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The Inconvenient Life of an Arousing Priestess 2

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KONYAKU HAKI DA HATSUJOU SEIJO by Makino Maebaru

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Prologue: Priestess Silono's Memories

THE break of dawn. Coming from the refugees of the monster attack, moans and sobs could be heard here and there around the campground. Priestess Silono watched the sun rise in the eastern sky over the imperial side of the mountains.

“So what if we made it through the night? Like morning means anything anymore...”

The sixteen-year-old muttered those words like someone her age would, then dropped her gaze to her earth-colored habit illuminated by the sunlight. Patched and mended all over, the holy woman's attire told the tale of how much turmoil she'd endured in the last year.

Silono was born the daughter of a wealthy merchant. She had wanted for nothing as she grew up with all the creature comforts. But when her saintly powers had been discovered, she was enrolled in the Holy Woman Learning Academy. And this was her second year working as a priestess since she'd started at the age of fourteen.

This past year had been hell. Once Monica Regulus—the saint whose powers were ranked exceptionally high—had been branded an “unholy woman,” the standing of priestesses in general fell precipitously. The Church declared that “all holy women are corrupted heretics” and summarily dismissed her from her post at one of the frontline bases set up against the monsters.

Holy knights and priests had been sent as replacements. In their unblemished, brand-new raiments, they took control and strutted about as if they owned the place. But they proved themselves utterly incapable when monsters attacked, leading to the town's devastation.

The tragedy lasted for a week.

Similar misfortunes befell many other towns and cities. Thankfully, her family had escaped abroad thanks to their connections. Silono's parents had tried to

convince her to abandon the country and flee with them, but the girl had refused. As a saint, she just couldn't leave behind the people suffering before her eyes.

However... She surveyed her surroundings. Sunlight shone on the hastily erected, shabby tents. The sounds of people groaning, crying, and cursing came from all over. In its impartial brilliance, the morning sun mercilessly revealed the pitiful figures of these citizens of the Kingdom of Kophe. They had lost everything and fled with just their lives, clinging to the Empire as the only place that would provide them safety.

Her vocation as a priestess demanded she act. But where to even start? She had been using her supernatural ability continuously, to the point her mind was in a haze. Silono wasn't even sure how many days had passed at this point.

Her inability to heal everything vexed her to no end. She'd spent her life fighting monsters as a holy woman. It was hard to believe she now passed her days powerless and unable to do anything after being betrayed by her country and forsaken by the Church.

Then, at that moment.

"It's a monster!"

Someone shouted the warning, causing an immediate uproar amongst the refugees. Silono looked up at the sky too.

A pterosaur flew toward them from Kophe, beating its massive wings leisurely. It spat small flames from its mouth like it was ridiculing the terrified people.

Chaotic shouts filled the encampment.

"Run!"

"Where are the holy knights?!"

"To hell with being a knight! At this point, I'm protecting myself!"

"No! Stay away! I can't take this anymore!!!"

The agitation amongst the people erupted into a full-scale panic as everyone ran about, frantically trying to escape. The makeshift tents were mowed down

while children screamed and cried. Shouts and shrieks echoed as people crashed into each other.

“I have to do something...because...I’m a saint...”

Silono rallied herself with those words and staggered upright. With the others fleeing behind her, she turned in the direction of the flying pterosaur and raised her battered hands.

“I, holy woman Silono, command into creation a silver shield...!”

She mustered every bit of her remaining strength to execute the defensive magic. But despite her desperate spell, the barrier disintegrated in less than a second. Silono’s saintly supernatural powers were at their limit.

“No... This can’t be...”

The pterosaur drew closer, and with it, her end—

“By the might of the fire goddess! Incinerate these vile creatures within my sight into ash!”

The spell rang out in a sharp, ringing tone. An explosive roar and shockwave followed the chant, making the very air tremble.

“Burn! Burn! Burn!”

Bam. Bam. Bam. Bam! Bam! Bam!

Consumed by the flames, the pterosaur turned into a ball of fire in the blink of an eye and crashed down to earth. Then the same women cast a spell aimed at the people frozen in shock by the sudden turn of events.

“Witches, sisters of eld, unveil a night of peace for all.”

As soon as her voice fell on the air, a languid, sweet scent like the one given off by the ripest fruit wafted everywhere. One by one, the agitated refugees dropped to their knees and laid on the ground, their expressions vacant.

A unit of medics rushed to the scene, their white cloaks billowing. Clad in the military uniform of the neighboring Belktrius Empire, they began assisting the refugees one after another.

Silono was dumbfounded.

“I... What...?”

“Apologies for the wait. You are now under the protection of the Flame Corps, the imperial knightly special forces!”

Though the scent lulled Silono into a gentle drowsiness, the girl craned her neck in the direction from which the voice came. Beyond the sleeping refugees was a group of people, one of them carrying a fluttering flag sporting the imperial coat of arms. Looking severely out of place here, a woman garbed in pure white saintly attire led them.

Red-tinged silver hair overflowed from her wimple. Crimson eyes like ripe strawberries. The sunlight shining down behind her created a halo around her. The legendary priestess Silono knew of only through rumors.

Was it her? Was it actually her?

“The arousing priestess, Madam Monica...!”

Tears cascaded down Silono’s face as she clasped her hands together and offered a prayer.

Monica Regulus, the unholy woman, made her triumphant return.

Chapter 1: The Arousing Priestess Makes Her Triumphant Return

EARL Causden's domain lay on the border between the Kingdom of Kophe and the Belktrius Empire. Clean, provisional tents were erected one after another on a section of the earldom. A temporary headquarters was also established. The refugees' campground transformed into a small settlement in the blink of an eye.

"You see, the Federation of Vela Bowes to the east is governed by nomadic people. I used their houses as inspiration for this set-up, and it's working out surprisingly well, in my opinion. Though I think this should make tent life somewhat easier."

Richard and I were walking around together in the campsite labeled Temporary Base A.

"Ah, it's his Imperial Highness, Richard..."

Whenever people caught sight of him, they busied themselves worshiping and admiring him.

"Isn't the woman next to him the lascivious saint...?"

"We're so grateful, so fortunate..."

"Mama! I saw the wan-ton priestess!"

"You mustn't call her that or point at her! It's rude!"

"Ahahaha..."

Richard wasn't the only one though. Next to him, I too was offered prayers in addition to the odd but well-meaning comments here and there. Certainly a strange experience for me.

We passed through the tents making up the residential district and found ourselves in an open clearing. There, the members of the Flame Corps led by

Richard raised their voices to be heard as they distributed food and supplies. The aroma of the warm soup made with medicinal herbs drifted all the way to us.

“It smells delicious, hm?” I commented.

“And the ingredients include medicinal herbs you grew, Miss Monica,” Richard replied. “The soup has noodles too, so overall, it should help their bodies recover.”

When the knights of the order caught sight of us, they saluted sharply.

After we crossed the border into Kophe, our first order of business was driving the monster back then calming down the people using hypnosis magic. Once we put the exhausted refugees into a temporary slumber, we went about sorting the injured, sick, and those whose lives were in danger. I directly healed the individuals with the most severe issues through my saintly powers while the medical corps handled the others’ treatment depending on their afflictions.

In the meantime, every knight in the order utilized their magic to erect the provisional tents all at once. By the time a full day had passed, the nearly one thousand evacuees were able to eat warm meals in a private space protected from the rain and wind.

To no one’s surprise, the people of Kophe were at first utterly bewildered by the Flame Corps’ sudden appearance and aid. But the monster’s extermination and the construction of a clean place to rest and fill their stomachs finally afforded them a much-needed sense of security. They remained docile as the knights administered relief in a practiced and coordinated effort. Proof of the knowledge they had gained stationed all across the Empire.

“By the way,” Richard said, peering intently into my face. He paused before continuing. “Might you be hungry, Miss Monica?”

“Um... I am, but I don’t quite feel like eating just yet. Never mind that, though. There’s something more important we need to discuss, Richard.” I wrapped my arms around my stomach and spoke aloud the thought that had been bothering me. “This rescue...won’t it be costly?”

“Naturally, since the Empire is laying out the best relief supplies it can

muster.”

“And you don’t think it’s a waste?”

“Not at all. It would be more wasteful if we *didn’t* use them when we ought to. The funds come from the profits your efforts produced for our country, Miss Monica, so there’s no need for you to fret. Despite the capital being for humanitarian aid, those in charge won’t simply approve ventures that put our ledgers in the red. Not even for me.” Then Richard winked smartly at me and suddenly, the tension leaked out of my body like a balloon deflating.

“I-I see...”

According to Richard’s explanation, the Empire’s Order of Knights, Special Forces division, also known as the Flame Corps, possessed a flourishing budget due to various factors. One was the profits from the potions enterprise. Evidently, the potion I supervised the invention, production, export, and sales of in the factory located in Psyend, a region in the Empire’s south, was selling explosively both domestically and internationally. Especially abroad. Those in charge at the factory monitored the market price and carefully adjusted production to maintain market equilibrium.

The other factor was exceedingly simple. Damage from monster attacks decreased dramatically in the Belktrius Empire, leading to greater public safety. In short, the country was at peace.

Richard explained all of this to me as we sat on a bench in the clearing. While he spoke, he graciously acquiesced to the demands of the throngs of people coming up to us. He shook hands, waved, and generally treated everyone with affection.

“Your extraordinary efforts not only allowed me to strike back at those cunning old men intent on rebellion, but also gave me the opportunity to strengthen my order’s arsenal. Thanks to you, enemies no longer crowd my way,” he said with a wink.

“Aren’t you afraid you’ll be targeted as a threat now instead with all that profit?”

Richard merely shrugged in response when I voiced my concern. “I’m

spending our budget outside the country under the pretext of humanitarian aid to avoid that very thing.”

“Ah, I think I see now.” I nodded.

“I thought you would. After all, the downfall of Kophe would pose a problem for our Empire too.”

“Hm... It all sounds so awfully convenient for you that, on the contrary, it makes me afraid of *you*.”

“Heh. Simply the natural result of an exceptionally powerful saint and the man who wants to put that saint’s skills to good use joining forces.”

As usual, he cheerfully made the victory sign with his fingers. Then, while waving smilingly at the onlookers, his gaze suddenly turned distant and he added in a soft murmur, “In any case, the amount we spend here is insignificant compared to what you’ve done for our national interest, Miss Monica. Not to mention how many more benefits we’ll reap moving forward.”

“What do you mean?”

He narrowed his flame-colored eyes and chuckled meaningfully. “Exactly what it sounds like. Consider this. Once peace is restored to our ever-so-lovely neighbor, the Kingdom of Kophe, its people will need a great many things for reconstruction, wouldn’t you say? Say, potions and goods made in the Empire.”

“Oh!” I clapped my hands together. “Oh, I see. You’re absolutely right, as usual.”

“And if the ocean becomes more peaceful, maritime trade will be more active. Only good things await.”

“Well...I’m inclined to believe you *because* it’s you, Richard. Though I do wonder if things aren’t going a little too well.”

Because ultimately, I was a holy woman of common breeding, which made me an outsider in the world of politics. Before the annulment of my betrothal, the education I received in preparation for becoming queen consort focused primarily on etiquette and royal manners instead of politics due to my upbringing as a farmer’s daughter. So no matter how hard I rack my brains, I

would never be able to come up with anything better than His Imperial Highness's projections.

"At any rate, I'm just glad to hear that Kophe's issues won't cause the Empire undue trouble."

My heart ached at the sight of the people lined up waiting for their rations. If only I wasn't a "lascivious saint." Then perhaps their lives wouldn't have been destroyed.

A week ago, I learned of the crisis in my homeland while in the Belktrius Empire. The more I heard, the more horrified I grew. Monsters ran rampant through more than half the country, leaving entire areas lawless, destroying farmland, and forcing many of Kophe's citizens to flee for their lives. All in all, an absolute disaster. Evidently, neither the government nor the Church devised any true countermeasures as they insisted on relying on strategy spearheaded by the high priest, the same one who excommunicated holy women. There were too many blunders to count in all this. Of course, the Kingdom didn't request assistance from other nations either, choosing instead to continue concealing the situation. Not to mention that the Church maintained its unyielding position on all priestesses being corrupted existences. At this rate, the country's destruction was all but assured.

"I... This is all my fault. It's because I was branded an arousing priestess."

I'm to blame. It was the first thought that came to mind when Richard had told me what was happening.

"If I hadn't been exiled...they wouldn't need a soup kitchen like this."

"Miss Monica..."

These people lost not only their homes and belongings but their precious families as well. They ran for dear life even with all the wounds, visible and invisible, they carried. But how many weren't able to escape? How much couldn't be saved? It made me dizzy to think about the scale of who and what couldn't be protected. It made me want to scream at my own uselessness.

"Miss Monica... Miss Monica!"

Richard rapped my shoulder firmly as I sunk into a forlorn silence.

“Nh... Ri...Richard...”

When I raised my head, I found him staring intently at me, his expression stern.

“Let me say this. There’s no need whatsoever for you to feel any sort of responsibility toward this country.”

“But—”

“Think. Think back. Who was it that expelled you with a single slip of paper?”

In his attempt to raise my flagging spirits, he now cupped the shoulder he’d thwacked with a gentle hand.

“Listen to me. You need to change your mindset about you being responsible for causing these people pain. How can I explain this to you... Look, this situation is indisputably caused by the Kingdom of Kophe’s many political mistakes. In his arrogance, its crown prince unilaterally ended your engagement and deprived a lone woman of the only home she’s ever known. A single word from him precipitated all this. None of this is a burden for you to bear, Miss Monica.”

“Richard...”

“You did your utmost as a saint with exceptional abilities. Nothing more, nothing less.” He gripped my hand tightly as he leaned in close to convince me. The earnest appeal in his gaze softened the tightness in my chest.

“You know...you’re right,” I said softly, then pressed on with more pep in my voice. “You’re absolutely right. This isn’t the time for regrets or indecision. The most important thing I must do now is help restore peace in Kophe.”

“Good. Now that’s the Miss Monica I know.” Richard’s well-shaped lips curled up into a smile. His face seemed even closer now, so close I could feel the breaths he took.

“I— Oh, dear.”

I felt my face go up in flames the moment I became aware of it.

“Miss Monica? Is something wrong?”

Richard remained exceedingly unfazed. Well, besides his concerned expression as he tilted his head inquiringly. Confronted by this extremely handsome man, my heart beat hard in response. I slipped my fingers from his and stood up, then deliberately raised my voice.

“R-Right then!”

Smack. I slapped both of my cheeks, rallied myself, and fashioned a smile despite the self-inflicted pain stinging my face.

“I-I’ll do my best! I’ll work myself to the bone! Hip, hip, hurrah!”

Richard burst into laughter as he watched me wave my arms in determination. Then, he spoke in a gentle tone, as if to reiterate his earlier point. “Let’s not be hasty though, hm? Your job is to light up everyone’s lives with your brilliant smile. Leave the difficult tasks to me.”

“Understood. As you wish then, Richard.” I nodded firmly. Never mind I was doing my darndest to hide my racing heart and the copious amount of sweat streaming in awkward places.

Yes, I had a job to do. I needed to devise a way to halt the destruction of the Kingdom of Kophe. *And then I must do what I can to achieve that.*



A week had passed since Temporary Base A was established near the border. We, the members of the Empire’s Flame Corps, settled down in the base and dedicated ourselves to the intensive relief efforts as well as the investigation of Kophe’s true state of affairs. Richard had sent correspondence to Kophe’s palace noting the actual extent of damage and countermeasures. The knights in the order discussed the management of the temporary base with the evacuees.

As for me? Well...I had far too much free time on my hands while all this went on.

“There’s no need for you to work, Miss Monica, since you’ll be busy soon enough.” So Richard had told me. The order’s magical unit handled the defensive magic and the medical squadron took care of the healing, mainly with potions. Despite my eagerness to work, there wasn’t much for me to do.

“But it makes me ashamed to do nothing except go through our food supplies.” So I had replied to Richard. Which was why I helped wherever they were shorthanded every day.

“Now then, today’s assignment is...helping the medical corps, hm?” I muttered to myself.

I exited my tent and headed toward their location. A large tent had been set up for the medics. Under the shelter blocking the sun’s direct rays, hygienic, waterproof tarps had been laid out to treat and heal people with relatively minor injuries.

At the outset of the rescue operation, the refugees had looked downtrodden and lifeless. But now, their bodies cleansed and clad in clean clothes, they smiled brightly. Many had recovered to the point that they chatted easily with each other, creating a more lively atmosphere.

“Thank ye, lady saint!”

An elderly man returned the cup to me after downing a potion. Clad in clothes provided to him and the others from our relief supplies, he rolled his thin arms energetically.

“Ahhh, ain’t nothing in this world like the holy woman water made in the Empire! And it’s delicious, to boot!”

“Haha! I appreciate the sentiment,” I replied.

It was only a slightly salty but simple enough potion. Still, I found myself smiling politely at his unexpected compliment on the taste.

“By the way, lady saint.” The old man lowered his voice. I listened attentively, wondering if what he wanted to discuss was so embarrassing he needed to whisper. “Yer the arousing priestess, ain’t’cha?”

“I... I suppose that unfortunate designation applies to me.”

“Then...will yer powers work on my lower half?”

“Excuse me?” I unwittingly did a double-take of his face and found him smiling bashfully.

“Well, y’see... Been a right long time since my little man had enough energy to

strut, y’hear? So I figured, since I have ye here, wouldn’t hurt to ask if ye can heal me with yer special power.”

Oh, dear. A nonessential and non-urgent medical request for treatment has landed in my lap. Whatever shall I do? Ha, as if I don’t know the answer already.

Courteous to the bitter end, I apologetically shook my head.

“I’m sorry. Though I would very much like to fulfill your request, unfortunately, I can’t use my holy powers indiscriminately. I must treat everyone equally. You do understand, don’t you?”

I spoke only the truth. If I used my supernatural abilities here, the effect on the incredibly stressed refugees would quickly turn the situation out of control. A frenzy of debauchery out in the open was *not* a joke. I mean, think of the children!

But the old man refused to back down.

“Please, I beg ye! Please! Ye don’t know how much it nettles me to see the state of my junior now. I couldn’t get ’im to stop crowing in my prime and now he’s quieter than a churchmouse.”

“U-Ummm...”

In that moment, I realized others were watching me. Their sharp, predatorial gazes made me feel like I was being hunted and sweat trickled down my back in response.

“He makes a fair point. If the lady saint heals us, we won’t need the potions.”

“Esteemed arousing priestess, please heal my scars too. It should be a simple matter for you, yes?”

“Um, well...”

“Dear wanton saint, are you perhaps in heat at the moment? I-Is there anything I can do to assist you with it?”

“Ummmmmm...”

I’ve gone and done it now, I thought to myself as the growing crowd overwhelmed me.

“Oy! All of you, enough!”

One of the knights noticed what was happening and tried to protect me, but the rush of people kept increasing.

“Say something, wanton priestess! The holy woman back in my hometown never hesitated to help us!”

“You’re a powerful saint, aren’t you? So you can spare a little of your power.”

“Eeek... P-Please calm down...!” I stammered.

Up until now, everyone had obeyed us meekly because they were on the brink of life and death. But as they recovered bit by bit from the worst circumstances, the discontent and suffering they’d endured started spilling out one after another.

In the Belktrius Empire, holy women as a rule were treated as sacred objects. Except Kophe was different, used to a saint’s self-sacrificing nature. Too late, I finally understood precisely why Richard had told me not to work. Because he’d known this would happen. I cursed my own stupidity now.

A small child ran over to me with a desperate expression. He couldn’t have been more than five years old.

“Lady saint, can you help my mama too? Her head keeps huwting real bad. Pwease help my mama...”

The advancing horde of people knocked down the child in their agitation.

“No!” I sprang forward without thinking and snatched him up from the ground. “Are you all right?”

“...Waaahhh!!!”

“Did you hit your head? Are you hurt anywhere?”

“Waaaaaahhhhhh! Maaamaaa!”

The whole experience must have been terrifying for him. Huge tear drops started falling from his eyes when he saw blood oozing from the scrape on his knee. The child’s shrill shrieks put the refugees even more on edge.

“Waaahhh! It huwts, huwts...”

My heart squeezed with every sob. Normally, I would use my saintly powers on just such a child. They didn't go into heat when I healed them, not to mention the time it took to dilute a potion's strength for a child. What's more, it was incredibly difficult to convince a crying little one to even swallow the liquid. But if I used my ability here to heal him, the situation would only worsen. I didn't know what to do.

And then.

Clap, clap!

A clapping sound suddenly filled the air.

"All right, folks, that's enough! Let me through, yes, thank you, coming through, begging your pardon."

A jaunty, masculine voice, slightly accented. The flamboyant man who threaded his way through the crowd had long black hair and wore round-framed glasses. His unfamiliar looks and appearance made me think he wasn't from the Kingdom of Kophe or the Belktrius Empire. Underneath a durable-looking longcoat made of some sort of stretchy fabric, he wore a long garment resembling a gown or tunic made from lustrous, black material embroidered with a dragon. He spread his arms wide with a dramatic flourish as he planted himself between me and the throng of people, making his long hair and clothes swish in an arc.

"Calm yourselves, folks, calm yourselves. Should Madam Monica collapse, we won't be able to supply you with the potions you've all grown so fond of."

"Mpf?!"

While he spoke, he leaned down to lift me up and then wrapped an arm firmly around my shoulders.

"U-Um."

He paid no attention to my flustered state. Once more, he gestured expressively with his other arm and spoke in a voice that carried comfortably. I could glimpse his canines as he smiled charmingly and appealed to the people's reason.

“What if monsters suddenly attacked? If we don’t have Madam Monica preserve her power, we’ll aaall be in very big trouble. But we’ll be fine as long as she and the knights handle things. So let’s treasure the woman who accomplished the tremendous feat of saving an entire country! Though...I suppose I can understand how it would be difficult to sympathize with others when your mind is battling your own problems, hm? Therefore! I present!”

He suddenly rummaged about inside his garments and pulled out a stone attached to a string, lifting it high in the air.

“This is called a Priestess Teardrop Stone, and it’s a talisman to ward off evil! Its miraculous effects have been felt even in the Belktrius Empire. We have a never-ending stream of overjoyed customers singing its praises, be it a stroke of good fortune, family harmony, prosperous business, and more!”

“You think we have any money on us, man?!”

His smile didn’t waver at the shouted complaint.

“There will be no charge for this today. But if you find it effective! Or wish for another! Perhaps even gift them to your relatives! Please do favor me with your patronage then. You’ll find my contact details written on the strap.”



Then he went about dropping stones into the hands of the dumbfounded refugees, cheerfully folding their fingers around each one every time. The order of knights took the opportunity to distribute potions to everyone as well. With the wind taken out of their sails, the crowd of people dispersed, their expressions baffled.

“Thank...goodness...”

I sighed in relief. Then the man with the round-framed glasses crouched down in front of the child at my feet, who sat on the ground with his mouth wide open in shock. And he gave the little boy a Priestess Teardrop Stone. Out of all the stones he’d handed out, this was the largest and loveliest, in the shape of a heart.

“Here. It’s a present for your dear mama. She’ll be happy.”

“Okay... Thank you, mister!”

The child nodded and dashed off energetically. As we watched him run back to his mother, the man murmured quietly from behind me.

“Well, well. Did you perhaps give him special treatment?”

“Just...pretend like you didn’t see that,” I replied.

His keen eyes picked up on the fact that I’d stealthily healed the boy’s knee. I found him a bit too close for my liking, so I took a step away from him. When I did, he narrowed his eyes at me like he could see through me.

“Then let’s pray he doesn’t realize what you did and tell everyone.”

“Urk... I-I could say the same to you! What you gave to everyone is industrial waste from the potion factory. You must know it has no benefits.”

The Priestess Teardrop Stones were in fact used-up magic stones from the factory.

Roughly speaking, magical stones could be used in two ways. First, the engraved type. A magical formula was engraved (not literally though; just that the magical formula is stored inside the stone) on the stone, allowing the stone itself to be used in perpetuity as a magical tool. This method required sophisticated techniques, so very few people, such as Professor Martinez, could

even construct them. Of course, this also meant mass production was difficult. The special defense mechanism to ward off lust used the engraved type of magical stone.

In comparison, the potion factory utilized the consumable type. The inherent magic contained within the stone was poured into other objects, making it a consumable good. In other words, the normal operation of the potion factory produced a large amount of byproduct from the consumable type of magical stone.

Once the power within this type of stone was exhausted, it turned transparent like a glass bead. The Priestess Teardrop Stones he distributed were these depleted stones wrapped in gold leaf.

He responded rather nonchalantly when I pointed this out to him. “Wasn’t the government stuck on how to dispose of them in Psyend?”

“W-Well, yes...”

How does he know that? Suspicious, I nodded reluctantly. A corner of his mouth curled up in amusement.

“You know, my grandfather always said, ‘Faith is a mysterious thing.’ So why not send up three cheers for the fact that I found a way to deal with the industrial waste *and* give everyone something to cling to?”

“You are quite right...” I straightened my posture and lowered my head in thanks. “In any case, thank you. You helped me out of a tense situation.”

“No thanks necessary. It’s the duty of the citizens of the Belktrius Empire to protect His Imperial Highness Richard’s most precious holy woman.” Then he placed his palm respectfully on his chest and bowed before introducing himself. “My name is Xenu. I’m a merchant who performs various tasks at His Highness’s behest.”

“Xenu...”

“That’s right. Xenu Eugenie, to be precise.”

What an unusual name. One rarely encountered someone like him in the Empire. Both his looks and clothes marked him as someone from one of the

eastern countries. Many immigrants flowed from the east through the continent's trade routes and settled in the Empire. I wondered if he was one of those.

"I look forward to making your acquaintance, Madam Monica." Xenu courteously lifted my right hand. Then, keeping his eyes locked on mine, slowly pressed his lips against the back of it. Despite the gentlemanly nature of the gesture, it felt oddly provocative.

Unwittingly, I froze at the touch. He narrowed his eyes inquisitively, as if he was saying, "Did I do something strange?" before he spoke.

"A kiss on the back of the hand is a conventional greeting, my lady," he said.

"Huh? Oh... Y-Yes, yes, it is."

He accompanied his flirtatious glance with a laugh, then spun around and walked away.

"What a suspici— I mean, strange individual." It wasn't kind to speak ill of the person who rescued me, so I softened my impression halfway through. "I can't recall someone like him accompanying us."

It was normal for a merchant caravan to accompany the knights on their expeditions. Though the battlefield presented business opportunities galore, at the same time, merchants were absolutely indispensable to both the knights and the exhausted, impoverished locals. But if the Empire acknowledged him as an official part of our entourage, why hadn't I met him at all before now? Especially in light of how conspicuous he was.

"Ah...pish posh. I'll think no more on this."

Although I had many unanswered questions on the matter of Xenu, I was so busy I ended up forgetting them all.



THE day after the commotion, Richard and I were invited to visit Earl Causden in his castle. He was the lord of this earldom situated on the border between Kophe and the Empire, and he was also the one who gave us permission to establish the campsite in Temporary Base A.

The earl, a man of around forty years old and possessed of an intellectual appearance, greeted us when we arrived. He introduced the young man standing next to him as his heir and eldest son. The same age as Richard, he had incredibly sharp, masculine features.

Both of them looked delighted to welcome us as they bowed deeply to Richard.

“Your Imperial Highness, Richard II Belktrius. We are honored to have you here.”

“I couldn’t begin to imagine spending so much time in a tent. You should have stayed with us from the start.”

While shaking hands with them, Richard replied using his best manners.

“No, no, that wouldn’t do. After all, we’re only here to provide aid. So the most important thing we can do to gain the trust of Kophe’s refugees is to eat and sleep with them in the same place.”

Then they both greeted me in the formal manner reserved for holy women in the Kingdom—bending down on one knee, right hand placed on the ground, head raised.

“Saint Monica, we are extremely delighted to have you return to your homeland, the same one which exiled you so disgracefully.”

“Please, stand up. It hurts me as well to know what’s happening in Kophe. I’m very grateful for the assistance you’ve bestowed upon us on this occasion.”

Father and son’s eyes widened with emotion at my words.

“Ahhh, your compassion knows no bounds...”

“We thank you as well, Saint Monica.”

Watching us, Richard nodded in satisfaction, though I wasn’t quite sure why.

Then they led us down a long stone corridor to a dining room.

“Our supplies are nearly exhausted, so forgive us because this is all we can offer at the moment...”

As the earl commented apologetically, I stared in astonishment at the food

laid out before us. All the dishes were local to the eastern part of Kophe, specifically Causden's earldom.

Richard smiled at them when he saw the unabashed delight on my face. "We very much appreciate your hospitality as I greatly wished for her to taste the flavors of her homeland again."

Then we sat down to eat dinner.

"This is my first time partaking of local dishes in Kophe. Before now, I only ate royal cuisine. I'm very much looking forward to it."

Richard gave his toast, and I joined in with a vague but polite smile while staring at the red wine that was so close in color to his hair.

Richard, you liar, I thought to myself. I knew full well that royal cuisine wasn't the only food he'd tasted. He would enthusiastically chow down on the grilled skewers full of mysterious meats and indulge himself in the muddy beer at the vanguard town. Oh, but maybe it would be better to call those low-effort meals instead of local cuisine...?

In any case, we gratefully dug into the fare while chatting about inconsequential topics. Earl Causden's son, Stefan, excitedly asked Richard all sorts of things about the Empire.

"I heard you achieved remarkable results in the Zaranktes Rebellion despite being in your teens."

"No, I simply roused everyone's morale in a rather reckless manner. If anything, I give all credit to my excellent subordinates and trusted confidant, Darius, for the victory there."

"I know you revitalized Psyend after monsters laid waste to it with the potion factory, so I'm curious to know of your relations with the region's former residents."

"Ah, yes, a good question..."

I had been listening quietly this whole time, but now I suddenly sensed something off. Lord Stefan seemed well-versed in Richard's brilliant military track record as well as his imperial ventures. My question, though, was how

could he know so many details about the neighboring country's crown prince?

Except even those involved in the actual exploits joined in merrily on the conversation—Richard, Darius, and everyone else—like it was the most natural thing in the world. Was I perhaps being too paranoid then? *Maybe I am...*

Though my unease remained, I chose to remain silent. Because ultimately, I was an outsider in the realm of politics.

After the genial dinner party ended, I adjourned to the parlor along with the women in both the earl's household and our knightly order to enjoy a spot of tea. We would all be retiring relatively early since this was merely an informal meet-and-greet. Once Solarus and I bid the others good night, we left the room. Outside, I found Richard sitting on a sofa placed in the middle of the corridor.

"You waited for us?"

"Only because I didn't want to be apart from you, Miss Monica. Our bedrooms are right next to each other, so let's go together."

"Thank you."

We walked down the dim hallway. As we did, I peeked up at Richard by my side. He felt even taller in his formal military uniform because of the darkness enveloping us.

On the journey to our rooms, I resolutely broached the subject bothering me.

"Richard, I'd like to ask you something... You and Earl Causden seemed to be on quite friendly terms. Does this mean you've known him for some time, even before our visit tonight?"

"Indeed. He helped me a great deal during my investigation into Kophe's current situation."

"Oh, then that explains why he and his son are so knowledgeable about the Empire."

"Ah-ha, so you *did* notice. Well done, Miss Monica. I expected nothing less from you." Richard grinned and continued, "Without him on our side, we wouldn't be able to do anything, such as bringing in materials to build the temporary base and assessing the refugees' conditions. I can't stress to you

how much his cooperation has contributed to our efforts on the ground. Especially because Kophe's royal family spurned our special envoys no matter how often we dispatched them."

"Wait a moment." I froze on the spot. "Are you... Are you saying that they *still* haven't acknowledged your aid?"

"I am." Richard had stopped and turned as well. Now he stared at me with a serious expression on his face. His scarlet eyes glittered, the same color as the flames flickering from the barely sufficient torchlights on the walls. "You see, the king of Kophe refuses to accept that the Kingdom has been overrun by monsters. You must be aware of this fact as well, yes, Miss Monica?"

"Yes, but... But in that case, is it truly safe to deploy the Flame Corps? Even though we're providing humanitarian aid, technically speaking, it's still part of the imperial army. What's more, we're operating here by working together with one of Kophe's lords."

Instead of answering my question, Richard smiled slightly and responded with a question of his own.

"Are you worried about me, Miss Monica?"

"How can I not be when...?"

I gasped then and hastily shut my mouth. Even though it was just the two of us, I still couldn't say the words out loud here. Richard narrowed his eyes at my sudden silence.

"Believe in me, Miss Monica."

His red hair shimmered in the torchlight, and his eyes, which seemed to reflect the flames, stood out vividly in the darkness. Despite the smile on his face, I felt an inexpressible fear. Was it simply my imagination...?

"It's nothing." I shook my head. "Forget... Forget I said anything. If you say it's fine, then I trust you."

"I'll never let anything bad happen to you. I swear it on my life, Miss Monica." Richard made the assertion in his usual honeyed voice, as if reminding and persuading me. "I won't allow the likes of yesterday's commotion to repeat

either. I *will* protect you properly moving forward.”

“I... Thank you.”

“Come, Miss Monica. Though our ally’s castle may be fortified, we still shouldn’t make ourselves vulnerable by talking in darkened corridors.”

“Agreed.”

I did as he urged and started walking again. As I did, an odd discontent lingered in my heart. What in the world was going through Richard’s mind?



THE room I was provided contained colorful furnishings in a softer palette than what I’d seen inside the rest of the castle. It must’ve been a guest room for noblewomen.

After cleansing myself using warm water in the attached washroom, I sank into the bed.

“Haaa... I’m so tired.”

The words spilled from the depths of my heart. The pain in my chest from witnessing the ongoing catastrophe here in Kophe. The censure from the refugees. My struggle in concealing my feelings for Richard. His continued secretiveness. All of it combined to create a sense of fatigue different from the one I experienced when I overused my saintly powers.

“I wonder what Richard will do henceforth.”

Though we had come here under the pretext of humanitarian aid, the royal palace still hadn’t acknowledged the Empire’s efforts. So was it really all right for him to mobilize imperial troops into the Kingdom via its noble subjects? Never mind that he himself was the one who’d invited me to join him on the journey. How had he phrased it again? “What say you, Miss Monica? Won’t you like to accompany me and enjoy the disgraceful failures wrought by those who slandered you as a lewd saint and exiled you?”

“I... I don’t understand you, Richard...”

I really didn’t. He was an enigma to me. No, that wasn’t quite right. It hadn’t always been like this. But what upset me the most about it was...

“Meow.”

The soft cry of an animal.

“Meow.”

I heard it again.

“Wonderful. Now I’m hearing things that aren’t there...”

Right now, I would dearly love to pet a cat. As the thought tumbled in my head, I sluggishly sat up in the bed and looked around for the source of the noise. With the pitch-black night sky behind it, a large, white, fluffy something stood by the window.

“Oh. So it *wasn’t* a hallucination.”

I stood up, draped a shawl over my nightclothes, then stepped out onto the balcony. A large, fluffy white cat with a long, lithe body balanced itself exquisitely on the thin railing. Only the lower part of its right foreleg was gray, like it was wearing a sock. It didn’t bolt even when I drew near. It merely stood there, licking the gray paw, the moonlight making its fur glow palely.

“Whatever are you doing out and about this late at night? Is there a reason you can’t go home?”

I slowly extended my hand, palm up. The defenseless-looking cat placed its chin there and purred happily. Underneath the luxuriously soft fur, I could feel its surprisingly thin bones. Delight overcame me.

“Gah... You’re so cute.”

Since it continued to rub up against my hand, I lifted it up into my arms and stroked it from head to tail.

“Meow. Meeeow.”

“T-Too cute...”

The more I pet the cat, the more my gloom dissipated. The anxieties wrought by human society could only be soothed by an animal’s fluff.

“You smell like perfume, hm? I can see you’re someone’s pet by how clean and well-groomed your fur is,” I observed.

“Meow.”

“Goodness, you are just too adorable. But you must know that a walk even within the castle is dangerous, yes? No telling what would happen if an evil woman captured you. Ahhh, I could cuddle you forever.”

“Meooow.”

After a while of indulging myself in its fluffiness, the cat slipped out of my arms. It nimbly climbed down the railing, before jumping, its body flying in the air toward the garden.

“Oh!”

It's going to fall! I involuntarily leaned over the railing. Then a black-haired man sprang into view, seemingly dissolving out of the darkness itself.

Illuminated by the moonlight, he held the cat in both hands, clearly having caught it in mid-air. I knew his face.

“Xenu,” I said.

“Well, well, if it isn't Madam Monica herself. I'm honored to meet you again on this lovely moonlit night.” He draped the cat around his shoulders like a scarf as he grinned up at me. I didn't expect him to be staying in the castle as well.

“Xenu, does that cat belong to you?” I asked.

“She does indeed. Her name is Saaya and she's my beloved sweetheart.”

The cat lounged on Xenu, clearly enjoying being pampered by him. Now I recognized the scent coming from her as his cologne.

“Were you all right after what happened, Madam Monica? No more trouble, I hope?” he asked.

“Yes, thanks. Everyone leapt to my rescue, and you can rest assured I chided myself on being so careless.”

“Good, I'm glad. The life of a holy woman isn't easy, eh?” Xenu chuckled ruefully. “I have a strong feeling Saaya visited you because she was worried about you too.”

“Oh, no. Please don't tell me you heard me...talking to myself?”

“Who’s to say? But I certainly don’t know anything about evil women wanting to abduct cats.”

“Darn it. So you *did* hear everything.”

Then we amused ourselves with silly conversations, him in the garden and me on the balcony. We talked about what cats ate, how comfortable the beds in the castle were, the weather, and more. Just ordinary small talk. But it was enough to loosen the tension I’d been feeling from all the political discussions. Before I knew it, the moon wasn’t as high in the sky anymore. Xenu’s voice suddenly dropped to a low register as he continued stroking Saaya’s fur.

“Madam Monica, I hope you can retire from your saintly duties soon and be free.”

“*Free...*”

“Oh-ho. Are you already looking forward to that day then?”

I didn’t know how to answer him. I knew the day would eventually come when my supernatural abilities disappeared. But it was the first time someone described it as the day I became free.

His long black hair fluttered as he cocked his head and smiled. “Answer me this, Madam Monica. Do you have a dream?”

“A-A dream? A bit of a sudden question, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps. But it stands. Is there anything you want to do after you stop being a priestess and finally become free?”

“I’ve never actually thought about it...”

“Heh... Is that right?” The canines in his mouth that peeked through his smile were striking. Xenu stared intently at me with his almond-shaped eyes as he continued talking. “Let me tell you my dream then. In the future, I’d like to live with bundles of cats. My plan is to collect cats like Saaya without families and support them in a mansion full of cats.”

“That sounds lovely...”

I pictured the mansion he described in my mind. An estate where one would run into cats wherever they walked on the grounds. The clean-up in such a

place would probably have to be handled using magical equipment. But it would very much be worth it with all those adorable cats.

“I believe a person reveals their personality when they talk about their dreams. No matter how grand or trivial a dream is, it’s one of the first things I ask the people I encounter. So...Madam Monica, what do *you* want to do after you quit your duties as a priestess?”

“I... Give me a moment to think about it.”

I couldn’t find the words when I tried to answer him. In my childhood, my dream had been to become a bride in my village and live happily ever after there. Then, after the discovery of my supernatural abilities, my dream became to protect everyone as a holy woman. Which brought us to now. My dream now was...to save the Kingdom of Kophe and remain by Richard’s side.

No, that wasn’t right. Because it was Saint Monica’s dream. What about *my* dream after I stopped being one?

“You can’t think of anything?” Xenu asked me as he continued petting Saaya. For some reason, I was suddenly afraid to think about it.

“I just... I just can’t imagine a future where I’m *not* a priestess...”

In the next moment, I heard a knock coming from behind me. I gasped, returning to my senses.

“I’m sorry, Xenu, but it seems like someone’s at my door.”

“Is that so? Then, until the next time we meet. I bid you a good night.”

Meow. Leaving behind Saaya’s soft cry as a parting gift, Xenu walked away, melting into the darkness. I strode back into my room to open the door and found Richard standing there like an unyielding wall.

“Miss Monica. I thought I heard voices talking. Was...someone here?”

Alarm skittered across my nerves even though I hadn’t done anything wrong.

“Yes, in a sense. A cat visited me and I tried to catch her, but her owner appeared in the garden and we got to chatting a bit.”

“Interesting. A pet cat, you say?” Richard’s eyes narrowed. Displeasure oozed

from his face, which was unusual for him.

I spoke quickly, rushing to explain. “A man named Xenu with a somewhat strong accent. He has long black hair and wears round glasses. He said he’s an imperial merchant who knows you, Richard.”

“Huh... I didn’t expect him to use his cat, though. Interesting indeed.” The corners of his flame-red eyes tightened grimly as he tapped his chin in thought. “I really didn’t want him to meet you, Miss Monica.”

“Oh... I’m sorry, then.”

Richard shook his head in response. “No, you have nothing to apologize for. I just don’t care for the knowledge that he’s come into contact with you when I’m not around. It’s my fault for not surveilling him more closely.”

“S-Surveillance...?”

“What’s done is done, eh... Right then. We’ll host a banquet tomorrow to introduce him formally.”

“Understood.”

It was clear that Xenu was involved in whatever Richard wanted to hide from me. A sharp pain lanced through deep in my heart. He had his secrets on this occasion as well. I supposed it made sense why he didn’t confide everything to me, considering my commoner upbringing and lack of ability in politics.

My earlier conversation with Xenu flashed through my mind. What was *my* dream? Not Saint Monica’s dream, but my own. Perhaps...it might be what I could do for Richard...?

“Miss Monica?”

Richard peered down into my face as I fell silent. My heartbeat sped up instantly in the face of his unguarded behavior and gaze.

“I-It’s nothing.”

When I finally got a good look at him, I noticed his relaxed shirt and damp hair. A tantalizing scent drifted from him too. The thickness of his chest and the rumble of his voice roused improper emotions within me. I found my eyes sliding away from his, which prompted him to murmur, almost like he was

talking to himself.

“Miss Monica...you’re so bewitching, I keep forgetting how easily suspicious men are attracted to you.” He brushed his lips against a tuft of my hair then pulled away with his usual gentle smile. “I’ll tell you about his real identity tomorrow as well. This is where I leave you tonight. Sleep well, Miss Monica.”

“Yes, you too.”

Richard vanished into his room. The thick door and walls blocked the sound of his footsteps.

“My...dream...”

I flung myself on the bed and buried my face in the freshly scented linens as I took deep breaths.

This isn’t the time to think about it, though. Right now, I need to focus on the task in front of me.

Before long, my exhausted body succumbed to sleep, cutting my thoughts short.



IT was beautifully sunny the next day. When I headed to the brightly lit dining room for lunch, Xenu had also arrived, accompanied by Richard and Darius. Xenu gave me a small wave as soon as he saw me.

“Let’s talk before we seat ourselves.” With an uncharacteristic smile, Richard introduced Xenu to me. “Miss Monica, allow me to introduce you to the merchant, Xenu Eugenie. Do you remember my uncle, Lord Heathcomille, the Minister of Environment and Agriculture and acting administrator of the Empire’s southlands and the crooked merchant he hired to sell off Psyend’s sacred tree? Well, he’s the one.”

“Wha— Y-You’re *that* merchant?!”

I was at a loss for words. But Xenu’s forced smile and Darius’s sour face told me Richard spoke the truth.

“His accent is an affectation. He uses it to present himself as a friendly merchant and lower people’s guard. He can speak several languages, including

those of the eastern bloc of countries, the various dialects across the Empire, and of course, Kophe's as well."

"W-Wow..."

"You can't trust in his humanity, but there's no one better than him to use as a merchant. Because there are very few imperial citizens with contacts and influence inside and outside Kophe's chamber of commerce. Though I'd like to reiterate that I do not trust him as a human one bit," Richard said.

"I-I see..."

I didn't know what else to say. Richard's terrifying grin didn't waver as he continued speaking.

"I must say, even I was impressed by your tactics, Xenu, my good man. It's certainly easier to worm your way into people's hearts than appeal to logic with glib words. Even cats can be used as bargaining chips, eh?" A faint smile on his lips, Richard tilted his head politely, seemingly curious. "What was it that he asked you, Miss Monica? Ah, right, your hopes and dreams for the future."

"He...did...indeed..." I replied cautiously.

"That's how he snakes his way into someone's heart, by sympathizing with them. Once inside, he continues to deepen his understanding of his targets in a similar fashion so he can determine his next move."

"Heh heh heh. But, Your Highness, I really did want to become friends with Madam Monica. I'm not lying when I say so." Xenu chuckled in amusement. Richard, on the other hand, only smiled even more brilliantly.

"Ah, yes. I suppose I can appreciate that you told Miss Monica your real name. I certainly would have found it unforgivable had you deceived her with a false name as you did the people of Psyend."

"Right, well, thank you kindly for the thorough introduction, Your Highness. Once more, I look forward to getting to know you, Madam Monica."

"I-It's nice to meet you too, Xenu?"

He executed an exaggerated gentlemanly bow and I smiled stiffly in response. A complex mix of emotions churned inside me. I was almost certain they were

involved in another tangled scheme I wasn't privy to.

The Monica who isn't a saint... I guess that version of me isn't useful to Richard.

Clearly, the confusion I'd felt when asked about my dream still lingered.

My summons to the Empire, the incident with Psyend and Lord Heathcomille, even the episode concerning Margrave Hietside. There was so much I'd been kept in the dark about. I understood that Richard only wanted to protect me from worrying more than necessary by limiting the information I had access to. But...

Could Monica alone do anything for Richard? Not the priestess, but the woman herself. *Me. No...* It was presumptuous of me to even think I could in the first place.

"What's wrong, Miss Monica?" Richard posed the question as my silence lengthened. The warm smile he directed at me contrasted sharply with the cold one he'd given Xenu.

His fluttering red hair, caressed by the midafternoon breeze. His beautiful, reassuring face. When I looked at him like this, a strange sensation unfurled in my chest suddenly. Sweet and painful at the same time. Damn and blast, I'd been done in by my own lascivious nature again today.

"Nothing at all."

I shook my head with a light laugh.

The future, huh...

In the end, what did I want for myself? I still didn't know. The way I was right now made me wonder—could I even continue as a holy woman until retirement?

And then Monica sighed imperceptibly so no one would notice. Xenu watched her out of the corner of his eye.



AFTER gathering all our equipment and making the necessary preparations at Earl Causden's castle, we headed to our next destination via stagecoach. The

vehicle traveled on a path alongside the winding, serpentine river. Beyond the valley lay the territory of Earl Balbis. Richard had already conducted discussions with him through Earl Causden. Always thorough in his preparations, the imperial prince.

The carriage ride using teleportation slates passed uneventfully. It was so peaceful at times that I found it hard to believe the country was being ravaged by monsters. Although we did occasionally encounter and defeat minor ones.

“It almost feels surreal like this, as if the catastrophe plaguing Kophe is a lie.”

While staring at the sunny sky through the coach’s window, I recalled my journey to the Empire after being exiled as an unholy woman. It had been a tranquil trip together with Mr. Redhead.

I glanced surreptitiously at the bench across me inside the carriage. Clad in his ultramarine military uniform, Richard rested his chin in one hand. The breeze ruffled his hair as he stared out the window lost in thought.

“You know...this reminds me of the day I left the Kingdom.”

“I can imagine.”

He lifted his head in response to my words and looked at me. Just like a year ago, he narrowed his eyes and smiled.

“Did we take this same road?”

My heart skipped a beat at the sight of his smile, so I directed my gaze outside to hide my reaction. Richard continued waxing nostalgic.

“You have no idea how happy I was back then, that you agreed to come with me, Miss Monica. Returning to the Empire was a risky decision for me, but...if you were with me, I had nothing to fear. That’s what I thought.”

“Ah, yes, I suppose it makes sense since I *am* an exceptionally powerful saint. Though I’m also glad I met your expectations and brought smiles once more to Their Majesties’ faces.”

“That’s not what I meant, Miss Monica.”

“Huh?”

He stared right at me. The breeze strengthened, shaking my heavy wimple. The magic stones tinkled and glittered as the wind rippled through them too.

“It isn’t just your special powers. It’s because *you* were there. Your presence lifted my spirits and inspired me.”

“Oh, I see. Thank you.”

I had no idea how to react to his declaration, so I merely thanked him with a vague smile. Because it was far easier for me if all he wanted was my abilities as a priestess. Frankly, thinking about what the woman “Monica Regulus” meant to him terrified me at the moment.

“Miss Monica, forgive me for overstepping, but...you seem unhappy lately. Is something bothering you?”

“Oh, no, not at all. I’m perfectly fine.”

Darn it, as usual, Richard was sharp as a tack. He persisted even though I tried to deflect.

“Did Xenu say anything that made you uncomfortable? What can I do to make you feel better? Perhaps present his head on a platter?”

“What does that mean?”

“Decapitation.”

“N-N-N-N-No! What an absolutely disturbing notion!”

“Well, if you change your mind, don’t hesitate to tell me, hm?”

“That does *not* sound like a joke coming from you...”

He chuckled merrily when I groaned and buried my face in my hands. If I truly wished for it, I had an ominous feeling that this man would most certainly present Xenu’s head to me.

“Honestly, I’m fine. I just can’t help worrying about things since I’m back in Kophe. That’s all it is. They’re simply worries without answers, so I’m sure I’ll forget them as long as I keep myself busy with work.”

“Are you sure? Then you’ll have to do your best, hm?”

Though his words were stern, his gentle tone clearly conveyed his concern for

me. My heart squeezed painfully. I'd had enough of the feeling. It kept attacking me even though I hadn't used my supernatural powers enough to induce heat recently. My libido must be broken then.

Between one teleportation slate and another, the brief carriage rides continued. And so our journey passed in this pattern.

At the urging of our guide, who was responsible for leading us to the Balbis earldom, we amused ourselves by frolicking in the valley's river. We caught delicious freshwater fish that only spawned in the spring and the beautiful, clear streams from the snowmelt felt wonderful. Then we relaxed under the shade of trees bursting with new growth. A truly heavenly resting spot.

The men of the knightly order dove into the river, naked from the waist up, while the women enjoyed the refreshing coolness a distance away from them upstream. As for me, I was a little further away from there, soaking from the knees down in the clear water. I'd removed my wimple to cool myself off more. Despite the lively atmosphere, I just couldn't feel the urge to laugh along with them, so I chose to go off on my own.

"You're upset, aren't you, Madam Monica?"

"Oh, Darius, hello."

Shirtless and with his slacks rolled up to his knees, Darius nimbly climbed up the rocky stretch. He looked mischievous to me.

"Goodness, you're so light on your feet."

He carried skewers of grilled fish in both hands.

"I went looking for you since I couldn't find you, Madam Monica. Here you are. I caught and grilled these myself."

While speaking, Darius made a gesture of emitting magic with his hands. I understood then that he'd roasted the fish using the magical power he possessed as a second-class mage.

"Thank you."

Darius and I nibbled at our fish as we sat next to each other. The steaming white meat fell off the bones, and I could taste the rich sweetness of it.

“Delicious...”

“Ahhh, freshly caught fish and clear waters. This is the life, isn’t it?”

He said nothing more. Just sank his feet into the stream and feasted on his fish without a care in the world. He wasn’t the type to leave someone alone, but he also didn’t pry. I truly appreciated his consideration.

I gazed at the knights shouting cheerfully off in the distance. Richard’s red hair stood out even from this far away. He was enjoying himself with his subordinates.

“Richard... He’s beautiful, hm?” I mused.

“Yes, as beautiful as a garnet, as dazzling as the sun, more fiery than the hottest flames, lovelier than the loveliest rose, our ideal god of war.”

“You never change, Darius. And I hope you never do.”

I giggled, staring up at his face. Coupled with his boyish face and slight build, he looked almost tiny when he stood next to Richard. But sat as he was next to me like this, I realized he was in fact a man as well. His shirtless state revealed his surprisingly muscular body, which was impressive in itself. Not to mention his genuinely wonderful personality. What’s more, the strange pain I felt with Richard didn’t afflict me with him.

So I felt safe with him, safe enough to confide in him.

“When...when my holy abilities disappear, we won’t be able to spend time like this.”

Darius’s eyes widened, perhaps surprised by my sudden, negative words.

“That was unexpected, Madam Monica. What’s wrong?”

“Well...I find myself thinking anxiously about my future,” I admitted.

“I’d be more than happy to lend you an ear whenever you need one.”

“Thank you.”

The rushing of the river drowned out the sound of our conversation. Secure in the knowledge that he was the only one who could hear me, I gave voice to the worries plaguing me at the moment.

“The only thing connecting me and Richard are my supernatural powers. So...I can't help obsessing over whether I can still help him even after I lose them...”

I spilled everything I'd buried inside in an incoherent rush. He didn't offer any solutions or advice; he simply listened intently and patiently. When I finally stopped talking, Darius murmured softly.

“I can't imagine how sad you must be to feel like His Highness doesn't rely on you, Madam Monica.”

Sad. The word made me feel like I finally found what I'd been searching for.

“Yes...yes, you're right. I'm sad. Because I can't stay by his side if I'm not a saint.”

Once I said it aloud, I realized how true the feeling was. The me who wasn't a priestess was sad. It felt like my relationship with Richard was ending.

I nodded to myself, accepting the inevitable. Darius brushed back his wet forelocks and questioned me.

“Is His Highness so very different now than during your time together in Kophe when he hid his real identity?”

“Hm... No, I wouldn't say so. Richard has always been dependable. My admiration for him hasn't changed since then.”

Darius grinned broadly. He looked even younger with his forehead visible. “Well, Madam Monica, it isn't as if you want to help His Highness simply because he's the emperor's younger brother, right? And he thinks of you in the same light. I'm certain that won't change even after you retire from your saintly duties.”

“But...”

“Don't worry. He isn't the sort of person to excise someone from his life once they're in his heart. Because he treats us members of the knightly order in the same way.”

