

Minami Kotsuna

ILLUSTRATION BY

Hitomi Hitoyo

*You Can
Have
Me
Back*
3

PARENTAL ADVISORY
WARNING
EXPLICIT CONTENT

*You
Can
Have
MY
Back
3*

Minami Kotsuna


New York

You Can Have My Back 3

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ILLUSTRATION BY Hitomi Hitoyo



Translation by Aleksandra Jankowska

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SENAKA WO AZUKERU NIHA Vol.3

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First published in Japan in 2021 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: October 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Payton Campbell

Designed by Yen Press Design: Andy Swist

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kotsuna, Minami, author. | Jankowska, Aleksandra (Translator), translator.

Title: You can have my back / Minami Kotsuna ; translation by Aleksandra Jankowska.

Other titles: Senaka wo azukeru niha. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2023-Identifiers: LCCN 2023004111 | ISBN 9781975363932 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975363956 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975363970 (v. 3 ; trade paperback)

Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Reincarnation—Fiction. | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.K6828 Yo 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc33

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023004111>

ISBNs: 978-1-97536397-0 (paperback)

978-1-9753-6398-7 (ebook)

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Lucas

Ionia's schoolmate and the lieutenant general of the Royal Army. Remains deeply in love with Ionia.



Josef

Leorino's childhood friend and bodyguard. His androgynous appearance doesn't betray his headstrong personality.



Dirk

Ionia's younger brother. Currently serving as Gravis's adjutant in the Royal Army.



August

Leorino's father, Margrave of Brungwurt. He is concerned about the future of his youngest son.



Ebbo

Ionia's subordinate and the last remaining survivor of the Special Forces. Witnessed Ionia's death.



Theodor

Gravis's valet. As a bloodline purist, he was never fond of Ionia due to his status as a commoner.



Kyle

The crown prince and Gravis's nephew. He has yet to marry. His personality is rather elusive.



Marquis of Lagarea

A powerful noble, uncle to the king. Good friends with Leorino's father, August.



Joachim

The currently reigning king of Fanoren. Gravis's half brother. Considered virtuous but largely unremarkable to his subjects.



Ionia

Met Gravis through a strange twist of fate, joined the army, and later died in battle.



Leorino

The fourth son of a margrave. Known for his unmatched beauty, he possesses the memories of the late Ionia.

Character Introductions



Gravis

The king's younger brother and the general of the Royal Army. Has grown bitter since the death of his best friend, Ionia, but has been courting Leorino ever since they met in the royal capital.

*You
Can
Have
My
Back*

Memories of Betrayal

Dirk mumbled, watching Leorino's solemn expression. He couldn't help the tremble in his voice.

It was too much to believe, too great a truth.

"You...you really have my brother's memories?"

"Yes. Please, believe me, Dirk."

"And you're saying my brother was betrayed and killed by one of his own men...?"

Leorino nodded.

"And there was a mole on the battlefield that day...?"

He nodded again.

"The attack would not have been possible without a mole. The gates of the outer fort cannot be opened from the outside. They're even stronger than the inner gates. If those gates were to be destroyed, everyone would know. But the outer fortress was overtaken in the night. What could that mean?"

Those words only stunned Dirk all over again.

How could the fortress have been breached without anyone noticing? With so few survivors, the truth had been lost to time.

“We were in the inner fortress at the time. So was Ebbo. Until we noticed something strange in the outer fort.”

Dirk turned to the large man once more. Ebbo nodded gravely.

“How did you notice what was happening in the outer fortress...from that distance?”

Dirk’s question was justified.

Zweilink was doubly fortified, with a buffer zone between the outer and inner forts, commonly known as “the plains.” The plains were so large that it would not have been possible to hear the noise in the outer fortress from the inner fortress.

“One of our men had particularly good hearing. He could distinguish sounds across vast distances. If he had not noticed the anomaly in the outer fortress that day, the inner fortress might have been taken in one fell swoop under the cover of night.”

Unlike Dirk, who was learning one absurd truth after another, Ebbo already knew everything and silently listened to Leorino.

Still, he clenched his fist so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

“Dirk, the true nature of Ionia’s unit was never revealed to the Royal Army.”

“Which means...what, exactly?”

“The Special Forces were formed from a group of commoners in Ionia’s platoon gifted with special abilities.”

“What...? You mean they formed a unit of ability users...? They wouldn’t...”

At the mention of special abilities, Dirk immediately turned to his superior, who nodded, understanding the question in his gaze.

“Special abilities sometimes manifest themselves in those of royal blood, and while it’s rare, commoners can possess them as well, the way Ionia did. These

commoners had come together to form a unit.”

“But how can that be? The records only say that my brother belonged to the mountain troops. I have never read of these Special Forces you speak of.”

Leorino nodded.

“No, I don’t suppose they would commit that to parchment. The Special Forces have never been formed since. That’s what I managed to unearth here.”

Dirk suddenly understood why Leorino had been so absorbed by his research in the archives.

“But it’s true. Ionia was officially a member of the mountain troops, but in reality he led an independent unit tasked with going into the harshest battlefields and using their unique talents to change the course of the war.”

Gravis took over, affirming Leorino’s words.

“It’s true that, at the time, a special unit had been secretly created under General Stolf. I knew of their existence. After the battle for Zweilink, they were stricken from the records.”

Dirk looked up at his superior with surprise.

“In Ionia’s case, the bishop of his diocese reported the existence of a child with a unique ability. Ability users don’t have easy lives. Sometimes they were considered ‘monsters’ and avoided... The Special Forces brought such people together.”

“If you’re monsters, then so am I,” said Gravis.

Leorino smiled up at Gravis, who was standing behind him, as if to say he appreciated the comment.

“The only destination for such people at the time was the Royal Army. The same is true for Ebbo.”

Dirk looked to the giant man next to him.

The look in Ebbo's eyes was like the surface of a calm lake.

"The captain is right. I also struggled when I was coming of age. I have the gift of superhuman strength."

"...!"

The large man thrust his fist out to Dirk.

"I can easily lift a carriage with its passengers in one hand. If I engage all of my Power at once, I could hoist the gates of the Zweilink by myself... I was the one who closed those gates that day."

Dirk was stunned speechless by Ebbo's confession.

"Ebbo is the only survivor of the Special Forces now that Edgar is dead. These awful burn scars serve as proof that he didn't hesitate for a moment to carry out my orders that day... I gave him these scars for the rest of his life."

Leorino slowly reached out and touched the burn scar on Ebbo's temple.

The pink keloid extended all the way down into his clothes. The scars also appeared on both his palms.

"Captain...I am proud of these scars. They are proof that we defended Zweilink."

"I know, Ebbo... You closed the gates and saved the lands of Fanoren from the Zwelfs."

Gravis nodded. "Steiger, there is not a doubt in my mind that it was your Power that protected this country."

Trembling slightly at the general's praise, Ebbo extended his scarred hand toward Leorino.

Leorino's fair, thin fingers squeezed his hand back.

Covered by Ebbo's palm, Leorio's hand looked exceedingly small in comparison.

“Captain...it was also you and your Power that defended our country.”

He stroked Leorino’s small hand over and over, as if handling something fragile.

“Your hands are so little now, Captain.”

“...Yes, compared to yours, mine could belong to a child.”

“Not like that matters.”

“...I suppose not.”

Leorino smiled at the casual tone of his voice. The man’s touch as he rubbed Leorino’s hand was perfectly wholesome.

The hand that had been warped and gnarled by the burns was now covered by a fair hand gently stroking the old wounds.

“If you had not crushed that boulder with your own hands, I wouldn’t have been able to close the gates at all.”

It was Gravis who responded to Ebbo.

“...What does that mean, Steiger? What is this about Ionia crushing a boulder?”

“A boulder had suddenly appeared in front of the gates. It was so large that I couldn’t lift it even with my superhuman strength.”

Gravis’s face turned rigid. “Is that true, Leorino?”

Violet eyes looked up at Gravis.

“Yes. When we headed from the inner to the outer fortress, it hadn’t been there. But when we started retreating, there it was... Someone had placed it there. They wanted to keep us from closing the gates.”

“Now wait a moment.” Dirk interrupted. “*Placed* it? In the middle of two fortresses? How could the enemy haul in such a large boulder without anyone noticing?”

Leorino shook his head. “No, it’s possible. Like, say, if they had the Power to leap with any object they touched, the way Vi does. In fact, Vi leaped to Zweilink immediately after while connecting hundreds of troops into a single unit. All they would need was a similar ability...don’t you think?”

“Yes, I could see it.”

Gravis stopped to consider it.

“...You mean to say someone among our enemies possessed the same ability I do?”

“To think they could move a boulder large enough to block the gates...”

Dirk paled and Ebbo answered.

“Indeed. Such Power is nothing to scoff at. Our abilities are directly linked to... for lack of a better term, the amount of life we have.”

“...I’m sorry, Steiger, I don’t think I follow.” Dirk groaned.

Ebbo carefully began his answer, wondering how best to explain it. “Using an ability drains one’s life. In my case, if I lift something large and heavy, the longer I hold it, the darker my vision gets. I feel a chill in the pit of my stomach, and I can sense that if I continue to use my ability, I will die. As for the captain...”

“The same was true for Ionia. Even crushing small objects would wear him out if he used the ability too many times in a row, and destroying the boulder would have drained him in no time.”

“...I see now the nature of your abilities. So I suppose we should assume someone had been able to place that boulder there.”

As Dirk visibly mulled it over, Gravis calmly considered it.

