingly off the water's surface, making it hard to believe something was wrong. At the very least, it seemed like the problem hadn't turned into a big one, which was a small blessing.

"Fiona, wait a moment."

Once they arrived, Linus swiftly dismounted, then, smiling, reached out to Fiona with both hands as she remained seated atop the horse.

"Um, I think I should be fine getting down."

She was a bit high off the ground, but all she had to do was get down. Besides, it was one thing for him to lend a hand, but the way he held both arms out silently demanded she leap into them. Or was that her imagination?

"This was your first horse ride, *and* it was a long one. I'm almost positive your body will be feeling the effects already."

"Is that how it works?"

Fiona gave in and took his hands. She jumped down, but her knees buckled the moment she landed as if she had lost all her strength. However, Linus' hands scooped her up faster than she could tumble to the ground, then held her securely in the circle of his arms.

"See, I told you so. Using muscles you normally don't will exhaust you much

more than you think.”

“Th-That gave me a fright. I apologize, Your Highness.”

If he hadn't pulled her close to him, she would have fallen unceremoniously on the ground. Contrary to his appearance, both his help getting her down and lifting her up earlier attested to his physical strength.

“Um, right then. I'm fine now, so you can let me go.”

“Hmmm? Just a little longer like this.”

His words put her in a bind since she was already standing upright, and they needed to investigate the lake. Yet Linus kept his arms wound around Fiona. Troubled, she looked up only to find him grinning down cheerfully at her.

“I can't conduct an investigation like this!”

She pleaded desperately with him, but his smile didn't waver.

“Captain...*please*, this is the perfect chance for a joke.”

“Don't look, don't listen. Pretend they're an illusion. One wrong slip of the tongue, and we'll all lose our heads.”

She distantly heard the knights saying something but couldn't make out the words from within Linus' embrace. At almost the same time she broke free of his grip, the village headman appeared and immediately led them to the lakeshore.

From there, she saw the clear, beautiful water had turned stagnant and black. It wasn't the transparency of dropping paint into the water but the murkiness of mixing viscous oil instead. The color alone looked sickening, making it impossible to believe it was harmless.

“It happened yesterday without warning. We asked a local priest to purify it, but the attempt didn't go well.”

Then, a man dressed in priest's attire standing near the edge of the water noticed them and rushed over to them.

“Secretary Everett! No, wait, you're a saint now, aren't you? Thank you so much for going through all the trouble to come here.”

“You were in the Central Temple before, yes? Brother Miller, was it?”

“Yes, I was. I’m honored you remember me.”

Fiona worked in the Central Temple as an aide to the pontiff, so her remembering his name and face meant Miller was an excellent priest. Which made the fact that he’d been unable to deal with the problem all the more concerning.

“Please explain the current situation.”

Miller nodded and led them to the water’s edge.

“As you can see, the water has turned dark and cloudy. The villagers first noticed the change yesterday morning. I arrived here just past noon.”

“How far has it spread?”

“It was like this by the time I arrived, from the other side of the wharf to this part of the shore.”

In short, the abnormality remained concentrated within the same range. That in itself told her it wasn’t spreading at an alarming rate.

“Did you inhibit the spread with a cleansing ritual?”

“Correct. The purification itself works, momentarily reverting the water to its original clean state, but then it immediately goes back to this. I’ve been doing all I can to stop it from spreading more. I determined we’ll either need several clergy members to handle this or a high priest.”

Fiona agreed with Miller’s judgment, but there was one thing she didn’t understand.

“Then why didn’t you simply request more? I believe that would have been faster and more efficient than summoning me for my opinion.”

“But I *did* request the dispatch of several clergy members... I just assumed you were here along with them. Is that not the case?”

Miller seemed genuinely surprised. That only deepened her confusion. Because they had definitely received a request for the saint only.

“Perhaps there was a miscommunication at some point... Regardless, our first

priority here is verifying the situation. Would you continue purifying as you have until now?"

In any case, she and Miller were here and needed to do what they could.

The priest walked to the shore and folded his hands in prayer. When he did, the murky, stagnant black water gradually became clear. A short time later, the water around them was pristine again, but the moment Miller stopped praying, the darkness encroached again.

Just like he said, while the purification had an effect, it didn't solve the problem.

"The black water is spreading in a fixed direction, which means there must be something at its source."

They followed the trail of the stagnant water to its possible source and discovered it ended near the wharf. When they searched for where the color was the darkest, they found a tiny bag fastened to one of the pillars. The bag, dripping with some sticky black substance, was dirty and smelled rank.

"This is the cause, isn't it?"

Fiona picked up the bag by the string. Miller's expression changed to one of horror as he stared at it.

"How utterly vile. No wonder the water's been corrupted."

"I know it looks like a normal bag, but we still have to do something about it. What do you think, Fiona? Should we take it back to the Temple?"

"No, that's too much work."

She silently prodded Linus, who tilted his head curiously, to take hold of the string. Then she rolled up her sleeves.

"Take that!"

She raised a fist high and swung it at the small bag. The moment her punch landed, her magic activated and scattered the black fragments before transforming them into particles of light that sparkled and vanished. Seeing that everything except the string Linus was holding had disappeared, Fiona rolled her sleeves back down.

“Wh-What did you just do?”

Though Miller asked the question fearfully, as a priest, he should already know the answer.

“I crushed the source, of course!”

“Hm, not sure that completely captures what you did, Fiona.”

“You only needed a single try...no, a single strike to purify something so polluted?”

Linus still cocked his head thoughtfully, whereas Miller trembled and blinked rapidly.

“If it isn’t a natural object, then someone set it there in bad faith, right? Are you sure we can afford to erase the evidence, Fiona?”

“We can’t be certain they had ill intentions. Besides, there are priests who can trace the magical energy back with just this string. On top of all that, leaving it be would have only increased the harm. And lastly...I simply didn’t wish to carry such a disgusting thing with me.”

“Fair enough.”

She carefully wrapped the string from Linus in a handkerchief before putting it in a pocket. That was when she realized his hand was dirty, but she didn’t have anything to wipe off the smudge since she just used her handkerchief.

“I apologize, Your Highness. Let me ask if anyone has something to clean you up.”

“No, it’s fine.”

So saying, he pulled out his handkerchief from his breast pocket, took Fiona’s hand, and wiped her fingers gently and carefully.

“What? No, stop, Your Highness; I meant finding something to wipe off the smudges on your hands!”

“Oh, really? I appreciate the offer. Perhaps I’ll take you up on it then.”

He gave her his handkerchief with a grin. Unable to fight back, she wiped his fingers. She was sure he would have been fine with anyone doing the deed, but



she did it herself since it wouldn't take too much time or effort. Linus' strangely good mood told her he, too, had loathed having his hands dirtied.

"Right, so all that's left is the water in the lake. Can we leave it to you?"

Miller had already been purifying it, and in such situations, it was better to let the local priest or priestess take the lead. However, the man shook his head apologetically.

"It pains me to admit that I've almost entirely exhausted my magic reserves."

It made sense. He'd been performing the cleansing ritual continuously since yesterday to prevent the abnormality from spreading further. He must be tired, too.

"Don't worry about a thing, Brother Miller. Because of your efforts, the pollution was contained to this area. Thank you very much."

No matter how effective the purification process, it would have been a disaster if that stagnant water had filled the lake. There was no guarantee the other clergy members would have made it in time, and above all else, the residents of the regions would have been in a quandary without a clean water source. When something happens, people tend to focus on those who directly solve the problem, but in most cases, solutions are found only because of the ones like Miller, who investigated and held down the fort until help arrived.

"No, please, you exaggerate. I don't deserve your thanks."

Miller flushed for a moment, then, for whatever reason, went deathly pale in the next. It almost gave her whiplash to see the dramatic change in his expressions.

"P-Please, you misunderstand!"

"Whatever are you referring to?"

"A-Apologies, I didn't mean you, Lady Saint. M-More importantly, might I impose on you to perform the purification?!"

Despite Miller's request to her, his eyes kept darting somewhere else. Curious, she followed the direction of his gaze and found herself staring into indigo eyes.

“So, Fiona, how exactly does a purification work?”

At the sight of Linus’ beautiful smile, Miller’s spine went ramrod straight, like someone shoved a stick into him.

“Each person performs it a little differently. Generally speaking, one touches the corruption, cocoons it in magic, and cleanses it. The range and speed of the ritual depends on a person’s magic and skill.”

“I see.”

Fiona suspected Linus must be learning about the process for the first time since he rarely had the opportunity to witness a purification as the crown prince. Though Miller’s color wasn’t very good, and his face was strangely stiff, perhaps that might be due to exhaustion from performing the ritual all night long. For fear of his well-being, she decided it was best she finished the purification.

“As well, I’ve been told that anyone as powerful as the pontiff can make the corruption disappear simply by touching it without a need to cover it in magic.”

“Wow, I had no idea.”

Perhaps encouraged by Linus’ admiration, Miller’s expression finally relaxed a bit.

Fiona rolled up her sleeves again and headed toward the lakeshore.

“It’s easier to set a range and concentrate only on it, so the basic idea is to envelop the area with magical energy. The advantage of not doing that is that it allows one to target a wider area, but the focus and magic required are different orders of magnitude. Most priests hardly utilize this method.”

“Is it really that amazing?”

Careful to keep her skirt from getting wet, Fiona crouched and raised her fist.

“Yes. A high priest’s purification ritual is a wondrous sight to behold. All that light...”

“Take that!”

She punched the water’s surface, and magic activated as droplets flew up in

the air, spreading instantly like ripples. The blackened, brackish water returned to its original translucent state as beads of light fell around the vicinity like a rain shower.

“Whaaat?!” Miller shouted in shock, and the village headman, who’d followed them but kept a short distance away, also stared up wide-eyed at the light orbs. Only Linus smiled in enjoyment.

“Fiona, are we about done here?”

“Yes, sir.”

She pushed her sleeves back down and stepped away from the water’s edge. Though she had tried her best to avoid the water, a few droplets had landed and dampened her clothes.

“Fiona, you were just as lovely dressed in light.”

“Yes, well, purification is a refreshing experience, both for the viewer and the doer!”

“...You really don’t get it, do you? Which is incredible in its own way.”

In a good mood, Fiona shook the water from the hem of her skirt. With a wry smile, Linus dug his fingers into his cravat. He exerted a bit of force to undo it and then unwound the length of fabric to wipe off the droplets still clinging to Fiona’s clothes.

“Your Highness, stop. You’ll get wet.”

“I’m more concerned about you, Fiona. Here, let me wipe your face, too.”

So saying, Linus reached out and stroked her cheek with a finger. It tickled, and she automatically pulled her head back, which, inexplicably, only made his eyes narrow in amusement. Flustered, she grabbed his hand and yanked the cravat from his other one to wipe his fingers. It was, in fact, unacceptable for the crown prince’s attire to be dirtied, but since he was already wet himself, there was no point worrying about the little things right now.

“Your Highness, as the crown prince, you are a very precious person, so it won’t do for you to remain in these damp clothes.”

“I wish you meant ‘precious’ in a different way, though, hm?”

Miller had been standing there slack-jawed and frozen the whole time. When he finally came to life again, it was to sigh deeply.

“As expected from you, Lady Saint. What an amazing feat of strength.”

“Not at all. What you witnessed was the result of diligent training. I’m used to touching things with my magic, so I only enclosed it in mine, purified it, and gradually simplified the problem, then I just hit it with my magic.”

“Begging your pardon, but...I think that last part is unusual.”

Before she could refute Miller, Fiona heard a shrill scream. A small crowd of people who’d been watching them from a distance started running toward somewhere one by one. Just as she wondered what happened, the village headman rushed over to them, looking shaken.

“Your Highness, Lady Saint, we received a report of monsters! A horde of them!”

Monsters were living beings poisoned by corrupted magic. Mobile, dangerous creatures that spread their filth and behaved aggressively toward other living things. Their physical strength far surpassed that of normal animals, and even if they were bested, their remains still posed a serious threat.

“Understood. Headman, please evacuate the residents to safety.”

“Lady Saint, what about you?”

“If monsters are our opponents, then it’s time for a priest...no, the saint, to show her mettle. Brother Miller, since you’re fatigued from your efforts, I want you to fall back and assist with the evacuation.”

“I brought my knights with me, so we’ll entrust the rest to you two.”

The head of the village nodded so vigorously in response to Fiona and Linus’ instruction that she worried his head would fly off. Miller bowed quickly to them both before he and the headman ran off to help the villagers to safety. She quietly sighed after they left.

“Monsters seldom appear in settlements like this one. Strange, don’t you think, Your Highness?”

People usually encountered them deep in the mountains. At most, one might

be seen in a town or a village occasionally, but rarely did they appear in swarms.

“I do, actually. At the very least, I don’t think we’ve had many, if any, incidents of hordes showing up in settlements in the last ten years.”

“I, for one, am glad to have the knights with us.”

While monsters could usually be defeated with swords, they proved too much for mere villagers to handle. The knights had been escorting them from a distance, but now they jogged over to Linus, their expressions tense. The sight of their swords hanging from their belts reassured her tremendously.

“In an unusual turn of events, there was a sighting of a monster horde. You all know what to do, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir!”

The trio of knights saluted to Linus, then unsheathed their swords and took up battle stances. Their gazes focused on ten wolf-like monsters lurking in the shadow of a building. A black haze curled around the giant wolves as they raced directly toward them on the now-deserted lakeshore.

“These things sure do have a one-track mind, eh? They’re coming straight at us.”

As Linus murmured, the ten wolf creatures drew near and skidded to a halt when they were close enough to hear their rasping breaths.

“Your Highness, you and the saint should step back a bit.”

The monsters attacked when the knights pointed their swords at them like it was the signal they’d been waiting for. Their opponents were a pack of giant wolf monsters. A normal swordsman might have had a hard time against them, but not so for the knights chosen by the crown prince as his personal guard. Working smoothly together, the three men dodged the monsters’ attacks and took them down one by one. At that rate, it was only a matter of time before they defeated all ten creatures.

The knights moved as they fought, naturally creating a distance between themselves and Fiona and Linus. In their place, though, a slain wolf lay on the ground nearby. A black mist wrapped around the monster, even in death. The

thing couldn't even return peacefully to the earth without a clergy member purifying it. A lamentable existence.

When most of the monsters had been defeated, Fiona took a step forward to perform the cleansing ritual on the fallen one. Sensing her movement, its head suddenly snapped up.

"Fiona!"

Startled, she stepped back while taking out the globe from her breast pocket and throwing it. For an instant, blue flames appeared, and the monster stopped. Simultaneously, an arm reached out from behind her and forcibly pulled her back, followed by the flash of a drawn sword.

In the blink of an eye, Linus cut down the wolf, and it collapsed to the ground with a heavy thud.

"Fiona, are you all right?"

He restrained her with his left arm and swung his sword with his right, shaking the blood off. The way he wielded it so effortlessly and the speed with which he'd cut it down told her more than words could of his proficiency and strength. Stunned by the monster and Linus' unexpected movements, all she could do was nod jerkily.

"I'm sorry, and thank you very much."

"As long as you aren't hurt."

"Your Highness, apologies for the wait."

The three knights walked back toward them, sheathing their swords en route. Behind them were several dead wolves surrounded in black haze and lying on the ground.

"I'll be purifying them now, so please step away a bit."

Fiona took a few steps back to have a clear view of all ten monsters. Then she clenched her fist, concentrated, and punched right in front of her.

"Take that!"

Ripples of light spread out in the air from her first, and magic activated

explosively, covering the vicinity. As soon as a ripple touched a monster, it transformed into particles of light. Before long, all of the remains had become light and faded away.

Tiny spheres of light remained around them, sparkling and floating in the air, reminiscent of snow falling. When she caught one in her palm, instead of melting, it disappeared with a little *pop*.

“Lovely. Truly lovely.”

Linus stared up at the sky with narrowed eyes. Fiona found herself smiling inadvertently at the joy radiating from him.

“Isn’t it just? Though the purification rite is tiring, it is effective. We have nothing to worry about, and the monsters are no longer in pain, either. The effort is worth it to me.”

Then he strode toward her, picked up a section of her hair, and kissed it softly.

“Your Highness?”

“Black hair swathed in light is beautiful, you know?”

His words made her realize the darkness of her hair made the pale light particles shine. If she were allowed to express her opinion, Linus’ silver hair looked even more beautiful as it glimmered under the beads of light. But that ultimately came down to personal preference.

“Goodness, Your Highness, you really are obsessed with black hair, aren’t you?”

“I am. I love *your* hair, Fiona.”

Exasperated, she surveyed their surroundings and saw the knights staring at them with the same exasperation she felt. Just as she thought, even they considered his fascination with black hair a bit too much.

“Wow...I can’t believe she *still* doesn’t get it after all that.”

“Don’t look, don’t listen. Pretend they’re an illusion. One wrong slip of the tongue, and we’ll all lose our heads.”

She heard the knights muttering something to each other she couldn't quite make out and wondered if they were discussing the journey back. Despite it being part of their jobs as the crown prince's personal guards, it must be draining to constantly have to steel themselves.

Noticing the dancing lights in the air, the throng of people, which included the village headman, walked toward them and profusely thanked them even though the knights were the ones who had defeated the monsters. Moreover, it was thanks to Miller's efforts that the pollution in the lake hadn't spread further. So she offered the priest up to the headman and his villagers, who were eager to extend their hospitality. Then she politely excused herself, Linus, and the knights, with the reason being her next assignment.

"Why is there a carriage here?"

Ready to ride double again on the horse with Linus on the way home, Fiona found a coach waiting in front of her instead. The interior beyond the door looked familiar, so it must be the same royal vehicle she'd ridden in last time.

"We're not in a hurry to return, plus I thought you'd be tired, Fiona, so I had one arranged for us."

Linus pulled her toward the vehicle, and they boarded it.

"Your Highness, please forgive me for what happened earlier."

As soon as she sat down on the seat, Fiona bowed her head deeply, and he watched her with a gentle expression. Of course, he understood why she apologized.

"There was no need to rush to perform the purification, hm?"

"Yes."

Everything had been fine even after the knights had finished killing the monsters. Still, she had to do the cleansing rite quickly and, in her careless haste, was almost attacked. If Linus hadn't protected her, she would have surely been wounded.

"Yet you acted to save the monster, didn't you?"

"Nothing nearly so noble. I just didn't want to see it in pain, is all... It was for



my own satisfaction. Again, please accept my sincerest apologies.”

Not only might she have injured herself through her recklessness, but she had also caused trouble for Linus. It had been a short-sighted decision on her part.

He moved to sit next to Fiona, who hung her head dispiritedly, and he gently rubbed her crown.

“You don’t have to apologize so much. You are an upright priestess and a saint, Fiona. All I ask is that moving forward, you choose the right time to make your move.”

When she peeked up at him, she saw herself reflected in his eyes. His unquestionably beautiful smile soothed her so much that she reflexively shook her head to dispel the enchantment.

“Your Highness...you always insist on spoiling me.”

“Well, *you* won’t spoil *me*, so I have no choice but to dote on you instead.”

She had no idea why he wanted her to pamper him so much, but she guessed the teasing way he responded was meant to put her at ease. Since the day they’d met, Linus had always been kind to Fiona. However, she couldn’t depend on his kindness forever.

“Your Highness, will you lend me your sword?”

“For what?”

“As thanks for your help thus far and as an apology for putting you in danger.”

“But what does my sword have to do with that?”

He fingered the sheath, his head tilted curiously.

“For this.”

She grabbed a fistful of her black hair and held it up to make it easier for him to see.

“I’d like to cut my hair and gift it to you because you love it so much.”

His eyes widened, and he froze, but a beautiful young man was beautiful no matter his expression, and she was awestruck again.

“If you have it on your person, you can look at it anytime you wish, meaning you don’t have to go to the trouble of visiting me. Like this, you’ll be able to use your time effectively.”

“Y-You’re joking, right? There’s no way I’ll let you do that.”

The unnatural stiffness in his face surprised her and made her wonder where exactly she’d gone wrong.

“Ummm, well, many priestesses have short hair and I don’t plan on marrying anyway, so I have no need to keep my hair long in a feminine fashion.”

“No. I said no, and I meant it.”

Linus barely let her finish before answering her curtly. Then, he gripped her hand tightly in his. The movement made her lose her grip on her hair, sliding softly across his hand as it fell on her shoulders again. She had no idea why he stared at her so intently. Regardless of the reason, he was much too close. Their breaths mingled, and his indigo eyes a sliver away made it impossible to look away.

“Um, Your Highness...”

She didn’t know what she should say. When he saw her confusion, he came back to his senses with a gasp, released her hand immediately, and put some distance between them on the bench.

“Right, sorry... If you’re so darn intent on thanking me, then why don’t you bake me something sweet? I haven’t eaten anything made by you in a few years now, Fiona.”

“Of course not. As the crown prince, you must not eat something that hasn’t passed your food taster’s inspection.”

As a child, she hadn’t known that, so she’d often made cookies and such for him. And seeing Linus eat them so happily made her happy, so she made a veritable mountain’s worth for him all the time. But as an adult, when she thought about the worst-case scenario, she shouldn’t rashly give him things to eat.

“I know. You don’t know how much self-control I’ve been exerting on myself

to avoid others taking advantage of you or dragging you into issues. Now that I'm the crown prince, though, we won't see many problems again on that front."

"I'm glad for you, I suppose? In any case, you *are* the crown prince, so I can't in good conscience give you anything I make..."

"But you said you wanted to thank me. Or are you going back on your word? Besides, I have some tolerance to poison, so I'll be fine."

Why in the world was this conversation unfolding on the premise that poisoning was a given?

"Except I won't be using poison?"

"I know. Oh, by the way, what was the thing you threw at the monster?"

"To throw in case 'a silver-tongued creature with fast hands who's much more dangerous than a bear' appeared."

At the time, she'd thought the pontiff had worried overmuch, but such a dangerous monster had appeared, so he'd turned out to be right.

"Then what about the flames?"

"I'm almost positive magic created them, but since the monster's fur wasn't burned, the item is meant only to stop an opponent. His Holiness gave it to me when we went to inspect the lake."

The object had saved her life, so she made a mental note to thank her father later.

"Interesting. To stop a silver-tongued creature with fast hands and more dangerous than a bear, eh... Looks like I'll need to have a little chat with Charles."

Despite his flawless, dazzling smile, Fiona felt disquieted for some reason. Must be her imagination.

"More importantly, Fiona, aren't you tired?"

"Huh? Oh, well, I suppose."

The words hardly left her mouth before he reached out with his arms and

pulled her onto his lap. In other words, he embraced her.

“Wh-Why?!”

One second, they were having a normal conversation, and the next, she was sitting on Linus’ lap. How? What? Why? Instinctively, she tried to slide back onto her side of the bench, but he had his arms wrapped so securely around her she couldn’t move easily.

Troubled, she glanced up at him only to find him staring down at her cheerfully. He was clearly enjoying himself.