A faraway look entered his eyes, like he was recalling the past. I remembered now their order's circumstances. Before they became the Flame Corps, they had been the Order of Knights, Special Forces, and they'd received a salary even

during Richard's, their commander, exile. Granted, the wages hadn't been much, but they had continued to receive them nevertheless because of him.

"Oh... You make a fair point," I said.

I suddenly felt ashamed of myself for being so anxious. Darius watched me twist locks of my hair in embarrassment and shrugged before continuing.

"I can understand why you'd worry though, since His Highness is more a man of action than words."

"Yes! Yes, exactly! That's precisely it! I wish he would talk to me more. That's why I became so anxious!"

"Hahaha! Everyone has thought the same at one point or another when dealing with him. But...I'll tell you a secret. He does it on purpose."

"He...what?"

"He wants to bear the burden alone. On the off chance his stratagems fail, he insists on taking responsibility for everything himself. His Highness is the sort who refuses to let others shoulder the burden."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that.

"I honestly wish he would depend on us more. Or...at least I used to. But I changed my mindset on that."

"In what way?" I asked.

"He doesn't want to burden us *because* he has high expectations of us. I only recently came to terms with this idea."

The cool breeze blew across, sweeping with it my hazy, gloomy emotions. I felt like my eyes were finally open to the truth.

Darius gazed at me. His blue eyes overflowed with his trust in his commander.

Oh. Right. Hadn't Richard said it many times before? "Believe in me." He had kept quiet about the situation in Hietside because he wanted to protect me. But I had been so insecure that I selfishly assumed the worst about him.

"Heh heh."

A laugh bubbled up from inside me. I couldn't believe how simple the answer

was or how pathetic I'd been. In the distance, I saw Richard jump into the river. The drops of water glittered as they splashed everywhere.

"You're right...that's just the kind of person Richard is. To my never-ending shame, I'd completely forgotten this fact," I confessed.

"He is indeed, Madam Monica. Which is why..." Darius's voice grew slightly more serious. Staring at me, he paused for a few moments before he spoke again. "Which is why...I fervently hope you'll continue to support His Highness evermore. You already know he has a tendency to hide his burdens behind a smile, so...you're the only one who can stand by his side."

"I think you could as well though, Darius. So why take yourself out of the running?"

"I can wield my sword for him on the battlefield, but the only one who can be his pillar in the truest sense of the word is you, Madam—"

Kaw! Kaw, kaw, kaw!

The beastly cries sounded like a crow's, but deeper and rougher. We stood up.

"It's a monster!" I cried.

"Let's go, my lady!"

I hurriedly put on my shoes, then ran, clutching the skirt of my saintly garb high so the hem wouldn't hinder me. Darius followed behind me, unsheathed sword in hand. Two bird-type monsters roughly the size of small dogs flew from the woods and headed straight toward the civilians. If I could just hit their wings, the rest would be easy.

"Be consumed by the fire goddess!"

I struck first by unleashing a blaze directly at their wings. The monsters crashed to the ground. Then I rushed to stand in front of the civilians, protecting them. The knights raced in as a unit and gallantly defeated the weakened beasts in a flash.

"Well done, everyone! An easy victory for us!"

Everyone cheered loudly in response to Richard's ringing words of praise. I

noticed he gripped his own sword as well. Amidst the joyful cries and applause, I looked around to make certain no other monsters lurked nearby.

“Nothing. Good.”

Just as I was about to join the others, Xenu suddenly appeared, looming over me.

“Good gracious, Madam Monica, you sure know how to put on a show, hm?”

“Eeek! Y-You surprised me.”

Although the single blast of fire magic wasn’t enough to induce the unfortunate side effect of my holy powers, I still reflexively moved away from Xenu. He clapped enthusiastically.

“Yes, yes, truly impressive. Let me tell you, I couldn’t contain my excitement.”

“Thank you...”

He continued clapping as he spoke. Even in a place like this, he wore his long, black outfit with the dragon embroidery. It made me worry unnecessarily if he was hot.

His clothes and hair fluttered in the wind blowing through the valley. I looked up at him as he tried to contain his flyaway locks then I broached the topic on my mind.

“Xenu, about our conversation a few days ago...”

He raised an eyebrow inquiringly at my abrupt words. “Go on.”

“Thank you for asking me about my dream. Despite Richard’s displeasure at your approach, your question made me think slowly and carefully about my own future.”

“Can I take it this means you found your answer?”

I turned my gaze toward the people enjoying their victory. The cool wind felt wonderfully refreshing and I’d done my job as well. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt so at ease.

“Yes. I plan on working by Richard’s side even after I retire as a holy woman. I want to help everyone with him. Although I still don’t know exactly *what* I

should do...I'll decide as the circumstances dictate. I guess you could say that's my dream now."

"I see." A gust of wind blew between us. Still holding his hair down, Xenu narrowed his eyes and smiled. "What a lovely dream you have."

He gently reached out a hand toward my flyaway locks bustled by the wind and carried a tuft to his lips. A chill skated down my spine at the sharpness in his gaze. He'd never looked at me like that before. As if a butterfly supping on a flower's nectar or a beast catching sight of its prey—I felt like I was being devoured by his predatory stare.

"What are you doing, Xenu?" I tugged my hair out of his grasp.

"Heh."

Xenu chuckled, watching the strands slip from between his fingers. "Madam Monica, let me ask you this. Can you hold on to that dream forever?"

"What?"

His golden eyes slitted even more. "Even if His Highness's position changes?"

"What...what do you mean?"

"Ahhh, unfortunately, it seems we're out of time. Until we meet again."

He bowed, then spun around, striding quickly toward one of the carriages. Wondering what made him suddenly leave, I heard someone's rough breathing as they ran up behind me.

"Tsk... I should have known he'd go to you once I noticed he shook off his guard," Richard said.

"Guard...? O-Oh my goodness!"

When I turned around at the turbulent words, I almost unwittingly fainted. Because Richard's torso was bare. He had taken off the jacket stained in battle and wound it around his waist. Drops of water clung to his wet hair and slid beguilingly down his chiseled frame. Clearly, he had dunked himself in the river. I didn't want to be sucked in by his outrageously excessive sensual appeal, so I covered my face with my wimple, like I was hiding behind a curtain.

“Miss Monica, what’s wrong? Did something bad happen? Did *Xenu* do something to you? Right now, you can choose the river or the woods for me to dispose of his body.”

“N-No, th-that’s not— You’re just too much— I can’t— Shoot...and...tarnation...”

“Ah-ha. My apologies.”

I could hear the laughter in Richard’s voice from beyond the wimple as he finally, blessedly put his blasted shirt on.

“Though I must admit your reaction makes me curious, considering there are a few knights over there in naught but their smallclothes. Especially since you’ve already seen me in various states of undress countless times when you healed me.”

“You can ask all you want, but you should already know the answer... I mean, I used a measure of my powers, and you know what they do to people... So... Um, I-I-I...I suppose I’m just trying to let the memory of your body fade from my mind by doing this. Since the sight is much too stimulating.”

Richard chortled merrily.

“All right, does this pass your judgment?”

When I peeked through the wimple, I found he had covered up most of his nudity. I felt as if the shirt still posed a serious threat to my sanity as it had grown transparent from his wet skin, but it also wouldn’t be right for me to impose any further on his consideration.

“By the way...what did you mean by ‘guard’? Are you having *Xenu* watched? Even though he’s cooperating with you?” I asked.

“He’s only doing so because our interests just happen to align at the moment. But make no mistake that he’s a corrupt merchant.”

“Is he really...?”

“Miss Monica, be careful. He’s especially dangerous when he says strange things to you without my knowledge.”

“All right...I understand. I’ll be careful.”

I agreed without question. Xenu *had* saved me once, but there was no denying his words had shaken me to the core. I mentally reminded myself that I needed to be cautious when dealing with him.

“By the by, Miss Monica.”

“Hm?”

“I heard. That you plan to be with me forever.”

For a moment, I stared at him, my mouth agape. Then the meaning of his words hit me.

“O-Of course, only if y-you don’t mind, Richard...”

My words were barely a whisper by the time I said his name. When I dared to look at his face again through the wimple, I saw him beaming, eyes narrowed at me. I could tell he was genuinely overjoyed.

“Thank you. I adore you as well, Miss Monica.”

“Urk...”

Adore. The word resonated powerfully within me and I felt my body heat. I despised myself for reacting so easily. When he said it with such a radiant attitude, I couldn’t help the storm of emotions surging within me even though I knew he didn’t mean it the way I wanted him to.

Wait. The way I wanted him to? Which way did I want him to mean it then?

As I went in circles in my head, Richard suddenly peered into the wimple.

“Eeek!”

“I’m all dressed now, so I think it’s well past time for you to show me your lovely face, or I’ll die of longing.”

“Gah! Y-You! You vexing man! Th-That barely counts as being dressed... Nooo!”

He pulled the fabric of the wimple apart with both hands. When he saw my face flushed scarlet, his cheerful grin widened even more.

Darn. Darn, darn, darn. If this was how things would be with him, then I might have been a tad reckless in declaring my intention to stay by his side forever.



“RIGHT, then, Richard, I’ll be back soon.”

“Understood. See you later, Miss Monica.”

It was after the surprise monster attack. Traces of red still lingering on her cheeks, Miss Monica made her way to the civilians. A few caretakers for the knights and a group of merchants. As well as women, children, and the elderly we took into our protection along the journey.

As I intently watched the scene fold, Miss Monica raised her voice.

“You’re all here safe and sound? Is anyone hurt?”

“We’re all fine. Everyone is accounted for.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear that.”

When she smiled cheerfully, the tense air of fear cloaking the civilians softened.

The children were completely soaked since the monster attack interrupted their playtime in the river. Right away, Miss Monica asked for fresh towels and knelt on the ground in front of them in her priestess attire. She started toweling them dry.

“Are you all right? You’re not hurt anywhere?”

“Nooope.”

“Are you suuure? How about here? Or here?”

“Kyahaha! That tiickles!”

Her smile lightened the atmosphere as she vigorously rubbed their bodies with the towels. While doing so, she inspected them thoroughly, looking for any signs of wounds, illness, or abnormality in their complexions. Her eyes were serious.

That earnestness of hers captivated me.

“Your Highness.”

From behind me came the voice of one of my knights.

“We’ve disposed of the monsters and secured the area. Xenu Eugenie is also remaining circumspect in his actions.”

“Understood. Once all preparations are complete, we’ll depart. Inform the leader of the civilians as well,” I said.

“Yes, my lord.”

Miss Monica was still laughing and chatting with the children.

“Lady saint, lady saint, why are you wearing a sheet on your head?”

“Now, now, don’t pull on it please!” Though her tone was chiding, the smile remained on her face. “It’s called a wimple and if I wear it, you can tell from even far away that I’m a priestess, yes? So that’s why.”

“Theeen, Monica, why are you a pu-ris-tess?”

“Hmmm, I guess you could say I was born this way?”

“Ohhh. Is there a way to fix it?”

“What does ‘a-rou-zing pu-ris-tess’ mean?”

“Tell us, tell us.”

“Gah! Let’s all just calm down for a moment, hm? Why don’t we put on our clothes and continue this discussion in the carriage?!”

I loved watching her work amongst the people, sleeves rolled up and saintly garb stained as she wiped the sweat off her face from her efforts. But such a situation made it too easy for the likes of Xenu to get close to her.

“What to do about this annoying problem...” I muttered.

It was difficult to block *all* contact between him and Miss Monica since I was using him. Occasionally, he would slip away from the merchants’ wagon to talk to her. So long as she was free to work as a saint, contact with Xenu—a merchant—was inevitable.

Things would be so much simpler if I locked her up somewhere no one could get to her. But she wasn’t a decorative priestess. No, she was a real one working on the ground.

“Guess I’ll have to be patient for a little longer, huh?”

On my way back to the coach, I ruminated on her earlier words. “*I plan on working by Richard’s side even after I retire as a holy woman.*” I couldn’t contain my joy the moment I heard her say that.

“I see you’re as madly in love with her as ever, Your Highness.” Loping up to me, Darius commented meaningfully.

“Naturally.”

As I agreed with him, I felt Miss Monica’s gaze on me. She’d noticed me. When I grinned broadly at her, her cheeks flushed immediately and she jerked her eyes away.

“God, she’s enchanting.”

Her attitude hadn’t always been like that. The lustful side effect wrought by her supernatural holy powers didn’t show on her face because of the special defense mechanism sewn into her clothes. But her *emotions* were a different matter entirely. I wondered if she knew how easily they showed on her face.

I shrugged into my clothes and headed to the carriage. I took the jewel shining on the medal on my chest and held it up to the sun. A magic stone the same vivid blood-red as my hair.

I could calm my carnal desires by imposing constraints on myself. On the off chance those constraints weren’t enough to hold back my lust, the magic stone camouflaged any expressions born of those animal passions. But neither my own control nor the magic stone were all-powerful. There were some things that just could not be confined.

Emotions—joy, anger, grief, pleasure, the whole gamut. And love.

“Miss Monica...you’re much too adorable for my poor heart to handle...”

The saint’s smile was a corrosive that so easily ate away at my iron control.

“Irony, considering how confident I’ve always been about my self-control.” With a wry smile, I spoke to Darius through the coach window. “Darius. I want you to continue conducting thorough background checks on anyone who tries to get close to Miss Monica. Some spies may change their behavior after infiltration, so I want all noncombatants, women and children included, to be

scrupulously investigated.”

“Understood.”

I acknowledged his salute with a nod then closed my eyes to compose myself. We were about to embark on another long coach journey, so I needed to maintain our easy, innocent relationship. For now.



“**UGGGH**, Richard is just too stimulating for the senses...”

Just in case, I drank a vial of the fish wort elixir that curbs arousal before returning to the carriage. Richard was already inside, sitting in a relaxed pose with his long legs crossed.

“Welcome back, Miss Monica.”

He smiled in his usual refreshing manner. His military uniform was back in place, covering up his earlier explosively *male* allure. Having said that, the dark blue collar presented another sort of seductive danger entirely as it provided a tantalizing backdrop to his strong throat.

The carriage started moving. We were the only two inside. I fiddled with my hair and gazed determinedly outside because of how aware of him I was. As for Richard? Well, I could feel his eyes boring into me.

“Um.”

“Hm?”

“A-Aren’t you staring a little too much at me, Richard?”

“I don’t think so? Merely the same as usual since I’m always captivated by you, Miss Monica.”

“I-I mean, yes, you do always stare at me, and I appreciate it, but...well, it makes me feel a bit embarrassed and, um...” I hazarded a peek at him. And found him beaming at me. My cheeks flamed instantly in response. “A-Anyway, when you do...it’s just too intense for me to handle...”

I hid my face behind my wimple like it was a curtain once more and heard Richard chuckling merrily when I did.

“You are truly a delight, Miss Monica.”

I had no idea how to deal with him. I know I used to accept this sort of behavior from him as a matter of course, but now, for the life of me, I couldn't remember how I did it. *M-Me, a delight? Preposterous.*

“I watched you earlier with the children. Thank you for taking the initiative in looking after them,” he said.

“Oh, it's nothing, really. I *am* a holy woman, after all.”

“Heh. I know they'll never forget your kindness, Miss Monica.”

“Stop it with the exaggerations.”

It wasn't fair how cool and calm he always remained. A thought suddenly flashed through my mind as I watched the wind fly in through the window ruffle his red hair. I said it out loud without thinking.

“Richard, do you know if...if there are magical stones capable of camouflaging not just lust but also normal human emotions?”

“Do you want one?”

“N-No, I don't. I'm just genuinely curious if they exist is all.” I spoke the words in a rush, feeling like he saw right through me to my racing heartbeat. Though I'd graduated from Kophe's Holy Woman Learning Academy, I wasn't particularly knowledgeable on the topic of magic stones.

He kindly gave me an explanation in response to my question. “It's theoretically possible with the engraved type. But according to the newest research, it's impossible to create one that can be put to practical use. Think about it. Despite knowing unequivocally which organs are responsible for the manifestation of sexual desire, the situation is much more complex for normal emotions. Meaning...it's incredibly difficult to restrain them by external means.”

“That's very true...”

“The researchers would need to understand all of a subject's emotions, list them in a magical formula, conduct experiments, and make improvements based on the results of those experiments, and even then, it wouldn't be enough. Since people change as time passes. What they once loved, they might

come to hate, and vice versa. People's changing nature would necessitate constantly rewriting the procedures..."

"All of which would require extraordinary time and effort, hm?"

"Precisely. A good way to put it." Richard nodded firmly in agreement. "In contrast, concealing lust is an exceedingly simple matter. Ergo, it's relatively easy to write down the formula, *and* it's safe because there's no chance of making a mistake. Although, the engraved type of magic stone requires advanced technology to create, so it isn't as if we can even mass produce them."

"I see..."

"In any case, the long and short of it is that it's difficult to fashion a flawless poker face with only a magic stone."

"....."

"What's the matter? Did I say something strange?"

I stared intently at him. He tilted his head curiously, his eyes exuding their usual affable charm.

"I...would just like my poker face to be as good as yours, Richard," I confessed.

"You're fine as you are, Miss Monica. I love the way expressions flit across your face so quickly. It makes you even more enchanting in my eyes." He laced his fingers together on his lap and beamed at me with his usual bright, unreadable expression.

"Well, I don't like it..." I grumbled.

I needed to train my poker face too. It wouldn't do for me to rely on magical stones for anything and everything. Hand pressed to my cheek in thought, I vowed to myself.



THE capital of the Kingdom of Kophe, in the conference room known as the Room of Tranquility. It was located further inside a larger meeting space. Weapons, magic, and supernatural abilities were prohibited in this room. There gathered the royal family, grand chancellor, several ministers, and the Church's

high priest and his aide. They sat in order of rank around the marble table, on the middle of which rested a number of strongly worded letters. Each one discussed Richard II Belktrius, the emperor's younger brother from the neighboring Belktrius Empire.

The latest letter contained a vociferous condemnation of the Kingdom's neglect over the present situation and detailed the dispatch of the Imperial Order of Knights, Special Forces for the just cause of providing humanitarian aid and monster extermination.

Chancellor Kantas groaned in disgust. "To think they actually marched on our country..."

When the first correspondence arrived noting the prince's intention to cross over the border leading his knights, none of them took it seriously. The very idea of a prince doing so was laughable. However, over the past year or so, Richard himself created a *fait accompli* by sending a number of similar letters, essentially establishing the fact that Kophe was well aware of the communications. And then, in what these officials of Kophe thought of as an exaggerated disclosure, he revealed the Kingdom's situation to other countries in an effort to seek their understanding and approval of his relief efforts.

Finally, two weeks ago, the man brazenly traversed the border. According to the latest letter, Prince Richard was already working together with a few of Kophe's lords. The king standing idly by doing nothing had created the justification for invasion. No decision had been reached on how to deal with the emperor's younger brother.

"The only option is to order all the lords to turn against him and attack."

This aggressive declaration came from the commander of the royal order of knights. Veins bulged in his forehead as he angrily clenched his fists.

"Our opponent is the Ferocious Crown Prince. There's no doubt his true motive is invasion and not simply humanitarian aid. At the beginning of this year, territory was ceded in the north due to a dispute with a margrave, but it seems that Prince Richard was involved in the matter," said one of the ministers.

"I agree that the relief efforts are just a pretext for his true designs, so we

need to focus on attacking that justification. Because if we don't tread carefully now, we run the risk of stirring the hornet's nest that is the Empire's army."

This came from the Chairman of the House of Lords, who rubbed his beard restlessly as he tilted his head in contemplation.

"Hm...I suppose it would be difficult to request assistance from our other neighbors in countering imperial aggression?"

"The nations to which we have ties through their nobles marrying ours have already declared their approval for Prince Richard's rescue efforts."

These words were spoken by an influential aristocrat.

The king, silent until now, posed a question to the high priest in a hoarse voice. "High priest, our country's campaign to destroy the monsters ought to be proceeding smoothly. There shouldn't be any openings for our enemies to take advantage of us. So the only natural conclusion is that the lords cooperating with him are rebelling against the state."

"It is as you say, Your Majesty."

"Then do you suggest we impose penalties and give orders to hunt down the lords who have defected to the imperial prince's side?"

"That would be the quickest way to resolve this problem."

"We are agreed then."

A few of the nobles aware of the true state of affairs in Kophe exchanged meaningful glances but held their tongues. Most of the people in attendance at this conference didn't know the reality of the catastrophe ravaging their country. So discussing the results of the high priest's rejection of holy women was perceived as rebellion against him.

No one was willing to risk their position by revealing the truth. And those filled with righteous indignation at the current events had long since been ousted from this council.

One of the nobles made a remark, being careful not to offend the high priest. "Your Majesty, I'm of the firm belief that the unholy woman is the cause of all this."

A chill suddenly descended. The high priest thumped his golden pewter staff hard on the floor. *Thwak!* The sound reverberated all the way to the ceiling with its fresco painting.

“That woman...that woman tempted the imperial prince in order to exact vengeance on her homeland. *She* is the mastermind behind all this.”

No one refuted the high priest’s words.

“Setting aside the matter of Prince Richard, we’ll have them deliver her and her alone to us. Then she will be executed.”

At the mention of Special Class Saint Monica Regulus, also known as the “arousing priestess” and other unsavory monikers, an atmosphere unique to those united against a common enemy erupted immediately.

“That’s right. *She’s* responsible for all this.”

“Even though most of our lands remain secure from the monsters, to think she and the Empire would invade so arrogantly after criticizing us for some minor missteps! That wanton saint is to blame.”

“Your Majesty! By your royal command, we will respond to Prince Richard and demand he hand over the unholy woman.”

Unexpectedly though, the king frowned and shook his head. “...We must be cautious.”

His words caused a stir amongst everyone in attendance.

“But why, Your Majesty?” The high priest sounded flabbergasted.

“I know her too. But remember that she was just an ordinary commoner. It would be dangerous to make her a martyr by executing her and thereby giving the people a cause for rebellion. So if the Ferocious Crown Prince insists on marching on our nation because of a holy woman from Kophe, we must proceed carefully.”

“I’m not satisfied with your judgment.”

The two most powerful people in this room were the high priest and the king. Lately, they had been working together to set the tone for the country, so if their opinions diverged, nothing was accomplished. Ultimately, with the two of

them at odds, no consensus could be reached and the meeting was adjourned in the interim.



“**GOD** damn it, why won’t Father drive out that lascivious priestess and that damn prince at once?! The knights won’t act either because of the old man’s weakness!”

His Royal Highness Prince Medaikonar kicked over a heavy chair and clicked his tongue as he raged. Accompanying him as part of his entourage was Keunt, his gray hair parted to the side. The latter tried to pacify the aggravated former even as he rubbed his hands together gleefully in the private parlor.

“P-Perhaps it might help to think of it like this, Your Highness: His Majesty must have deemed that dealing directly with the wanton saint and the emperor’s younger brother would put the Kingdom of Kophe’s authority at stake.”

“Hm... Well, I suppose you may have a point.”

Keunt smiled ingratiatingly at Medaikonar, who sat down on the sofa and folded his arms in annoyance. Then he turned around and glared at the maid, silently commanding her to serve tea quickly. Before long, the rich aroma of rose tea permeated the room as she poured. It was the prince’s favorite. Gold leaf floated in the clear red tea.

“Mmm...there is nothing better than tea imported from Ezeleya.”

While enjoying a cup of the tea, Medaikonar pushed his fingers through hair the same color as the gold leaf. Though he maintained his solicitous air on the surface, Keunt gleefully puffed up on the inside with conceit. A new chapter had been etched in the memoir he privately titled *The Epic Tale of Keunt Strelizzi*. He’d been mentally writing it for as long as he could remember.

“Keunt, the third son of Duke Strelizzi, who had fallen so low in the world that he’d been sent to Mayga Cieux. But he achieved great success even in the face of adversity. His accomplishments earned him the favor of the royal family’s heir, who elevated him to the position of his personal valet—”

“Still, that unholy woman unsettles me.”

Medaikonar's words interrupted Keunt's internal composition of his epic novel. The crown prince's gaze dropped to the rose tea in his cup as he cocked his thoughtfully.

"I know she often visited the palace on official business during her time working as a priestess, not to mention her being in residence while she undertook training as the future queen. Even considering all that though, there's no way she should have been able to become acquainted with anyone in the Belktrius imperial family... So of all the people in the world, how could she have possibly curried favor with that Ferocious Crown Prince?"

"An excellent question..."

Keunt frowned in thought too. The arousing priestess he knew was dedicated zealously to her work. She showed no interest in men, nor did she care for her appearance or pretension. The Monica he had known was a kind, considerate woman who talked to everyone in a friendly manner.

Which was exactly why he had deigned to bestow his attention upon her! Except the impudent baggage had rejected him and irritation seethed in him once more when he recalled her face. But then he remembered the savage way her engagement had been annulled and the sadness cloaking her as she left the hall that day, and exhilaration surged through him at the just deserts she'd received for trampling a person's sincere affection. The scene of her exiting the hall with her tail tucked between her legs would prove to be a fantastic highlight in the opening chapters of his epic.

"What's more, Prince Richard's whereabouts should have been unknown. Is it possible then...that he entered our country in absolute secrecy?" Medaikonar asked.

"I highly doubt that, Your Highness. There is nowhere an emperor's younger brother has the chance to meet a country bumpkin such as her."

"Right, of course, considering the unholy woman lived in Mayga Cieux of all places. As if a prince would hide himself in such an uncivilized remote location. An absurd notion from a logical perspective."

"Indeed, indeed. Every day, those people sang obscene songs and plied themselves with cheap, watered-down spirits while they danced without a

thought in their plebeian heads.”

“Then perhaps the lustful priestess seduced him using vulgar sexual techniques she learned in those outskirts. Damned woman,” Medaikonar cursed her.

“Yes, yes, that must be it. So it stands to reason that a prince twisted around a lewd saint’s finger isn’t someone worth fearing.”

Keunt sifted through his memories of the frontlines he had never been able to adapt to and then his mind pictured the unholy woman’s smiling face. She had smiled and enjoyed herself even in such an unseemly, filthy place. No one in their right mind should have been able to do so.

Which reminds me, there was a man who acted overly friendly with her... That detestable redhead...

Keunt, who used to watch Saint Monica obsessively back then, recalled the redheaded man who shadowed her at every opportunity. The excessively tall man with the disheveled hair who was always ready with a cutting remark and a glib smile. The man’s skill in battle and amiable nature had vexed Keunt to no end. His existence had been a troublesome one because everyone had liked him. But he was probably lying dead by the roadside in some godforsaken place, just like so many others. Served him right.

“Your Highness, the high priest has arrived,” a servant announced.

“Show him in,” Medaikonar said.

The servant lowered his head deferentially and stepped back, and Keunt retreated to stand by the wall.

The high priest, Pisciozze, entered the parlor with his priests in tow. He smelled of the unique incense used exclusively by the priests. The man bowed to Medaikonar.

“State your business,” Medaikonar said.

“Allow me to be frank then. Please help me kill the arousing priestess.”

Medaikonar grunted in shock. Next to him, Keunt felt the same.

“We must use every means at our disposal to rid our country of her very

existence. At the risk of giving offense, I believe His Majesty's cautious approach will get us nowhere."

"As much as I'd like to say, yes, I'm not sure it would be a good idea."

When Medaikonar hesitated to agree, Pisciozze pressed his appeal rather strongly.

"Are you not the crown prince of the Kingdom of Kophe? Will you not become its king should His Majesty abdicate?!"

"Kophe's k-king..."

"Your Highness, if you find a solution to this country's problem and protect it, His Majesty will have no choice but to abdicate. Both the aristocracy and the proletariat are waiting for you to take the throne and guide their willing hearts. They wait for you to accomplish great feats your father never could. By executing the unholy woman who humiliated you, you will become this Kingdom's hero, allowing you to proudly wear the crown that is rightfully yours."

"Me, the hero..."

"The emperor's younger brother, the one known as the Ferocious Crown Prince. He leads his own order of knights and has eliminated enemies within and without the Empire for years, making him an incredibly influential man despite only being in his twenties. If he is underestimated like His Majesty has been, at worst, the Kingdom of Kophe will be destroyed like the Principality of Arjentia, or at best, be annexed by the Empire."

"....."

"Your Royal Highness Medaikonar, *you* are the only one who can save our kingdom from this threat."

Although Medaikonar had initially been opposed to agreeing to Pisciozze, the indecision on his face seeped away the longer he listened. The high priest possessed just as much influence as the royal family. So the prince's eyes began to sparkle at the man's entreaty and honeyed words.

"I see... What you're saying then, high priest, is that I must act, that you have

faith in me.”

Medaikonar was a naive prince who could be easily swayed. From a young age, he had no merit aside from his good looks. Coupled with his status as the crown prince, he had unconsciously lived his life doing the bidding of those around him, swept along by their desires. So if the powerful people around him praised him and urged him to take action, it was only natural that he'd do exactly what they wanted, incited as he always was by them.

Next to him, with his thirst to climb the social ladder, Keunt was another man easily roused by honeyed words. The epic novel in his mind had taken a completely new turn.

This could work! If he succeeds, I'll become the new king's most trusted confidante and...achieve success the likes of which the House of Strelizzi has never seen!

In his mounting excitement, Keunt completely forgot about the detestable redhead.

Little did Keunt know that he would be reminded of him later, under the worst circumstances.

Chapter 2: The Arousing Priestess's Mission

“SEETHE, my holy powers. Stir, my life force. The torrent of my magic knows no bounds as it rushes toward the heavens.”

The monsters claimed dominion over Kushli, a town on the outskirts of Balbis's earldom. We had charged into battle straight away, and as usual, I applied my supernatural powers on myself to buff the knights with my magic.

“With my power, I offer these strong, noble warriors divine protection and grant them a shield against all enemies.”

“My holy powers, protect those strong, noble warriors as well!”

“Madam Monica, over here too!”

“Over here, over there, everywhere! My holy powers, protect them all with your whole might!”

Only those I used my supernatural abilities on went into heat. Including me, of course. Thankfully, the magic stones sewn into my saintly attire made it so my lust didn't show on my face. I couldn't be more grateful for the outfit's flawless protection because it made my job so much easier!

The boulder demon burst forth from the ground and attacked. These monsters came into existence through other monsters taking over simple rocks. No matter how much one burned or attacked the rock itself and turned it into sand, if the monster at its core wasn't destroyed, it would revive again and again. An extremely troublesome enemy.

“While the magical squadron casts their incantations, keep attacking it so it doesn't flee into the earth!”

At Darius's order, the other knights charged in with determined shouts. Rocks whooshed out from the ground repeatedly as the boulder demon tried to trip them. Perhaps groundwater was leaking because every time the monster used this attack, mud splashed up everywhere.

“Be careful! Don’t get sucked in by the soil!”

As the rocks caught the knights flat-footed, more came from another direction, breaking off and raining down on them. I repelled the incoming projectiles with a defensive wall and executed flight magic on the knights.

“You who love the earth. Until my prayer is answered, leave gravity behind and take flight in the sky as birds of prey!”

If one could fly, then one need not fear rocks!

“All right, you lot, show Kophe’s monsters the might of the Empire!” Richard leapt atop a boulder and slashed at the falling rocks while rousing his knights’ fighting spirits. “Defeating the rock demon means getting our hands on the many magic stones making up its body! So do your damndest to protect the magical unit!”

“Yes, sir!”

All the knights responded in unison. Their morale was high.

Attacking the boulder itself was completely meaningless. Which was why all the mages gathered in a safe spot to chant as a group to cast the spell. Some detected the location of the core, others constructed magic to restrict the movement of the rocks, and a few surrounded the space to prevent the boulder demon from escaping.

As they devoted themselves single-mindedly to calling forth their magical power, I continued casting defensive magic on them.

“Lady saint! Behind you!”

“Huh—”

I turned around to see a rock zooming at me. I automatically raised my arms to protect myself when suddenly my legs flew out from under me. Richard swung me up in one arm as he used the other to cut through the rock with his sword.

“Miss Monica, you need to look after yourself properly, too,” he said.

“Th-Thank you.”

He swung his sword while carrying me like I was nothing more than a lightweight package. When I wrapped my arms around his neck to lighten his load, the musk from his sweat-drenched skin wafted up. I suddenly felt lightheaded.

“Urk...”

Drool started pooling in my mouth because of his rich scent assaulting my nose. The sensation spurred me to escape, so I looked at the rock demon to see if I could do just that. I found many thick, straight rods jutting up from the ground. *Splish, splish*. They made obscene watery noises as they thrust out then sank into the muddy soil. *Glop...*they exploded upward... *Succc...*they sank down... *Glop... Succc...*

I covered my face, overwhelmed by the sight.

“Ughhh... Such splendid specimens shooting forth...” I moaned.

“It’s a good thing I had the foresight to have the silencing magic cast. So don’t worry, Miss Monica, no one else here can hear you.”

“O-Okay...”

I practically melted from the inside out at the sound of Richard’s low, mellow voice. The shivers racing across my body gave me pause. Something wasn’t right. I *was* in heat, right...? But I didn’t remember my body being so responsive so quickly.

“Miss Monica, are you all right? Are you feeling unwell?” he asked.

“Ah... Y-Yes... I’m sorry. I’m fine.”

“Coordinates for monster core identified, containment and binding magic construction completed! Everyone, evacuate!” Darius raised his voice. He’d joined up with the squadron of mages.

The soil where the boulder demon was buried began to glow in warning. From within the circle of Richard’s arms, I activated my magic on the ones I granted the ability to fly.

“God of wind, grant these strong, noble warriors raptors’ wings!”

It took only a few seconds. Then, all the knights floated up in the air. In the

next instant, magical vines suddenly erupted in the soil and tightened around the boulder demon.

“Madam Monica!”

“Done!”

Still held in Richard’s arms, I formed a pose using both hands as if to shoot an arrow into the air. In the middle of the immobilized monster, half-buried in muddy water, I found a bright red dot. I constructed an arrow made of light imbued with magic and released it.

“Purify!”

Whoosh!

The ground shook when the arrow pierced through the red dot. Just like that, the boulder demon met its downfall.

“Huzzaaaaaah!”

The knights sent up a cheer. I slumped against Richard’s chest in exhaustion.

“Haaa...”

The vines created by magic were nothing more than a magical illusion. They faded away into light along with the boulder demon. The flight magic I cast on everyone hit its limit and they all drifted slowly to the ground, like feathers falling down gently.

“Well done, Miss Monica.” Richard smiled, still holding me. My heart skipped a beat.

“Th-Thank you. I... I must be heavy, yes? You can put me down now.”

“I know you’re not feeling well, so don’t push yourself. I’ll carry you.”

He sheathed his sword then adjusted his hold on me with both arms this time. His grin didn’t waver. His dazzling beauty almost created a halo effect around him.

“Heeee-”

“Miss Monica?”

“Ah...”

Odd sounds tumbled out of me. Not good. The shivers continued to rock my body. If I lost focus now, I had a bad feeling I’d cling wantonly to Richard with no concern for what the others might think.

“P-Put me down. I’m feeling strange...even though I didn’t use as much of my powers as I normally do...”

“That’s true. Instead of your usual magnificent prowess where you blow the enemy to smithereens, you used an arrow to conserve your energy. Hm...can you think of anything that brought on this excessive response then?”

“Urk... Nh... No, nothing...”

His low, thoughtful murmur made me shudder. It felt like his voice wound itself deep into my eardrums. If this kept up, it wouldn’t be long before I started screaming things like, “M-More! Whisper more things to me! Make a mess of my ears!” I squeezed my thighs together tightly and feigned a calm I didn’t feel at all.

“I-I’m fine! Really! I-I-I-I think this strangeness is temporary. I-It will pass soon enough, so please, please, put me down,” I begged.

“I won’t.” Richard, who usually indulged me, refused to listen to me at times like these. “You’re on the verge of collapse, aren’t you? I’ll run fast to get you to base, so hold on tightly to me.”

“Huh— Oh! Wai— *Eeeeeep!!!*”

Richard started loping and I clung to him like a vine. I was keenly, painfully aware of the knights’ stares as we passed by.

“His Highness and Miss Monica have returned!”

“Thank you very much to you both!”

“Huzzah!”

We made it back to the base constructed of tents and wagons. I was dying of embarrassment. I felt like my head would combust at any moment now. What made it all worse was the cheers and clapping from the citizens of Kophe as we arrived. They even tossed confetti at us.

“Your Imperial Highness! Madam Monica! Thank you very much!”

“The knights were impressive too! Absolutely amazing!”

“Your Highness! Please look at me!”

“Madam Monica! Esteemed arousing priestess! Please grace me with your gaze!”

The people’s ardor was tremendous. How dependable and heroic Richard must seem to them after saving their lives, especially when compared to the holy knights and priests, their last ray of hope, who proved themselves utterly useless against the monsters terrorizing their home.

I looked up at him from within the cocoon of his arms. He waved and smiled at the exuberant crowd even as he continued holding me. No matter how I looked at him, he was the true saint for he had risked his life for a just cause.

“My, my, Richard, aren’t you popular?” I teased.

“I promise I won’t let it go to my head.”

He replied with a wink, and I could only nod stupidly, my mind overcome by desire.



RICHARD’S Flame Corps was welcomed with great fanfare everywhere we went in the Balbis earldom. The earl and his son were also delighted while their subjects shed tears of gratitude at our arrival. Everywhere we went, we heard a storm of praise.

“Does His Highness rouse the people’s morale in the Empire just like he does on the frontlines here?”

“It makes me feel safe seeing how strong the knights’ fighting spirit is. They’re so well-mannered too. Unlike the Church’s priests, they actually listen to the people’s woes.”

“He’s so handsome *and* strong. Prince Richard truly is a god...”

And so it went, as they all expressed their deep admiration for him.

We took up residence temporarily in Earl Balbis’s castle. As we recovered our

energy from the long journey, Richard had chosen the next location for our monster hunt and conducted talks with the area's lord. At the moment, he, Xenu, and I were sitting at a round table in a dining room located within a building separate from the main castle. This dining room was used specifically for lunchtime. Darius stood behind Richard while Solarus stood behind me.

Richard was enjoying a delicious, simple stew. As usual, he was in a good mood.

"Thanks to the rumors spreading all across the country about our deeds in Temporary Bases A and B, we've received a deluge of requests for aid from feudal lords. Ahhh, does my heart good to see us being accepted like this."

"Hm... I wonder if the demand for you will ever go down, Richard," I remarked.

"So long as you keep working hard for me, Miss Monica, I'm sure it won't."

My heartbeat sped up at the dual assault of his sugary tone and smiling face, and the food stuck in my throat, refusing to go down.

"W-Well, bully for you, I suppose," I responded.

Capturing the people's hearts through bold propaganda then turning the tide in his favor had been Richard's signature move since his time in the Empire, even before his exile to Kophe. Now that we were back, he still participated actively in the monster hunts while allowing me to take center stage on the campaigns. The redheaded imperial prince alongside Saint Monica making her triumphant return combined to create a powerful, lasting impression. He really was too good at capturing people's hearts, this charisma monster.

I drank some cold water to control my racing heart. *Poker face, Monica, poker face!*

"I still can't believe the government of Kophe has yet to give its official approval on our deployment..." I said.

Richard nodded thoughtfully. "Kophe's political deadlock goes beyond my predictions as well. Eh, but it can't stop our momentum. It won't be much longer before our activities involve the whole Kingdom."

“Madam Monica, you’ll be happy to know that I’m doing everything I can too,” Xenu interjected with a smile.

“And by that, do you mean...distributing suspicious good luck charms?” I asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Heh heh heh... Not *just* that. I make sure the troubadours sing about your fantastic deeds all over the country and gather information where it can be found. Those are my contributions to the cause, you see. And of course, I continue to hand out the Priestess Teardrop Stones.”

“I really think your reputation will improve if you *stop* giving those away... Wait. D-Did you just say songs?! What?!” I cried, embarrassed.

“Oh, yes, they sing of the legend of the fearless crimson comet and the white shooting star, the Ferocious Crown Prince and Saint Monica, who protects and heals everything with her miraculous supernatural powers. There are even wandering storytellers using paper plays to depict this epic tale.”

“P-Paper plays...?!” I repeated.

“Almost forgot to mention the promotional efforts in the urban areas. Accessories and local goods featuring both of your images as well as anthologies and fan books written by authors in each region.”

“Wait, wait. The scale of what you’re telling me is so vast, my brain can’t keep up. Not to mention all the unfamiliar jargon you’re using.”

When I gestured frantically with my hands for him to stop, Xenu chuckled merrily. Richard’s unreadable smile remained pasted on his face as he calmly took it all in stride.

“Miss Monica, don’t be fooled. Though he’s hidden it well, he’s been using the work I assigned to him as a pretext to rake in the riches. Of course, I’ve been supervising his activities closely, meaning I fully intend to collect our dues from his sales of products featuring our names. So no need for you to worry.”

“Hohoho! Now, now, ‘hidden’ is a bit of an exaggeration, Your Highness. You should know speed is of the essence in business, so I merely informed you after the fact is all.”

“Hahaha! You don’t say.”

Their laughter did nothing to assuage the tension sparking between them beneath the surface. All I could do was chuckle dryly.

“Right then, there you have it. I can lay the groundwork in the Empire, but not so much in Kophe, which is why I put Xenu in charge of it here,” Richard said.

“That makes perfect sense to me.” I nodded.

Richard produced excellent results on the battlefield. His popularity was soaring too. Furthermore, thus far our victories against monsters in Kophe had been leagues easier to achieve than in the Empire. We had more than enough personnel and equipment, making the current bouts of fighting nothing compared to the carnage we’d experienced every day in Mayga Cieux. In the past, there was never a night when we could *all* enjoy a good drink in victory because we would inevitably lose comrades.

In the span of less than a year, the citizens of Kophe became disillusioned with the Church and the holy knights’ endless series of disgraceful defeats. Then, Richard appeared leading his knights. How beautiful he must appear to them, shining like a beacon through his remarkable successes on the ground.

“Ah, yes, speaking of reputation,” Richard commented while clearly enjoying his meal. “The address ‘arousing priestess’ has evidently spread throughout the Kingdom as an official honorific title for you, Miss Monica. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Do...do you even know the definition of ‘*honorific* title’?! ” I cried.

“Hm, let me think. A respectful way to refer to someone. Am I correct≡?”

“Then how in the world is ‘arousing priestess’ respectful?! Honorable?! Have you lost your mind?! ” I slammed my hand down.

“I don’t think so?” He beamed at me. Then his sweet smile transformed into a statesman’s smile. “‘Saint Monica’ already exists and the title doesn’t pack much of a punch. Wouldn’t you agree? I suppose calling you the Special Class Saint isn’t *terrible*, since you’re the only one in history to be given that rank. But if we use that, the only impression most folks will have of you would be, ‘Oh, she must be quite strong.’ And I feel that’s not quite enough.”

"I guess you're not wrong, since many people aren't even aware of the different classifications for holy women's supernatural powers," I agreed.

"Exactly. Which is why the Arousing Priestess is the best title to make both your abilities and accomplishments known," he pressed.

"Ugggh... I can't deny it makes sense logically, but still." I clutched my head. Richard narrowed his eyes and continued talking.

"Kophe's crown prince, the one who popularized 'arousing priestess' as an insult, is on shaky ground in the royal court. So this is the perfect opportunity to turn it against him by using it as an honorific title for the saint who saved the Kingdom. I did the same with the Ferocious Crown Prince because it was first used to criticize me. Besides, haven't there been times in the present when people called you that respectfully?"

"W-Well, yes..."

"Then it's settled. People will accept it much more easily than you think. As the patron saint of children and fertile livestock, you could be a blessing to the average family."

"I mean... Hm... I guess...? Hahaha..."

Laughter was the only response I had to Richard's wink. The term 'arousing priestess' had long ago left my hands and I certainly couldn't stop its out-of-control spread at this point.

"Not to mention it irritates me when people say your name so easily," Richard said. "Do you know how long it took before you told me what your name was, Miss Monica?"

"Huh?"

My eyes jerked to his face at the sudden roughness in his voice. I found him smiling his usual smile at me.

"Anyway, that's the long and short of it." Beaming, he tilted his head meaningfully. Heat rushed to my cheeks.

"I-It's nothing. Nothing's wrong with me."

"Miss Monica?"

Truly, something was wrong with me lately. Every time I saw Richard, I reacted strangely, like I did in heat.



IT'S best to take care of oneself as soon as possible when one isn't feeling well. So...

"Madam Monica, as you requested, today's perfumed oil is made with fish wort. Although I must warn you that it will make the whole room reek pungently of newly grown weeds. Would you still like me to use it?"

"Yes...because it soothes me," I said. "I can regain my senses buried in the smell of fish wort."

"I feel sorry for you in that case."

I could feel Solarus's sympathetic gaze on me as she massaged my back.



“Madam Monica, you clearly have the body of a saint. I can tell the strain you put on it by using your supernatural powers, not to mention the intense tension in your head from constructing spells. It would be very easy for you to grow a hunchback from bending over to heal others, so I recommend you take care not to round your shoulders inward too much.”

“Ah! Ngh! *Ahhh!!!*”

“Conversely, the blood flow in your lower half is excellent. It must be because you’re always walking everywhere. I can see how muscled your legs are too. Heh heh...makes them worth massaging, if I do say so myself.”

“Ow, ow, ow!”

The pain gradually turned to a pleasant warmth as Solarus kept working. I still couldn’t figure out where the strength in her arms came from, considering how pale and slender they were. Astounding.

“Solarus...can I tell you something?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“Lately, I... I feel like something’s wrong with me, as if I’m broken.”

“Haven’t you always been that way though?”

I couldn’t refute her statement. A cold sweat beaded on my skin as I remained silent. She urged me to continue.

“So, what brought on this maudlin sentiment?”

“Um...well...it just feels like my lustful reactions have been overly strong recently.”

“Hm.” She stared down at me with a serious expression on her face.

“Thanks to all the time I spent in combat as a holy woman, I know how much of my powers I can use before my mind becomes overwhelmed with strange thoughts or my body grows hot with desire. But lately, I haven’t been able to read myself well. Somedays I find myself blushing at the drop of a hat or, conversely, overcome by an odd heaviness on others.”

“Have you considered consulting with a magical physician?” she asked.

"I already did. I'm apparently the picture of health and my magical circuits are functioning perfectly too. Other than that, he couldn't give me a more definitive answer since holy women are outside of his field of expertise."

"Are there no experts specializing in the health of priestesses in Kophe?"

"No, not really, because...well, we're disposable, you see."

"Hm, I do indeed."

Solarus stopped massaging me to wash the fish wort oil off her hands. She ruminated thoughtfully as she did so.

"Then...let me ask you this. Did my touching you induce you into a rut?"

"Not at all. It just felt good like it normally does."

"Which means...you don't go into heat for everyone, correct?"

"Yes, I suppose that's one way to put it..."

"Is there someone in particular you react to?"

"Waaa!"

"Waaa?"

"Ummm... Well... Hm... Since we've established I don't go crazy over everyone...maybe we just leave it at that..."

Solarus went into detective mode at my sudden change in attitude. She pressed her hand against her chin and made thoughtful, humming noises.

"Aside from me...I can think of Darius as someone else who's close to you. Is it him?"

"As if I could view Darius in *that* light. Don't even joke about it," I said.

"Then could it be that man you met not long ago, Xenu Eugenie?"

"Perish the thought!"

"Okay, then let me think about the knights in the order you're on relatively friendly terms with. Is it Rodrigues? Gidaille? Perhaps Tomacath?"

"N-No, no, none of them. Ummm."

When she saw me panicking, Solarus narrowed her catlike eyes and pressed me.

“Or... Is it...His Highness, Richard II Belktrius?” she guessed.

I held my tongue.

“Madam Monica, you *do* know you’re terrible at lying, don’t you?”

“U-Urk...”

“In that case, I don’t see any problem in you being aroused by His Highness. I’m happy for you, in fact. Joyous news indeed.”

“H-Happy?! Joyous?! How?!”

Her eyes widened at my outcry. “Well...I think you’re unaware, so allow me to tell you that His Highness has never opened his heart to anyone else as much as he has to you.”

“Oh. Really? I find that a bit hard to believe, frankly.”

“Believe it. At the very least, you would be shocked by how coldly he treats women in general.”

“But he’s so kind to you, Solarus.”

“Only because His Highness and I share the same...*inclinations*.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Tee hee. Let’s just say he and I are very *particular* about our...preferences.”



WE used a teleportation slate to head straight away to Marquess Podzern’s domain.

“Welcome, welcome! Your Imperial Highness! And the esteemed Arousing Priestess!”

Goodness, how utterly wretched for those two titles to be next to each other.

“Strangely enough...I think I’m getting used to hearing it...” I muttered.

“Heh, glad to hear that,” Richard responded.

I turned toward the welcoming crowd of people and waved with a resigned smile. All of the lords we worked with so far in Kophe welcomed us like they were imperial subjects instead. I felt an indescribable sense of discomfort with their attitude and Richard's easygoing acceptance of it.

"Richard," I said.

"Hm?"

"I just want to confirm something with you... What we're doing, it *is* humanitarian aid, yes?"

"Of course. Is something bothering you?"

"No, not quite, but I don't know how to put what I'm feeling into words..."

"There's no need for you to worry, Miss Monica."

As the power of Richard's smile swept away my murky unease, the marquess himself spoke to me.

"Madam Monica, other holy women have gathered to meet you. They've been quite looking forward to it."

"T-To meet me...?!"

I was so happy that my worries flew away in an instant.

After meeting with our various contacts, I finished unpacking in a hurry. Then, the marchioness kindly led me to a salon where all the priestesses had gathered. Their eyes sparkled upon seeing me and they stood up to greet me.

"Special Class Saint, also known as the Arousing Priestess, Monica Regulus in the flesh!"

They curtsied politely to me.

Darn it, that horrid moniker had already become an honorific title to them too...

"My name is Nia Viego and I'm a First Class Saint," said a woman with her blonde hair in a pixie cut. She seemed to be around my age. Perhaps the most powerful holy woman here, aside from me.

"Third Class Saint, Tricia Piskes. I'm so honored to meet you!" said a girl,

around fourteen years old. Her cheeks were flushed a rosy pink and her long, chestnut-colored hair was tied into twin braids.

“I’m Orin Mouw, also a Third Class Saint. We’ve all been awaiting your return, Madam Monica.” A calm older woman with downcast eyes, she bowed her head to me most respectfully.

“Please, enough with the ‘Madam.’ I’m a holy woman just like all of you, so feel free to speak with me normally,” I said.

“No, we couldn’t treat Prince Richard’s right-hand woman, and the Special Class Saint no less, so discourteously.”

“His right...hand woman... Is that how people perceive me?” I could neither affirm nor deny her words, so I settled on smiling wryly instead to gloss over the awkward moment.

Being welcomed so profusely by my fellow holy women was one of a number of happy occurrences since my return to Kophe. They all treated me kindly despite the status of priestesses in general declining because of me being denounced as a wanton saint. They had come from all over the country to meet me, and after reporting on the current situation in each region, they planned to join our order of knights.

I finished greeting them and we exchanged updates on the ongoing state of affairs.

“The forest of Mayga Cieux is only growing bigger. Presently, a tall barrier has been erected to thwart the tree demons’ invasion...”

“In the mountain district of Gheesemed, the local forestry guild and holy women are working together to protect the territory. The lord has holed himself up in his estate in the capital and refuses to return.”

“It’s a nightmare everywhere, isn’t it...?”

Though they behaved cheerfully enough, I knew the truth. These women had endured much pain and strife this past year, barely escaping with their lives to come to us for aid as their very last resort. Our conversation had started merrily enough, but the more we talked, the heavier our discussion became. As the Arousing Priestess responsible for this, it all weighed heavily on my heart.

“It’s my fault the standing of saints has fallen so low... Even so, you all protected Kophe and for that, I thank you.” I bowed my head.

“No, it isn’t!”

“You did nothing wrong, Madam Monica!”

Each of them defended me vigorously.

“I’ve admired you ever since I learned about you during my time in the Holy Woman Learning Academy. The Arousing Priestess is the hope of all saints.”

It made me happy to hear their defense of me. It also made me all the more determined to live up to their expectations.

“Thank you. From now on, I’ll do my best to make up for lost time.”



I flung myself onto the bed after I went back to my room. Then I started muttering to myself while staring up at the ceiling. Good thing I was alone.

“If only my engagement hadn’t been annulled...then those women wouldn’t have suffered.”

Even the people of Kophe, who had welcomed me back so warmly, would realize as much once peace returned to the country. That if I hadn’t been banished for being the so-called Arousing Priestess in the first place, the Kingdom’s peace would have never been disrupted. *Speaking of! That darn moniker! How in the netherworld! Did no one find it unusual? To use it! As a bloody honorific! Everyone, please, use your heads and think about it logically!*

“Urgh!” Before my thoughts took a truly dark turn, I sprung off the bed and lightly slapped my cheeks. “No, Monica! You mustn’t obsess over the past!”

Right. I didn’t have the time to brood leisurely about it.

“Because I’m the blasted *Arousing* Priestess. And...everyone wants my help!”

Just as I squeezed my hands into determined fists, a knock sounded on the door. It was Solarus.

“Madam Monica, Lord Xenu wishes to speak with you. I tried to turn him away, but he remains persistent. I’d be most grateful if you permit me to use

force against him.”

“Stop, stop. Before you do, let me at least ask him what he wants.”

I hurried to the parlor next door. A few moments later, Xenu entered holding his cat, Saaya.

“Meooow.”

“Hello, Saaya.”

When I opened my arms wide, Saaya leapt nimbly into them like a snow-white ball of fluff. Then, just like cats everywhere, she rubbed against me, silently saying she was graciously allowing me to pet her. *How cute.*

“Heh heh. Looks like Saaya missed you too, Madam Monica,” Xenu remarked.

Solarus poured tea for me and Xenu.

I broke the ice as we sat on sofas across from each other. “So what is it you want with me? It must be something terribly important for you to come all the way out here.”

“I’ve actually come to see you quite often. They just refuse to let me in.”

“O-Oh, well...”

I couldn’t help smiling ruefully at Richard’s overprotectiveness. He didn’t have to be quite so vehement in rejecting Xenu’s overtures. After all, it wasn’t particularly odd for me to talk to merchants like him. Though I couldn’t deny that the man had moxie.