It had been assumed that no one outside of the borders of Fanoren possessed special abilities, but now they had to consider the possibility of at least one ability user siding with Zwelf.

“...In any case, the boulder was placed there to keep the gates from closing.”

Leorino and Ebbo nodded at the same time.

At first glance, the mountain of a man and the faelike boy had nothing in common. And yet, they had a shared past.

“Did Ionia destroy that boulder?”

“Yes, the Captain crushed it just before Your Excellency arrived with reinforcements. But even before that, he was using his Power with reckless abandon.”

“But then...that would mean my brother...”

The men looked to Leorino for an answer. Leorino nodded and smiled calmly.

“Even if Edgar had not stabbed him, there was no hope for Ionia. Isn’t that what you’re trying to say, Ebbo?”

“Yes, Captain... At the time, he had already used his Power beyond any measure of reason and was very nearly spent.”

Dirk saw the man standing behind Leorino clench his fists.

Dirk didn’t possess any ability and couldn’t understand what it meant for someone to use their Power beyond their limits. But he did understand that the ability was finite and was used at the cost of one’s life.

Ebbo once more reverently held Leorino’s small hand.

“Captain, you already knew at that point that you were not going to make it, didn’t you?”

“...I wonder. I suppose I did.”

“Seeing you put your life on the line, I was able to follow through with your orders.”

Leorino’s violet eyes turned glossy.

“...Ebbo.”

“I remember you yelling over the closing gates, ‘Victory is ours!’ My face was

on fire. It was so blisteringly hot I wanted to die, but I could hear you, too.”

There was something between Leorino and Ebbo that only they could understand.

“I really wished I could forget that day entirely.”

Tears welled in Leorino’s eyes at Ebbo’s words. “I’m sorry I dragged you back into that hell. And I’m not your captain anymore.”

“No, you’re still my captain, even if you’re a lot smaller and more cherubic now. I know my captain came back to me with you.”

“Ebbo...”

“It was not a battle easily forgotten. And in the end, I never did.”

“I know. I don’t want to dream about that day anymore either, but that night still haunts me... It plagues my nightmares over and over again.”

The older man’s burn scars twisted as he frowned. “It hurt, didn’t it? The men were slowly swallowed by the fire, and I could smell my own flesh burning...my blood boiling... It was so damned hot, Captain.”

Leorino pressed his forehead against Ebbo’s fist.

Leorino looked up at Dirk, his eyes filled with tears.

“Dirk...I’m sorry I kept it from you until now.”

“Is that all?” Dirk asked Leorino with a pale face. “That’s the truth of your past that you wanted to tell us about?”

Leorino bit his lip.

“...No, there’s more. Ionia’s death also affected me personally.”

“...What do you mean?”

“It’s the reason my legs are the way they are. I fell from the walls of the outer fortress six years ago, on the day of the memorial service. That’s when I broke

my legs.”

“...Lord Leorino.”

Feeling Dirk’s pained gaze, Leorino resolutely shook his head. “I don’t want to be pitied. I am telling you this because it’s related to what happened eighteen years ago.”

“What do you mean?”

“Six years ago, it was the surviving traitor, Edgar Yorke, who jumped from the fortress walls with me in tow.”

“...No.”

“It’s true. I was a young boy when I met Edgar by chance and pushed him to the edge with my words.”

Ebbo looked heartbroken.

“I felt tired and was allowed to rest in a small room. That’s when I dreamed of the battle. When I woke up, Edgar was right there. I was astonished. The traitor from my dream, the man who had stabbed me, stood right in front of me. Then, in a trance, I hounded him down. I told him I remembered everything...”

Dirk couldn’t help but imagine.

A man who had lay low, living with the secret of his betrayal for twelve years. A noble boy, whom he had never met before, suddenly announcing he knew what he had done.

That boy had the very same violet eyes as the man he had killed.

How shocked Edgar must have been to have his guilt suddenly exposed and denounced by this strange boy.

“Edgar became delirious and said, ‘my life is over,’ then threw himself off the wall, with me still in his grasp.”

“...My god.”

Dirk recalled Gravis suddenly vanishing from his office that day. He later found out he had leaped to Zweilink. It must have been Leorino who had called him.

“I couldn’t move my legs... They hurt so much. It took me two years to be able to walk again. I was in so much pain every day.”

Leorino stared at the fire on the tabletop and fell silent for a longer moment.

“...He said that if he was going to die, he was taking me with him. He wanted to kill me again... That man killed me *twice*.”

“Lord Leorino...”

“No, I didn’t die the second time. I survived...if only to expose his crimes.”

The change in tone startled the men.

Leorino’s eyes were somehow vacant, reddish from the flames reflected in them.

“...The man died in the very fortress he had betrayed. It was only natural. He should have died there long ago.”

“Lord Leorino...? What’s wrong?”

Leorino didn’t seem to react to Dirk’s concerned question. In fact, it was as if he hadn’t heard him at all.

“We were told he was dead, so why was he standing by the boulder? ...Ebbo, did you see him?”

Ebbo looked to the general in dismay. Gravis, too, furrowed his brow and observed Leorino carefully. “Leorino.”

Leorino was acting strange.

“Didn’t you see him, Ebbo? He was laughing. He was using the wind to fan the flames. The fire engulfed them one after another, friend and foe alike... He saw me, and he ran.”

The men felt as if Leorino's shadow, swaying in the flames of the lamp, had suddenly swelled to twice its size.

It was as if Ionia's soul had taken over Leorino's body beyond the confines of his dreams.

"Leorino, stop!" Gravis placed his hands on Leorino's shoulders, but the words wouldn't stop coming from Leorino's mouth.

"We were at our wits' end. Our friends were dying. I kept praying for them to reach us in time. I kept praying that Vi would come and we would be victorious... Until then, we would hold the fort."

"Leorino! ...*Ionia*! Stop!"

"...All I could ever offer Vi was my blood and my loyalty."

Gravis's face crumpled.

Leorino's small face was wet, tears streaming down his cheeks as he gazed into the void and continued to speak.

"So hot..." Leorino huffed, wiping his forehead.

"Captain... Captain, I get it! Please don't do this!" Ebbo pleaded in a heartbroken voice.

"Ebbo... Ebbo, close the gates."

"Captain...! It's over! That battle is over. It ended eighteen years ago!"

"No, it's not. We're *still* right there. If we close the gates now, our men will be burned alive. But if we don't close them, Fanoren will fall...!"

The men clenched their fists at the cries of Leorino's soul.

"Flesh, I smell burning flesh. Ebbo...is he dead?"

"Captain... Captain Ionia!"

"Did I finish him off? ...There's a traitor in our midst. I must tell Vi... Someone, please...!"

“Leorino! Come back to us!”

Gravis yelled and tightly embraced Leorino’s slender body from behind. Leorino was shaking.

“...What you’re seeing isn’t real.” Gravis covered his eyes with his large hand.

Leorino was out of breath and trembling. *“Vi...”*

“You’re not Ionia. You’re Leorino... Leorino, wake up.”

“Leorino...am I? I’m... I’m...”

“It’s a dream. Leorino, you must wake up.”

Leorino suddenly released a grief-stricken shriek and began sobbing. His forehead was drenched with sweat.

“Vi... I’m hot, it hurts, so hot...”

“Relax. It’s all right. You’re not in Zweilink, Leorino... Come back to us.”

Ebbo and Dirk could only stare at them in silence.

Leorino’s head went limp.

“Leorino!”

“Lord Leorino!”

The men watched on in horror.

He seemed to have lost consciousness for the briefest moment. Leorino quickly opened his eyes.

“...I-I’m sorry...”

He immediately closed his eyes again.

“Dirk. Call for Sasha!”

“...No! Vi, don’t... I can’t stop here.”

His slender fingers clung onto Gravis’s arm with all his might.

“...I’m sorry you had to see me like that... I’m all right. I can keep going. Please.”

Gravis finally understood how much pressure Leorino’s mind and body had been under from Ionia’s memories. Ionia’s last moments were too heartrending to relive, even for a soldier like Gravis. Leorino had experienced the moment of his own death countless times since before he was even half-fledged.

Checking his forehead, it was immediately apparent he had a fever.

Such was the toll that Ionia’s memories had taken on Leorino’s body and mind. It was no wonder that he fell ill so often, and Gravis clenched his teeth, regretting that he hadn’t noticed.

“Leorino, let’s not do this anymore.”

Leorino looked pathetically weak. He had clearly reached his physical limits. But he was desperately trying to push through with his willpower alone.

“...Vi, let go of me, please. I’m all right. I still have something I must share with you all.”

“Leorino...”

“I didn’t come to the royal capital to be pitied... I overcame what happened to me. The fear, the pain. I left everything I don’t need in Brungwurt in order to avenge Ionia.”

Burning Soul

“...All right. You can keep going. But the next time you faint, that’s where it ends. Are we clear?”

Leorino looked up at Gravis with gratitude and offered him a small smile.

Seeing his expression, the men quietly breathed a sigh of relief. His condition had already visibly improved.

Leorino exhaled heavily, wiped the sweat from his brow, and turned to Dirk and Ebbo once more.

“The fact that he ran away when he saw me, that he was stoking the fire, and what he said when he stabbed Ionia...all of it convinced Ionia of Edgar’s treachery. Then, six years ago, I met Edgar again at the fortress. Not as Ionia, but as Leorino Cassieux.”

There, Leorino suffered the injuries that changed his life forever.