“You must have aches and pains all over since today was your first horseback ride. Then you did all that purification on top of that. So, of course, you’re tired. You can sleep on the journey back.”

“Be that as it may, I can’t bother you any more than I already have, Your Highness.”

First of all, he hadn’t needed to come to the lake at all, but he’d still accompanied her. He’d also supported her while riding the horse and fought a monster to protect her, so Linus must be exhausted, too.

“If you *really* want to give me thanks and an apology, then...let me hold you like this.”

He murmured the words gently before softly kissing her crown.

“Oh, I see. Instead of cut hair, you like hair that’s still growing on a person’s head, crackling with youth and energy.”

Despite the opportunity to get his hands on the black hair he loved so much, his lack of enthusiasm for her earlier suggestion had puzzled her. Now, she had her answer. To use an analogy, he preferred flowers blooming in nature versus those plucked and arranged in vases for decoration inside.

She had always thought his fascination with black hair incredible, but to think he was so particular about the state it should be in as well. Alive, not dead. Frankly, his obsession was starting to become a nuisance.

“Hm...right, we’ll just leave it at that.”

“Still, I’m too heavy like this. Can’t I just sit by your side and sleep that way?”

If all he wanted to do was play with her lively hair, he didn't need to hold her. In fact, she felt it would be easier for him to stroke it sitting normally next to him.

"No. That's not nearly as comforting."

"Comfort, you say?"

Any way she viewed this situation, weight was the biggest problem, so what in the world was he going on about? When Fiona cocked her head in confusion, Linus let out a strained laugh.

"Then how about this? If you fall asleep in my arms, we'll stay like this until we get back to the capital. And if you don't feel sleepy, you can sit next to me."

She nodded in agreement, and he stroked her head over and over again. Within the confines of the silent, swaying carriage, her fatigue steadily made her drowsier. When she started nodding off, Linus gently cupped the back of her head and rested it against his chest with a rueful smile. The solid, stable pillow only worsened her sleepiness, then a thought suddenly flashed through her mind.

What would happen if she didn't fall asleep? How were they even supposed to decide that? If she wasn't careful, they might arrive at the royal capital while waiting for confirmation of her sleep or not sleep state, and in that case, she'd be in his arms forever.

Then did this mean...no matter what happened, the only option was for him to cuddle her? Despite her epiphany, she had almost lost the fight against sleepiness, so there wasn't much she could do anyway.

"Good night, Fiona."

Her eyelids closed after running out of strength, and as her consciousness slipped away, she only heard Linus' voice.

"You really aren't doing anything, right?! No magic or trickery?!"

"How many times do I have to tell you? No, I'm not doing anything."

"Then explain *this* to me!"

"Simple, Fiona. You're exhausted from a combination of your first horseback

ride and all the purification you performed.”

“In that case, why can’t I just lie down on the bench?!”

“We don’t want you falling off it from a sudden jolt of the coach, do we now? Let’s put that aside and talk about what’s *really* on my mind. What exactly *is* a ‘silver-tongued creature with fast hands who’s more dangerous than bear’?”

“Good question. I’m not sure. Do you have any guesses?”

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**WHEN** she slowly opened her eyes in response to a familiar voice, she saw a beautiful silver-haired young man and the ceiling. She blinked repeatedly to clear the fog of sleep. Noticing she was awake, Linus smiled down at her.

“Oh, hello, Fiona. Good morning. Did you manage to get some sleep?”

“Good morning, Your Highness...?”

She sat up straight as Linus supported her. They were still inside the carriage. The door was open, and Charles stood outside, his expression grim.

“Your Holiness, if I may, I’d like to give you a report on the lake’s abnormality.”

“Fiona, shouldn’t you think about the situation you’re in right now first?!”

“Ah, you’re right... Your Highness, I’m sorry I’m heavy.”

Her father’s words made her realize she was still on Linus’ lap. In the end, she *had* fallen asleep, and from their position, she wondered if he’d held her the whole ride. For a moment, she worried if his limbs had gone numb, but his sunny grin told her he was fine. Unexpected, that. Perhaps those who honed themselves through the sword were cut from a different cloth.

“Except that’s not the issue at hand?! Your Highness, you *swear* you haven’t done anything untoward, yes?!”

“Like father, like daughter. As I told her, the answer is no. She’s fine. We’re fine. All I did was hug her a little, kiss her hair, and cherish her sleeping face.”

“Scoundrel! ‘All,’ he says! Rogue!”

Behind the screaming Charles were Linus’ knights, who all nodded solemnly in

agreement.

“Stop being such a worrywart, Charles. I haven’t done anything yet. Keyword being ‘yet,’ hm?”

Charles scowled ferociously at the sensual note in Linus’ voice; then, he exhaled deeply.

“Right back to the actual topic. If I heard correctly, you purified the object polluting the lake, the lake itself, ten large wolf monsters, and you did that all on your own, yes, Fiona? It’s only natural you would become drowsy after everything. On the contrary, I’m surprised you *only* fell asleep. Normally, the burden would be much heavier, not to mention a job like that would usually require several pontiff-class clergy.”

“You said it.”

While Charles massaged his throbbing temples, Linus seemed to be enjoying himself.

“Brother Miller, who was handling the situation on-site, is also a man of mid-level or higher power. That’s how he was able to keep things under control just in time.”

“Yes, and then the Lady Saint swooped in. You never disappoint, Fiona.”

“Not at all, Your Highness. The outcome was simply a result of my steady efforts. Besides, the pontiff is much more—”

“Yes, right, well, let’s just leave it there, eh? Now get *down* from there.”

Charles’ sharp remark made her realize Linus still held her. However, try as she might to dislodge herself from his embrace, he had his arms wrapped securely around her. Basically, she couldn’t move.

“Um, Your Highness.”

She looked up at him, silently imploring him to release her. His indigo eyes stared right into hers.

“Well done today. Enjoy your rest.”

“Yes, my lord. And thank you very much for everything.”

Before Fiona even finished speaking, Linus' face drew near. She thought he was going to kiss her hair like normal, but he was so close that she instinctively closed her eyes and felt him press his lips right above her forehead instead.

"Your Hiiighneesssss!!!"

Linus sighed, knowing no one else but Charles would unleash that earth-shattering yell. He loosened his hold to slide his hands under her arms to lift her up.

"All right, all right, calm your horses, Charles. No need to deafen us all."

"Only if you *kindly* stop making promises you can't keep!"

Charles took Fiona from Linus and deposited her gently on the ground, but she wasn't a toy to be tossed around. She wished they would just let her walk under her own steam.

"Can you blame me though? Because you know better than anyone how patient I've been these last ten years, Charles."

Her father was momentarily at a loss for words when he heard Linus speak in a tone lower than usual. Then, the younger man smiled at him. Though Fiona was curious about whatever promises they discussed, she hesitated to ask because this was the pontiff and the crown prince. There must be many top-secret things she didn't know, wasn't *meant* to know, and she shouldn't recklessly nose around.

After waving Linus and his knights off, Charles sighed heavily.

"Good job, Fiona. You can give me all the details later... But first. He *really* didn't do anything to you, did he?"

"He didn't...?"

She wondered what her father could be referring to. Linus embracing her and kissing her hair was an everyday occurrence not even worth mentioning. Then, was she supposed to tell him about something different from their norm?

"Ummm, well, let's see... I tried to cut off my hair and give it to him as thanks for saving me, but he declined. Apparently, His Highness prefers lively black hair still attached to one's head."



Fiona informed her father proudly of this new discovery, yet for some reason, Charles frowned instead.

“Right... I don’t know how much longer a young woman your age can remain so oblivious, but for now, I’m relieved.”

“Are you? Then might I assume Your Holiness also prefers living hair as opposed to dead hair?”

“I suppose. Yes, let’s just say I do and leave it at that.” Charles chuckled wryly and gently patted Fiona’s head.

## Chapter 5: It's Finally Open Season

“**FIONA**, we're going to the palace,” Charles announced as soon as he walked into his office.

She started preparing right away. Today, she was working on administrative tasks in the Temple, and now, she wondered if something had happened.

“You as well, Your Holiness? Was our ruse about the fake saint discovered?”

Despite the extenuating circumstances and lack of malice on her part, her scheme involved deceiving the king, pretending to be a saint, and stealing the budget. There was no way to get out of this without punishment.

“If anything happens, don't worry about me, and take care of yourself.”

“As if I'd ever do something like that. Besides, His Highness would *never* allow it.”

Just because Linus was the crown prince didn't mean he could protect her from everything, not to mention she hated the thought of causing trouble for him in such a fashion. When push came to shove, Fiona was determined to be the only one who would be punished for their fraud. She would tell the king she had deceived them, threatened them, whatever it took for her and her alone to take the blame.

“Furthermore...you are, in fact, *not* a fake saint.”

“Huh?”

“Right, off we go. I have a carriage waiting for us outside.”

She hurriedly picked up her coat and left the room with Charles.

When they arrived at the palace, they were led to the same audience chamber as last time. They waited patiently there, and before long, the king, prime minister, and Linus appeared. Fiona and Charles bowed their heads respectfully. With a wave of his hand, the king told them to lift their faces as he sat down on his throne.

“I heard you not only solved the problem of the abnormality in the lake, but you cleansed all the monsters, too. You don’t disappoint, Saint of Cost Performance. Cost performance truly is a magnificent thing, eh?”

Fiona bowed her head in thanks at the king’s smiling, satisfied aura, but privately, she thought that nothing she’d done had any bearing on cost performance anymore. The concern she’d had on her mind for ages about the country’s future under a daydreaming king surfaced again. For now, though, it seemed her fraud hadn’t been exposed, and she had escaped punishment for another day, which relieved her. She would take the small victory.

“The whole thing is strange to me, frankly, considering I heard that packs of monsters rarely appear these days. Not to mention they charged directly at Fiona.”

“Very strange indeed, Your Highness. Perhaps the saint has some special power that draws them to her.”

Linus smiled politely at the prime minister, his gaze boring into him. In response, the prime minister turned his face away from the prince.

“You know what else I heard? That we can trace the magic back to the source from the string remaining of the mysterious object we found in the lake.”

Linus commented without looking away from the prime minister. Charles took that as his cue to step in.

“By your leave, Your Majesty, if I may interject. His Highness is correct. It is possible to do that. I detected remnants of magic belonging to the individual who set the trap in the lake and conducted my own investigation into the matter.”

It was understandable when the prime minister’s eyes widened in shock. The ability to follow the trail of magic left behind in something was a rare one. Although it might seem useful, it consumed a lot of power, so out of consideration for his own well-being, Charles had not made its existence known to the general public.

“And what were the results?”

“I checked again and again. The trail always led to the palace.”

The prime minister's shoulders flinched at Charles' words. If anyone in the palace had anything to do with the incident at the lake, it would be a serious problem. So she wasn't surprised to see him grow pale.

Linus smiled, his eyes never straying from the prime minister. Though his smile was beautiful and gentle, for some reason, it felt cold to Fiona. Perhaps that could be attributed to her nerves.

"Probably because I touched the string. I mean, it's preposterous to think anyone in the royal palace would do such a thing, right?"

"S-Spot on, Your Highness! Of course, there's no such person here."

The prime minister's eyes darted everywhere. He was likely just terrified because he normally didn't deal with monsters and corrupted objects.

"Can you investigate further?"

"It will take a little longer to trace magic other than His Highness'. If you have no objections, Your Majesty, I can get started right away. What do you say?"

Charles shifted his attention from Linus to the king, who nodded with such dignity one would never know he was a whimsical man in his prime.

"By hook or crook, we need to suss out the criminal who polluted the lake. I don't care how long it takes; just get the job done."

"Yes, my liege. I will present to you the culprit and proof of their wrongdoing without fail."

Charles bowed his head deferentially to the king, then smiled at the prime minister. Fiona was impressed by the pontiff's insight and thoughtfulness. He had seen through the prime minister's fear of filth and smiled reassuringly at him.

"As for you, Lady Saint, brava. I heard you performed your duty splendidly. I'll have to think of a proper reward, eh?"

The king's smile resembled Linus', as only a father and son could. Perhaps then that was why her tension eased, why she felt close to him. Normally, anything the king offered was to be accepted, but she desperately needed to tell him something.

“I’m honored to receive such praise from you, Your Majesty. However, I did not work alone. His Highness and his knights defeated the monsters, and a local priest contained the spread of the pollution at the lake, keeping the damage to a minimum.”

“Fair point. Even if the knights and priest were simply doing their jobs, they still did them well. It won’t be much, but I shall make sure they’re rewarded, too... I trust there are no cost issues with this?”

As the king, he could do whatever he wanted, so she found it charming that he would ask her for permission with his head tilted thoughtfully. A middle-aged man with dreams was truly formidable.

“Of course not. I think lauding those who do their utmost is just as important as punishing those who do wrong.”

“Agreed. Then, Lady Saint, as for your reward...”

“No, thank you.”

“You said it yourself just now, did you not? Besides, it would be odd if you were the only one I didn’t reward. Or are you saying there’s nothing in particular you want?”

When she nodded affirmatively, the king rested his chin on his hand and fell into a contemplative silence.

“By the way, Lady Saint, do you have a man you favor or a lover?”

“No, I do not.”

Though perplexed by the sudden change in topic, she still answered honestly. Linus scowled, and Charles pressed his lips together tightly like he was containing himself. She wondered what in the world was wrong with the two of them.

“Excellent. Then let us discuss the engagement between Crown Prince Linus and the Saint of Cost Performance.”

“I...what...?”

That was all she could blurt out, unable to grasp the meaning of the words the king spoke with a smile. If this was another flight of fancy for the daydreaming

man, then a crisis was upon her. But how exactly was she supposed to interpret his announcement?

“Isn’t that premature, Your Majesty?”

Panicked, the prime minister objected, yet the king was unfazed.

“In our country, a saint is protected as the king’s consort. She’s also a good match for you in terms of age, so I trust there are no complaints?”

“None at all, sire.”

Linus replied to his father with a blinding, flawless smile, and the king nodded, satisfied.

“What say you, Saint?”

Fiona struggled for words. This was the first she’d ever heard of a saint marrying a king. Moreover, as an imposter, it wouldn’t do for her to become one.

“His Highness’ wife will someday become the queen consort, yes? Wouldn’t a woman from a suitable lineage be a better match for him?”

“It is exactly as the Saint says!”

The prime minister almost interrupted her. Then he took a breath and focused his attention on the king.

“While I understand our customs, more than a century has passed since the last saint appeared. Such conventions do not suit the modern age, Your Majesty.”

Fiona needed the prime minister to prevail in this argument. Otherwise, this, too, would just be tacked onto her list of sins committed as a fraud. The king looked back and forth between Fiona, who nodded firmly in agreement, and the prime minister with his serious gaze, then mulled things over for a bit.

“Then we’ll postpone the engagement for now and think about the future together.”

At the king’s decision, the prime minister sighed in relief, and Linus frowned.

“First, you’ll attend the upcoming ball with the crown prince.”

A ball. The function was attended by nobles. Which meant out of the frying pan and into the fire for her.

“As a commoner by birth and education, I have no notion of how to dance or of etiquette. My wardrobe is lacking as well, so I don’t think I’m suited for such a venue...”

“Don’t worry. We can entrust everything to the crown prince. Isn’t that right, Linus?”

“Yes, sire.”

The beautiful father and son smiled at each other, and the king took his leave along with the prime minister. After they were gone, Charles sighed deeply.

“Alas, we have come to this moment.”

“Indeed we have, so let’s do our best to get engaged, hm, Fiona?”

“But, Your Highness, you have the right to choose your own partner.”

Regardless of their nation’s tradition of making a saint a consort, it was much too cruel of the king to ignore Linus’ thoughts as if the matter was already set in stone. Of course, as the crown prince, Linus’ feelings might not be prioritized when it came to marriage, but the woman chosen for him must be one with status, beauty, education, and more that would benefit him.

Not only was Fiona a commoner, but she was also a fake saint, which made her entirely unsuitable for him.

“I do, and that’s exactly why I want to marry you, Fiona.”

“I’m sorry?”

Had he settled on her because he couldn’t marry the woman he truly loved, and Fiona was someone he felt comfortable with? Or did he love black hair so much that he was willing to turn a blind eye to everything else? The latter was far more likely but also a terrible reason to choose a wife, so should the time come, she would simply hack off her hair and give it to him instead.

As Fiona seriously considered making an offering of her locks, Linus, who’d been watching her intently, grinned happily.

“Well, it’s finally open season, hm? I’ll tell you everything little by little.”

“Nothing is official yet, Your Highness.”

Linus’ smile only broadened at Charles’ sharp retort.

“How long have you known me? Do you really think I’m letting this chance slip?”

“Too long and no, I don’t.”

Charles groaned and hung his head in despair. Linus clapped him cheerfully on the shoulder.

“You’ve known what would happen for ten years now.”

“Perhaps, but I most definitely didn’t expect things to go so far or turn out like this. Regardless, I want you to think of Fiona first and foremost.”

“Of course. That’s exactly what I’m doing. Why else would I have become the crown prince?”

“You sure did grow up to be nasty, Your Highness. Every offense intended.”

“Aw, come now. Think of it as I grew up motivated by pure love instead.”

Linus looked happy while Charles seemed exhausted, yet she had no idea what they were talking about in the first place.

“Ummm...?”

In response to her confused, questioning sound, Linus gently clasped Fiona’s hand.

“Fiona, from now on, you’ll be treated as my future fiancée. Of course, I, too, shall think of you as such and behave accordingly.”

“A-All right?”

Except, didn’t the king just say moments ago that he would postpone their engagement and think it over some more? So why did Linus discuss it like it was already a done deal?

“This is where we part today. Be careful on your way home, hm?”

He smiled gently at her before bending down to softly kiss her cheek. Unlike



when he kissed her hair, his pliant lips directly touched her skin and made her twitch. Fiona stared at him in wide-eyed shock. He simply nonchalantly waved as he strode out of the audience chamber.

“The cunning rascal sure didn’t waste time, eh?”

Charles exhaled after he saw Linus off, then noticed Fiona standing there frozen and unable to move. He gently patted her head.

“Are you all right, Fiona? If you don’t want any of this, just say so. And I give you permission as well to purify that scoundrel, body and soul.”

Purification of the soul almost sounded like death. Despite her confusion, Fiona nodded slowly.

“No, it’s fine. I was simply surprised by the kiss on the cheek since it was the first time he’s done that.”

“Oh ho! So, he *did* practice moderation! How unexpected. You still haven’t answered my question, though. Are you all right?”

“Yes. I suppose I’m used to it since he’s always kissing my hand, hair, and head.”

“And I must say, none of that pleases me either!”

Charles realized Fiona studied him intently as he raised his voice in agitation. Embarrassed, he scrutinized her face in turn.

“Are you *sure* you’re all right?”

“I am. I am, but I don’t know. I’m just surprised.”

“Yes, you already mentioned that, my dear. As for me...how can I put it into words? On the one hand, I didn’t want him to do anything to you out of concern for you, Fiona. But on the other, I know about His Highness’ circumstances, so I can’t help but want to support him.”

She had no idea what her father was talking about, but she understood he was worried about her. While she didn’t want to cause trouble for Charles, she also didn’t know what the right thing to do was.

“Listen to me, Fiona. Regardless of what His Majesty decrees, you have the

right to refuse. Don't get swept up by duty or honor. Instead, I want you to think carefully about this before you make a decision. Whether you become the crown prince's consort or not, I'll support you. And...if we need to flee abroad, let's do our best together."

"Why are my only options to marry the crown prince or flee abroad? Personally, I'd like nothing more than to live my life normally as a priestess."

Was he perhaps talking about the worst-case scenario if she was exposed as a fraud? Even so, Fiona was the culprit, so she would leave the country alone.

"Regardless...we'll do our best."

"Haaah."

She sighed. Ultimately, she didn't know what exactly they would be trying their best at, but overwhelmed by Charles' serious expression, all she could do was nod.

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"**THESE** documents outline each orphanage's status. I don't think there's any issue prioritizing the ones that have requested building repairs due to deterioration."

Budget passed the papers to Fiona and explained the areas to be fixed in detail.

"Um."

"Are you wondering about the highway infrastructure? Though it will be a long battle, prospects are looking good for expanding the roads around vital towns and cities near the royal capital."

Management presented new documents to Fiona and discussed with Budget how to manage the craftsmen's time and resources.

"Um, no, that's not what I meant... It's this situation."

"What do you mean?"

They both looked inquiringly at Fiona, who held the various materials in her hands. More accurately speaking, Fiona sat on Linus' lap as he stroked her hair.

Budget and Management exchanged glances, then cocked their heads, puzzled.

“Isn’t this the same as usual?”

“What?! I-I mean, yes, he does kiss my hair and hands, but he’s never held me like this until now?!”

The first time he’d embraced her had been on the carriage ride that day, and for whatever reason, he hadn’t stopped doing it ever since. She most definitely thought it strange, but no matter how much she begged him to stop, he would dismiss her objections with a smile, so she desperately needed a third party’s opinion to determine if she was the one in the wrong. Management had been kind enough to tell her that gentlemen didn’t touch women’s hair in public, which was why Fiona hoped the other woman would advise Linus that the current situation was unacceptable.

“Since you two will soon be engaged, that much should be fine... I think.”

“You *think*?”

So, was it fine for them to be this intimate or not?! Especially when their engagement hadn’t even been decided yet.

“Lady Saint, until now, you were neither engaged to His Highness nor were you lovers, correct?”

“That’s correct.”

When she answered without hesitation, Linus snorted with laughter inexplicably behind her.

“Then, all that sexual harass... No, flirting... Er, your closeness as friends? In any case, your engagement means His Highness’ behavior now is understandable.”

“Well, I don’t understand it.”

“I believe that is something for you two to solve together.”

Management said those words brusquely, and Fiona realized she wasn’t wrong. Though her pleas to Linus had fallen on his seemingly deaf ears, she mustn’t give up on finding a solution through mutual discussion.

“Um, Your Highness.”

“Yes, Fiona?”

He peered at her from behind, his lips within touching distance of her ear. Blindingly dazzling as he was on the outside, Linus had a beautiful voice, too, and now her ear shrieked in delight. Fiona unconsciously shivered from the combined sensation of his breath and hair tickling her cheek.

“I can’t read documents like this. Please release me.”

She could not concentrate on anything held as she was on his lap. And considering his fatigue, it would be better to have him put her down for good anyway.

“Then how about we do this?”

As soon as he spoke, the arms wrapped around her waist moved, and her vision shook. By the time it settled again, she found herself sitting sideways on his lap and looking into his indigo eyes narrowed in amusement.

“That’s not what I meant. And this makes it even harder to go through the documents.”

“Gracious...is *that* what you’re concerned about?”

Management murmured something, and Budget nodded in response. See? Even from an outsider’s perspective, this position was not suited to reading papers.

“You want me to put you down?”

Fiona nodded forcefully, and Linus cast his eyes down sadly. When he looked at her like that with his beautiful face, it made her feel like *she* was at fault, and she wanted him to stop.