“I absolutely needed your opinion on something today, Madam Monica,” he said. “No one else will do. I’m in the process of preparing supplies for all the holy women now working under the Flame Corps, and I thought it wouldn’t hurt to consult with you too.”

“That makes sense.”

A very proper discussion then. I was glad he hadn’t been run off. With that thought in mind, I went with him and Solarus to the priestesses’ temporary lodgings. Each of the bedrooms in Marquess Podzern’s estate was furnished with an immaculate bed and daily necessities, which made life so much more

pleasant.

“I’ve more or less prepared everything a woman would need on a long journey, but I wondered if there were other essentials holy women in particular would like,” Xenu said.

As I surveyed the items, I didn’t notice too much or too little of anything. They had endured much strife since Kophe essentially excommunicated saints, so I wanted them to get a fresh start on life in this brand new, unsullied environment.

“Thank you, Xenu. I’m sure they’ll all be delighted by your consideration. I’ll try to find the right opportunity to ask them what they want as well.”

“I’d be much obliged.” He smiled at me. Then he narrowed his eyes and rummaged in his sleeves. “Ah, before I forget. One last thing... This is a present for you, Madam Monica.”

“A present?”

He handed me a glass bottle with some sort of liquid inside. I could see fresh herb flowers pickled in the clear, viscous liquid.

“It’s a massage oil. I hear it’s all the rage abroad and luckily, I managed to get my hands on some, so here you go. Open the stopper and take a whiff.”

Solarus snatched it out of his hand before I could touch it. She took off the stopper and sniffed it, then poured a little of the liquid onto the back of her hand and licked.

“It’s fine, just perfumed oil,” she declared.

“Th-Thank you.”

Xenu didn’t look the least bit displeased by her distrust of him. “I heard this silver-haired maid massages you regularly, Madam Monica,” he said. “In which case, I figured you might like to use a new massage oil, so I acquired it for you.”

“How did you learn that about me?” I asked.

“Heh. It’s a secret.”

I couldn’t help thinking he really was a shady man. Nevertheless, I was

grateful for the perfumed oil. Curious about the scent, I took the bottle from Solarus. When I removed the stopper resembling a gemstone, an invigorating mixture of orange and bergamot wafted out, tickling my nostrils. I normally liked soft, floral oils, so this was a pleasantly refreshing change of pace.

“Thank you. I’ll make sure not to waste it.”

“Of course. I’m glad you like it.”

Xenu stepped forward, bringing his face close to mine. At this distance, he could speak secretly to me without others hearing. He took advantage of it by whispering into my ear, his lips almost brushing against it.

“Even if I’m not by your side...I’m honored to think that you’ll wear my scent on your body, Madam Monica.”

“Nh...!”

“Right, then. Thank you for your time.”

After politely kissing the back of my hand, Xenu strode away, his easygoing gait belying the heated sultriness he had just displayed. Saaya leaped from my arms and silently cat-walked her way behind him.

“...What a strange man,” I mumbled to myself.

“He’s after you, Madam Monica.”

“After me? *Me*? Because I’m a holy woman?”

Solarus stared intently at me. “For an arousing priestess so sensitive to sexual desire, you’re surprisingly oblivious when it comes to blatant courtship behavior, hm?”

“Courtship behavior?! B-But that’s impossible! I mean, Xenu and I only recently met. Not to mention I’m the so-called wanton saint. The very idea of it is preposterous.”

“Then let me ask you this... The oil he gave you is thick with his carnal passion. Knowing this, can you still say you’ll be able to rub it all over your body?”

“Ummm... I-It’s not like the oil itself has done anything wrong... Besides, it would be a waste not to use it...”

“So you’ll be able to meet His Highness while wearing Xenu’s oil?”

I went rigid, like she had struck a vital point.

“I-I—”

“If you’re going to feel guilty toward His Highness, then the safest choice is to not use it. That said, you do not mind if I dispose of it, yes?”

“Right, thank you...”

Solarus’s words finally made me realize what an outrageous present I’d received. A present to rub into my skin, one that would have enveloped me in a new aroma... In hindsight, it was quite a I-lewd gift.

Oh my goodness. She’s right. How in the world could I ever face Richard after using such a thing? The very idea goes against socially acceptable behavior. Did I temporarily lose my mind back there?

I couldn’t bear the thought of seeing Richard clad in Xenu’s scent. But I still didn’t know *why* I felt like this.



WE established Temporary Base C in a plot of land near the relatively undamaged castle town while setting up Temporary Base D within Marquess Podzern’s castle grounds. This latter one was to safeguard children and the wounded. Richard’s Flame Corps used the castle as their base of operations. They became ridiculously busy over the coming days, hunting monsters and protecting refugees.

Alongside all this, Richard continued to make his appeals to Kophe’s royal court while holding meetings with nearby lords who approved of our efforts.

“Prince Richard, I’m overjoyed to be making your acquaintance...”

“Your Imperial Highness, we of the House of Norman, pledge to follow your commands henceforth...”

The visiting lords all greeted us warmly and kindly. If an outsider saw their attitudes toward Richard, they might mistake the lords as his vassals already.

I often attended the discussions as well, at Richard’s behest. According to

him, “You undertook a royal education during your engagement to Kophe’s crown prince. Furthermore, Miss Monica, you’re a holy woman from the Kingdom, so I would greatly appreciate your presence at these conferences.” How could I refuse after all that?

But I felt terribly out of place at the meetings. Because after exchanging the usual greetings, they ignored me like I was air.

“If you plan to build a recovery center, you should place a saint there as well, instead of merely distributing potions.”

“No, with a saint, everyone will demand the use of her powers and become overly reliant on her. Saints are a source of confusion in the field. They should only be assigned to key locations such as bases for carrying out monster hunts.”

“A single saint should be able to handle working both in the field and at the base.”

“Excuse me...may I comment?” When I spoke up, the lords all turned glaring eyes on me. Despite my discomfort, I pressed on with my thoughts. “There are currently twelve priestesses here. Not nearly enough to allocate to all the proposed recovery centers. In addition, their abilities range from Class Five to Class Two, so the difference in their supernatural capacities is plain to see. In order to effectively draw out their abilities, it’s necessary to form teams and stabilize the combat system.”

These Very Important People fell silent for a moment. Their displeasure at an annoying holy woman interjecting in their conversation created a uniquely unpleasant atmosphere for me.

In the Belktrius Empire, the fact that I was a priestess put me in an unusual position. That combined with Richard’s recommendation meant the powerful old men there actually listened to my opinions, albeit reluctantly.

However, here in my homeland, the existence of saints was taken for granted, so I felt a different kind of opposition from the lords. Both of these factors made it difficult to accomplish anything here.

But, in this room, I was the only one who could speak for us holy women. I straightened my spine and continued.

“It isn’t just the Empire’s Flame Corps on the frontlines here. The people of Kophe are fighting side by side with them as well. For the safety of everyone who dared to support His Highness for the sake of the Kingdom of Kophe, and to maintain morale, I believe it’s vital to have the appropriate protection and stable healing system afforded by a saint’s supernatural powers. Which is why I propose—”

“*Haaa.*” One of the lords exhaled in frustration and scowled at me. “Are you saying then that a saint doesn’t need to sympathize with the suffering of the people?”

I most certainly was not. Of course, I didn’t say that out loud. But I struggled with a retort. Because what could I even say to these people who were so fully convinced that priestesses could be used willy-nilly however they chose?

While I racked my brain, I heard Richard put his elbows on the table with a solid thump next to me. He steeped his fingers. Wearing his usual smile, he struck back at the lord.

“In the Belktrius Empire, we adopted her methods of command in the field to exterminate monsters, and they are still very much in use. Despite being a knight commander who isn’t even there at the moment to lead the troops, both the monster hunts and reconstruction efforts continue smoothly. In a country *without* saints, no less.”

Richard paused after emphasizing the last bit before he went on.

“If her wealth of knowledge is applied in Kophe, I’m sure the outcome will be well worth it.” He smiled. “But why waste time on words when we can let the results speak for themselves? And I promise you that Madam Monica is the type of person who can meet and exceed expectations.”

Then he pushed through his agenda and the meeting ended.



AFTER that, I went to the lounge to take my afternoon break with Professor Martinez, the head of the institute for magical research. He had also attended the meeting. He spoke now while wiping his glasses.

“Good grief, I knew what to expect based on hearsay, but even then, I was

shocked to actually see how saints are treated here. I'm frankly baffled by their attitudes, considering the intriguing case study supernatural powers present."

Professor Martinez was a slender, extremely scholarly man of fifty years old. Though he was the indoor type, he was also surprisingly proactive. When he heard about our rescue campaign, he had enthusiastically decided to accompany us with a "Fantastic! A chance to continue my research on holy women!"

I sat across from him on a long sofa. A coffee table with a tea set on top separated us. I shrugged in response.

"For the people of Kophe, especially the nobles, a priestess's work is a matter of course," I explained. "It doesn't even matter how well we do our jobs either, because there's no raise or upward mobility."

"They don't allow you to live your lives to the fullest, but neither do they kill you. The saints are forced to maintain a strange existence in limbo so as not to threaten the Great Church's position, eh? But what makes me curious is the fact that the Kingdom has yet to achieve a complete purge of monsters despite the spontaneous occurrence of holy women in the country. So there's definitely...a need to study this more..."

"I've wondered the same thing myself, Professor."

He continued muttering to himself while drinking water from his thermos. Just as I tilted my cup of tea for another sip...

"Miss Monica! Well done!"

...a voice suddenly came from behind me and I jumped up with a startled shriek.

"G-Gosh, you gave me a fright."

"Apologies for the wait, Miss Monica, Professor Martinez. It took longer than I expected to convince the opposition to see things my way."

Richard plonked himself down next to me on the couch and casually crossed his legs. He beckoned for the ever-ready butler in the room to pour him a cup of black tea. Then he spoke while sipping, holding the cup elegantly.

“Concerning the rebuilding of Kophe’s cities, I appointed those who agree with elevating the status of the saints as leaders,” he said.

“And there was no backlash?” I asked.

“A clever lord understands it would be in his best interest to align himself with me. Even if he finds it difficult to accept the situation in his heart, once I impose a system in place, he’ll have no choice but to adapt to my will. And when he does, he’ll realize he was glad he followed me.”

I said nothing.

“Hm? Is something the matter, Miss Monica?” Richard blinked innocently as I stared intently at him.

“Nothing really... Just when I listen to you talk about politics, I’m reminded you really are a statesman,” I remarked.

“You should become familiar with politics as well, Miss Monica, since you’re well on your way to becoming an individual who will stand at the top.”

“Have you forgotten that not only am I a commoner, but *the* Arousing Priestess as well?”

“Which is precisely why you’ll rise to great heights.”

“N-Not to mention, I’ll be nineteen soon too. Who knows how long my powers will last?”

I fiddled anxiously with a tuft of my hair as I spoke. The silver tresses had gradually started changing color since I first became a saint, and now roughly eight inches upwards from the ends were dyed a peachy pink. Richard wrapped his hand around mine still holding the hank of hair and pulled it toward him. Then, he pressed his lips firmly against the strands, the sound of the kiss loud in the parlor.

“Eeek! R-Richard, what?!”

“Even if you lose your powers, your experiences and accomplishments will remain. All you have to do then is use your history as a stepping stone to change your position. Simple.”

“Change...my position...?”

“That’s right.”

His beautiful eyes caught mine, refusing to let go. Though we were in the middle of a serious discussion, I could feel my heartbeat going wild and my body temperature skyrocketing.

Uh-oh. Am I breaking down again...?

Then, with a gasp, I remembered Professor Martinez sitting on the other side of the table. Eyes sparkling behind the lenses of his glasses, he diligently took notes while watching us.

“Lady saint, for a moment there, you appeared to be disoriented! Your behavior is usually concealed by the special defense mechanism in your attire, so this is my chance to understand your true reactions!”

“D-Don’t treat me like a lab subject, Professor!” I cried.

Wait. He brought up a good point. I’m wearing my saintly garb today as well, so why weren’t my expressions being camouflaged? Are the magical stones losing their efficacy?

“Well...I brought Professor Martinez along with us because this is just how he is, and I knew he could be trusted.” Richard chuckled wryly and released my hand. Now that I’d surfaced from the strange, hazy atmosphere, he winked and smiled at me. “In any case, Miss Monica, I’d like you to become the hope of all the saints. Oh, and you needn’t concern yourself with clamoring weeds. I’ll incinerate them for you.”

“Haha... I’m a bit terrified because it almost sounds like you’ll actually do it,” I said.

“Heh. You never know.” Beaming, he skillfully sidestepped my words before his expression grew more serious and he continued. “Oh, by the way, Miss Monica. You’ve been playing too much with the children lately.”

“Geh...”

“You really need to learn to be more careful even with the guards assigned to you.”

Richard looked exasperated. The truth was, I’d secretly been assisting with

the care of the refugee children and had only been granted permission to do so on the condition that I be escorted within the castle grounds.

“It doesn’t suit you to be cloistered inside the castle, so I thought it would be fine for you to do as you please. Everyone needs a diversion and all. But...please be careful, all right? Even children can be dangerous.”

“Hold it right there. Richard, you can’t honestly be suspicious of *children*...?”

“Miss Monica.” His voice dropped. “You’re no longer *just* a holy woman or a village girl. You’re my right hand and a saint who came from the Empire. A saint who saved Kophe. So using women and children to attack is an old and common trick.”

“But—”

“You need to be more self-aware.”

“I... All right, I understand.”

I knew he worried about me, and I also knew how careless I could be. Although I agreed with him, pain lanced through my chest when I thought of the children. They needed as many adults as possible to care for them. It was my fault they’d even been forced into such an untenable position.

Despite being denounced as a wanton saint and virtually exiled, ultimately, I was the one who made the decision to leave the Kingdom. I was to blame for not being able to protect what I was supposed to in the first place.

Richard had to look at the larger picture because of his position. From his perspective then, I was most certainly too naive, but...I bore the responsibility for all holy women’s future. Then there was my own responsibility as a saint. I still couldn’t stop thinking of myself as a commoner priestess. So becoming more self-aware was easier said than done.



AFTER we finished eating breakfast, Professor Martinez and I set about working in the fields.

“Madam Monica, we’re severely understaffed for the care of the children at Temporary Base D. Might I impose upon you to help? Even if you can only spare

time in the morning.” A maid came running up to me, panting for breath. “One of the women who works there went into labor, so we needed to make the preparations for the birth. We can try to find someone else, but it would be best for the children to be looked after by someone they know...”

“Understood.”

I washed the dirt off my hands and stood up. Next to me, Professor Martinez frowned.

“Lady saint, you *do* realize it hasn’t been that long since His Highness rebuked you?”

“It’ll be fine. Just like this field, the base is within the walled area and the knights are there too. We’ll keep this a secret from Richard, hm?”

“A secret... Hmmm... A difficult request indeed.”

“Please? Pretty please?”

“How about this... I’ll inform him, but will make sure to tell him the reason why. After all, it’s not like we can stop the helper from giving birth, eh?”

“Thank you so much, Professor!”

As usual, Solarus had been waiting silently for me. Once the professor and I finished talking, I took her with me and we followed the maid to help care for the children.

“Ummm, let’s see, Temporary Base D...”

The castle was partitioned into sections by several walls, and Temporary Base D was in one of them. Dozens of children and their guardians were in the square normally used by the knights for their military exercises. I also spotted two knights standing on guard. On the other side of the square was an old, two-storied wooden lodge. It was currently being utilized as Temporary Base D.

“Ah... I can definitely see why there aren’t enough adults here,” I said.

Hands on my hips, I watched the children run around and play all over the area. They ranged in age from newborns to around ten years old and they vastly outnumbered the grownups in this cramped space. This many little ones meant lots of personalities, which made it so much easier for arguments and scuffles

to occur between them. On top of all that, these children had escaped from monster attacks, so they most certainly needed adults to look after both their minds and bodies.

“Ah! It’s Madam Monica!”

“Monica, Monica! Luka’s fighting again.”

“Monicaaaa! Let’s make mud balls again!”

As soon as they noticed me, they bounded toward me all at once.

I became busy then. I pacified boys who accidentally broke things when they tussled with each other. I held small children who trembled from their memories of the monster attacks and cast calming magic on them with the Witches of Peace incantation. I helped the adults caring for the babies and toddlers by purifying dirty clothes through magic.

“Goddess of dew! O, goddess of dew, may your power cleanse and cast the filth into Venus’s river!”

The laundry floating in the air was engulfed in pure white foam and agitated vigorously in a circular motion. Clean now, the clothes and sheets all settled gently inside the basket. Not a wrinkle in sight. It was a magic that incorporated the blessing of the goddess presiding over housework and put it into practical use. Although there were self-operating magical apparatuses in the Empire that cleaned and laundered, in Kophe, humans still needed to perform these tasks.

“*Haaa...* I’m so glad I learned laundry magic in the Empire...”

I headed toward the old lodge from the washing area. Solarus was inside, skillfully cleaning the corridor.

“I cleaned the windows, performed pest control, and sorted the daily necessities,” she said.

“Thank you.”

She glanced at the children outside with expressionless eyes, then murmured quietly. “I... I’m not very good with children, you see.”

I nodded while helping up a child who had crashed into my legs. “Solarus, I’d be much more shocked if you *were* good at it.”

“Temperamentally, I’m vastly more suited to spanking adults to the brink of tears than soothing crying children.”

“Why am I not surprised...”

I suspected the children sensed Solarus’s forceful nature too. They played tricks on me without reserve, but they did nothing whatsoever to her. Even the most mischievous boys fled at a single look from her.

“I see you’re done with the laundry.” With her slender frame, she hefted a mountain of sheets. “I’ll be back after I carry these to their rightful place.”

“Thank you, you’re a lifesaver. Right then, what’s next...”

I suddenly felt a presence, so I turned around. A girl of around fourteen years stood right behind me. I hadn’t even heard her walk up to me. Her simple clothes marked her as a village girl. Based on the stained apron she wore over them, I assumed she was a child minder too. Though her clothes were clean, her arms and legs were stick-thin. Her complexion was awful and her chestnut-colored hair, unkempt. If she was malnourished, then she might actually be older than I thought.

“Um, Madam Monica...” She faltered, as if she couldn’t bring herself to say whatever it was she wanted to. I drew close to her.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Her huge, sunken eyes pierced straight through me, refusing to look away. She leaned unsteadily against me. She must be feeling unwell. Was she hungry? Just as those thoughts flashed through my mind.

Plunge.

“Ngh...!”

A burning sensation in my stomach. Followed immediately by a savage pain. She mustered what strength she had left in those thin arms and twisted the blade deeper into me, her teeth chattering the whole time.

“It’s your fault! It’s your fault! It’s your fault, Madam Monica! You threw us away, Madam Monica! You abandoned Kophe while you wore your pretty clothes and smiled! You abandoned us! Can’t forgive you! Won’t forgive you!

Can't! Can't! Can't!!!”

My snow-white saintly attire turned red with blood.

My stomach felt like it was on fire. The agony and the shock almost made me wild with panic, but I suppressed it with reason. I held my breath and looked around. A woman and children who noticed something was wrong started approaching me. I couldn't let the little ones see this. I grabbed the girl's hands, then looked at the woman, shaking my head frantically. *Run, go!* I hoped she understood my signal.

The woman gasped with realization then nodded once before fleeing far away, taking the children in tow with her.

I stared at the girl in front of me. She was pale and trembling violently.

“Ah...”

She finally realized the gravity of what she'd done when blood gushed copiously from where she stabbed me.

“It...it's your fault, Madam Monica... You left us...behind...”

A cold, greasy sweat slicked my skin. I smiled at her as best I could.

“I'm sorry...for forcing you to this point...”

I myself had no idea why I smiled. But I thought I needed to, I needed to let her know that it was all right, that I forgave her.

“Madam Monica!”

A clear, ringing voice pierced the air. In the next instant, the girl was bound from head to toe in rope—Solarus. Her eyes desperate, she tied the girl up.

“Don't hurt her, spare...her...life...” I choked out.

“Madam Monica, don't talk!” Solarus rushed to me after dragging the girl away. I showed her my red-stained stomach. I heard her inhale sharply at the sight.

“Solarus,” I said. “I'll stitch the wound as you pull out the blade... P-Pull slowly. Slowly, okay?”

“Understood.” She nodded. I cast my supernatural saintly magic on my own

stomach.

“Ngh— Ahhh....!”

I stopped the flow of blood. Then, from the inside and outside, I inspected the organs, muscles, and nerves severed by the knife. Once Solarus started pulling it out slowly, I sutured the wound in time with her movement using my powers.

“Haaa... Agh! Ngh... Ah...! Ow— Mmmpf!”

I didn’t have the wherewithal to anesthetize myself with magic. The wound itself was agonizing enough, but suturing it through magic added another dimension of pain, a burning sensation. The sweat continued pouring out of me. The excruciating agony was the only thing keeping me from fainting from blood loss. It was a vicious, never-ending loop.

“Haa, haa... Ahhh...” I gasped and panted.

At long last, Solarus pulled the knife completely free and the cycle ended.

“Well done, my lady. And I’m so sorry...”

She loosened my clothing and wiped away the blood covering my stomach. When the sunlight illuminated my midsection and I saw no scars, I wondered why my body felt so cold.

Then, in the next moment, I fell unconscious.



THE next thing I saw was the ceiling flickering in the lamplight. I was lying in the soft, cozy bed in the bedroom provided to me in Marquess Podzern’s castle. It must be nighttime. When I turned my head, I found Solarus sitting by my bedside.

Upon sensing my gaze, Solarus startled and her catlike eyes widened.

“Please wait a moment, Madam Monica.”

She stood up, curtsied, then rushed out of the room. The sound of her rapidly receding footsteps was soon replaced by the arrival of the magical physician who had accompanied us from the Empire. After he finished his examination, the next person entered.

“Richard...”

His expression made the words lodge in my throat. There was no trace of his usual easygoing demeanor. Instead, he scowled ferociously at me, the look on his face deadly serious. He strode imperiously toward my bed and seated himself in the chair occupied first by Solarus then the doctor.

“I told you to be careful, didn’t I?”

He spoke the words, staring directly at me. Heavy emotions radiated from his blazing eyes. Once again, I was struck keenly by the gravity of the situation.

“I’m sorry... Who knows about what happened?” I asked.

“Only a few involved in the incident. The children didn’t see your blood. Solarus took care of everything by the time you were carried here.”

“She...she did nothing wrong. I’m to blame,” I said.

“I know. She was also attacked by a different assassin. She managed to defend herself and came out unscathed, but that one was a child as well. Well... it’s unsurprising she feels responsible for being unable to protect you, so I suggest you allay her concerns accordingly later.”

“Of course...”

My thoughtless actions caused trouble for Solarus as well. Richard spoke bluntly as he watched me clench the sheets tightly between my fingers.

“You’re most definitely at fault on this occasion, Miss Monica.”

“I am.”

“It should have been easy for you to erect a magical barrier, especially against a child. Not to mention your failure to detect the blade. Because I knew you were capable of protecting yourself, I assigned the bare minimum number of guards to you so you could move around freely.”

“It’s exactly as you said, Richard... I was careless.”

He enunciated each word clearly, his tone hard, and all I could do in response was hang my head in shame. His expression remained grim for some time before a wrinkle creased his brow and he shook his head. Then he groaned in

frustration.

“Forgive me...and forget I said all that. Nobody can criticize you. Least of all me.”

He sighed and dragged his fingers through his already disheveled hair. His eyes were bloodshot and he had dark circles under them. Clearly, he was exhausted from the ordeal. I deeply regretted the worry he’d suffered because of me. I apologized to him from the bottom of my heart.

“I really am so very sorry.”

His lips flattened into a straight line. The disconsolate look on his face was unbearable to see. He also seemed both dismayed and angry at himself. I kept talking.

“And thank you for rebuking me properly for my blunder. You’re the only one who’s kind enough to scold me when I need it. No one else will.”

I understood how awkward it was for people to complain about the saint so close to him.

“I...I saw too much of myself in the refugees. When I was in the Empire, the slight differences in language and culture made it easy to live as a holy woman. But...here in Kophe, it felt like I could see the old me in them.”

Richard stroked my cheek then wrapped both of his hands around mine, which had started shaking since Lord knows when.

“It isn’t as if I forgot about your connection to the Kingdom...but I suppose I might have underestimated the impact being back would have on you.”

“Richard...”

“So...while it may be true that your reckless kindness was the cause of this incident, it doesn’t mean that I want you to be an apathetic saint. Because the Miss Monica I adore is undoubtedly the sort of person who can’t ignore anyone in trouble.”

Once he said his piece, he exhaled, as if trying to clear his head.

“I think...a breeze is just the thing we need right now. I’ll open a window.”

“Please.”

After opening the window, he returned once more to my bedside. The thin curtains fluttered. I could see night had fallen completely outside. The stars in the sky and the torchlights in the castle that never sleeps flickered brightly. Richard narrowed his eyes against a particularly strong gust of wind.

“Miss Monica...you’re in a difficult position right now, aren’t you? As usual, the people of Kophe, especially the highborns, look down on you and the existence of priestesses as a whole. It doesn’t matter to them if you and your fellow saints save them. They refuse to listen to your opinions and don’t even care if they use you all as drudges and work you to the point of self-destruction.”

He gripped my hand tightly as the words tumbled out of him one after another.

“I’ve been trying my best to encourage them to change their mindset, but...I also knew that in dealing with them, your self-worth has been taking a steady beating.”

“That’s not true!” I argued.

“Yes, it is. If I consider your position, I can’t simply ask you to do anything I wish. Even those who swore fealty to me did so under the facade of being my ally. Because underneath the surface, they continue to disparage holy women, unable to change the bad habits of their country.” His fingers squeezed mine. “And then...of all things...to use children as assassins and force them to say, ‘It’s your fault.’”

“But...”

I couldn’t stop myself from protesting. The reason that child was forced to kill me, her misfortune, all of it was because of the Arousing Priestess—

“Her words weren’t wrong,” I finished.

“Yes, they were. They absolutely were.”

“Nh...!”

He spoke flatly, his resolute tone brooking no argument. Then he appealed to

me with burning eyes.

“Listen to me, Miss Monica. Those in power wield their authority in order to take responsibility for their actions. The ones in power are to blame for driving you out and for everything their mistakes wrought after. They and they alone are at fault. So why doesn’t that child turn her blade instead on the Kingdom of Kophe and the lords who didn’t protect her in the first place?”

“Oh...”

“Do you think it makes sense for someone to point a knife at you and blame you after you sympathize with them and comfort them? No, right?”

He was angry. Not at me, but at those in power in Kophe. As His Imperial Highness Richard II Belktrius, another person in a position of power, their behavior infuriated him.

“Richard...”

“Both Kophe’s royal court and its parliament have yet to arrive at a conclusion as they continue their farcical councils. They refuse to even listen to the pleas of the feudal lords. They won’t accept they erred when they cast saints down. So... Miss Monica...” He stared intently at me. I felt sucked in by the passionate emotion blazing in his flame-colored eyes. His well-formed lips moved. “I need you to make up your mind.”

“What...what do you mean...?”

“You talk about yourself being a saint and commoner almost as if both of those are bad things. But those experiences are powerful weapons only you possess. None other than the Arousing Priestess will create the people’s future. Stop thinking you’ve already lost, Miss Monica. No matter how painful things become or how paralyzed you feel, believe in your own sense of justice. Keep smiling boldly as you always do. I need you to make up your mind right now that you’ll stay the course as you are and have been. Your unwavering smile will save both Kophe’s citizens and its saints.”

“Richard, are you asking me to follow in your footsteps, the same as when you embraced the mantle of the Ferocious Crown Prince and decided to work as the Empire’s hope?”

“Yes.” He spoke without hesitation, his feelings clear. “Special Class Saint Monica Regulus will carve a new history for Kophe. You *must*, Miss Monica. And I’ll do anything to help you achieve that.”

“Richard...”

“Well, this went much longer than I intended. In any case, you have to cherish yourself. It’s your duty to be confident. Understood?”

“Yes. If... If it ever seems like I’m about to lose my way again, please, guide me back on the right path,” I requested.

“You know I will.”

He narrowed his eyes and his expression softened. Illuminated by the lamplight, his finely chiseled features appeared even more distinct. How utterly beguiling a beautiful person appeared when they smiled. A sweet pain lanced through my chest upon suddenly experiencing this matter-of-fact truth.

Richard tilted his head inquiringly at the change in my expression. “Is something wrong?”

“Ummm... I-I was just thinking that perhaps it’s time for you to let go of my hands...?”

My attention was fixed on his hands clasping mine tightly. It felt like mine would become clammy at any moment and the thought alone made me want to die of embarrassment. Despite our serious conversation, the fact that I abruptly reacted so strangely made me ashamed of myself. My body was definitely broken.

“But I want to keep holding your hands. Can’t I?” he asked sweetly.

“Um, well... O-Of course you can.”

“Ahhh, I can feel how alive you are like this. It makes me...happy, Miss Monica.”

He laughed softly before lifting one of my hands and pressing it to his cheek. Then he moved it to brush his lips across my palm. I barely held back an odd moan.

It was nighttime and we were the only two in my bedroom. Sitting on my bed.

Richard and the Arousing Priestess alone together. Th-This was unacceptable, on an ethical level...!

“I, um... I-I have something I need to tell you, Richard.”

“Go on. I’m listening.”

“L-Lately... Lately, even when I don’t use my supernatural powers, I...I’ve been feeling strange. Quite often too.”

Krak.

The sound of something hard breaking. It sounded very near us too.

“Huh? Where did that come from?” I asked.

“A deteriorating metal fixture on my uniform finally broke, eh... Anyway, let’s get back to what you were saying.”

He raised an eyebrow in amusement. I just remembered I wasn’t wearing the clothes sewn in with the special defense mechanism against lust. A plain, white negligee covered my body. Which meant my flushed face and awkwardly stiff posture gave me away. The more embarrassed I felt, the more aware I became of Richard’s gaze and the touch of his hands.

“Well, do you remember what happened in front of Professor Martinez a few days ago?” I continued. “How the camouflage in my attire wasn’t working? S-So...I appreciate that it doesn’t bother you even when I look at you with my, um, unnatural gaze. B-But...do tell me if you hate it. Th-The moment you feel uncomfortable...I’ll make sure to walk away right away.”

I said it. I. Said. It. By revealing that my recent heats were so strong and unusual that even the mechanism couldn’t control them, I knew I had only caused him unnecessary worry.

When I timidly looked at his face to see his reaction, I found him smiling incredibly gently at me. And of all things, he twined our fingers together even more.

“Eep.”

“I couldn’t be happier to hear you say so *because* it’s you, Miss Monica. You can gaze at me however you want, and you can ask of me anything your heart

desires. Only to you will I give whatever you wish for. Even my body is yours for the taking.”

“Y-Your body—”

The bombshell statement left me flabbergasted.

“Y-You can’t,” I said. “It’s licentious to offer yourself to just anyone. That would be tantamount to a meaningless tryst. An illicit sexual relationship. I-I mean, I’m not your lover or your fiancée.”

Lover. The moment the word escaped from my mouth, a chill overcame me like I touched something ice-cold.

I... What...what am I even saying...to Richard...to an imperial prince...?

I almost forgot. About the huge and definite disparity between our social standing. No matter how friendly he was to me, no matter how much he insisted I call him by his given name, no matter how kind he was—none of it changed the indisputable fact that he was the emperor’s younger brother.

“Miss Monica, I—”

“I-I should change. Yes, I should change out of this sweat-stained gown... Besides, it’s grown so late. Why don’t we talk properly tomorrow?” I interrupted whatever Richard was about to say. Pulling my hands free of his, I fashioned a smile and put up a good front. “I want to be with you when my body is normal, and I’m not inundated with arousal at the oddest times. So...I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“Of course... If that’s what you want, Miss Monica, then I’ll respect your wishes.” He pressed a kiss to my hair then stood up from my bedside. “I’ll summon Solarus. See you tomorrow.”

“Yes, see you tomorrow, Richard.”

As I watched him walk away, he stopped in front of the door.

“Miss Monica.” With his back to me, he said my name. “Earlier...what I said, about the people’s future...”

I couldn’t see his expression. His voice was low and the words seemed to be wrung out of him, which was completely unlike him. Nevertheless, he continued

speaking.

“None of that matters to me. The truth is...all I need is y—”

“Richard, what...?”

“Never mind. Forgive me, it’s nothing. Right...right then. Good night, Miss Monica.”

He added the last bit in a light tone, then, without turning around even once, he left my room.



IN Crown Prince Medaikonar’s private lounge in the royal palace. The sounds of glass breaking, Keunt kicking against the wall, and his shouted curses echoed in the opulent room.

“Shite...! The assassination failed! That thrice-damned lascivious saint still lives!”

“P-Please forgive me...”

The genuflecting priest had come to make his report. Keunt clicked his tongue derisively at the man, who knelt there trembling with his head lowered. Sitting in a chair behind him, Medaikonar gazed down coldly at the priest.

“Leave. I’ll send further instructions in due time.”

“Yes, sire...”

The priest practically fled from the room at the dismissal. Medaikonar pushed back his flowing golden hair and exhaled in frustration.

“So, what do you think we should do now about that aggravating imperial prince and his tramp of a priestess?”

Several influential people sat at the table in front of him, including Duke Strelizzi, Keunt’s father and the current Minister of Domestic Affairs.

“Killing her would have significantly reduced the imperial prince’s military might...”

The high priest’s aide muttered those words. He had brainwashed a few of the orphans in the orphanage run by the Church and turned them into assassins

as part of the plot to eliminate the Arousing Priestess, Monica Regulus. Except the assassination failed and all the infiltrators had been captured. In his seat next to the aide's, high priest Pisciozze nodded emphatically.

"The ones captured were all disposable pawns anyway, so we weren't dealt a serious blow. But...those two are more dangerous than I ever imagined. The Church will continue to support the fight against Prince Richard and his Flame Corps."

"Good."

The Minister of Foreign Affairs gave his approval.

"It will be too late if we wait for His Majesty's decision. We have no choice but to thwart the Flame Corps' invasion directly."

Even now, the king refused to act because he preferred to monitor the situation. At present, the parliament was divided solidly into two camps—those who supported the king in his cautious approach and those who supported the crown prince in his warmongering. The men gathered in this room comprised the core of Medaikonar's faction. The Minister of Defense clenched his fist and aggressively stated his opinion.

"Momentum in support of engaging the Flame Corps in combat is also growing within the order of knights. Rumors have already reached my ears about Duke Worth, in whose territory lies Aniyimu, our country's third largest city, cooperating with the imperial prince behind our backs. If this continues, our Kingdom will be in jeopardy."

After that, the leading members of the crown prince's faction put their heads together and exchanged their thoughts on the matter for some time. The more they talked, the more heated the discussion became. And the greater their ambition climbed to destroy Prince Richard and the Arousing Priestess.

"I've heard your opinions and will take them into consideration." Medaikonar stood up and rapped the table. "On behalf of my father, I ask this of you. I wish to conduct an all-out war against the emperor's brother. I ask those who want to protect our Kingdom of Kophe from the Empire's aggression to align themselves with me."

“I have no doubt patriots will gather under your banner, Your Royal Highness. Soon to be Your Royal Majesty.”

A corner of Medaikonar’s mouth curled up when they all bowed deeply to him.

“My personal guard will join the military campaign. Our goal is to try the Arousing Priestess on charges of heresy then execute her once we find her guilty.”

A lone maid had waited outside the room where the prince and his followers raised their voices in excitement. Before anyone could come out, she slipped into the servants’ corridor and raced through the pitch-blackness like a mouse. She ran down the complicated passageway before arriving at a storage area further inside the palace. After making sure she was alone, she pulled out the pendant lying against her chest inside her uniform.

Attached to the chain was a Priestess Teardrop Stone, which glowed faintly in the darkness. She picked it up, carried it close to her lips, then whispered rapidly into it. Within a few moments, the Priestess Teardrop Stone lost its shine. Then the maid tucked the pendant back inside her uniform and returned to the servants’ quarters like nothing had happened.



AT the same time in Duke Worth’s villa in Aniyimu, Richard sat in a chair and stared at a wall lit by lamplight. Golden letters appeared on it, like an invisible hand penned the words smoothly.

“I see, so the participants were the crown prince, with Keunt’s father, the Minister of Domestic Affairs, heading the rest of the group, which included the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense as well as the high priest and his aide... A tremendous cast of characters, all of whom I’ve had the unfortunate pleasure of meeting.”

A ruthless smile on his face, Richard crossed his legs leisurely.

“The mastermind of the plot to assassinate the Special Class Saint is the crown prince. He also declared his intention to attack my knights in conjunction with his own personal guard and the Church’s holy knights. Interesting...”

Xenu and Darius stood behind him.

“Based on the speed and magical energy, we believe the source of the transmission came unmistakably from the royal palace. As I mentioned to you before, the transmitter is a disposable one, the so-called Priestess Teardrop Stones distributed to the people. They’re indistinguishable from similar types of junk items, so you can rest assured that their true function won’t be discovered, Your Highness.”

This was why Xenu had so enthusiastically passed them out everywhere on their travels thus far.

“Goodness Gracious, my lord, what a daring decision on your part to use a humble merchant such as myself to conduct intelligence operations for you,” Xenu said. “And one who worked for your former political enemy, no less. What a strange twist of fate, eh?”

“I don’t trust you as far as I can throw you, but I *do* trust in that mercenary nature of yours,” Richard replied to him without turning around, a thin smile stretching his lips. “For a long time I wondered how my uncle was able to gain such accurate information on my projects, you know. Then I discovered it was because he had commandeered a civilian who excelled in espionage, and it all made sense.”

“Well, I for one, would *dearly* love to continue our professional relationship for many years to come, Prince Richard.”

Xenu and Richard’s interests were currently aligned. To Richard, Xenu had tremendous value as a merchant proficient at espionage and working behind the scenes in Kophe. As for Xenu, he was in the market for a new backer in the Empire.

“Incidentally.” Richard’s voice sharpened. “What’s this I hear about you continuing to seek out Saint Monica?”

“No, no, it’s all a misunderstanding. I simply wanted to gift her things that would help with her recovery. Seemed like she was having a hard time after getting hurt, you know? Things like linens, rare stuffed animals, perfumes, and such. No trickery here, and besides, I haven’t met her at all recently.” Denying the allegation, Xenu waved his hands about, causing his sleeves to flutter lazily.

Richard glared up at him from his chair.

“Tell me your aim.”

“I’m just trying to be sociable since she doesn’t look so happy. On the contrary, wouldn’t it be *more* awkward for me to ignore her?”

“I’m ordering you not to talk to her unless it’s absolutely necessary. I won’t tell you again.”

“Yes, yes, as you wish. I’m already doing my best to stay away, you know. But...considering we share the same goal in the same space, I’m sure there will be moments when coming into contact is inevitable, so go easy on me, Your Highness.”

“*You* don’t get to decide those moments,” Richard warned.

“Then, you should know that obstructing my movements means I can’t perform my work smoothly. You haven’t put any ‘restrictions’ on me so far because you trust my work, right?”

The situation would be incredibly volatile if they didn’t have a good reason to collaborate. Darius used his thumb to unsheathe his sword just enough for the sound to ring loudly in the room. Xenu shrugged dramatically in response to the tacit warning and laughed.

“Oh-ho, isn’t that terrifying? I’ll take myself out before His Highness’s savage hound sinks his teeth into me. A very good night to you both.”

Richard’s intense gaze didn’t stray from Xenu as he left the room on that bit of nonsense.



AFTER the surprise assassination attempt, Richard quickly devised a plan to prevent something like that from happening again. Both the refugee adults’ and children’s backgrounds were once again thoroughly investigated. He also implemented background checks on all the incoming and outgoing tradespeople. Then there was his reexamination of the knights’ security system as well as his careful consideration in terms of my treatment at future meetings with the lords.

As for me, the person responsible for all this? Well, I'd essentially been confined to my bedroom in Marquess Podzern's castle.

"Ugh... I'm so bored..." I sighed heavily while staring up at the ceiling. The only people I was allowed to talk to were Solarus and Darius, who visited me every day. "Is this really necessary? I can't just lay about like this when so many people need me."

"It's dangerous, so please stay here."

"Fiiine..."

Solarus became incredibly strict with me since the stabbing incident. She refused to take her eyes off me for even a second. Her behavior was only natural considering all the trouble I'd put her through.

Now she stared at my hands.

"I see you're keeping yourself as busy as ever, Madam Monica, even though you really should be resting after what happened."

"I can't help myself... I just get so restless when I have nothing to do..."

I was currently working on some embroidery using magic-infused threads. It would be summer soon, meaning insect repellent was vital. The colored threads had been soaked in extract from an insect-repelling herb and I cast my supernatural saintly power on them while embroidering. They were very effective even when used in things like waistbands and ribbons.

As someone who grew up in a farming village, I'd always either been working or minding the children from a young age. My hard-working days only continued after becoming a holy woman. Idleness just didn't suit me.

"Argh, I really want to leave this room... I can feel my body slowing down."

The door suddenly opened as I stretched while grumbling. I knew who it was right away from the way it opened. Richard.

"Miss Monica, how are you feeling?"

"Richard! Can I leave the room?!"

"No."

“Gah. Fine.”

“Now that we have that out of the way... There’s something I want you to look at.”

A maid entered behind him. She curtsied to me before bringing in a trousseau of clothes. I glanced at it and immediately covered my mouth with my hands. I could never forget these garments.

“Clothes from...Nowasilo...”

An undyed blouse stitched with flower embroidery, an embellished apron, a simple black skirt made of durable fabric, a thick waist cord, and a vest. The forgotten memories of my life in the village came flooding back. I turned my head to look at Richard.

“H-How did you even get them here?” I asked.

“People with relatives in Nowasilo came all the way here and gave them to us. They said you should have them since you were born there.”

“I...I can’t believe these clothes still exist...”

“Why don’t you try them on?”

“But...”

“I want to see you in them. Besides, it would make those people extremely happy as well.”

“When you put it like that...I have no more reason to refuse.”

The minute Richard stepped out of my room, I had Solarus help me dress. They had included a headband too, so I decided to change my hairstyle from its usual one. Just like the older girls did when I was little, I bound my hair in a single braid then draped it over my shoulder in the front.

A nervous peek at the mirror showed a version of me who looked exactly like those girls so long ago in the village.

Richard came back inside the room and his eyes brightened when he saw me.

“You look charming, Miss Monica.”

“T-Truly?”

“Yes, very much so. As pretty as a picture.” He walked around me, inspecting me from every angle. “So this is how you would have turned out if you hadn’t become a saint, hm?”

“I...I’m suddenly feeling embarrassed for some reason now.”

“Why? The outfit suits you so well.”

“Uuurk.”

“I think you’re very impressive as you normally are, dignified and solemn. And of course, you’re stunning and elegant when you dress up in your formalwear. But you look wonderful with your hair braided like that too. This different version of you has an appeal all its own.”

“Gah...”

“Hmmm, I had no idea your hair had grown so long either. That particular style makes the pink gradation in your hair even prettier.”

“Nh...”

“Your Highness, I believe it is high time for you to curtail your excessive praise. At this rate, the next time Madam Monica suffers from the side effects of her powers, even this traditional costume from her village will start to arouse her.”

“S-Solarus, phrasing, please...”

Richard’s beaming smile didn’t falter at all, which made me squirm all the more under his sparkling gaze. I didn’t even have a wimple I could hide behind, so there was no escape for me. I thought about covering my face with my braid, but decided that would be too impulsive, so I ended up just holding it in my hands and fiddling restlessly with it.

Watching me, he rubbed his chin and hummed in thought.

“Hm...considering how bashful you are right now, I’m assuming I can’t convince you to wear those?”

“Wh-What do you mean by ‘those’?”

“The wedding clothes.”

“Ngh—”

“One of them told me something *very* interesting when they dropped off all these clothes. That if you try on the wedding clothes before getting married, you’ll have a happy marriage. Now doesn’t that sound nice, Miss Monica?”

“H-How would I know?! As if I have the wherewithal to even think of marriage with the current state of Kophe.”

“Are you sure? I won’t force you though.”

While shaking my head vigorously in refusal, I suddenly came to my senses and looked down at the clothes I wore. They were old—no, *because* they were old, I could tell how well they’d been cared for over the years.

“Richard.”

“What is it?”

“I can’t accept these clothes. Look at how well they’ve been preserved... I’m certain whoever owns them has a lot of memories in them. They’re irreplaceable.”

Indescribable emotions dwelled in the worn-out pinafore dress and in the neatly, lovingly stitched embroidery too. As soon as I realized this, I felt embarrassed at my artless excitement about trying on the clothes.

“I’m going to take these off then return them directly myself so I can thank whoever donated the clothes. It’s more than enough that I was able to wear them again after so long.”

“Really? Can’t say I’m surprised then. That’s very much like you, Miss Monica.” Richard nodded with a smile. “The owner wanted you to have the outfit and for it to be kept in a safe place. But...you’ll have a chance to discuss their wishes with them directly, so it’s fine.”

“Thank you. If they don’t mind, I’m hoping they’ll allow me to create a pattern or even teach me how to sew and embroider the clothes myself.”

“Of course. I had a feeling you might request something like this, so I already started working on it.”

“Thank you!”

“But only after the background check is complete and the ‘constraint’ is in place.”

“Constraint...like the kind Darius imposes on himself?”

I blinked in surprise. Darius was the type who increased his magical power by placing a magical constraint on himself that would cause his male organs to explode if he lost his virginity.

“I thought you had to have a certain amount of magical power to do that though. Most people don’t have much magic to begin with.”

“If it’s just a ‘behavioral constraint’ that doesn’t enhance your abilities, then having a static-electricity level of magic is enough to impose it.”

“Wow...I had no idea until now.”

“No wonder, as it’s actually considered forbidden magic in the Empire due to its heinous power.”

“What?!”

“Although I have no idea how it works in Kophe.”

“Forbidden magic... Ummm... Since I didn’t know about it, then the magic must be forbidden here as we—”

Richard pressed a finger to my lips, shushing me. Then he interjected with a smile.

“Although I have no idea how it works in Kophe, hm?”

He repeated his words with emphasis this time. Oh. He was telling me I shouldn’t look into it. That I should just stay oblivious as far as the constraint magic went. Right then.

He continued talking as I grimaced sheepishly in understanding. “To make sure that no one can hurt you again, I’ve decided to place a magical constraint on everyone who defected from Kophe and swore allegiance to me. If they try to hurt you...well, let’s just say they aren’t going to like the effects of the binding spell.”

“Do I even...want to know what those effects are?” I asked.

“They should encounter no difficulties as long as they have no desire to harm you for the rest of their lives. To tell you the truth, I didn’t tell them about it. Even though I don’t know whether or not it’s considered a forbidden spell in Kophe.”

Those weren’t words he should be saying while winking so blatantly at me.

“W-Won’t this create potential for an international crisis...?”

“You make a very fair point. Hurting the virtuous Arousing Priestess Monica Regulus, not to mention an inability to protect its own people from monster attacks. Kophe truly has created an international crisis, hm?” Richard shook his head dramatically in dismay then pressed his face close to mine, his eyes narrowing. “I guess this is our little secret, hm, Miss Monica?”

“Eee...”

Terrifying. Absolutely terrifying. No one in their right mind would perform a forbidden spell on the citizens of *another country*. But he was going to such terrifying lengths to protect *me*, so as the recipient of his well-meaning but terrifying efforts, I felt it would be awfully discourteous of me to object.

Richard beamed reassuringly at me. I guess my expression must have conveyed my thoughts.

“Don’t worry. So long as this country treats you well, nothing bad will happen.”



AFTER leaving Miss Monica’s bedroom, I conducted negotiations with the relevant party then went to my office, where I was now. I gazed out the window. Duke Worth’s villa was situated on a hilltop overlooking the plains of the Kingdom of Kophe. I murmured to myself while staring at the perfectly sunny, tranquil day outside.

“Agggh. I want to burn this whole rotten country down.”

“I see you’re in a dangerous mood, Your Highness.”

“Can you blame me, Darius? This is a country where people plot to assassinate Miss Monica by using her hometown’s traditional clothing as a

souvenir.”

Darius didn’t laugh, only frowned sadly. “It really is unfortunate that we must continue to keep Madam Monica in the dark about the truth.”

The ones who came bearing the customary garments of Nowasilo were honest rural women. At least that was the impression they had tried to cultivate with their appearances. They had in fact turned out to be the Church’s underlings. A supernatural ability had been woven into the garment’s sewing threads. The trap would activate with the sharpness of steel when the designated recipient—in this case Miss Monica—wore it, tightening around her body and crushing her.

Darius had pulled the threads out and incinerated them. The priest who had woven the evil magic must have realized we had a talented magician on our side through the burning of his threads. After that, the garment was thoroughly inspected before being given to a seamstress Xenu introduced us to. She stitched the clothes back together and they were safe again for Miss Monica to try on.

She hadn’t suspected a thing as she marveled over the outfit and thanked me. I knew her delight in it came from the heart. Even though it had originally been designed to *kill her*.

The Church’s minions had been rendered harmless since the women had violated the binding spell. We planned to educate them for some time and then decide what to do with them.

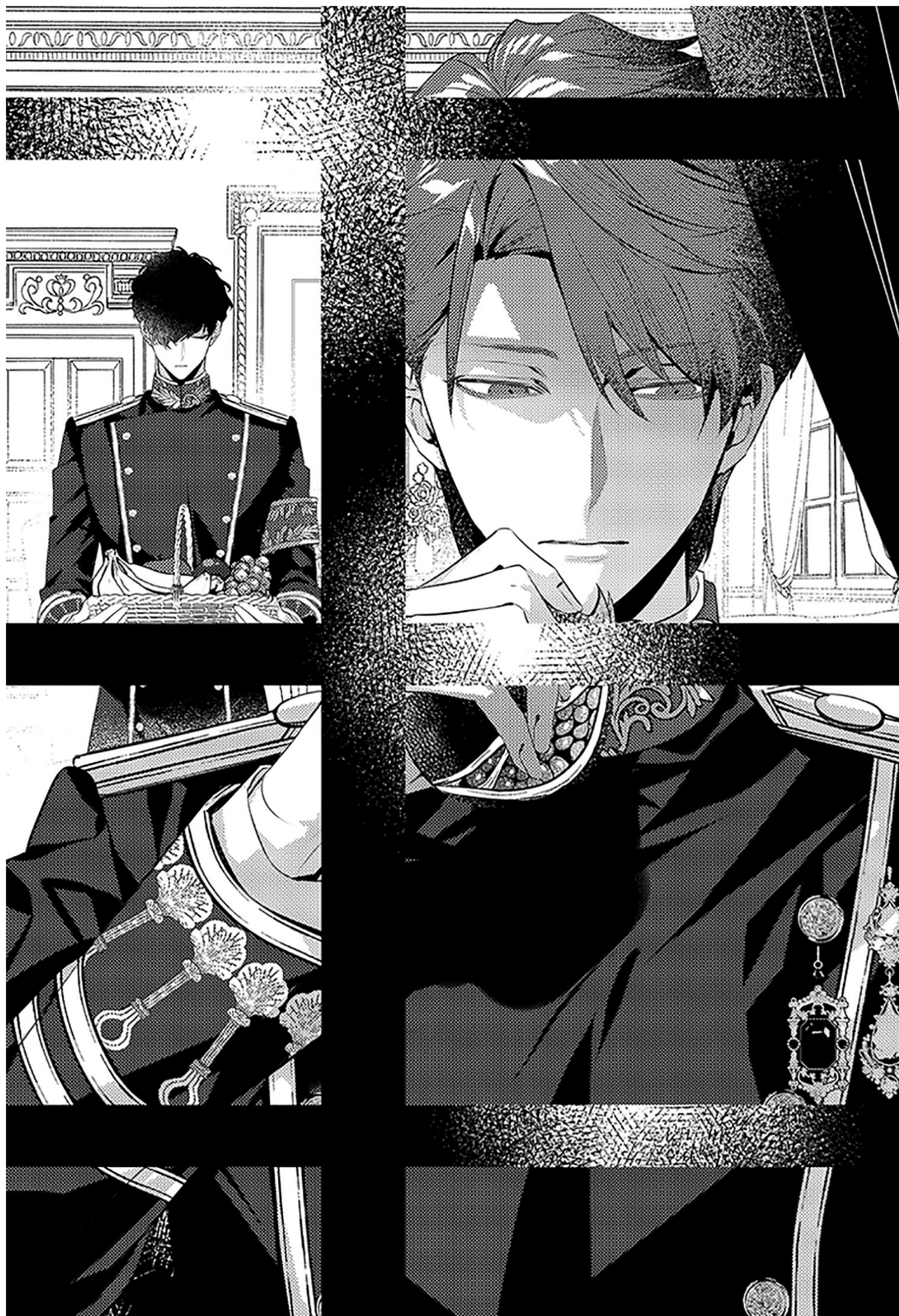
“The *only* reason I haven’t burned this country to the ground yet is because it still has some value.” I ground the words out angrily. “I would have conquered the whole damn Kingdom through force if not for Miss Monica’s sadness at the prospect.”

“If Your Highness so desires, I am ever ready to set this place aflame, unworthy as I might be for the task.”

“Excellent. I’ll be depending on you when the time comes, Darius.”

Darius brought me a basket of fruits. I picked up a pomegranate and bit right into it, unconcerned with the thick skin. I narrowed my eyes while lapping at the

tart juice trickling out.



“She is the Empire’s Arousing Priestess. As such, I have the authority to purge any citizen of Kophe who has harmed her.”

My people had already completed their investigation into the origins of the child who’d stabbed her in the stomach. I had the branch of the Church responsible for the brainwashing under my thumb, as well as any others involved in the plot. Those who knelt at my feet and swore allegiance to me were bound by the magical constraint without their knowledge. Though I ostensibly forgave them, they were nothing more than pawns for my use.

With the spilling of Miss Monica’s blood, I gained control over the core of Kophe’s central leadership ahead of schedule. I didn’t miss the irony in the situation.