“This is the most important part. Edgar said something as he jumped with me in tow. ‘Once my crimes are exposed, it’s all over. They’re going to kill me anyway.’”

“Wait... Did Yorke mean...?”

“I believe someone else was pulling the strings eighteen years ago. Edgar was likely just a pawn.”

Dirk was stunned speechless, but Ebbo nodded deeply at Leorino’s words.

“Edgar was too much of a coward to commit high treason all on his own. He

didn't have the spine."

"That was also my impression of Edgar. But I still don't know the whole truth. That's why I wanted to find out more about him."

Having said this, Leorino heaved a deep sigh and closed his eyes. Gravis held him from behind.

"Come... Lean back."

"...All right. Thank you."

Leorino thanked Gravis and leaned back against him. He must have truly exhausted himself.

He then looked up at Gravis and asked if he could continue the conversation.

Gravis frowned.

"You do realize you're feverish again, yes?"

"...I'm fine for now."

"If you insist..."

Gravis allowed him to continue. He figured it would only cause Leorino more pain if he were to interrupt him now, forcing him to relive those memories all over again.

"The last thing I want to tell you about is what happened to me after the accident. I know you may be wondering why you're learning this now, and not six years ago, but...I had forgotten about Edgar for a while."

"From the shock of the incident?"

Dirk asked with a pained look, but Leorino shook his head.

"Perhaps at first...but no. A certain man was involved."

"A man...?"

"It was because of him that I couldn't recall Edgar's final words... No, I had

forgotten them entirely.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not following.”

“He had come to see me several times after the incident. Each time, he told me over and over again to forget about the pain.”

Leorino’s words were met with a response from Ebbo.

“No way.” He murmured in a tense voice. “You’re not saying he...he stole your memories?”

Leorino nodded. Dirk frowned.

“What? What do you mean, Steiger?”

“He’s right. My memories were stolen. And not only mine. My father’s and Vi’s as well... His Excellency must have been there to hear Edgar’s last words, but neither could remember them.”

Dirk turned to his superior. Gravis nodded.

“Leorino is right. I do remember the incident, but I have no recollection of what Edgar Yorke had said in his final moments.”

Ebbo and Dirk were lost for words.

“Memory manipulation... I’ve never met anyone with such an ability.”

“So...who could have possibly stolen your memories...?”

“The Marquis of Lagarea, Bruno Henckel.”

Leorino’s answer was like a long-held sigh.

But the impact of his words made Ebbo and Dirk instantly pale.

“.....No way.”

Dirk jumped to his feet and, forgetting all about Leorino’s infirmity, grabbed his shoulders before he could stop himself.

“You... Lord Leorino, do you understand the gravity of what you just told us?”

“Yes...I do.”

“I want to believe you...but if that’s true, our kingdom is in great danger.”

Leorino nodded at that.

“How about proof? What proof do you have?! If a traitor has been occupying the heart of our country’s politics for over eighteen years—”

“...Dirk. We can worry about that later. For now, let Leorino speak.”

Gravis interrupted his adjutant’s erratic train of thought. Dirk let go of Leorino with a start and promptly apologized.

“I-I’m sorry, Lord Leorino. Please, continue.”

“Of course... My apologies.”

But Leorino seemed to have finally run out of energy, and his head lolled once more.

He was too exhausted to keep his head upright. He was wilting before their eyes like a flower pounded by rain.

“Leorino!”

Gravis shook his shoulder to rouse him.

“You decided to do this, so see it through to the end!”

A gentle reminder on his part. Leorino found the strength within him once more.

“Yes... Dirk, Ebbo, I want you to listen just a little longer.”

“...Of course. I’m so sorry, Lord Leorino. Please continue.”

“I had a dream that brought my memories back. At the time, I shed tears of frustration, wondering how I could have forgotten something so important. And with that...I came to suspect the marquis. The marquis happened to be visiting Brungwurt at the time, so I performed an experiment.”

“An experiment?”

“Yes. What I remembered and what I was going to attempt... I wrote them all down in a letter to myself and gave it to my attendant. Then, when we had breakfast together, I told the marquis that I remembered the incident.”

Dirk was now chilled to his core, impressed at the risk Leorino had taken.

Glancing at his superior, he saw that Gravis was also looking down at his partner's head with a scowl.

“The Marquis of Lagarea said to me, ‘You don’t need to think about Edgar any longer’... Or at least, that’s what I think he said. He said something else, and then I forgot about Edgar once more.”

“...No way.”

“It’s true. I had even forgotten that I had written to myself until after breakfast, when my attendant handed me the letter.”

Dirk shuddered. He covered his mouth, trying to get ahold of his emotions. He felt like if he didn’t, he would have screamed in fear of the implications.

“Could it be so easy to control someone’s memories...? Could someone truly do that?”

Leorino nodded. “It was that experience that convinced me that the Marquis of Lagarea possesses the ability to manipulate people’s memories... He, too, is an ability user.”

“Captain, may I ask you a question? How did you recover the memories that were taken from you?”

Leorino pondered Ebbo’s question for a moment.

“...I’m not quite sure. Though I felt like the memory wasn’t exactly *erased*, but rather I had lost the ability to recall it.”

Dirk had no idea what Leorino was talking about.

“I suspect the Marquis of Lagarea’s Power to manipulate memories is limited to what he knows about the person in question.”

“Captain...I don’t get it. Could you explain?”

“I mean that there are matters the Marquis of Lagarea knows nothing about. I have other memories he did not know of—Ionia’s memories—that connected me to Edgar.”

Ebbo and Dirk both groaned quietly.

“...All right. The marquis did not know that you, Lord Leorino, had inherited my brother’s memories.”

“So he erased the memories of Edgar throwing himself off the fortress walls with you in tow, but the memories of the captain remained.”

Leorino nodded resolutely.

“Yes. The marquis does not know that Ionia knows about Edgar’s betrayal. So I was able to use Ionia’s memory, which he could not steal, as a trigger to retrieve the words spoken by Edgar six years ago.”

Dirk looked up at his superior.

“Your Excellency...what should we do?”

“Leorino’s memory alone is not enough to ascertain that the marquis is an ability user and has betrayed our country.”

“Indeed.”

“But Leorino is right. I, too, cannot remember Edgar’s final words.”

“Really...? Nothing at all?”

“Yes. I remember failing to grab Leorino’s hand, but I can’t recall what Edgar said. I had never questioned it until now.”

The man remembered every letter of every document, every word of every meeting, and who had spoken it. And yet Dirk’s superior could not remember a

single word Edgar said.

“If Leorino’s theory is correct, the only connection I have to Edgar was the day of the incident. Perhaps, with that erased, I can no longer access that memory.”

The men were all in thought.

“There is something we must consider. It was Lagarea himself who undertook the investigation into Leorino’s incident,” said Gravis.

Ebbo gritted his teeth. “Did he, now?”

“Yes. His final report concluded that there was no information that would lead us to the truth.”

Hearing the general’s words, Ebbo and Dirk let out an animalistic growl in unison.

“...So you’re saying that all information concerning Edgar might have already been erased.”

“If the enemy possesses such an ability, they will also be able to erase any evidence in the future.”

Dirk looked at Leorino with concern. “Lord Leorino, I want to believe you, but I still can’t say for sure that the marquis is the mastermind behind all this. There is no clear evidence.”

Gravis stepped in. “The Marquis of Lagarea is a man kind of heart and renowned as a loyal subject to the crown. He has served our country for decades and is a widely respected man of character.

“He is also a good friend of my father’s... He was a very kind uncle to me.”

That was precisely why the information Leorino relayed had been so shocking.

“But we cannot say he is truly innocent, either. Of course, eighteen years ago, the Marquis of Lagarea was also at the center of national politics. What if he had been manipulating our memories as he saw fit this entire time?”

Dirk shuddered. "...That's a horrifying thought."

"I actually have no memory of Edgar being at the fortress. It's a minor detail, but given that this has now become *personal*, I must investigate this fact further."

Dirk and Ebbo nodded at his words.

"That's all I wanted to tell you."

With that, Leorino closed his eyes.

"All the evidence may have already been erased. Perhaps people's memories have been, too...but I really wanted to learn the truth. If the mastermind is still alive and could threaten our kingdom, which Vi seeks to protect...I absolutely had to tell Vi all I know."

The men's chests tightened.

Leorino and Ionia shared the same principles.

They would both put themselves in danger for Gravis's sake without a second thought.

"A traitor might bring war to Fanoren again... That's my greatest fear."

Gravis and Dirk silently exchanged glances.

Leorino couldn't have known that Zwelf was about to unleash war on their lands once more, but his words seemed to be predicting what was to come.

It was no coincidence. Leorino's arrival in the royal capital had been brought about by fate.

Family Embrace

“I wanted to look into it, but didn’t know how. I was...supposedly incapable of independence and in need of a protector,” Leorino muttered.

Dirk had already heard the details behind Leorino’s arrival in the capital from Sasha.

“But...my father gave me a grace period of two years.”

Dirk furrowed his brow. “...Lord Leorino.”

“My father allowed me to find my path to independence in the royal capital. So I came to see if I could find out more about Edgar Yorke and the Marquis of Lagarea... Although, in the end, I learned very little, and caused much trouble instead...”

The time he was given by the margrave was not, in fact, intended to give Leorino a chance to become independent. Dirk knew that it was an early evacuation in preparation for the coming war and a period of time to get to know Julian better.

But he couldn’t tell Leorino that. He hoped Leorino would never have to find out.