“As you wish, Fiona. I guess I have no choice.”

With that, he lifted her up easily and set her down on the sofa. As she reflected on the pleasure of having her posterior seated on furniture instead of him, Linus moved to sit next to her and began petting her hair.

Him touching her hair shouldn’t have been a problem because it was business

as usual. Or so she'd thought. But Linus' face was close. Far too close. If she turned her head to the side, all she would see was him, beaming relentlessly. So it was no wonder she felt bothered.

"Your Highness, please don't stare at me so."

"Why?"

"I can't focus when all I keep thinking about is you watching me."

Until now, he had sat next to her countless times to toy with her hair, but his face had never been this close. She could not fathom why he'd become so much more intimate.

"Fascinating. So you're thinking about me, huh, Fiona?"

"Huh? Well, yes, of course, given the circumstances."

Who wouldn't be when a beautiful face watched one from literally right by one's side?

"That makes me happy. Ridiculously happy."

Linus gave her a soft kiss on the cheek with a heart-melting smile, and Fiona automatically pulled back, putting some distance between them.

"Your Highness...you're acting sort of strange."

"Am I?"

"'Am I?' he says. You truly don't think so?"

When he asked her with a grin, she almost deluded herself into thinking *she* was in the wrong. Almost. Because she knew she could not lose this battle.

However, Budget and Management were staring at Fiona in exasperation.

"Respectfully, we are *not* getting involved in your tiff."

"It'll be fine. They've always been like that anyway."

Their dismissive attitudes made Fiona wonder if she was the odd one out. Her frown deepened alongside her confusion. Watching her, Linus reached out and gently stroked her head.

"Well, I should have expected as much in the beginning. Slow and steady,

hm?”

Fiona had no idea what exactly was supposed to be slow and steady, but he seemed to be in a good mood.

“Don’t forget, the ball is tomorrow. I’ve made arrangements for your dress to be ready on time.”

“A dress?”

She knew a ball dictated formalwear, yet as a commoner, the world of high society was unknown to her. Of course, she had no experience with such glamorous attire, so she was a bit nervous.

“Fear not, I know it will look lovely on you. How can it not when you’re so charming, Fiona?”

“And might I ask where you borrowed it from?”

“Borrow? The ball is your unveiling as a saint and the crown prince’s fiancée. Naturally, I had it tailored.”

“Which means it won’t be inexpensive, yes?”

Fiona’s brown eyes glittered. She didn’t know how much it cost to tailor a dress, but she was sure it was expensive because even readymade clothes weren’t cheap. As the Saint of Cost Performance, waste bothered her.

“The dress falls outside the scope of cost-effectiveness. It’s a necessary expense. After all, I’m the authority when it comes to social functions like balls and such, right?”

“Well, I suppose, since I’m not familiar with that side of life.”

She didn’t even know what a normal ball entailed, so it was hard to determine what was and wasn’t necessary, which was why she deferred to Linus’ opinions on the matter. Even so, Fiona could not accept the idea of money being spent on a dress for her.

“Everything related to your outfit I paid for out of my own funds. I didn’t burden the national coffers, so relax.”

“But that just means the burden was put on *you*, Your Highness.”

“I enjoy dressing up my adorable Fiona. Not to mention, I’m thrilled to introduce you as my fiancée in public. Though, *because* you’re adorable, a part of me doesn’t want to show you off to others... I guess I don’t have a choice since you’re a saint, too.”

Why wouldn’t the blasted man remember that their engagement was still only under consideration and not finalized? On top of that, she only understood half of what he said, so she wished he’d speak clearly for once.

“I knew it. Something *is* off with you, isn’t there?”

Fiona looked to Budget and Management for validation, but neither lifted their gazes from the documents.

“Respectfully, I reiterate that we are not getting involved in your tiff.”

“You’ll be fine. You’ve always been like that anyway.”

Would she? Had they? Her head cocked in confusion; she snuck a glance to the side and was met with Linus’ beautiful, smiling face.

“I’d say she’s less the Saint of Cost Performance and more the Saint of Impregnable Fortresses.”

“And he’s the crown prince who’s begun to launch a full-scale assault to break through said fortress with his arsenal...”

“What was that? I’m not sure I heard you.”

The two government officials whispering to each other jerked and straightened at Linus’ casual remark.

“We just thought you two make such a lovely couple!”

“Ah, I see. That makes me happy. Doesn’t that make you happy too, Fiona?”

Although the three of them smiled, something felt off about the varying degrees of warmth. There was definitely something strange afoot. Yet if asked what, she wouldn’t know how to answer.

“Right then, as reluctant as I am to part with my beloved, duty calls. Fiona, I’ll be picking you up tomorrow, so wait for me, hm?”

“Yes, understo—”

Before she even finished, Linus kissed her softly on the cheek. He was so close she could touch him. Ensnared by his eyes, she only stared at him in surprise, unable to move a muscle.

“See you soon.”

He smiled at her, and this time, kissed her on the forehead before exiting the office.

While Fiona blinked rapidly, Budget and Management covered their mouths as if desperately holding something back. She honestly wondered what in the world had happened to Linus. Yes, he had taken every opportunity to kiss her hair until now, but without warning, he had expanded the targets of his lips. Not to mention how awfully close he liked to get now. Perhaps his recent strange behavior coincided with the talk of their engagement. Nevertheless, she felt restless and troubled. He had always been by her side, so she really shouldn't have been bothered by him... And yet.

Curiously, her heart both raced frantically and floated dreamily. Fiona sighed quietly, even as she felt lost at sea by the mix of emotions.



## Chapter 6: Surprisingly, Nobles Prefer Close Contact

“...I feel like I’m marrying my daughter off.”

Charles had tears in his eyes when he finally saw Fiona in her finery. The custom-made dress Linus ordered for her had arrived in time for the ball. It was a pink-beige confection—gorgeous without being ostentatious. A gossamer top layer of fabric was threaded in gold embroidery from bust to skirt, and it shimmered and sparkled beautifully with her every moment.

The ribbon wound around her waist was the same pink-beige but made of a different, glossy fabric. An elegant rose made from the same fabric was set in the knot of the ribbon. Her gloves were white, and her hair was swept up into a loose chignon decorated with floral ornaments made from white and silver thread that set off her black hair splendidly.

Her necklace was silver inlaid with pink gemstones. She didn’t know the name of the gem, but she thought they were beautiful.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, sir, but you essentially are.”

Charles’ shoulders slumped in despair at Ada’s quip. Fiona privately thought they were both being much too dramatic.

“In any case, His Highness has a wonderful eye for style. Just as I expected. The whole outfit suits you well, Fiona, and you look so lovely.”

“But it’s too showy for me. I can’t settle down in it.”

Though she appreciated Ada’s compliments, she couldn’t be completely happy. Fiona was used to wearing her holy attire at work, and her regular clothes were even more plain. As someone who’d led an extremely normal life as a commoner, she found it difficult to adjust to such fine fabric and expensive jewels.

While she thought the dress was charming and glamorous, the mental strain she felt wearing it was tremendous.

“Fiona. You are simply ravishing.”

Linus exclaimed upon his arrival at the Everett residence. Those were the first words out of his mouth, and he fixed his narrowed eyes on Fiona. He continued showering her with praise for several minutes, but she wasn't in the proper frame of mind to accept them.

She had met Linus often over the past decade. Lately, they met regularly in the royal palace, but when she thought about it, this might be the first time she saw him in his formal wear.

The gold embroidery threaded through his deep gray jacket was exquisite, and his silver hair flowing down his back shone more brilliantly than usual. The white rose pinned to his chest added to his blinding beauty that could make anyone blush. Fiona should have been used to him by now, but even she breathed a sigh of wonder.

It wasn't just his superbly sculpted features but his aura overflowing with elegance, beauty, and sensuality. An absurdly perfect bachelor crown prince.

No wonder young noblewomen chased him relentlessly, one after another.

“The dress truly does become you, Fiona. And now, if I may, for the finishing touch.”

With that, Linus pulled out a white rose from somewhere and deftly pinned it to her bodice.

“You and I match.”

“Will everyone at the ball wear a rose then to match with each other?”

If so, that would create a serious challenge for flower shops. She didn't know how many people would be attending, but surely, the number couldn't be small, in which case, the florists would have a hard time growing enough roses to meet demand.

“No, I simply wanted to match with *you*, Fiona. How could I not when you're so adorable? Plus, I need to make sure no annoying pests bother you.”

Charles threw up his hands in exasperation at Linus' smile and remarked snarkily.

“What? It isn’t enough for you to declare she’s a saint and the top candidate to be your betrothed?”

“Not nearly enough, no. I want to flaunt her and make sure every man, woman, and child in the country knows. That’s the least I expect for someone so enchanting.”

She didn’t understand most of what he said, but she was fairly certain he was complimenting her all dressed up like this.

“Thank you very much. You as well are looking quite, er...marvelous, Your Highness.”

Just because it was natural for a gentleman to compliment a woman didn’t mean she wasn’t happy about it. While she had intended to thank Linus and compliment him on his beautiful appearance, Fiona stumbled over her words since she lacked experience saying such things to a man. In the end, that was all she could muster, and she regretted it, knowing she hadn’t expressed herself properly. Then she noticed him wide-eyed and frozen.

“Did...did you all hear that?”

Linus slowly, awkwardly, turned his head to the side, like a rusty automaton coming back to life after long years of disuse. She must be imagining the slight tremor in his voice.

“Did you hear what she said just now?”

“Yes, yes, we heard.”

Linus was unbothered by Ada brushing him off.

“You heard her, right?”

“I heard nothing.”

Charles vehemently denied him, but his words didn’t slide into Linus’ ears as the crown prince sighed deeply.

“I can’t believe the day has come when Fiona lauds me as marvelous and dashing. Not only that, she confesses she’s lost her heart to me.”

He looked radiant as he smiled happily, his cheeks a bit flushed. However, his

words sounded odd.

“Is it just me, or did you embellish a great deal?” she asked.

“It’s definitely just you.”

Linus didn’t miss a beat, which made Fiona flounder to refute.

“Well, I won’t deny you’re beautiful, Your Highness.”

Not only was he gorgeous and refined, but he practically oozed sex appeal. When she told him that simple truth, he clutched his chest, overcome with emotion.

“Charles, did you hear her? Fiona said she loves me.”

“Your Highness, I think you should get your ears and head examined soon.” She was worried about him because he kept interpreting her words differently than she intended.

“Heed me well, my lord. You will make every earnest effort to escort her like a gentleman. Is that clear?”

“I know, I know. Has there ever been a time when I *wasn’t* a gentleman?”

Linus was as gentlemanly as they came and a beautiful gentleman at that. But gentlemen didn’t kiss one’s hair, so it was uncertain if he was a gentleman in that sense.

“Until now, you have barely toed the line, but ever since you loosened the reins on your self-control, I’ve scented danger in the air. If you force Fiona to do anything, I won’t forgive you, royal status be damned. Remember that.”

“Of course. As if I would do something so stupid after all this time... Right then. Ready to go, Fiona?”

Linus slipped her hand into his and brought it to his lips with a brilliant smile. Then he helped her into the carriage and sat beside her instead of across from her. Never mind her usual attire as a priestess, today, she wore a dress. The voluminous folds took up a lot of space, so she didn’t understand why he would sit next to her.

Just as she was about to suggest he sit on the opposite bench, she noticed

him watching her intently with those indigo eyes. She feared the strength in his gaze would bore a hole through her and unconsciously pulled away from him just a bit, even though she should have been used to it by now.

“Um, is something the matter?”

“Not at all. Simply thinking what a truly divine vision you make.”

While the dress was undeniably lovely, something else bothered Fiona.

“I don’t know the price of the dress, but it must have cost a fortune, yes?”

“Well, it wasn’t cheap, that’s for sure. *However*. This is your debut as both a saint and my fiancée. Still, I did a decent job of keeping the costs down, if I do say so myself.”

“Then I apologize for the burden the arrangements must have placed on you, Your Highness.”

Although Fiona was grateful he hadn’t dipped into the treasury for the outfit, ultimately, she was causing Linus trouble. He told her not to worry about it, but how could she not when such a fine dress was right before her eyes? Just thinking about how much it cost scared her.

“Money is no object when it comes to you, Fiona.”

While fiddling with her black hair, Linus smiled cheekily.

“Um, Your Highness.”

“Yeeesss, my dear?”

He wound strands around his fingers this way and that as he grinned at her. Truly astounding what a beautiful picture he made regardless of his actions.

“I feel that you’ve been behaving strangely lately.”

“Oh? How so?”

Not even a hint of shadow lurked in his shining eyes, which made her question whether she was wrong about her suspicion, so she’d appreciate it if he stopped.

“You’re always extremely close, and you kiss me everywhere. It’s made me wonder why now and why all of a sudden.”

“All of a sudden, hm?”

Linus smiled wryly and released her hair, the black tresses spiraling back toward her.

“If you twist my arm, I’d say I was holding back until now. But I made a promise to Charles, and I don’t want to push you either, Fiona. So slow and steady.”

He stroked her cheek, his finger almost gliding down it. The sensation made her shiver involuntarily.

“Slow and steady at what though?”

“That...is still a secret.”

He pressed his lips to her cheek, which brought his smiling face much too close for comfort. Her chest tightened for some reason, and she hurriedly looked away from him. He had delighted in invading her personal space until now without remorse, yet something felt different about his recent behavior, especially at the moment. Fiona suspected she was overwhelmed by how beautiful Linus was in his formal raiments.

A beautiful prince in full dress was nothing more than a weapon of destruction. And a commoner like Fiona stood no chance against him. By his “slow and steady,” he must have meant helping ease her into situations like this. It was likely his way of showing his consideration.

Convinced by her logic, she nodded to herself. Then, his hand appeared in front of her face.

“Here, Fiona.”

A necklace made of bluish-purple stones emitting a translucent shine rested on his palm.

“How lovely.”

“This is from me to you. I tried to make it as simple as possible, so I want you to wear it.”

“Do you mean all the time?”

Members of the clergy weren't forbidden from wearing jewelry, but she hesitated to walk around carrying such an expensive necklace. And being a saint in the present didn't change her thoughts on the matter.

"Until now, Fiona, you weren't let out...I mean, you never left the Temple. As the pontiff's aide, you only ever interacted with the high priests, whom we won over... Still, not many of them knew your face either. But things will be different from now on, so I need you to wear that as an insect repellent. Will you? For me?"

"Insect repellent? I didn't know the necklace had such an effect. It will come quite in handy when I'm harvesting medicinal herbs."

On top of using magic, her job also involved creating medicine. However, she often worried about bug bites when she ventured into the forest to look for medicinal plants and herbs. Burning insect-repellent incense helped, but it made the air too smoky, so wearing a necklace would be far more convenient.

"Charlies and I did everything in our power to make sure no irritating pests clung to you, though thanks to our efforts, you ended up exceedingly naive. But I think that's adorable too."

Linus muttered to himself as he hooked the necklace around Fiona's throat. Her brown eyes sparkled with excitement over the piece of jewelry, and she barely heard him. The stones felt cold when they touched her skin. Just as the thought flashed through her mind, he lifted the necklace and pressed his lips to a beautiful gem.

All she could do was stare at the beautiful painting he made. Then, she finally realized something when he lifted his head, and she stared directly into his eyes.

"These stones are almost the same color as yours, Your Highness."

Both were a clear bluish-purple, and the depth of the hue changed depending on the angle. Truly stunning.

"That's right. Which is exactly why I want you to wear it, Fiona."

Unable to endure the combined power of his glittering gaze and beaming smile, she unconsciously looked away from him. Linus wasn't the only strange

one recently. Fiona could give him a run for his money in the strangeness department.

He had been by her side for so long as a precious older brother figure, so why did her heart feel so restless now?

“So...I’m having some effect, after all, hm?”

“What?”

He whispered so softly she couldn’t make out what he said. In response to her questioning sound, he merely smiled and kissed her hand.

“Nothing at all. Oh, look, we’re almost there. I’m looking forward to the ball, my cherished saint.”

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“**THE** glare makes my eyes hurt.”

Once their carriage arrived at the royal palace, Fiona and Linus made their way to the venue, where she was met with one surprise after another.

The space was several times larger than the royal audience chamber and illuminated by several chandeliers. The shiny floors displayed intricate patterns set in stone, and the number of people dancing to the music played by the orchestra were more than she could have ever imagined. On top of all that, everyone in attendance wore stunning outfits complemented by luxurious accessories.

Everything and everyone sparkled so brilliantly, blindingly, that her eyes stung.

The scrumptious spread piqued her interest, but this world she had stepped into was so different from anything she knew that it was all just too much for her.

When the king introduced her as the Saint of Cost Performance, Fiona had been certain there would be some backlash. Surprisingly, there had been no opposition, perhaps because no one would directly defy their ruler.

However, that was a separate issue from whether or not the people would *accept* the existence of a saint. At the mention of how her ability emphasized



cost-effectiveness through waste reduction, a few individuals' expressions became stormy. She suspected they had been directly affected by the waste reduction policies she'd implemented. A request had been submitted for a wig replacement budget for this ball, too, so some of these folks might bear a grudge on that front.

*Protect your own darn wigs.* Fiona sent the thought fiercely through her mind.

For some time now, she'd been trying to distract herself by thinking of these and various other topics, but it was still too difficult to keep her eyes fully open against the overwhelming glitter around her. When she sighed quietly, Linus, standing next to her, looked at her in concern.

"Fiona, are you tired?"

She definitely was. If she said so out loud, she knew he would swiftly get her out of there because he was a kind man. Unfortunately, as the resident saint, she couldn't leave so early, so she decided to bear with it a little longer.

"No, I'm fine. Um, I'd like to visit the washroom."

"Ah, of course. Let me ask one of the staff to guide you."

That was the reprieve Fiona granted herself, and a maidservant led her to the powder room. Normally, the wide corridors in the palace would make her nervous, but the fact that they weren't lit to a blinding shine by chandeliers soothed her weary mind.

After taking care of her needs, she stepped outside the washroom, knowing she needed to return to the ballroom. However, she walked slowly to enjoy the calm atmosphere as much as possible. As she ambled, Fiona saw a beautifully dressed flock heading her way.

Evidently, young ladies of good breeding *also* visited the facilities in groups. One truly learned something new every day, and the new discovery pleased her. Then, the cluster of women stopped in front of her.

"*You* are the saint? What is this 'cost performance' nonsense anyway?"

Fiona had become sick of the mountains of lip service she'd been subject to thus far, so being questioned in such a direct manner was refreshing. She

straightened her spine and stared thoughtfully at the golden-haired girl.

“It means evaluating something’s efficacy against its expense. When low costs produce high results, we call that cost-effective. Moving forward, I intend to focus on eliminating waste and increasing cost performance.”

“Ugh, it was a *rhetorical* question.”

Grim-faced, the maidservant had been watching the girl stalk closer to Fiona and rushed to stand in front of her protectively. When she did, the young noblewoman ominously scowled and shoved the servant aside. She didn’t even spare the woman a glance as she stumbled and fell on the floor. The flaxen-haired girl simply exhaled.

“You may be a saint, but this cost-performance business is questionable, in *my* opinion. Not to mention, I heard you were originally a *priestess*. I cannot *believe* His Highness, ever so kind as he is... *Excuse* me! Are you listening to me?!”

“Are you hurt?”

Fiona helped the maidservant up, and the woman promptly smacked the dust off her skirt. She only had light scratches on her palms, no serious injuries otherwise.

“You are so uncouth,” the girl snapped.

“Don’t tell us you’re actually going to ignore Lady Mulligan?” One of her hangers-on exclaimed.

Now she knew why the girl looked familiar. She was the same one Fiona had talked to during Linus’ sword training with the knights. As the daughter of Prime Minister Mulligan, it was clear she came from a family of good standing, not to mention how splendid she looked in her ballgown.

But that was all there was to her.

“Why do I have to listen to anything you say?” Fiona retorted.

“*Why*, you ask?! Because I’m the prime minister’s daughter, of course!”

The girl’s tone was pitiful and admonishing, yet her answer made no sense to Fiona.

“Then a prime minister’s daughter can just push others aside without care or decency?”

Annoyed, the young lady sighed and finally shifted her gaze next to Fiona.

“That’s a *servant*. It’s *her* fault for standing in my way.”

“In which case, all you had to do was ask her politely to move. Words exist to be used, you know.”

Fiona still held the maidservant’s hands in hers. When she focused on them, beads of light danced in the air, and her abrasions vanished.

“Thank you very much, Lady Saint.”

“I’m glad there won’t be any scars. Shall we go then?”

“Stop right there, you. Goodness, you are *so* rude!”

“Hm, I’d have to agree to disagree on that.”

Just as the pack of young ladies, led by the prime minister’s daughter, began attacking Fiona verbally, a clear, beautiful voice resonated around them. Unable to resist it, they turned in the direction from which it came and saw Linus standing there.

His formalwear accentuated his silver hair and indigo eyes, making him unimaginably more beautiful than any dolled-up noblewoman. Even though he had been right next to her until a short time ago, seeing his impeccable figure again brought a dreamy sigh to Fiona’s lips.

Everyone else curtsied respectfully at the crown prince, but Fiona was spectacularly late on the uptake and remained the only one with her head up. Impressed by the young ladies and the maidservant, she hurriedly dipped into a belated curtsy.

“I was wondering what took you so long, so I came to check on you. Only to find *this*. What business might you have with Fiona, Lady Mulligan?”

Linus strode over to her and surveyed them from his position by her side. Although his smile was as lovely as always, panic bloomed on the women’s faces as if they felt guilty or uneasy.

“I-I simply wanted to have a chat with her.”

“By all means, then.”

“Oh, no, it’s not important enough to impose on your time, Your Highness.”

His smile broadened when he looked up and away from the gaggle of aristocratic young women.

“Such beautiful beads of light. Fiona, you used your magic, didn’t you? I wonder why.”

“Begging your pardon, Your Highness, but the Lady Saint did so heal my wounds.”

The maidservant answered him plaintively. His gaze switched between her and the frowning young ladies. Then he exhaled quietly. They all let out muffled shrieks at the sensuality in his action.

“Fiona is the saint our country summoned and the woman who will be my fiancée. Make sure you don’t forget that.”

The cluster of genteel women nodded even as they trembled at the sight of his incredibly gorgeous smile. Once he saw they understood, Linus took Fiona’s hand and began walking.

“Um, Your Highness.”

Since he had come here to escort her back *and* he’d come to her defense, she knew she needed to explain the circumstances to him. But Linus only smiled when he looked at Fiona. Despite him being all smiles until now, this particular one was more gentle than the others.

“Let me guess. They tried to pick a quarrel with you, and she got hurt protecting you, right?”

“I couldn’t prevent any of it from happening, and for that, I apologize.”

The maidservant bowed her head in penance as she spoke, but Linus stopped her with a raised hand.