At present, we hadn’t killed anyone, only enacted the binding spell. Richard II Belktrius, the humanitarian statesman and would-be savior of the Kingdom of Kophe. A man who condemned the offense but not the offender.

“Everyone keeps saying I’m more suited to the emperor’s throne...but it’s a lie.” A self-deprecating smile curved my lips. “If I had become the emperor, I would have placed magical constraints on every last citizen...making me no different from a dictator.”

My brother would have saved Kophe in a more conciliatory way. He would have sent aid long before the situation turned this disastrous. Which was exactly why I asked him to give me full authority over the matter of Kophe. Because when it came to politics, I was much more level-headed than my gentle older brother. By chipping away steadily at the Kingdom’s power and capturing the people’s hearts, I made it so that Kophe’s citizens would welcome me naturally.

“I’ll never forgive the country who wounded Miss Monica so terribly for so long.”

In my mind, I recalled my fateful encounter with the saint who showed me my path.

Interlude: The Ferocious Crown Prince's Creed

FIVE years ago, in the Kingdom of Kophe's third largest city, Aniyim, Richard was in a tavern where laborers gathered. Curses, cheers, groans, and a whole host of sounds could be heard from the men using barrels as tables and downing cheap alcohol under the dim light cast by the lamps. Pale barmaids skillfully wound their way through the maze of tables as they delivered the drinks, like moths fluttering about.

Richard was in the midst of an arm-wrestling match with a muscled, bald man on one of the barrel-cum-tables.

"So ye ain't just a pretty face, eh, laddy!" the man boomed.

"Heh. I'm all out of funds, so take it easy on me, mister!"

The spectators who had bet on the match shouted in excitement.

"Oooooohhhh!!! Get 'im! Do 'im in, redheaded sonny!"

"Don't ya dare lose to him, Steel Arm Bob!"

The bald man, Steel Arm Bob, strained to push Richard's arm down. In the meantime, Richard coolly assessed Bob's strength while holding up against the pressure exerted by his opponent. Though his thick arms were superb specimens, Bob was being done in by a combination of his exhaustion from his work doing heavy manual labor and the alcohol. His stamina was less than the average of Richard's subordinates. In his desperation to win against a new face, and a young one at that, Bob pushed himself too hard.

Winning would be easy. But the only reason Richard even went along with this child's play was to gather information and build connections.

"Whooooaaa! Bob's head is turning red!"

"Goooooo! You can do it, sonny boy!"

For a few moments, Richard feigned a strenuous performance to create the illusion of a close match before finally pushing Bob's arm down. Bob offered a

handshake, looking satisfied that he had committed every ounce of his energy to the seemingly even match.

“Well done, laddy! Ye trounced me good!”

“I appreciate it. Can I hope you’ll come to my rescue if bad guys target me?” Richard asked.

“Hahahahaha! Count on it!”

Laughter filled the air. Friendly matches that simultaneously allowed his opponents to save face while also enjoying themselves led to forging bonds. Furthermore, when Richard returned the winnings he collected from the bets placed by the onlookers and other rivals by buying them all a round of drinks, they always toasted him and went on their merry way with satisfied looks on their faces.

The ones who wanted to talk to him more remained behind, clustering around the table.

“Gave us a helluva good time, chap!”

“Hardly see red hair like yours ’round here. Take it you’re from the Empire?”

Richard smiled ruefully at the curious men and smoothly crafted a tale about his circumstances. “I argued with my older brother and left home. I just couldn’t handle the annoyances that come with being a second son. So I came here because I heard I could make a living. But I’m starting to get fed up with all the nasty jobs. How about you old dogs? What are your stories?”

After that, they were more than happy to give Richard the information he sought without him even asking.

“Don’t get on any of Lugley’s ships. Lotta rookies end up as bait for the sea monsters.”

“Unloading cargo from Ezeleya’s merchant ships is hard work, but they pay well and fast. Though they harp all the time ’bout being careful with the goods ’n’ all that...”

“Oh, yeah, sonny, let me tell ya about this one man...”

Lonely men like these were everywhere. They ran through the day’s earnings

before the day even ended, drowning themselves in alcohol. So simply making a friendly overture was enough for them to open their hearts to someone.

Smiling, Richard lent them his ear, listening to their complaints, life stories, and epic tales. He kept plying them with the murky beer the whole time. The place might change, but the fundamentals of social interaction remained the same.

The question was, why did Richard need information? Because having been driven out of his country, he was searching for a place where he could hide his name and identity. There were plenty of people outside his homeland who would eagerly help the imperial crown prince, so it wasn't necessary for him to play the part of a penniless mercenary. But Richard had chosen to abandon his identity. With his newfound anonymity, he finally had his chance to observe how the ordinary folk lived. If he was being honest with himself though, it was more than that. His choice was born out of desperation.

Richard cared deeply about his older brother. From a young age, he'd been a hot-blooded arrogant little shite who looked down on adults with both his speech and attitude. They had found him both impertinent and unpleasant. So for the boy Richard who had been feared, his calm, gentle, and compassionate older brother was an irreplaceable source of support. He possessed virtues Richard lacked. He was someone he loved and respected with all his heart.

Then their father died under suspicious circumstances on an expedition and their mother died giving birth to their stillborn younger sister. Which left his beloved older brother as an emperor in name only while Richard was forced by imperial advisors to meet with the daughters of the six most important bloodlines in the Empire. They believed his recklessness needed to be reined in by marrying him off to one of them.

It was one thing for him to simply meet them. But the young ladies literally threw themselves at Richard, who was still a boy back then. They would contrive to be alone with him during the day, and it wasn't uncommon for them to threaten to tell others that Richard had taken advantage of them. At night, he was so afraid of them trying to take advantage of him through a fait accompli while he slept that he often suffered from insomnia.

The knights of his personal guard were the first members of the Special Forces he established, the group which would eventually become the Flame Corps. With this order of knights, he undertook missions to dangerous places starting in his teens. He did this work for his brother's sake, as well as to escape the daughters of the aristocracy.

But those young noblewomen, ordered by their parents, still chased him all the way to the frontiers. Regardless of their high social aspirations, most of them had grown up in sheltered environments, leaving them naive to the world's realities. They complained endlessly about the places they pursued him, calling them dirty and backwards. All in front of the people in those very lands who had their homes destroyed. They never bothered to conceal their disgust, not with their words or their expressions.

The girls also forced the exhausted knights to accompany them everywhere, as if the warriors were their servants to be ordered around. Not to mention their nasty attitudes toward young ladies from destroyed nations whom Richard and his knights protected, because the daughters of those six houses labeled those poor young women their rivals. The same so-called aristocratic daughter who clad themselves in sheer silk gowns at night and tried to seduce him with their charm. He could accomplish so much for his country with the money they spent traveling to chase after him and the negligees to seduce him. To him, their actions reflected on his nation's aristocracy as a whole—filthy, self-righteous, and unpleasant.

Why did his mother and younger sister have to die when disgusting girls and women like them still lived? Endlessly plastering themselves against him wearing their beautiful clothes and shameless smiles.

In order to vent his bitterness and frustration, Richard fought recklessly as he pleased throughout the Empire. Even then, his actions backfired. The ones in power who feared his ever-rising achievements spread false rumors that they suspected him of revolting against his older brother.

All he had ever wanted was to protect his brother's standing. When Richard realized that he had instead inadvertently become a weapon the opposition could use to overthrow his beloved older brother—he renounced his claim to the throne and fled the country.

After entering the Kingdom of Kophe, Richard decided to hide himself for a while in Aniyim because of its large population of outsiders. Once his time there ended, he wandered from port town to port town since they too attracted many outsiders. It was the best way to maintain his anonymity. Sometimes he worked as a mercenary on monster hunts and other times as a bodyguard for merchants. Occasionally, nobles sought him out, attracted to his striking appearance, but he always refused them to conceal his true identity as the emperor's younger brother.

Abusing his body with brutal work day in and day out gave him a chance to clear away the dark storm of emotions inside him from his life in the Empire. At least that was how he felt.

Then, one day, as he lived such a life on the brink of despair, a fisherman approached him in a port town where Richard was working. On one of his free dives to collect sea urchin, the man had witnessed Richard's skill in exterminating monsters. Missing a few teeth and showing signs of liver disease, he was a thin, frail old man with skin tanned from long years in the sun.

"'lo, redheaded boyo. I seen how good ya are with yer sword. Whaddya say to goin' out to Mayga Cieux, the forest of monsters? Ye'll find the strongest monsters in the country there, and they're always lookin' for foolhardy younguns like yerself to fight on the frontlines."

"Really? Do tell."

"Yea, don't matter none if yer an outsider or someone runnin' from their life 'cuz of a guilty conscience. 's long as ye can fight, ya don't ever have to worry about money or food. Though 's also why only women with a checkered past live there. So if yer looking for a fine woman out there, yer shit outta luck, sonny."

The old man howled with laughter then, his wide-open mouth displaying the gaps in his teeth. Richard chuckled too, lured in by his infectious laughter.

He thought the old man's suggestion sounded like a good opportunity.

Whenever he was in search of a place to stay on his travels, he often stayed in brothels. He would choose an idle woman who couldn't attract customers and borrowed only her bed and bath to rest his body because it was convenient. So

the sort of place in the farthest reaches of the country where only women with checkered pasts stayed would be perfect for gathering information.

After casting off his mantle as the imperial crown prince and living such a harsh life every day, at some point in time, Richard had begun devising a plan to return to the Empire. Right around the time the season for sea urchins ended, he boarded a stagecoach bound for Mayga Cieux. When he finally reached his destination at the end of the long journey, the first thing he saw at the scene filled with shouts and roars was the lone figure of a priestess strenuously healing others. The one he would call Saintess.



THAT evening, the saint was still in the cemetery, burying the dead. She had yet to eat dinner. The many layers of her special garb were heavily stained with dirt and blood.

“Priestess... Priestess, priestess.”

Standing behind her, Richard said her name several times before she finally heard him and turned around with a gasp.

“Ah... I’m sorry. I’m still not used to being called that.” She winced apologetically. The saint was still a young girl, her beautiful silver hair spilling out of her wimple. “Ummm...and you are?”

“I’m Ri—”

He abruptly stopped talking when he realized he was on the verge of revealing his real name. When he did, the saint, one step ahead of him asked him if she could call him Mr. Redhead instead. The girl was a quick thinker. Impressed, Richard nodded.

“Sure, that works. I’ll help you. It must be difficult with how small you are.”

“No, I’m fine. I... I’ve buried a lot of people, so I’m used to it.” Her eyes grew dark with sadness.

Without waiting for her to agree, he picked up a shovel and started digging. He replied to her as he did. “In that case, we’re birds of a feather, since I’m used to it as well. So don’t worry.”

“Oh, all right... Thank you then. With us working together, we can finish faster.”

Right after she spoke, she clumsily placed her hand on her chest.

“O earth, bless me with your strength.”

For an instant, her body glowed faintly in the twilight. Then her actions left him speechless. Though she was just a normal slender girl, she picked up the body of a fully grown man, placed him carefully in the hole, and gently covered him in soil. Despite the heavy labor involved, she performed her work so quickly and thoroughly that he almost couldn't believe his eyes.

Richard shivered in awe when he realized she'd been telling the truth when she said she was fine. “You're amazing, priestess, you know that? I've encountered a few others before my arrival here, but this is my first time meeting one as strong as you.”

Those holy women had been only slightly stronger than mages. They could do so much more if only their abilities were properly cultivated, so he hated to see their potential go to such waste. For the most part, saints here were treated as just that, holy figures to raise the people's morale and encourage them instead of true combat assets. They were hardly any different from lovely girls and women passing out high-quality potions.

But not her.

“Probably because I'm technically a Special Class Saint.”

“Special Class?”

She answered his question in detail. Saints in Kophe were ranked by their abilities and hers was the highest. Enhancing herself through her supernatural abilities made her as strong as a Second Class Mage. When he heard that, Richard thought of Darius, whom he'd left behind in the Empire.

“I understand now how powerful you are, but there's no resulting backlash?” he inquired.

“Hmmm...my body gradually grows hot and my mind goes blank. That's really about it. Mayga Cieux is my first experience with real combat, so I use my

powers while monitoring my condition.”

“Incredible.”

“...I wouldn’t say that.” She hung her head down sadly. “Because...I couldn’t protect them.”

Her shoulders trembled. Then she resumed burying the dead in an effort to collect herself. She thanked each individual, stroked their cheeks and hands, and offered a prayer. Their peaceful faces looked so beautiful that it was hard to believe they’d been killed by monsters. Richard assumed her supernatural magic had something to do with that. The way she put each and every one of them to rest, it felt like a mother tucking in her children to sleep.

Her conscientious and skillful movements told the tale of the violence she’d experienced in her life so far. It was heartbreaking to see in this girl, a child really, so small and with such tiny hands.

“Everyone in my village too... If I had just woken up earlier, I could have saved them all. So now, when someone says I’m a strong holy woman...it doesn’t mean anything if...if I can’t protect anyone...”

“Priestess...”

“I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t feel like this because I’m supposed to be a pillar for everyone to rely on.”

She smacked her cheeks, wiped away her tears, and smiled determinedly. The setting sun illuminated her grimy face. Richard felt his heart twist painfully at the teardrops still clinging to her eyelashes.

The girl paid him no attention as he stood there stunned. She simply continued the burials in a brisk manner.

“Right, this isn’t the time or place to cry,” she told herself. “First, I need to make sure all of these people return peacefully to the earth. If I don’t, their souls can’t ascend to heaven. Then, I...I need to show everyone on the frontlines that I know what I’m doing, that they can trust me.”

She resolutely clenched her small hands into fists and continued performing burial rites with a sunny smile. The little priestess finally noticed Richard

standing there, not moving an inch. She turned her big eyes on him and tilted her head questioningly.

“What’s the matter?”

“Uh..... Sorry, it’s just...I’m feeling so moved.”

“Why?”

“Well...you’re breathtaking, and...simply extraordinary.”

The sudden confession perplexed the saint and she froze. Richard drew close to her, knelt down on one knee, and performed the knight’s salute. He didn’t care if the gesture exposed his identity because it felt so natural to do it.

“Mr. Redhead...?”

The setting sun created an ethereal halo around the bewildered girl.

Because in that moment, Richard had realized that he’d forgotten what it meant to be born as an imperial prince. Forgotten how he wanted to wield the power he’d been granted as an accident of birth. Forgotten what he wanted to do as the imperial crown prince. His power wasn’t to emerge victorious in a power struggle or exact revenge on the people who had driven him into exile. No, he wanted to become the strength for virtuous, extraordinary people like his older brother and this girl standing in front of him, so that he could protect them.

He wanted power. He wanted to become stronger. Finally looking ahead to his future, he swore the vow to himself.

“Saintess.”

Just by using her temporary name, he felt the shackles he’d placed on himself creak.

Ahhh, is this...what they call love?

The emotions that drove people’s hearts couldn’t be stopped by restraints. But above all else, these very emotions rattled those restraints. Happiness, sadness, rage, joy, and everything in between. As well as hatred. And love.

So Richard marveled at the fact that the softer emotions yet remained in him.

The unfamiliar sensation racing throughout his body felt good, made him happy, even as it discomfited him. For the first time in his life, he felt joy because he could offer his heart to the person in front of his eyes.

“Saintess.”

He poured his feelings into the word. It frustrated him that he couldn’t ask her real name, but in a way, he was glad he couldn’t. Because if he learned her real name right now, he was afraid the storm of emotions inside him would destroy the binding.

“I feel I came here in order to meet you,” he confessed.

“Y-You’re exaggerating.”

Naturally, she looked confused since she didn’t share in his earth-shattering revelation. Richard didn’t mind though. He simply smiled at her from the bottom of his heart.

“In any case, I’m looking forward to getting to know you,” he said. “I’d love it if you could teach me all sorts of things.”

“You say that, but...you *are* aware that I’m still a novice, yes?”

“Then how about this? We’ll help each other, since we’re both novices.”

“You’re a strange one, aren’t you?”

The saint still looked baffled, but she gave a resigned shrug before sticking the shovel in her hands into the ground. She smacked her hands on the bottom of her skirt to loosen the dirt from her fingers then held one out to him. Though it was small, the palm was callused and roughened from manual labor and the nails short. The hand of a working-class person. Different from the pale, soft hands of the daughters of nobility who slithered around him so insolently.

To Richard, her hand looked unbearably strong and dependable, tender and beautiful.

“Then...here’s to us being friends, Mr. Redhead,” she said softly.

“Indeed. I can’t wait, Saintess.”

He felt an overwhelming urge to cry.

“What’s the matter? Are you hurt?”

Concerned, she peered up into his face. Richard shook his head with a laugh.

“No, not at all. Just...you’re so wonderful, I feel like I might break.”

For the very first time in his life, he felt grateful for being born.

Chapter 3: An Evolving Bond

I was visiting the general library of Aniyim University, one of Kophe's three largest academic institutions. The university itself was located in the heart of Aniyim. Darius, my escort-cum-companion, accompanied me. After borrowing a private room and spending some time gathering information, he and I sat on the terrace sipping on medicinal tea made with fish wort.

"Ahhh...this pungent aroma, this sharp taste. Reminds me that I'm alive," I sighed.

"Well, I can understand how you might be feeling stifled lately, considering you've been doing your work while confined, which meant you didn't have to hide your heat-induced reactions," Darius remarked.

"Exactly. But...it really is fun being out and about like this. Thank you for coming with me, even though you're so busy."

"Of course. I myself start feeling suffocated if I spend too much time in aggressive, men-only spaces. I'd go stir crazy were it not for our chats, Madam Monica." Darius smiled as he spoke. I was pretty sure he was telling me the truth.

Ever since I'd been stabbed by the assassin, I'd basically been placed under house arrest in my room in the castle. There, I tried on different outfits and immersed myself in work while Richard set about compiling opinions from his supporters, allies, and vassals in Kophe to determine the ongoing humanitarian aid policy. Since Darius was Richard's personal bodyguard, I could imagine how much strain he'd been under accompanying him to all those meetings.

"By the way, I read the newspapers," I said to Darius while munching on Kophe's traditional confections. "Is it true that part of the Church swore fealty to Richard?"

"Yes. Are you aware that the assassination attempt on you has been reported

on an extensive scale within the country and abroad as well?”

I nodded affirmatively. Apparently, Richard had made sure the news spread not just inside Kophe but also in the Empire and every major country in the world.

“Despite being branded with a disgraceful moniker and exiled from her homeland, the great priestess Monica Regulus, spurred on by her altruistic conviction, returned to save her country. With the backing of the Belktrius Empire, she’s continued her generous efforts, but in a shocking turn of events, she nearly forfeits her life to an assassin’s dagger. Who brainwashed the poor orphan into committing the heinous deed? Was it the Church? The royal family? One of the noble houses? Every country raises its voice in censure and outrage at the incident.”

The words and style changed depending on the nation, but for the most part, that was how the news coverage unfolded. Harsh criticism was being levied against the Kingdom of Kophe from around the world, while in the Empire, there was a surge of national sentiment toward Saint Monica and the glory of His Highness, Prince Richard II Belktrius.

“I also read that a lot of governments imposed trade embargoes on Kophe,” I said.

“They did indeed,” Darius confirmed. “Conversely, trade with the Empire is booming. Not too long ago, the Monarchy of Ezeleya even proposed opening trade between our countries.”

“Ezeleya?!” I bent forward in shock and repeated what he said to make sure I heard correctly. “You must be joking, Darius. Considering how long they’ve been ridiculing the Empire as a band of savage tribes in the east.”

“Evidently, their current monarch is very proactive when it comes to international trade,” he replied.

“I know me getting stabbed was the catalyst for all this, but the scale of the situation has grown so enormous, I feel like my head’s going to explode.”

“Hahaha! His Highness will take care of all the difficult things, so I think you should just relax and do what you can, Madam Monica.”

“Is Richard well?” I asked. “I worry about his health since Kophe’s climate is so hot and humid...”

I hadn’t seen him since the day he came bearing my village’s traditional costume. Almost a week now. The weather would get even hotter soon and I worried about him.

Both hands wrapped around his teacup, Darius grinned meaningfully. “So, you’re concerned about His Highness?”

“I... I mean, of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be?”

My cheeks burned because I had a feeling he meant the question in another way. The more I thought about it, the more embarrassed I became. My heart was racing a mile a minute now.

“Heh. You’re flushed, Madam Monica. I wonder how delighted His Highness would be if he could see you right now.”

“Stop teasing me, darn it,” I huffed. “These heats have been ridiculously strange lately, and as you can see...it doesn’t take much anymore for me to react like this. Sometimes, my warding camouflage doesn’t work either. Like now, for example.” I tried to change the subject while vigorously fanning my flaming cheeks. “N-Now then. What about *you*, Darius?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well...you and Solarus are from the same province, aren’t you? I remember you telling me before that only citizens of the same country would understand. So perhaps you have feel—”

“No, I don’t. Not for her.” Before I could finish what I was saying, Darius calmly denied it. “We come from different lineages in our homeland, the Principality of Arjentia, when it still existed. I came from a line of knights while she was one of the nobility. Just because we’re from the same country doesn’t automatically make her a romantic interest for me. So I suppose you could say my feelings for her are akin to devotion, perhaps even faith?”

“Darius...”

“If anything, I’d say my feelings for His Highness are much more wicked.

Hahaha!” he chuckled.

“Well, it certainly didn’t take long for the conversation to take a vulgar turn, hm?”

“In any case, I definitely can’t see her in that light. The relationship I have with her is different from the one you have with His Highness, Madam Monica.”

“What?”

My heart stopped then sped up. Darius cackled gleefully, flashing his canines at me.

“How do you *really* feel about His Highness? Be honest now. I promise it won’t leave this room. It’ll stay between us.”

“U-Urk...”

Shoot, the conversation circled back to me. I was so hoping it wouldn’t. While sipping on my tea, I looked everywhere but at him as I tried to think of a way to wiggle my way out of this.

“Richard is an impressive man whom I respect. That...that is all.”

“Is it really? Are you sure?” he pressed.

“Have you forgotten that I’m the *Arousing* Priestess? I can’t trust my senses at all. I don’t know if I feel strange because of the, um, arousal or...or if there’s a dee-deeper meaning to it. Besides...he’s the emperor’s *brother*, an imperial *prince*. The gulf between our backgrounds is too large,” I said.

“Then do you think you can kiss me?” Darius challenged.

“Huh?”

From behind his fringe of black hair, his blue eyes bore sharply into mine. His lips were curved invitingly, and his canines peeked out from the corners of his mouth. Just as a shadow fell on my face—

“Wind!”

Whoosh.

Darius flew away spectacularly. When I realized what I’d done, I paled and came to my senses.

“Da-Darius!” I cried.

He spun, placing both legs against the wall to brace himself, then returned calmly.

“Hahaha! I was only joking,” he said.

“I-I’m sorry...”

“I am as well. I shouldn’t have tested you like that.” He righted the fallen chair and sat down again before continuing. “Things other than sexual arousal can unsettle the heart, you know.”

“Such as?”

“It’s only a matter of time before you answer that question yourself, Madam Monica.”

“I don’t understand...”

“Here’s a hint. If His Highness tried to kiss you just now like I did, would you blow him away or not?” he asked.

“I...”

I said nothing else. Only took another sip of the fish wort medicinal tea even as I blushed furiously. I used the bitter taste of the liquid to forcefully slam the lid on thoughts I shouldn’t think.



STARTING from the east, parts of the Kingdom of Kophe fell under Richard’s jurisdiction with rapid momentum. The citizens joyfully accepted a ruler who guaranteed their safety as did the lords of each region because they naturally wanted to avoid destruction visiting their lands. As for the landed lords who opposed Richard, there were reports of their subjects rebelling against them.

The Church too had split into two sides, with the newly established Saints’ Faction. Up until now, the organization’s hierarchy revolved around the high priest as the central pillar. But the Saints’ Faction wanted the Church’s core to focus on the divine blessings and protections afforded by the saints.

I was shown the faction’s crest, but for some reason, it felt like I was looking

at a profile of my own face. Or perhaps it was just my imagination?

We were currently traveling down a heavily guarded route on our way to Whistler, the second largest city in the Kingdom. During our journey, we saw the flags of the Flame Corps erected at various bases, and the people of Kophe welcoming Richard's knights with warm cheers.

Richard and I were alone inside the carriage. We were eating baguette sandwiches on the coach ride because we wouldn't have time to rest for a while after arriving at the castle that was our next destination. The words Darius said to me a few days ago echoed in my head.

If Richard...tries to kiss...me...would I blow him away...?

My heart always pounded strangely whenever we were together, so I tried my best not to look directly at him. So naturally, I ended up staring out of the window most of the time, catching sight of pristine flags bearing Richard's crest staked in desolate fields.

It was enough to dampen my excitement a little at being alone with him.

I murmured quietly, "Won't the Kingdom of Kophe do something to stop this situation?"

"They *can't* stop it. Not anymore," Richard replied matter-of-factly as he chewed on his sandwich. He licked a spot of red sauce clinging to his finger. "The royal court, the parliament, and the Church haven't been able to keep up with our momentum. If parliament decides to prioritize expelling me from the country, the lords' opposition will grow stronger since their lands and their people are suffering from the ongoing monster attacks. Having said that, voicing objections to the Church's monster extermination strategy means a complete disavowal of the high priest himself, so that's not an option. As for apologizing to the Arousing Priestess—it would be tantamount to the royal family forfeiting their authority after having driven you out. The king would be forced to abdicate and Crown Prince Medaikonar would be stripped of his position as well."

"Isn't statecraft supposed to be conducted by a gathering of wise and powerful people? So why have things turned out so terribly?" I asked. "Though I'm not sure if it means much for a commoner like me to say this."

“Kophe has enjoyed peace for far too long. Surrounded by the sea on three sides, protected from invasion by other countries because of the presence of monsters, and those very monsters destroyed diligently by the holy women. The existence of said women led to a plateauing of research in medical care and weaponry. Protecting this long-held precedent meant no advances in technology. As long as something was done about the monsters, nothing else mattered because of the country’s ideal geographic location blessing it with a temperate climate and plenty of water.”

Richard opened his mouth wide and took a huge bite of the baguette sandwich. He chewed and swallowed, then licked his lips. His princely good looks and the way he filled out his gorgeous uniform only enhanced his incredibly masculine gestures. He was such a temptation, I had to look away for the sake of my own sanity.

If those lips...drew close to mine...

Would I blow him away with wind? Or...

“Miss Monica, you’ve been shaking your head a lot. Is your neck stiff perhaps?” he asked me.

“Lately, I’ve been losing my mind over the smallest things, so I’ve been making a conscious effort to abstain from those thoughts.” I chomped into my sandwich as I replied to him, all the while mulling the problem at hand seriously.

Truthfully, the Empire *was* remarkably forward-thinking and eager for reforms. Even a questionable woman like myself had somehow adapted to life there as if it was the most natural thing in the world, and new ideas were being implemented more and more. In comparison, there was Kophe. Even though I’d been chosen as the crown prince’s consort despite being a saint of common birth, it was still fundamentally a conservative society, rooted in precedent.

“So through its own actions, or in this case, *inaction*...Kophe has reached a point where it essentially has no choice but to accept the Empire.”

“Indeed. Even if we’re acting under the guise of humanitarian aid, it would be a nuisance being perceived as a threat. But we’re managing that aspect quite well,” Richard responded very nonchalantly.

He spoke only the truth. There was no chaos in the locations under his authority. During the period the Empire was actively expanding its territory, it respected the unique cultures and governances of each location. The imperial way of doing things was clearly working in Kophe too.

“Oh, Richard, look,” I said. “There are people on the other side of the field.”

We both stuck our heads out the window. Around twenty people had gathered on the other side of the field. From their attire, they looked to be local farmers and residents. They all bowed their heads deeply as our carriage rolled by.

Ruined fields and people bowing their heads in gratitude.

“...They must have waited for us to pass through.”

My chest tightened painfully. The smallest change in fate and I might have been standing with them. A commoner who grew up in a farming village. One temporarily affianced to Kophe’s heir. The Arousing Priestess now belonging to the Empire.

There must be something only I, Monica Regulus, can do.

“Richard. I want to help those people,” I said.

“All right...as long as you don’t go overboard with the sympathy and hurt yourself, Miss Monica.”

“I know, I know. I won’t make the same mistake again.”

His gaze on my face, Richard smiled at me. Even though I knew he was only being kind because I was a saint, my heart still leapt with a sweet, completely inappropriate emotion.

Ahhh, I’m losing my mind again... Disgraceful, to have such thoughts toward His Imperial Highness...

I could heal my body with my supernatural powers, but I had no idea how to mend broken emotions. Unacceptable for the Arousing Priestess. I squeezed my hands into fists.



WE had arrived at Marquess Salvadore's castle, where the Flame Corps' flag with its unique insignia flew. Along with the other holy women, I was in a corner of the yard where Richard and the marquess's knights practiced their military exercises.

"Heed the voice of my saintly power. Take Saaya's pain away right this hour!"

I held my hands over the recipient—Xenu's cat, Saaya—of my healing spell and before our very eyes, the scratches on her forelegs disappeared, leaving behind no scars. While I was at it, I stroked her fur and the luster returned to it in the wake of my palm.

"And that's how you free chant."

The priestesses raised their voices in admiration. Restored to her natural fluffiness, Saaya raised her chin and tail imperiously at the attention focused on her, turned around, and with a wiggle of her bottom, strutted away elegantly. She leaped into Xenu's arms and purred in her throat, demanding he pamper her. Xenu smiled and inclined his head politely at us.

"Thank you very much, Madam Monica," he said. "She's very happy."

"Meow."

One of the holy women muttered intently, almost to herself, "Hmmm, so saintly powers can be activated even without the use of a set incantation."

"That's correct," I replied. "A mage activates their magical ability by resonating their incantations into the world through their voiceprints, so there isn't much freedom. But a saint's supernatural power activates through acting on the saint herself. It requires a lot of concentration at first, but once you get used to the method, it will become much easier to use words of your own choosing. In short, free chanting."

"I can't wait to practice!"

"Becoming proficient with this method means we can activate our powers quickly and efficiently!"

They grew incredibly excited at my explanation. Most of the saints here were

younger than my nineteen years. It was like seeing gaggles of girls bubbling with enthusiasm in a girls' academy.

And the young knights over on the training ground watched us in interest. I waved at them.

"Everyone, you're more than welcome to come here if you get injured!" I invited. "Thank you in advance for helping us with our training!"

"Yes, ma'am! We'll do our best!"

When the gallant knights saluted, the priestesses blushed and glanced meaningfully at each other. The wholesome exchange between the young men and women made me feel like an older sister watching over her younger siblings. I couldn't help grinning at the innocent atmosphere.

"Right then, ladies. Let's practice with their help!" I said in a cheerful voice.

"Yes, ma'am!"

It didn't take long for one of the knights to become injured. He loped over to us and holy woman Nia rolled up her sleeves, ready to make an attempt.

"Okay, here I go with my free chant! **Please heal this warrior's wound.**"

"Whoa...!"

The knight let out a cry of amazement when her spell worked.

I had several reasons for wanting them to practice free chanting. One, there were things to learn outside of the Holy Woman Learning Academy. Two, the knowledge that they could be creative with their magic. And three, to build their confidence. The longer a chant was, the more accurately a priestess could activate her supernatural abilities, but this also required stamina to work. By skillfully utilizing free chanting while conserving energy, a saint could extend her time on the field, allowing each person to do more.

I was the Arousing Priestess. Helping them change their mindset and the way they worked would make their jobs tremendously easier, and it was a mission only I could accomplish.

From the corner of my eyes, I saw long black hair fluttering in the breeze. Xenu watched us with a smile on his face, Saaya still in his arms. Sometimes he

talked to the holy women and other times they went to him to play with Saaya. Clearly, he got along with them and vice versa.

Our eyes met when I stared at him a little too long. Xenu grinned and tipped his head in acknowledgment.

“When in the world did you get so friendly with them?” I asked.

He chuckled, flashing his canines. “My company is in charge of looking after the girls during their stay. How can I know what they actually need if I don’t talk to them?”

The saints nodded with cheerful smiles as they listened to our conversation.

“Madam Monica, the lotion Xenu gave me makes my skin so plump and dewy.”

“I came here with only the clothes on my back, but he had extra outfits and daily necessities ready for me.”

“I’m very glad to hear you’re all happy,” Xenu said. “Don’t hesitate to let me know about anything else you might need.”

They had all accepted him easily. I hadn’t changed my mind about him being suspicious, but I was grateful for his consideration. He was still a shady character though.

“Thank you for helping them feel comfortable here,” I said.

“Glad to do it. It’ll make life a lot easier for me too once peace returns to Kophe.”

It wasn’t a terrible feeling per se, but...I just couldn’t quite describe the sense of discomfort I felt toward Xenu. Since he was a merchant, his collaboration with Richard made sense to me. That also explained his kindness toward the other priestesses. But I wondered if there was something more to him than simply business.

Hmmm. I smell trickery afoot.

I stared at him in silence.

“Is something wrong, Madam Monica?” he asked.

“Not...really...”

“Then do you think I’m untrustworthy?” Xenu grinned meaningfully before suddenly thrusting his face close to mine.

“Nh...?!”

He chuckled merrily when I stumbled back reflexively away from him.

At that moment, one of the girls exclaimed in excitement, “It’s Prince Richard!”

My gaze went to the training ground. There, I found him engaging in bouts with his and the marquess’s knights. Instead of his usual formal military attire, he wore simple war fatigues much like the rest of the members of both orders. He defeated his opponents one after another with a sword used in mock battles. The knights were determined to score a point against His Imperial Highness, but Richard handled them easily, practically dancing circles around them.

The saints and the knights not participating in the mock battle watched in amazement. He knocked his final opponent to the ground. When Richard reached down to help the knight up, everyone clapped enthusiastically like it was the most natural thing to do.

The exhausted knights staggered over to us for healing. After putting away his practice sword, Richard started jogging in our direction. His eyes on me, he waved with a smile. Then he suddenly stopped. Because a figure in a dress under an open parasol walked toward him from the edge of the training ground.

“Ah, that’s Marquess Salvadore’s daughter.”

I glimpsed a woman with long golden hair wearing a mint-colored dress underneath the white parasol being held by a maid. I could see her talking to Richard.

“I wonder if the marquess plans to wed his daughter to His Highness?”

“As far as position and breeding go, I’m not sure...”

“But she’s lovely, so if he takes a liking to her, I think it will go smoothly

between them.”

The saints and knights gossiped to each other in whispering, curious tones. After Richard shook his head with a smile at the marquess’s daughter, he resumed his jog back to me.

“Miss Monica!”

As soon as he called out my name, I found my voice stuck in my throat. Everyone immediately bowed or curtsied to him upon his arrival. The center of attention, he stooped down in front of me and offered me his head.

“Won’t you wipe my sweat off?”

“Um... Uuumm...”

When I did as he asked, his flame-colored eyes slitted as he gazed at me.

“You were watching me, weren’t you, Miss Monica? I won because you did~≡!” he said with a playful wink.

“Oh...”

With all eyes on us, I had no idea how to react. Richard grinned, amused by my confusion. The noble’s daughter under the parasol stood motionless as she watched us. The saints and Marquess Salvadore’s knights looked on in keen interest too.

He...he’s doing this on purpose, isn’t he?! Why?!

I could feel the color leaching from my skin. I didn’t know what else to do.

The clanging of the lunch bell released me from the spiral of awkwardness I was falling into. At the sound, everyone dispersed to take their meals. After that, I found myself alone with Richard in the castle’s deserted rooftop garden.

“Richard, how could you do that to me...? I wanted to crawl into a hole and die...” I complained.

“Hahaha! I couldn’t help myself. The marquess’s daughter is annoyingly tenacious,” he said.

“Well, you sure shocked everyone with that little display.”

“I had to make sure they all knew how well you and I get along, Miss Monica.”

The nervous sweat had cooled on my skin, but I still felt bewildered. Meanwhile, he smiled in his usual devil-may-care way.

All sorts of herbs grew thickly and verdantly in the rooftop garden. The beautifully constructed arches and other ornaments made the garden a pleasure to view, but it was fundamentally designed with practicality in mind. Even the roses were edible, specifically the magical variety useful for recovering magical energy.

“So what is it you wanted to discuss, Miss Monica?”

Right. I had a good reason for inviting him to the rooftop garden.

“I want to try restoring Kophe’s fields. Remember what happened when the legendary snow beast was chasing you, Richard? How my supernatural saintly powers went out of my control and caused flowers to bloom in the soil? If I could control it and apply it properly, I think it’s possible to make the lands destroyed by monsters arable again.”

The more I talked, the more his face hardened, which was unusual for him.

“I can’t let you do that,” he said.

“Please.”

“I can’t guarantee your safety in that sort of situation, Miss Monica. First of all, I’ve made you work far more than I intended to. As the commander of the Flame Corps and on a personal level as well, I can *not* allow you to push yourself any further.”

“You know I’m used to working. If anything, compared to my time farming on my family’s land as a child, what I do now barely counts as work.” I scowled fiercely and flexed my biceps in an attempt to lighten the mood. But even then, Richard’s expression didn’t soften.

“I know being a workaholic is second nature to you, Miss Monica. But that’s neither here nor there.” His frown clearly expressed his worry over me. It didn’t deter me though as I continued arguing vehemently.

“But at this rate, no matter how much peace is restored or how much humanitarian aid we provide, the people of Kophe will starve. You understand

that too, don't you?"

"Well, yes." He agreed easily enough.

"It isn't just the fields destroyed by the monsters, but also the farmland people couldn't tend to after they fled," I went on. "So much of the land is in such poor condition. If we don't do something to restore them, the Empire's support will mean nothing. Everything we've done would simply end up being a waste of time."

Richard fell silent in the face of my appeal. I didn't know what the silence meant.

He mulled it over for some time before once more shaking his head.

"It's too dangerous." Expression serious, he continued. "Miss Monica...you were bedridden for a week after the Hietside incident. Back then, you were able to rest and recuperate in peace because we were in the Empire, and moreover, somewhere I could protect you. But it's just too dangerous in Kophe. Have you already forgotten the assassination attempt not so long ago?"

"Ugh..."

Normally, I would have bent to his will and given in to him by now. It was never my intention to trouble him. But as a former citizen of Kophe's working class, I had good cause to press my case and persuade him.

"Richard, listen to me. If we try now, the land will be ready in time for the rainy season."

"The rainy season, hm..." His eyes widened slightly upon hearing my words.

"Think about it. Do you really believe it's realistic for the Empire to continue providing aid through next year? If we put my plan into action now, the crops will be ready by the fall harvest festival. I can devote all my attention to the fields while the other holy women handle the monster hunts and rescue efforts. What do you say?" I proposed.

"The other priestesses can't do what you do."

"Yes, they can. I taught them. Well, technically, I'm *teaching* them and it's all still theoretical at the moment."

“What?”

“Look.” I handed over the sheaf of papers in my hand to him. “I made a list of all the saints’ abilities and categorized their strength levels. If they work together properly, a minimum of fifteen should be enough to do what I do. Right now, there are twenty-two saints in total. Meaning we have plenty of personnel to fill in the gaps if we need to.”

All the holy women who gathered under Richard’s banner possessed a variety of experience, abilities, and personalities. If they were given work suited to their individual aptitudes, they were more than enough to replace a Special Class Saint. On the contrary, they had to be able to manage without me if we wanted truly sustainable peacekeeping.

And then there was what I needed to do.

“Only the Arousing Priestess is capable of revitalizing the fields. And I should be working on this *exactly* because there’s no precedent.”

He was quiet again. Then he groaned and growled out a reply, almost like he was talking to himself. “Damn it, Miss Monica... Is there *really* a need for you to go so far for this blasted country?”

“It’s my homeland.”

“Even though they *threw* you away?” There was no trace of his usual gentle smile on his face. My heart beat faster at the darkness in his eyes. “This country made you miserable and not a single part of me wants it to flourish. You sacrificed yourself to protect it, so it’s absurd to use that as a stepping stone for *their* happiness.”

“Richard—”

“Let me be brutally honest. I want to raze every last bit of this country to the ground. I don’t give a fig about the nation nor the pathetic lords who depend on you while deriding you and certainly not their damn daughters. Even the citizens can rot for all I care.”

I couldn’t say anything in response to Richard’s uncharacteristic attitude or expression. He spat out such scathing words, but for some reason, to me, Richard looked like he was on the verge of tears.

“But...” He paused, then smiled wanly, as if succumbing to my persistence. “But...if you truly want to protect them, then I’ll bend to your will.”

He reached out to me with both hands and gathered a few strands of my hair. When he pressed his lips against them, I shivered in reaction, like a warm breeze swirled inside me. My cheeks heated. I knew he didn’t mean it like that. Even so.

Something was wrong with my libido again. I mentally begged my body not to break. I needed it to remain calm at least for the duration of our discussion...

“Promise me, Miss Monica.” With my hair still pressed against his lips, Richard pleaded with me, his gaze earnest. “You can purge the earth. In exchange, after you activate your holy powers, you won’t leave my side until you’ve completely recovered. You agree to confinement in a room somewhere safe, enclosed by a powerful magical barrier. Aside from Solarus and Darius, I won’t let you see anyone else. And I won’t hesitate to execute anyone who poses a threat to you. This is how strict I’m going to be to protect you. Do you accept these conditions?”

I nodded. “As long as you allow me to heal the earth, I’ll do whatever else you want me to, Richard.”

“Whatever I want, hm... You really shouldn’t make such a reckless promise,” he said, his voice heady.

“I don’t think it’s reckless.”

Krak.

I heard the sound the minute the words left my mouth.

“Huh? What was that just now...?” I asked.

A dry crackling noise, like glass breaking, came from Richard.

“Don’t worry about it. Just an accident.”

Richard smiled, looking satisfied.



AFTER Miss Monica left.

“Well, well, Your Highness, are you absolutely *sure* you want to let her walk away?”

I heard an amused voice come from the shadows. I replied without taking my gaze away from the direction in which she had departed.

“Why don’t you stop hiding already, Xenu?”

He strolled out dramatically from deep within the garden and executed an ever-so-polite bow.

“Listening to you, Your Highness, it’s clear you don’t understand the finer points of love. But for whatever reason, Madam Monica is crazy about you.”

With his long hair pulled back, the man narrowed his slitted eyes behind his glasses and grinned at me, flashing his incisors. He always reminded me of a snake. I narrowed my own eyes and responded with a cold smile.

“Is your plan to pry into my personal affairs and profit by spreading gossip about it?”

“I’m hurt you’d think so. As a subject of Kophe, I’m just deeply curious about the woman you’ve chosen.” Xenu snickered, covering his mouth with one of his sleeves. “Although I for one am grateful for her tireless efforts. Makes it so much easier to hand out the Princess Teardrop Stones. Someday though, her supernatural saintly powers *will* reach their limit. You and I both know that. So it would definitely be to your benefit for her to create a miracle here in the Kingdom before she retires, thereby giving you the chance to take control of everything. Isn’t that right?”

I started walking away after realizing there was no need for me to listen to his drivel.

“Oh, but, I *do* have a good reason for coming here.” Xenu casually ambled over to me. “His Royal Highness the crown prince raised an army. Would you like to hear the details?”

At his words, I felt my eyes take on the darkness cast by my role as His Imperial Highness.



A few days later, Richard finally acquired a lord's castle. Viscount Telestraza's, to be exact. The castle and the area around it had been abandoned with the constant presence of monsters. But the Flame Corps, in conjunction with the unit of holy women, succeeded in recapturing it. It only took about two days to reach the royal capital without using transfer magic, so the castle was very convenient location-wise.

The villa on Telestraza's castle grounds, the one where the Viscount lived with his wife and children, became my personal residence, for all intents and purposes.

"Miss Monica, we've learned to fight without needing your presence on the frontlines."

Richard assigned me to the rear quite often lately for my own safety. Now, he reported to me the results of the latest battle with a cheerful smile.

As for the citizens of Kophe, they welcomed him fervently all over the country. Approximately 70 percent of the aristocracy had sworn fealty to him.

"I still can't believe that most of the country has fallen under your control, Richard..."

Even I could hear the wonder in my voice as I listened to his report in the lounge. His grin broadened and he raised his first two fingers in the victory sign.

"With this castle in our hands, as well as my standing order that only those bound by the constraint magic can approach you, you too can rest without worry when the time comes, Miss Monica."

I blinked in surprise at those words. "You...you did all that just so I can recuperate if I collapse from overusing my powers?"

"Of course, why wouldn't I? There is no chance I will ever let you be in danger again. Never again."

His flame-colored eyes narrowed. I shivered at the fierceness in his gaze. The Ferocious Crown Prince was terrifying. His maneuvering behind the scenes scared me.

"Miss Monica, preliminary arrangements have been made for the selection of

land to restore for cultivation.” Richard changed the subject. I automatically straightened my spine in response.

“So...the day has at last arrived to put my plan into action, hm?”

“Yes. Do your best, Miss Monica. The first location is...Nowasilo.”



*“**THE** people staged a revolt and the castle is on fire.”*

The Minister of Domestic Affairs, Duke Strelizzi, jumped up from his chair in his office upon receiving the report. The almost fifty-year-old man had inherited his title in his twenties and since then amassed and wielded tremendous power in the world of politics.

He immediately ordered for a carriage to be readied to depart. If he used a teleportation slate to head directly to his castle, there was a risk the peasants would be lying in wait for him in front of the one on his estate. The journey back took three days under an overcast sky that threatened to dump a torrent of rain at any moment.

When he finally arrived, he found his holdings already transformed to ash. The fields were scorched black and battered armor and weapons lay scattered everywhere. The castle lay charred and abandoned, the treasures protected by him and his predecessors over generations gone.

One of his knights, who had barely managed to escape with their lives, knelt on one knee and reported to him. “The people were enraged to learn that Lord Keunt had instigated His Royal Highness into banishing the Arousing Priestess... Then they started rioting, demanding we hand over Lord Keunt or they would burn down the castle. Before we could inform you in time, they tossed monster corpses that catch fire easily all over the grounds. It didn’t take long for the flames to spread...”

Duke Strelizzi picked his way through the burned ruins of his castle and looked out upon his domain from the terrace that used to have the best view. He could see blackened traces that had been used as the starting points for the fires.

“...What of the peasants? And the rest of the knights?” he asked.

“They all fled. As for...the other knights...”

He fell silent. Duke Strelizzi ground his teeth to the point of breaking them and glared at the sky. Luckily, all his family members were gathered at their residence in the capital at the time, so their lives were protected. But he had lost too much.

“This...is a turning point, isn’t it?” he murmured.

How did mere peasants learn his son Keunt had become the crown prince’s close aide? Not to mention their extremely effective rebellion incinerating his lands to naught but embers. Regardless of how deftly they made their escape, it was entirely too unnatural that not a single one had been captured nearby.

The first drops of rain fell from the cloudy skies.

Duke Strelizzi raised his head and let the water cascade down his brow as he cycled through his memories and pictured Prince Richard II Belktrius’s face. When the previous emperor had still been alive, he’d met the boy a few times at various functions. Compared to his calm, gentle older brother, the young prince’s blazing flame-colored eyes ensnared people, his ferocity irrepressible even at that age.

“So, this is what he turned into... Terrifying.” His lips turned down, Duke Strelizzi walked back into the scorched interior of his castle. Then he ordered his knight. “We’re returning to the capital immediately. Get ready.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”



A week later, I stood in a wasteland in the stifling humidity that blanketed the world as a sign of the coming rainy season. The stench of filth assaulted my nose and an oily, muddy swamp stretched as far as the eye could see. The combination of monster bodily fluids, carcasses, and excrement befouled the earth.

Monsters of various sizes crawled everywhere. They hadn’t noticed us yet because of the shielding magic I employed. Next to me were Darius and Solarus in her military uniform, which was unusual for her.

“There’s...nothing here anymore,” I muttered.

No vestiges remained of the hometown I loved so much. The only thing that caught my eye was a slightly elevated round hill protruding like a hump. It used to be the center of the former village of Nowasilo. Today, only a large stone slab stood as a monument to mark the villagers’ mass burial.

The former village district of Nowasilo stood between Mayga Cieux, the forest covering the western half of the country, and the royal capital. It doubled as an essential point for controlling Mayga Cieux and protecting the capital. Since it was a no man’s land, no serious harm would come to Kophe even if our strategy failed. It made sense to select this location as the first candidate for purification.

“Miss Monica.” Having given his orders to his knights, Richard approached, his armor clanking. Then, in a gentle, considerate tone, he continued. “...Can you do it?”

“Yes, I can. For the sake of everyone lying in rest here and all those in Kophe who still live.” I nodded firmly, staring straight ahead. **“Shield, release.”**

The moment I chanted the release spell, the monsters’ attention focused immediately on me. Bat-type, large serpent-type, and sheep-type. Countless numbers of them and all their bloodlust homed in on me.

A powerful gust of wind blew through.

I could hear the sound of armor plates rubbing against each other. I felt the knights positioning themselves as a unit. Every member of Richard’s order was here for today’s operation. The refugees of Kophe waited behind a formation of wagons as logistical support.

I inhaled deeply. My hands trembled, either from my excitement at finally being able to exact vengeance or the fear I experienced in the past. Sadness, anger, tension, resolve. A kaleidoscope of emotions swirled within me, turning into a raging torrent.

I squeezed my hands into tight fists on my chest and stood unyielding.

“Come. I won’t lose again!” I knelt down and pressed both palms to the ground. **“I am saint Monica Regulus, a heavensent child of this ancient**

continent. Heed the voice of my saintly power. O earth, respond to my call and release the abundance trapped within!”

Darius shouted, using my chant as a signal. “Go! Protect Saint Monica! We’re taking this land back once more for the people!”

“Aaaaaayyyyyyyyyeeeeeee!”

Thus the fierce fighting began. A cacophony of noise rang around me. Blasts of magic, explosions of dirt, roars and bellows, weapons clanging, holy women yelling.

“O earth, expel the seeds of malice, resurrect yourself, and return to your true form.”

I closed my eyes and connected my consciousness with the earth. The flesh originated from Mother Earth and the soul returned to the heavens—the power dwelling within a saint’s body came from the earth. I spoke to the vegetation living in the soil. To the insects and lifeforms.

“Recall the sun’s affection. The meadows’ breaths. The proper cycle of death and rebirth. I know. I know the abundance of this earth.”

Suddenly, my senses dissolved. It felt like my limbs entwined with the ground and disappeared. I continued the chants through my heart instead of my words.

“O earth, you who raised me. You who blessed me with flesh and blood. Now I, Monica Regulus, share my saintly powers with you who have too little.”

I felt like I was being dragged in by the earth. My powers were on a rampage far greater than during the time against the legendary snow beast. I grit my teeth and held on to my sanity. But it kept sucking me in steadily. *This isn’t right.* The moment after the thought flashed through my mind I realized something.

Oh... Oh, I see... My affinity with the earth is much stronger than it was when I was in Hietside... Too strong!

I was born and raised in this land. My ancestors lived here for generations, so my affinity with the earth that shaped my very existence was much too strong. I

communed with this earth too much.

“N-No! This is...bad... My reason...” I ground out.

“Madam Monica!”

“Darius, focus! I’ll take care of her.”

Solarus caught me just as I was about to collapse. I mustered up the last dredges of my power while clinging to her. Mages continued shooting monsters down from the sky. I could hear the knights shouting too.

Then all the noise disappeared with a snap.



AROUND that time, Darius, assigned as Monica’s bodyguard, felt a sense of wrongness. Something wasn’t right with her. As he mowed down a monster with his flame-magic-infused sword to protect Monica behind him, he whipped around to look at her. She and Solarus were behind a semi-transparent, milk-white barrier, so no monsters should be able to hurt them.

Her hands still pressed to the ground, Monica had stopped chanting. She was hanging on by a mere thread, on the verge of collapse. Solarus also seemed concerned about her condition as she took a fighting stance.

“Raaaar!”

Bellowing, Darius defeated the pterosaur-type monster that flew in front of him. Then he cut down the tentacles wiggling up out of the ground.

The second after he wiped the sweat off his brow, he heard Solarus scream.

“Madam Monica!”

When he jerked around reflexively to look, he doubted his own eyes. Monica’s silver hair spilled out of her wimple and glowed pink, as if lit from within. Solarus forced her head up. Monica’s vacant eyes glowed in a color he’d never seen until now.

Even magic couldn’t create such a rapturous expression. Saint Monica seemed no longer human but—*something* else entirely. Darius felt a chill run down his spine.

Her lips moved. He couldn't read them. But he understood one thing—she spoke in the ancient tongue.

“Huh...? What in the—”

The next moment, the ground started shining, with Monica in the center. A pillar of light covered the entire area in an instant.

“Nh...!”

Darius automatically covered his face. In contrast to the intense glare, a warm feeling enveloped him. Like he was being wrapped gently in someone's body heat. Or stroked by a comforting hot wind. The rich fragrance of flowers permeated the air.

The sweet sensation melting him from the inside out made him shudder and Darius automatically bit down on his lower lip. The scent was designed to trigger sexual arousal. The small pain stopped him from making a terrible mistake.

After some time, the light dimmed then vanished entirely. The aroma caressing his very core went with it and the fervor in his body calmed. Slowly, gingerly, he opened his eyes and found the whole area blanketed in beautiful new growth and flowers.

“This...is...”

The monsters were all gone and a cool, refreshing breeze carried away the stagnant air.

With a gasp, he returned to his senses and spun around to look at Monica and Solarus. Though she strained, Solarus nevertheless supported the fallen Monica as best as she could with her slender frame.

“Ngh...”

“Lady Solarus!” Darius shouted and rushed toward them, cradling Monica in his arms before Solarus dropped her. Her disheveled hair spilling out of her wimple had returned to its original pink-tinged silver. As far as he could tell, she was simply unconscious.

A few of the magic stones sewn into Monica's holy attire were broken.

“Madam Monica, what sort of a burden did you take upon yourself...?”

“Miss Monica!”