Dirk could easily imagine how much hope Leorino had found in his father’s words. How much courage had his small, brave, humble soul mustered up to come to the royal capital, fully determined to fight alone?

Dirk was eager to protect that spirit.

“...That is why, when I saw Ebbo at the training grounds, I knew I must speak with him.”

Gently, Ebbo took Leorino's hand in his own. Leorino looked at his former subordinate with teary eyes.

“Ebbo...”

“Captain... Thank you for coming back to us.” Ebbo brought Leorino's hand to his forehead. “I was there with you, so I know you would never lie to me. I believe you.”

“Ebbo...”

“My Power belongs to you until the day I die. If you ever fight again, I will follow wherever you may go.”

Hearing this, Leorino smiled, tears trickling down his cheek.

“I'm sorry I got you involved in all this...even though I knew I'd be causing you pain again. Thank you.”

Leorino bowed deeply to the man who had once been his subordinate.

“And, Dirk...I'm sorry for deceiving you by pretending to accidentally drop my dagger. I didn't know how else I could get to Ebbo.”

“Ha-ha... You really got me good. His Excellency was livid... I was fully prepared to lose my job.”

Laughing, Dirk rose from his seat and crouched next to Leorino.

He then looked up at his superior, standing behind Leorino like a guardian angel, and asked permission.

“Sir...I understand that Lord Leorino is very important to Your Excellency.”

“Dirk?”

“But just for the moment, may I...use my family privilege?”

Gravis understood what the adjutant meant.

He smiled faintly and nodded, knowing he wouldn't be able to say no to him.

The next instant, Dirk was hugging Leorino.

Leorino's thin body flinched at the movement.

"D-Dirk...?"

"...Thank you, Lord Leorino, for finding the courage to come to the royal capital."

Leorino could only stare.

The strong, older little brother hugged his slender body, which bore no resemblance to his actual brother's, with all the tenderness in the world.

"His Excellency returned my brother's sword to us. We cleaned it of blood and soot until it looked brand-new and placed it on display in my father's workshop."

Tears spilled from Leorino's eyes.

"...D-Dirk..."

"Come and see it, Lord Leorino. Father and Mother will be pleased."

"...O-of course."

"I'm sorry I doubted you...especially when you've returned my brother to us. You must have been so worried and scared."

"Dirk..."

"You're my brother, and...you're also Lord Leorino, *and* you also got me hook, line, and sinker the other day."

Leorino rested his forehead against the warmth of Dirk's chest and quietly broke into tears.

"D-Dirk...I'm sorry."

"Lord Leorino..."

“I’m sorry. I always wanted to tell you how glad I am to have met you.”

“Me too... I was too young back then to understand my brother’s struggles. I’m sorry, and...welcome back.”

Tears had also gathered in the corners of Dirk’s eyes.

Leorino’s helpless body was nothing like the muscular older brother he remembered.

But still, he could feel it. His brother had entrusted this young man with so much. And, just like his brother, he was trying to fight for the man he loved.

Dirk looked up at his superior once more.

He could not decipher the emotion on Gravis’s face, but he could tell that he was watching over them.

Perhaps he really had held back for as long as he could. If he had not revealed his secret now, Leorino would have likely continued to fight this dangerous battle all alone, groping in the dark for a way forward.

Dirk nodded to his superior with visible gratitude, glad they had been able to keep Leorino safe.

“...You’ve fought so hard, Lord Leorino. You did all you could on your own. From now on, it won’t be just His Excellency—I’ll also be here for you. I’m probably a little more flexible than him. You can count on me.”

Gravis scoffed at his adjutant’s comment.

“Not to mention...you have Captain Steiger, too.”

Ebbo nodded repeatedly at Dirk’s words.

Leorino looked at the two men in turn, his tired face breaking into a reassured smile. Leorino’s tearful violet eyes were undoubtedly the same shade as Dirk’s brother’s. But at the same time, those eyes were filled with Leorino’s own courage and determination.

Moved by his beauty, Dirk tightly hugged Leorino again.

It was a familial embrace. At that moment, Leorino became a part of the family Dirk swore to protect.

“Thank you, Lord Leorino...for bringing me to my brother.”

Gravis patted his second-in-command on the shoulder. He then picked Leorino up in his arms.

“That will be all for today.”

Finally, the tension must have worn off. Leorino was on the verge of fainting.

“...Wait,” Leorino protested. “We must speak of what comes next...”

“We will have plenty of opportunities for that. That’s more than enough for one day. You did very well.”

Leorino grumbled a little, but soon ran out of energy and fell unconscious in his exhaustion.

“I hope Lord Leorino will be all right.”

“He had a high fever the day before yesterday. He hasn’t fully recovered yet.”

Hearing that, Ebbo squeezed Leorino’s limp hand.

“He’s running hot... He must be dreaming of that battle.”

“Steiger?”

“I would know, sir.” The scarred man watched Leorino with a sad look in his eyes. “My captain... Lord Leorino, every time he recalls that day, is stabbed in the stomach and burned by those flames over and over again.”

Leorino was clearly acting strange when he spoke of Zweilink. His eyes were vacant, as if he was dreaming, virtually blind to reality.

“The inside of the fortress was like an active furnace. I still occasionally have nightmares about it. When I jerk awake from the burning heat, I’m usually

feverish and writhing in pain... To think that his slender body has to suffer through those flames so often... Such a shame.”

Pity appeared on Ebbo’s face.

The men looked at the unconscious Leorino with heartbroken eyes.

“I’ll be back as soon as I return Leorino to the palace... Ebbo Steiger.”

Ebbo slowly got to his feet and saluted. “Yes, sir.”

“You are to report directly to Lucas for the time being. Dirk, find a reason to transfer Steiger that won’t raise any suspicions.”

“Of course, sir.”

“You are to remain in the royal capital and await further instructions. In the meantime, can you discreetly trace someone with connections to the Special Forces? You’ll be in contact with Kaunzel.”

“I can’t say it’s easy to keep a low profile with my appearance...but I do have someone I trust to gather information without asking questions.”

“I’ll help,” said Dirk. “If you want to gather information in the common areas of the royal capital, I could be of use.”

“Most importantly,” Gravis instructed in a stern voice, “you must be very careful not to have anything *stolen* from you. The past Leorino carries is directly linked to the future of our country.”

Having carried Leorino to the palace, Gravis returned to his office.

The adjutant greeted him with a salute.

“...Is Lord Leorino feeling better?”

“No. We can only give him medicine for his fever and keep an eye on him. If the fever is psychosomatic, there is nothing the doctors can do.”

Silence fell between them.

“...In any case, that was quite shocking.”

“...I’d imagine.”

Seeing the calm, silent smile on his superior’s lips, Dirk’s noisy mind finally calmed a little.

“It must have felt like a bolt out of the blue for someone so young to tell you he’s your older brother.”

“Now that I think about it, the first time we met, he kept asking me to tell him all about myself with this spark in his eyes...”

Gravis silently watched Dirk make an effort to act cheerful.

“I never would have guessed it was because he was excited to meet his little brother. I did think he was being awfully chummy... Ha-ha, but that explains a lot.”

“He’s fonder of you than anyone else in the Palace of Defense. Don’t think about him as your brother, just treat him as you always have. That will be best for both of you.”

Dirk clenched his fists at his superior’s words.

“...I had no idea my brother had met his end like that.”

“Neither did I.”

“But I investigated it to death... Son of a bitch.”

Gravis sympathized with his adjutant’s self-derision. “...Son of a bitch, indeed.”

Dirk smiled hearing his superior swear in a very unroyal manner. He could sense his kindness.

“Sir... May I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“Why was my brother’s unit classified? What happened to the Special Forces?”

Gravis watched Dirk in silence for a moment, then heaved a deep sigh and began.

“It happened when I was very young. Abilities were particularly rare among commoners, and yet the army managed to find several. They planned to assemble a special unit of commoners with abilities who did not strictly belong to any one unit and could be sent to particularly difficult battlefields.”

“...And my brother fell into this category?”

“The Royal Army was desperate for ability users, but most of them were royals or nobles with royal blood. Such as Madame Maia, for example.”

“Right...”

“How many nobles would enter the army of their own volition? But no one cares what happens to commoners, which was very convenient for the Royal Army... Simple as that.”

Dirk bit his lip.

“As for your other question, I abolished the Special Forces after the war.”

“Why?”

“...I didn’t want people to suffer like Ionia had. If people knew they could do so much more than regular soldiers, the hunt for ability users would begin. Abilities are not some blessing. They eat away at your life. That’s how Ionia met his untimely demise. I couldn’t allow such inhumane practices to continue.”

Ever since the war, Gravis had been secretly protecting commoners with abilities.

Gravis placed those who couldn’t find their place in the world in a secret organization managed by Theodor in hopes of providing them refuge. The man who had been following Leorino was one of them.

“...I’ve been entrusted with the role of your adjutant, and yet I’ve been living my life without knowing a single thing about what truly happened. How can I ever face my brother now...? Ha-ha, how utterly pathetic of me.”

“Is this really the time to get sentimental? We’ve much to do.”

Gravis patted Dirk on the head. Dirk couldn’t help but laugh. It was the first time his superior had been so gentle with him.

“...Does the Ice-Cold General deign to comfort me?”

“That’s your punishment for the self-deprecation.”

“Ha-ha... I appreciate your guidance.”

“If you were just my second-in-command, I would leave you alone, but you’re Io’s brother. You’re something of a younger brother to me, too.”