“Don’t worry. There wasn’t much you could do without serious repercussions considering the other party was the prime minister’s daughter. The fact that

Fiona isn't hurt is more than enough. You may take your leave."

The woman curtsied. After she left, Linus let go of Fiona's hand. She'd been standing there silently during their exchange.

"Now, won't you tell me what they said?"

"Ummm, well, I explained to them the definition of cost performance, then without warning, their mood turned sour."

Their displeasure had been clear after she'd told them, so perhaps her explanation had been too complicated to understand?

"I see, I see. The truth is, I was thinking of taking you home because I suspected you were tired, Fiona. But will you stay with me for a little while longer?"

"Where are we going?"

She seriously doubted he wanted her to accompany him to the lavatory, which begged the question of where exactly he planned on taking her in the middle of a ball.

"You see, I think it's best to nip things in the bud as early as possible."

Linus stretched his hand out to Fiona, his captivating eyes locked on her.

"My beloved saint. Won't you grant me the privilege of a dance?"

She blinked in awe at his painting-perfect gesture.

"Um, I don't think I'll be good at it, though."

Born and raised a commoner, she had no notion of what the dances of nobility entailed. Though her answer had been honest, he only let out a strained chuckle.

"Fiona, at times like this, you're supposed to say, 'It would be my pleasure' with a pretty blush on your cheeks."

"But I can't dance, so..."

"Don't worry. You're in good hands."

She was quite worried. However, if Linus insisted, then she couldn't very well

refuse him out of hand.

When she reluctantly placed her hand in his, he gripped it firmly. And when he smiled at her, she thought everything would be fine. It was the strangest feeling.

Holding her hand, he led her back to the ballroom, where they entered the circle of dancers on the dancefloor. However, she couldn't conceal her surprise at how close they were, with his arm around her waist and his other hand clasping her own.

"A-Aren't we too close?"

However much used to his affectionate nature, she couldn't help feeling nervous about their bodies being so close in front of all these people.

"Not at all."

Prompted by his pointed gaze, she looked around them and saw the other dancing pairs had just as much, or little in this case, space between them. There was even a couple who locked eyes so ardently with each other that it embarrassed her to look at them.

"I think I understand now. Surprisingly, nobles prefer close contact. Is that why you're so unrestrained about closing the distance between us, Your Highness?"

For some time, she'd been wondering why he'd been so strangely close to her recently, and she wondered if it had merely been practice to interact with nobles in public as a saint. He must have wanted to help accustom her to the social mores of high society so she didn't embarrass herself or the royal family.

"Goodness, you're so kind, Your Highness."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes, I do. You've been that way since we first met ten years ago, like a precious older brother to me."

Linus led her slowly because Fiona still wasn't used to dancing. Her lack of dancing ability wasn't his problem to manage, yet he remained considerate of her in this regard.

“Older brother, huh...”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said such a rude thing to you, Your Highness.”

She picked up on the hint of coolness in his tone and rushed to apologize. No matter how comfortable he was with her, he was ultimately this nation’s crown prince. So for a mere priestess...well, she was a saint now technically. In any case, for someone like her to refer to him as a brotherly figure was beyond discourteous.

“No, it’s fine. Because I did my best to play that exact role for the last decade. You’re right on that score, Fiona. *But.*”

Linus pressed down on her lower back and pulled her even closer to him. They were so close that saying she was in his embrace wouldn’t be an understatement. Fiona vaguely heard shocked exclamations from around them.

“From now on, I’m your fiancé. And I don’t want you to forget that.”

Smiling, he traced a finger down her cheek, the movement almost gliding. This time, the shrieks in the vicinity sounded much shriller and clearer. Regardless of the nobility’s preference for close contact, the outraged sounds told her Linus’ behavior marked a deviation from the norm.

“I thought our engagement was still under consideration?”

“Well, in my heart, there’s only one answer.”

He moved the hand stroking her cheek to cup the back of her head and gently dropped a kiss on her forehead. The shrieks became full-fledged screams now and echoed in the ballroom. But Linus’ expression remained serene as he beamed at her.

“Fiona, hurry up and *look* at me, hm?”

## Chapter 7: The Truth of This World

**“HAAAH.”**

Fiona sighed heavily inside the palace’s reference room. She hadn’t planned on visiting the palace today, but the need to research various things upended that. She would have preferred her usual office, except Linus would inevitably show up.

Despite the *carte blanche* he took when it came to kissing her hair, she hadn’t minded it because she’d believed his behavior stemmed from his overflowing love for black hair. However, the Linus of late was a different story. He constantly invaded her personal space. He was always much too close and touched her much too often.

While she appreciated his attempts to help her adjust to aristocrats’ preference for close contact, Fiona was a commoner through and through. Even she was starting to wonder if he was going overboard with the kisses on her cheek and forehead in public.

She also had a bone to pick with Budget and Management. Why did they never stop him? Management had told her that gentlemen didn’t kiss one’s hair, yet Fiona found it strange that the other woman left Linus alone whenever he pressed his lips, not just to her hair but her cheek as well.

And Linus, the rogue, knowing no one could stop him, petted Fiona’s black hair endlessly. When opportunity struck, he’d wrap his arms around her and kiss her all over. He was turning into a beautiful, sexually harassing gentleman. She worried whether it was acceptable for a crown prince to be like this.

To break the deadlock of the situation, Fiona had suggested a few days ago that she could learn about nobles’ preference for physical closeness from others. His reaction remained burned in her mind even now. No trace of dark emotion had clouded his beautiful face, yet his aura had instantly transformed from the warmth of a midsummer sun to the extreme cold in the dead of



winter.

Budget had trembled uncontrollably and lost the ability to speak. Management, meanwhile, clung desperately to Fiona's arm and beseeched her with the mysterious words, "Recant. Please recant your statement! Before the halls of the palace are awash in blood!"

For whatever inexplicable reason, she at least understood that their lives had been in danger. Fiona's instincts had told her as much, so she'd given into Management's plea and retracted her suggestion. In response, Linus, his attitude threatening, had muttered something along the lines of, "I thought slow and steady would win the race, but at this rate, someone might steal her from me, so perhaps the time has come to show no mercy." In the meantime, Budget and Management wept with relief and held hands, overjoyed at still being alive.

Unable to comprehend the sequence of events but recognizing that stopping Linus' sexual harassment was too dangerous, Fiona continued to be on the losing side of her and Linus' close-quarters battle.

Frankly, he made her feel restless. She wished he would rein it in a bit.

She sighed again, then began reading through the pile of documents stacked in front of her. She needed to set some priorities regarding developing the national highway infrastructure, which meant learning about the industries of the towns and cities on the major roads. Apparently, there was also a knack for laying down flagstones on places that saw heavy carriage and cart traffic. Or so she'd heard. Fiona felt guilty about delegating everything to the government officials and tradesfolk, so she'd decided she had to study the topic as well.

By the time she finished poring through a large number of reference materials, dusk had already fallen outside the window. Thinking it was time to go home, she tidied all the papers, but when she put her hand on the door, it refused to budge.

"Is the lock broken?"

Though Fiona didn't remember locking the door, it showed signs of age. Perhaps she had accidentally locked herself in by pushing the door closed earlier.

“No matter, a patrol will come by eventually.”

It wasn't as if she was trapped in the middle of a forest. Neither would she be in danger should she be forced to spend the night here. However, she'd likely catch a cold if she slept here, so she might as well stay up flipping through more documents.

In the worst-case scenario, she could simply jump out of the window if she wanted to leave. Knowing she wouldn't pass up this opportunity to gain more knowledge, Fiona sat back down in a chair and opened a book.

After reading several volumes and returning them to the shelves, a book sporting the word “saint” on the cover caught her eye. It would be perfect for a change of pace, so she picked it up, sat down again, and began flipping through it.

“‘Black hair is the sign of a saint. Saints are not born in the surrounding region, including the Kingdom of Gene.’ Hm... I see.”

Which meant Fiona must have been born in a far, faraway land. As far as she knew, no one had searched for her, so there must have been a reason for her exile. Or perhaps she had been sold. By no means was she praising the practice, but she'd heard stories of poor families selling their children to reduce the number of mouths to feed. She wondered if that was how she ended up in this country.

*...I really don't remember anything about that day a decade ago.*

She'd found herself cocooned in light upon regaining consciousness. When she had been terrified and didn't know what to do, Linus took her hand.

*“I'll protect you, Fiona. So, in exchange, stay by my side forever.”*

He'd said those words to encourage the girl who'd lost her memories. She knew they hadn't meant much to him, and he'd probably already forgotten them by now. Even so, they had been the light breaking through the darkness anxiety had created in her heart and the lifeline she had needed to survive in this world.

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**AND** then, something happened about a month after Charles adopted her. By then, Fiona had adapted to her new life bit by bit and had slowly started interacting with the people around her. That was also when she finally understood Linus' position as a prince of this nation, but she hadn't yet figured out how friendly or distant she should be with him. By then, she'd also learned that princes couldn't play forever. So, hoping for normal friends, she started playing with the neighborhood children.

On that fateful day, Fiona accidentally heard the children's parents talking.

"Her black hair. I don't know where she even came from, but she would be an easy target to find if someone was searching for her. I hate to say this...but she might be a criminal from a foreign country."

"Well, I know black hair is a sign of a saint. But she seems to be a useless freeloader. I feel awful for Lord Everett because a man in the prime of his youth shouldn't be forced to take in a child like that."

"I heard the prince comes to see her secretly, so perhaps the situation is akin to keeping an exotic pet."

"I heard she talks to him like they're equals and even touches him. I understand she lacks common sense, but goodness, there *has* to be a limit."

Unable to withstand the mocking laughter, Fiona ran, desperate to flee that awful place. She just wanted to go somewhere where no one was, and before she knew it, she found herself on top of a small hill. It was the same place Linus had taken her countless times. She loved it because of the wonderful view of the city from the hilltop.

The places she knew, the house she lived in, and even the name Fiona were all things given to her. The only reason she could even live this life was thanks to Linus and Charles. And yet, on top of being useless, all she did was cause trouble for them.

There was no guarantee she wasn't a criminal; Charles' prospects for marriage became distant after adopting her, and as far as Linus was concerned, she was simply a good deed. Someday, a day might come when they grew weary of her. When she became a hindrance...and when it did, they would throw her away.

As soon as she realized this, tears welled up in her eyes. She clenched her fists, trying her hardest not to cry, but she couldn't stop her vision from blurring.

Though Fiona could speak, she had only recently learned the alphabet. She still lacked a proper understanding of many general customs, and since she was still a child, she doubted anyone would hire her even if she sought work. Not to mention, her striking black hair would probably be the first reason no one would employ her.

Despite seeing the shambles her life would be in if Linus and Charles abandoned her, a different emotion dwelled in her heart.

"...I'm scared."

As the words spilled from her lips, she slowly crouched down. With the way her head hung down, her tears fell freely, creating tiny, wet splotches on the ground.

Linus and Charles were so incredibly kind, and she didn't think they'd abandon her. But those dark thoughts were born from the helplessness and fear Fiona felt at the thought of separating from them, the two who were the root of who she was now.

At the very least, she needed to make herself useful. Not just take, but also be able to give. If she gained a little more confidence in herself, could she stay by their sides?

She helped Ada with chores like cleaning and laundry and could even cook a few simple dishes now. However, Fiona didn't *have* to be the one to do all those things. Anyone else could do them.

"Oh, I see now... I want to be needed."

She didn't want to cause trouble for Linus and Charles. She just wanted them to want *her* to stay. Fiona felt like she understood the true colors of the vague apprehension overwhelming her and that knowledge lightened her heart a bit.

"Fiona!"

When she jerked her head up in surprise at the shout, she saw Linus running

toward her. Unlike his usual relaxed self, he looked panicked. She wondered if something happened.

Standing up, she stared in a daze at his silver hair gleaming brilliantly under the sunlight. The closer he got, the more thunderous his expression grew.

“What happened?!”

As soon as he was in front of her, he reached out and touched her cheek. For several long moments, his beautiful indigo eyes ensnared hers before she finally remembered she’d been crying. Fiona rushed to wipe away her tears, and he offered her his handkerchief. That was when she saw the red streak in his hand.

“Your Highness, you’re hurt!”

“It’s just a scratch. Don’t worry about it. You’re more important, Fiona.”

Fiona held on tightly to his hand, wiping her tears with a handkerchief, not wanting to let go. A kind boy who put her tears first even though he himself was hurt. At the very least, she wanted to give back something to him.

“If only I could heal your wound.”

In response to the words she blurted out without thought, tiny spheres of light appeared around Fiona. The little lights flickered cheerfully in the air, unconcerned by her shock, then just as quickly vanished.

“What were those lights just now...?”

When she first met Linus, many beads of light, just like them, had danced around her, but this was the first time she’d seen them since then. Bemused, she dropped her gaze, and the red streak in his hand was nowhere to be found.

“I believe that was healing magic.”

“So you can use magic, Your Highness?”

“No. I’m almost positive it was yours, Fiona.”

She didn’t remember having magic, but Linus wouldn’t lie to her. Did that mean Fiona had the disposition to utilize healing magic? The moment she realized that, it suddenly felt like she saw things in a new light.

“I heard that healing magic is fundamental for the clergy.”

“That’s right. The strength of each person’s power varies, but that’s the minimum requirement to enter the Temple.”

“Then—I’ll become a priestess.”

Since Charles was a priest, she generally understood what the job entailed. Aside from using healing magic, priests and priestesses also used the power of prayer to drive monsters away. They played a vital role in society. She’d heard that not anyone could become a clergy member, so Fiona wondered if she worked hard enough, they would accept her.

Even if the healing magic she just used was a fluke, she knew that by dedicating herself wholeheartedly to her studies and putting in her best effort, she should be able to control the magic on her own.

“But, Fiona, you’re—”

“I’ll work hard. I’ll do my best to be useful to you and everyone else, Your Highness.”

What if someone told her she couldn’t take on such an important duty because she was an outsider? Then, she would ask Charles to at least teach her healing magic.

Linus stared at her contemplatively for some time before he sighed deeply.

“You know you don’t have to try to be useful or anything like that... All you have to do is just be there.”

“I’m sorry?”

She knew he said something, but his voice was so low that she couldn’t make out the words. At her questioning comment, he narrowed his eyes and gently patted Fiona on the head.

“All right. I’ll ask Charles to have you accepted as an apprentice priestess.”

“Thank you very much, Your Highness!”

Now, she could help Linus and the others, even if it was just a little, and repay the debt she owed them. A smile bloomed on her face, and in her joy, she unconsciously squeezed his hand tightly in hers. Then, with a gasp of realization at what she’d done, she hurriedly released it. He didn’t miss a beat; he scooped

her hand into his this time and held tight.

“Why did you let me go just now?”

“Your Highness, you’re a prince, so casually talking to and touching you demonstrated a severe lack of common sense.”

“Who was it? Who said something so stupid and unnecessary?”

The aggravated click of his tongue didn’t suit his lovely face, but not a second later, Linus cupped her hand between both of his.

“You can do whatever you want to me, Fiona. Talking, touching, you’re free to do as you like. I’ll touch you too, so that makes it fair, right?”

Well, in a sense, it was fair, but she had the distinct feeling that they were two ships passing in the night as far as the core of their discussion was concerned.

“The truth is, I, too, want to be free to do as I wish, but I have a lot of things to take care of before I can accomplish that. I promised Charles. So, for now, I’ll content myself with your hands and hair.”

Fiona didn’t know what Linus meant, but she at least understood he would be touching her hair and hands.

“Your Highness, you don’t dislike black hair?”

“Perish the thought. Who could ever hate such a beautiful color? In fact, I don’t just like it...I love it.”

Then he picked up a lock of her hair and grinned. Today, as well, he melted her worries with his smile and words. He accepted her as she was, flaws and all. The warmth unfurling in her chest comforted her to no end. All she wanted to do was let herself be spoiled by his kindness...but she couldn’t do that.

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*“I’LL protect you, Fiona. So, in exchange, stay by my side forever.”*

For Fiona, those words were the truth of this world. The cornerstone of her heart. If Linus said he would protect her, then she wanted to become someone worthy of his protection. But she didn’t just want to be protected. She wanted

to stand proudly by his side.

A precious promise, a precious person, a precious place.

She refused to lose any of that, so Fiona decided she would do everything she could and more. She felt only gratitude to Linus and Charles for watching over her this last decade. If she had proved even a little useful to them as a fake saint, then her black hair wasn't such a terrible thing. The thought made her smile.

The matter of the saint, this country's history, the materials needed to make cobblestones shock-and sound-absorbent. While she absorbed herself in consuming all sorts of books, she vaguely heard a commotion outside the door.

When Fiona looked through the window, she saw the moon high in the sky, indicating quite a few hours had passed. Were the knights training in the middle of the night, then? As she tried to immerse herself again in her book, the doorknob suddenly rattled. Startled, she jumped up, and after a moment of heavy silence, the door blasted open with a thunderous roar.

"Fiona!"

Dumbstruck, she could only stare as a beautiful young man with silver hair flew inside the room and snatched her up in his arms.

"Heavens above, I'm glad you're safe. Once I heard you'd disappeared and no one knew where you went... You have no idea how worried I was."

Linus squeezed her so tightly that she struggled to breathe. From above her head, his rough breaths, strangely erotic to her ear, enveloped her. He had hugged her countless times and even held her extremely close during the dance at the ball.

But, somehow, this time was different from all the others. Despite the restless ache in her chest, his embrace satisfied something within her and warmed her heart. What exactly *was* this feeling?

"Why are you here, of all places?"

"Um, I think the lock broke. Though I think we should be more concerned about the door itself."



It lay sadly on the floor, sporting a gaping hole.

“Ah, right. It’s fine since I’m the one who broke it.”

Any way she looked at it, it was most definitely *not* fine. Something else bothered her, too.

“But how did you even...?”

The door was incredibly thick, not the type to come off with a push.

“I kicked it open.”

“You kicked it. Open.”

Her eyes widened in astonishment at the unexpected action from the always gentle Linus. At the same time, she felt a jolt of surprise at the realization he possessed the strength to destroy a door like that.

“Fiona!”

While she blinked in amazement within Linus’ arms, Charles charged through the damaged frame of the dearly departed door. He spared a single scowl at the fallen door before rushing over to her.

“Fiona, I was worried because you were late. I assumed His Highness refused to let you go, so I stormed over to his office to get you, only for him to tell me he had no idea where you were. I lost too many years of my life right then and there... Incidentally, my lord, would you kindly set her free already?”

“No. I don’t want to.”

Linus’ hold on her tightened even more. When a croak like a frog stomped to death escaped from Fiona’s lips, he hurriedly loosened his grip.

“She’ll be staying in the palace tonight.”

“Your Highness! That would be highly improper!”

Linus slowly shook his head in response to Charles’ uncharacteristically sharp tone.

“It’s for her safety, so relax. Summon Ada, please.”

“Well then...in that case.”

Just when his hold finally slackened, Linus suddenly lifted her into a princess carry.

“What?! I can walk, you know?!”

“I don’t want to make you walk.”

“I’m sorry?!”

Fiona sent a baffled glance at Charles, who patted her head, his expression conflicted.

“Just do what he says for now. Lord, I was so worried...”

Lost at sea, she nodded obediently, and Linus carried her off, striding imperiously through the palace. On the way, several members of the palace staff saw them, which embarrassed her terribly, but he was unfazed. As expected of a crown prince used to being the center of attention. She couldn’t help being impressed by his attitude.

They entered a room through a snow-white door, and he gently lowered her onto a sofa inside.

“Your Highness, I apologize sincerely for making you worry.”

“It’s fine. I have an idea what happened to the door. The same person is probably responsible for nobody notifying me of your presence in the palace, Fiona.”

She didn’t know why Linus’ eyes narrowed menacingly. At first, she thought it might have something to do with the lock on the door failing, but she was likely wrong.

“In any case, I’m just glad you’re all right, Fiona. So, tell me what you were doing there in the first place?”

“Research.”

“The whole time?”

“When I tried to leave to go home, the door wouldn’t open, so I saw it as my chance to read up on a variety of topics.”

His eyes widened in surprise at her reply before he let out a strained laugh.

“Huh. I see. You know, Fiona, at times like that, you’re supposed to shout, ‘Help me!’”

“I didn’t think the situation was that grave.”

“In hindsight, sure. But what if something had happened that couldn’t be undone... Land’s sake, I was terrified for you.”

Linus wrapped his arms around Fiona. She wondered if she hallucinated the gleam of tears in his eyes. That’s how serious they looked, so she could only nod.

“I’m sorry it took me so long to notice, even though you were literally in the palace.”

“What? No, how could you have known? You mustn’t blame yourself... Wait a moment. You’re notified every time I visit the royal palace, Your Highness?”

It was one thing if she had business with him, but she thought it unnecessary when her work here had nothing to do with him. What was the meaning of that?

“Of course I am. After all, you’re my dearest fiancée. ”

Linus’ indigo eyes were far too close because she looked up at him, so Fiona hurriedly faced downward. That only ended up burying her face in his chest, which didn’t improve the situation for her at all. She tried pushing against him with her hands to create some distance between them, and he gave in with a wry huff, loosening his arms just the slightest bit.

“Um, I also read up on saints, that no one with black hair is born in the surrounding region and that it’s a sign of a saint.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Right now, my hair works in our favor since I’m playing the part of a fake saint. But please keep in mind that should things turn ugly in the future, you’re free to throw me to the wolves.”

“That’s not going to happen. I hate even the idea of it. So no.”

Fiona sighed in exasperation when Linus responded without hesitation and patted her head.

“Goodness, do you love black hair so much?”

“I won’t say I don’t.”

He grinned as he scooped up a skein of her tresses.

“There’s no way I’m letting you go now, Fiona, not after all this time.”

The way he pressed his lips against her hair made him as pretty as a picture. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from the sight. A sight she’d seen too many times to count over the past ten years. Though Linus remained steadfastly beautiful, something felt different about him now.

Smile broadening, he lifted his head and reached towards Fiona’s cheek.

“And that is where we shall call a halt.”

Fiona jerked in surprise at the sudden remark. When she looked to the door, she found Ada standing there with her hands on her hips.

“Well, hell and damn, you sure got here fast. You know you could have taken your time.”

“I had a feeling you’d say exactly that, which is why I rushed right over.”

Linus laughed at Ada, who curtsied ever so politely at him, then stroked Fiona’s crown.

“You must be tired, right? Go to sleep now.”

She didn’t even have time to reply before he dropped a kiss on her forehead and walked out of the room.

“Good grief. That young man is a pain in my backside. He hasn’t changed at all in a decade.”

“Be that as it may, he told me to stay the night for my safety because I’m a saint, albeit an imposter.”

The measure must have been necessary to quell the commotion, especially since he mentioned something about her disappearing.

“You are most categorically wrong on that score, Fiona, darling.”

“You’re right. His Highness has always been kind, so he must have simply

been worried about me.”

After all, he was the same person who’d picked up Fiona after she lost her memories at the age of ten and watched over her since then.