At that moment, His Highness came running up to them, his uniform awash with monster fluids telling the tale of his fierce battle against them. When he reached them, he dropped down to the ground next to them and slapped her lightly on the cheeks. His desperation came through his expression as he called her name repeatedly.

“Miss Monica! Miss Monica, wake up! Damn it, Miss Monica!”

Her eyelashes fluttered and her lids opened. Her eyes, the color of ripe cherries, stared up at His Highness in a daze. A faint smile curved her lips.

“I did it, Richard...”

She weakly held up her fingers in a V sign, mimicking his master. For a moment, regret twisted His Highness’s face—then he smiled and spoke.

“You did, Miss Monica. Well done.” After His Highness picked her up in his arms, he ordered his two subordinates, his voice low. “Darius, check on the others and the area. Solarus, with me. You’ll help me take care of Miss Monica.”



I... What happened...

I remembered up to the point that I fused with the earth. Then I regained consciousness while Richard carried me to the coach. Not a single monster carcass in sight in the whole area around us. Only vividly green new growth and a multitude of flowers blooming out of season. The powerful scent brought to mind a fierce spring, but we were well past that season.

“My attempt succeeded...” I muttered weakly.

“Yes,” Richard replied curtly. There was no smile on his face or emotion in his voice.

“Madam Monica! Thank you very much!”

“Madam Monica!”

The knights, the civilians providing combat support, and the holy women

greeted us with cries of joy and enthusiastic applause. The crowd of people naturally parted to Richard's left and right as he strode briskly through them carrying me. I was still in a half-confused state by the time we reached the large carriage and he placed me down on the bed inside. Solarus and a lady's maid deftly prepared a warm bath and change of clothes for me.

Richard knelt by the bedside, gripped one of my hands in his, and exhaled deeply. "That...was much too reckless. You surprised me."

"What exactly did I do?" I asked.

"You don't remember?"

"Not really..."

"What am I supposed to do with you?" Richard shook his head in exasperation. "Miss Monica, your hair turned pink and the whole thing was bizarre, to tell you the truth."

"I made you worry, didn't I? I'm sorry." While staring up at the ceiling in a daze, I thought back to the sensation I experienced earlier. I felt like I'd overcome one of the limits binding me as a saint. "Richard. I might be able to use my saintly powers more skillfully. At this rate—"

"Stop right there."

"Mpf."

He cut me off then placed a steamed towel on my face. He then proceeded to admonish me as he vigorously wiped my face.

"Don't think about work right now. You know you'll only get busier after your success here. So, please...just rest for now."

"All right, I understand."

It wasn't my intention to make him worry. His expression was pained as he continued scrubbing at my face. I stopped his hand and asked him a question.

"Oh, which reminds me. Richard, you're not hurt?"

"Of course not. The barrier you cast went a long way too."

"Good, I'm glad. If...if something ever happens to me, don't hesitate to rely on

the other priestesses.”

“No. I only need you, Miss Monica.”

“Mrgh... W-Wait, s-stop that. Hold on!”

The hand rubbing the towel over my face stopped. We stared at each other.

“Miss Monica, what is it?”

“Um...”

I forgot how to breathe with his beautiful face so close to mine. *Argh, this is bad.* Another day, another strange reaction from my body in his presence. It especially made no sense today because I hadn’t used my powers on myself, so I shouldn’t be in heat at all. Feelings of desire surged up inside me, just like they did when I was in heat as a side effect of my abilities...

“Are you feeling unwell? Where does it hurt? Answer me, Miss Monica,” he demanded.

“Oh... Um, no, that’s not it...”

The comfort of being held in his arms, combined with his unique musk, put me at ease. Then there was also the fact that I’d been warming myself in his body heat, pressed against him for so long. All of it combined to penetrate straight through my reason and impulse to drive me mad.

“Richard...get away from me. Something’s wrong with my powers. L-Lately, even the s-smallest stimulation is t-too much for me...”

“Please do as she says, Your Highness, and step away from her,” Solarus said, spreading a small towel open with a snap. “I’ll be cleaning Madam Monica’s body now.”

“Right then. I’ll see you later, Miss Monica.” Richard smiled his usual sunny smile and winked at me. Then he pressed his lips against my hair flowing on the sheets and walked away, his steps light.

“*Haaa...*” I covered my face with my hands and took a deep breath. He was much too thrilling for my broken senses.

“Yes, yes, save it for later, Madam Monica. First, we need to get you changed.

Just lie there obediently.”

“Thank you...”

I wasn’t sure if it was because of his departure, but I suddenly felt utterly spent. Even lifting a finger required too much effort, so I let Solarus undress me and wash me off, though I felt apologetic toward her for my sluggishness.

“Ahhh, your whole body is stiff. I can barely dig my fingers into your flesh, despite the treatment I gave you this morning. You’re worse than a dead tree...”

Solarus took the opportunity to check my physical condition from head to toe while undressing and washing me. I felt nothing in the pressure points where I usually felt pain when she prodded at them. It seemed that a vast disparity now existed between my real age and my physical age.

“Heh.” Solarus chuckled suddenly and spoke to me as I lay there unresisting. “Madam Monica, you are in fact remarkably tranquil.”

“Huh?”

While massaging my hand, she smiled meaningfully down at me. “Tell me. What happened to your abnormal rut?”

“I...what?”

Unbelievably, the arousal coursing through my body until just moments ago was receding. Whenever the sexual heat affected me, I couldn’t even bear the touch of Solarus’s hands. It was usually so bad that just the rocking of the carriage would be enough to plunge me into a swamp of strange sensations.

“You’re not broken, Madam Monica. Well, setting aside the reckless use of your abilities today.” Solarus spoke very matter-of-factly, like she understood everything. She poured aroma oil on my hand and dug in with her fingers to massage. Vanilla, a scent I adored. I felt comforted by both the scent and her relaxing touch, which naturally made my mind stop spinning in circles.

“Am I really...not broken...? But...” I thought of Richard. Just recalling his gaze and musk made my chest tighten deep inside, same as it did when my powers ran amuck and incited odd feelings. “No, I *must* be broken...because...”

A heavy drowsiness started overtaking me and I couldn’t finish my thought.

“Sleep well, Madam Monica,” Solarus murmured gently, brushing my hair.



AROUND the time Monica fell into a deep sleep, the Flame Corps entered a new phase of their duties.

“Sir! The enemy forces are moving from our 12 o’ clock position!”

Richard’s flame-colored gaze sharpened as he stared off into the distance. Far, far beyond the newly transformed field of flowers in the former Nowasilo district, he spotted a military formation. Based on what he could see, the enemy’s host numbered one hundred, give or take. Their scout estimated two-thirds were holy knights while the remaining were knights of the royal guard. It seemed they had waited for the Flame Corps to draw closer until they were in a position to be ambushed directly from the side. But evidently, they had grown tired of waiting and were on the move.

Richard narrowed his eyes on the enemy. “If they hadn’t moved, I’d have let them pass as a sign of good faith, but clearly, their general had other intentions in mind from the start.”

Pretending to retreat, the Flame Corps was in fact already in position to counterattack. The large wagons they had brought with them were intended to hide their formation in an unobstructed location. And the folks pretending to be commoners providing combat service support were actually knights of Kophe who had descended upon Richard, pledging allegiance to him. They were positioned as decoys in a visible location. Wearing farmers’ clothes, they acted relaxed, laughing and chatting as they ate the army rations they’d brought along with them. A binding spell had been cast on all of them, so betrayal wouldn’t be coming from that quarter.

If their loyalty to the enemy was powerful enough, there might be some willing to cast aside the constraint and essentially commit suicide in an attempt to collude. But their opponent was that thrice-damned crown prince of Kophe. And morale on Richard’s side was incredibly high, especially after the miracle Monica had shown them.

He checked their configuration as he walked and dropped his voice to speak to his troops. “Wait until the enemy makes its move. The second they launch an

arrow or magic at us—you're free to fire at will."

Then he ordered the line of carriages to proceed at a leisurely pace. They plodded along, practically inviting their opponents to attack. And when the first arrow flew at them, the vehicles ground to a halt and Richard shouted.

"To those who shoot arrows at our army that has come to provide humanitarian aid to Kophe! Know that you attack your own people too! To assail us with arrows after we've been wounded by monsters is the height of foolishness! So to protect the citizens of Kophe and my own subordinates, as well as this country's treasured holy women, I *will* repel you! Mark my words!" Then he brandished his sword wide and held it high. "Charge!"

"With my power, I grant these strong, noble warriors divine protection and a shield against all enemies."

The saints chanted their blessings all at once, and the first unit raced forward, running faster than horses. When their dramatic rush attracted the attention of the enemy's forces, Richard raised his left arm and moved it broadly, giving the signal. In response, a few mage soldiers launched tremendous blasts of magic from the only hill in the vicinity—the village of Nowasilo's cemetery. The hail of magic struck the enemy from the side, distracted as they were by the knights' fierce attack.

Krakl, krakl, krakl, krakl!

The sound of swords clashing overlapped with the glow of magic exploding like fireworks. Richard smiled coldly, the light from the magic reflecting in his eyes.

"Clearly, they thought they could defeat us while we were exhausted from hunting monsters... But the experience of those complacent from peaceful lives is very different from ours!"

The imperial Flame Corps weren't the only ones fighting spiritedly. The knights of Kophe did the same alongside them.

"Listen up! Our job is to support the imperial army protecting us!"

"Bastards fired those arrows at us even knowing we were here!"

It was only a matter of time before the battle ended. In their favor. Richard was disappointed to see the enemy forces retreating more quickly than he had imagined. Took the wind right out of his sails.

“With this...we have proof that the Kingdom of Kophe attacked us.”

It was the first time in a long time that he had a justified reason for engaging an enemy without the need to hold back.

“Darius. Is Miss Monica’s carriage safe?” he asked.

“Yes. Nothing got close to it. Neither the enemy’s arrows nor magic nor the citizens of Kophe who are our allies.”

Richard nodded and turned around to look at the coach furnished with Monica’s bed.

“...Miss Monica?”

At that moment, he saw Monica gazing out from the carriage window. She wore only the white chemise used as an undergarment and her hair was unbound too. Even from this distance, he could see the peachy glint of her hair and eyes. Her lips moved.

Stop— or so he thought she said.

“We’re about to witness the saint’s power going on another rampage! Everyone, at the ready!”

The instant after Richard shouted the order—

Rrrrrrrmmmmmmmbbbbbbllllll!

Thick trunks of ivy sprouted from the ground and swallowed the enemy knights.

“Wh-What the hell?!”

It lasted less than the blink of an eye. Richard’s knights stood there dumbfounded as tentacles of ivy caught Kophe’s holy knights and royal guard one after another, wrapping around them and stopping their movements. The vines crushed their armor and swords. With no protection on their bodies, their screams and shouts echoed everywhere.

Richard ran toward Monica's carriage. Inside, he found her limp from fatigue and Solarus at her side, supporting her. The light was steadily fading from her hair.

Solarus looked up at him.

"She...she suddenly got up out of her bed and...when she looked out the window she started muttering 'Stop' incoherently... I think she was speaking the ancient continental language. I believe she cast the magic unconsciously."

He looked closely at Monica and saw her hands and feet bound in Solarus's ropes. She must have done so to prevent his saint from flying out of the carriage. He picked her up and laid her down on the bed, calling her name.

"Miss Monica, Miss Monica."

"Ri...chard?" She smiled dreamily at him, like she was in a haze. Her smile was so unsuited for a battlefield that he felt it shoot through his heart like an arrow. "Richard... Did I help...? I smelled-blood, so I... Did it end this time...without death...?"

"...Miss Monica."

Her smile looked much younger and more innocent than usual. Unable to bear it, he clasped her tightly to his chest. Her body felt feverish cocooned so snugly in his arms. As she drifted into unconsciousness, the light in her hair and eyes calmed, along with the ivy running amok outside the carriage.

Simultaneously, Richard and Solarus breathed deep sighs of relief.

"Solarus...look after her."

"Understood."

Teeth clenched, Richard let go of Monica and exited the coach, leaving her in Solarus's care.

He couldn't forget her smile even during the cleanup and aftermath. The enemy forces dragged in front of him were in an awful state, their armor and clothes shredded to pieces by the vines. Their commanding officer was a priest from the Church. His scout's report about the enemy's composition ended up being right on the mark—two-thirds were holy knights and one-third were

knights of the royal guard.

Whether from fear of the battle against him and his forces or terror of the ivy, they trembled violently and obeyed meekly.

On the return journey, Darius sat with him in his carriage and asked him about the prisoners of war.

“What shall we do about them, Your Highness?”

“Well, Miss Monica said she doesn’t want to see blood, so there’s our answer, eh?”

Meaning if she hadn’t said anything, Richard would have condemned them to execution. Darius smiled ruefully in response.

“Right then, we’ll treat them very politely as our captives. Besides, casting the binding spell on them is as good as capital punishment anyway.”



WHEN the news broke at the royal palace about the failure of their attack.

“What...what did you say?” Next to Keunt, Medaikonar dropped his teacup. It shattered on impact. “Wh-What am I supposed to do now...?”

Medaikonar paced restlessly around the parlor as he chewed on his nails. Keunt, afraid and on edge, stood near him without saying anything.

The crown prince had readily agreed with high priest Pisciozze’s counsel and exultantly helped him raise an army. They should have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams, so they could report their tremendous victory to the king. But that wasn’t what happened. He’d lost his personal guard and approved the disbursement of national funds for the expedition without conferring with the government. What should have been an easy victory instead turned into a nightmare, with most of his troops being held captive by the Empire.

He had ordered everyone who knew about this to remain silent, but it was only a matter of time before the king found out. Which was why Medaikonar continued to pace fearfully around the parlor. He’d been like this for almost half a day now.

“Say something, Keunt!” he roared.

“Heee!”

When Keunt flinched in terror, Medaikonar clicked his tongue in aggravation and resumed his pacing.

Keunt wanted to say something inspiring, reassuring. Unfortunately, he still kept a secret from Medaikonar. That his home—the Strelizzi ducal residence and its holdings had been burned to the ground by the peasants.

“Enough. Leave me.”

“Y-Yes, Your Highness!”

Medaikonar spat the words at Keunt, who could only nod meekly.

The latter was grateful for the opportunity to escape the parlor and it showed in his attitude. He rushed out of the palace, intent on boarding his family’s coach. But when he arrived at the stables and ordered a servant to prepare the carriage, the servant responded uneasily, clearly troubled.

“What’s the meaning of this?”

“My lord...your coach isn’t here.”

“Impossible!”

“I hate to inform you, but...Duke Strelizzi ordered the return of the vehicle to his estate in the capital.”

“My father...? But why...?”

He didn’t understand why his father would do such a thing. For now, he ordered the servant with the downcast gaze to prepare another carriage instead. There were extras in the palace for just such situations.

The coach rolled up smoothly and when he boarded, he ordered the driver to take him to his family’s estate in the capital. Rain started falling.

Roughly half an hour later, the carriage arrived at its destination, but a problem occurred. The guard refused to open the gates.

“*Tsk...* He must not realize it’s me. I’ll remember his name and make sure he’s dismissed.”

The idiot guard probably wouldn’t open the gates because this carriage was

different from the usual one he took from the palace. Having no other choice, Keunt stepped out from the vehicle and showed his rain-soaked face to the guard.

“You there! I know damn well you know who I am! Hurry up and open the gates!”

But the well-built guard didn’t budge at all as he replied, “Per Duke Strelizzi’s orders, I am not allowed to permit Lord Keunt entry into the grounds.”

For a moment, he couldn’t understand the words.

“What...? What do you mean?!”

“As a gatekeeper, I do not have the authority to discuss this further. Your understanding is appreciated.”

“You dare to ridicule me...?!”

The rain fell heavily now, so strong it made it difficult to hear someone’s voice. Battered by the downpour, Keunt stood on his tiptoes in front of the gates and seized the guard by his lapels, demanding entry. His efforts were for naught. No matter how much he shouted and railed abuse at the man, the guard’s unyielding attitude never wavered.

Behind him, the horses shook off the rain pelting them in annoyance. The coachman had also reached the end of his patience.

“Damn it all to hell! What is Father even thinking...?!”

Just when his frustration peaked, another carriage approached the gates. There was no mistaking the elegant coach painted in black. It was his father, Duke Strelizzi’s personal vehicle.

“Father!” Keunt ran toward it and stopped in front of it, spreading both hands in appeal. Then he knelt on the flagstone next to the carriage and shouted to his father inside. “Father, the guard won’t open the gates for me! Thanks to that, I’m absolutely drenched. Please let me inside your coach.”

Slowly, excruciatingly slowly, his father twitched the curtain open. He glanced down at Keunt very briefly—then dragged it closed again, the *whoosh* of fabric final.

“Huh...?”

The coach rolled leisurely past Keunt, who looked flabbergasted. Still kneeling on the ground, he watched in blank amazement as the gates opened to allow only his father to pass through.

“Lord Keunt.”

He had no idea how long he’d remained in his shocked state there. The butler came out from inside the mansion, walked through the gates, and offered Keunt an umbrella. Then the white-haired man wiped his hands before placing a letter in them.

“This is from Duke Strelizzi. Please read it.”

Still in a daze, he tore open the envelope. His eyes grew rounder and rounder as they swept over the words on the paper. His body started shaking in fear.

““The duchy of Strelizzi...endorses His Imperial Highness’s decisive measures... As the third son, should you choose to align yourself with His Royal Highness... The Kingdom of Kophe’s future is clear, so...so I choose to do the necessary to protect our family’s name...””

Keunt couldn’t believe it. His father had pledged his allegiance to the emperor’s younger brother, the man seduced by the accursed Arousing Priestess Monica.



WE used teleportation slates a few times and two days later in the afternoon, finally arrived at Viscount Telestraza’s castle, the Flame Corps’ base of operations.

During the return journey, we stopped at a relay point where Richard and I cleaned up. After we finished, we resumed the trip in the same carriage. As soon as he saw me waiting near the stables, he strode briskly toward me, his shoes clacking on the ground. He looked me over with a serious expression.

“Ri-Richard?”

“Miss Monica, how are you feeling? Any pain or unusual sensations? Have you been sleeping well since? Eating properly? Are you all right walking? Shall I

carry you?”

“I-I’m fine! I’m fine, so stop!” I hurriedly stepped away from him, my face flushed from the thorough examination of his hands all over me. “Honestly, don’t you think you’ve been invading my personal space a little too much lately...?”

Heart racing, I pressed my hands against my chest and inhaled deeply. Richard looked baffled for an instant before dazzling me with his usual bright smile.

“Really? I can’t help it, since you’re so gosh darn adorable, Miss Monica.”

“D-Didn’t I tell you a while ago? A-About, you know...something being wrong with my heats. It’s dangerous, so let’s not be rash, okay?”

“Well, if you insist, I guess I have no choice but to stop, hm?” He nodded easily enough then very matter-of-factly picked me up in one arm.

“Wh-What did I literally just say?!”

“Just until I get you into the carriage. There we go. I put you down. Happy?”

When he gently plunked me onto my seat, I thanked him automatically. It would have been rude not to.

“Thank you...”

He stared intently at me once more for a few beats before commenting thoughtfully.

“I’m glad to see you back in your right mind again, Miss Monica.”

Upon our triumphant return to the castle, many citizens of Kophe welcomed us with cheers of joy.

“Thank you, Arousing Priestess!”

“Thank you for saving this country! All hail Prince Richard!”

I could feel my face forming a stiff smile at the people who greeted us from the roadside.

“‘All hail Prince Richard,’ hm? I wonder if that’s appropriate to say what with everything going on...” I kept smiling as I waved at everyone. Richard didn’t take his eyes off me the whole time. “Richard, you won’t wave to them?”

“Me?” For a moment, I could have sworn his expression was bone-chillingly cold. Or perhaps it was my imagination. He replied without looking away from me. A corner of his mouth curled up sardonically. “I’m angry, so I don’t think I will.”

“Huh?”

I hadn’t expected him to say that.

Richard finally turned his gaze outside the window when I responded in confusion. He continued then, the torrent of words like a dam breaking. “None of them know how much and how long you’ve suffered to protect this country with all your might. From the time no one knew your name, you’ve strived, worried, and cried for these people while enduring terrifying experiences... They never even *tried* to know anything about you. Yet only at times like these, when it’s convenient for them, do they latch on to you and take advantage of you, welcoming you and wanting you to smile at them. It’s infuriating. Unbearable.”

“Ri-Richard...?”

“Ahhh, this is bad... Just like you Miss Monica, I think I’m finally reaching my limit after coming back here.” He plowed his fingers through his hair in frustration. I couldn’t see his expression. Unable to take my eyes off him, I forgot about waving at the crowd.

His large hands covered his face, but through his fingers, I glimpsed his flame-colored eyes. Our gazes locked. An instinctive shiver raced through my body. To use an analogy, I imagined this was how prey felt when caught in a ferocious predator’s sights.

“Damn... Forgive me?” He must have noticed my fear. Richard abruptly returned to his senses and smiled apologetically at me, his brows lowered in a frown. “I didn’t mean to glare at you. I just can’t look away from you is all, Miss Monica.”

“N-No, you didn’t... I’m fine, truly. And, thank you for thinking of me...” Despite my pounding heartbeat, I fashioned a smile and shook my head.

“Moving forward...we’ll have to make sure that Kophe treats you and all its

holy women properly, hm?” In an attempt to lighten the tense atmosphere, he closed the subject in a bright tone then started waving at the people on the roadside with his politician’s smile. I followed suit and did the same.

Though I put on a calm, composed act on the surface, I still couldn’t control the racing of my heart. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t afraid. But there was something even greater than the fear—excitement. Because for an instant, I saw a glimpse of something vivid in Richard’s expression.

If...if that was his true face, then... When he realized I was scared, he immediately apologized to me, which I appreciated. But. On the contrary. *Under that powerful gaze, I...*

I wanted him to keep looking at me with those intense eyes. I wanted him to say my name more and drown me in his passion. That was what I’d actually thought. If I were to put a name to the feeling, it would be...

Desire...

Cold sweat trickled down my spine.

I...toward Richard...only toward him is my body broken...?

He had said he would continue placing his faith in me and entrusting me with work. So wasn’t it the worst possible development for our professional relationship to be lusting so one-sidedly after my business partner?

This is worse than worse... I don’t think I want to think about this anymore, so I won’t. I put a lid on my thoughts and focused on responding cheerfully to Kophe’s people.



AFTER Miss Monica and I went our separate ways, I headed for my bedroom. I stepped inside, closed the door, then slumped against it. When I looked up at the ceiling, it felt like the angels drawn on it were laughing down at me. I groaned in despair.

“I’m...definitely at my limit too.”

Ever since coming to Kophe, I’d been keenly aware of the constraint cast on me coming steadily apart at the seams.

Binding magic like Darius's held firm because specific actions triggered them. No matter how strong the person's desire or how aroused their body became, as long as they didn't give in to their long-cherished wish, there wouldn't be a price to pay.

As Prince Richard of the Belktrius Empire, my constraint was different. The price I paid was magic itself. With constraints like mine, the bound desires were connected directly to emotions themselves. Thanks in part to my strong sense of reason, simple desires not accompanied by emotions were curbed. However...

"Miss Monica..."

Even through her comfortable holy attire, I could see the slim set of her shoulders. Her soft cheeks. Every time her carefree smile disturbed my emotions, I could feel my constraint rattling too.

"She trusts me too much."

I rubbed the medal pinned closest to my heart. It declared to any and all my position as the emperor's younger brother. But most importantly, only the imperial family knew the true meaning of the magic stone set in it.

The magic stone disguised the carnal passions that leaked through the gaps of the spell binding me. In the face of such overwhelming desire though, it too would become expendable soon enough.

"Haaa..."

I closed my eyes and the image of how Miss Monica looked when we first met played on my lids. Wounded, exhausted, and sobbing. Treated as a disposable saint. Thin arms and a thin neck. Brand-new priestess garb stained with dirt and blood. Despite all that, she worked earnestly and even smiled while doing so. My saintess.

At first, my respect for her was close to devotion out of a need to protect and cherish her. It started from there. The more I got to know her, the more my desire for her accumulated, like sediment at the bottom of my well of feelings for her.

Her small hands that showed clear signs of a hard worker. Her soft hair

spilling from her wimple. Her bright, natural smile that stroked gently over me like a refreshing breeze.

“...I love you, Miss Monica.”

The state I was in put the Arousing Priestess’s moniker to shame. I had no doubt of it.



“OH, this is...”

The early summer sun shone down warmly. White clouds drifted in the sky and dazzlingly green grass blanketed the knoll. Vibrant verdant farmland stretched as far as my eyes could see.

Baby goats tottered all around me, still uncertain on their young legs. I stood in front of a small wooden church where the villagers and my family clapped for me.

“Monica, congratulations on your marriage!”

“Be happy!”

“Huh...?”

I looked down to see myself clad in beautifully embroidered wedding clothes made entirely of undyed cotton.

“M-Marriage? Me...? With who...?”

My eyes were blurry for some reason, so I couldn’t see their faces clearly. I felt my mother approach even though I couldn’t see her face. She spoke to me as she placed a wreath of flowers on my head then a veil over it. Her gentle voice was nostalgic to me.

“Be happy, Monica.”

I heard the sound of a door creaking open directly behind me.

“Now go.”

She pushed gently at my back and I stepped through the church doors with my father, whose face I also couldn’t see. My hand was tucked into his arm. The groom waited for me under a wooden carving of the goddess. Every step I took

brought me closer to him until I finally stood by his side.

Clad in dignified black wedding clothes, he reverently lifted my veil.

“Miss Monica.”

A tall man with vivid, blood-red hair, blazing flame-colored eyes, and a gentle gaze.

“Richard...”

The moment I realized the groom was Richard, the world changed colors. The soft, warm atmosphere of the wooden church transformed into a cold, stone-built church. The guests were all aristocrats with black voids for faces. I couldn't tell if they were smiling or scowling.

The applause rang out ceaselessly. But I had no idea what it was like outside. Were people wishing us well or not?

Before I knew it, he was dressed not in the black wedding clothes but in his ultramarine formal military uniform. My usual holy attire draped over my figure now too as he stroked my hair.

The jewel on his chest glittered strangely. I smelled blood and gunpowder.

Wearing his usual unchanging smile, Richard stretched his hand out to me.

“Miss Monica... Stay by my side, even in this painful world...”

“Richard...”

At that moment. The sweet smell of honey wafted in the air. Followed quickly by the dual scents of hot, freshly made pancakes and melting butter. *Szzz!* Ah, the sound of something frying in a skillet. This was...

“Ah, you're awake?”

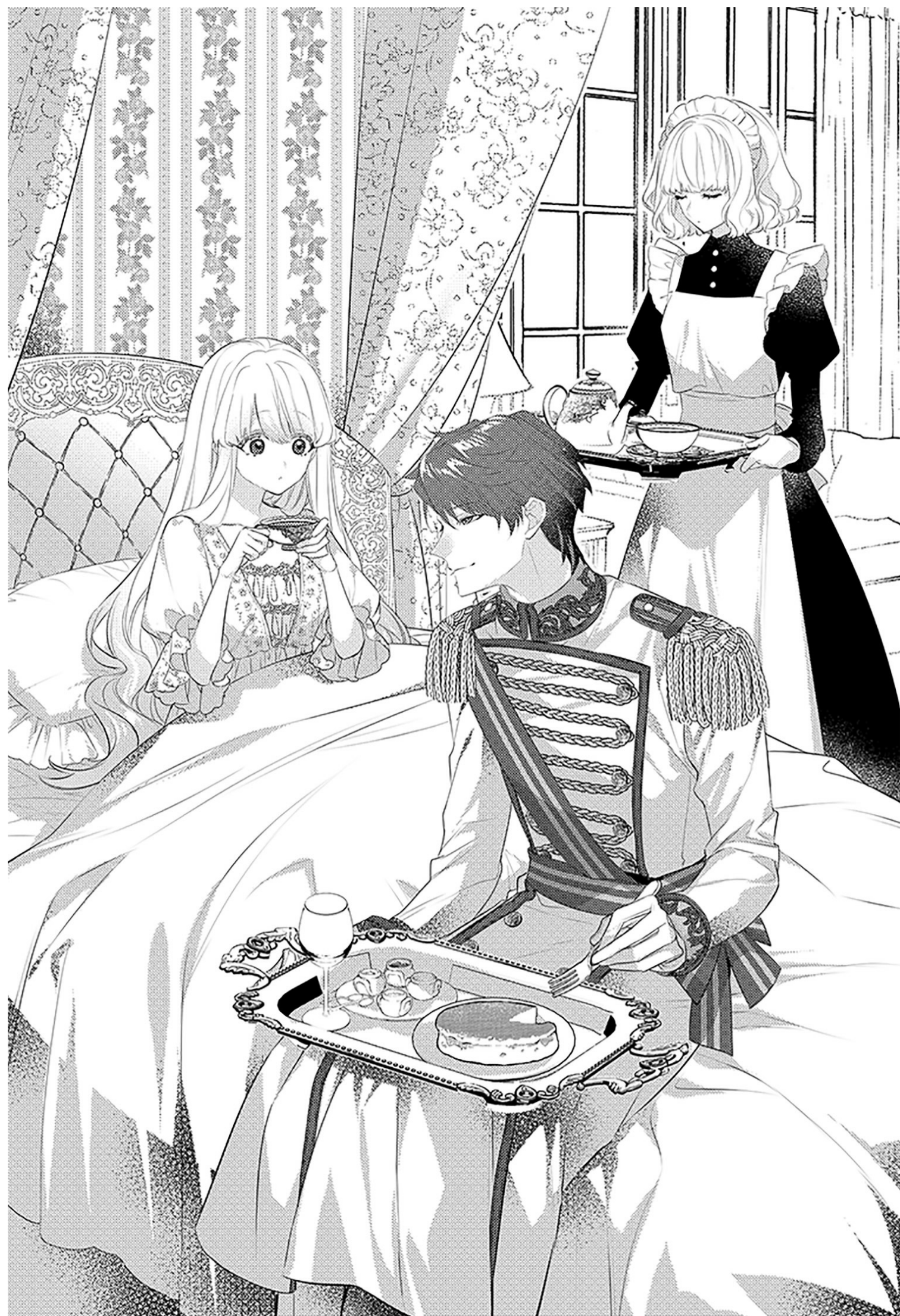
When I jerked upright in bed, the first thing I saw was Richard sitting on it, eating pancakes. Remembering what happened in my dream, I was at a loss for words, my mouth opening and closing uselessly.

“Here, open wide. Say ‘Ahhh.’”

“Oh— *Ahhh...*”

He lifted his fork to my lips and slipped a small piece of pancake into my mouth. The sweet and delicious taste almost made me tingle. He fed me another piece after I finished chewing and swallowed the first. I opened my mouth. Ate. The pattern continued for a while, him feeding me, me eating. In the meantime, Solarus poured us black tea.

I took the sturdy cup from her with both hands and sipped slowly. A few more swallows to fortify myself...then I looked at Richard properly again.



“Why are you the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes, Richard...?” I asked.

“Well, you wouldn’t open your eyes no matter how much we tried, Miss Monica, so I decided to stay until I was sure you were fine. Besides, I wanted to relax as well, and this is as good a place as any. When I’m outside, someone inevitably wants me to do something, you know?”

“In short...you used my room as an escape, hm?” Though I felt bad about worrying him, I was also relieved to see Richard acting like his usual easygoing self. “Ummm, let me see... I remember we arrived at Viscount Telestraza’s castle then I took a bath and that’s where my memory stops... How long have I been asleep?”

“Three days.”

“Th-That many?!”

“Yes. Proof of your exhaustion, eh? But I suppose I should be glad you can eat this much after waking up. Your strong stomach makes you even cuter, Miss Monica.”

I accepted Solarus’s offer of a shawl and placed it around my shoulders before standing up. For some reason, I felt embarrassed about Richard seeing me in my comfortable lounging clothes.

It was quite sunny outside. A warm, peaceful day.

“What happened to the purified land afterward?” I asked.

“Your attempt exceeded expectations. Evidently, burning the weeds growing profusely there now thanks to you would make the soil even more fertile. I’m currently building a base there now for the Flame Corps, but eventually, we’ll be able to construct a new village.”

“Good, I’m glad.”

I felt relieved. Maybe the reason the villagers and my family appeared in my dream was to encourage me. Optimism filled me.

“I’m going to change. And then I’m going to eat. After that, I need to express my greetings to everyone.”

Solarus curtsied in acknowledgment and started preparing to help me dress. Richard ate the remaining pastries on the table with his hands. Licking crumbs off his finger nimbly, he commented like he remembered something.

“Oh, right, question for you. Who were you marrying?”

“Ngh!”

“You were talking in your sleep, you know. Asking about who you were marrying.” He walked toward me and stooped down, peering into my face. The gesture was so much like Richard-the-groom in my dream that my cheeks immediately caught flame.

“Um... Uhhh... It... It was just a dream. Ah-ha! Remember how I tried on the wedding clothes and you asked me about weddings in my village, so um—”

“Miss. Monica. Who. Did. You. Dream. Of?”

“Your face...is...too close...so I can’t...say it...”

“Well, I sure hope it was me. Surely you wouldn’t think of any man except me, right? Surely.”

When he tilted his head thoughtfully, a wonderful scent floated from him. It wasn’t cologne but Richard’s unique scent itself. The peculiar, unrestrained emotions rioting inside me sent my pulse racing.

“Aaabooout...thaaat...ummm...”

I couldn’t look at his face, not with my own on fire. I tried to cover it with my shawl, but he just simply tugged it off. I shrieked softly.

“Don’t hide your face. Clearly, whoever it is, it’s making you not want to look at me. Which makes me want to hear the name of the man even more.” He stroked my cheek with the back of his hand. The stimulation was so overpowering that I almost swooned right then and there. Before I could though, Solarus cleared her throat loudly.

“Your Highness. You heard everything she said in her sleep, so perhaps refrain from coercing an answer from her?”

“But I want Miss Monica to say it when she’s awake.”

“Don’t make me...say it...you.....odious man!”

“Pleeeeeease. Pleeeeeease, say it. I’d love to hear it from your lips. Think of it as my fee for performing in your dream~≡!”

“Good grief.”

“Ummm... Well...” A few words. I just needed to say a few words, but my voice wouldn’t come out. It was embarrassing to feel like I was the only one who was so aware. “I saw...*you*...in my dream... I saw you, Richard... You were the man, so...”

“Excellent. If it had been any other man, I would have been forced to hunt him down and kill him.”

“Even though it would have been just a dream?! Even though the man wouldn’t have been at fault at all?!”

“Heh. I’m joking.”

“Except it doesn’t sound like a joke to me,” I retorted.

“Madam Monica, follow me to the room next door please. I’ll help you change after you take a warm bath.”

“Then I’ll be seeing you soon, Miss Monica.” He placed a kiss on the crown of my head.

“Eeek!”

I just realized I hadn’t bathed in three days since I’d been asleep for that long, and I did *not* want him doing that to my unwashed hair. So I practically fled from him to the room next door.



“SOMEDAY *history will prove that saints and their ilk are savage, repulsive creatures.”*

Those words were once spoken by Kophe’s king.

And now, the reality was that the Kingdom of Kophe was on the verge of collapse.

“What has the crown prince wrought...?”

In a lounge in the capitol building, the high priest's aide slammed his fist down on the thick, heavy mahogany table. Everyone else sitting around the table, each one responsible for the country's current state, remained silent.

They were losing ground fast as both the vassal lords and regional churches swore fealty to the Empire. And amidst this, Crown Prince Medaikonar's surprise attack on the Flame Corps failed. What made the whole thing was the timing of the raid. Medaikonar's troops had ambushed Prince Richard's order of knights directly after they completed purifying Nowasilo's lands. To attack the enemy when they were spent after an ordeal, not to mention when the enemy also included a group of civilians, was a massive blunder on the part of the royal family and the Great Church.

Medaikonar had been confined to his personal chambers as a result. Simultaneously, Duke Strelizzi, who they would have never suspected of defection, disowned his third son, Keunt, and pledged his allegiance to the emperor's younger brother.

In the meantime, the national orders of knights and holy knights, overwhelmed in dealing with Prince Richard and his troops, neglected their duties on the monster front. The extent of the resulting damage finally became so high that news of it could no longer be suppressed and reached the royal palace.

At the behest of the king, who expressed deep concern over the monster encroachment, High Priest Pisciozze at long last ordered an emergency convocation of all the saints in the country. But he was already too late. Almost all of them had sided with Prince Richard and his imperial army, the one to which Arousing Priestess Monica Regulus belonged. And the few who didn't because they wanted to remain neutral fled to a convent located in a territory with which the Kingdom had a nonaggression treaty.

The Kingdom of Kophe and the Great Church had lost their holy women. And they had only themselves to blame.

"One by one, the feudal lords fall under Prince Richard's command without displaying any resistance. And the ones who try to, ultimately have no choice but to obey him to protect their territory because they just can't manage the

monsters on their own. Unbelievable...”

“What in the hell are our country’s knights and holy knights doing?! Those imperial bastards invaded with so few numbers that we should have had the overwhelming advantage against them!”

“Well, should it really come as a surprise that Saint Monica is well aware of how priests operate in combat as far as equipment and tactics go? They have countermeasures for everything.”

“Shite...! That evil woman should never have been granted a royal education since she’s clearly hellbent on squandering it to exact vengeance on our nation.”

“The masses have become her devotees, and more and more people are opposing the royal family and Church.”

“Can’t we capture her as a witch and execute her for heresy?”

“As if Prince Richard would allow that to happen. He intentionally elevated the Arousing Priestess, and as a result, a great many revere her. I wager this method is one reason the citizens of Kophe won’t revolt against him.”

“Furthermore, based on the information we’ve been able to collect about him and his people, he apparently has survivors of the Principality of Arjentia in his order of knights.”

They were discussing the small, mountain principality located between the Empire’s northern expanse and a neighboring country. It had been thoroughly annihilated to the point of extinction several years ago.

“The Empire seems to be actively mitigating the psychological resistance the former subjects of Arjentia feel about receiving imperial aid. They did so through numerous efforts, such as protecting the livelihoods of the survivors after their country was destroyed, recovering their national treasures stolen by other countries, restoration, and more.”

“Well, it doesn’t change the fact that it’s bizarre he went out of his way to bring such people along.”

“Right, because from the very beginning, we could sense his aggression

against Kophe.”

It was a distinguished roster of people gathered in this room, but not a single one gave voice to a countermeasure Kophe could utilize. The Belktrius Empire’s propaganda machine was substantiated by the emperor’s younger brother, Prince Richard’s popularity and his achievements. Then to add Saint Monica and the survivors from the tragedy of Arjentia to his hand created a very effective method in capturing the people’s hearts.

As for the Kingdom of Kophe—Crown Prince Medaikonar was incredibly unpopular with the populace as the one responsible for expelling the Arousing Priestess. Many nobles also were disillusioned with his speech and conduct.

“At this point, our only way out may be to issue a formal apology to the Arousing Priestess and attempt to rebuild our relationship.”

“That’s right. It isn’t as if she was officially exiled from the country.”

“But it will mean repudiating the crown prince’s actions after he dishonored her by annulling their betrothal and that’s one thing we must avoid.”

“We’ve also received statements of censure from other countries about the attack against Prince Richard’s forces.”

“At this rate, Kophe will end up isolated and without allies.”

“Nonsense. The Kingdom of Kophe belongs to the king of Kophe. It was the emperor’s younger brother who invaded our country, disguising his true intent with pretty words. Based on what I heard, that young whelp didn’t even bother taking a wife after renouncing his claim to the throne. Instead, he devoted his time to mobilizing his knights within the Empire and abroad. So it’s entirely possible he’ll request one of the royal princesses as his reward for saving the country.”

They exchanged meaningful glances. If offering a single princess would turn the tide in Kophe’s favor, then they would gladly offer him as many as he wanted. After all, their opponent was the Red Lion from the Belktrius Empire, a country made up of barbarian tribes.

One of the men in attendance muttered as he rubbed his chin. “What if one of the turncoats who switched to his side already affianced his daughter to the

man?"

His words created a stir amongst them.

"Hm...it might be best to conduct a conference to evaluate the situation."

"You mean to marry off one of our daughters to those savages? There is no precedent for such a political marriage between Kophe's royal family and the Empire."

"It doesn't need to be a princess. Could be any of the aristocrats' daughters. Perhaps a patient girl fluent in many languages."

"She should have potential as a spy as well, but she can't be too young either, or else we accomplish nothing."

"Then..."

"In that case..."

Underneath the facade of concern for their country lay a calculating greed to protect their own interests and their cunning expressions finally revealed these nobles' true natures.

"Ahem."

The sound of the grand chancellor's aide clearing his throat echoed, effectively quenching the flames of avarice flickering in the room. The king sat on an elevated dais, flanked on either side by the high priest and grand chancellor. The three of them were high enough to look down on the rest of the convocation.

This Round Table had already lost half its nobles. The ones who remained were those from the capital and minor nobles from small, nearby cities. Priests from branch churches under the High Priest's jurisdiction rounded out the rest of the council. Almost all of the lands under their control as well as the lords who used to be their vassals had fallen under Prince Richard's command, leaving them with desolate territories ruled by monsters.

"Let me ask you all..." The king stared at everyone present with hollow, sunken eyes. Then he started speaking in a hoarse voice, one that seemed to reverberate across the land. "Our nation's knights, alongside the Church, have

repelled countless monster outbreaks and invasions from other countries over these many, long years. The feudal lords had no cause for rebellion in all this time. But now, things I would have once thought impossible keep occurring one after another. So answer me this: what is Kophe lacking at the moment?"

No one could answer the king's question. Because each individual here had already been forced to confront the hard truth. They lacked everything.

The catalyst for the Kingdom's collapse was the Arousing Priestess—Special Class Saint, Monica Regulus's banishment. She was punished with the breaking of her engagement and exiled in all but name from the nation, leading to a policy rejecting saints as a whole. Holy women served as the foundation to the structure of the state. And their removal as keystones resulted in an inevitable chain of destruction.

It was too late to rebuild this place as it once stood. Which was exactly why the aristocrats wished to discuss offering their daughters as compensation. Because everyone knew it was too late.

At that moment, they heard the sound of footsteps running in the corridor outside. They half-rose from their seats and focused on the door.

"Did we finally win?!"

The messenger who burst through the door knelt down on one knee, his face pale and his voice strained. "Urgent news! Marquess Chepre's territory has been conquered!"

The color leaching from his face, a white-haired man stood up in shock. "But that's my domain! What about my son?! What happened to the son I entrusted with the defense of our lands?!"

"Cut off from the river, the people held a festival with song and dance celebrating wine and crops upwind... Furthermore, it appears that even monsters were defeated during the festivities..."

"But what about my son?!"

"He and his men lost the will to fight and...submitted to the imperial prince. Your family, your subordinates, and your people are all safe. Those suffering from minor injuries are being treated by the imperial army as we speak."

“I see...” Marquess Chepre hung his head listlessly and covered his face. Then he said nothing more. Everyone in the room fell silent, an air of helplessness overtaking them.

The king folded his hands in defeat and stared down at them all with a weary gaze. “It seems...this country truly can’t survive without the saints...”



“**I-IT’S** not my fault. The high priest... The high priest, he—”

Trembling in fear, Medaikonar chewed on his nails now that his military failure had been discovered. The crown prince. Under house arrest. And because of his confinement, he had no way of knowing if the high priest himself was in a precarious position too.

“Your Highness.”

Ker-chak. The door opened and Keunt walked in. Medaikonar jumped up and clung to him.

“You can’t leave me. Don’t leave me.”

This is the climax, Keunt thought to himself. Thus did he have the opening pages of his great epic novel as he mentally penned a rewrite. The crown prince of Kophe, humiliated and tormented by the blasted Arousing Priestess. And his ever-loyal aide, Keunt, always by his side even after his family abandoned him. Then, when the crown prince eventually staged a stupendous comeback and restored honor to his name, Keunt’s eminence would rise alongside his.

“Your Highness! I’ll always, always be with you!”

“Keunt...!”



IN order to do something about my lack of physical activity, I laid a mat down in my room and started going through a few stretching exercises. Then Richard came calling. I had just stretched my legs out and bent forward, reaching for my toes with my fingers.

“Flexible as ever, eh, Miss Monica?”

“No knock as usual, hm, Richard?”

“Now, now, don’t be like that. Someone’s usually standing in front of your door when it’s a bad time for me to enter, right? So I don’t on those occasions.”

“I suppose that’s true...”

If someone were to ask me whether I actually disliked his sudden entrances, the truth would be that I didn’t. So in order to avoid such shamelessness on my part being discovered, I mumbled the rest of my words and trailed off noncommittally.

Today, he wasn’t in full military dress. Instead, he wore casual clothes since he was off duty. His hair was in its natural state, untouched by stylists. The first button of his shirt was undone, exposing his collarbones. Like this, he reminded me of the Mr. Redhead I used to know.

“I’m assuming you’re doing this because you’re not getting enough exercise? Which reminds me, we haven’t sparred lately. How about a round?” He grinned and indicated the outside with his thumb. I hurriedly shook my head.

“N-No, thank you!”

“Why?”

“Too much stimulation.”

“Too much what...?”

It was just as I said. Ever since learning that my body’s lustful reactions went haywire only where Richard was concerned, I’d been unable to entertain even the thought of sparring with him, even though our bouts had been run-of-the-mill before. I suddenly found it embarrassing for him to watch me fight in thin clothes. Not to mention watching *him* in *his* light state of dress made me drowsy in the strangest way.

He smiled in amusement as I fidgeted restlessly then pointed a finger up, like he’d thought of a new idea. “How about this then? There’s a festival today, so why don’t we visit the castle town together and enjoy ourselves?”

“Um...are you sure I can leave the castle? What with the assassin problem and all.”

“This and that are two different things. Remaining cloistered within these walls as mere decoration for too long will dull your brain, body, and senses, right? Wandering around outside and having fun are also part of your job, Miss Monica. And who knows, perhaps you might even notice something on our jaunt outside.”

“Well, if you insist, Richard, then...yes, I’d like to go with you.”

I stood up and looked out the window. In the castle town below, I saw brightly colored banners and floral decorations everywhere. It was clear the people were in high spirits even from all the way up here.

“Then it’s settled. Don’t worry, we’ll all work together to protect you~≡!” he said with a playful wink.

“I’m sorry for the trouble.”

“No, no trouble at all. Besides, both my subordinates and I need to learn more about Kophe, so this will be a good chance to do precisely that. Right then, let’s all get ready for this little excursion.” He winked at Solarus, who stood patiently in the room. “I’ll leave Miss Monica’s disguise to you.”

“Understood, sir.”



AND then, about an hour later, Richard and I met again in the carriage. As part of his disguise, he had dyed his hair black. He also wore a white shirt with a matching two-piece checkered suit and a hat. He looked like the well-bred son of a merchant family. The black-framed glasses he wore to hide his glittering flame-colored eyes suited him exceptionally well.

I was in disguise too. My hair, dyed a chestnut color, had been gathered into two plaits hanging down my shoulders and I wore a checkered dress. I had deliberately chosen the outfit because it was the complete opposite of a holy woman’s attire.

It seemed like our disguises were a success because when we disembarked from the carriage and stood in the beautiful plaza with its flower clock, no one paid any attention to us. Relieved, I smoothed my hands down my chest.

“I did cast a simple stealth spell on us to make sure we don’t create a lasting impression, but...I think we’ll be just fine.”

Richard stared down at me as I spoke. His next words sounded quite heartfelt.

“Miss Monica, I’ve felt like this for a long time now...”

“Hm?”

“When you dress like an ordinary young woman, you look so young. Absolutely fetching.”

“Huh?! Th-Thank you...?” I stammered.

“I wonder if it’s because letting your hair down like that emphasizes your baby face? And those big, beautiful eyes of yours remind me of lop-eared rabbits. Next time, I’d love it if you showed me your hair in its natural color, hm?” Richard picked up one of my braids and pressed his lips to it. I jerked in reaction and automatically put some distance between us.

“W-Will you stop that? We’re pretending to be siblings on this walk and big brothers don’t do that to their little sisters,” I chided.

“Wait, is that the act we chose to go with?” He arched an eyebrow.

“Huh? It’s not?”

The corners of his eyes softened as he grinned. “What if we pretend to be newlyweds instead?”

“Newlyweds—”

Our conversation was interrupted by thunderous applause coming from across the square. A gorgeous, colorful procession was coming down the boulevard from the clock tower to the plaza.

“Here, for the lovely couple! You two should throw flowers too!” A cheerful older lady handed us fresh flowers from her basket as she passed by.

Richard beamed at me as he twirled a marguerite daisy in his fingers. Clearly, the “lovely couple” comment pleased him.

“I really don’t think there was any deep meaning to her words,” I said. “Anyway...more importantly, look over there! So pretty!”

The beautiful wedding procession caught my attention and I couldn't look away. The couple's carriage had been lavishly decorated with flowers along with the white horse leisurely pulling it down the street. Another carriage behind them held their relatives and they too waved at the spectators on the road who continued clapping and flinging flowers. Based on what I could hear from the conversations around us, the daughter of a prominent merchant family in this town had finally landed a husband.

The procession lapped around the square's floral clock tower once then headed in the direction from which it had come.

"Oh! Richard, look!"

"It's Xenu."

We spotted Xenu waving from one of the carriages carrying wedding guests.

"That makes sense. He must have connections to them since he's a merchant too."

When he noticed us, he grinned broadly from atop the coach and waved specifically in our direction. He held Saaya solidly to his chest as he did so. Then he tossed a flower-decorated hat at me.

"Wah!"

When I caught it without thinking, an old man near us laughed cheerfully in response.

"Well, ain't you a lucky miss! A guest sharing their gift means a marriage proposal!"

"Huh?" My gaze jerked back to Xenu. He winked at me and then he was gone as the coach rolled away.

"Right then, I believe this calls for a funeral pyre, Miss Monica."

"Oh my goodness, Richard, stop it. You're scaring me. Enough!" I shook my head frantically at him because he looked deadly serious about wanting flames right this instant. "Neither Xenu nor I know about this festival's traditions, so I'm sure he threw it without understanding what he was doing."

My attempt to pacify him did nothing to erase the displeasure on his face.

Saying nothing, he snatched the hat from me then aimed for a pole on the last carriage in the procession. He flung the hat at it, and it landed neatly, hanging from the top.

A-An excellent throw!

“Hahahaha! Way to send it back, sonny!” The old man walked away, laughing hard.

“I admit it wasn’t smart of him, but you really didn’t have to toss it away,” I said.

“Even though keeping it would mean accepting his proposal? It might be a silly custom, but it’s not a joke to me.” With those words, Richard took my hand in his. I flinched at the sudden move.

“Wh-What is it?” I asked. But he didn’t just hold it. No, he interlaced our fingers. “E-Eep!” It was the only sound I could make in response to Richard, the only person capable of inciting lust in me even without the use of my supernatural powers.

“If I do this, no man can approach you with ill intentions,” he stated. “And no one will mistake us for siblings either. What say you?”

“No one will...mistake us...for siblings...”

“You don’t want people to think of us as lovers?”

“L-Lov—”

His eyes lowered to half-mast as he pressed me.

“B-But I’m just...just a priestess... and y-you’re the imperial prince...”

“Wrong. You’re Miss Monica and I’m simply Richard.” Then he pulled me close to him so he could whisper in my ear this time. “Or would you prefer it if I wrapped my arm around your waist instead?”

“Ummm...Richard...”

“I kid, I kid.” He let out a shout of laughter as he stepped away from me. But he didn’t let go of my hand as our fingers remained interlocked. “Remember this, Miss Monica. So long as you don’t hate it, I’ll want to do whatever you’ll let

me get away with.”

I didn't know what to do when he said those words with such a poignant expression.

“I-In any case, let's just enjoy ourselves,” I managed to say.

“Yes, good idea, Miss Monica.”

After that, holding hands, we strolled amongst the crowd and enjoyed the festival. At a target shooting stall, he won me a garland. At a food stall, we both savored the flavor of skewered, buttered, roasted potatoes. For some reason, they held a play about Saint Monica on the stage. As I covered my face in a terrible panic, Richard howled with laughter next to me, holding on to his stomach.

The knights who had disguised themselves as ordinary people were always nearby and I felt safe knowing we were well protected. Darius and Solarus pretended to be siblings and strolled along not far from us. Unlike me and Richard, they actually looked like they could be biological siblings. It was entirely possible they were related, though the connection might be distant. After all, aristocrats intermarried quite often. *Ohhh! Maybe that was exactly why Darius stated so firmly that he couldn't see Solarus in a romantic light.*

In a romantic light, hm?

I peeked up at Richard, who looked like he was enjoying the acrobats' show. What did he think of me? What was I to him? I knew he cared for me. I knew he thought of me as a friend and ally. And lately, I felt like his displays of affection were more frequent, blatant.

But...that was it. I didn't know anything else.

Hold on. Anything else? What in the world am I thinking...? He cherishes me as a friend, so what more is there beyond that?

I didn't understand my own desires. My hand felt hot in his. Richard's musk, his profile, his voice. *I want it all. More.* I couldn't help thinking so. *What did I want? How did I want it? Having His Highness call me “Miss Monica≡~!” and cherish me, what more could I possibly want?*

Do my feelings...of lust toward him mean that...I want him to...make love to me?

"Ahhh!"

"M-Miss Monica?!"

"I-It's nothing. It's nothing. Um...um...that's right! I'm just embarrassed about something I did! That's all!"

It was the only thing I could think of to gloss over my unconscious shriek.

I-I-I want Richard to m-make I-love to me...?! Unbelievable of me to f-feel such a desire for him wh-when he doesn't feel those things at all! A-And even if he did, I'm the Arousing Priestess for goodness sake. How utterly shameless of me.

In my mind flashed memories of the women in the imperial court as well as the young noblewoman from a while back. It felt like being splashed with ice-cold water. The recollections cooled the dizzying emotions rioting inside me.

I looked down at my free hand. Short nails, plain, and roughened from years of hard work.

Richard is the emperor's brother. He's a prince. He isn't someone to direct my wayward lusts at... I wouldn't trouble him with my carnal passions. I should just channel those sensations elsewhere. That was all I had to do. But much to my surprise, the idea depressed me.