Dirk’s eyes were burning. Still, he resisted the tears, knowing how absurd it would be for a man approaching his thirties to cry in front of his superior.

“Don’t make me cry... I’m a mere commoner, the son of a humble blacksmith.”

“And I’m a mere royal, a humble general.”

“Hic... Sir...”

“Do you think you can believe Leorino?”

“...Yes.” Dirk bowed deeply, his eyes still cast down. A single tear fell onto his shoe. “...Thank you for letting me see my brother once more.”

The corners of Dirk’s eyes were slightly red.

“...I’m sorry you had to see that. I must say, Your Excellency is surprisingly kind.”

“I’m trying to be nice to you and *that’s* your response? For what it’s worth, you’re not as pretty as Leorino when you cry.”

Dirk replied to his superior’s jab with a knowing smile. “Oh, so the moment you fall in love, you abandon the title of the Ice-Cold General?”

“I don’t know what you call me behind my back. Can’t abandon something I never owned in the first place.”

The adjutant and his superior exchanged friendly banter the way they always did. It was how they showed they cared for each other.

“Right, so...about the issue at hand, who are you planning to tell?” It was time to return to their main concern.

The adjutant made a conscious effort to look solemn. “We shall certainly need outside help. It’s just...all of this is so much.”

“We can start with Lucas. He already noticed that Leorino is the reincarnation of Ionia.”

The adjutant was surprised. “Oh... The lieutenant general already knows? That simplifies things.”

“And in regards to Leorino’s father, considering the situation with Zwelf, the only thing we must avoid is August informing the man in question. That’s why we must get him thoroughly involved.”

Dirk noticed that his superior had not once explicitly referred to him as “the Marquis of Lagarea” since they arrived in his office.

This must have been his way of saying that walls may have ears, and they should act with that in mind.

“Yes, sir.”

“There’s also Theodor and Ginter.” Gravis mentioned the names of his valet and the chancellor.

“Chancellor Ginter is always in close proximity to the person in question. Should we worry if the information will be safe with him?”

“No, Ginter should be fine. Lucas and Ginter are good friends from their days with Ionia at the Academy of Higher Education.”

“They are...?!”

Dirk was once again surprised at his late brother’s connections.

“If we tell Ginter the truth, he will help us. We should let Lucas handle that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The official line is that we’re preparing for the war with Zwelf.”

“Duly noted. What about the lieutenant general?”

Gravis considered this for a moment. “I’ll let Lucas speak with Leorino. Then again...”

“Will that be a problem?”

“No, Leorino wants to do so himself. But given his health...I’m not exactly certain when.”

“...Fair point.”

Given what Dirk had seen earlier, Leorino seemed far from making a full recovery.

Leorino had looked thinner than a few days prior, which might have been caused by digging daily through Ionia’s memories. Dirk wanted to punch himself for thinking that he had imagined it.

“...No.”

“Sir?”

“Why pointlessly draw this out if we get it all out of him sooner rather than later?”

His superior seemed to have made up his mind.

“Tell Lucas to come to my palace tonight. He will meet with Leorino.”

Dirk nodded.

“The problem of Ionia is also Lucas’s problem. We can’t move on without him.”

Dirk was flustered by these words. The question he had wanted to ask for so long rose in his throat.

“...What?” Gravis turned to his second-in-command, who looked unusually hesitant.

“I’d like to ask you about the past, if I may.”

“What about the past?”

“Um... What sort of relationship did the lieutenant general have with my brother?” Dirk cast his eyes down as he asked this.

“What exactly do you want to know?”

“I want to know who my brother died for.”

Gravis was silent for a moment.

“Lucas was Ionia’s significant other. I was in love with your brother despite this. *That* sort of relationship.”

“What?” Dirk was surprised.

He didn’t think getting his answer would be so easy. But more than that, Dirk was shocked by what his superior just told him.

“B-but! I think that my brother...my brother had devoted himself to Your Excellency.”

Dirk thought that Ionia had carried feelings for Gravis that were not meant to be.

He also thought that Gravis had cared for Ionia deeply.

That was why, when he was promoted to adjutant, Dirk suspected that this promotion was the general’s personal atonement to his brother. Although this proved not to be true in the end.

"Lucas was Ionia's significant other."

"...Is that really true?"

"Yes, Lucas loved your brother more than I ever could. Ionia loved Lucas, too, but your brother had sworn his loyalty to me, and died for me. That's all."

"No, but...the way Lord Leorino spoke just now..." Dirk was confused.

"I was in the middle of a struggle for the throne. Your brother was a commoner, and a man. Back then, no matter what we did...we could never have been more than 'master and servant' or 'best friends.'"

But didn't that mean, if it were not for the issue of status, they could have been happy together?

Noticing Dirk's heartbroken expression, Gravis denied it with his strong gaze.

"Don't get any strange ideas."

"...Is that why Your Excellency wants to marry Lord Leorino? Because he's the reincarnation of my brother?"

The prying question seemed to have touched a nerve.

"Mind your business, Dirk."

The anger was clear in Gravis's eyes, but Dirk was prepared for the reprimand.

"I apologize, sir. Still...I believe I have the right to know Your Excellency's intent."

Gravis glared daggers at his second-in-command for a moment, then muttered dryly: "Yes, you do have the right to know."

"Well, then..."

"If the margrave will eventually become my father-in-law, I suppose you'll be something of my brother-in-law yourself."

“B-brother... His Excellency’s brother-in-law...”

Gravis chuckled at the shaken adjutant.

His anger could never last in Dirk’s cheerful presence.

“Now, of all times, your carefree approach to life is priceless.”

“I’m sorry... I didn’t mean it as a joke.”

“If you want a serious answer, fine. Let’s see... I suppose I initially suspected that he might have some kind of connection to Ionia, but in the end I fell in love with Leorino for entirely different reasons.”

“L-love...”

Dirk was embarrassed by his superior’s unexpectedly candid words.

“What? You *asked*, did you not?”

“No, I was just shocked...to hear you speak about love, of all things, sir.”

Gravis turned on his heel and sat himself in his chair. “...But now I want to free Leorino from Ionia’s memories.”

For a moment, Dirk’s heart ached. He really was sentimental.

“...Do my brother’s memories bother you, sir?”

“No, you fool. Of course not.” Gravis barked back. “Ionia returned to us after eighteen long years. How could I not be happy?”

“Why, then?”

Gravis covered his mouth with his hand.

Dirk waited patiently for his superior’s answer.

“It’s simple... I just can’t stand to see Leorino suffer anymore.”

The so-called Ice-Cold General’s face crumpled. “I let Leorino suffer like that

for six years. What does that make me?”

“But it was the Power of the man in question that made you forget about him. You mustn’t blame yourself.”

“That doesn’t change the fact I left him alone and in pain for so long.”

When he looked up again, his superior had recovered his usual inscrutable expression, but there was something Dirk could infer from that one moment alone.

His Excellency must really love Lord Leorino.

Dirk was glad to know that.

“Your Excellency, have you already proposed to Lord Leorino?”

Dirk’s voice was cheerful enough to dispel the gloomy atmosphere, and Gravis scowled at his second-in-command with a freezing glare.

“I’m under no obligation to tell you.”

“Sir, if I may, I am your brother-in-law. Although I must admit I never thought that, at my age, I would suddenly gain such a beautiful, angelic brother.”

“That easygoing nature of yours is practically a special ability of its own.” Gravis grimaced. He knew that this lighthearted banter was his adjutant’s way of trying to change the mood.

“My head is still spinning with everything I’ve learned today... Oh, on that note, sir, there’s something about Lord Leorino that concerns me.”

Gravis fell silent. He understood what Dirk was trying to say.

“He really can’t be walking around projecting that sort of, ahem, *aura*. That can’t be safe.”

“I know. But as I’m sure you’ve noticed, Leorino is completely oblivious to it,

so what exactly do you want me to do?”

“Completely oblivious... Most people care about such things, don’t you think? After *my* first conquest, I wanted everyone to know I was a full-fledged man now.”

“Dirk, be serious.”

The starry-sky eyes watching the adjutant now seemed to carry the freezing air of midwinter. Dirk drew back at that.

“Oh, I’m being very serious.”

“Fool. I’ve no interest in your *conquests*.”

“Hah... Well, what do you plan to do, then?”

If the situation remained as it was, Leorino could hardly continue working at the Palace of Defense. Unless Leorino was made aware of his change and learned how to hide it, his innocent sex appeal would announce to the entire world that he had slept with a man.

“Why don’t you just tell him about it, sir?”

“Tell him what exactly? To suppress his sexuality so that people don’t find out we’ve had sex? You want me to explain that to someone as sheltered as him? What if Leorino refuses to sleep with me after that?”

“S-sex...”

Whatever Dirk had imagined at his superior’s immodest wording was evident in the flush that bloomed on his face.

Gravis glared at his adjutant scornfully.

“Just my luck to be stuck with a brother-in-law who imagines his brother’s bedroom escapades.”

“No, I...I shouldn’t have said anything. I sincerely apologize.” Dirk folded into a deep bow. Leorino was practically family now. Imagining him in bed was absolutely unacceptable.

“It is the parents’ duty to teach their child about such matters.”

“Well, yes, it’s essentially part of one’s sex education.”

Gravis turned his exasperated gaze to his adjutant. “...I *am* considering it. But he struggles to conceal his emotions in general, which may cause greater issues in the future.”

Dirk wondered if by, ‘in the future,’ Gravis meant the day Leorino would stand next to him as his spouse.