“I’m not saying he isn’t kind. However. He’s very selective about the company he keeps. Or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say his attachment to some is powerful... Well, someone who doesn’t notice that is also amazing in her own right.”

“Ada?”

The Everetts’ housekeeper mumbled something to herself, but her voice was so low Fiona only caught confusing snatches.

“They kept you far from even the notion of romance and discouraged everyone around with all their might. Those two only have themselves to blame for raising such a splendidly oblivious individual.”

Ada smiled cheerfully and gently patted Fiona on the head.

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**THE** bed in the royal palace was softer and more comfortable than she could have ever imagined. The instant she found herself cocooned in its plushness, she lost her battle against fatigue and slept deeply until morning. After she and Ada went through their morning rituals and readied themselves to head home, a knock sounded on the door. When she opened it, Linus and Charles were standing outside.

“My father has summoned us. Seems the prime minister wants to discuss something... I’m guessing he’s done sneaking around in the shadows, hm?”

“Your Highness, you’ll give someone nightmares with that face, so please take care.”

Linus continued to smile as Charles pulled on his cheeks. Confused, Fiona followed the two of them to the audience chamber. Before long, the king and the prime minister arrived.

As soon as the formal greetings were conducted, the prime minister sneered at her.

“Fiona Everett, the so-called Saint of Cost Performance, is an imposter!”

All she could do was widen her eyes in surprise at the bombshell revelation. Though the man’s words were true, acknowledging them here would also affect the others. How could she ensure that the blame fell on her and her alone?

“Putting aside the matter of your disrespect in bringing this up, do you have any proof?”

Seeing how calm Linus and Charles looked, Fiona guessed their angle of attack was that the prime minister was making false accusations. In which case, she couldn’t interfere. For now, she waited for the prime minister’s answer and watched how events unfolded.

“I’ve never heard of a soul being summoned, nor is there any written record of such. What the ‘saint’ is doing is simple budget embezzlement.”

“Even though she achieved results as a saint?”

“The reduction of floods and the increase in crop yields is thanks to the repairs on the levees and bridges. Those things can’t be directly attributed to the saint’s power.”

Too right. Perhaps the only reason this country could even function with a middle-aged daydreaming king was because of the prime minister. As a citizen herself, she felt the need to convey her gratitude.

“Let’s suppose you’re right. Which begs the question. Who was even approving the wasteful budgets in the first place without doing the proper due diligence, hm?”

When Linus, all smiles, pointed that out, the prime minister was temporarily at a loss for words. The man cleared his throat uncomfortably several times before continuing.

“Moreover, the knights were the ones who defeated the monsters at the lake. Not to mention a local priest contained the spread of the corruption too.”

“Have you forgotten that Fiona purified the monsters and the lake afterward?”

“Both of those jobs could have been entrusted to the priest without issue, so

they do not count as evidence of her being a saint.”

Correct again and again. Though she’d performed the purification, it was something any reasonably powerful clergy member could have accomplished. And in fact, Brother Miller had stopped the spread. Dispatching a few more priests and priestesses would have also resolved the problem easily.

Fiona caught herself before she nodded in agreement. Charles sighed quietly in relief when he saw before taking the stage.

“Are you saying then that you don’t believe His Highness and I witnessed the soul summoning with our own eyes?”

“As to that...”

Of course, even the prime minister couldn’t deny that charge. He couldn’t recklessly accuse the Central Temple’s pontiff and the crown prince, both key figures in the nation, of lying.

“Would you like to know something interesting, Prime Minister? Lately, certain families have been constantly throwing their daughters in my face as candidates to be my wife. Do you know what else? We had an incident last night, so we’re trying to root out the criminal.”

Though puzzled by the sudden change in topic, Fiona remained silent. She noticed the slightest frown marring the prime minister’s brow.

“Criminal? Even if the saint was locked inside the room, wasn’t that simply because the lock was broken?”

“Oh ho. I didn’t say a single thing about Fiona being locked in. As ever, the speed with which you acquire information never ceases to amaze me, Prime Minister.”

“W-Well, the goings-on in the palace find their way to my ears one way or another.”

Linus beamed at him, and in response, the prime minister smiled stiffly.

“Now, riddle me this, if you will. How do you intend to verify whether or not Fiona is an imposter?”

What in the world was Linus saying? Wouldn’t the smart move here be *not* to

touch on that topic since she was a fraud? She unconsciously glared at him, but his gaze never wavered from the prime minister.

Though the prime minister had been showing signs of panic, he regained a measure of calm from the crown prince's inquiry.

"We'll invite Slava's Saint of Abundance. Once we compare her to a real saint, I should think the difference would be clear as day."

"Ohhh, the Saint of Abundance, eh?!"

The king had remained silent until then. Now, he exclaimed with a sudden sparkle in his eyes. The mention of the neighboring nation's saint unnecessarily piqued the whimsical middle-aged man's interest, and Fiona thought that might not bode well for them. She focused her attention on Linus and Charles, beseeching them with her eyes to stop this madness, but neither noticed her, their cold stares focused on the prime minister.

"Prime Minister, can we really invite her?"

"Please leave it to me, Your Majesty."

Beaming, the king nodded happily, which told them more than anything he was deep in thrall to his spirit of *je ne sais quoi*. No one could stop him now.

"I don't have any doubts about the Saint of Cost Performance, which is why I'm sure she'll get along splendidly with Slava's. I'm looking forward to it!"

Fiona was baffled by his assumption that she would get along with the other woman when he had never even met Slava's saint. Regardless, the king's approval meant the neighboring saint's visit was essentially a done deal. So, it was only a matter of time before she was unmasked as a fake saint.

As her mind went in circles on how to deal with this situation, Linus gently placed his hand on her shoulder. His expression showed no trace of defeat, much less any intention of abandoning her.

"Don't worry. I have an idea."

His eyes narrowed.

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**WHEN** their audience with the king ended, Charles and Ada went home, but for some reason, Linus led Fiona to his office. She suspected they would be discussing their strategy on how to deal with the fake saint situation.

She waited for the servant to pour tea and leave before she turned to Linus, sitting next to her.

“Your Highness, I believe we need to make the first move before I’m exposed as a fraud.”

“No need.”

“We came up with the story that a soul was summoned, so if we proclaim the soul left, there shouldn’t be any problems.”

She doubted she would be completely acquitted of wrongdoing, but at the very least, that explanation would reduce the impression of any involvement by Linus and Charles in the matter of the imposter saint. If anyone was to be suspected, it should be Fiona, who claimed to host the soul, so she alone should be punished.

“No need.”

Without hesitation, he rejected her motion again with the same words. She hung her head dispiritedly.

“But I don’t want to cause any trouble for you and His Holiness, Your Highness.”

He sighed, and before she could even react to it, he reached out with his arms and pulled her into an embrace.

“You aren’t, and you won’t. If anything, you should rely on us more.”

“No. I won’t do that. I can’t.”

When Fiona pushed experimentally at Linus’ arms, he loosened them, then peered into her face.

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve been nothing but a burden to you both for ten years now,” she said.

“Right, I know that’s been bothering you for a long time, Fiona. But there’s more, isn’t there...? Go on, tell me.” His gentle voice convinced her she could say anything she wanted without fear of repercussions, which made her want to blurt out words she never intended to say out loud. “Why don’t you want to cause trouble for us?”

“Well, I—”

What she should say was, “Causing trouble for others is never a good thing.” But another reason existed within her. And he probably knew what it was.

“Because if I don’t fulfill my role properly...you’ll think I’m useless and unnecessary.”

She wanted to return the favor they’d done for her by looking after her all these years. Yet she also knew that was just lip service to make herself feel better. The truth was...she just didn’t want to be abandoned.

Although she now had a few acquaintances, Linus and Charles were absolutely essential to Fiona, who had lost her memories. So she couldn’t help the fear she felt at the thought of being abandoned by them. Even though she knew they would never do such a thing because they were fundamentally kind people. Even though she knew simply having such thoughts was rude, she couldn’t help them.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for saying things that sound like I doubt you and His Holiness, Your Highness.”

Though Linus might not be angry at her, he must surely be disillusioned with her. The thought alone made her feel sad, and her head unconsciously drooped.

“Of course, I’d never abandon you.”

As soon as she heard his gentle voice, he tightened his arms around her again.

“Haven’t I been by your side this last decade, Fiona? And I will be from now on, too. Forever.”

He stroked her head as if silently telling her not to worry. His gesture was enough to steadily calm her heart.

“Don’t worry about the Saint of Abundance either. Believe in me.”

When she lifted her face, his gentle indigo eyes, narrowed thoughtfully, were there like always. She found it curious that just looking at that beautiful bluish-purple color put her at ease.

Linus would never betray her, nor would he abandon her. Which was why everything would turn out fine. Fiona nodded in acceptance. He smiled in response, his hand stroking down her head, her cheek, then her black hair. He pressed his lips to her hair, her forehead, then her cheek before laughing softly, the sound sheepish.

“You know, it makes me happy that you believe in and accept me as I am. But I really wouldn’t mind if you were a tad bit more wary of me.”

“Wary? But why? You’re a person, Your Highness, so I see no reason to be wary of you.”

Sometimes, he went overboard with the sexual harassment, but it wasn’t as if she disliked it. So, she truly didn’t see him as someone to have her guard up against.

“Well, I suppose I *am* grateful for your faith in me. But know this, Fiona. I’m not quite who you think I am.”

When she cocked her head in confusion at his enigmatic words, he grinned and patted her head.

“I’ll enlighten you on that front some other time. *After* you’ve come to see the real me, hm?”

## Chapter 8: The Saint of Cost Performance and the Saint of Abundance

“I wonder how they’ll test me against a real saint.”

The day finally arrived for Slava’s Saint of Abundance to visit their kingdom. Fiona and Charles were inside a carriage heading to the royal palace.

“You have nothing to fear, Fiona.”

“So you say, Father, but I am unmistakably a fraud. I’ve already accomplished my primary goals of thwarting the saint summoning and reducing budgetary waste. I suggested to His Highness that I claim the summoned soul has left my person, but he rejected the idea.”

“I’m not surprised at all to hear that.”

Though it bemused her to find Charles nodding in agreement for some mysterious reason, she worried if their course of action was the right one. As a priestess, Fiona could purify monsters, but if they asked her to do something only a saint could, they would discover she was an impostor.

“His Highness put a stop to your notion because it isn’t necessary. I promise he has a good reason, so don’t worry. It’ll be fine.”

“I certainly hope so.”

She sincerely doubted Charles would say that without a strategy in place, so she cautiously chose to believe him.

“Fiona, have you considered how things might be better if you *were* a real saint?”

“Well, just for now, it would be nice to be a real one if only not to be exposed as a fake. However, I’d much rather be ordinary.”

Even though her hair was an unusual color, and she had no memories before the age of ten. Despite those pesky little trifles, Linus had rescued her, Charles

had raised her, and working as a priestess allowed her to lead an enjoyable, happy life. So, she didn't need anything special. As long as she could live normally, it was more than enough.

"Is that right? You know, Fiona, His Highness and I care deeply for you. Despite his *eccentricities*, he would never do anything to hurt you. So don't fret."

Fiona returned Charles' smile with one of her own.

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**THEY** were ushered immediately to the audience chamber upon reaching the palace. Today, they would only be greeting their visitors, so at the moment, only the king, prime minister, Linus, Fiona, and Charles were in the room.

Nerves chewed at her as they waited for their guests to arrive. Then, the doors opened, and two figures appeared. A flaxen-haired handsome young man and a raven-haired lovely young woman.

It was the first time Fiona met someone other than herself with black hair, and her eyes unconsciously zeroed in on that color. The golden locks of the young man next to her made her midnight tresses stand out even more. Now, she understood Linus' obsession with black hair. For Fiona, she thought nothing of her hair, but black amongst various pale hues inevitably drew the eye.

The other girl had also been scrutinizing Fiona, but the moment their eyes locked, Slava's saint looked away. Perhaps Fiona offended her by staring so rudely. And at their first meeting, no less. She felt awful and swore to herself she'd be careful moving forward.

"For our saint to meet yours as a sign of our countries' friendship is a tremendous honor for us. My name is Paul Slava, and I'm the crown prince of my country. This is the Saint of Abundance."

Beaming, the king stared at the two of them. The presence of two saints in one room was likely tickling the fancy of the daydreaming man in the prime of maturity.

"Thank you for coming, Saint of Abundance. What a charming little lady you are."

Looking fairly pleased, the girl in question acknowledged His Majesty's words with a nod. Paul jabbed her discreetly with his elbow, a silent signal to introduce herself.

"I'm Manaka Yoda."

She was clearly annoyed, but the king didn't seem bothered. So long as he was allowed to indulge in his daydreams, he could afford to be magnanimous.

"And this is our country's Saint of Cost Performance."

"My name is Fiona Everett."

Prompted by His Majesty, she curtsied politely and introduced herself. However, Manaka's gaze was focused somewhere else entirely.

"Hmmm. And who's that next to you?"

"I'm Linus Gene, the crown prince. Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Saint of Abundance."

He smiled slightly with his usual calm expression. Manaka had been watching him intently as he introduced himself, and now her eyes sparkled.

"He's so hot! I've decided. I'm going to be his wife."

"...What?"

Everyone in the room said the same thing, but Manaka alone remained in high spirits.

"Crown prince means you'll eventually be the king, right? Which will make me the future queen. I can't wait!"

The king and prime minister couldn't conceal their bafflement, and Paul let out a tremendous sigh. Though Linus' expression didn't change, Fiona couldn't even begin to guess his thoughts on the girl's proclamation.

"Manaka. You're behaving insolently toward another country's crown prince, whom you just met for the first time. Moreover, you have a contract with our nation as its saint. You haven't forgotten that, hm?"

"Paul, I won't deny you're a hottie. But you nag too much, and you're a serious stick in the mud, so I don't like you."

Paul didn't bother hiding his aggravation as he covered Manaka's mouth with his hand.

"Please accept my sincerest apologies for this discourtesy. We'll take our leave for today, and we look forward to tomorrow's ball."

Paul practically dragged Manaka out of the room, his hand still pressed so tightly against her mouth that Fiona feared the girl couldn't breathe. Now that the storm had passed, everyone left behind in the audience chamber exhaled.

"The Saint of Abundance goes far beyond the problem child I expected. I'm so bloody glad Fiona is our saint."

The king nodded vehemently in agreement with Linus' comment. Fiona vaguely remembered them discussing the issues with Slava's saint, but she was dumbstruck at how the young woman behaved toward the crown prince of a country where she was a guest. And as her chaperone, Paul clearly did not have it easy.

For now, their first hurdle to clear was tomorrow's ball... Yet Fiona found herself worrying. Though no one said it aloud, it seemed everyone was thinking the same thing, and a collective sigh echoed throughout the audience chamber.

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**FIONA** and Charles returned home to discover Ada had prepared a light repast of tea and cookies for them. The old adage that the body craved something sweet when tired was true. The crispy, light cookies she munched on gradually healed her heart, weighed down by an unexpected fatigue. She swallowed the happy sweetness with a sip of tea and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Heavens above, what a terror of a saint. She'll definitely pose a problem. Now I can sympathize with Slava."

"Be that as it may, she *is* a real saint."

She remembered hearing about bountiful crops, but it seemed like the stuff of dreams for an entire country to have a good harvest.

"Well, apparently. But farming will exist even without a saint, eh?"

"She declared her intent to wed His Highness. What do you think of that?"

“Complete nonsense, that’s what. It’ll never happen.”

His blunt words surprised Fiona. Unbothered, Charles took a sip of tea from his cup.

“When a saint is summoned, the first thing she does is form a contract with that country.”

“Oh, really?”

“Technically, it’s the summoner... The point is she makes an agreement with the first person she meets in this world. Saints often possess unparalleled powers, so the goal of such an agreement is for her powers to be used for the sake of the nation and to avoid any abuses of said powers. In return, the country guarantees her safety, which places both parties of the contract on an equal footing.”

Though the king’s flights of fancy drove him to summon a saint from another world, the truth of the matter revealed a far more businesslike relationship.

“Thus, it’s impossible for that saint to marry into another nation. It would run counter to the contracted country’s national interest, so the state would never allow it.”

“But can’t a contract’s terms be changed? The saint desires the marriage, and I think the match might even benefit the Kingdom of Gene.”

Fiona wasn’t sure how the situation would unfold, considering the leaders of their country needed to factor in their relationship with Slava, but she personally didn’t think it was impossible either.

“...Does her demand bother you?”

She put her cup down at Charles’ question.

“Well, His Highness adores black hair.”

His eyes widened before he made a half-groan and half-laugh sound. Then, he reached out to pat her gently on the head.

“Fiona, my girl, looks like you’re growing up, too, if that expression is any indication.”



“Huh? What expression?”

Flustered, she pressed both hands to her cheeks, unsure what he meant.

“I can’t say I don’t feel lonely, especially when I’m still ambivalent about *that* fool being your partner. But...if you’re happy, then that’s what matters.”

In the end, she didn’t know what he was talking about or what sort of face she made. However, Charles’ amused smile told her she’d get no explanation from him anytime soon. Fiona sighed in resignation and popped the last cookie in her mouth.

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**ON** the day of the ball, Fiona wore another dress Linus had ordered for her. The skirt’s fabric was particularly eye-catching. A deep bluish-purple embroidered with silver thread and studded with countless beads, its beauty resembled the expanse of the night sky. A layer of translucent cloth in the same color gathered in complicated frills gave the viewer peeks at the starry fabric underneath.

White and silver lace in wing-like patterns covered the simple indigo bodice of the dress. The lace wound down to her waist in a spiral pattern, creating an overall polished but glamorous air.

Her gloves and shoes were the same bluish-purple, and her silver bracelet glittered. She wore the same necklace made of indigo-colored stones Linus had gifted her last time and layered a braided silver one over it. The silver lace thread hanging from her silver and white, flower-shaped hair ornament connected to her floral earrings. The combination of a mature color scheme and pretty details made it a splendid outfit.

As soon as Ada skillfully finished styling her hair, she put makeup on Fiona. It amazed her to learn that Everett housekeepers had the ability to doll her up in a fashion fit for an aristocratic social event. When she said as much out loud in a wondrous tone, Ada laughed in surprise.

“Well, that’s because I used to work in the royal palace.”

“Oh, really?”

Fiona had assumed she'd always been on staff for the pontiff, but apparently, the older woman had an unexpected personal background.

"I was His Highness' governess and took care of him since he was a little boy. When you arrived ten years ago, Fiona, he worried about the lack of a woman's presence in your life, so he sent me to work here instead."

"I had no idea."

Though she didn't know the particulars of Ada's role in the palace, working there must have been quite the honor. And in light of her taking care of Linus, the crown prince himself, clearly, the woman was capable professionally. Fiona felt guilty that someone so incredible wound up working in a commoner's household just for her sake.

"Ada, don't you ever think about wanting to return to the palace?"

"Life there is interesting in its own way, but I enjoy the relaxed pace of our life here, Fiona. Although...I have a feeling I'll find myself back there eventually."

"Huh?"

"Right then, we're all done here. Have a marvelous time, our very own Lady Saint."

Ada grinned cheerfully and gently pushed Fiona out the door, where Charles waited for her. They both boarded the coach, which set off for the palace. As soon as they arrived, the door to the vehicle opened, and there stood a gorgeous, silver-haired young man. A gasp escaped her lips at the outrageous situation.

"You're the crown prince. What in the world are you *doing*?"

The heir to the throne of an entire country should *not* be opening carriage doors for a commoner like Fiona. Just because Charles was the pontiff and Fiona the saint did *not* make it appropriate for Linus to wait for their arrival.

"You're my dearest saint. You should be glad I didn't ride out all the way to your house because that's what I really wanted to do."

When she grasped his outstretched hand, the bracelet on her wrist tinkled merrily. As she stepped down from the coach, the brooch pinned to one side of

his jacket grabbed her attention. The elegant lace, which resembled white and silver wings attached to flowers, looked undoubtedly familiar.

“That matches the trimmings on my dress.”

“Of course it does. Because *we* are a match.”

The fact that he’d done the same thing last time told her Linus *really* loved matching.

“I appreciate you noticing this, but maybe you could throw me a bone and notice the color scheme of the dress itself?”

“The color scheme, you say?”

It was a lovely palette reminiscent of a starry sky. What was she missing?

“The color of my eyes and hair. They’re in those necklaces too, hm?”

Now that he mentioned it, she realized it was true. Both the deep bluish-purple and the glittering silver thread were the exact shades of his indigo eyes and silver hair, respectively. Linus’ jacket, too, reflected those colors, making them a matching pair in that sense as well.

“Goodness, you’re right. I can’t believe it took me this long.”

“Mmm...you truly are a tough nut to crack, Fiona.”

“Well, Your Highness, it’s your and my fault she’s like this since we did our darndest to keep her away from *that* part of life.”

“I can’t deny that. What’s done is done. She’s too adorable, and neither of us wants to deal with any pests swarming around her.”

Confused about their conversation, she looked to Charles for clarification. His smile was chagrined as he replied.

“Generally speaking, dressing one’s lover or spouse in one’s colors is an expression of affection and possessiveness.”

“Possessiveness.”

“It means because you’re *my* saint, Fiona, I want to paint you in my colors. They really do suit you, too. You’re enchanting, Fiona.”

His eyes narrowing in delight, he scooped up her hand to press his lips to the back. The sight of Linus kissing her in his formal wear was leagues more powerful than usual, and she couldn't help the racing of her heart.

Truly, the power of formal attire was frightening. If such were the results of spending extraordinary sums of money on tailoring, one would be extremely satisfied with the cost-effectiveness.

While Fiona's bewildered mind contemplated the cost of clothing, Linus grinned, obviously enjoying himself.

"Fiona, you are my only saint. You are also my one and only fiancée. Don't forget either of those things."

"But I'm a fraud. And our engagement is still under consideration."

Before she finished speaking, his face drew near, and his lips brushed across her forehead. Though fewer people were outside than in the ballroom, evidently, Linus' sexual harassment was in top form tonight as well.

"When we head inside, I'll have to leave you both as I have my own rounds to make... So keep this word in mind, Your Highness. *Moderation.*"

"Of course, of course. Shall we go then, my lovely saint?"

She'd wanted to grumble a bit, but the words on the tip of her tongue disappeared in a flash in the face of his dazzling smile. The power a beautiful crown prince wielded was infinite and, frankly, troublesome. Fiona sighed, then took Linus' hand and started walking.

The venue was the same, and the chandeliers sparkled as brilliantly as ever. The color of the tablecloths was different, but if they continually changed things like that every time, well, how very extravagant that was.

No sooner had they finished greeting the king than two striking individuals, one with midnight hair and the other with golden, approached them.

"Linus, I want you to be my escort!"

Fiona's jaw dropped open at Manaka's sudden demand. No greeting or any hint of politeness preceding it. Even she had better social graces than that. Though Manaka looked lovely in her pale green dress, her outrageous words

and conduct almost overshadowed her beauty.