"Miss Monica...what's wrong?" After clapping at the acrobatic performance, Richard looked down at me again with a smile.

"Don't...stare at me so," I pouted.

"Why? I can't help myself when you're so charming."

I saw myself reflected in his beautiful flame-colored eyes behind the fake glasses. *Stop it. Don't look at me with those gentle eyes. Or else I'll misunderstand. I'll want things I shouldn't. I'm the Arousing Priestess. My body's been broken for much too long now. Having these lustful desires even when I haven't used my powers. You make me blush just by existing. Keep this up and I'll be drowning in these shameless, embarrassing emotions...!*

The crowd dispersed when the show ended. As we followed the flow of

people to the canal, Richard questioned me.

“You seem upset about something. Did the performance bore you?”

“No, it’s not that... I just lost myself in thought staring at your profile, Richard.”

He stared at me, stunned. Of course he would be! How else was he supposed to react when I said such odd things!

I let go of his hand and half ran to the railing separating the canal from the road. It was actually a river used as a canal. Today, its banks were cluttered with old men drinking and being merry because of the festival.

I squeezed the railing tightly with my hands, clinging to it. While staring at the water’s surface, I expressed my thoughts to him. I saw his face reflected in the water.

“I-I’m sorry... I know I told you a little about it some time ago, but...lately, um...my heats have been happening even when I don’t use my powers. Something’s wrong with me, I know it.” Heat. Just saying the word out loud embarrassed me, and my voice dropped to a whisper. “The strangest thoughts immediately enter my mind, you see... I’m sorry. Please don’t hate me.”

“Miss Monica.” Richard stared at me intently, his expression serious. “Tell me something... Do you react like that to other people as well?”

“Oh, no, not at all. Only when I’m with you, Richard. I don’t know how to explain it, but it feels like lassitude takes me over. In a good way though. I also just feel safe with you, so I suppose that could be it...”

“I see.”

“I’m... I’m sorry. For seeing you in such a light even though you’re...you’re the emperor’s brother.”

The look on his face was indescribable. His expression was usually incredibly frightening or flippant and smiling. Now, it seemed like he didn’t know what to feel or how to react.

“Then...here’s another question,” he began slowly. “Do you hate having these ‘strange’ thoughts because of me?”

“Huh?” I didn’t expect this line of questioning.

“Miss Monica, does it disgust you or make you feel bad in any way to think such thoughts about me?”

“Oh... *Ummmmmm*... No. It actually makes me relieved to know that...that you’re the only one I respond to like this. So...if it’s you...I feel as if...I don’t mind...”

I wouldn’t hate it at all if I slipped up with him *because* it was him. Besides, I doubted anything would happen anyway since he didn’t have a libido.

I suddenly caught sight of the bride and groom standing on the bridge. They were holding hands and they looked so happy. My chest tightened painfully. Even though Richard and I had held hands too, the two of us were worlds apart from them.

“If His Highness tried to kiss you, would you blow him away or not?”

Darius’s words rang in my ears.

I...

“Miss Monica.” Richard’s voice tugged me back to reality. He was staring down at me with a soft smile. It was different from his usual sunny one. This one was gentle, calm. “Let me make this clear. You can think of me however you want, and I wouldn’t mind at all.”

“No. Impossible. I mean, you’re the imper— Mpf!”

He pushed a stick of candy against my lips. When had he even gotten his hands on it? They must have been passing it out during the street performance earlier.

“Don’t say it. If you did, it would be quite tactless of you, hm?” Looking a little sad, Richard tilted his head thoughtfully. “I’d be more than happy to go back to the Mr. Redhead you knew if that would make you feel more at ease, Miss Monica. You know I have no problem abandoning both of our countries either.”

“That would be...shockingly audacious, don’t you think?”

The only thing I could do in response to the scale of his suggestion was shrug helplessly. I didn’t know if he was serious or joking. The vexing man gave me no

clues either as he merely smiled cryptically at me, his gaze never wavering from mine.

“Unfortunately, I can’t protect you completely as Mr. Redhead. Which is why I’m using my position and authority as the imperial prince. You’re the only reason.”

“Sounds like an abuse of power to me...” I remarked.

“And I’m just fine with that. After all, if I do my job too earnestly, I might end up interfering with my brother’s work. I certainly wouldn’t like that, and I doubt he would either.” Richard continued while twirling the lollipop idly in his fingers. “But...should you want to abandon it all and run away, I’d like nothing more than to go with you and start our lives over from scratch as simply Monica and Richard. Let me know if you ever feel that way and I’ll come running, eh?”

“So, dereliction of duty comes after abuse of power, hm?”

“If you wish it, I’ll do whatever is necessary. No matter how unjust, wrong, or painful.”

What could I say to that?

“Clearly, you still don’t understand even after I’ve said all that,” he said.

“What don’t I understand?”

“The fact that I adore you.”

“But...I know that?”

I wasn’t sure how to react. Even though he wasn’t the kind of person to feel sexual desire, my stupid mind wouldn’t stop confusing his expressions of affection with my depraved ones.

“Your adoration is different from my lust, right?” I asked.

“Does it have to be? And does it really matter?”

“Huh?”

“No one can separate their emotions into simple categories, whether affection, desire, or love. Even my brother and sister-in-law are tangled up in so many versions of love between them. So there’s no need to separate desire

from love, because it ultimately doesn't matter." Richard leaned against the railing with a gentle smile. "If two people love each other and that love makes them want to touch each other, then does their bond really need to be defined beyond that? At least...that's what I think."

As he spoke, he stroked my hand with his fingers, silently telling me what he wanted. When I let him slip his hand into mine and interlace our fingers, he smiled happily, his eyes lowered in delight. His expression made me blush.



Desire was shameful. But if he didn't mind my lustful feelings, then perhaps I didn't have to suppress them anymore.

"Oh...is that how it works?" I asked.

"I mean, as long as the two are happy, right? It doesn't matter what name they apply to their relationship. Just like it makes me happy when we're together like this."

"You're right. I feel the same..." When I turned my gaze away from his out of embarrassment, something that had been on my mind caught my eyes again. "I've been wondering why that bride and groom have been standing there."

A red-lacquered bridge in the center of the canal that cut through the town. The middle of the bridge was lifted up, cutting it off from either end. That was where the newlyweds stood.

"What is that...?"

"I believe that's a lift bridge. It's my first time seeing the real thing too... See that big boat over there? Even something that size can pass under the bridge with the middle part raised."

"Wow... I had no idea."

Impressed by the sight, I continued staring and then...the two standing on one end of the disconnected bridge jumped!

"What?! Whaaat?!"

Water splashed when they dove into the canal. Their guests and spectators clapped enthusiastically.

"Wh-What a terribly odd festival this is turning out to be!"

Drunk, old men on a small freighter moored not far from us toasted each other then looked up at us.

"Hey, there, missy, this your first time here? What ye just saw now was the wedding ceremony's climax."

"In this town, the last thing a newlywed does at the end of their ceremony is jump into the river together!"

“See, a long, long time ago, one half of a pair jumped into the river hoping to be reunited with their other half in the next life. Or summat like that.”

“But don’t ya fret about ’em ’cause we got some mages on standby in case something goes wrong. So their lives ain’t ending here, that’s for sure. Heh heh heh.”

“Fascinating...”

Once the newlyweds dove into the river, it became a free-for-all for other couples to do the same. One after another, they jumped from the same bridge. Just like the old men told us, several mages stood at the ready on the banks and in the middle of the river. The bride and groom had cords infused with floating magic wrapped around their arms for their safety.

Drenched, the couples laughed delightedly under the rays of the early summer sun.

“Missy, ain’t you gonna jump in with sonny boy there?”

“Us? But we’re not from here...” I said.

“Festivals are meant to be enjoyed, girly! So go in for a swim with that strappin’ lad!”

“You heard them. Let’s go,” Richard said with a wink.

“Huh? W-Wait, no...”

One of the old men let out a whistle.

“Have fun, you two!”

Riled up by the old men, Richard dragged me toward the jumping-off point on the bridge, my hand still in his. The spectators around us clearly thought we were another couple joining in on the festivities because they showered us with flowers and applause on the way.

Our escorts watched us too, rueful smiles on their faces.

“See you soon.”

“Here, take care of my hat and glasses.”

One of the guards took both from Richard very politely and walked away.

I could feel my face growing hotter and hotter as the knights I knew pretending to be ordinary folks grinned in amusement at us. We had finally arrived at the edge of the lift bridge, on one of the lower platforms. Standing here now, I shivered at how unexpectedly high up we were.

“Here, let me tie this cord around you. We use it in lieu of lifebuoys.”

An older woman skillfully bound us together by wrapping the cord around his left wrist and my right. Despite the lovely embroidery stitched into it, the cord felt like a chain. A tool for a wedding.

A lukewarm breeze ruffled my skirt and hair, lifting both high in the air.

The glitter of the water’s surface illuminated Richard’s hair and his eyes. He looked like he was enjoying himself immensely.

“All right, we’ll jump on three. Ready?”

“W-Wait!”

Without thinking, I gripped his hand with both of mine. Everyone watching smiled cheerfully at us, well aware that there were women who lost their nerve right before the jump.

“What’s wrong?”

All of this felt like a dream. Standing above this beautiful sparkling river, celebrated by the crowds, jumping in together as lovers.

“Isn’t...isn’t this something couples do? But we’re—”

Richard froze then. Then he stared intently at me in silence for a few beats.

“Miss Monica... Do you want to be with me in the next life too?”

“Huh?” I paused for a moment before answering. “I...”

Overwhelmed by the fervor in this most unusual of places, I ended up blurting the truth to him.

“I...want to be by your side, Richard...not just in the next life...but for eternity.”

The moment I confessed, the sweetest smile bloomed on his face. At that exact instant, the water’s reflection struck his eyes, making them glow more

beautifully and fiercely than the sun.

“I’ll never forget those words, as long as I live.”

With those words, he tugged on my hand and took a step back, preparing himself for the leap.

“W-Wait! I’m not ready yet!” I cried.

“Too bad. Here we go, Miss Monica!”

It took only a second. Richard took me along with him when he leaped. Then, the cheers of the spectators. The sky. The waterfowls. The water’s surface shining. Everything flashed by in my eyes frame by frame.

Splash. Cold. He embraced me in the water.

“Nh...” As I instinctively flailed, afraid of drowning, he suddenly pushed his face close to mine.

“Miss Monica, Miss Monica, we’re floating.”

“Oh...”

That was when I noticed he was holding me as he floated magically in the river. Then I felt my face flush when I realized I was the only one who’d panicked.

“Th-Thank you...”

When he slicked back his wet hair, thrilled shrieks came from the crowd. Of course they did. Who wouldn’t in the face of this sexy monster? He lifted my arm up and used his teeth to break the cord.

Then he kissed my wrist and grinned at me, flashing his teeth.

“With this, you can’t ever leave me, Miss Monica.”

“You...vexing...man...”

Blissfully unaware, the spectators clapped loudly and congratulated us.

He wrapped one arm around me and pulled me along as he waded out of the river. I used drying magic to dry our bodies lightly once we were out. After I finished, he stared directly into my eyes and murmured softly.

“It’s the same for me, Miss Monica. Even though my chest hurts when we’re together, I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“...What?”

The air between us felt suspended.

Richard’s expression was deeply earnest as he gazed down at me. “Miss Monica, the truth is, I—”

That was when Darius and Solarus rushed over to us.

“I believe it’s about time we return to the castle,” said Solarus.

As soon as the wedding ceremony officially ended, the crowd began thinning out. The knights in our security detail glanced over at us and nodded affirmatively.

“You’re right... Thank you.”

“Let’s go then,” Richard said. “Update me on our people at headquarters.”

“Yes, sir, they...”

Just like that, he changed the subject and listened to Darius’s report about our security and ongoing in the castle. Still damp from our sojourn in the river, I fiddled with my plaits, struggling to switch gears mentally from the warm, cozy feelings bubbling inside me.



THE wedding reception took place in another location and the feast continued. The bride’s family was hosting a garden party at their company where employees and guests alike were treated lavishly. From the second-floor parlor of the brick building, a man looked out the bay window.

When he adjusted the strength of his eyeglasses, the magical lenses picked up the figure of a man and woman walking by the canal, hand in hand. Prince Richard, and the object of His Imperial Highness’s infatuation, Saint Monica.

“Hm...just about time to make a move.”

Xenu grinned, baring his canines, and tipped the glass of alcohol to his lips.



IN Viscount Telestraza's castle, I walked down the second-floor corridor, accompanied by the fawning nobles of Kophe.

"I'm busy. Make it short," I said.

"I understand, my lord, but please be patient. Now, if you will follow me into here."

Every minute, every second counted in my drive to destroy Kophe as thoroughly and efficiently as possible. And yet, their steps remained light as they led me to the lounge at the end of the corridor. There, I found a contingent of lords gathered inside. Wearing similar expressions, they bowed to me in an identical fashion. The butler adeptly placed a tray of refreshments then poured me a cup of coffee.

"Your Highness, please take a look at the courtyard. I'm sure you'll find the sight pleasing."

"....."

I picked up my cup and walked to stand by the bay window. When I looked down, I saw a gaggle of young noblewomen having a garden party in the blooming courtyard. They sat down on the soft, green grass and helped themselves to the assortment of tea and pastries spread out on the linens. A relaxed tea party better suited to picturesque hills and dales.

"Lovely flowers, are they not? We wished for Your Highness to cast your gaze upon Kophe's elegant culture."

Underneath the large white umbrella set up by the maids, the daughters of these aristocrats sat on the lawn clad in outfits that exposed so much skin it reminded me of ladies' evening wear. Their long hair draped over the skirts of their dresses as they rested their feet on the grass. In normal circumstances, men wouldn't be privy to such a languid tea party. Gentlemen amused themselves with hunting and such, while women deepened their bonds with each other through such relaxing activities. So these men and their daughters both had some nerve to hold an event like this where all and sundry could see.

"Ah, yes, I see, a culture typical of a country that would christen a saint as the Arousing Priestess," I remarked.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing at all. I am indeed bewitched. The flowers bloom beautifully, splendid as the plants and trees too.” I schooled my features into an understanding expression and smiled at the so-called gentlemen in the room. They returned my smile with their own and started boasting about their respective daughters to me.

“My daughter is Diana. Isn’t her black hair lovely? She’s so clever she can read books in the imperial language.”

“That’s my Iona over there. She’s still young at fourteen, but isn’t her smile absolutely charming? I’ve already received a flood of letters asking for her hand in marriage, from within the country as well as abroad.”

“If we’re talking beauty, then why don’t you consider my daughter, Magdalene? She’s so stunning she was chosen for the starring role in the national theater’s performance. You can take her to any function as she’s quite sociable too.”

One by one, the fathers tried to pawn their daughters off on me. I memorized their words while evaluating each of the girls and women. The aristocrats assumed my thoughtful attitude was one of eagerness and they couldn’t conceal their glee.

“With all due respect, for the longest time, I thought Your Highness wasn’t interested in women.”

“Of course I am. Why would you think otherwise?” I asked.

“Well, there are rumors about how you relentlessly evaded marriage talks in the Empire and how, even now, you show no signs of wanting to settle down, so...”

“I don’t attend social functions at the moment because the sole reason I’m here in Kophe is for my humanitarian work. It would be a grave disservice to the people of Kophe if I were to indulge in parties indiscriminately, hm?”

“What an outstanding mindset.”

They acted so obsequiously that if I said black was white, they wouldn’t

contradict me at all. While staring down at their daughters, I started thinking about which one to invite to tea first. After verifying each young lady's intelligence, the current state of her family's domain, and her behavior, I planned on marrying her off to the perfect match. Although I was sure their fathers intended to marry them off to me, the emperor's younger brother.

Being a bachelor occasionally posed a disadvantage, but having members of the ton attempt to sell their daughters to me wasn't always a bad thing. I was extremely well aware of my value as bait. When noblewomen looked at me, they imagined an ideal prince. Their romantic fantasy inevitably set off a cascade of dreams and desires in them for me to break them free of their cages. Which made it very easy for them to spill all their secrets to me. And their fathers eagerly offered those daughters to me in marriage.

However, all of their seductive wiles were wasted on me. Nothing stirred when I looked at them. Not like the hellfire that scorched me from the inside out at the mere thought of Miss Monica.

"Haaa..."

I finished the cold coffee while recalling the ardor burning in my chest.

None of the nobles in this room knew who my true love was. Shame, really. For *them*, since the woman they derided as the Arousing Priestess would determine their future.

Chapter 4: I Want to Save the Arousing Priestess

“**THIS** potato yields a good harvest in poor soil. The flavor is mild and delicious too, so I recommend it.”

“I hope it takes to the soil. What about Nowasilo’s original crops?”

“Oh, yes, wheat. The livestock eat Salatine grass, and sometimes I use Melazu to supplement their feed.”

“There are several Salatine species, but which one was it?”

“Well, the blades are large...”

Kophe’s Minister of Agriculture, Professor Martinez from the Empire, a farmer from my village, and I were deep in conversation. We were all racking our brains at one of the fields on the castle grounds. Then I heard light steps coming from the direction of the castle. When I turned around, I saw Richard, his hair fluttering as he practically skipped his way over.

“Heelloooo, Miss Monica!”

“Richard.”

His smile was so cheerful that if he’d been a dog, his tail would have been wagging enthusiastically. He flashed me a peace sign with both hands.

“Kophe’s royal family has finally agreed to meet me!”

“Really?!”

“The letter just arrived!”

“Huzzah!” I shrieked in delight and raised both hands high, then with a jump, I high-fived him.

Finally! Finally, finally, finally! The Kingdom of Kophe agreed to conduct formal talks!

Everyone else nearby looked relieved to hear the glad tidings as they glanced happily at each other. Having worked so long with these people in the same

castle toward the same goal, we were all determined to rebuild the country.

“You two are as close as ever, hm?” the Minister of Agriculture commented with a rueful smile. Standing next to him, Professor Martinez nodded vigorously.

“His Highness and Madam Monica are always like this.”

This relationship between me and Richard quickly became common knowledge. I’d also found a solution for my Richard-exclusive sexual desire. Every time my heart raced in his presence, I accepted it with a mental, “Yup, my broken body *isn’t* doing its job again tremendously today too!” Positive thinking and all. It might not necessarily be the *best* solution, but I needed something to get me through until our humanitarian work in Kophe ended.

Richard turned his attention to the field where a variety of seedlings had been sown. “You were hard at work today as well, Miss Monica?”

“Yes. We were discussing the particulars of restoring the former Nowasilo district,” I explained. “The specialists need to know what used to grow there and where the houses were, things like that, so when the time for redevelopment comes, there aren’t any issues. We also talked about crops and such...”

“Forever the hard worker, hm?”

His smile made my heart skip a beat, so I slid my gaze from his. “O-Of course, it’s for Kophe’s sake.”

“Heh.”

The Minister of Agriculture groaned in exasperation when he saw us behaving like we do again. Then he remarked thoughtfully. “...Your Imperial Highness, you have a very sunny disposition, don’t you? I envy that.”

I wondered what other prince or royal he was comparing Richard to in his mind. In a moment of nostalgia, I tried to recall the crown prince, Medaikonar, my former fiancé and the one who’d given me the Arousing Priestess appellation. But so much had happened this past year that I couldn’t even picture his face anymore.

Prince Medaikonar had replaced his older brother, Prince Stevvay, as the crown prince. I'd never met the latter. He had always been frail, then when he sustained grievous injuries during a certain incident, Medaikonar usurped Stevvay's claim to the throne. Not long after, Prince Stevvay had removed himself from the line of succession and had been convalescing ever since in a royal villa away from the main palace.

The hardships the royal brothers endured were so very different compared to His Imperial Majesty and Richard, who had lost their parents young and made it this far by supporting each other.

Though I know that Richard's cheerful demeanor is a deliberate act on his part...

"Miss Monica, is something the matter?" Richard cocked his head inquiringly at me. His tender expression showed no traces of the hardness he'd revealed to me in the coach on the return journey from purifying Nowasilo. I thought back to the anger and forceful energy in his voice as he spilled what was in his heart. And I shivered.

He's shown me his true self and I'm grateful for the knowledge.

I felt a tightening deep in my chest. Was it my uncontrollable lust? The fundamental fear one experiences in the presence of a warrior? Or something else entirely? Who I was now didn't know.



THE conference took place right away the next day. The location was Kophe's state guest house located in the royal capital. *Officially*, the king and queen had invited Prince Richard of the Belktrius Empire to a luncheon meeting.

Under the blue sky, the beautifully paved capital brought back memories for me as it welcomed our carriage. I hadn't been back since the day I received the directive to leave the Kingdom of Kophe quietly. That had been over a year ago now.

The royal capital maintained a completely different atmosphere from other cities I'd visited. In those, I was usually welcomed with open arms, though occasionally greeted with outright hostility. But neither was the case in the

capital.

“It’s...so quiet here. Hardly anything like the lively city it used to be,” I remarked.

The streets were devoid of people. The only things that moved were forgotten banners and flags that hadn’t been taken down, fallen leaves from roadside trees rustling in the breeze, and squirrels racing down the streets to cross from one side to another. The city seemed to have stopped breathing, as if time itself had stopped.

Just when I finally thought I saw someone, it turned out to be holy knights standing at attention. They were positioned all along the streets, like imposing decorative objects.

I spied the bakery where Richard and I had our last meal in the royal capital. Though it had been a thriving shop back then, it was now permanently closed.

“Miss Monica, there’s something you need to know,” Richard began. “Right now in the capital, anyone who talks about the Empire is incarcerated.”

“What?”

“That’s why the streets are so deserted... Everyone’s desperate to survive,” Richard murmured quietly, a faraway look in his eyes. But in them I saw contempt and disgust for the so-called statesman who continued to engage in such foolish political acts.

Not long after, our coach finally arrived at the state guest house’s depot. Richard helped me down from the vehicle. Once outside, I stared up at the marble building from my memories. For me, the state guest house was both a source of pain and nostalgia.

“Let’s go, Miss Monica.”

“Yes.”

One of the servants led the two of us to a room deep inside.

It was chilly inside the building. Every step I took reminded me of the time I’d spent as Crown Prince Medaikonar’s fiancée. The tough, hectic days filled with lessons as part of my education for becoming the future queen. Back then, I had

to wear high heels and walk without lifting the hem of my dress or scraping my shoes against the tile, my back straight, with my pace matching the prince's all the while making sure my head didn't bob. I had been desperate to perfect the walk.

Today, I wore the comfortable pumps that went along with the rest of my saintly attire. I could move easily in my outfit and the hem only reached my ankles, making it easy to walk. I kept pace with Richard by his side. The past me would have been overhauled at standing out like a sore thumb. But I was just fine now. My pure-white holy garb was more dependable than any dress in the world, which meant it was natural for me to walk with my shoulders back and head held high.

So I was just fine. I pushed away the kernel of anxiety that made me want to curl in on myself and encouraged myself instead. *Look ahead and walk.* That was all I had to do.

"Miss Monica, are you nervous?"

I shrugged at Richard's quiet question. "You noticed?"

"I did."

"A little, to be honest. Being here reminds me of all the lessons I had to take in training to be the future queen... Not to mention how they banished me too. But I'll be fine."

"Miss Monica, you're beautiful and strong," he said sweetly. "Don't doubt yourself. Remember that and stand proud."

Warmth bloomed in my body under his tender gaze and smile. I couldn't believe it was reacting so feverishly even in these circumstances. Still, I felt myself relaxing as the ridiculous carnal response blew away my tension and anxiety.

We were led to a beautiful space called the "Purple Jade Room" with a purple crystal chandelier and table decorations. When we stepped inside, a coolness characteristic of rooms built out of stone enveloped us.

The Kingdom of Kophe's royal couple and crown prince sat three across at the head of the table. The last time I saw them was the night my engagement was

dissolved. His Majesty was a man of fifty years with deep wrinkles and sunken eyes. Whether it was sickness or fatigue that cursed him, he looked much older than his actual age. Her Majesty, a slender woman in her forties, wore a voluminous dress made with yards of material, her blonde hair coiffed up tightly on her head. Originally the daughter of a duke, she never interfered in politics, yet she nevertheless radiated a tremendously intimidating aura even when sitting down.

Then there was their beloved son, Crown Prince Medaikonar. As soon as he laid eyes on me, His Royal Highness tossed his perfectly ordered golden hair and glared at me, his face pale.

Other political leaders were also in attendance, but I noticed a lot of important faces were missing. Many more than I expected. It made sense that those who swore fealty to Richard weren't here. Even so, the gathering was extremely small. This fact alone told me that Kophe was in much more danger than I ever imagined.

I discreetly swallowed the saliva pooling in my mouth out of nerves. Next to me, Richard took a step forward and executed a supremely elegant bow. The rest of our entourage followed suit and bowed our heads respectfully.

Their Majesties stood up and greeted Richard with royal bows.

"Thank you for coming, Prince Richard of the Belktrius Empire."

"I am delighted to meet you again, and glad to see you in good health. By the way, Your Majesties, if I may?" Richard maintained his statesman's smile and continued without waiting for them to respond. "Please permit me to introduce to you both a few individuals I brought with me today. Do I have your leave to do so?"

A commotion stirred the atmosphere. Ignoring the agitation from those around us at his impudence for not following the proper protocols of a formal greeting, Richard signaled to the imperial knights with his eyes.

From the other side of the door, another group of visitors stepped into the space. The sight of them left me speechless. Darius, with his long fringe swept to the side, which was unusual for him, wearing a cloak over his full dress uniform. The cloak sported a gorgeous crest featuring a black dog, very

different from his usual attire.

And holding his arm was a slender gray-haired noblewoman, slight of stature, wearing a pure white dress—Solarus. When she lifted her downcast purple eyes, it felt like a cold, snow-leaden wind rushed through the room, as if the temperature suddenly dropped in here. She could be mistaken for the snow queen from the land of ice.

Her dress rustled as she walked toward Their Majesties, her steps almost weightless. She stopped in front of them and smiled with her rouged lips. The rose color suited her pearl-white skin beautifully. Then she bowed formally to them, a bow different from the type she executed in her role as a maid.

“It has been a very long time, Your Majesties. And a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Royal Highness.”

They must have been stunned that she even addressed them directly. Next to his parents, Prince Medaikonar couldn’t conceal his shock. But Their Majesties, old hands at politics, maintained their composed expressions and said nothing.

“Who...*are* you?”

It was Medaikonar who spoke.

From next to Solarus, Darius answered instead, his sharp blue eyes unobstructed by his usual hanks of hair. “This is Her Grand Ducal Highness, Princess Solasvita Rustis Novenbled Arjentia, first in the line of succession to the Principality of Arjentia. And I am Darius Sye, son and heir of the commander of the Canes Venatici, the grand ducal guard.”

“Ah, Arjentia... But why is the princess of a ruined nation here?” Medaikonar asked.

Solarus smiled in a refined demeanor so unlike her at the surprised crown prince of Kophe. “It as you say, Your Royal Highness. An imperial margrave conspired with the neighboring Philisbyl Kingdom to destroy our homeland. The one who safeguarded the survivors and rendered judgment on the margrave was His Imperial Highness, Prince Richard. When I became privy to the knowledge that he had been invited to this summit, I strongly requested he allow Darius and myself to attend as ones who could attest to his sincerity. But

this visit needed to be kept secret for my safety, so please accept my humblest apologies for withholding such information.”

“So...you lived...”

To me, it almost sounded like His Majesty groaned the words. Speaking of myself, all I could do was stare goggle-eyed in amazement at the transformation Solarus and Darius had undergone as well as their true standings.

When I shifted my gaze to Richard, I found him smiling back at me, like the cat that ate the canary. As if he was silently saying, “Oh, are you surprised?” Then he inserted himself into the conversation with a bright tone.

“Right, then, shall we continue this over lunch? I’m quite looking forward to enjoying Kophe’s traditional cuisine.”

His words brought all the other attendees back to their senses, reminding them why they were here in the first place. By taking the initiative from the start, Richard established his authority over them.

With the formal greetings now complete, we on the imperial side also took our seats at the table. Richard and I sat down side by side then Solarus followed. Darius stood nearby, where he could watch over both Richard and Solarus. When my eyes met Darius’s, he winked slyly at me. Goodness, he really was much too dashing like this.

The luncheon began with the chef’s greeting. Perfectly coordinated and movements crisp, the male servers arranged on the table the royal cuisine that was the pride of Kophe’s royal family. Everything looked delectable and I knew it actually must have been. But I couldn’t taste a thing because of my nerves. As I awkwardly executed what I could recall of formal table manners, I realized how acutely grateful I was for the education I’d received as a queen in training.

Smiling sunnily, Richard interacted amiably with the distinguished nobles of Kophe gathered around the table. His initial menacing aura felt like a fever dream in comparison. The nobles responded easily to the handsome imperial prince’s affable charm and conversational ability. They relaxed more and more under his attention, their tension dissipating.

Although I knew him well, it still surprised me to learn how much he knew

about Kophe. From the best ports to harvest sea urchins to the places where the herbs in the quiche grew. Even the hobbies the nobles' sons enjoyed. The conversations were lively enough. But. It almost felt as if...

As if Richard wants to say he sees right through them...

Their Majesties remained silent as did a few wary nobles along with the Church's high priest and priests. Prince Medaikonar was the only one obviously on edge since he was unable to read the situation.

Richard chuckled lightly at a joke one of the aristocrats told. "Yes, indeed, Kophe is a wonderful place. Blessed by a temperate climate and protected by the earth itself with few natural disasters, the land yields high-quality crops. For example, this sauce. It uses distilled spirits and a renowned liquor from Ezeleya as the base into which fresh fruits are crushed. Then the whole mixture is simmered down to achieve this consistency. Kophe's position on the western edge of the continent made it a major maritime trading center, which allowed this sauce to even come into creation."

The nobility in the room were thoroughly captivated by the good-natured young man before them. He had them eating out of the palm of his hand.

Then, all of a sudden...

With a smile still on his face, Richard transferred the dinner knife he held in his right hand to his left and adjusted his grip accordingly with the switch.

"However."

Bang. The violent sound echoed.

The knights standing at attention near one of the walls stirred in anger. Because Richard had stabbed the knife into the table with all his might.

Silence descended abruptly at the unexpected act of savagery. The atmosphere chilled. The knights rested their hands on the hilts of their swords and the attendees stared at Richard, holding their breaths anxiously. It was a tense situation.

"Oh-ho, how rude of me." Richard accepted a replacement knife from Darius with a smile. "Forgive me if I'm being rude, but am I right in assuming that

today's luncheon menu consists of ingredients and dishes from towns and cities in Kophe destroyed by monsters?"

The king stared in amazement at him. Richard responded with a light laugh, his eyes narrowed. "Were you aware of this, Your Majesty?"

Panicked, the high priest cut in before the king could respond. "I ask that you refrain from making such wild accusations toward His Majesty."

Richard sliced through a piece of meat leisurely then lifted it to his mouth, chewing slowly. His attitude indicated he paid no attention to the high priest's words. He lowered his eyes even more, licked his lips, then pierced the vegetables on his plate with his fork.

"According to the chef's explanation earlier, these Hohelp greens can only be harvested near the estuary's fountainhead in Hohelp. But the monsters decimated the fields and the people who could work them fled. The only ones left there now are starving elders. The few girls became food for the monsters."

As if offering his condolences to each ingredient, Richard discussed at length each locale the food came from as he continued eating.

"This potato dish is a traditional one from the Healikani mountain district. A deranged priest awakened to a pagan religion and sacrificed young children to monsters. Of course, his actions were meaningless since the whole Church ended up destroyed anyway by the monsters."

He paused to take another bite then continued.

"Incidentally, the appetizer earlier was made with pot-herbs from the Zanon grasslands, wasn't it? By the time we arrived there, nothing remained but a barren wasteland. Oh, please, do continue eating. After all, this is food offered in exchange for life and famine. Wouldn't want to disappoint the chef who made all this, hm? So we must enjoy this feast."

The members of the imperial entourage resumed eating per Richard's words. As for Kophe's side, the royal family, politicians, and religious authorities had no response to his commentary even though they all sat together in supposed solidarity.

His Majesty's sunken eyes were wide and his lips trembled. Sitting next to

him, Her Majesty was eerily quiet and still in such a situation. The indifferent look on her face said none of this had anything to do with her. Prince Medaikonar was busy opening and closing his mouth fruitlessly as the color on his face went from pale to red and back again while he experienced a gamut of emotions, from anger to shock to confusion. He squeezed the tablecloth so hard between his hands that I could see the wrinkles from here.

Richard surveyed everyone in the room with a cool expression then stood up slightly from his chair. He grasped the knife he'd thrust into the table and exerted himself a bit to pull it out. He smiled brightly as he tossed it aside.

"I apologize for my rudeness. I simply could not believe that none of you present were unaware of the places destroyed within the country." He sat back down and resumed eating the meat on his plate very neatly.

No one on the royal side touched their plates. My features schooled placidly, I dug into the delicious-looking meal to satisfy my stomach. I still couldn't taste anything because of my nerves, but I went through the motions of chewing and swallowing. And I contemplated.

Obviously, politics was another reason Richard had us traveling all over the nation until he finally received the summons to the capital. Of course, humanitarian aid was the major reason since it was vital to see the state of things with our own eyes.

The servers' shaking hands arranged the last course on the table. Dessert. An assortment of tiny cakes and fruits. When I took a sip of the digestif, I found it surprisingly sweet. The alcohol and confections did nothing wrong. If anything, I was grateful for all this food especially in light of the circumstances afflicting Kophe, so I dedicated myself to properly savoring the flavors of this final course. Sweet. Sadly, I still couldn't taste anything.

The Kophe side of this luncheon couldn't touch their dessert plates either.

"...Your Imperial Highness." A hoarse voice. Immediately, everyone's attention turned to His Majesty. He looked like he was trying to choose his words carefully. After a few short beats of silence, he continued, his eyes on Richard. "As the king of the Kingdom of Kophe, I'm grateful to you for the aid you've provided."

Prince Medaikonar, the grand chancellor, and the priests looked horrified. Richard responded to His Majesty's words of thanks with a sunny smile. His aura was the complete opposite of the ferocity he'd demonstrated just a short time ago.

"I only did what I thought was natural, Your Royal Majesty," he said. "Were the Kingdom to fall to ruin, major powers around the world would use your country as a foothold to turn their blades against our empire. And I certainly couldn't have that, hm? From a humanitarian standpoint and in terms of our own interests, the Empire takes the position that it is committed to the defeat of your monsters and the rescue of your people. However."

The smile on Richard's face remained unchanging. Only his gaze sharpened now.

"My order of knights, the Flame Corps, were ambushed in the former Nowasilo district by a contingent of your royal guards and holy knights. Not only did a few of my own people suffer injuries, but so too did the citizens of Kophe, civilians who approved of our relief efforts and assisted us with them. As a result, the distrust amongst my supporters toward your country has skyrocketed and that is the current way of things."

"B-But that's because you—" Agitated, Medaikonar jerked up from his seat.

Richard didn't spare him a single glance as his gaze stayed on the king's face. "Your Royal Majesty, shall I accept this affront as your country's consensus on the Empire's aid?"

The smile on Richard's face had vanished at some point.

The king said nothing. Lord Kantas, his uncle and the grand chancellor, spoke instead. "I believe the Empire has a biased opinion of this matter, Your Imperial Highness. Have you not been making the lords of this nation your vassals one after another under the banner of your cause? Therefore, the only way to interpret your actions is as aggression."

Spit flew from his mouth as he argued vehemently. Richard didn't look once at him either. He continued staring at the king as he spoke.

"I understand that information has been circulating in the royal court that

we've been winning over lords for the purpose of invasion. So the question, Your Royal Majesty, is: who will *you* believe? Those who haven't set foot outside of the royal capital yet have the temerity to spread unsubstantiated rumors, or me, who has dealt firsthand with the monsters destroying your nation?"

Using a dessert fork, Richard neatly cut a piece of cake off. Though he smiled once more, his flame-colored eyes did not.

"I sincerely wish for your country's survival and prosperity. After repeated rejections of my formal petitions to lend assistance, I took the necessary steps through the lords who administer these lands to demonstrate my will. Should you choose to denigrate our aid as an invasion, none of your neighbors will *ever* support you in the event of future crises."

A pause to take a bite of his dessert then he continued.

"Moreover, our empire has gone to similar great lengths to provide relief to other countries in the past. The Principality of Arjentina was one of them."

Solarus inclined her head regally in agreement. Then she and Richard both fixed their gazes on the king once more.

"Your Royal Majesty. All that we in the Empire's Order of Knights, Special Forces seek is your approval to support the Kingdom of Kophe and defeat the monsters."

"You...!" When Lord Kantas tried to intervene, His Majesty silenced him with his eyes then spoke.

"Continue."

With a nod, Richard did just that. "I request permission to station a limited garrison of the imperial army in Kophe. We need a base of operations to conduct both relief efforts and monster hunts."

"A-As if we would allow you to do that!" Prince Medaikonar shouted those words angrily. His father's hard glare rendered him mute for an instant, but even that wasn't enough to suppress his agitation. "You bastard, you plan to make this country a vassal state, don't you?! I wager the Empire actually encouraged Philisbyl and the margrave to destroy Arjentina just so you could get

its survivors to trust you!”

High Priest Pisciozze picked up the gauntlet Medaikonar threw down and ran with it. “With all due respect, our kingdom doesn’t need the Empire’s support. As part of the Church’s monster control division, our holy knights are more than capable of exterminating the monsters. I must say this next part at the risk of offending you, Prince Richard. Do you realize your actions as the Empire’s representative demonstrate your lack of faith in the Great Church of Kophe?”

The grand chancellor added his own remark after the high priest’s. “The results of our efforts against the monsters and the status of each territory have been correctly reported to the Kingdom’s parliament. Wouldn’t you agree then, Prince Richard, that it’s reasonable to expect a discrepancy in accuracy between the information that reaches us through the *proper* channels from each region and your *unofficial* rescue efforts?”

In the face of the clamoring individuals in the opposition, Richard continued eating his dessert with a composed expression. His table manners were so lovely that I fancied the dessert was delighted to be consumed by him. When he finished it, down to the last mint leaf used as garnishment, he looked at the king. He continued behaving like he was speaking only to His Majesty.

“Your Majesty. When we questioned members of the royal forces that attacked us a few days ago, they testified they acted under orders from Kophe’s Crown Prince Medaikonar and High Priest Pisciozze.”

The prince and the high priest both paled. The king didn’t react at all now.

“...I see.”

Those two words conveyed everything he felt.

“If you give me permission to establish a garrison in Kophe, I plan on purifying the whole of Mayga Cieux.” Richard glanced at me then. “Madam Monica, if you would. Please explain how it’s possible to cleanse the forest of Mayga Cieux with the power of all twenty-two holy women in the country.”

“Naught but a pipe dream!” For some reason, High Priest Pisciozze suddenly shouted with a panicked expression. “His Royal Majesty despises saints. It is already the height of blasphemy to have the wicked Arousing Priestess here,

but you wish to further the insult to the king by engaging her opinions too? Absurd.”

“Well, there you have it, Madam Monica. Right from the horse’s mouth. Evidently, expunging every last monster would actually be an inconvenience to certain quarters. Whatever shall we do now?”

“How dare—”

Ignoring the high priest who now fumbled for words, Richard closed one eye and continued. “Right then, Madam Monica. I believe it’s high time you demonstrate to His Royal Majesty that you’re the only one capable of saving Kophe.”

Everyone in the room directed their attention toward me. Hardening my resolve, I turned to face the king. I flinched when I saw the hatred oozing from his eyes.

“Your Royal Majesty, I am well aware of your disgust for holy women. I also know that our meeting like this again is discourteous to you. However...if I can save the Kingdom of Kophe from the monsters, then I wish to do so by purging them with my supernatural powers, even if I’m hated for them.”

The king kept silent. I pleaded with him as he stared at me with his unreadable, sunken eyes.

“The former Nowasilo district has been purified and though it’s small, the people there can expect a harvest come autumn. I have already proved that my plan will work. Therefore...won’t you listen to what I have to say?”

No one said a word. A long time passed. Then His Majesty spoke, sighing.

“Prince Richard. We will send you an official thank you at a later date.”

He replied to Richard, not me.

“Then might I be bold in presuming I have your permission to establish a garrison?”

His Majesty nodded, silently affirming Richard’s question. When he spoke again, it sounded almost like he was talking to himself. “I do indeed loathe holy women. I despised our warped system of governance preserved by the reliance

on saints. But..." The king's gaze pierced through me. It was the first time he acknowledged my existence. "At the very least, since her time in the palace undertaking a queen's education, Saint Monica has never once uttered a lie. One might even call her too honest for her own good."

Indescribable, undefined emotions flitted inside my chest. I bowed my head to His Majesty.

And so the luncheon ended without incident.



AFTER that, Crown Prince Medaikonar and High Priest Pisciozze were summoned to the audience chamber where they knelt on the floor, their heads bowed. Sweat dripped down their jaws onto the marble floor. They understood the gravity of being called to the audience chamber instead of a private parlor or office. The king's heavy exhale reverberated throughout the wide space.

"A part of me suspected something was wrong. But to think even I failed to recognize the extent of destruction in our country. It seems I have succumbed to old age as well." He slumped deep into his throne and swallowed medicine proffered by one of his aides. His eyes dark with emotion, he stared down at the men in front of him. "You two...you dared to use me as a puppet."

"N-No, Your Majesty—"

"Rebellions, one after another. The steady decline of my advisors inside the court. The lack of food too... I finally see the reason for it all. I allowed myself to be manipulated by the likes of you because of my hatred for the saints..."

"Father."

"Leave. You will await my judgment on this matter. I don't want to look at either of you right now."

The king closed his eyes and said nothing more.

"What do I do, what do I do, what do I do? This is the end. I'm going to be deposed as the crown prince. I can't have that."

Pale and shaking, Medaikonar sat with his knees curled to his chest on the sofa. Pisciozze and his subordinates exchanged silent looks. Their expressions

were grim too. If the prince was deposed and Pisciozze removed from his position, the country's power dynamics would change dramatically. And should that happen, the Church's power structure would also be rewritten by the saints' supporters.

"No, no, no, no, no. This can't be happening. This can't be..."

In a corner of the room, Keunt mumbled incoherently in a full-on panic. Abandoned as he had been by the house of Strelizzi, he too shared his fate with all the others in the room. The epic novel he'd been writing in his mind—*The Tale of Keunt Strelizzi*—would end as merely a dream at this rate.

"The endless bouts of suffering he endured in his school days when no one would recognize his genius. His gallantry and courage fighting hard on the frontlines of Mayga Ceiux. Keunt, who exacted vengeance on the Arousing Priestess for humiliating him and still saw his star rise in the world. Confronted by savage demons from the Empire, would he, alongside the virtuous crown prince and high priest, scatter his enemies in another display of breath-taking heroism?!"

As soon as he started painting the words in his mind, a jolt of electricity ran through him. Yes. It was a spectacular chance to turn the tide in his favor in this once-in-a-lifetime battle!

"Your Royal Highness!" Overcome with emotion by his own delusions, Keunt rushed to Medaikonar's side.

"Keunt, what...?"

He stared at the prince's beautiful face wet with tears, his golden hair disheveled. Beauty was justice. And Keunt realized he still remained under the banner of justice, so he appealed strongly to the prince with his fists clenched resolutely.

"His Majesty is no longer capable of ruling! Senility has already rotted his mind! As the crown prince, you must decide now if you have the determination to carve a way forward into the future!"

"I...decide...?"

"That's correct. Your life isn't over yet, Your Royal Highness. In fact, why

should the king be allowed to set your course at all?! For *you* are the one who will create the future! Look around you and see you have both me and the high priest on your side!”

At some point, Pisciozze bent a knee reverently in front of Medaikonar and gripped his hands firmly. “Your Highness, what say you...?”

The light in the two pairs of eyes shot through Medaikonar and restored the glitter in his own.

“Do you remember the legend of the knight, Re Tuts Bea? He destroyed an enemy host of tens of thousands invading the country with only a few hundred troops. Your Highness, you’re destined to become a new legend yourself!”

As *am I*, Keunt added silently to himself. It wouldn’t do to forget his part in this epic story.

“The nation’s elite worry about our kingdom as well. So long as you have their will on your side, neither that evil imperial prince’s schemes nor that harlot of a priestess need to be feared!”

They squeezed each other’s hands tightly.

“We’re taking them down!” the prince declared.



WHEN I returned to my private chambers in Viscount Telestraza’s castle, Solarus greeted me in her usual maid uniform.

“Welcome back, Madam Monica.”

I felt discomfited by her bowing her head to me in such a servile manner after witnessing her guise as “the princess of a ruined country.”

“O-Oh, thank you, um, Solasvi...”

Before I could finish saying her real name, Solarus shushed me by pressing a finger to my lips.

“I am Solarus, Madam Monica. I use my full name only in official circumstances, and as you may have guessed, Solarus comes from it. So please stop.”

“Mrgh.”

“Please don’t ever call me by that name again. I’m quite fond of my current standing, you see. Besides...I only took on that form again at His Highness’s request, albeit *very* begrudgingly.”

Knead, knead. Rub, rub.

Solarus talked to me while massaging my cheeks and jaw with both of her hands. Though her touch wasn’t deep like her usual massages, I could feel the nerves stiffening my face dissipating as her fingers worked. It felt so good I had a hard time speaking...

“So, Madam Monica, the next time I hear you say Solasvita or any of my other names, I shall punish you. Understood?”

“U-Undadood.” I mangled the word.

“I will hang you from the ceiling using rope tied with exquisite knots and present you as a beautiful objet d’art.”

“Mpf!”

“You *do* know that I’m thoroughly familiar with the elasticity of your body, yes? Your lustrous silver hair with its ever-expanding tint of pink and pale soft skin...I shall emphasize these most attractive features with a rope dyed using safflower grown in Benisil. It will make a beautiful contrast wrapped around your holy attire... I’ll use natural lighting to display you... In which case, it may not be a terrible idea to bind you and exhibit you in one of the fields...”

“I-In the fields...?!” I gasped.

Solarus had clearly entered a zone of no return while massaging my face. The dangerous glint in the former princess’s eyes remained as she continued murmuring absent-mindedly, her eyes on me.

“Ahhh, what a sublime sight you would make. I want to try it out right away... Begging your pardon, Madam Monica, but will you call me Solasvita one more time?”

“Wh-Why?”

“Because I need justification to punish you.”

“Justi...?!”

Solarus finally returned to reality from her dreamy trance. She released me and cleared her throat discreetly. “I apologize for my behavior. It seems I was unconsciously seeking relief.”

I wasn’t surprised considering how stressful the situation must have been for her. Just when she was finally living a peaceful life as a maid, she needed to take on the mantle of an important person from a destroyed nation once more. Oh, but she was so lovely.

“Solarus.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Um... Although reviving Solasvita might have been a necessary evil for you, I thought you were incredibly beautiful.”

“Thank you very much. I shall cherish the compliment.” She continued with a ladylike smile on her face. “But now, I am merely Solarus, His Highness’s servant and your maid, Madam Monica. This role is the happiest for us all.”

Hand on her chest, she curtsied to me. I thought back to everything she’d done for me until now. It made me realize I didn’t know anything about her past. But I was certain there must have been so many times she wanted to give up her status.

“If that’s what makes you happy now, Solarus, then I’m happy too. I feel so blessed to have you looking after me,” I said sincerely.

“Please allow me to continue doing so, Madam Monica.”

“I’m in your care.”

The oddly formal exchange made me giggle. The corners of her mouth tipped up slightly too.



A week passed as we enjoyed the peaceful days that felt like the calm before a storm. On a morning when the first rains of the rainy season started falling, a letter arrived that would change our destiny. Richard summoned his knights and our supporters in Kophe to the castle’s great hall. Then he opened the

letter in front of us all, read it, and announced its contents.

“His Royal Majesty has given his official seal of approval for our establishment of a garrison as well as our support in the complete purge of Mayga Cieux...” He paused to look at me before declaring in ringing tones. “At last...the time has come to commence the operation.”



THE night before we set out for Mayga Cieux, a grand party was held in the castle’s great hall. It functioned as a combined rally and farewell celebration. I wore an evening dress and heels again for the first time in a while. Naturally, Richard was over-effusive with the praise.

“Miss Monica, you are absolutely ravishing! I appreciate you wearing the new outfit! It looks fantastic on you!”

“You know there was no need to custom-order a new dress,” I replied.

“I simply wanted you to wear something I chose, Miss Monica.”

“O-Oh...I see.” Before my cheeks flushed, I slid my gaze from his and fidgeted restlessly.

Today’s creamy white dress, similar in color to my normal saintly garb, exposed a great deal of décolletage. My hair was tied up in an elegant knot, with lacework and beaded accessories wound throughout it. The skirt of the dress created a lovely, slim silhouette, but was surprisingly easy to move in.

Richard stepped on to the stage and addressed the crowd of attendees when the party started. “You’ve all worked incredibly hard in our many battles thus far. Thanks to your efforts, Kophe and the Empire can now stand in solidarity like this wishing for the purification of Mayga Cieux.”

His elegant upswept hairstyle and gorgeous full dress uniform looked especially good on him tonight. He skillfully spun his words, passionately conveying the tragedies and sights he’d witnessed across the country and the resilience of the citizens of Kophe. I could hear people sniffing with emotion as they listened to him.

“To tell you the truth, it was hard seeing the true state of affairs when I first

stepped into the Kingdom. But its citizens' fortitude and dependable natures opened my eyes. My chest burned with feeling, and I felt a powerful desire to lend them a helping hand. Your thoughts moved the king as well. I have no doubt this is the result of each and every one of Kophe's citizens doing what they can for their country."

Richard made eye contact with each person in attendance as his eyes moved over the crowd during his earnest appeal.

"I'm sure that just hearing the name 'Mayga Cieux' makes this country's people afraid. But we'll be fine because we overcame a great deal thus far. I believe in all of you. Let's bring peace to Kophe together."

A storm of cheers and applause followed in the wake of his speech. I was a bit teary myself, even knowing how talented he was at this kind of showmanship.

Once he finished, the party went into full swing. A ball was held in the dance hall for knights and young ladies to mingle, while those who wanted to enjoy a quiet chat with others savored spirits in the luxurious lounge. The garden, illuminated magically, created a romantic backdrop in the night. The scent of various perfumes mixed with the tantalizing aromas coming from the light repast. Each and every person was in their best finery, creating an atmosphere akin to a museum. You could have all the eyes in the world, and it still wouldn't be enough to admire it all.

And as for me...

"Esteemed Arousing Priestess, about the cultivation in my territory—"

"Arousing Priestess, I'd like to hear your thoughts on our medical system."

"Lady Priestess, are you interested in establishing a new religion?"

"Hahaha..."

...there I was surrounded by a crush of old men in this dazzling environment, hounded by questions about work. Not an iota of splendor in this little pocket of the hall. Although I actually appreciated it since I wasn't very good at balls or parties.

"Hooo, I finally managed to escape..."

A lull in the conversation with the old gentleman gave me the opportunity I needed to make myself a plate of refreshments. Just when a champagne glass filled with a scrumptious gelatin dessert caught my eye, another old man approached me. This time, it was a mustachioed aristocrat.

“Saint Monica, may I have a few moments of your time?”

“Is something the matter?”

He drew even closer to me, ambition glittering in his gaze. “I heard you and Prince Richard have a very close relationship. So...” When he glanced meaningfully at a young lady attended by her mother, she blushed and they both walked over to us. I realized they were his daughter and wife. “So would you arrange for His Highness to make my daughter’s acquaintance?”

“O-Oh, um...”

I looked around the hall, searching for Richard. He sat on a sofa chatting with young noblemen. It didn’t seem like an atmosphere where I could just bring a young lady to introduce to him.

“Well...I’ll let him know.”

“Thank you very much! I really appreciate it!”

The mustachioed man’s daughter bowed her head, cheeks still flushed and expression overcome with emotion. When the trio walked away, another pair of an older man and younger woman approached me.

“Arousing Priestess, might you mediate a meeting with His Highness...”

“Would you tell us anything you know about His Highness’s love life and the type of women he prefers?”

“Do you know where His Highness’s bedroom is?”

“Would you slip this love potion to His Highness? I bought it in secret from a merchant.”

Wait, wait, wait. That last request was most definitely a crime!

I deflected every single one of them with vague responses and harmless information about him, such as he was very good at cracking crab legs. Except

for the last person. I reported her to the guards on duty then escaped to find a deserted spot.

I finally found it on the second floor. The location allowed me a view into the atrium doubling as a dance hall below.

“I’m exhausted...”

I lowered myself into a dainty chair and sipped on the juice in my champagne glass while rubbing my aching toes. Below, men and women twirled around the room in pairs, their dances matching the rhythm of the jovial music. They were all clearly enjoying themselves. Richard was dancing with a young lady wearing a neat dress.

“He says he’s not good at it, but he still dances more beautifully than everyone...”

Watching him from up here made his athleticism and strong sense of rhythm obvious. He danced with the young ladies, one after another. He showed no hints of fatigue as he matched his steps to his partner’s ability and led them. The women who waited their turn to dance with him all had the same fighting spirit in their eyes the knights did during monster hunts.

I recalled children lining up for stuffed animals and hugs. The memory made me chuckle softly.

“Oh-ho, what do we have here? Not a wallflower but a celestial star.”

“Eeek!”

Startled by the sudden voice, I whipped around to see who it was and found Xenu behind me, an indulgent smile on his face.

“Y-You’re much too close, Xenu,” I said.

“Here you go. You haven’t eaten much yet, right?”

“Mpf.”

I tried to move away from him, but he gently stuffed a bird-shaped steamed confection in my mouth. When I automatically accepted the snack, he chuckled and sat down next to me.

His long black hair fell in lustrous waves down his back. He too wore formal attire. It closely resembled his usual high-collared long tunic except for the luxurious fabric, silk with black and red hues. A closer inspection revealed various designs—dragons, flowers, birds, and more—embroidered in the material using thread in similar colors. It was fancier than a minor noblewoman's. His dangling earrings and necklace complemented his exotic outfit, very clearly not in the style of Kophe or the Empire, very well too.