He sincerely prayed the day would come without incident.

“I must admit, I do not envy you.”

Dirk recalled the way Leorino looked just a few moments earlier.

He possessed exceptional innate beauty, not to mention that of his bloodline. That alone was reason enough to keep him out of harm’s way, but now he was beginning to project an aura that was certain to attract men. It was beyond dangerous.

Were that not enough, within his head lay a secret that could shake the very foundations of the kingdom.

And now, he was also the only love and greatest weakness of the man at the center of the country’s military.

He had to be protected at all costs.

“Will you continue to keep Lord Leorino in your palace?”

He wasn’t familiar with royal customs, but simply keeping Leorino locked up in his palace couldn’t possibly look good to the public eye.

“No, I will return Leorino to the Brungwurt residence soon.”

“Oh? In these circumstances?”

Gravis nodded. “I promised August to return him as soon as possible. And, given the situation, it would be preferable for him to remain in the safety of his

parents' home than in my palace.”

“Which means...”

“We’ll handle the pursuit of the truth on our own. You just saw him, so I’m certain you’ll understand. Leorino has *several* predicaments at the moment.”

Dirk couldn’t argue with that.

Why did Leorino, who was usually so sensible, often act so recklessly? Having listened to his confession today, Dirk finally understood.

Leorino fundamentally lacked the instinct of self-preservation—it was visible in every word and deed, the same kind of self-sacrificing loyalty that had led Ionia to lay down his life.

This was likely why his superior was so overly concerned for Leorino’s safety.

Dirk, on the other hand, couldn’t help recalling Leorino’s desperation as he said he had come to the royal capital to pursue the truth.

“Still...Lord Leorino wants to learn the truth most of all, so the thought of not involving him at all seems rather cruel.”

“Getting him involved out of pity can only put him in unnecessary danger. Letting him join the search is out of the question.”

Dirk thought this was an arrogant decision that didn’t take Leorino’s feelings into consideration.

Leorino had his own pride, after all.

They only want what’s best for the other... This better not complicate things...

“Your Excellency...would it really be in Lord Leorino’s best interest to protect him this way? He’s been working so hard this entire time and fighting his own

battles in the royal capital. Can't you involve him in some way or another?"

Dirk appealed to his superior as his brother-in-law to reconsider his treatment of Leorino.

"And how, exactly, would you like him involved?"

His starry-sky eyes took on an unsettling glint.

"How, exactly? Well..."

"You want him to go with Steiger to follow in Edgar Yorke's footsteps and investigate anyone who might know something? To expose his face to the city? That would be inviting the enemy to grow suspicious."

Of course, they couldn't let him do that. Leorino would hardly be able to investigate anyone in the first place. He would be too conspicuous.

"What if the man in question catches notice of the matter? What if he steals Leorino's memory again?"

"Well, when you put it that way..."

"Or should we let him gather information in high society?"

"That would be less dangerous, at least."

"Don't be a fool." Gravis spat in an ice-cold tone. "Have you forgotten what happened at the soiree and the training grounds? Those filthy men would drag him into some room and that would be the long and short of it."

"R-right..."

Gravis was right.

Leorino's incredible beauty was just too conspicuous. He would require the company of a guard, and was not at all suited for covert action.

Still, Dirk wanted to let Leorino fulfill his long-held desire in some way.

Sensing Dirk's thoughts, Gravis fixed his gaze on his second-in-command with a stern expression.

"Dirk. We must get to the bottom of this important secret that Ionia left us,

even if it means going against Leorino's will."

"Yes, sir."

"What's the point of your pity? We can never allow Leorino to confront our enemies directly. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir... Still—"

"I've failed twice before."

Dirk's breath caught in his throat.

"As long as he's willing to risk his life out of devotion, Leorino will quickly throw himself in harm's way for the sake of his cause. Just like Ionia did."

Gravis's eyes flashed gold.

"I won't get a third chance. If I fail, his soul will never return to us again."

Early Summer Rain

In the evening, the royal capital was beset by out-of-season rainfall.

He had made the trek from the Palace of Defense to the detached palace of the king's brother, and by the time he had reached his destination, his cloak had become heavy and was dripping wet.

The royal palace in the capital of Fanoren was not a single building, but a general term for the large architectural complex consisting of twelve palaces with the Palace of Administration at its center. The Palace of Administration and the king's residence were in its center, and the distance from the Palace of Defense in the front garden to the palace of the king's brother in the inner gardens would take a grown man roughly an hour to cover on foot.

The palace of the king's brother, Gravis Adolphe Fanoren, was located at the far end of the complex. The reason for Gravis's choice was simple: It was a quiet spot where no one would bother him, and his special ability rendered physical distance of no consequence to him.

Most people got around the palace grounds by carriage or horseback. The access to the inner gardens was tightly restricted. That evening, any visitors to the palace were required to complete formal procedures in advance.

The man slowed his pace and stopped in front of the main entrance. There, the attendant of the king's brother was already waiting for him.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Lieutenant General Lucas Brandt. Welcome

to the Palace of Starlight.”

“Long time no see, Theodor Anhalt.”

Theodor offered him a polite greeting. Lucas dismounted his horse and handed the reins to the nearby stable hand. The horse was of a powerful build, strong enough to nimbly carry a man of Lucas’s size. His favorite horse’s black coat glistened in the rain, as did his master.

“Could you towel him dry?”

“Of course, sir. We will take good care of him until your return.”

The horse obediently followed the stable hand. Theodor took the soaked cloak from Lucas.

“We assumed you would be arriving by carriage, given the weather.”

“A horse is faster. Besides, he rarely gets to trot through the inner gardens.”

“I see... Someone bring the lieutenant general a towel.”

A servant rushed in from behind him and offered the man a large hand towel. Lucas took it and roughly wiped his wet hair. Fortunately, the cloak had kept his clothes almost entirely dry.

“Where is His Highness?”

“He is waiting for you in the parlor.”

Theodor led the way. Lucas saluted Gravis before entering the room.

“Your Highness, thank you for your patience.”

“No, thank you for coming. Make yourself at home... Don’t tell me you came on horseback in the rain?”

“Of course, it was faster that way. Where’s Leorino...?”

Lucas slowly scanned the room.

“I’m letting him rest for now. After I brought him to speak with Dirk and Ebbo

Steiger, his fever returned. He's not feeling well."

"Right..." Lucas cast his eyes down and sat opposite Gravis. With that, Theodor offered him a small glass filled with what appeared to be alcohol.

"Theodor, are we safe?"

"Yes, we have just patrolled the entire property. No one is to come near for at least an hour."

Gravis nodded in approval. "Theodor, I want you to sit down and listen as well. We're going to need your help."

"Yes, sir. May I also help myself to a drink?"

Lucas was quick to make a snide remark. "I see the privilege of His Highness's childhood friend is still in effect. Have you no shame drinking in front of a guest?"

"You're in no position to tell me what to do. I've warned you countless times, and yet you continue to use foul language toward His Highness, I swear... Which one of us has no shame?"

Gravis felt nostalgic hearing the two exchange jabs for the first time in so long.

Theodor—a bloodline purist—and Lucas—who had always sided with Ionia, a commoner—had been at each other's throats since their school days. But, for some reason, both had sworn their loyalty to Gravis, and when they fought against a common enemy, they worked together shockingly well; they had the strangest of relationships.

"This may take a while. Listen to me over a drink."

"Don't mind if I do."

With that, Lucas took a swig and choked on the strength of the alcohol

burning his throat.

“Theodor, you bastard... Hard liquor, of all things? ...Dammit, you want me drunk or what?”

“It may be early summer, but I was trying to be considerate and warm you up after your ride through the rain. Besides, you can’t get drunk off a glass or two of hard liquor with a body that large.”

Lucas clicked his tongue. Gravis held up his hand to stop them from quarreling.

“I’ll skip the details of Leorino’s memories and get right to the point.”

“Of course.”

“First of all, Leorino does not have all of Ionia’s memories. I’m not certain what that means exactly; it’s an experience only he can describe. In his dreams, everything is connected and vivid, but when he wakes up, the details become hazy. That’s why his memory is spotty. Please hear me out with that in mind.”

They nodded silently.

“Spotty as they may be, he has relived certain memories over and over in his dreams, and those have become quite vivid in Leorino’s mind.”

Lucas’s shoulders shook slightly at these words. “Your Highness, do you know which of his memories are vivid, exactly?”

“Well... He seems to remember events concerning you and I better than others. That, plus the battle for Zweilink.”

“...I see.”

Gravis took a sip of his drink. The next instant, a deep crease formed between his brows, the same expression that had appeared on Lucas’s face just a moment earlier. “...Well, that’s rather strong.”

“Theodor, you bastard! Did you pour His Highness the same hard liquor?”

“I figured that even His Excellency might want something a little more stimulating for a change.”

Theodor was completely unbothered by Lucas's insults. He then proceeded to take a swig from the glass he had prepared for himself. The liquor was strong enough to make a grown man swoon, but the valet didn't even flinch.

At the very least, the alcohol burning away at their reason had eased the men's tensions.

"Moving on to the issue at hand. It concerns the memories of Zweilink that Leorino carries."

Lucas's face fell.

"Lucas. I know this is hard for you to hear, but please be patient."

"Yes, I understand. Go on, please."

"First, the truth of what happened that day. Ionia was murdered by Edgar Yorke, a member of the Special Forces. Leorino says he was also the traitor who brought the enemy into the outer fortress."

Lucas and Theodor's faces went stiff.