Paul, who had lagged a few steps behind Manaka, looked dashing in his snow-white formal wear, which unmistakably marked him as royalty. But his expression told Fiona the prince from Slava was already exhausted.

“I was under the impression that Prince Paul is your escort, Saint of Abundance.”

“I’d rather have you, Linus!”

“Be that as it may, I’m already escorting my saint.”

“Just let Paul handle her then.”

Regardless of Manaka’s status as a saint, Linus was the crown prince of another country. The way she spoke to him went beyond casual and into rude. Listening to the other girl speak almost made Fiona’s stomach knot with tension.

“As well, I don’t remember giving you permission to address me by my name.”

Though Linus had remained all smiles the whole time, an aura of displeasure cloaked him. Or, at least, that’s what it felt like to Fiona.

“Wh-What’s the big deal? You should be happy I even know it.”

“Interesting. So what you’re saying is that by dint of her position, a saint is allowed to address a foreign prince she hardly knows by his given name, even without his permission.”

“E-Exactly.”

Linus’ smile never wavered, but even Manaka sensed she was treading on thin ice, so she dialed down her arrogance slightly. Paul watched the exchange with a disgusted expression, then finally stepped forward in resignation to pull Manaka by the arm.

“Manaka, your disrespect knows no bounds. You, too, are a representative of my nation, and you need to behave accordingly. Don’t you understand our actions affect the relations between Slava and the Kingdom of Gene?”

“Blah blah blah! Can you *be* any more of a fuddy-duddy?! I’m dancing with Linus!”

The second Manaka screeched like a child throwing a tantrum, magic burst around them. The flowers decorating a nearby table wilted and decayed, and the dry, withered petals fell. Murmurs rose in the air as the sudden change caused by her scream caused a stir.

“While the Saint of Abundance has the power to encourage plants to grow plentifully, she can also do the opposite.”

Paul explained, his eyes aggravated as he stared at the dead flowers. The simpleness of his statement did nothing to undermine the terror of her power. Fiona realized the situation was much graver than she thought, and a chill ran down her spine. Because she finally understood the meaning of the contract Charles had mentioned. Summoning a saint from another world didn’t guarantee benefits for the country that did so. On the contrary, if such power was misused, it would be a catastrophe. Which was precisely why a contract needed to be formed at the time of summoning.

Frowning, Linus shifted his gaze from the dead flowers to Manaka, who seemed to be on the verge of exploding in fury again.

“At this rate, she’ll kill all the flowers in the ballroom, and we can’t have that happen... Fiona, forgive me, but I’ll be right back.”

He gently patted her head, then took Manaka’s hand and led her to the dance floor. Despite coming from another world, the girl danced fairly well. It made Fiona feel a bit embarrassed over her own awkward dancing.

“I’m terribly sorry, Saint of Cost Performance. Please allow me to escort you in exchange.”

“No, thank you. I’m fine on my own.”

She didn’t want to cause trouble for Paul, nor was she in the mood to dance. However, the flaxen-haired, handsome young man smiled sheepishly.

“If I’m being honest, I’m exhausted from babysitting *her*, and I desperately need a break from the mind-numbing conversations with the young ladies here. So I have a feeling no one will bother us if I escort you.”

Even the mischievous smile on his face enhanced his good looks. Were *all* princes such handsome young men?

“Oh, I see now. You’d like to rest. Very well.”

Fiona could understand becoming tired when one had to accompany the likes of Manaka. Though he was a prince, Paul was forced to bear such a heavy burden.

“Addressing you as the Saint of Cost Performance is a bit of a mouthful, not to mention overly stiff. Would you mind if I call you Fiona?”

“You may address me as you wish, Your Highness.”

“Then will you call me by my name as well?”

“No, I cannot be so discourteous.”

As ignorant as she was of high society’s mores, even Fiona knew it was rude to address a foreign prince by his given name. Even if it technically wasn’t a problem because Paul himself had given her permission, the mental strain was too much for her, so she didn’t want to give in.

“May I ask how you refer to Prince Linus?”

“As ‘His Highness.’”

“Then, it would be quite interesting indeed if you called me by name, hm... But I won’t coerce you.”

“Thank you for your understanding.”

Paul smiled in response to her words.

“Yes, I do appreciate how honest and charming you are.”

“Charming... Then do you as well have a preference for black hair, Your Highness?”

It was a shocking truth. Perhaps there was something in royal bloodlines that made their progeny obsess with black hair.

“I confess, I’m a bit lost by the topic, but I’m willing to indulge you. While black hair is lovely, that has nothing to do with your personal charm, Fiona.”

She froze, her eyes wide. Paul tilted his head in confusion at the sight.

“Is something wrong?”

“Oh, um, no, not at all. I’m simply not used to being told that, so I was just surprised.”

“Don’t tell me Prince Linus *doesn’t* shower you with such compliments to the point you grow weary of them?”

She found it strange to hear him describe it as if it was natural to become fed up with the words, but she couldn’t deny Linus *did* often say similar things.

“His Highness’ flattery is akin to a daily greeting, so I’m sure there isn’t any deep meaning to them.”

When Linus and Charles often said she was “adorable,” Fiona knew they meant it as “our little girl is the cutest.” They saw her less as a woman and more as a younger sister and daughter, respectively. She might even go so far as to say that the way they doted on her was closer to how they’d treat a flower or a pet.

Except Paul burst out laughing, clutching his stomach when he heard that.

“Well, isn’t this a surprise? Despite wearing that dress and those jewels, you don’t understand Prince Linus’ words at all. You are an absolute delight.”

As he wiped his tears away, still chuckling, Fiona wondered what exactly was so funny.

“You’re lovely, Fiona. That includes your black hair, of course, and your beautiful eyes. Frankly, you’re a vision in that dress.”

“Huh? Oh, um, thank you very much.”

Unused to such compliments, she unwittingly stumbled over her reply. Paul laughed again in response.

“Since we may not have another opportunity, won’t you dance with me? One song is all I ask.”

“I’m originally a priestess and a commoner, so I can’t dance very well...”

Then, she recalled Linus’ words buried in the back of her mind.



*“Fiona, at times like this, you’re supposed to say, ‘It would be my pleasure’ with a pretty blush on your cheeks.”*

In the face of a foreign prince who had made an effort to interact with her and even now politely stretched his hand out, seeking a turn on the dance floor, would it be embarrassing of her to refuse? It was either that or stepping on his feet constantly while they danced, and she couldn’t decide which of the two was ruder.

But if she took Linus’ words into account, then for now, the normal thing to do would be exactly as he had suggested. Accept the invitation with a “It would be my pleasure.” Making herself blush was too difficult, so she chose not to. Right now, Fiona could only manage one hurdle at a time.

“Um, it would be my...”

“Paul, stop bothering Fiona.”

## Chapter 9: The Promise Made Ten Years Ago and The Contract With a Saint

**LINUS** stormed over to them, his voice sharp. He tugged Fiona by the arm toward him. His voice and attitude differed from usual, and she floundered a bit at the change in him.

“What are you doing?! You’re supposed to be escorting *me*, so why are you even bothering with *that* woman?!”

Displeased, Manaka rushed over as well. It turned out Linus had returned to Fiona as soon as the song ended. That was not the norm for the ever-gentlemanly Linus, and she wondered if perhaps he tired himself out more than expected during the one dance with Manaka.

The girl glared daggers at Fiona as she clung to Linus’ arm.

“I have a great idea. You and Paul make *such* a cute couple, and Linus and I suit each other perfectly, too. We should just exchange saints.”

Though Manaka clapped her hands in delight at her cleverness, the two princes’ expressions rapidly darkened. The transformation scared Fiona enough to look away for a moment.

However, it wouldn’t be a terrible prospect for the Kingdom of Gene to acquire a true saint, and there was a possibility that it could come to fruition. For some reason, the thought made pain lance viciously deep inside her chest.

“Don’t you think so too, Lord King? If I become the crown prince’s consort, your country is guaranteed to see bountiful yields.”

The surrounding nobles frowned when Manaka called out loudly to the king, who was a bit further away from them. Fiona wondered if their disapproving glances were due to the girl practically shouting during a function such as this or her outrageously casual manner in speaking to their monarch. She would guess probably...both.

Fiona thought the king might raise both hands in enthusiastic agreement. But contrary to her expectations, he only shook his head with a troubled expression. When she saw that, Manaka's expression went instantly from smug to dour.

"Why?! Here I am, being generous enough to offer myself as your future daughter-in-law!"

While it surprised Fiona to see the fanciful, middle-aged king of Gene refuse the girl's offer, after considering the matter closely, she realized an exchange would mean she, the fake saint, would go to Slava. And that would be committing fraud, so in hindsight, she was glad it wasn't going to happen. Receiving a real saint in exchange for sending an imposter was only asking to start a fight.

"Manaka, watch what you say, or neither of us will like the consequences."

"Shut up, Paul!"

Until then, Linus had remained silent. He now exhaled deeply, shook off Manaka's arm wound around his, and lifted Fiona's hand in his.

"Fiona is the only one who will be my consort."

Her heart practically bounded out of her chest at the way his indigo eyes narrowed and his perfect lips smiled. By not sending an impostor, the two countries would avoid a diplomatic incident. He was merely protecting her. She knew all this very well, but still, her pulse pounded fast.

"Be that as it may, Your Highness, she *does* have black hair."

Fiona herself didn't know why she even said that. All she had to do was thank him, but she couldn't. It had made her incredibly happy to have him defend her, so why in the world couldn't she just tell him that?

Though Linus had been acting strange lately, Fiona could say the same of herself.

"I don't have any interest in her."

She had unthinkingly blurted the comment because, despite blocking the exchange of saints, she'd assumed he was intrigued by Manaka's black hair.

“But you like black hair.”

How could he so easily say he wasn't interested after all the petting and kissing he'd done to Fiona's hair?

“That doesn't mean I'm fine with anyone who has black hair.”

His stare only intensified, and Fiona's heartbeat accelerated again. This painful tightness in her chest had been bothering her for a few minutes now. Was she sick? She pressed her hand to her chest, and when she looked up, her gaze met his smiling one. Her eyes skittered away immediately.

“Th-This is ridiculous. A *real, bonafide* saint practically offered herself to you on a platter, and you turn me down?!”

As Manaka's voice rose in anger, magic whooshed in the air around them, wilting the lovely flower arrangements on one table after another. Every bloom nearby darkened and withered, like brown ink splashing into clear water, staining it.

“If I can't become Linus' wife, I'll kill all the plants and vegetation in this country. But if *you* are a real saint, then all you have to do is stop me.”

“She makes an excellent point. If the Saint of Cost Performance is a true saint, I would very much like a demonstration of her power.”

Without any of them realizing, the prime minister had strode over to watch the drama play out. Now, he spoke, his stare harsh on Fiona. He had suspected her of being a fraud from the beginning, so he must have decided this was the perfect opportunity to prove it.

“When hell freezes over is the day I accept a woman willing to destroy an entire country over a childish temper tantrum,” Linus asserted. “And how many times have I said Fiona is the *only* one who'll be my wife? Are you deaf?”

“What did you say?!”

Manaka's expression underwent a change at Linus' calm, quiet refusal. For a moment, she paled, then in the next, her complexion reddened furiously, and a thunderous scowl marred her pretty face. In response to her worsening mood, the magic she unleashed grew heavier. It no longer affected only the flowers

but began tainting the food arranged on the tables as well. The food dried up, then decomposed all at once, as if oceans of time passed in an instant.

Screams rang out in response to the ominous event, then the sound of something breaking somewhere.

“I’m a saint. I’m better than everyone! I’m extraordinary!”

Consumed by her fury, Manaka screeched, and with every word, the alcohol poured into glasses changed color and foamed rapidly. That was the breaking point for the guests gathered in this ballroom. First, the flowers rotted, then the food, and now the spirits. Like a dam breaking, people poured out of the venue as they fled the terrifying scene.

The potted plants around the space either browned while emitting a smoke-like substance or rotted from the roots and toppled to the floor. Apparently, the range of her magic extended to the courtyard outside because a tree suddenly crashed through one of the windows, sending broken glass flying everywhere.

The venue had fallen into chaos. People stumbled into each other, desperate to escape. A few even went down hard. Someone crashed into a table near them, and all the glass dishware on top of it fell to the floor and shattered. Fiona raised her hands instinctively to protect herself from the shards, but Linus was faster as he pulled her toward him.

Before she knew it, she found herself cradled protectively in his embrace.

“Fiona, are you all right?”

When she raised her head at the sound of his voice, she saw a slice running down his cheek, oozing blood.

“Your Highness, you’re hurt.”

She hurriedly reached up to touch his cheek, and beads of light suddenly danced around them. After the cut disappeared from his beautiful face, she sighed in relief.

“Thank you.”

“That’s my line. Please put yourself before me.”

Fiona could heal injuries to a certain extent because of her ability to use

healing magic. However, Linus was the crown prince, and she needed him to understand that it would be catastrophic for their country if anything bad happened to him.

*"I will protect you, Fiona. After all...I promised you, didn't I?"*

Linus covered Fiona's hand on his cheek with his own and smiled at her.

*"I'll protect you, Fiona. So, in exchange, stay by my side forever."*

His words from ten years ago. The promise he'd made to a girl without her memories. She had honestly thought he'd forgotten it a long time ago. But clearly, he hadn't. And now that she knew he'd kept it faithfully all this time, an inexplicable warmth spread inside her chest, filling her whole being.

However, she knew she couldn't allow herself to be satisfied with just that.

"Thank you very much, Your Highness. But it's unacceptable for you to be hurt. Because...I want to protect *you* as well."

"What are you saying, Fiona?"

Being protected by him made her happy, and she also knew he cared for her. If she wished it... No, she didn't even have to say anything for Linus to protect her from anything and everything.

That was exactly why she hated letting him spoil her like this. She didn't want to become the kind of person who gave up on her potential. She wanted to stand proudly and unashamedly next to this beautiful individual.

"I know how to fix this."

Fiona gently pushed herself out of Linus' hold and focused on Manaka. The violent magic unleashed by the enraged, black-haired girl was starting to affect the tablecloths, too, their color darkening. She rushed over to stand right in front of her and raised her right hand high. Then, Fiona mustered all her strength to slap her hard on her pale cheek.

The plosive sound echoed in the ballroom, and silence descended on the chaotic space. Manaka's eyes bulged so wide Fiona feared they would pop right out of her head. She pressed her hand to her cheek, trembling in disbelief as she glared at Fiona.

“Wh-What’s the meaning of this?!”

“The best way to solve a problem is to beat the source.”

Before she even finished speaking, Fiona’s palm found its way back to Manaka’s cheek. She slapped her over and over again, the smacking sound ringing satisfyingly in the atmosphere.

“Fiona, hold on a second. I’m not sure you can apply that in *this* situation.”

From behind her, she heard Linus say something, but she ignored him and continued rapping the other girl mercilessly on her cheeks.

“The key is to discover and strike at the source early. The earlier, the better is what’s vital. And then, one must attack ruthlessly and completely.”

Honestly, Fiona’s hand hurt so much she almost couldn’t bear it, but she needed to power through and endure the pain. Now was the time to display her mettle as a priestess. Having recklessly decided to carry the spirit of every clergy member in the country, she raised her hand again and devoted herself to attacking the cause of their current problem.

“Ahhh! Stop it already, will you?!”

Manaka’s protests came to naught because of Fiona’s continuous slaps. The girl finally screamed in outrage, unable to bear it any longer. Perhaps due to her attention being diverted to defending against Fiona’s punishment, the magical energy filling their surroundings steadily dissipated, and the corruption stopped at some point.

“All the dishes prepared for tonight were a result of the concerted efforts of the fishermen who caught the fish, the farmers who grew the crops, the tradesmen who delivered everything, and the chefs who cooked the dishes. Many people poured their time, effort, and money into the menu. So who do you think you are to make it all rot before anyone could even taste it?”

Not to mention the damage inflicted on the tablecloths, windows, and glassware. She couldn’t even begin to calculate the enormous sums of money that would be required to repair all this destruction. No amount of waste reduction in the budget would be enough.

“Hmph. I’m a saint. A magnificent, all-powerful one. Slava is prospering thanks to *me*, so I can do whatever I want.”

“If a saint is considered magnificent and all-powerful, it is because of her achievements and recognition of her efforts. But that still does *not* give a saint the right to do whatever she wishes.”

Regardless of the abundant harvests Manaka was responsible for, it was intolerable for her to destroy things violently every time she didn’t get her way.

“God, you nag just like Paul does. You are so annoying. Well, if you hate it so much, why don’t you fix it? You’re a saint, right? What was it again? Sea bounty or something?”

“Th-That was the one the Kingdom failed to summon ten years ago. The current saint is the Saint of Cost Performance.”

The prime minister had cowered some distance from Manaka as she’d rampaged. Now, he nervously approached them again and answered in Fiona’s stead. The saint from Slava snorted in derision when she heard his explanation, her expression bored.

“Cost performance? Please. Well, you went on and on about time, effort, and money earlier, so put your money where your mouth is and fix all this.”

Manaka’s mocking attitude made it clear she thought the task impossible, and the prime minister nodded in agreement as he sneered at Fiona, too. They not only imagined her being unable to do anything, they likely wished for just that.

She didn’t mind their doubts, though. In fact, she thought they were correct to be skeptical. However, the reality was that Manaka had not only ruined the efforts of so many of her country’s people, but she had also placed the royals and, more importantly, the king and crown prince in danger. So Fiona could not understand Manaka’s audacity in seeking to prove her a fraud while never uttering a single word of apology for all the wrongs she’d committed.

Then, she finally took note of a hand that had rested comfortingly on her shoulder this whole time. When she looked up, familiar indigo eyes glittered back at her.

“I know you can do it, Fiona, so don’t worry. I’m here for you.”



Linus' words blew away the anxiety clouding her heart. She hadn't realized how reassuring it was to have someone who believed in her and pushed her until now. At that moment, she felt like she could do anything.

"Thank you, Your Highness."

Fiona took a deep breath, then surveyed the ballroom.

The spoiled food and drinks, the dead flowers, the rotting plants and trees, the discolored tablecloths, and the broken glassware. It was an unmitigated disaster. And though the aristocrats in the room looked at her in confusion, they didn't seem as panicked as before.

Manaka's power created this foulness. Then, all Fiona had to do was eliminate her influence and rejuvenate everything. In short...purify and heal.

She folded her hands, closed her eyes, and inhaled deeply again. It wasn't whether she could or couldn't. She *would*. It would work because Linus was on her side.

A pause. And then.

"Take that!"

She opened her eyes and thrust her fist forward at the same time. The magic she unleashed coalesced into a line of light that drew various patterns and words in the air before bursting into shining ripples all at once. An icy wind blew through, and soon, warm particles of light filled the area.

When buoyant beads of light touched withered flowers, the little orbs disappeared as if gently sinking into the blooms. Then, the crackling dryness and decaying brown slowly reversed course. Soon, the petals trembled with life and color again. Similarly, the fallen trees and potted plants grew lush green leaves once more, and the tablecloths gradually reverted to their original colors.

Evidently, Fiona's magic only worked on the effects wrought by Manaka's. The food and drinks were restored to their former state, but the broken windows and glassware remained broken.

Manaka and the prime minister weren't the only ones standing immobile and

slack-jawed. The nobles stared in open-mouthed shock. Just when she found herself amused by the spectacle, a large hand gently stroked her head.

“You certainly don’t disappoint, my saint.”

“Nothing so dramatic, Your Highness. This is just the result of mastering the fundamentals of magic and diligent training.”

Fiona had purified and healed. Though there were differences in power among them, all clergy members learned both skills. Individual effort also helped in improving the abilities. She had been a bit concerned about whether she would have been able to defy a saint’s power, but her daily training proved itself to be a force to be reckoned with and validated her efforts.

“True. But converting it to such a degree takes talent. And you did an incredible job, Fiona.”

By now, Linus had been patting her head so long that she was about to ask him to stop. However, the power of speech abandoned her when her eyes met his gentle, indigo ones. As ever, he remained both beautiful and kind. Then, did this mean...Fiona was the one who’d changed?

“This is all wrong. You told me she was a fraud, but a fraud wouldn’t be able to do all that!” Angry and with her hands on her hips, Manaka accused the prime minister, who shook his head in panic.

“I-I have no notion of what you speak of.”

“Don’t give me that. You’re the one who asked for *my* help in exposing a fake saint!”

“Ahhh!”

The prime minister shouted in an attempt to drown out Manaka’s words, but everyone heard her, so it was a meaningless gesture on his part.

“Correct me if I’m wrong then, Manaka, but what you’re saying is that you colluded with the prime minister of the Kingdom of Gene, hm?”

Manaka scowled in annoyance at Paul’s deathly quiet question.

“I didn’t *collude* with him; I *helped* him unmask an imposter. As a noble saint, it was only natural for me to say yes, don’t you think?”

“Without telling me?”

At first, Manaka’s attitude was aggravated and displeased at being forced to answer him. But the longer Paul’s expression remained detached and his tone neutral, the less aggressive she became and the more uncertain she seemed.

“But he was the one who told me to keep it a secret.”

“N-No, I didn’t!”

The prime minister shook his head vehemently as he slowly retreated. Staring at him, Paul exhaled deeply.

“You conspired with a leader of a foreign nation to cause the downfall of a legitimate saint. Furthermore, in your desire to become the wife of said nation’s crown prince, you showed your willingness to abandon Slava. In which case... your selfishness will no longer allow you to escape the consequences of your actions as you have thus far.”

His expression still dispassionate, Paul grabbed Manaka’s arm and dragged her in front of the king. Linus put his hand on Fiona’s back and gently pushed her forward, silently telling her to do the same. With everyone’s contemptuous stares on him, the prime minister reluctantly walked toward the monarch.

There they stood in front of him. Manaka and Paul. The prime minister a bit off to the side. Fiona and Linus. And even Charles, who’d pushed his way through the crowd.

Manaka, the cause of the fracas, tossed her head defiantly as she stood there. Her movement attracted the surrounding nobles’ attention. Aside from the crackling sounds made by the broken shards of glass as the servants cleaned them up, no one else moved or said a word.

Paul sighed heavily, then stared directly at Manaka.

“Manaka Yoda. According to the contract made at the time of your summoning, if it is determined that your magic will cause harm to our country, your own magic will be used against you to bind you. I trust you haven’t forgotten these terms?”

Paul sent Linus a sidelong glance. He nodded in acknowledgment and picked

up the metaphorical torch from Slava's prince.

"Not only did you disregard His Highness Paul's repeated warnings, you also declared to all and sundry that you would become my consort. Then there's the matter of your collusion with Gene's prime minister and the disrespect you've shown to the Saint of Cost Performance. Last but not least, the chaos you created at tonight's ball. I, Linus Gene, crown prince of the Kingdom of Gene, hereby declare I witnessed all this with my own eyes."

Paul inclined his head, then faced the king again.