When I bit into the bird-shaped steamed pastry, the sweet flavor of red bean filling spread in my mouth. Delicious.

"I've...never had this until now. Scrumptious indeed," I said.

"It's a dish from my homeland. I invited chefs from there to make it for you, Madam Monica."

"J-Just for me?"

"Yes."

Xenu grinned cheerfully. "If what I do for you becomes a memory for you, then I'll gladly spend however much it costs. Speaking of, I have more treats for you."

A steamer rested on top of the plate in his hands. Inside was a variety of steamed buns—pinched and folded, round, and bite-size in addition to the bird-shaped one. He gave me a bamboo pick and I gratefully dove in.

"Thank you... I don't even remember the last time we talked, Xenu," I said.

"Agreed, which is why I'm here now. I wouldn't want you to forget me." He looked down at the ball below. "Well, will you look at that? Those young ladies have eyes only for His Highness. At this rate, the knights won't ever get hitched."

"Hm...fair point."

Xenu stared at my face. "You look sad, Madam Monica? Are you jealous?"

"J-Jealous! As if!" I chewed determinedly on the bun in my mouth. It felt like he hit me right where it hurts.

"You're right. That was rude of me. After all, you and His Highness don't have

that kind of relationship, huh?”

I had a hard time swallowing, so I kept chewing, stalling to reply. I chose to remain by Richard’s side even knowing we didn’t have *that* sort of bond. But hearing it from another person, I felt both crushed and miserable.

I gazed down at Richard. His red hair sparkled beautifully, awash in the light cast by the chandelier. He looked dignified in the military uniform that covered his toned body. Perfect to the tips of his fingers.



Xenu murmured quietly next to me, like he could see right through my heart. “Watching His Highness dance makes one keenly aware of his position, doesn’t it? That he’s an imperial prince and one is a commoner. That the worlds you live in are so different... Ah, I’m talking about myself, by the way.”

“Oh, I see...”

Xenu added that last part almost as an afterthought, but his words described me. That was how I took them.

Richard finished dancing with his current partner and another young lady immediately took her place. In a way, I was his dance partner right now too, but on the battlefield and as the Arousing Priestess. If his principal battlefield returned to high society and the world of the ton, then it was only natural that his partners would change constantly.

I wanted to work alongside him forever. But.

The song ended and his current dance partner reluctantly stepped away. The young noblewomen waiting for their turn glared coldly at his next partner. Someday, I would end up in the same position as them. When that day came, would I still be able to work next to him?

“Madam Monica.”

Xenu’s voice sounded very close. Before I knew it, his face was at point-blank range. So close I could see the striations in his golden pupils. He took a breath, about to continue speaking. And then—

“Miss Monica!”

My name echoed across the great hall. I looked down to the first floor with a gasp and saw another song had just ended. Richard waved up at me from the dance hall. The young ladies stared in shock. Then their hostile gazes turned toward me like a barrage of arrows.

“Urk, I don’t want to stay here a second longer.”

“Miss Monica! So this is where you were!”

In the blink of an eye, Richard stood before me, panting lightly. It was clear he ran up here. The pressure from his blinding smile scared me.

“Right then, that’s my cue to leave. Here, Your Highness, have a seat, and enjoy your evening.” Xenu hurried away with that parting remark. Richard spared his departing figure a single glance then turned to stare at me, his eyes narrowed.

“Miss Monica...are you all right? He didn’t do anything to you, did he? Do I need to have him executed?”

“Will you stop with the unsettling suggestions? We were just talking. That’s all...”

We were just talking. While the words slipped out, Richard’s hands suddenly caught my eye. Large, rugged, and strong. The hands of someone who fought on the frontlines. When I thought back to those hands grasping the young ladies’ slim, soft hands, an unbearable pain squeezed my heart.

He stared at me with a worried expression. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes... I think I ate too much, even though I knew I shouldn’t in this dress.” I smiled wryly at him. In response, he raised an eyebrow in amusement and chuckled too.

“When this is all over, we’ll have ourselves a no-holds-barred victory celebration. No dresses or balls. Only alcohol and tankards to toast.”

“I’ll make sure to leave my stomach empty for it when the time comes.”

As we laughed together, the music started up again. Looking down, I saw the aristocrats twirling around the dance hall, new encounters blooming.

“Watching His Highness dance makes one keenly aware of his position, doesn’t it? That he’s an imperial prince and one is a commoner. That the worlds you live in are so different...”

Xenu’s words ran through my mind. For some reason, I suddenly wanted to cry.

“Richard.”

“Hm?”

“I wonder how much longer I can spend time together like this with you?” The party’s extraordinary atmosphere melted my sense of reason. It was the only

explanation for why I blurted out my true feelings to him. “Calling you Richard like it’s the most natural thing in the world... Laughing together, joking together, fighting together backs pressed against each other... After all these years of helping each other, I’ve started thinking maybe it’s about time for us to move on.”

“Miss Monica, are you...perhaps a little drunk?”

“I doubt it, since I haven’t had any alcohol tonight... Though I might be drunk off the atmosphere. I’m sorry. I... Being here, it just struck me again how miraculous it is that I get to be with you, Your Highness. I’m sorry for putting a damper on the mood.” I tried to force a laugh, but I couldn’t. Richard seemed paralyzed by my unusual behavior, like he’d forgotten how to smile.

The music ended again in the dance hall.

Krak, krak.

“Hm? What a strange sound...”

A dry crackling sound was coming from him, like someone had stepped on glass and broke it. In the next moment, I found myself in the circle of his arms.

“Mpf...”

The first thing that hit me was the alluring scent of his sweat. The musk was proof of how long he’d been dancing tonight. I couldn’t think of anything to say, not with his hand on the back of my head pressing my face tightly into his chest. My mind went completely black at the feel of his powerful, resolute arms around me. I just stood there in a daze, letting him do what he wanted.

Another song ended, but Richard continued to hold me tight. And I let him. I closed my eyes, savoring his body heat. It should have felt cramped and painful in his hold. But the space within his arms felt like home.

Then I had a thought. It *felt* like I knew him, but I didn’t actually know anything about him at all. Because it was the first time he embraced me like this.

Oh, I see... Richard might be a friendly person, but he never touches others more than necessary.

He often kissed my hair, high-fived me, sparred with me, and even rode on horseback together. But his touches never went beyond that. I finally realized this truth once he hugged me like this. And then my next question was, why? Why didn't he touch me more?

Because I've spent my working life in a constant state of desire due to my powers... If he touched me and hugged me when I'm in heat, then I would interpret his actions in a different way. I might attack him...and that would be dangerous for us both. That must be why.

Then why was he embracing me now? Most likely because he wanted to cheer me up after seeing me so upset. There was no other answer, since Richard didn't feel romantic love or passion or desire.

In that case...let me indulge myself a little now.

This unusual situation must have made me drunk. Because I boldly wound my arms around him. I could have sworn a slight tremor ran through his back. For a moment, I was afraid he hated it, and a chill overcame me. But he didn't pull away or release me.

"Thank you, Richard... You always cheer me up at my weakest moment."

"I...I'm not as kind of a man as you think I am."

"Yes, you are. Even now, it feels so wonderful being with you like this."

"Oh...really."

He muttered the words quietly then gently let me go. The warmth that accumulated between us dissipated. His flame-colored eyes pierced me. The smile on his face was his usual kind one.

"Miss Monica. Once we settle things in Kophe, you and I are going to have a nice, long talk about the future."

"The future?"

"Yes. I...can't tell you just yet." He tugged on a hank of my disheveled hair then leaned down to whisper in my ear. "But know this: I have no intention of letting you go. Think of it as a hint to our conversation and plan accordingly, hm?"

“What do you—”

Mean? Except a sudden explosion meant I didn’t get the chance to finish my question.

“A surprise attack?!”

Without hesitation, Richard jumped over the banister and landed in the great hall below.

“Get to your positions! Knights, prepare for battle!”

The atmosphere of the party transformed instantly.



THE knights’ shouts rang out.

“Enemy raid! The enemy forces bear the crown prince’s crest!”

“What did he just say...?!”

The music stopped at the sound of the alarm bell, and a beat later, a messenger knight ran into the hall.

“Enemy at the gates! A magic bomb was blasted against a castle wall!”

Amidst the panic of the guests, Richard’s voice carried powerfully in the great hall. “Non-combatants, follow my knights’ orders and evacuate quickly. I want all members of the fire brigade to report to their stations immediately and the saints should follow their squadron leaders’ instructions! The rest of you get to your posts!”

“Yes, sir!”

The knights enjoying the party lined up and grabbed their swords from the ones responsible for weapons. Then they headed outside to counter the attack.

“Richard!” I chased after him, tossing my heels away as I raced down the stairs to the first floor. “What can I do?”

“Go protect the civilians in a safe place, Miss Monica.”

I didn’t expect him to say that because I thought he would want me to help as combat service support.

“You’re an asset we need to preserve. Try to use as little of your supernatural abilities and magic as possible, but make sure none of the non-combatants are hurt. And one more thing.” He lowered his voice and leaned down to speak directly into my ear. “I’m positive they’re coming after you.”

“Nh...!”

“That’s what I would do if I were the enemy. So...hide in a safe place.”

“U-Understood. May the fortunes of war favor you.”

As knight commander, Richard’s orders were absolute. When I nodded affirmatively, the corners of his eyes relaxed just a fraction though his expression remained grim. He kissed the crown of my head and then we went our separate ways. I took charge of the guests who were running around in a panic, leading them to safety.

Once all the civilians gathered in the great hall and I did a head count, the knights on security detail and I stood watch over them as we monitored the situation. Sounds from magical explosions reverberated outside, sometimes shaking the castle heavily. The people congregated here let slip their fears.

“Why did this happen...?”

“Who’s attacking us?”

“Monsters are one thing... But humans...”

I know Richard told me to avoid using my powers as much as possible. But I needed to calm down the anxious guests. I formed a sigil with my fingers and pressed it tightly against my chest.

“Seethe, my holy powers. Stir, my life force. The torrent of my magic knows no bounds as it rushes toward the heavens.”

One of the knights noticed, his expression surprised and uneasy. I ignored him and continued performing my magic. I used silencing magic to muffle my voice and chanted after establishing the area of effect for the spell.

“Witches, sisters of eld, unveil a night of peace for all.”

The soft weeping and angry murmurs disappeared as the magic calmed down their troubled hearts. Then, one after another, they slowly collapsed on the

ground and fell asleep.

The knight approached me hesitantly. “Madam Monica, His Highness instructed you to preserve your powers...”

“I’m sorry. I’ll speak to Richard properly after this is all over.”

“Well...to tell you the truth, this was a big help. Especially because the battle seems to be taking time.”

Expression grim, the knight stared out the window. Outside, magical explosions lit up the night sky like fireworks all over the castle grounds. It was clear the enemy had a few mages stronger than Second Class. I also had no doubt of their composition.

“The Church’s order of holy knights and...the knights in the royal guard...”

Just saying the words out loud sent a shudder of revulsion through me. Because the people who should have been protecting Kophe’s citizens instead launched a surprise attack at night, and at a party with so many civilians no less.

It wouldn’t shock me at all if they’re scheming something even more heinous...

With a gasp, I noticed an anomaly at the top of a spire.

“Grant unto me an owl’s keen sight.” I rubbed my eyelids then activated the magical detection spell and strained my eyes for a closer look. When I saw a strange purple light flickering at the tip of the spire, I shouted. “It’s a magical lure light! The enemy’s First Class mages are using it to lure monsters!”

“What?!”

The knights raised their voices in shock. I had a feeling the battle had grown so intense that the enemy’s magic squadrons weren’t coping well. At this rate, it was only a matter of time before the monsters attacked.

“It would be easy to destroy the light with my magic. But...doing it from here would reveal my location.”

Richard said the enemy was most likely targeting me. Putting the civilians to sleep inside was one thing, but I couldn’t risk doing anything that would expose my position to the foes outside.

“Goodness, what am I supposed to do now?”

That was when I felt a hand on my shoulder. The scent of cologne enveloped me.

“You look like you’re in a pinch, Madam Monica.”

“Xenu! The magic didn’t make you fall asleep?!”

“Heh heh. I’m actually wearing a magical device that wards off magic. An ancestral secret, you see.”

If I looked closely at the beads sewn into his cuff, I saw one had burst open. Saaya, his cat, slept peacefully in the cradle of his arms.

“Why don’t I help you, Madam Monica?” He whispered the words softly. “By chanting into one of my Priestess Teardrop Stones, I can make the others fly and destroy the magical lure light. I have enough magic of my own to determine that a few enemy knights are in possession of Priestess Teardrop Stones.”

“You can do that?! Wait. Why does the enemy have your bloody Stones?”

“Naturally, because they’re talismans you can get for free.” Xenu narrowed his eyes and chuckled. I just realized he and Richard were definitely alike in some ways.

“Basically, you activate their Stones with one of yours here to destroy the magical lure light out there, yes?”

“Exactly. Except my magic is only Fourth Class. I understand how to execute my plan in theory, but my magic alone won’t be enough to do it.”

“Hm... What if I lend you mine as I amplify it? Will that work?” I asked.

“It should.”

There were actually two ways I could have helped him. The first was to invigorate him with my saintly powers and strengthen his magic. The other was to enhance my own magic and pour my magic into Xenu as an external tank of magical energy.

The first option meant arousing him and the second, me. I didn’t even have to think about it. Of course my only choice was the latter of the two.

“Got it. Then...I’ll lend you my magical energy. Prepare yourself.”

“Understood.”

Xenu nodded and tied his hair back then turned to face the window, straightening his posture. I could hear him muttering an unfamiliar incantation as he made a sigil with two raised fingers. He ended the chant with, “Please.” I held my hands over his back. I inhaled and imagined the magical energy deep inside me flowing from my palms.

“Seethe, my holy powers. Stir, my life force. I share with him freely the torrent of my magic.”

Link established. The moment I felt it happen, the magical energy within my body rushed in huge quantities toward Xenu. I clenched my teeth and endured the powerful current. He was sweating too.

“Break!”

He whispered the word fiercely. *Whoosh*. Projectiles whizzed toward the magical lure light and pierced through it. It exploded, sending up a cloud of white smoke into the sky, distinctly visible even in the darkness.

One side of his mouth curled up in response to the sight.

“It worked, huh? Haha... I didn’t realize magic could be this powerful.”

I suddenly grew dizzy as exhaustion crept in. Xenu held me upright as I swayed.

“Madam Monica, are you okay?”

“Yes... Yes, I’m fine. I just need to rest a bit.”

The magical energy in my body was amplified because I’d cast my saintly power on myself. As I poured my magic into Xenu, my supernatural abilities continued to enhance my magic. Repeat cycle. I hadn’t felt this dizzy in a while and I pushed myself away from him. Thanks to the magic stones imbued with the special camouflage sewed into my dress, the side effects didn’t show on my face. Even so, this was bad.

After informing the knight that the magical lure light had been destroyed, I asked him if I could be alone for a bit. Once he gave me permission, I walked

quickly to a corner of the great hall. There were sofas and curtains placed around the space, so I chose a sofa in a deserted spot and curled up into a ball on one end of it.

“Ughhh... This is different from when my body goes haywire when I’m with Richard... I feel like I’m going to lose my mind...”

Suddenly, a shadow fell over me and the tempting scent of cologne drifted in the air. When I looked up, I saw Xenu staring down at me. Backlit by the lamps in the hall, his smile flashing his canines looked strangely striking.

“Madam Monica, I know this is rude to ask, but...are you feeling *those* effects?”

“...Yes. So go away.”

“I’d be more than happy to help you through it though.”

“Huh?”

For a second, I couldn’t understand the meaning of his words. Xenu continued speaking, his tone considerate and matter-of-fact. My frozen state didn’t bother him.

“I’m not a noble, just a simple merchant. I’ll also keep what happens between us a secret, which means you won’t have any problems in the future.”

“Ummm...”

I was at a loss for words since no one had ever taken such an assertive but respectful approach with me. I had been attacked and I had seen blatant lust directed at me. But I had never been...invited. Until now. And it definitely felt like an invitation.

“What do you think, Madam Monica?”

He took my hand and pressed a kiss to my finger, his lips making a soft sound. I thought his touch would excite me—but unexpectedly, the complete opposite happened.

No. I don’t want him. I want—

I immediately brushed his hand aside, practically slapping it away.

“Ah, I see.” Xenu’s eyes were slightly widened with surprise. I gasped and shook my head.

“I’m sorry. I...I know you made the offer out of kindness, but...I can’t. I don’t want to.”

“My apologies then. Of course, I won’t force you if you don’t need my help.” He didn’t look at all perturbed by my answer or my attitude. He simply narrowed his eyes suggestively behind his round-framed glasses. “But if you *do* ever need me, feel free to come to me.”

“Thank you... Your kindness is more than enough...”

I managed to finish saying what I had to and then hugged myself even more tightly, enduring the lust raging through my body. It combined with my disgust at myself to make a mess of my mind.

What I want...

Wasn’t a man with slender fingers and a fragrant cologne. When I recalled the sensation of *his* touch, I wanted more. It wasn’t lust for lust’s sake either. The one I wanted to direct this uncontrollable heat toward was—

No, no, no, no, no. You can’t think about him. Stop thinking about this. No.

Red hair so vivid it looked like fresh blood. A compelling gaze that grew even more forceful when he narrowed his eyes. Long eyelashes and a gentle smile. Strong, dependable arms, right down to the fingertips, that held me tight. The way he said my name so sweetly in my ear. Only one man.

“Madam Monica.”

“Nhhh!!!”

The voice whispering in my ear was so different from the one I was remembering that I stiffened out of reflex. Xenu had drawn near me without making a sound and now he spoke softly.

“I love you, Madam Monica. I want to stay by your side for the rest of my life as your husband.”

When I lifted my face, I found his so close to mine that I saw myself reflected in his eyes. He beamed down at me.

“We come from similar backgrounds and I swear I won’t ever hurt you. All in all, I’d say I’m a very good catch.”

There was so little distance between us that our noses almost touched. Hearing his confession from a hair’s breadth away, I jumped up from the couch and fled.



I was watching the battle unfold from headquarters. The enemy’s knights yelled while lighting up the curtain of night with flare magic.

“Our opponent is a lone whelp! Don’t be afraid! Charge!”

With that war cry, Kophe’s knights charged down the bridge connecting Viscount Telestraza’s castle and rampart. The water in the moat below rippled. A single black-haired knight stood in the middle of the bridge.

He unsheathed his sword smoothly then shouted.

“I am Darius Sye, the knight of wrath! Burst under my sight!”

The explosion lit up the dead of night like daylight. The bridge collapsed, and both Darius, our decoy, and the enemy holy knights fell. I knew he would return safely.

The situation wasn’t terrible. We were steadily whittling their numbers down, so the longer the battle continued, the greater our advantage as the side with the holy women.

Strange. It looks like they’re stalling for time...

At that moment, one of our mages shouted.

“Th-They launched a magical lure light!”

“What?”

Eyes glowing with magical detection, the mage pointed to the top of a castle spire.

“There’s a lot of smoke up there. At this rate, the monsters in the vicinity will be attracted to the castle...!”

So the enemy had in fact been stalling for time. They must have released the

lure light while we were distracted by the intense volley of magical attacks.

“How can we destroy it?”

“We need one First Class mage or two or more Third Class mages.”

I mulled it over while staring at the spire. I couldn’t afford to split up the magical squadron. It also might be too late if we waited for Darius to come back.

But then, unexpectedly, the problem was solved shortly thereafter. It almost felt anticlimactic.

Fwish. Projectiles of some sort flew from the enemy’s side straight toward the top of the spire. The lure light exploded. Our mages’ unit cheered in excitement.

“It was destroyed! How strange though... Why did the enemy destroy their own gambit?”

“This is...Miss Monica’s work.”

“Huh?”

I spoke confidently. She was the only one on our side capable of using magic on a First Class level. I also understood why the agents of destruction came from the Kophe side.

“We end this quickly. I’m worried about her.” I smoothly unsheathed my sword. “I’m going in too. Watch my back.”

“Yes, sir!”

And before dawn even broke, every single individual on the enemy’s side surrendered.



THE next morning, the ringleaders of the night attack and their subjects were being held in the castle’s courtyard under the sun’s brilliant, invigorating rays. They were forced to sit on the lawn and I stared at them wide-eyed. Because one of them was someone I had never expected to meet here.

“Prince Medaikonar... Why would you do this?”

His golden hair always impeccably styled, he now slumped on the ground, bound and battered. By chance, we ended up in this situation where I looked down on him, so he glared up at me, his face twisted bitterly.

“You arrogant arousing priestess...!”

Even his insults felt nostalgic. To think the day would come when the man responsible for that moniker would hurl it at me again. His Royal Highness, Crown Prince Medaikonar Kophe. And in a situation like this, no less.

When I tried to bend a knee in greeting out of habit, Richard stopped me, his voice cold as he stood next to me.

“Don’t. You can remain standing.”

“But—”

“I’ve already contacted the royal palace. By the joint authority of the king and grand chancellor, I’ve been entrusted with judging Medaikonar’s crimes.”

“Wha—” Medaikonar mumbled the word. But Richard ignored him.

“So don’t kneel, Miss Monica. He’s no longer the crown prince or a noble. He’s nothing. He disregarded the will of his king and parliament to turn his blade against not only the Empire but his own people. For all intents and purposes, he is a true criminal.”

“You call me...a criminal...? To hell with you!” Trembling with fury, His Highness Medaikonar started shouting, his blood-stained, cracked lips twisted. “Arousing Priestess Monica Regulus! After humiliating me, you dare to seduce the emperor’s brother?! Have you forgotten your obligations to your homeland?! You treasonous tramp of a saint!”

Treasonous tramp of a saint. I wasn’t sure how I felt about being upgraded from an arousing priestess.

Faced with my former fiancé’s unsightly state, I experienced a complicated mix of emotions. Exasperation, pity, resignation. I knelt down in front of him, our gazes level.

“Miss Monica.” Richard tried to stop me, but I shook my head.

“Please. Just this once.”

“...All right.” Instead of nodding, he casually unsheathed his sword. Obviously a threat to curb any attempt on Medaikonar’s part to hurt me. His Royal Highness twitched, his shoulders tense.

I looked into his blue eyes and posed a question. “Your Highness...why would you do something like this? To think you would launch a night raid on a place filled with so many of Kophe’s people, your precious subjects.”

“Oh, spare me. Those who betrayed me are no longer my subjects but traitors! It’s the duty of a country’s rulers to demonstrate their wisdom and judgment by wielding their weapons against traitors!” Spit flew from his mouth as he shouted. Then he looked up at Richard. “And you, you bastard! I don’t care how angelic you seem on the surface because I see through you! I know exactly what you’re thinking! You plan to devour Kophe with this invasion!”

Richard merely stared down at him apathetically, not saying a single word.

I stood up and dusted off my skirt. “Richard. I’m done now.”

“I see. Then...will you let me handle the rest?”

“Please and thank you.”

I spun around on my heel without looking back once. I thought he continued hurling swears at my back, but none of them filtered through my mind, so I wasn’t sure. It was almost like hearing a language I didn’t know.

“Your Highness...”

Those were the only words I could muster at what had become of the crown prince of my homeland. I just felt empty.



“RIGHT then.”

I watched Miss Monica leave then turned to look down at the former crown prince. A single glance was enough to tell me fear stiffened his shoulders as he sat on the ground like a miserable wretch. He prattled on through trembling lips.

“Don’t think you have license to treat me like this just because you’re the emperor’s brother, you bastard.”

“You still haven’t realized, eh, Medaikonar?”

He scowled, his expression filled with loathing. “What nonsense are you on about...?”

“Tell me. Why do you think you were able to defy the king not once but twice in raising an army against me?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Because there are plenty of powers within Kophe desiring to expel you.”

“Part of the Church,” I stated the words coldly. “The Medaikonar faction and the high priest faction. If the pus in this country were to join hands and scheme to raise an army, the king would be satisfied if both were eliminated at once.”

“What...what are you saying?”

“Do you truly think the king wouldn’t realize the mess his imbecile son perpetrated twice?”

“That...impossible... I... But I’m the crown prince...?!”

His voice shook with fear, as did the rest of him. He finally seemed to grasp the situation. But not an iota of sympathy welled up in me. If he hadn’t let his conceit blind him, he should have been able to see the truth right away from the start just by looking at the facts and using his head.

The king had looked down on Medaikonar since his engagement with Miss Monica. Despite his and the Church’s hatred for saints in general, why would the crown prince be affianced to one? A curious conundrum. In a sense, the royal family should have hidden the sudden breaking of the betrothal and the aspersions cast on her as a lewd saint to spare themselves the humiliation. So why was the news instead spread all across the country? Even more curious.

Answer? Because Medaikonar was nothing but a puppet to the king. Right from the very beginning.

Although I was certain the country’s downfall after her loss and the Church’s follies were things the old man hadn’t accounted for. Regardless, the king never thought of Medaikonar as one fit to rule. Even if peace had remained, he would have used his idiot son as a puppet to warm the throne while the real power

still rested within his grasp. He also created the concubine system set to begin with Medaikonar's rule to make sure as many children as possible were born so that he could select a grandchild worthy of the throne.

The proof was clear in the king's conduct after the luncheon meeting. He pinned all of the blame for putting the Kingdom of Kophe into danger solely on his puppet son, the crown prince, and High Priest Pisciozze, who'd gained too much power. He had them struck down without ever lifting a finger by deliberately overlooking the two men joining forces to raise an army and allowing us to defeat them.

The king was the sort to discard anything that needed to be discarded for the continued survival of the Kingdom of Kophe. That was the reality.

"Father... No, His Royal Majesty would never allow me to be humiliated like this!"

"You really don't understand, do you? Most likely because you were raised as a dimwitted crown prince."

"Dimwitted?! Me?! Keep mocking me and I'll see that you pay dearly for it!" Red in the face, the former crown prince shouted furiously.

I thought about what purpose his life could serve while staring down at him. It would be a waste to feed him to the dogs, since he *was* a former crown prince unfortunately. But I also knew it wouldn't be smart to let him live for too long.

Medaikonar overdid it with his tantrum and pitched himself forward, landing on the lawn. He couldn't protect his face because he was bound, so an ugly scream ripped out of him on impact.

"Medaikonar... Remember this. Blue blood is inherited at birth, but it never promises peace."

I instructed Darius and my other subordinates on how to deal with him then walked away. I still had much to do. Even if the king made his move, I needed to maintain the advantage.

On my return to the castle, I met with the members of the merchant caravan and the knights in the resupply unit in the plaza. While talking to them, I spotted Xenu. When he noticed me too, he narrowed his eyes and bowed

dramatically to me.

“Well, well, if it isn’t His Highness himself.”

“.....”

Last night, this man’s Priestess Teardrop Stones were responsible for destroying the magical lure light. The only way a man with such a small amount of magic could pull off a feat like that was with Miss Monica’s assistance.

“Ohhh, I’m scared. Please don’t glare at me like that. Did I do something to offend you?” Utterly shameless, the man shrugged and asked me that question.

The binding spell wasn’t cast on him. Instead, our mutual interests were the basis for our relationship. The merchant’s power and information network had been vital for our strategies on this expedition in Kophe. If I executed the crown prince right now, I wouldn’t have any problems on my hands. I couldn’t do that with this man though.

If only I could cut every man who approached her into pieces without consequence.

“Ah, right, Your Highness.” Xenu deliberately widened his eyes in an exaggerated motion and spoke. “I asked Madam Monica to marry me.”

“What...did you say?”

My voice came out unexpectedly low. In Xenu’s eyes, I saw my own deadly serious expression reflected. He maintained eye contact, clearly declaring his intent not to escape or hide. He kept talking.

“She and I are both commoners and our backgrounds are a good fit too. If a merchant like me and a saint bonded, that would make things a lot easier for you as an imperial prince, right? Oh, but she hasn’t given me her answer yet. I proposed in haste, you see.”

At that moment, other knights drew near. I couldn’t continue the conversation, so I ended up walking away without hearing all the details from Xenu.

A marriage proposal.

The image of her energetic face laughing from within the frame of her wimple

clung to my mind. It squeezed my heart the entire time I conducted official business.



“HAAA! Haaa... Haaa...!”

Panting and covered in mud, Keunt Strelizzi was running away. He had abandoned everything and escaped before the crown prince’s army fell during the night. He had taken off his armor and tossed it aside along with his sword, fleeing with just his life.

He arrived in the castle town and slipped down a back alley of the quiet shopping district. Luckily for him, no one noticed him and that was how he welcomed the dawn. It was pure coincidence that he heard the rumors of the prince being captured from the chatter of the shop owners who had gathered to open their respective businesses.

“His Royal Highness...!”

How awful. In the shadow of a dumpster, Keunt covered his pale face with both hands. The merchants continued talking with each other.

“I wonder what will happen to the prince considering the high priest’s fate.”

“The high priest? What happened to him?”

“Oh, you don’t know? Well, the prison he was incarcerated in wound up being attacked by people who held a grudge against him.”

“Guess it’s the end for the high priest and the crown prince, huh?”

Sweat soaked every inch of Keunt’s body. Not realizing he was there, the merchants chattered on, hope in their voices.

“I bet life will get a lot easier for us commoners from here on out. All because of the wonderful Arousing Priestess.”

“Ah, yes, that fine lady. The Great Church received its just deserts for banishing her from the country with its downfall.”

“Apparently, the adherents of the former Church are being treated as heretics, but that’s not our problem. After all, God is the one who protects our

lives.”

“As long as they can do something about the monsters, that’s all that matters to me... Ack, gotta get a move on.”

“Hey, everyone, His Imperial Highness is about to make an announcement.”

“Ooohh, let’s go, let’s go.”

Even after the merchants left, Keunt heard passersby holding similar conversations. The higher the sun rose, the more people appeared. All he could do was remain crouched in the garbage and tremble in fear.

“Ahhhh, what do I do...? At this rate...”

Would Keunt Strelizzi’s epic novel end here?!

But he couldn’t remain hidden forever, so he resolutely slipped into the stream of people and stealthily snuck toward the public square where everyone was gathering.

Imperial knights in dark blue military uniforms stood on an elevated platform in the plaza. In the middle of their line was a tall man with red hair who caught his eye. The colorful medal pinned to his chest set him apart from the rest of his contingent. At a glance, Keunt guessed he was the accursed imperial prince, Richard II Belktrius.

He strained to get a closer look because he had bad eyesight. He stared at Richard for a few seconds. And then he received the shock of his life, like a lightning bolt hit him.

“That’s... No, it can’t be...”

He remembered feeling this vague deja vu during the night raid too, when the emperor’s younger brother had been illuminated by the explosions. But now, in the light of day, with his face clear to see from a high place, Keunt knew.

“That redheaded son of a bitch...”

It didn’t matter if he changed his clothes or combed his hair to a shine. He would know that detestable, pretentious face anywhere.

“What in the bloody hell... The imperial prince is...that bastarding redhead!”

Amongst the throng of people, a few turned around and glanced uneasily at him. He had muttered the words out loud without thinking. Keunt shut himself up and snuck away from the crowd.

“I need to save the crown prince... That’s the only way I can live...!”

There wasn’t a soul on the road away from the square. Agitated, he forgot to hide himself and cackled loudly as he ran. The warped smile on his face showed he’d lost his mind.

“Good, it’s not over yet! If the imperial prince is that redheaded bastard! Then...I still have a chance of winning!”



THE morning we set out for Mayga Cieux to implement our purge plan, Richard and I were in a conference room in the new outpost on the frontlines. He had a base built in the town closest to the forest of Mayga Cieux and made the necessary preparations to put the plan into action. Because our old outpost had been swallowed up by the forest, rendering it unusable.

Although the crown prince’s night raid delayed our schedule, the incident prompted Kophe’s royal palace, parliament, and the Church to express their full support of Richard’s relief activities. Kophe’s royal army was participating too, transforming the plan to one that would restore the country to its former glory.

“I still find it hard to believe the government granted its official approval...” I said.

“Are you nervous, Miss Monica?”

“Of course I am. I mean...who actually thought the day would come when we’d be purifying Mayga Cieux?”

“Heh.”

“Why are you laughing?”

“Because I was right about your nerves making you anxious.”

“Well...I suppose, since I don’t think we’ll fail.”

I looked down at the table in front of me. A map was spread out on top of it,

noting the combined military forces' and the holy women's positions in minute detail. We had been meeting late into the night every day for two weeks to prepare for this event. Everyone had done what they could.

"Hey, Miss Monica." Richard stroked my cheek with the back of his hand. Lately, it felt like the frequency of his touches had increased again. Obviously, it was fine since I didn't hate it. But still.

"What is it, Richard?"

"I...nothing. I just wanted to say your name."

His strangely sweet gaze made me bashful for some reason. It felt like my body froze as I was unable to look away from him.

"O-Oh, I see..."

"Besides, now is the only time I can touch you. I surely shouldn't once you start using your saintly powers, right?"

"Nh... R-Right."

For an instant, I recalled the indescribable sense of revulsion I'd felt when Xenu touched me the night of the party.

"Miss...Monica?"

His keen eyes picked up on my clouded expression. In response, I forced a laugh and waved my clenched fists deliberately.

"A-Anyway! I'm counting on you today, Richard!"

"Yes, let's do our best...Miss Monica."

When he smiled at me, I felt relieved that I was able to smooth over the awkward moment.



THE plan was shockingly simple when put into words.

We would launch an all-out offensive against a section of the forest made up of tree demon monsters, have Kophe's mages activate many magical lure lights, and create an area within the forest with few monsters.

There, First Class Saint Nia, a few select elite members of the Flame Corps, and I would charge in using flight magic. While under the protection of the knights and Nia's barrier, I would plant my hands on the ground and purify the place. From safe locations, the other holy women would cast their saintly powers on me and provide support. I had requested special magical tools be created for today's operation to allow priestesses to send their powers to another priestess, me—sparkling wands fitted with magic stones.

However, the plan had one drawback. The fact that we couldn't station holy women with the knights conducting the general offensive. To make up for that, healing would be handled by the potion squad, led by Professor Martinez, and the healing squad, which now included a core group of priests from the Church.

It was a perfect plan, with everything we had at our disposal at this point in time. The only thing left was for me to give it my all and make it succeed.

"Be that as it may... I still have the chills at being back in Mayga Cieux..."

One of the priests used his teleportation magic to bring us close to the forest. Under the blue sky, the many trees—well, the tree demon monsters squirmed, their foliage wiggling like tentacles. The earth's surface under the forest was a black, sticky area typical of polluted land. The approach of us humans attracted several pairs of glittering eyes peeking out from the dark depths of the forest.

There was no need for the monsters to leave the forest since it was imbued with the powerful magical energy of the tree demons. But as the forest itself expanded, the range of monster sightings increased rapidly along with it.

At Richard's signal, Darius saluted and smoothly unsheathed his sword.

"Charge!"

The knights moved at once under Darius's command and rushed into the forest of monsters. Creatures spilled out as a horde. The mage squads provided support from the rear, firing the magic each specialized in. Our goal this time wasn't to eliminate through force but to buy time. They needed to draw the monsters out for as long as possible with a minimum of injuries.

Half an hour or so later, one by one, wounded knights were brought into the rear units. Darius returned as well, spattered in monster blood from his fight on

the frontline.

“Your Highness, I’m ready to go whenever you need me to.”

“Hm. I do believe it’s our turn now, Miss Monica,” Richard commented to me. When they heard him, the holy women squadron gathered holding their sparkling wands with the magic stones. The colors of their saintly attire indicated their class of magic. They bowed deeply to me and Nia.

“Please return safely.”

“Everyone, I...”

I felt Richard thump my shoulder when the emotion inside me moved me to tears.

“Come, we must hurry. We can’t let the knights’ hard fighting go to waste either.”

“You’re right.” I nodded—then unwittingly did a double-take at him. “Wait. What do you mean ‘we’?”

“We as in you and me, Miss Monica.” He said it so matter-of-factly, I panicked.

“But! You’re His Imperial Highness! You might die charging into the depths of Mayga Cieux!”

“And you think that means I shouldn’t risk my life while I send others to their death instead? In what world is that something a dashing man like me would do, hm?”

“B-But...your role in all this was the strategist of the plan...”

“Don’t worry. Should the worst come to pass, Solarus is here as well.” Richard winked pointedly in her direction. Clad in her military uniform, she bowed at him.

“In the event of the prince’s death, I, Solasvita Rustis Novenbled Arjentia, shall resume my previous standing as a provisional queen and act on behalf of His Imperial Highness, Richard II Belktrius of the Belktrius Empire, our sworn allies.”

“P-Provisional queen?”

How could a queen also be a queen in another sense of the word? This time Richard winked at me.

“That’s one of the reasons I brought her along.”

“But I do *not* want to do that whatsoever, so please do *not* die, Your Highness.” Though her expression remained cool as ever, she had deep wrinkles between her brows. It was obvious she loathed the idea of returning to her former royal status.

“You heard her, Miss Monica.” His face lit up with his usual forceful grin. “I very much want to protect my beloved Miss Monica with my own hands. And I will.”

“...Fine. Then I promise I’ll return you and everyone else unharmed, Richard.”

Cheered on by the holy women, we flew above Mayga Cieux using my flight magic.

“You who love the earth. Until my prayer is answered, leave gravity behind and take flight in the sky as birds of prey!”

The time had finally come to put our final plan into action.

We determined our landing point right away. Darius led the way toward a spot where the ground was just barely visible and descended.

“I am Darius Sye...” His right hand hovered over the magic stone attached to his sword’s hilt as he started his incantation. **“...the knight of wrath, and my power resounds through the air! May that death knell be the last sound my enemy hears as he bursts apart and passes on into the beyond!”**

A tremendous explosion followed. Then a hot wind. His spell blasted both tree demons and monsters in one fell swoop. No matter how many times I saw it, his explosions always satisfied a vicious need for destruction in me.

Next to descend was Nia. She landed in a section of the huge crater Darius created and constructed a domed barrier. **“O timid silkworm princess, spin thy cocoon of protection.”**

Richard and I followed her down, along with two of the knights. While everyone protected me, I placed my palms down on the ground and closed my eyes. I took a deep breath then linked with the earth.

“I am Saint Monica Regulus, a heavensent child of this ancient continent. Heed the voice of my saintly power. O earth, respond to my call and release the wealth trapped within!”

I knew how it worked since I’d done it once before, so I managed to connect right away. I poured my saintly power into the land as I maintained consciousness. Though they were far away, I felt the other holy women wave their wands and send me their holy powers while saying my name.

This is going to work, everyone.

My scalp grew hot as I sensed my hair changing color. I lost the feeling of all my senses and simply focused on using my supernatural ability to become one with the earth.

This...is...

Just as I was about to fall asleep, a hard jolt raced through my body. I felt like I was being sucked in by the ground. It was much, much stronger than the sensation I experienced in Nowasilo.

“Ngh... Ahhhhhh...!!!” I screamed.

“Miss Monica!”

I heard Richard’s desperate cry. I couldn’t reply. The overwhelming power of the forest would swallow me whole at this rate.

“Miss Monica, we should retreat temporarily.”

I shouted half out of reflex. “No! I...I can...finally...fulfill my duty as a priestess!”

I gasped at the rush of words from my mouth.

Oh, I see... The reason I always fought so hard, putting my life on the line is...

In the next moment, everything in front of my eyes went white. In this pure-white world stood a girl of about ten years old with silver hair and red eyes. She

stared at me. Clad in embroidered clothing typical of Nowasilo, her hair in pigtails, carrying her youngest brother on her back. Loved and cherished by her family, so she shares her love as well. A blessed child.

...me.

In this pure-white world, many people stood behind this girl. Her older brother and younger siblings. Her parents, relatives, and all the villagers. The people she mourned at the outpost. And all the holy women. They all watched *me* with gentle smiles.

The young me stepped forward. Smiling innocently, she spoke. “You *can* change the world. Don’t give up, Arousing Priestess.”

Then the world went black and I was left alone in the darkness.

“I... I’ll protect! Protect everyone! Next time...next time for sure!”

Including myself in the past.

“Miss Monica.” I heard Richard’s voice from directly in front of me. I felt him stroke my cheek. “Use my power too. Because...I don’t need it anymore.”

In the next instant, something pressed against my lips. A powerful stream rushed from my lips to deep inside and suddenly my body felt light. Reason started returning. The magical energy flowing into me converted to life force and I was able to control the runaway rate at which the earth sucked in my saintly powers a little at a time.

I grew calm. Before I knew it, so did the land. The monsters’ smells began disappearing.

The connection snapped and I opened my eyes. My vague senses became more and more distinct. I knelt on the ground and slumped against Richard, resting my cheek on his chest.

“Is it...over?”

Lying against him, I surveyed our surroundings. The whole area was now just a forest. I didn’t see monsters anywhere. I heard the small birds twittering.

Darius answered me while wiping the sweat off his brow. “It’s very likely that the monsters of Mayga Cieux weren’t born that way. They were organisms

living in the forest who absorbed too much magical energy from the land and transformed into broken creatures. With the magic eradicated down to the root from your purification, the flora and fauna returned to their normal state, unlike other places...or so I suspect.”

“We need to conduct a more thorough analysis later, hm?” After agreeing with Darius’s assessment, I looked up at Richard. “Thank you, Richard. We did it! At long last!”

“We did.”

His eyes suddenly slid away from mine. I had never seen him like this. And then...a violent sound came from between us.

Krak, krak, krak, krak, krak, krak!

“Huh?! What is that?!” Shocked, I stared as Richard’s medal fell off. Its gemstone had shattered into pieces.

Richard sighed deeply. “I guess this isn’t enough...on its own...huh?”

“What? What do you mean by that?” The stone had been incredibly large, but perhaps it was a magic stone? “Richard...?”

“I...*adore* you, Miss Monica.”

Was it simply my imagination or did I hear something that sounded suspiciously like *desire* in his voice? It must be because that note had never been there before.



SINCE his escape from Viscount Telestraza’s castle, Keunt had been traveling on foot and via carriage for a month now. He arrived at the hospital dedicated to treating wounded knights located in Stoma Redd on the northern coastline. It was referred to as the final abode for knights who were abandoned after becoming disabled from injuries sustained in monster battles.

This was Keunt’s first visit as well, and he found it resembling an abandoned building that hadn’t been properly cared for. Holding up the Strelizzi family crest, he entered and walked through the dark hospital with its stagnant air. He headed to the room he was looking for after receiving instructions from one of

the nuns acting as a nurse.

It was a large room deep inside the building with the view through the window blocked by a rock wall. Inside a man lay face-up on the bed, looking like a corpse.

Keunt approached the man who seemed to be waiting for death. “Thanks for your efforts on the frontlines, Commander Lockfay of the order of the holy knights.”

The man in his forties stared at Keunt with his dull eyes for a moment before they widened in amazement. “You little... N-No, why are *you* here...?”

“We can talk about that later. Right now, the crown prince is in jeopardy, and we’re the only ones who can save him.”

“His Royal Highness is in what?! How did that even happen...?”

Anguish twisted Lockfay’s face as he tried to sit up. Though his limbs barely remained, his flesh had gouges, his bones were destroyed, and his damaged nerves screamed in extreme pain whenever he tried to move. Without the help of potions and saints, his only option would be to sleep and pray for recovery. That was the sad reality of medical care in Kophe.

“Here, you can have this.”

Keunt took out a vial of potion from his tattered bag. He had acquired it in the confusion of the night raid. Just a sip was enough to bring the light back to Lockfay’s eyes. Now that his arm was functioning again, he snatched the bottle from Keunt’s grip and downed its contents like a parched beast.

“Haaa... Haaa...what is this potion...?!”

“I’ll tell you those details later too. Former knight commander, how much do you know?”

It turned out that Lockfay didn’t know about Prince Richard’s act of aggression or the Arousing Priestess Monica’s return. He had been sent to the hospital shortly before the imperial invasion. So Keunt told him in his own words about the Empire’s actions and Saint Monica’s savagery thus far as well as the terrifying efficiency of the redheaded bastard’s plan to take control of

Kophe.

“And then Prince Richard captured our crown prince. That bloody redhead... Ergo, I need your help to rescue His Royal Highness.” Then Keunt dramatically withdrew another bottle of potion. When he saw it, Lockfay loudly swallowed the saliva pooling in his mouth. “Do you hate Saint Monica? If you do, let us retake the crown prince.”

“If only that damn priestess had been obedient...I could have remained the commander of the holy knights at Mayga Cieux... I could have led the troops from the rear... You have no idea how much I’ve suffered...since being sent to this hospital...”

Lockfay grabbed the potion from Keunt’s hand. Then he twisted off the stopper and drank it all. When he finished, he glared up at him, eyes setting with resentment.

“I thought I would die here. But if I can exact vengeance *and* have the crown prince in my debt, then of course I’ll follow you.”

Keunt smirked and shook Lockfay’s hand firmly. His epic novel was nowhere near finished. “I have an idea... It’s a strategy only we can execute since we know the redhead and the imperial prince are one and the same.”

It was settled. Drunk off his own words, Keunt trembled in excitement at the thought of revenge.

“Just you wait, Arousing Priestess Monica...”

Chapter 5: A Storm of Emotion

“IT finally feels like summer...”

I sat on a chair in the garden terrace of Viscount Telestraza’s castle. I eased my feet into a bucket filled with ice and flowers then created a breeze using magic to cool myself down. *Klink*. The sound of the ice. Orange juice sat on the glass side table—not my usual pot of fish wort medicinal tea.

“I can’t believe over a month has passed since then...”

I thought back to our operation in Mayga Cieux like it was yesterday. My days had been incredibly peaceful since then.

Long story short, the forest of Mayga Cieux recovered. The plan succeeded fantastically without any fatalities and so the curtain closed on that chapter of my life.

Once it ended, I returned on my own two legs without fainting. We all had to deal with the aftermath for a few days upon our return, but once I was no longer needed, Richard half-ordered and half-begged me to rest. And I’d been doing just that ever since, idling my days away without doing any work.

I took naps. Read books. Strolled in the courtyard. Did some embroidery. Tended to the flowerbeds on the castle grounds. Even tried my hand at cooking. It was the first time in my life I was free to do whatever I wanted.

“I haven’t even worn my holy attire lately...” Today too, after Solarus’s massage, I lazed around in a simple white dress. “I wonder what will happen to the Kingdom of Kophe moving forward...”

“I believe they’ll have to restructure everything from the bottom up.” Though I had just been talking to myself, Solarus replied anyway, her hands still busy with her needlework. “Crown Prince Medaikonar has been deposed and High Priest Pisciozze, along with many of his subordinates, have been removed from their offices. Both events combined to shake Kophe’s very foundations. Then

there's the reconstruction efforts all across the country on lands destroyed by the monster frenzy. Rebuilding through their own efforts will be very challenging."

"Which means...Richard will remain here for a while yet," I said.

"Yes, especially after being furnished with a number of castles to use as bases for monster campaigns."

"He didn't *actually* come to this country to...conquer it...right?" I asked.

"I would *probably* agree with that."

I decided not to think about any more difficult topics and ended the conversation there. Then I started fiddling with my hair. Although my hair turned into a starkly vivid color during my connection with the earth, in the end, the garish color faded away quickly, leaving behind my usual silver hair with the pale peach gradation.

"Oh, speaking of Richard. What is he up to?" I asked.

"I'm not privy to His Highness's schedule."

"I...see." I slumped deeper into my chair and swished my foot in the pail of ice.

The owner of the cheerful voice who always barged in playfully was nowhere to be found. Richard had suddenly stopped visiting me.

"Would you like to see him?" Solarus asked.

"Well, yes... But I know he's busy. Plus, I'm not in a position to go to him."

Saying the words aloud made me realize something again. Richard wasn't a person a commoner saint could just brazenly go see. It had always been like this.



IT was night now. While I lamented not being able to see Richard again today, I stood on the balcony and gazed outside. Voices in conversation reached my ears.

I looked around and even leaned over the railing to identify the source. When

I did, I saw Richard walking and talking intimately with someone in the corridor of an outbuilding illuminated by lamplight that burned all night. A golden-haired young lady in an evening gown.

“...!”

Without thought, I rushed back to my room. I pressed my hand to my chest and felt the violent pounding of my heart.

Is the reason...he hasn't been visiting me lately...because of marriage talks...? Everything abruptly made sense. So he wanted to deal with everything first... including what to do with me before he came to see me again.

I knew this day would eventually come. It was only natural for Richard to marry someone. If he married a noblewoman from the Kingdom of Kophe, it would make his future work a lot easier to manage here. His network would grow too. Both the commoners and aristocrats of Kophe would accept him much more easily as “the knight who married into the Kingdom” rather than “His Imperial Highness.”

“So that’s why... Well...good for him. As long as it makes his job easier...” I muttered.

My heart hammered so hard I could hear my pulse roaring in my ears. My chest hurt so much I wanted to scream. I pushed down on my chest and crouched on the floor, trying to endure the pain.

“I’m fine... My body is just doing its usual strange dance... This is a happy occasion. It is...so it’s strange for me to feel like this.”

There was a pitcher of water and a pot of fish wort medicinal tea on the bedside table. I plucked only the leaves from the pot, placed them in the glass, then chewed them and swallowed. I prayed fervently that the intensely bitter taste and smell would pacify my heart.

“No...this isn’t working...why...something’s wrong with me...”

I slipped into bed and forcibly cast magic on myself.

“Witches, sisters of eld, grant me the comfort of sleep...”

Drowsiness overtook me before long. It started from the tips of my fingers

and toes and worked its way up. I closed my eyes as I felt my body grow heavy. It was the only way I could think of to force myself into unconsciousness.

The next day, neither Solarus nor Darius would tell me anything, so I decided to take a walk in the castle and subtly question others about Richard's movements. They all knew that he was meeting with noblewomen one after another.

"Oh, His Highness? He hosts a luncheon every day and banquets fairly often too."

"Women with young daughters invite him to their salons."

"Makes one wonder who His Highness will choose as his partner, hm?"

Everyone was immensely curious about this new topic related to the Ferocious Crown Prince.

"Madam Monica, if you learn anything new, make sure you let me know. Mum's the word!"

"I will. Leave it to me." Puffing my chest out, I agreed readily on the surface, but on the inside, I was being torn to shreds. *Why?*

I shouldn't be surprised, though... After all I'm the Arousing Priestess and a commoner. This is just the natural order of the world.

The indescribable gloom spreading inside me pushed me to the brink of madness.

"No. I can't act like this. I'm just a bit tired is all... I'll take a break in the courtyard."

Fish wort might be growing there now. I headed toward the castle's inner courtyard on unsteady legs.

Refusing to lose to the summer heat, the colorful flowers in the courtyard were in full bloom. A dream-like world stretched before me.

"When plants and trees come into heat, flowers bloom and butterflies dance, creating a picturesque scene. And yet here I am, behaving so disgracefully..."

For some reason, I ended up following the vivid butterflies with my eyes as

they flitted here and there, their glittering scales falling off. As I watched them, I caught sight of a long tunic made of lustrous black fabric completely unsuited for the season beyond the wall where hanging baskets were suspended in regular intervals.

“Oh, hello there, Madam Monica. What a nice surprise.” Xenu turned around with a smile. He stood under an extravagant black parasol sewn with a multitude of tassels and beads. He gently held it over my head. “So unusual to see you alone. His Highness isn’t with you today?”

He tilted his head thoughtfully in the parasol’s shade. Feeling awkward, I avoided his gaze.

“I...haven’t seen him lately.”

“Well, I should apologize for bringing up a sore subject then.”

Xenu held up a voluminous sleeve to his mouth and spoke dramatically. When I looked at his clothes closely, I realized how thin the cloth was. The sun’s rays pierced through his sleeves and hem, making the material slightly transparent. The thinness of the fabric must keep him cool even in this weather.

“There’s no need for you to be so upset, Madam Monica. When our main jobs end, it’s only natural for Prince Richard to end up out of our reach.”

“You’re right... The other holy women are doing more than enough to make up for my lack.”

The Empire was at peace too. A baby was born to Their Imperial Majesties and the potion factory was chugging along swimmingly. Kophe’s royal palace, parliament, and Church also followed Richard’s will. Not to mention the forest of Mayga Cieux had been purified. It was no wonder he didn’t need me anymore.

“Madam Monica, do you still want to work by His Highness’s side forever?”

“I... Hm. I suppose, yes.”

Hearing those words out loud I realized how ambivalent I must sound.

Huh? But why... Even though I’ve always wanted to help him and stand by him.

Tears pricked my eyes when I remembered how Richard looked smiling down at the young lady. My desire was so out of control that all I wanted to do was monopolize him. And I couldn't do my job by his side with this feeling.

"Don't... Don't cry, Madam Monica." Xenu wiping my tears made me realize I was crying. When I looked up at him, I saw genuine concern for me in his eyes as he stared down at me. "I really think you should marry me, Madam Monica."

"I..."

"I'm not saying you should have a change of heart right away. What if we bonded ourselves with a contract marriage and went abroad together? You wouldn't be treated as the Arousing Priestess. In this world, you would be free and known only as a merchant's wife." He pressed his case despite my clear confusion. "If you remain near His Highness, you too might someday be ordered to enter into a political marriage with a noble, you know."

"Ah..."

My eyes widened. Why didn't I notice until now? Richard had always made a place for me to belong. He even told me he had no intention of letting me go. As a finishing touch in his efforts to build a home for me, from his perspective, it would be natural to marry me off to someone else.

That's right... There's no contradiction. If I marry some noble, I can help him even if I retire from being a saint. I can still create a place to belong. So...is that what Richard meant...when he said he wouldn't let me go...?

"Madam Monica, you are originally a commoner. Didn't your queen's education show you that you won't ever become like those noblewomen, good only for window dressing?"

"Indeed... I can never become one of them."

My palms were thick from manual labor and my skin tanned easily in the summer. I couldn't fulfill my mission as an elegant aristocrat whose every movement was restricted. Because I was a saint of common origin and a workaholic at heart who loved her job.

"Another thing."

“Ah...”