"The only thing we never found out about the battle for Zweilink was how they took the outer fortress. It should have been impossible to breach it so easily... So there was an inside man after all."

"Yes. That same Edgar Yorke was found near death after the battle and managed to survive. No one ever suspected he could be the inside man."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. I managed to find a record of Edgar's rescue. His injuries were caused by Ionia's attempt to fight back, but he ran out of strength and couldn't finish Edgar off."

Lucas's closed fist trembled.

He likely imagined the same thing Gravis did.

"Lucas... Does that name ring a bell?"

“Hm? Edgar... Edgar Yorke... No, I’m sorry. Your Highness, do I know him?”

“Six years ago, he threw himself off the outer fortress of Zweilink with Leorino in tow.”

“What?! Then surely, I must have heard of him at some point...” Lucas questioned his own memory.

“The Special Forces were disbanded, and he was reinstated and assigned to some department or other. Time went on, and six years ago he was assigned to Zweilink.”

Lucas was stunned speechless. Even Theodor had paled.

“Which means the incident six years ago...?”

“It was no coincidence. Leorino was taken by his father to Zweilink for the memorial service. When he took a moment to rest, he dreamed of that day. Perhaps the visit to Zweilink acted as a trigger. In a daze, Leorino happened to see Edgar and...denounced him for his crimes.”

“Which led to the incident...”

“Yes. Edgar was delirious when he restrained Leorino, still a boy at the time, and threw himself off the fortress walls, holding Leorino. You know the rest.”

Lucas dug his fingers into his wet hair and groaned like an animal.

“Here’s the part that matters most: Eighteen years ago, and again six years ago, Edgar hinted that there was a traitor who had been pulling his strings the entire time.”

“...What?!”

“Ionia heard it first eighteen years ago. And six years ago... The margrave and I must have heard something in those last moments before Edgar’s fall, but neither of us can remember. Only Leorino could recall what Edgar had said.”

“Your Highness, if I may, could you please elaborate?” Theodor asked his master with a puzzled look on his face.

“The margrave, Leorino, and I had our memories of Edgar stolen by a certain man after the incident.”

“By whom?”

“The Marquis of Lagarea, Bruno Henckel.”

“No...!”

“What... What in the world?!”

Lucas and Theodor stood up in shock at the same time.

“Leorino is certain that the Marquis of Lagarea possesses the ability to steal memories, and that he has stolen our memories because he is the culprit.”

The two men looked incredulous.

“I realize it’s difficult to accept this at face value, but one thing I can tell you for certain is that I don’t remember.”

Gravis tapped his forehead with his finger. The men gasped at the gesture.

“Your Highness’s memory? But you do remember trying to save Lord Leorino, don’t you?”

“Yes, I remember what happened before and after, and how I just missed Leorino’s hand, but I don’t remember Edgar’s face or what he said before he jumped.”

This was no time to get sentimental.

As the man in charge of the country’s defenses, Lucas was forced to consider it. “...Your Highness, this is preposterous. If that’s true, how long have the roots of treachery been spreading throughout our country?”

Theodor shook his head rigidly, still in disbelief. “I simply don’t see why he would do that. The Marquis of Lagarea is the only person of his status to have achieved such prosperity. He is a relative of the king and has long held the position of Secretary of the Interior. What reason would he have to betray our country?”

“You are right. We have neither evidence nor a reason. The Marquis of Lagarea himself is a man of mild character.”

For a moment, the men wondered if Leorino was mistaken.

“Why does Leorino suspect the Marquis of Lagarea?”

“Unfortunately, Edgar died without telling us the name of the man who had manipulated him. One day Leorino remembered that he was missing a certain memory, but he still possessed Ionia’s memories from eighteen years ago. That’s when everything fell into place.”

“Fell into place...”

“Yes. He wondered why his own memory had disappeared, and given the circumstances, suspected that the Marquis of Lagarea was the culprit who had stolen that memory. Leorino wrote down what he had remembered and recklessly confronted the marquis, implying that he had remembered the incident. And...he was robbed of his memory once more.”

“No...”

“That’s how he became convinced of the nature of the marquis’s ability. He came to the conclusion that he must have stolen his memories of Edgar out of fear Leorino might reveal the truth of his involvement in the plot.”

It was mere speculation.

They had no proof, and telling anyone would only result in having their sanity questioned, but it was Leorino who had returned Ionia’s memories to the men.

“It would be a fool’s errand to make any real case against him with just this,

of course. But there are too many coincidences for us to ignore Leorino's accusation as mere fantasy. We must get to the bottom of this," Gravis announced simply. He wanted to believe Leorino, but given his responsibility for national defense, he could not allow himself to be misled by sentiment.

Theodor sighed. "If only Lord Leorino had any evidence at all..."

"Theodor, we're going to look for it ourselves." Gravis looked into each of the men's eyes in turn and made his argument. "We can't just take Leorino's word for it at this point. We are the only ones who would believe him. The only basis for his claim are his memories of a past life."

"But Your Highness plans to investigate further... And you, Lucas."

The two men, as different as the sun and the darkest night, simultaneously nodded at Theodor's words.

"If it's not true, we must prove that to Leorino, and to Ionia... What do you say, Lucas?"

"Of course, Your Highness," Lucas agreed. "If this is Ionia's final wish, we must fulfill it. It's our duty to reveal the secret of Zweilink and avenge Ionia."

There was a feeling only the men firmly bound by Ionia's existence could relate to. It was a sentiment that transcended all reason and logic, a desire they had to see through to the end.

Theodor seemed to have made up his mind.

"I understand. If Your Highness bids it, then I must make it so. May I ask who else knows of this information?"

"Outside of you two, Dirk, and Ebbo Steiger—he was in Ionia's unit at the time."

"Steiger. The hero of Zweilink. So he, too, decided to take a stand for Ionia."

Theodor recalled the giant of a man, the ability user covered in burn scars. He had sworn his allegiance to Ionia.

“I’ve instructed Steiger to investigate Edgar’s past. You’ll hear about this from Dirk, but I want you to assign Steiger to a unit you’ll be able to stay in touch with.”

“I shall. But have you checked any records concerning Edgar Yorke yet?”

“Leorino read all he could find.”

Lucas grunted and crossed his arms. “I see... So that was his purpose for those archive visits. His research was his official excuse, but behind the scenes he was looking into past records. He’s clever, that one.”

“He is. He may seem ignorant of the ways of the world, but he’s quite sharp, don’t you think?”

“I thought his research itself was not the work of a rookie. I’m sure his Brungwurt education played a part, but Ionia’s memories must have also helped.”

“Indeed. He was unable to even leave his house on his own, but he desperately tried to discover the truth of what happened eighteen years ago by himself. He did the same thing at the training grounds—he’s reckless through and through.”

Theodor stood up and refilled their glasses. The men downed the alcohol in one smooth motion.

“Still...if the Marquis of Lagarea is the culprit, what could be the motive? Money? Some grudge against our country?”

“...Damn you, Theodor. You’re just going to keep going? ...How you can do this is beyond me.” Lucas was covering his eyes as they watered at the sting of the alcohol.

Gravis, too, had closed his eyes and turned his face to the ceiling. Theodor was the only one who remained unmoved by the stiff drink.

“...The flow of money is something we won’t be able to trace alone. Lucas,

what do you think about involving Ginter?”

“Marzel will help if you mention Ionia, but I don’t think he’d believe such an absurd story without first having Leorino prove it. He won’t just go along with a plot that would turn the Marquis of Lagarea against him.”

“I see... Theodor, do you know Lagarea’s main source of income?”

Theodor placed his hand on his chin in thought.

“I would need to explore the topic in detail, but I believe that area in the south produces significant amounts of iron. I would presume it’s some iron-related venture.”

Gravis and Lucas exchanged glances.

Iron. It was iron that flowed from Zwelf to the warring Jastanya Islands via Gdaniraque, and was used to finance the next war.

Gravis and Lucas were both soldiers. They couldn’t ignore this disturbing coincidence.

“Lucas... Can you ask Ginter to secretly investigate the flow of iron within the country?”

“I can. Shall I tell him about Leorino?”

“I’ll take Leorino to see Ginter when he’s feeling better. That’s when we’ll reveal everything we know and ask for his help. Until then, tell him to prepare for the war with Zwelf.”

Gravis turned to his valet.

“Theodor, send someone to Lagarea for a covert investigation. Make them find out about his birth, family, reputation within his territory, income, taxes; any information, no matter how trivial, that has not reached the royal capital.”

“Yes, sir.”

Settling on a course of action, the men finally could finally take a breath. With that, Theodor lifted the bottle of liquor.

“How about another glass?”

Gravis and Lucas sighed, then nodded in unison.

As one of them inhaled the drink with little more than a shrug, the remaining two groaning at the sting, a shy knock sounded on the door.

“I thought you’d sent everyone away.” Gravis glared sternly at his valet.

“I’m sorry, sir. I had made one exception to report on a certain matter.” With that explanation, Theodor opened the door.

There stood an old man—Leorino’s personal attendant—with an apologetic look on his face. “Master Leorino has awakened, sir.”

The Remains of Romance, the End of Love

The early summer rain pattered away at the windows.

The large bedroom was dim, its lights turned down as low as possible.

A figure lay on the bed. Leorino was sleeping. Gravis approached the bed and sat down by the pillow. He gently ran his fingers through Leorino's sweaty hair.

Leorino slowly opened his eyes.

"Leorino, can you speak? ...Look, Lucas is here. You said you wanted to speak with him."