"Your Majesty, do you concur?"

"I do."

Paul bowed deferentially at the king's affirmation. The elegant movement contrasted sharply with his hard expression. To Fiona, he didn't even seem like the same person who'd talked to her.

"I am deeply apologetic for the commotion at your ball, Your Majesty. The Saint of Abundance has committed egregious violations of her contract with Slava. Normally, her punishment would be dealt with internally, but considering the trouble we've already caused you all, would you allow me to carry out the judgment here?"

"Go ahead. For the sake of both of our countries, it seems you have no choice but to follow through with the contract stipulations."

"Thank you very much."

Paul bowed to him again before pivoting to Manaka once more. He stretched his hand toward her and rested his palm in the air right in front of her neck. Then, he exhaled shortly.

"Wh-What are you doing?"

"As a party to the contract, I, Paul Slava, invoke and impose the restrictions."

As soon as he finished saying the words, light gathered around her neck. When it circled all the way around, the glow disappeared, leaving behind a collar made of what looked to be black leather.

"What is this? Take it off!"

Panicked, Manaka grabbed at the collar, but it stubbornly refused to come off. It was only about as wide as one of her fingers, but Fiona couldn't see any seams anywhere, making her wonder how Paul even put it on her.

Magic burst around Manaka. Perhaps the girl thought that if she couldn't physically rip it off, then she would try to make it rot off using her power since it had a corrupting effect on organic matter and processed goods. However, contrary to Fiona's expectations, the collar remained as is. There were no signs of decay or discoloration. If anything, Manaka's complexion paled.

"I-It hurts! It hurts!"

She screamed as she clawed at the collar. The magic surrounding her vanished, and as soon as it did, the tension on her face eased.

"In exchange for the government of Slava guaranteeing your safety and providing you with food, clothing, and shelter, you swore not to conduct yourself in a manner harmful to our country. In the event of a breach of contract, we agreed it would be your magic that created a collar to restrain your powers. Did I or did I not explain the terms of the contract over and over again to you?"

So saying, Paul lowered his hand.

"You have only your own foolish actions to blame for this outcome. Since you won't be able to use your power as a saint like this, I realize our harvests won't be as bountiful as they were until now. Even so, I have decided it's better to weaken your power, Manaka."

"No, you can't be serious. I'm supposed to stay like this forever?"

Manaka hadn't cared at all despite Paul's numerous warnings, but now even she looked terrified at the prospect of losing her magic. Fiona suspected her power as a saint was the foundation on which her self-esteem relied. The girl looked so frail in her bewildered state that the arrogant Manaka until now might as well have been another person entirely.

"As long as you don't try to use magic, it won't hurt. And if everyone acknowledges you, the collar will disappear on its own. I know I explained all that as well... I guess this means you'll just have to do your best, won't you?"

“This has to be a joke. I’m the chosen saint!”

Paul glanced pointedly at a servant waiting patiently nearby. At his signal, the servant took Manaka by the hand. Her face blank with surprise, she left the ballroom without resistance.

“I apologize for all the trouble we caused, Your Majesty.”

The king nodded, accepting Paul’s apology, then beckoned the prime minister with a wave. Mulligan, unable to defy the command, slowly walked forward to stand in front of Gene’s ruler.

“Prime Minister. Did you really collude with the Saint of Abundance? I’m struggling to wrap my head around the fact that you asked for her help to expose the Saint of Cost Performance as an impostor.”

“I... I...”

“You had her in your sights because you’ve been embezzling from the national budget by padding it with empty figures and nonsense requests, hm?”

Upon hearing Linus’ words, the king’s expression took on a thunderous cast while the prime minister went pale. Fiona’s impression of the man was that he had been protecting the country from a king caught up with his castles in the sky, but the prime minister’s reaction conveyed to her that likely wasn’t the case.

Linus took a sheaf of documents from a servant, handed it over to the king, then returned to Fiona’s side. She suspected the papers likely contained proof of the embezzlement. The fact that the crown prince presented the pages to the king meant it was conclusive evidence of a crime. While it would have been nice if he’d informed her in advance, she also understood that he might not have been at liberty to discuss the prime minister’s scandal so openly.

Not to mention why he came right back to stand next to her because Fiona had assumed he would remain near the king to explain things. Curious, she peeked up at him to try to suss out an answer, only to find Linus grinning down at her like he’d been waiting for her to do just that.

“Don’t worry, Fiona. I won’t leave your side.”

He whispered the answer to her unspoken question. Apparently, he stayed for her sake. Though she hadn't forgotten the problem of his severe sexual harassment, especially with her hair, she also couldn't deny the relief she felt at having Linus near.

"I pulled some strings and also had a lot of help with this. So I'll need him to pay the price for putting Fiona in danger. Oh, and one more thing. Regarding the trap set in the lake a while back, I traced the magic back to the prime minister and secured evidence of his involvement, so rest assured on that front, my liege."

As always, Linus was beautiful when he smiled, but right now, he was also a tad terrifying.

"We'll have to discuss this in detail when we have time later, eh?"

The king muttered to himself as he skimmed through the documents. Just then, the prime minister, whose head had been hanging in shame, suddenly jerked his face up to glare at Fiona. She barely had the time to recognize the emotion in his eyes as hatred before he rushed toward her with a knife gripped in his outstretched hand. When had that even gotten there? The moment Linus saw the older man swing, he forcefully pushed Fiona behind him, switching places with her.

He nimbly kicked the prime minister's arm, caught the flying knife in mid-air, and used his momentum to place it neatly against the other man's neck. His flowing movements and incredible speed robbed everyone of speech. All they could do was stare in stunned silence.

"Well...looks like we'll be adding the attempted murder of a saint to the list of your crimes. I sincerely hope you don't think you can avoid prosecution like you have in the past, hm?"

Linus said this with a brilliant smile that outshone the starry sky, then lightly tapped the prime minister's cheek with the knife blade. That was when the older man collapsed on the floor as if his knees gave way.

While Fiona was aware of Linus' skill with a sword, she was still baffled. It was one thing for two armed opponents to face off against each other. But she very much doubted any other crown prince could take down an armed opponent

with his bare hands.

As she watched the guards take the prime minister away, she realized something important and hurriedly gripped Linus' arm.

"Your Highness, are you hurt?"

She stared up frantically at him, and his eyes widened in surprise before he quickly smiled and rubbed her head.

"That should be my line, you know... But I'm fine. He didn't get me."

Though he didn't seem to have any knife wounds, her worry didn't dissipate. She ran her hands all over his arms and chest, checking for any injuries or bruises. A moment later, however, Linus' hand stopped her.

"Fiona, I'm fine, honest. Besides, that's all I can handle, especially considering we're in public."

"I beg your pardon?"

She accepted the first part of his remark but didn't understand what he meant by the second. Before she could even tilt her head in confusion, arms reached out from behind her and pulled her into a protective embrace.

"Your Highness. *What* did we say about moderation?"

Charles growled the words at him, his expression grim as he held Fiona away. Linus only grinned in response.

"Excuse the interruption, but I think it's past time for the Saint of Abundance and me to take our leave tonight. I'll return another day to discuss how Slava can compensate Gene for causing such a disturbance."

Paul bowed to the king, then walked toward Linus. His relaxed expression was the opposite of the one he'd had earlier.

"I finally put the reins on that runaway horse. I appreciate you providing information and your cooperation, Prince Linus."

"Information?"

Fiona said the word curiously. Without responding to Paul, Linus removed Charles' arms from around Fiona, then curved his own around her shoulders.



Any way she looked at it, he should have prioritized his conversation with Paul right now instead of this foolishness. However, he merely stroked her head in satisfaction.

While she struggled with what to do about him, Paul continued with a wry smile.

“His Highness contacted me when he realized the prime minister was scheming with Manaka. I already had my hands full dealing with her temperamental personality, so her violating our contract in public would give me the chance to rein her in. Which is why I decided to work together with Prince Linus.”

Then Paul and Linus had expected everything that transpired tonight, including Manaka’s rampage and Mulligan’s attempted assassination of Fiona.

“I held a small sliver of hope that she would at least play the part of a proper saint in another country, but...we all know how that turned out. What’s done is done, hm?”

The hint of sadness on Paul’s face told her he hadn’t wanted to place the collar on the other girl. But he couldn’t let her get away with her behavior forever, so this visit had likely been her last chance to redeem herself. Despite rumors of Manaka’s antics spreading as far as the Kingdom of Gene, he had continued watching over her until today. Perhaps he’d been hoping she’d have a change of heart.

“Yeah, well, I have a bone to pick with you, Paul. While I was dancing with your saint, I saw you being overly familiar with mine.”

“I couldn’t help myself, not when Fiona is so charming.”

“While I agree with you, I would much rather you didn’t notice that about her.”

It was rare to see Linus express his frustration openly, like a child would. Setting aside the contents of the conversation, it was clear the two were friends.

“Fear not, as her heart never once wavered under my attentions. You, too, have your work cut out for you, eh, Your Highness?”

Paul chuckled in amusement, then left the ballroom with a wave.

“Linus, Saint of Cost Performance, and Your Holiness, I bid you to come here.”

The king’s voice rang out. It seemed he’d been waiting for their conversation with Paul to end before summoning them.

When the three of them lined up in front of him, the king sighed deeply, a hand pressed to his forehead.

“Never in my wildest dreams or nightmares could I have imagined the prime minister interfering with our finances. Pathetic man. But then he went beyond that by trying to ruin our saint while involving another country. His actions leave me no choice but to punish him harshly.”

“My liege, while we have much to discuss, Fiona is exhausted from purifying the rot the Saint of Abundance brought about, so might you permit her to take her leave tonight?”

“Huh?”

Linus spoke first, and his request startled her, but the man himself beamed his usual smile.

“Oh, um, actually, I’m—”

“Fiona, you mustn’t push yourself.”

Just as she was about to tell His Majesty she was fine, Charles put his hand on her shoulder. Was he silently telling her he had something private to discuss with the king so she should make herself scarce?

“Right...then.”

She complied since she didn’t have a reason forcing her to stay. In response, Charles smiled ruefully and patted her head.

“Though I am torn about handing you over to him...*you* are the one who will ultimately make your choice, Fiona. Remember that, hm?”

His sad tone worried her, but her father’s smile didn’t waver.

“Fiona Everett, the Saint of Cost Performance, I look forward to your efforts on behalf of our country’s cost-effectiveness. You’re dismissed!”

She wanted to ask him how long she was supposed to remain in the role. Perhaps she could retire soon. However, all she could do was nod in the face of the king's carefree grin. Middle-aged men obsessed with their dreams were true terrors indeed.

# Epilogue

## “TIRED?”

After Fiona sat down on the sofa in the room with a view of the garden outside, Linus sat next to her. It's not that she wasn't tired, but her brain was so overloaded with information that she didn't have time to be tired, so she just shook her head in answer. This room, so far removed from the chaos of the ballroom, was so quiet that everything until now seemed unreal.

“Your Highness, did you know about everything?”

“What do you mean by *everything*?”

“For starters, the fact that the prime minister was embezzling from the national budget by padding it with empty figures and nonsense requests.”

“I suspected him for a long time but didn't have all the evidence until recently. It took a lot of ingenuity and effort to get it all in order, you know. But thanks to you eliminating basically all manner of wasteful spending, he started getting nervous. Probably realized his time was coming, so he made some sloppy moves, which helped me a lot.”

As far as Fiona was concerned, she had simply been doing her job. But it made her happy to hear she'd been useful in helping Linus gather the evidence he needed of the prime minister's wrongdoings.

“By the way, it was him who kept increasing the budget for wigs.”

Did that mean Mulligan wore a wig, too? Or were the wigs just an easy pretext to pad the estimates? The truth of the prime minister's hair would forever remain shrouded in darkness, but in any case, she would appreciate people protecting their own wigs.

“Then what about the Saint of Abundance? Did you know about her?”

“Paul and I have known each other for a long time. Ever since she was

summoned to Slava, he's been coming to me for advice on how to deal with her awful behavior. Apparently, there was only so much Paul could do to rebuke her because the nobles of Slava would defend her on account of not wanting the saint to lose her power. But it was another story entirely if she breached their contract decisively in another country. So when he found out the prime minister contacted her, he told me right away."

In short, despite being aware of the prime minister's conduct, Linus hadn't stopped the man for Paul's sake. Well, he also might have let Mulligan run around freely on purpose to secure evidence. Manaka's agreement allowed the prime minister to proceed with his scheme to ruin Fiona, Gene's own saint. Even if the other girl hadn't agreed, Paul could still have used the conspiracy against him. Either way, it didn't change the fact that the prime minister had been cornered.

"All I did was give Paul information. If the saint had done the right thing and refused the prime minister's offer or reported it to Paul and behaved properly, nothing would have happened. In the end, it was her own fault."

She couldn't deny that plenty of avenues to escape the fetters of the contract had existed for Manaka. Though she knew the other girl had brought it on herself, Fiona still felt sympathy when she recalled the sight of her so dejected. Being summoned from another world meant not knowing anyone around her. As someone who'd lost her memories, Fiona knew all too well how disheartening that felt. Just like she'd had Linus and Charles to support her emotionally and mentally, her powers as a saint must have done the same for Manaka. So, to lose them, even temporarily, must be devastating.

"I wonder when that collar will be removed."

Paul had said it would naturally disappear when everyone acknowledged her, but the statement was so vague that it was hard to determine any kind of time frame from it.

"Well, that depends on her, doesn't it? We all saw how shocked she was when she found out she couldn't use her saintly powers. Hopefully, that'll be the catalyst she needs to reflect upon herself. But Paul's a good man, so I doubt she'll suffer for too long."

“We *are* talking about Prince Paul, yes? But he said it would only disappear if she earned the people’s recognition.”

“Paul is the other party to the contract with the Saint of Abundance. So *his* will decides whether to impose or remove the contract’s shackles.”

“What?!”

Did that mean Paul had deliberately lied?

“Based on the saint’s personality, if she found out that Paul is the one who controls the terms of the contract, then she’d only pretend to get her act together. But if she were to think she needed everyone’s approval, that should help improve her attitude. He wants her to reflect properly on her actions as a saint not just for her own sake but also to avoid any similar troubles in the future.”

“O-Oh, well, yes, I can see his perspective.”

“When a saint is summoned from another world, that inherently means all her ties to that world are severed. Since we of this world summon them for our own reasons, we want them to be as happy as possible. But it will be hard for her to achieve happiness if everyone around her is unhappy because of her, don’t you think?”

He was right. Summoning a saint from another world didn’t mean just inviting a useful existence. It meant forcing someone with a family, home, and life of her own into an entirely different world. Fiona only just now realized this obvious truth.

“Though I’m a fake saint...I’m glad we managed to stop the summoning this time.”

She could understand wanting a saint’s aid when a country was in danger. However, she could *not* understand summoning one simply because a monarch was envious of a neighboring nation’s prosperity. From the saint’s perspective, both reasons were unacceptable, but it was still a relief for Fiona that one less person would be separated from her family.

“Hm, yes.”

Linus likely looked down sadly because he was thinking the same thing as her. He had said Paul was a good man, and she'd argue he was, too.

"Not only did we discover that the prime minister was responsible for all the wasteful spending, but we also improved budget allocations tremendously moving forward. That means the Saint of Cost Performance did her job. So...I think it's time for me to hang up the mantle as a fake saint, no?"

Since their setting for the fraud was a summoned soul residing within her, all she had to do to end it was say the soul had left. And as long as Linus and Charles backed her up, there would be no problems. Once she lost her status as a saint, Fiona would return to being the pontiff's aide, and with that, any talks of an engagement with Linus would also vanish. It was all very logical and expected, yet an inexplicable pain stabbed her in the chest.

"No need."

"But I can't stay an impostor forever."

He paused for a long moment before speaking again.

"Fiona. You're a saint."

"Now, now, Your Highness, you know the ploy was a temporary one."

She had proposed the tactic as a means to protect the country against the king's unreasonable demand to summon a saint from another world. She knew she was a mere priestess. Nothing more, nothing less.

"No, you don't understand. Fiona, you're a *real* saint."

Linus' smile was strained, and his eyes were dead serious. It didn't look like he was joking.

"...What do you mean?"

"You know about the saint summoning a decade ago, right?"

"The Saint of Sea Bounty, was it? But it failed, which was why the king wanted to try again."

Once she learned how enormous the budget had been and how many people had been necessary from the decade-old documents recounting the

summoning, Fiona came up with the idea to pretend to be a fake saint.

“It didn’t actually fail.”

“What?”

If it didn’t fail, then that meant the summoning had succeeded. But Linus had no reason to lie to her, and no such Saint of Sea Bounty existed, so the only conclusion she could draw was that it had failed.

“During the summoning ritual in the palace, only the king—my older brother because he was the crown prince then—and the pontiff were present. Since I was just a prince, I didn’t even know a saint summoning was taking place.”

According to the records, a number of magic knights and priests were involved in addition to the three Linus mentioned. But since those individuals represented a rotating source of energy, it was likely that only a few were present for the summoning itself. Frankly, the king and the crown prince wouldn’t have been useful, so Fiona thought it was the right judgment call to have only the bare minimum number of people on hand.

“That day, I just happened to visit the courtyard when suddenly a huge flood of light appeared in front of me. Then, the next moment, a little girl with black hair stood there.”

His eyes happily narrowed as he remembered what happened.

“I thought the girl was an angel. She was so adorable, and the light was so beautiful that I couldn’t move for a while. But that girl had lost her memories and looked so scared...which made me want to protect her.”

Linus clenched his fists and sighed softly.

“I would have loved nothing more than for the two of us to stay together like that forever. Unfortunately, her black hair meant she was very likely a saint. And in our country, a saint would become the future queen. Obviously, Father would never have taken her for a bride, considering the huge age difference, so I knew she would wind up as the crown prince’s consort. So...we hid her.”

“Why?”

Fiona had heard about Gene’s custom of making the saint a queen. Keeping



her existence a secret then might be considered an act of disloyalty toward the king, depending on the circumstances.

“My older brother was the crown prince then. If you asked me to describe him in one word, I’d choose ‘scum.’ He was already in his mid-twenties at the time. He had so many scandals with women and did not show a hint of compassion for others. Even if the saint became his consort, he would never care for her.”

Oh, right, Linus had only recently become the crown prince. Until his official accession, his elder brother had been the heir to the throne. Fiona didn’t know much about the line of succession, so she hadn’t paid much attention. Perhaps Linus’ brother had been deemed unfit for the position, which explained why Linus took over the rank instead.

“Having said that, a powerless second prince couldn’t hide a saint on his own. Though my father isn’t a bad man, he’s always been a dreamer, so I couldn’t tell him. And too often, others were fooled by my brother’s appearance and charm, so I couldn’t think of anyone else I could trust. Then, it just so happened that my good friend Charles was in the palace that day, and I asked him to help.”

At the time, Charles wouldn’t have been the pontiff, but he definitely would have been a high priest, which meant his presence at the palace was related to the summoning.

“‘Work for the sake of this country.’ ‘Become the consort of a man over fifteen years older, a vile, womanizing scum of a man.’ Can you imagine how cruel it would have been to say something like that to a ten-year-old child who lost her memories? The country was stable and at peace, so there was no need to rope a saint in and rely on her. Charles agreed with me.”

While she couldn’t deny he was right about the horror of asking such things of a young girl, she also understood that back then, Linus, who’d only been a boy and the second prince, and Charles, a mere priest, had staked their lives to keep her a secret. As always, she was moved by the two men’s kindness, but she found herself a bit curious about his older brother, considering the disgust in his voice when he spoke of him.

“Charles had his terms, though. One day, when she was old enough, we

would tell her the truth and give her the choice over her own future. As well, to avoid anyone abusing her, she would be placed in the Temple's protection. We went a step further by having him adopt her. As a high priest, no one would say anything about her hair, at least not to his face or hers."

Charles' black-haired adopted daughter who'd lost her memories. Until then, Fiona had simply listened to his story. Now, she gasped and looked up at him.

"That saint—"

"Was you, of course, Fiona."

Linus nodded slowly. She felt almost cocooned by his gentle gaze.

"Now I'm the crown prince, and with you being twenty, you're an adult like you always wanted to be. Plus, everyone knows you're a saint, and you have the achievements of one. Last but not least, I already made my intention to marry you public, so there are no more obstacles."

"B-But... But I'm not sure about a so-called Saint of Cost Performance being your consort..."

She had a mountain of things she wanted to ask and say, but in her confusion, she didn't know where to start.

"Fiona, you should know better than anyone that the Saint of Cost Performance is a ploy."

Yes. She should. Considering she had come up with the lie, no matter how well-intentioned, herself. She was supposed to be an impostor, but Linus' earnest expression told her he spoke the truth, which deepened her confusion.

"All right. Let's suppose I *am* the Saint of Sea Bounty. I don't have any power related to the marine industry."

Though she had never even thought about praying for a big catch, at the very least, she'd never heard anyone mention good fishing hauls because of her presence.

"I think some kind of accident happened. That's probably why you appeared outside where the summoning rite was being held and had no memories. Because Slava's Saint of Abundance was summoned in the right place with all

her memories intact.”

In short, even if Fiona was a saint, she wasn’t the Saint of Sea Bounty. Just like she’d read in the book some time ago, black hair was the sign of a saint. While it wasn’t clear what her particular brand of magic was, she had to acknowledge the high possibility she was a saint.

“Oh...no wonder you kept going on and on about our engagement and me being your consort. Because you thought of me as a saint.”

Linus had said it was the people of this world’s responsibility to make sure the saint was as happy as possible, cut off so completely from her old world as she was. Realizing his older brother would never be able to do that, he had set to work creating the best environment for her. She felt touched by his kindness, but at the same time, she couldn’t deny there was sadness, too.

Something was wrong with her lately. Fiona made a mental note to be examined by a physician soon.

“No. You’re wrong.”

Panicked, he shook his head, and she didn’t know why.

“Then is it because I have black hair?”

“Why would you even think that?”

“Because you like black hair, Your Highness.”

She knew because she’d seen more than enough of his passion for black hair over the last decade. Her confident answer only made him groan with laughter, which made his silver hair ripple and sparkle as he shook with mirth.

“I know I’ve said this to you countless times, but I guess it bears repeating. Not anyone with black hair will do. In fact, black hair isn’t even necessary. I wanted to touch *your* hair, Fiona... I just wanted to touch *you*.”

He picked up a lock of her hair and pressed it to his lips. She should be used to this by now, but for whatever reason, she couldn’t look away.

“I became the crown prince to make you, who would eventually be revealed as a saint, my future queen.”

His words meant he took action to achieve that goal. Ten years ago, there was already a crown prince, and Linus had acted to overthrow him.

“Oh my goodness... Is *that* what you meant by your dearest wish, the one you’ve had for so many years?”

“Yes. It wasn’t becoming the crown prince but you, Fiona.”

His stunning revelation left her speechless. If someone looked up the word “speechless” in a dictionary, they would see an image of her as she sat there now.