Xenu lifted my chin up to meet his gaze—then he leaned down to whisper in my ear. “If you agree to go with me, you won’t ever have to see His Highness getting married. How does that sound to you?”

“...!”

“Picture it. Just like Their Majesties Belktrius...he weds a high-ranking noblewoman and the two walk side by side happily, bearing children who know their father’s love... Tell me. Can you still stay by his side then, watching over him like you do now?”

He moved his hand away from underneath my jaw and reverently took one of mine. While placing a kiss on the back of my hand with his cold lips, he pierced me with his eyes. Feeling like prey being hunted, I found myself unable to move. I couldn’t look away from him either.

“So, Madam Monica, won’t you choose me? We can leave the castle as early as tomorrow.”

“I...”

“Choose me. You’ll make everyone happy if you do. Don’t worry. It’ll all be fine.”

He used his grip on my hand to pull me closer then wrapped me softly in his arms. Hidden by the parasol, he brushed a finger across my cheek. The moment his faint smile disappeared, Xenu lowered his face to mine. He was going to kiss me.

I didn’t know what to do. My head was a jumbled mess of emotions. If I saw Richard marrying someone else joyously, I knew I couldn’t send him off with a smile or applause. But marrying Xenu to escape was... Wrong.

“I’m sorry.” I shrugged out of his arms and stepped out from under the parasol. And then I immediately bowed my head deeply to him. “I...can’t use you like that, Xenu. Not for marriage. It hurts me terribly to think of Richard leaving my side after he marries. But...I can’t accept a political marriage either. Even a marriage in name only won’t work for me. Forgive me.”

I recalled the wedding ceremony I saw in my dream. To me, it was the most natural thing in the world to want a happy wedding blessed by everyone in the village. I knew it would never come true.

Then there was the next part of that dream. Where Richard lifted my veil in a cold, dark church attended by indifferent guests. It didn't matter that we didn't have their blessings. I knew it was absurd that Richard had even been the groom. And yet.

"I...I want to marry the one I love... No other marriage will do," I asserted.

I couldn't kiss anyone except Richard.

Xenu remained silent for a very long time before he asked me a question. "... Then, can I assume that's your choice now?"

"Yes."

"All right, I understand."

From under the parasol, he smiled at me, his attitude nonchalant. "I wouldn't want to come off as unromantic if I keep pushing you when you're so clearly reluctant, Madam Monica. I'll back off for now. But know that I'm not giving up. Not yet. So...if you ever need someone to cling to in tears, my arms are always open." He placed a palm on his chest and bowed respectfully.

"You don't have to do that. I'd hate it if I'm the reason you never marry," I said.

"Divorce exists, you know. And I wouldn't mind being your paramour either. There's lots of ways we can be together."

"I think...I might dislike you." I stared at Xenu, unamused by his comments, and he merely shrugged in response. Then he changed the subject.

"By the way, Madam Monica, if you won't run away with me by marrying me, what *do* you plan to do?"

"I don't understand the question."

"Well, think about it. Wouldn't it be hard for you to stay by Prince Richard once he marries?"

“Urk...” I moaned in despair at Xenu, who clearly only asked me this question to entertain himself. “While I admit it’s painful to be by his side, I don’t want to marry anyone else either.”

“So passionate. I hope he appreciates it.”

“Although I suppose the safe choice would be to enter a convent and spend the rest of my life cloistered there,” I said.

“Ahhh, that actually suits you really well. I can imagine it easily.” Xenu lowered his eyelids in a friendly manner and agreed emphatically. “One attached to an orphanage might be nice, since you love children, Madam Monica.”

“Good point. If I won’t be having any of my own, I would enjoy taking care of others’,” I replied to him with a bright laugh. Then a sudden movement caught my eye and my gaze shifted. “Huh?”

It was Richard.



EXACTLY half an hour before I ran into Miss Monica and Xenu, I’d been secluded in my office doing my job. I had been there the whole morning. Though we saw the end of the monsters running wild in Kophe, dealing with the aftermath kept me incredibly busy for days on end. I made so many trips from Viscount Telestraza’s to the royal capital in a day, and back again, that I barely had time to sleep most days.

Day after day, I met with Kophe’s king and ministers to discuss a variety of issues. What to do about our limited garrison of knights in the country. Reporting situational updates to the Empire and dispatching experts and collaborating with them. Notifications to the nobles and commoners in the country as well as official announcements to other countries. Conferences with merchants in Xenu’s network.

The most important issue I dedicated myself to was the elevation of saints. The Great Church of Kophe was completely restructured with the priests of the Saints Faction now in charge. We worked diligently together to create a new ranking system for holy women.

I had summoned a few people I trusted from the Empire to assist me, but I tried my best to read through all the topics and retained the final decision-making authority. I was now at an important stage in my work to solidify the foundations for the Arousing Priestess Monica as well as myself, so I had no intention of relaxing my grip just yet.

I didn't mind being inundated with work as both the imperial prince and the knight commander. In fact, I welcomed it if my efforts led directly to a peaceful life for my older brother and security for Miss Monica.

However... Out of the corner of my eyes, I caught sight of a mountain of things in my office that made me frown. Genealogy charts, personal backgrounds, handkerchiefs, love letters, gifts, and more. The young noblewomen of Kophe started their heated battle to claim Prince Richard. Me. Just looking at the pile brought back memories of all the ways imperial ladies had attacked me and I felt myself getting fed up all over again.

"Haaa..." I sighed.

"How about a break, Your Highness?" Darius smiled ruefully as he poured me a cup of strong fish wort medicinal tea. "This is all certainly a nuisance, isn't it? The dunces who put offering their daughters over the country's revival think nothing of your efforts and I personally view it as an affront to you."

"I suggest you rein in the frankness in mixed company, Darius. I can do what I want here *because* they're idiots. And I need them to remain that way."

"Hahaha! Well, it makes sense, since their actions mean they're willing to obey you."

Speaking of those daughters offered by their parents, once I ascertained their backgrounds and personalities, I set up marriage meetings between them and my subordinates whom they would be compatible with. At first, both the daughters and their parents didn't bother concealing their discontent and grumbling with my tactic. They tried to hound me for a while longer (if they had so much time on their hands, I wish they would just do their bloody work), but over time, their meetings with my men progressed smoothly to the point of engagements. In any case, I placed all the ambitious idiots as pawns under my control and focused on rebuilding the country.

It didn't seem like any magical tools were mixed in with the various gifts. Even so, Darius opened and shook each item carefully and he complained while doing so.

"Honestly...how does an embroidered handkerchief count as a worthy gift for someone who worked day and night to salvage a country on the brink of extermination?"

"Nothing we can do about it. Politics and monsters and all of that might as well be in another world for the daughters of Kophe's nobility," I said.

During peaceful circumstances, their actions would be considered extremely proper. Their abilities and positions in high society might even be regarded as superior. But in these unusual times, I found their conduct, frankly speaking, revolting.

"Ah, an inconspicuous incantation is embroidered into these garter socks. Allow me to burn them." Before he even finished speaking, the cursed item in Darius's palm went up in flames. He commented while brushing away the ash in his hand in the unlit fireplace. "What you need the most right now, Your Highness, isn't an embroidered handkerchief or the fanciest tea snacks. It's sleep, meat, and Madam Monica, though perhaps not necessarily in that order."

"...Miss Monica."

The second I heard her name.

Krak, krak, krak, krak, krak!

A few of the magic stones inside the room exploded.

"Yikes."

"Don't tell me... I destroyed them all again, didn't I?" I groaned.

"Hahaha... Well, that's just how magic stones work. They'll break even if you don't wear them."

Even Darius flinched at the ferocity of the shattering.

"I want to see Miss Monica," I said.

“I know... Trust me, I know.”

“How long has it been since we last met...? More than a month now? This is...*hell*.”

“And even when you do manage to free up time, you’re either attacked by the young ladies or overwhelmed with unexpected work.”

“I always thought of myself as an austere man, but surprisingly enough, that might not be the case.”

“You are, Your Highness. Aside from Miss Monica, your constraint never breaks with anyone else.”

“Agh... I can’t think of her right now. If I do—”

Krak, krak...

I heard more magic stones shattering.

“Darius. What does my face look like right now?”

“Like you could impregnate a female legendary snow beast with your eyes alone.”

“Damn. I can’t depend on the magic stones anymore. Well, this isn’t good...” I clutched my head and sighed deeply. Darius guffawed.

“That’s just what happens when you’re tired. Hahaha! Survival instinct or reproductive instinct? You decide, my lord.”

“I want...to see...Miss Monica...”

“Your Highness... I think you shouldn’t see her right now, for a number of reasons...”

“I know, I know. I’m nothing but a fierce animal at the moment. I won’t risk her life like this.”

“I’m glad to hear you saying what I’m thinking.”

“Darius. Pour me another cup of the fish wort tea.”

“At once, sir. I never could have imagined the day would come when you needed it too, Your Highness.” Chuckling wryly, he poured me another cup.

“That’s it. I’m at my limit. I’ll be back after a visit with Miss Monica.”

“Enjoy. But remember to control yourself.”

“Of course.”

I tore through the urgent work needing my attention with a rush of energy and declined all invitations to the afternoon salons just so I could carve out time to see Miss Monica.

The emotions overflowing within me were so strong at this point that it was impossible to recast my constraint. Not to mention how easily the magic stones broke the second I dropped my guard. Though I knew I had to use my reason to keep my surging desire in check, I was fed up with it all and well past my limit of not seeing her.

But when I walked quickly to her private chambers, only Solarus was inside, cleaning. She spoke with a cool expression. “Just terrible timing, sir. Madam Monica took an attendant with her and went on a walk. She said she would be going to the garden.”

“The garden, huh? Thanks.”

The instant I heard her destination, I half ran toward it. Just the thought of being able to see her again made my fatigue, irritation, and everything else vanish.

I didn’t regret releasing my binding spell in the forest of Mayga Cieux. I had decided that once most of Kophe’s problems were taken care of, I would break the constraint and tell her everything—my true feelings, which she had never understood no matter how many times I’d told her, and everything else once the situation settled down.

Should I just tell her today?

I stepped into the garden with sweet exhilaration coursing through me, and I spied her from behind immediately in her pure white attire. Dappled by the shadows of the overhanging trees, she looked as beautiful as ever to me.

Just when I was about to call out to her, my feet froze. Xenu was standing in front of Monica like a black shadow. Immediately, I felt my emotions darkening.

She spoke to him in a bright tone of voice. “While I admit it’s painful to be by his side, I don’t want to marry anyone else either. Although I suppose the safe choice would be to enter a convent and spend the rest of my life cloistered there.”

“Ahhh, that actually suits you really well. I can imagine it easily.”

When did they get so close? Xenu spoke to her candidly.

“One attached to an orphanage might be nice, since you love children, Madam Monica.”

“Good point. If I won’t be having any of my own, I would enjoy taking care of others’.”

Then, Xenu and her attendant caught sight of me. When she followed their gazes and turned around, her eyes met mine—and she paled.

“Oh... Richard.”

My mind went blank upon seeing the awkward, uneasy expression on her face. The next thing I felt was an impulse jolt through me. From deep in my mind, emotions surged and boiled. Was it jealousy? Possessiveness? Lust? The feelings burned me from the inside out like melting steel.

I’m losing control.

I covered my face with my hands and turned away from Miss Monica. I didn’t want to expose any more of my ugliness to her than I already had. And I thought while I endured: Just how great was my desire that had been suppressed by the constraint?

Krak.

Once more, cracks appeared in the brand-new magic stone in the medal on my chest. At this rate, I would end up showing her the worst side of me.

“Miss Monica, I—”

Then—

“Noooooooo!!!”

A scream and the sounds of turmoil came from far away. The two of us

automatically looked at each other. Based on her dignified expression, she was already in holy woman mode.

“Let’s go, Richard!” she said.

Ahhh, that’s right. I love her because this is the kind of person she is.

My heart, scorched by the dark emotions, was again dyed in a sweet tenderness.

I nodded and we both raced toward the direction the voice came from.



RICHARD and I found something completely unexpected when we arrived at the plaza in front of the castle gates.

“Ack, little priestess!”

“Missy, it ain’t safe! Don’t come any closer!”

Nostalgic voices called out those familiar nicknames.

“But the old outpost was destroyed... What are you all doing here?!”

I had never forgotten it. That place where every day we teetered on the brink of life and death so we enjoyed ourselves to the fullest with fleeting memories. The place full of memories. Less than twenty of its people were here now. But they were all imprisoned inside a dome-shaped barrier. Outside of it stood a maniacally laughing Keunt with bloodshot eyes and another man—

“Knight Commander Lockfay!” I cried.

The former commander of the knights at the outpost.

“Gahahahaha! This man shares his destiny with me—Keunt! We’ll release these prisoners in exchange for the crown prince and the Arousing Priestess Monica! But really, who would have thought you would turn out to be that infuriating Redhead, Your Imperial Highness!” Keunt spat the words at us. I gasped in response. Richard had indeed hidden his identity as Mr. Redhead for the longest time now. But he said nothing in response, his expression ice-cold.

“What *will* you do now? Hesitate too long and these friends of yours won’t live to see tomorrow! Hand yourself over, Saint Monica! And release the crown

prince, you ginger bastard!”

Even now, this waste of a human still insulted Richard in such a manner. Though I had lost my patience with his arrogance a long time ago, worry simultaneously hit me. Frankly, neither Keunt nor the former knight commander scared me. Just like they knew our weaknesses, we knew theirs. It wasn't like their little rebellion would succeed, not when their opponent was Richard. But I didn't want to cause any more trouble for the people of the outpost.

I took a step toward them. “I understand. If you'll release them all in exchange for me, then I accept.”

“Miss Monica?!”

I turned around to face Richard and fashioned a bright smile for him. “Don't worry. Solve this while I buy us time.” I took another step toward them. “Let them go.”

“Hyahahaha! I'll punish you right now for making a fool out of me!”

Keunt took out an explosive from inside his coat and flashed it at us, cackling crudely. He had always been a bit unstable, but in less than two years, his mind had clearly broken even more.

The former knight commander snorted derisively as he stared at me in contempt. “Right, then, we'll start by releasing the first captive—”

“There's no need for that.”

I suddenly felt a hold on my wrist and then I was dragged into Richard's arms.

“Richard!” I sucked in a sharp breath when I glanced up at him and saw his eyes.

“Don't just decide things on your own. I told you I wasn't letting you go, Miss Monica.” He gripped my wrist with a serious expression. Then he tightened his hold on me from behind and pressed his face close to my ear to whisper, “I won't let any man other than me lay a single finger on you.”

His words were powerful, tinged with a heat I'd never before heard.

“Stop stalling and get over here, Arousing Priestess!” Keunt screamed. The

former knight commander unsheathed his sword and threatened our friends.

With his left arm wrapped around me, Richard extended his right hand as if seeking permission to dance. **“Fire goddess, burn.”**

“Huh?”

D-Did he just cast magic?

In the next instant, flame arrows shot out from his fingertips. A beautifully clean execution of magic. The two perpetrators were engulfed in pillars of flame in the blink of an eye.

“Gaaaaaahhhhhhhh!!!”

“Ah...” I was dumbfounded by the unerring attack.

Richard jerked his chin at nearby knights and meted out instructions coldly. “Extinguish the fire after it burns some more. Then take them to the dungeon and revive them with potions in front of the crown prince’s eyes. Do *not* use the saints. I forbid it. Once you resuscitate them, punish them for an entire day. Not enough to kill them but enough that they’ll never forget the hours they spend writhing and screaming in agony. I want to make certain they regret this for the rest of their lives. After that, I’ll let you know how to deal with them, so wait for my orders. Oh, and one more thing. Don’t kill them, no matter how much they beg for death. Keep them alive.”

“Yes, sir.”

Released from their barrier prison, everyone from the outpost collapsed to the ground from relief, their expressions dazed. I didn’t even have time to call out to them before Richard picked me up and started walking away.

“Let’s go, Miss Monica. You can’t witness this,” he said.

“U-Um.”

“Hm?”

“Well, Richard... Didn’t you tell me once upon a time that you barely have any magic?!” I asked.

“And it was true, up until I voided the constraint in Mayga Cieux. Now, I can

use up to the Third Class level.”

“Y-You cast a binding spell on yourself?! What kind?!”

“I’ll tell you that and more shortly.” His matter-of-fact reply did nothing to assuage the confusion in my head.

Darius rushed over and saluted to us sharply. Dependable as ever. “Your Highness! The rioters outside have all been captured and tied up!”

“Good. I’ll leave the rest to you. I’m at my limit already.”

“Yes, I can see that clearly on your face! At your leisure, sir!”

“Huh? What? Whaaat?!” I cried.

While Darius watched us go with a cheerful grin, I could only look on in blank amazement. By the time I came back to reality, Richard had already carried me inside the castle. He walked quickly, wearing his usual enigmatic expression. His stern, unsmiling face was so lovely, I felt it doing incredibly bad things to my heart. But it also left a powerful impression. And it was a bit scary too.

“We’re going to my bedroom,” Richard announced.

“Your *what*?!”

“It’s the best place for us to speak alone.”

This was too terrifying. Strangely enough though, I didn’t feel like resisting. This situation of being carried to his bedroom in his arms naturally meant shameless thoughts flitting in and out of my mind, resulting in both my face and body growing hot. I hadn’t used my saintly powers, but I was a mess, just like when I was in heat.



RICHARD kicked the door to his bedroom open with his foot and then he kicked it closed again once we were inside. *Ohhh, myyy, so His Imperial Highness uses his feet to open and close doors just like the rest of us ordinary folks!* That carefree thought helped me retain my sanity.

Richard gently tossed me on the bed. As expected of the bedroom of the lord of a castle, the ceiling was crowded with murals of dancing angels. When I

started counting the angels in an attempt to escape from reality, Richard loomed over me, his face deadly serious.

“Eeep!”

I had only ever seen this particular scenario in my imagination. He stroked my hair away from my face then pressed his lips firmly against the ends of a few strands. His kiss made a soft sound.

“Ack.”

“Be honest with me. Are you afraid when I do this to you? Do you hate it? What do you feel?” he asked.

“It is a bit scary, but...I do...not...hate...it...” I slipped into stilted formal speech.

“Ahhh, I’m so glad.”

Finally, for the first time today, Richard smiled, though it was faint. But it was most definitely different from all the smiles he’d shown me until now. The best way I could describe it was overwhelming? Amazing? Something along those lines.

“Richard, I feel as if you’re not acting like your usual self?”

“Sleep deprivation might be the cause. Since it’s extremely painful not being able to see the person you want to see and embrace for days on end.”

“Um... Ummm—” I lied when I said his handsome face was scary when he was serious. Because his serious smile was too.

“Miss Monica, may I hold you?”

“Oh...”

As soon as I gave him a small nod, Richard fell on top of me, still lying on the bed, like a starving man. He swept his arms around me and squeezed. Then, of all things, he buried his face in the nape of my neck. I suppressed a shriek of surprise and simply stared up at the ceiling, not really understanding reality as it happened. The angels laughed. *Stop laughing.*

“Haaa... I feel alive again...”

I had never heard this particular tinge in his voice before as he snuggled closer

to me and gave free rein to his need to be spoiled. Every time his lips and the tip of his nose brushed against my skin, I felt a tingle deep in my head.

But wait. Let's say his attitude right now was to be analyzed objectively. It was almost as if. Um. Well...

"Richard."

"Hm?"

"Did...Did I... Uh. Did I heal you today with my powers?"

"No. But you don't need to do that to excite me. Just looking at you arouses me, Miss Monica."

"Excite?! Arouse?!"

"Would you prefer I say 'you send me into heat' since you're more familiar with that verbiage?"

"Did you lose your mind or something?!" I cried.

"Heh. You're so cute, Miss Monica."

I couldn't decide if he held me like this to calm himself down or to make sure I wouldn't run away. In any case, some semblance of rationality returned to him and he sat up on the bed. When I did the same, our eyes met.

We were so close we could kiss at any moment. On top of a bed. Where he had gently pushed me down up until a second ago. So being on the receiving end of his heated gaze in such a situation, I reached up and viciously pinched my cheek.

"Ow, ow, owwww."

"Miss Monica, stop that."

"This isn't a dream."

"That's right, this isn't a dream."

"But... Um, uhhh... Richard, I... Wait. Deep breath. Calm down. Now I can ask you. What in the world happened? This is so unlike you."

"Fair question. But first, you have to answer my question."

“A-All right.” I nodded nervously at his imperious tone that wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Do you really want to leave me?”

“About...that...”

“Are you going to marry Xenu? I won’t let you. If you *do* want to marry him, I’ll have him executed.”

“Aaargh, what is it with you and *execution*?! Don’t do that, understood?! Especially because he hasn’t done anything wrong to me! Understood?!”

Whether it be his lack of hesitation in setting people on fire or honestly everything he does, this man was just too darn extreme, shockingly so. Well, I suppose I shouldn’t be shocked considering his Ferocious Crown Prince moniker.

“Then why?” He scooped a hank of my hair and rubbed it against his cheek, his gaze on me steady as he asked. “Why did you say you want to leave me? I heard you talk about entering a convent, you know. Why do you want to deprive me of your existence? Even though...even though I know you don’t hate me.”

He didn’t smile. And it scared me.

“But...I could say the same to you, Richard.” I had so much I wanted to tell him too. I clenched my fists and gazed at him. “You’ve been holding marriage meetings lately, haven’t you?”

To my shame, my voice quivered. His eyes widened. That expression made me think my assumption was correct.

“I’m going to enter a convent. Because I’m not strong enough to give you my blessing and wish for your happiness when you marry.”

Saying the words out loud, I realized how incredibly pathetic and selfish my reasoning was. I scrubbed away the tears threatening to spill over, then I revealed to him the truth of my filthy feelings as I looked down at my hands.

“Whenever my desire upends my thoughts, I...I feel things for you not as the comrade and friend you treasure, but as...someone who...someone who looks

at you, and only you, with *those* eyes. I'm the Arousing Priestess, after all. A shameless woman."

"Miss Monica..."

"I... It's not like I *don't* want to stay by your side. I do. I'm grateful you said you won't let me go. But I can't celebrate your happiness. I know, I'm awful. What's more, a political marriage with someone else is impossible for me too. Maybe it's because I'm a commoner, but...it's been my dream since I was a child to become the bride of the man I love. Unlike those young noblewomen, I lack the resolve to enter into a political marriage. So...I'm sorry. Now that you know, please, let me enter a convent."

Silent, he listened to me attentively. As I put it into words, I realized my true feelings, which I had been running away from. It was always my dream to marry the man I love. The truth was already clear the moment I dreamed of that wedding. My body and my desires weren't broken. If I was going to give voice to the truth, then now was my only chance.

When I fell quiet, Richard sighed long and heavily.

"I'm sorry. I'm the one at fault here for not telling you my true feelings and confessing everything properly earlier. I'd decided I would once the situation in Kophe was in order, but to think I made you so anxious... I'm sorry. I'll tell you everything." He continued while running his fingers through my disheveled hair. "First of all, I'm not hosting or going to any marriage meetings. The nobles here keep trying to foist their daughters off on me without so much as a by your leave, so I've simply been introducing them to my knights instead to keep the fuss to a minimum. Of course, I didn't want to just force them into anything. So I talked to each young lady privately to learn about her personality, hopes, and more to match her with a compatible knight."

"Oh...and that's why you were meeting with them individually?"

"I don't know what you saw, but I was essentially meeting with them around the clock. Although some of the young ladies were particularly stubborn and wanted to seduce me at night."

Richard had dark circles under his eyes. Perhaps he looked unnecessarily scarier than usual because of his exhaustion.

"You were under such stress...and here I misunderstood the situation," I muttered.

"Besides, if I leered at any woman other than you, Miss Monica, both Darius and Solarus would present to you my head on a platter. Because those two are much more extremist about you than you think, Miss Monica. They're super fans of yours."

Um, I seriously doubt there's anyone more extreme than him in this world!

He didn't give me a chance to interject as he continued, "Next. Did you truly think I'd let you go? Even after I told you I wouldn't?"

"Wh-Which is why I assumed you would...ask me to enter a political marriage...and that would make it easier...to stay...by your...side..."

"Match you with another man? Don't even joke about that. I can't even bear it when another man talks to you like he's your friend. To think I would ever marry you off to one is heresy."

"U-Ummm—"

"Let me make something clear, Miss Monica. I have never and will never use you as a tool. And I would never do something that would make you unhappy."

"You're right... I really am so sorry for viewing your actions in the wrong light."

"It's fine. Besides, I have a feeling Xenu put ideas in your head."

"Geh."

"I thought so."

Pressured by the dreadful expression in his eyes, I asked him another question. "Then, the reason you always told me you would make a home for me and not let me go is..."

"Just like I've always said, Miss Monica. Have you still not realized?" Richard suddenly smiled. A soft smile that made me melt. "I...adore you, Miss Monica. I love you."

"Um... Ummm—"

"May I kiss you? I will."

Without waiting for an answer, he kissed me. Once. Then again.

“W-Wait. Um.”

“You don’t hate it, right?”

I needed him to stop staring at me so close that our breaths mingled when he spoke.

“Great. Then I’ll kiss you more.”

He laced his fingers with mine and proceeded to kiss me again and again, always changing the angle and pressure. The count from the first one increased steadily. When I counted to ten twice and was about to start on a third round, I turned my face away gasping for breath and stopped him with a “Wa-Wait.”

His eyes glittered with desire. He slicked his tongue across his wet lips, and it almost made my head explode. Nothing made sense and I was at my limit with not understanding.

“Ri...chard...you...you never showed me th-this sort of expression...not when we fought the legendary snow beast...and not even on the frontlines...”

“You’re right.”

“S-So I just...I just thought you were the sort of person wh-who didn’t feel those things.”

“I just wanted to show off in front of the girl I love.”

“That’s it?!”

“That’s it. It was very important to me that I did so.” He said it so casually, like it was a fact. “Before you could fall in love with me, I wanted you to think of me as a friend you could trust, one who would make you feel safe. I didn’t want to be one of the many others who turned their instinctive desires on you.”

“Y-You tricked me.”

“I did. I’m a bad man, Miss Monica.” He leaned in close again to press his lips against mine.

“Nh...”

“You’re so damn adorable. I can’t get enough of you. I don’t want to stop.”

Eyes closed, I felt him kiss me again. Then I peeked a little and saw his narrowed eyes, a mischievous smile on his face.

“I told you a little about my constraint earlier, right?” he said.

“Oh, I think I’m starting to understand...”

“I had placed it on myself long before I met you, Miss Monica. I counterbalanced the instinctual lusts of the flesh with magic in order to remain calm at all times. You could call it a forced, pseudo-castration.”

“An impotent emperor...and his younger brother who performed a mock castration on himself... Clearly, you’re brothers, considering how important your lower halves are to both of you.”

“I did it so I could refute any accusations to take responsibility for illegitimate children or lies against me that arose. The young noblewomen have been hunting me for a very long time, you see.”

“I...I can’t even imagine what you went through.”

Thinking about his standing, I realized a constraint like that must have been necessary indeed. With His Imperial Majesty unable to sire a son of his own for so many years, a child born to his younger brother would have clearly added new sparks to an already fraught situation.

“When we were on the frontlines in Mayga Cieux, I controlled my urges with only my constraint and my reason,” he continued. “But after coming here, I started using a magical stone too, just in case.”

“Magical stone...? You don’t mean—”

“Yes. My own camouflage against desire. It activated to keep the feeling off my face whenever my constraint buckled.”

“Oh...that explains why your people were able to prepare the same kind for me so quickly after I settled in the Empire.”

“Correct, because the imperial family actually had them in their possession. A magical tool that only the emperor’s family could use. So tweaking them just a bit for your profile was a simple matter.” He grinned. All I could do was bob my head in agreement when he smiled at me like that. Everything made sense now.

“B-But if you’re in a pseudo-neutered state because of the binding spell, you don’t need to bother with a magical stone,” I said.

“I needed it just in case the worst happened. By the time I returned to the Empire with you, I was so madly in love with you, that my emotions drove my actions to the point that my constraint grew increasingly unstable. I was confident I could manage with just my sense of reason, but I figured it wouldn’t hurt to be prepared. Especially after what happened against the legendary snow beasts.”

Richard planted a quick kiss on my hand then, like explaining was taking up time he would rather spend doing *other* things. Was this how sweets felt before they were devoured?

“Miss Monica, you’re incredibly sensitive to others’ sexual desires, aren’t you? In exchange for you working your saintly powers at full capacity in the Empire, I wanted to be an absolute safe base for you. Here, look. Look at the state of me today until I went to see you.”

He unpinned the medal from his chest and took out the gemstone, which he then placed on his palm to show me. Both the medal and the gemstone had cracks in them. The latter especially looked like crushed quartz. It was many times larger than the magical stones sewn into my holy attire.

“Ah, the *krak krak* sound...”

“Yes, the *krak krak* sound~≡!”

“Eeek...”

“I don’t plan on hiding the cracking sound, so I suppose I don’t need it anymore.”

“Wait. What do you mean? What does *that* mean?”

“Heh heh heh. You should know without having to ask.”

“I do not understand, sir.”

“How about a touch somewhere special? Then you would.”

“N-No! No, no, stop that. Goodness, you’re so lewd, Richard.”

“Heh. So cute.”

With our faces so close, I could see myself reflected in his eyes as he smiled, which seemed like his usual one. But there was something different about it. His flame-colored eyes were fixed steadily on mine and the mask he used to wear of the safe and secure gentleman was completely peeled off.

I had confronted many peoples’ desires until now. Yet this was the first time someone showed me their ardor so openly. It scared me. Even so, I couldn’t pull away from him. I just wanted him to kiss me even more. Anything beyond that was a little *too* stimulating though.

“Miss Monica.”

The gentle beast in front of me took my hand gently in his. The simple action was enough to paralyze me. At least, that was how it felt.

“After the Mayga Cieux purification operation, I used my busy schedule as an excuse not to see you. Days turned into weeks, into over a month. Because... ever since I took off the constraint in Mayga Cieux to share my magical energy with you, I’ve been like this the whole time. Most of the magical stones I brought with me have been destroyed. Miss Monica, I wanted you so badly, every minute of the day, that it was unbearable.”

His tortured, heated gaze poured over me as I sat on the bed with him. Only me. I suddenly remembered what he said atop that bridge.

“‘There’s no need to separate desire from love, because it ultimately doesn’t matter.’ When...when you said those words, you were talking about yourself, weren’t you, Richard?”

“Yes. Which is why my constraint couldn’t suppress my feelings for you.” His eyes, which looked like gold in the right light, shone fiercely. “After everything was settled, I planned on making the king of Kophe adopt you as a daughter so that I could make you my wife without trouble. And once I did, I would confess to you. But clearly, it was impossible from the start, hm?”

“Nh... Just because you can make a revelation so casually doesn’t mean it still isn’t a bombshell announcement?!”

“I didn’t want to force you, Miss Monica, so I surmised it would be best to

discuss our path forward after you told me your thoughts.”

“Y-You say that, but before I even could, you just went off on your—”

Smeck. Richard shut me up with a kiss then continued, “But then I heard you say you wanted to enter a convent and I knew I had to propose to you right away. I’ll never let you go, Miss Monica. I’m making you my bride immediately.”

“W-Wait. What does that mean?”

“It means your superficial knowledge about love and desire will become applied knowledge after our *very* hands-on approach.”

“Eek!”

“I’ll carve myself so deep into you that even if you run away to a convent, they’ll turn you away at the gates without a second glance.”

“Ack...! W-Will you wait a second...?!”

“If you don’t like anything I do, tell me. Just a shake of your head and I’ll stop. Trust me.”

His fingers twining with mine traced up my arm. The sweet ticklish sensation made me shiver. My elbow, upper arm, shoulder. And then slowly, very slowly, his hand cupped my cheek.

Reflected in his flame-colored eyes, I looked like firewood tossed into a raging fire. I couldn’t say “no” or “wait” anymore. I let him do what he wanted. Richard looked down at me and chuckled softly, his gaze spellbound.

“Miss Monica, in order to make you my wife, for you to be respected and honored by everyone, I dared to make you suffer. And now that suffering is finally over, for both of us. I’ve yearned to touch you. I’ve always, always wanted to do this with you.”

Then he gave free rein to his ardor like his previous control never even existed. His hands stroked all over me. Where, you might wonder? I couldn’t say it. Absolutely not.

Did I perhaps awaken an extraordinary, outrageous man? But—even his obsession with me made me happy. I might be broken too then.

“Richard...”

I felt incredibly giddy. Passion crumbled my reason to dust. Richard laughed, his wild expression mirroring mine.

“Forgive me, Miss Monica, for not being the gentle Mr. Redhead or the pure imperial prince you imagined.”

I was enthralled by his pink tongue licking my lips. His flame-colored eyes scorched me from the inside out. Only I knew his real nature. The thought was so indulgent it almost made my head spin.

“Are you sure...I’m enough for you, Richard?”

When I stroked his cheek, he closed his eyes in pleasure and surrendered his body to mine. I sifted my fingers through his hair, traced the shape of his ears. He whispered to me in a heated voice.

“You’re the only one I want, Miss Monica.”

He grasped my chin and kissed me again. This was probably the most joyous time of my life. The angels’ warm amused smiles on the ceiling no longer bothered me.



SEVERAL days later, Richard took me with him to the royal family’s villa. Situated in the center of a fantasy flower garden, the structure was cozy compared to the royal palace. There, we would be meeting a certain individual for the first time. The former Crown Prince Medaikonar’s older brother, the new Crown Prince, His Royal Highness Stevway. He had been reinstated into the line of succession.

White furnishings filled the room softly illuminated by indirect sunlight. Lying on his bed, the current crown prince welcomed me and Richard with a smile as we bowed formally to him.

“Apologies for my unsightly appearance. It’s difficult for me to get out of bed.”

He resembled Medaikonar quite closely, but at thirty, he was seven years older than the former crown prince. Possessed of a fragile constitution, he was

fair-skinned and ethereal. His neatly combed, long golden hair was tied back in a loose knot. His pale green eyes stared thoughtfully at me as I curtsied.

“Monica, is it? This is our first time meeting, hm? My family put you through much hardship.”

“I’m truly delighted to make your acquaintance, Your Royal Highness Stevvay.”

I hadn’t been able to meet him even when I had been in residence during my queen’s training. A terrible accident in his youth left half of his body paralyzed. He never left the villa for fear he would succumb easily to disease due to his weak constitution. Richard told me there were also some suspicious circumstances surrounding the accident.

Actually meeting him now, I found the new crown prince to be much more dignified and dependable than the rumors gave him credit for. I thought he would be able to capture people’s hearts much better than Medaikonar ever could.

Ah-ha, I understood now what Richard meant by the suspicious circumstances of his accident.

Taking his health into consideration, after making some small talk, I cut to the chase.

“If you’ll excuse me, Your Highness.”

“Yes, of course. I leave myself in your hands.”

Our purpose for visiting him today was to heal him with my saintly powers. Supported by his attendants, he sat upright on the bed, with his thin legs exposed over the bedside. I knelt in front of him. With my hands hovering over his legs, I cast my powers on him.

The crown prince closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation of my supernatural abilities coursing through his body.

“Thank you... I can feel the pain receding. What a fine talent.”

There was only so much my saintly powers could do. They could improve blood circulation and lessen pain, but they couldn’t return a worn-down body

to its former state. Of course, even casting my powers as the Arousing Priestess had no adverse side effect—unfortunately.

“I have decided. You no longer need to use your power on me. Save it for those in greater need than me.” His Royal Highness lowered his eyes softly and directed his gaze to Richard. “Prince Richard. I want you to give her the best place she belongs. That is my wish as Kophe’s next king.”

“Your will be done, Your Royal Highness.”

Richard bowed deeply. Then he quietly winked at me at an angle the crown prince couldn’t see.

Epilogue: Prepare Yourself, Richard!

“GOODNESS, Monica, it’s been too long! I’ve been so worried about you!”

“Your Majesty...! I’m so glad to see you happy and healthy!”

My birthday had already passed and along with it the peak of summer. Time was now drawing close to the autumn festival. In the Kingdom of Kophe’s royal palace, Her Imperial Majesty Tundica hugged me tightly. Behind us, I heard Richard and His Imperial Majesty talking.

“I’m happy to see you all here, Christopher.”

“Of course, we are. It is after all the new king’s ascension to the throne of Kophe. It’s a huge moment for you as well.”

“Andrew’s with you too?”

“Naturally. His wet nurse is looking after him at the moment.”

Andrew was the emperor and empress’s son. Even as we listened to their conversation, Her Majesty patted my face and hair with sparkling eyes.

“Oh, Monica, you’re so lovely. Your new holy attire suits you very well.”

“You don’t think it’s a biiit too ostentatious...?”

“Ostentatious is exactly what you want though! Since you’re the king’s adopted younger sister! Ahhh, I feel as if a new religion will be born when everyone sees you looking so noble. I invited thirty court painters to the event, so I’ll have them paint you from all three sixty-degree angles, hm?”

“Th-That’s too many!”

“You would think so, but it’s honestly not enough. I want to memorialize as many memories and events as I can, such as His Majesty’s strength and our beloved son growing up. So the more painters, the better. Even though I *do* have plenty at the moment.”

She smiled at me with her commanding “Her Imperial Majesty” gaze. I

realized something when she put it into words.

“By leaving it as a picture, the nobles who swear allegiance to the emperor are honored, and the emperor can leave it as ‘proof’ of his legacy. In order to facilitate the transfer of his support base to the crown prince when he ascends to the throne...is what you mean, yes?”

“Exactly, since His Majesty and Richard suffered greatly as children.”

The emperor and Richard lost both their parents at a young age. They barely had any memories with or portraits of their family. Leaving behind portraits clarifies their backing and strengthens the authority of the emperor, empress, and imperial crown prince.

“But it isn’t just for political reasons... I want Christopher, Richard, and Andrew to have tangible proof of their memories as a family. The more, the better. Because we never know when our loved ones will leave us, hm?”

“Your Majesty...”

“So there you have it! Listen up, you wonderful painters! Please start sketching us!”

“Gah! Stop, stop, stop.”

The empress grabbed my hand and called over a few painters to sketch us. For some reason, I felt both her instructions and conduct had even more presence than before.

“I’m so glad to see you so lively, Your Majesty.”

“Tee hee. Once I gave birth, I suddenly found myself much less burdened.”

“What say you, Monica? Hasn’t my Tundica become even lovelier since you last saw her?” The emperor approached us. Upon receiving her husband’s warm smile, the empress blushed prettily and beamed happily back at him.

“Oh, Your Majesty, will you stop it? You’re embarrassing me,” she said in a lovey-dovey voice.

“Tundica. You’re even lovelier when you’re embarrassed,” His Majesty replied with equal adoration.

“Your Majesty,” she responded with hearts in her eyes.

Goodness, all this sweetness almost gave me a toothache. At this rate, it wouldn’t be long before their next child was born. The thought pleased me tremendously.

“Madam Monica.”

I saw a black outfit flutter from the corner of my eye. When I turned to look, I saw Xenu approaching. He executed a very dramatic but also very polite bow.

“Hello, Xenu. It’s nice to see you again after so long,” I said.

“I’m honored to be able to meet you again, Madam Monica. Allow me to congratulate you on your engagement.”

“Thank you. I’m glad to see you’re doing well too, Xenu.”

Apparently, I was the only one feeling awkward. Xenu narrowed his eyes in amusement as he stared down at me. *Chk*. I turned to my side upon hearing the metallic sound and saw Richard about to unsheathe his sword.

“No, no, no, no. Stop, stop, stop!” I cried.

“Ahhh, I figured this would happen. Heh heh heh.” Xenu chuckled, utterly unperturbed by Richard’s threatening attitude. “I’m here now because I wanted to greet you before I left. I’ll be departing for Ezeleya soon. On His Highness’s orders.”

“Orders?” I jerked my gaze to look at Richard’s face. “You’re not exiling him, right?”

Richard shook his head in exasperation at my suspicious question. “Unfortunately not. Because I still need him to work for me. Although it will be an exile for all intents and purposes.”

“Heh heh heh. If you’re that worried, Your Highness, why don’t I just disappear into the ether along with the information you want?”

“Ha ha ha!”

“Ugh, will you two stop it already? Today is a day to celebrate, understood?”

Honestly, things always got a little too dangerous whenever they met each

other. Though on the contrary, I also couldn't help thinking they got along surprisingly well in a strange way. But if I said that out loud, they would just fight, so I kept silent.

"Now that we're done with the jokes." Xenu prefaced his next words with that comment. "No one can say yet that the Kingdom of Kophe and Prince Richard's position are on solid ground, so I'm using my power as a merchant to obtain Ezeleya's backing. We're trying to make people think that it's more profitable to establish relationships with His Highness and the Empire in the future."

"Fascinating..."

So the Kingdom is still in jeopardy? But before I could voice my concern out loud, Xenu stopped the thought in its tracks by pressing his lips close to my ear and whispering, "If your betrothal to His Highness ends, I'm always here for you."

I wouldn't let him rattle me ever again. I smiled at him demurely. "That will never happen as he pledged to me that we will be married for life."

"Miss Monica~≡!" Richard interjected, sounding happy.

"Then are you in the market for a paramour?" Xenu asked invitingly.

"All right. We're done here." Richard covered both of my ears with his hands and peered down at me from above. "It's going to start soon, Miss Monica. Let's get on the parade coach."

"Yes, let's."

After Xenu walked away with a wave, I stared up at Richard with a laugh. He shone brilliantly under the sun.

And then the parade to celebrate the new king's ascension began.

After everything that had happened, His Royal Majesty officially decided to abdicate. Less than a year from now, the new Crown Prince, His Royal Highness Stevvay, would ascend to the throne as the new king during the official ceremony.

Today's parade served as an advance notice to all the people in the Kingdom.

In attendance were the emperor and empress of the Belktrius Empire as well as other royalty and nobility from around the world celebrating the birth of the new king. Their participation was meant to support and congratulate His Royal Highness Stevvay on his accession to the throne.

The parade was scheduled to lap around the capital starting from the royal palace's main gates. Prince Stevvay's coach led the way. The masses on the roadside cheered their future king effusively. The same prince who endured the tragedy of being removed from the line of succession because of his unfortunate accident. This image made it very easy to capture the people's hearts by painting over the corruption of the previous crown prince.

The carriage Richard and I rode in was third in the procession, behind Prince Stevvay's and the Kophe royal family's. Before we passed through the gates, I spoke to Richard, who sat next to me.

"Oh, which reminds me. Whatever happened to Keunt and the former knight commander?"

"That's...a good question."

He smiled. *Ah, best not to probe further, hm?*

Our coach was welcomed with enthusiastic shouts. By Richard's side, I fashioned a polished smile and waved to the crowds. I had become used to it at this point. When I smiled, men and women of all ages cried out in excitement.

"Lady Arousing Priestess! Thank you very much!"

"Esteemed Arousing Priestess!"

"Smile at me too, please! I want to be blessed with children!"

"M-Me as well! A smile that will cure my impotence!"

"P-P-P-P-Please your s-s-s-smile..."

I was no longer fazed by the borderline vulgar calls that belied my elegant attire and smiled. One could say it was my way of taking the offensive.

"I can't believe how far I've come..."

For a common saint to become the royal crown prince's fiancée as well as the

Arousing Priestess. And then...

I peeked at Richard next to me. His upswept red hair revealed his strong forehead. The sumptuous full dress uniform was complemented by the gorgeous ultramarine cloak. It felt like the deep crimson lining represented his inner self.

The crowd of spectators watching the parade thinned out and their voices grew distant as the procession continued moving. In a controlled movement, the knights led the line of carriages to the next main boulevard. The streets along which the parade was open to the masses were thoroughly guarded by the special forces knights of Kophe.

As the Special Military Advisor, Richard was effectively at the top of Kophe's military chain of command. All of the country's military power was placed under Richard's command. Clad in their splendid full military dress, every one of them working in today's parade was under his control. Every last one.

"In the end...Kophe became a country in which you hold all the military power, Richard," I remarked.

"That is what happened, isn't it?"

"Have I told you lately how scary you are...? Because you are."

Kophe had essentially been stripped bare. It was virtually no different from total surrender.

Richard smiled cheerfully. "I refused the position countless times, but the knights were *veery* insistent on me unifying them. When the government begged me to at least accept a role as a military advisor even for a limited period of time, well, how could I say no after all that? Really, I had no choice in the matter."

Unamused, I stared at him. Because I knew well now the immense appetite he concealed under that mask of irreproachable conduct.

"And what about Prince Stevvay's fiancée? Did you also have no choice in setting him up with Her Majesty's younger sister?"

"Weeell, I only did that to make it easier for Tundica's family to have an easier

life. Political marriages and marriages of convenience are quite common, you know.”

Next to His Royal Highness sat Empress Tundica’s younger sister, Margaret Sowles, daughter of Marquess Sowles. She would officially become Prince Stevvay’s consort in six months. It had become difficult to find a husband for her after Tundica became the empress, so by marrying Stevvay, she would become the bridge connecting the Kingdom of Kophe and the Belktrius Empire.

“I know Maggie will get along famously with His Highness, which makes me really happy, you know?”

“You really are terrifying... Oh, speaking of terrifying, Richard.”

“Hm?”

“Why am I wearing such an ostentatious saintly outfit?”

I gripped the fabric of my new clothes as I spoke. It was white, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes, and airy, like I would lift off into the sky at any moment. Multiple layers of tulle lace combined to make the stylish wimple inlaid with beads. Thin silk ribbons were sewn all over the attire, and they arced lightly in the breeze. The dress itself was made entirely of lace. Overall, it was less a saintly outfit and more...

“Reminds me of wedding clothes...” I remarked.

“Hahaha! No, no, you’ve got it all wrong, Miss Monica.” Richard waved his hand casually in dismissal. “I have grand plans for your wedding clothes.”

“You...*what?*”

The carriage rattled as it turned a corner. The wave of cheers drew closer. The parade was once more approaching a street where onlookers could see it.

First, the people sent up joyous shouts for Prince Stevvay, who led the procession in his carriage. The cheers continued and—our coach finally appeared before the crowd of roadside spectators. The people of Kophe welcomed us with enthusiastic applause and acclaim.

His expression rapt, Richard took my hand in his. “Miss Monica, I love you.” He leaned down and kissed my cheek lightly. Under the falling cherry blossoms,

he smiled at me, his face a hair's breadth from mine. "Once more."

This time he kissed the other cheek. *Everyone* noticed when he did it the second time and their loud cheers turned into teasing calls and wolf whistles with excited squeals mixed in.

"Woooooow!"

"Y-Your Highness!"

"Eeeek!"

Their voices grew louder. Wait. This wasn't right. Because we weren't the main event today!

With all eyes on us, Richard finally kissed me on the lips.

"Heh...and that ends our perfect performance."

His flame-colored eyes narrowed. My cheeks burned at the heat in them.

"Miss Monica, let's take our time planning our wedding ceremony and choosing the right date, hm? Ah, we should have an engagement party too. I'm sure it'll create a stir."

"Richard...you really are...a vexing man..."

"I adore you, my precious Miss Monica."

His smile was gentle and bold. It was both beloved and a tad odious to me. Because he had the nerve to kiss me without warning in front of all these people!

He always had me dancing on the palm of his hand even as he attacked me head-on with his love. But he should know by now that such acts were dangerous against the Arousing Priestess! The fact that everything inevitably went his way made me a little...no, a lot, annoyed!

"Darn you."

Before I knew it, my hand stretched naturally toward his cheek. The roadside crowds fell silent, waiting with bated breath. Richard's eyes widened, surprised by my unexpected action. And then.

I brushed my lips ever so lightly against his. I scowled at him out of

embarrassment then declared loudly, while staring into his eyes. “What did you think would happen when you said those words to the Arousing Priestess, Richard?! Of course I’ll want to kiss you!”

“Miss...Monica...”

“Huuuuuuuzzzzzaaaaaahhhhh!!!”

A thunderous roar of approval came from the spectators now.

Richard pressed his hand to his mouth in shock. I had never seen him this clearly flustered before. He was red all the way to his ears. *Ha, take that!* I still tingled from embarrassment, but I had finally succeeded in routing him.

“How bold... Now whatever shall I do with you, hm...” He mumbled the words happily, hand still covering his mouth. He kept muttering to himself, his monologue mixed with chuckles and dreamy sighs. And as he spoke, he excitedly tapped the toes of his shoes together, his legs crossed. “Miss Monica, sweet Miss Monica. I’m incredibly happy.”

“O-Oh, really...?”

“Can we change our plans after this? I hope they’ll let us. I think we should just skip the ceremony at the temple, so I can whisk you back right away and straight to bed.”

“You...!”

“I jest, I jest.” Eyelids lowered, Richard chuckled when he saw me at a loss for words.

“It never sounds like a joke coming from *you*! Especially when—”

“Especially when you remembered? What we *did* the other day?”

“Ngggh!!!”

His usual carefree grin. He had long since flung aside the veil hiding his desire and seeing the emotion in his eyes now, I felt dizzy. Of course, Richard wasn’t bothered at all by my agitation. He truly embodied the devil in devil-may-care with his attitude.

“I don’t know if I can control myself until all the ceremonies finish today.

Considering I want to ravish you this instant in your saintly attire,” he said in that accursedly suave voice of his.

“Will you stop it?! We’re in public! Have you no morals?!”

“Come on, Miss Monica, time to wave to everyone.”

“Urk...!”

He whispered the words right in my ear as he planted a kiss on it. There was no use fighting him. He casually wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me as close to him as he could. Then he responded to the cheers with a broad, invigorating smile. I knew very well that was a lie too.

My face stiff with displeasure, I found it difficult to wave at the crowds. I was dying of embarrassment.



All of our friends from the original post raised their tankards in a toast to Richard from their VIP seats on the roadside. I knew they were only wishing us happiness, but even the innocuous cheer made me red-faced.

“Let’s be even happier from now on, hm, Miss Monica~≡?” He winked.

I felt like I was about to lose my last grip on sanity in the face of that meltingly sweet smile.

“Arousing Priestess! Be happy!”

“Esteemed Priestess!”

“Lady Arousing Priestess!”

The calls of Arousing Priestess didn’t end. Unlike the first time I heard those words, they used it as an honorific title, with smiles on their faces and well wishes in their voices. But as I was at this very moment, I could only hear the words as Prince Medaikonar had intended.

Right now, I was *far* from the respectable Arousing Priestess.

“Darn it! Darn it! I can’t take it anymore. I just need someone to say it as an insult so I can stop feeling guilty! Why won’t anyone abuse me?!” I covered my face with my hand and gave a muffled shriek.

Watching me, Richard said in a singsong voice, laughing, “Then how about I abuse you to both of our hearts’ content later~≡?”

“Darn you, Y-Your...Your Arousing Highness!”

“I’ll make you eat your words, Miss Arousing Priestess Monica~≡!”

Afterword

HELLO, I'm Makino Maebaru. Thank you so much for picking up the long-awaited second volume of *The Inconvenient Life of an Arousing Priestess*!

Within this past year or so, the wonderful Yamato Fujimine's comic adaptation of this novel finally began serialization and the English edition was published too. Such exciting developments for the Arousing Priestess. This volume focused on her return to the Kingdom of Kophe. It isn't about conquest or annexation... Probably.

Monica, who finally realizes she's in love, and Richard, straining in more ways than one as he destroys his magical stones. The two of them lead his knights into the Kingdom and establish supremacy... No, wait, they provide support and while doing so, they start understanding each other more and more. That's what this story is about. I have another rescue tale planned for Monica too.

She constantly undervalues her own abilities despite her outstanding record of achievements. She's the type of girl who doesn't like to stand out and will let others take the spotlight with a smile. No matter the situation, she just can't prioritize herself. I feel it isn't too much to say that I write my works to make heroines like her as happy as possible. Monica is at peace because she has Richard by her side. Speaking of Richard, he's the sort of man who will just shrug casually if the Empire falls or a meteorite hits and respond with, "Don't worry, Miss Monica. I'll handle it, one way or another.≡" And that's exactly what he does.

I think the new character who stood out the most this time is probably Xenu Eugenie. His existence was hinted at in the first volume, but I doubt anyone predicted how he actually turned out. That's what I'd like to think anyway. Isn't Hachi Uehara's illustration of him sublime? It perfectly captures his shadiness and beauty! This ladykiller with a devious smile has a different perspective on life than Richard. I hope you're excited to see what he's up to next!

The last thing I'd like to do is acknowledge everyone involved in the publication of this book. All the readers who read the first volume, the web

version, the comic adaptation, and the English edition. It made me so happy to see you so excited and impatient for the second volume. The artist Hachi Uehara, for drawing Xenu as such a gorgeous and dubious man. My editor and proofreader who I depend on from the bottom of my heart. The designer who made the cover so happy and colorful. To the artist, Yamato Fujimine for the incredible comic adaptation that makes me keep changing my definition of incredible. The booksellers in bookshops all over the world, the distributors, and everyone else involved in this work. Truly, thank you so very much. Without every last one of you, the Arousing Priestess wouldn't exist. Finally, I give my thanks to my friends, family, and grandmother for always supporting me.

Thank you very much for reading. Please don't hesitate to send your thoughts and comments to SHUFU TO SEIKATSU SHA CO., LTD for the Japanese version and to Cross Infinite World for the English version.

I hope we can meet again soon!

Makino Maebaru

August 2023



Too Strong to Belong! Banished to Another World!

By Kazuki Karasawa Illustration Akane Rica

Still Too Strong in Another World!

Sakurako longs to fall in love. Unfortunately, her super-strength scares everybody off! If only she were normal... But then she would have died long ago.



The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor

By Sarasa Nagase Illustration Mitsuya Fuji

A young woman with overpowered magic gets sent back 6 years after being killed. She takes this second chance at life to get with her greatest enemy, the dragon emperor!



Reincarnated as the Last of My Kind

By Kiri Komori Illustration Yamigo

An endearing slice of life fantasy light novel series about a nonhuman girl's journey to become an alchemist to repay the family who took her in!



1
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Suzume Kirisaki
● ARTIST
Cosmic

I Guess This
DRAGON
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