“You were always so insistent that you would become an adult once you turned twenty years old. And I became the crown prince to make you my wife. So Charles made me promise I wouldn’t pursue you seriously until you reached that age. Of course, that didn’t stop us from keeping the insects away and you far from any hint of romance. Though I suppose we may have been *too* overprotective, considering how you turned out... But you don’t hate me, do you, Fiona?”

Smiling, he tilted his head inquiringly, and the sensuality of his gesture made her heart leap.

“I don’t...hate you. Because you’ve always been by my side. You saved me, and you’re important to me.”

“I appreciate that. But I know there’s more. Feelings different from the ones you have for Charles.”

Perhaps the biggest difference between Charles and Linus was their positions. The crown prince was destined to wed the saint. Which didn’t necessarily mean it *had* to be Fiona.

“When talk rose of exchanging saints and the Saint of Abundance becoming your wife, I...my chest hurt at the thought.”

He narrowed his eyes so slowly at her honest remark that someone might have mistaken the gesture for drowsiness.

“That’s called jealousy, Fiona.”

“Jealousy.”

Her heart ached at the thought of him marrying Manaka but leapt when he said he wanted to marry *her*. If both of these things could be attributed to jealousy, it meant she had strong feelings for him, which begged the question.

Did Fiona love Linus?

A riot of emotions exploded in her chest. The realization embarrassed her, but it also felt *right*. To her, he'd always been a constant presence, the kind older brother. Yet before she knew it, he had become much, much more.

Heat blossomed in her face at the sudden epiphany, and she pressed her hands to her cheeks, hoping to cool herself down. As soon as she did, large hands covered hers.

"So. Be my wife."

His glittering gem-like eyes stared unflinchingly into hers. They had done exactly this countless times over the past ten years. But now that she understood he saw her as a woman and not a younger sister to be protected, every trace of composure abandoned her. Her cheeks grew hotter, the right words refused to surface in her mind, and all she could do was open and close her mouth like a fish. Perhaps Fiona was the Saint of Fish then.

Her mind in disarray, she suddenly had an absurd craving for fish. Fortunately for her, Linus' smile brought her back to reality.

Was it all right for someone like her to become the consort of a crown prince so dazzlingly beautiful he might as well have been spun from the light of the heavens itself?

"Well, since you've already made your intentions public, arranging for another saint now, not to mention searching for other bridal candidates would cost a lot of time and money. So, if we analyze the cost-effectiveness, I believe I may be a suitable option. Are you certain, though?"

"I should be asking *you* that, you know."

Linus pulled his hands away from on top of hers and sighed quietly.

"Do you know what the name 'Fiona' means?"

"Bright, white, and just, yes?"

He was the one who'd named her. She had always thought it curious he'd given her a name with "white" as a meaning even though she had black hair. Nevertheless, it was her name because Linus had chosen it.

"I assumed you gave me the name because you didn't want me to lose to others' curiosity or prejudices because of my unusual black hair."

"That's part of it, but only a small part. You stole my heart the moment I met you, Fiona. So I gave you the name to remind myself you're 'the light that illuminates me.' And you see how my hair is silver-white? Your name represents my color...so it means you're mine."

Her jaw dropped again in shock, mouth opening and closing foolishly. Now a full-fledged Saint of Fish, she felt that she needed to focus on ensuring all varieties of fish species thrived.

"But you're talking about yourself from ten years ago, yes?"

Despite realizing her feelings toward Linus only moments ago, her mind could not keep up with the impact of his words.

"Did you know that saints form contracts at the time of their summonings?"

"His Holiness told me about it. That a saint makes an agreement with the first person she meets in this world."

He'd said saints possessed unparalleled powers, so the country guaranteed her safety in return for their powers being used for the nation's sake and to avoid any abuses.

"Yes, that's right. The Saint of Abundance was deemed so detrimental to the interests of her country that, in accordance with the contract, her own magic was used to collar her."

Oh. To her, it seemed like Paul had placed it, but it turned out to be Manaka's magic. A contract kept both parties safe and bound them to one another more than they'd like.

"Wait, but I don't have a contract with this country. Supposing I *am* a saint."

"You're not wrong about countries being a party, but remember, the contract a saint makes is the first person she meets in this world. In the Kingdom of

Gene's case, normally, the king and crown prince witness the summoning ritual."

Except Fiona had appeared outside of the ceremony site and hadn't met the king or the crown prince a decade ago. Did that make her a stray saint without a contract?

"Does this mean we'll be forming a contract now?"

Though she had no intention of harming the country, after seeing what had happened to Manaka, she was a little afraid of being collared.

"No. We did that ten years ago."

"What?"

"We made a promise to each other, remember?"

When he beamed at her, she thought back to his words from that day.

*"I'll protect you, Fiona. So, in exchange, stay by my side forever."*

"That...is a contract?"

"It is."

"But there's nothing in it about any punishments if I do something to hurt the nation."

Protect the national interest and prevent abuse of the saint's powers. Not only were neither of these conditions included, but Fiona had always been free to act as she pleased, so it didn't feel like a real contract.

Picking up on her confusion, Linus gently stroked her head. That was all he did, but her mind calmed, making the gesture truly formidable.

"A country uses its saint in exchange for protecting her. But all I need is for you to stay by my side, Fiona. I want to protect you, so that's exactly what I'll do. Which is why we don't need fetters or punishments."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course."

The smile he gave her then was so blinding that she couldn't look directly at

Linus. Even though she'd always thought him far too handsome for his own good, now that she was aware of her own affection for him, the power of his smile increased exponentially, terrifyingly.

"These last ten years, you've always been on my mind, Fiona, and I devoted myself to making you mine. That's how long I've waited. So...don't think I'll let you get away. Ever."

Gentleness and a different kind of heat dwelled in the eyes that stared so intently at her. To quiet the loud beating of her heart, she pressed her hand to her chest.

"If I may be so bold then. Do you mean you...love me? And you didn't just choose me because I'm the cost-effective option?"

Should that turn out to be the case, then the marathon of sexual harassment he'd subjected to her person, mostly her hair until now, was not only a physical display of affection but also his way of expressing his love. Fiona knew she was at fault, too, for being so oblivious all this time. At the very least, though, the people around them could have tried to warn or stop him. Because she *just* realized they had unintentionally been flirting in public, which made her heart beat even faster.

While Fiona blushed furiously, Linus slumped in disappointment.

"Bloody hell. How did I miss that? I'm an idiot. Right, better late than never."

He muttered unintelligibly, castigating himself. Then, he raised his head and stroked her cheek, his fingers gliding softly.

"I love you so much. There's no room in my head for anything but you, much less cost-effectiveness. So you better prepare yourself, my dear saint."

Before Fiona could even catch her breath at his dizzying sensuality, Linus closed his lips over hers as if he would brook no further arguments.



## Side Story: What Makes Linus' World Go Round

**LINUS** had gone to the courtyard that day on a whim. But afterward, he was grateful from the bottom of his heart for that whim. From the moment he saw the black-haired girl enveloped in light—his world began revolving around Fiona as its axis.

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“**UGH**, why is every day so bloody boring?”

Sighing, Linus Gene muttered to himself after stopping in the palace courtyard.

The fourteen-year-old boy was this country's second prince. However, his connection to the throne was negligible since his brother, the crown prince, was more than ten years older than him. So there wasn't anything in particular he had to do.

Luckily or unluckily, he excelled in academics and the military arts, so he spent his days loafing around and feigning a facade of congeniality to avoid attracting his brother's attention. At this rate, his brother would end up the king, and Linus would likely wind up marrying some noble's daughter. He sighed again because this vision of his future didn't interest him in any way.

At that moment, a pure white light blanketed the courtyard.

“Whoa!”

It was so blinding that he instinctively closed his eyes and raised his arms, but even that wasn't enough to snuff it out of his view. When he sensed the intensity of the light finally dimming, he slowly opened his eyes and found a young girl standing there.

Lustrous black hair illuminated by infinite beads of light. The way her hair sparkled and shone looked like stars falling from the sky.

An angel had appeared.

He knew he was supposed to call the guards if he saw a stranger in the courtyard. Yet he couldn't tear his gaze away from the unreal sight and beautiful black hair.

"Where...am I?"

The girl slowly opened her eyes and whispered as she looked around. He was captivated by her caramel-colored eyes that glittered like andalusite. Then, as the seconds ticked past, he noticed the tears welling in them. He couldn't leave her alone now, so Linus rushed over to her in a panic.

"What's wrong? Are you lost?"

She seemed to be around ten years old. There was no way she had come to the palace on her own, so perhaps she'd lost sight of her parents. However, the young girl only shook her head silently.

"Then what's your name?"

He knew most of the nobles' names. If she had something to do with the Temple, he could just ask his best friend, Charles. Except she trembled in response and looked up at Linus like she'd start sobbing at any moment.

"I...don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Why am I here? I don't know my name. Why don't I know it?"

Tears began spilling over like a dam breaking. The beads of light reflecting off them made them look like falling jewels. Before he even had a moment to think about how beautiful the sight was, Linus found himself reaching out and wiping them away.

The girl didn't know her name or where she was. Either she was confused, or there was some reason to explain the loss of her memories. Whatever the answer, all he wanted to do was ease her fear. Preoccupied by that sentiment, he opened his mouth before he realized what he was doing.

"Fiona."

Upon hearing the word, the girl tilted her head curiously. The simple movement captivated him, and he could feel his lips curving into a smile.

“This name is my gift to you. Until you remember your real name, your name is Fiona.”

The black-haired girl—Fiona—widened her eyes so much he feared they would fall out of her head. She blinked repeatedly.

The name “Fiona” meant “white,” “just,” and “bright.” And for Linus, it also symbolized his own silver hair. She would be the light illuminating his dull world. His intuition told him so.

He gently cupped her shaking hands in his and narrowed his indigo eyes.

“I’ll protect you, Fiona. So, in exchange, stay by my side forever.”

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**“YOU** honestly have no idea how shocked I was then.”

The young man sighed dramatically and gave an exaggerated shrug.

Charles Everett was Linus’ best friend. Despite being more than ten years older than him, he treated the royal spare like he would anyone else, without any regard for the boy’s royal status. Some might even call Charles an eccentric. He was already a high priest at a relatively young age, so there was no questioning his talents.

For those reasons and more, Linus entrusted Fiona to Charles.

“And who in their right mind wouldn’t be when someone summons you only to tell you to adopt and protect a child? Though I had no intentions of marrying, I also never imagined I’d become a father first.”

“I didn’t have a choice. You know as well as I do it would have been practically impossible to protect her in the palace.”

It wasn’t a simple matter for a fourteen-year-old second prince to take in a girl younger than him of unknown background. He hadn’t liked the idea of unsavory rumors hurting Fiona, but he’d been even more afraid of his father, the king, and his older brother, the crown prince, finding out about her.

“So...do you think she’s, you know...?”

“Likely, yes. Based on what Your Highness told me about her, combined with

that black hair and the nature of the magic she possesses, I don't think Fiona is of our world."

Linus nodded in agreement with Charles' words.

The day Fiona appeared in the courtyard, a summoning ritual to call forth the Saint of Sea Bounty was underway in the royal palace. He'd heard the ceremony failed and no saint appeared, but he'd wondered if Fiona was the saint ever since learning of the summoning.

"In this case, I think how you handled everything was good for her. Because if she's revealed as the saint, she will become the future queen... Age-wise, she will become the crown prince's consort since the king is far too old for her. I hate to say it, but that future would only have brought her unhappiness."

Though the remark disrespected the crown prince, Charles spoke the truth. At the moment, Linus' older brother was a bachelor, but everyone in the country knew about his womanizing ways. To add insult to injury, he rarely studied or engaged in physical training and lacked the personality to stir the people with his words and deeds. Frankly, he couldn't think of a single thing his brother excelled at. It was no exaggeration to say that he attained his current position only by virtue of his birth, and he often used his status to behave arrogantly.

Frankly, the man was an utter embarrassment. So when they rescued Fiona, they decided that she couldn't be kept in the royal palace because they didn't want her to be misused by the crown prince since the saint was a symbol of ultimate authority.

*"The country isn't in dire need of a saint."*

*"It's unfair to ask a ten-year-old girl who lost her memory to work as a saint."*

*"Becoming the wife of an idiot crown prince over fifteen years older and with a terrible reputation as a womanizer is too cruel of a fate to place on her."*

Charles had agreed with Linus' pleas and adopted Fiona as his daughter. It was a serious act of betrayal to take custody of a person who was likely a saint summoned by the country and then hide her. However, his brother's character was so terrible that even Charles, a high-ranking priest, despised him. Linus wouldn't be surprised if his brother ended up assassinated one day.

“You haven’t forgotten our promise, right? Once Fiona is an adult, we’ll tell her the truth of her circumstances and let her choose her own path.”

“Of course I haven’t. It’s her life, and she has the right to decide where it goes. I’m curious, though... You keep reminding me over and over again. Why?”

It would soon be a month since the two of them took Fiona under their protection. But every time Linus visited the Everett residence, Charles insisted on bringing up their promise, and he was getting fed up. Perhaps his friend was afraid of Linus monopolizing the saint’s power. He should know better than to think he’d do something so troublesome.

In response, Charles frowned and fell into a thoughtful silence.

“Your Highness...don’t tell me you haven’t realized?”

“What?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Father.”

A knock sounded on the door, followed by Fiona entering. Unlike the first time they’d met when the little girl with the lustrous black hair and caramel-colored eyes saw Linus, she beamed at him. That, more than anything, told him she led a peaceful life here, and he smiled back at her.

“I baked cookies. I added the walnuts you love so much, Father. Will you try them?”

A sweet scent wafted over them from the plate she carried so carefully. Charles smiled at her.

“Thank you very much, Fiona. Of course, I’d love to. Let’s eat them together.”

Her expression brightened, but she immediately shook her head.

“No, I can’t. Um...I don’t want to intrude on your time with His Highness. Besides, I still have another batch to make.”

After she put the plate down on top of the table, she turned around to leave. Without thinking, Linus gripped her hand.

“Your Highness...?”

Though he realized he had surprised Fiona, Linus still wasn’t inclined to

release her. The way she tilted her head in confusion was adorable, and the fact that, at that moment, the only thing she saw was him made him feel strangely fulfilled.

“You know, I like honey.”

She blinked those beautiful eyes at him several times before nodding in understanding.

“Then next time, I’ll bake cookies with honey, too.”

“I can’t wait.”

“Me neither!”

She smiled happily at him, and he finally let her go. After she was gone, Linus picked up a cookie from the plate and munched on it. The pieces of walnut in the cookie were rich and flavorful, but he felt vaguely dissatisfied when he thought about Fiona making the cookies for Charles.

“You *really* haven’t realized?”

“And I repeat, what are you talking about?”

Sighing deeply, Charles watched Linus pick up another cookie.

“You love Fiona, don’t you?”

“...What?”

He cocked his head in confusion, his brain unable to process Charles’ words. His friend wasn’t the type to throw out baseless accusations, so he must have seen something to lead him to make such a judgment.

“Wait, do you think I’m protecting Fiona because I’m in love with her?”

Linus wouldn’t deny his interest in her. He still hoped she would be the something special to liven the monotony of his days and never tired of watching her.

“You exasperate me. Usually, you’re so sharp, but you’re so dense in the strangest ways.”

“The country doesn’t need a saint in these peaceful times; it’s wrong to make her work as a saint when she doesn’t even remember who she is, and there’s

no way she'd be happy as Brother's wife. You agreed with me on all these counts, Charles."

"None of what you said is a lie, but they're also official reasons to convince me, aren't they?"

Charles picked up a cookie and held it aloft to show him.

"Riddle me this. Why did you stop Fiona and tell her you like honey? Because you were jealous of these walnut cookies, weren't you? You barely show any interest in others, Your Highness, so from the moment you put your time and effort into protecting her, it was proof you think of Fiona as special."

Charles popped the cookie into his mouth, chewed in satisfaction, and, after swallowing, reached for his teacup.

"Special."

Linus realized Charles was right. He had just thought of her as something to brighten up his dull life, but...he'd been wrong.

"Charles. What does it feel like to be in love?"

"Uhhh. Look in a mirror? Although I suppose you can think of it like this. You're happy when you're together; just seeing her smile is enough; you want to hold her in your arms, and you definitely don't want to hand her over to another man. Something along those lines." Charles spoke without pause, then took a sip of his black tea.

"So that means she's 'special' and I 'love' her, huh?"

Linus folded his arms and mulled it over. He enjoyed spending time with Fiona, and whenever he saw her smile, it made him smile, too. He felt fulfilled the moment he realized she saw only him in that brief window of time. He hadn't been able to take his eyes off her since the instant he saw her, so the fact that he'd given her a name symbolizing the color of his hair must mean "she's mine."

"I see... It looks like I'm in love with Fiona."

"Which is exactly what I've been saying all this time... Um, Your Highness?"

Charles panicked a bit when he noticed Linus' aura transform. It was too late

to do anything about the boy now. The black-haired girl who'd been an object of interest to him had now become the object of his affection.

"It's just like you said, Charles. I want to be with her, I want to see her smile, I want to hold her... And I sure as hell don't want to hand her over to another man."

"About that... Those were just easy-to-understand examples, and if you would be so kind as to *not* stare at me with murder in your eyes, I'd appreciate it."

Linus hadn't intended to scare his best friend and was dismayed by his own behavior. Charles was the only person he trusted to care for Fiona, so he would never direct any bloodlust toward him. He was simply jealous.

"You get to live with Fiona and have her make your favorite cookies anytime you want. The least you can do is put up with a few aggravated stares from me. And obviously, it's out of the question to give her up to another man, but I also don't want any of them getting near her."

"You only *just* realized and accepted your feelings, so don't you think you're going a *tad* overboard with the possessiveness?!"

Again, Charles was right, and Linus couldn't do anything about it. The truth was the truth.

"Oh. Is this why you keep asking me over and over about our promise to tell her the truth when she's grown and let her choose her own path?"

Once Fiona knew the truth about herself and accepted she was a saint, only then would she become the crown prince's bride of her own volition. Had Charles feared Linus would keep the truth from her and take her choices away from her?

"I don't believe you'd do anything to bind her. However, I was concerned because I'm a firsthand witness to your fascination with her. I thought you might try to keep her as my adopted daughter instead of handing her over to the crown prince."

"I wouldn't do that to her. Fiona's life is her own, and the choice is hers, too. It's not my place to force her."



Precisely because he loved Fiona, Linus didn't want to crush her will or take away her choices.

"Which is why—I'll become the crown prince instead."

"...What?" Charles froze, his jaw hanging practically to the floor.

"Once Fiona finds out she's a saint, she'll be betrothed to the crown prince by our country's custom. So, if I become the crown prince, everything will turn out fine. And if she wants to hide the fact that she's a saint even after she learns the truth, she can still be my future queen."

Linus' feelings wouldn't change whether or not she was a saint, so all he had to do was make the necessary preparations. Regardless of what she chose, things would fall in his favor.

"H-Have you forgotten we already have a crown prince?!"

"Actually, I sort of did. My scum of an elder brother well into his twenties who can't do a single thing properly and is only capable of causing trouble."

"Don't tell me you're thinking of forcing him out of the position?" Charles gulped audibly.

"Stop exaggerating. It's not that serious. You know I don't like fighting... *However*, if our father deems him unfit to be the heir, then I will naturally become the successor, right?"

"You just said you don't like fighting! But you have every intention of crushing him with all your might, don't you?!"

Linus grinned at Charles, whose expression was a mixture of fear and exasperation.

"I can't help it. I love Fiona, so I don't want to hand her over to anyone else."

She belonged to him. No matter who his opponent was, he refused to give her up. Fiona was a saint, and if a saint was destined to become the crown prince's bride, all Linus had to do was become the crown prince. Logically, it was very simple.

"Then promise me this."

“What, you’re not going to stop me?”

“Like you would stop even if I asked.”

Charles let out an aggrieved sigh from the depths of his soul, then fixed his gaze on Linus.

“You will become the crown prince, *and* you must wait until Fiona is twenty years old, the age *she* considers to be adult. Until *both* of those conditions are met, you must promise me you won’t make any serious advances on her.”

“Why?”

Charles was the one who said that being in love meant wanting to embrace the one you loved, so why was he trying to make him wait ten years?

“You said it yourself, didn’t you? Fiona’s life is her own, and her choices are her own, too. She is still a child. As her savior, if you approach her seriously, she will not be able to deny you. So please refrain from excessive contact until she adapts to this world and can make her own decisions.”

While Linus understood what his friend meant, he was still unhappy about it. However, Fiona could sometimes be a little distant, and there was no denying that she likely remained anxious about her inability to remember her past. He didn’t want her to hate him if he forced her, and he also hated the thought of Fiona losing herself.

“Fine. I promise. But...can I at least touch her hair?”

Truth be told, he wanted nothing more than to give free rein to the overwhelming love he felt and wrap her up in his arms. For her sake, though, he could control himself. And yet, he would at least like some kind of reward or comfort.

“In moderation, yes. *Only* in moderation.”

“Then does that include her hands?”

“Same answer. Moderation.”

In short, as long as he practiced moderation, touching was fine.

“Excellent. Time to find a comb that’ll suit her hair. I’ll need perfumed oils,

too.”

Is this what exhilaration felt like? To feel like his heart practically flew? Ever since meeting Fiona, he kept making new discoveries. Every day was exciting.

“At the risk of being rude...you *do* understand the meaning of the word ‘moderation,’ don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

When Linus smiled cheerfully at him, Charles sighed *and* shook his head.

He would start by eliminating his worthless older brother. It would be quicker to confront him directly, and frankly, the odds were heavily in Linus’ favor. However, Fiona would be ill at ease after open war, and, in the unlikely event something happened to her, he would never forgive himself. At any rate, he still had a good ten years until she turned twenty, so taking his time to secure the position of crown prince didn’t sound bad either.

Everything he’d do from this moment forward was to claim Fiona as his own. For her, he would wait as long as he needed and do whatever must be done. Because from the moment he saw the black-haired girl enveloped in light—Linus’ world began revolving around Fiona as its axis.

## THE END





## Ayakashi and the Fairy Tales We Tell Ourselves

By Kosuzu Kobato    Illustration by Meiji

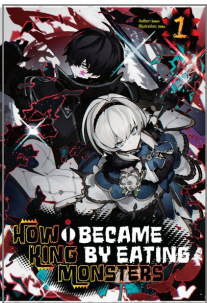
When Haruka's life collides with Takumi's, she suddenly starts seeing ayakashi! But it's not scary because they look like cute stoats to her, much to Takumi's dismay because all he sees is her fawning over goblins!



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

By BlueBlue    Illustration by Meiji Anno

Alexandra swapped places with the villainess and is ready to stop the endless otome game loop cycle by beating up the love interests and the heroine!



## How I Became King by Eating Monsters

By Daken    Illustration by Shiba

A prince unknowingly rises from assassination target to king by eating monsters! A story of comedic misunderstandings.



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