"...Luca? Luca is here...?"

Lucas stood motionless near the door, seemingly frozen in place.

"Yes... I want to speak with Luca... I'm sorry, Vi... Lend me a hand."

"Here, I'll help you up."

Gravis sat deeper on the bed and easily lifted Leorino into a sitting position. He leaned Leorino's upper body against his chest. Leorino's feverish eyes found Lucas standing by the door.

"Luca...I missed you."

Watching them, Lucas's shoulders trembled.

"Lucas, come," Gravis called.

With his permission, Lucas quietly approached the bed.

He was even larger than Gravis. There was something lionlike about him.

“You’re too tall, I can’t see your face clearly...,” Leorino mumbled.

Gravis chuckled and instructed Lucas to sit down with his chin. Lucas knelt by the bed.

“There, now I can see you...” His violet gaze met Lucas’s amber.

The moment he looked into those familiar eyes, Lucas’s chest felt tight as he recalled all that he had just learned.

His beloved whom he had lost forever. The young man who brought back the memories of that man was right in front of him.

Leorino extended his slender hand to Lucas. Having instantly taken his hand, Lucas looked behind him to Gravis. Gravis nodded calmly.

Leorino’s hand was hot and slick with sweat. His thin fingers looked as if the smallest amount of force could easily shatter them.

Ionia’s hands had always been calloused from his sword, but Leorino had inherited the memories of Ionia’s soul and was fighting with these very hands as best as he could. He was a fine warrior himself.

“...Are you all right? You’ve been through a lot.”

“Luca... Has Vi told you everything?” It must have been the fever. Leorino’s eyes were bloodshot. He seemed to struggle to catch his breath. “I’m sorry I... didn’t tell you I had Ionia’s memories and... I’m sorry I lied to you.”

“No... I was so lost in my pursuit of Ionia, I asked you for the impossible.”

“I couldn’t tell you because...I thought I wasn’t enough. I’m sorry.”

“I should be apologizing. Leorino, I wasn’t trying to invalidate you, but...I was so fixated on Ionia that I made you suffer as a result.”

Lucas was filled with pity and regret for Leorino.

At the same time, Lucas realized that the only wish he held in his heart still refused to waver.

All I want is...

The only person Lucas truly wanted was that red-haired young man, Ionia Bergund.

“...Leorino, can I ask you for something one last time? Can you tell me who you are?”

“...Who I am?”

“Yes.”

Leorino’s feverish mind needed a moment to process it. “I am Leorino Cassieux.”

“I see.”

At that moment, Lucas’s fixation on Leorino was severed for good.

Ionia would never come back, no matter what he did. Lucas understood this with all his heart. And he despaired.

Lucas looked at Gravis, still supporting Leorino’s back. The men’s gazes met, but they exchanged no words.

A man who never got to embrace his love, but who had received Ionia’s eternal loyalty alongside his death.

Opposite him, a man who had been physically closer to Ionia than anyone else, but who could never own his heart.

“But...” Leorino looked up at Lucas. “But I have memories of living as Ionia. I have the memories of living with both of you. If I weren’t so weak, I would have liked to live as Ionia again... Vi, Luca... I’m so sorry.”

Leorino’s eyes immediately reddened. Lucas gritted his teeth to keep his emotions in check.

“Leorino...I’m sorry about all this. I know I’ve caused you pain.”

“...No, that’s not true.”

Leorino was not feeling well and would not be able to talk for much longer. Lucas then asked the question he most wanted to ask.

“Is the Marquis of Lagarea our real enemy?”

“...Yes, I believe he is. But I don’t know. I don’t...have any evidence.”

“But Ionia’s memories and your own experience tell you as much, don’t they?”

Leorino nodded slowly.

“Then I shall trust you.”

His bloodshot eyes stared at Lucas. “...Why do you trust me?”

“Because you delivered Ionia’s last wish to us.”

“Thank you for trusting me... You too, Vi. I was so afraid you wouldn’t believe me.” Leorino smiled faintly. “If the Marquis of Lagarea really is a traitor...Luca, what will you do?”

“I will kill him with my own hands.”

Leorino only stared at him. “He may not be the mastermind after all... Would you still do it?”

“Perhaps it’s wrong for someone in my position to say this, but if Ionia says it’s true, I’ll do whatever it takes. I don’t need proof.”

Hearing this, Leorino smiled again. "...You always were like that, Luca. The first time you met Vi, you were so belligerent, trying to protect me... I was quite shocked."

The men exchanged glances.

Ionia and Lucas had been thirteen and Gravis had been eight when they first met at the academy of higher education.

"I remember. I knew immediately that Ionia had a special regard for His Highness that His Highness seemed to take it for granted. That pissed me off."

Hearing Lucas's snide remark, Gravis's shoulders shook with laughter.

"I was finally about to see Io again when suddenly this big oaf stood in my way and snatched him away right before my eyes. I *actually* wanted to kill him at that moment."

The men's hearts warmed when they saw Leorino smiling at their exchange.

"Vi was upset...and Luca was acting strange... I didn't know what to do."

"Is that so?" Vi whispered, bringing his lips to Leorino's forehead. Lucas gently rubbed his small hand.

"Luca didn't get along with Theodor, either... Was it my fault?"

Hearing that, Gravis laughed, remembering their antics just a few minutes earlier. He suddenly thought about how he would love to include Theodor and Ginter in their reminiscences of their school days someday. God willing, one day, they would.

"But in the end, you two got along pretty well."

"...That's true. It's because Io was always there with us. Otherwise, I wouldn't have spoken with him, and we certainly wouldn't have had such a long-lasting relationship."

"Yes. If it had not been for Ionia, I would never have spoken to His Highness,

much less to Theodor.”

The men seemed to recoil at the thought.

It was an act, of course. Their infantile jealousy of each other had burned out eighteen years ago, the very moment Ionia died before their eyes.

Instead, they had spent the past eighteen years without Ionia, living with feelings only the other could understand.

“Yes... Back then, it was always the three of us,” Leorino murmured.

They quietly remained in their own private dimension.

“...It’s raining, isn’t it? We can’t see the stars today,” Leorino said quietly, and Gravis looked to the window and nodded. There was a damp, rainy smell in the air.

“You wanted to see the stars?”

“I remember often looking at the stars from my dorm window.”

Leorino looked from one man to the other.

“Ngh... I’ve remembered something.”

Gravis cradled his head and stroked his hair. “What is it? What did you dream of?”

“...Should I say it?”

Leorino looked up and Gravis gently planted a kiss, only the softest touch upon his lips. It was his sign of approval, assuring him that he should be brave and say whatever he wanted.

Leorino closed his eyes and accepted the lightest of kisses. The act was so full of reverence for Leorino, it felt sacred.

“Not long before graduation...the headmaster summoned me to his office.”

“Oh, that shameless bloodline purist. He ordered you around like a dog.”

Lucas gently stroked the back of Leorino's hand with his thumb, urging him to continue the story.

Leorino chuckled. "The headmaster summoned me when King George fell ill and said, 'His Highness Prince Gravis is the most suitable person to be king.'"

"That's so..."

"I argued with him. I said Vi loves his brother and has no desire to take over the throne."

Leorino looked up at Gravis again. Seeing his concerned gaze, Gravis forced a smile.

"That was decades ago. It's all resolved now. Don't worry about it, keep going."

"That was when the headmaster said something else. I was a commoner... I suppose he thought he could get away with it."

"What did he say to you?"

"He said 'Bruno and Lady Brigitte must have been lovers. I don't doubt that it was King George who got between them when he fell in love with Lady Brigitte at first sight.'"

The men exchanged glances.

...The Marquis of Lagarea was in a relationship with his adoptive sister, who later became the king's concubine?

Brigitte was the concubine of the former King George and the mother of the current king, Joachim. Brigitte was born to a minor noble family, but in order to become the king's concubine, she was adopted by the previous Marquis of Lagarea, a distant relative, before finally capturing the attention of the king.

"...So the headmaster said the former king stole the marquis's significant other?"

“...I’m not certain.”

Leorino weakly shook his head. Gravis frowned, seriously considering it.

“I’m sorry... I simply don’t know. All I remember is what the headmaster told me.” Leorino let out a hot, shaky breath and went limp.

Seeing him like that, Lucas stood up, recognizing his cue.

“I don’t think Leorino can do this much longer.”

“No, I suppose not.” Gravis looked down upon his head with concern.

“I’ve overstayed my welcome. I shall take my leave.”

Leorino’s eyes followed Lucas.

“Lucas! ...Is that what you truly want?” Gravis immediately stopped him.

“You can tell me next time you see me. That is, if you remember it at all.”

“Lucas!”

“...I really should go. Leorino, get all the rest you need.” Lucas turned on his heel and headed for the door.

Watching his back draw farther away, Gravis whispered in Leorino’s ear. He knew he was asking too much of him. But this was something only Leorino could do.

The final hope to fill the eighteen-year-long void in Lucas’s heart. The last words Ionia never got to tell him.

“Leorino... Lucas is leaving. Come, didn’t you have something to tell him?”

“I... Did I?”

Then Gravis addressed Ionia.

“Remember. Come. You’re still there, aren’t you? ...Where are you? *Ionia*.”

At that moment, Leorino vacated his body.

Yes. There was one last thing he wanted to tell Lucas.

The feelings he reserved for Gravis. And the feelings he had for Lucas. All of them.

I must tell him...before the gates close.

“Ionia... You’re in Zweilink.”

Leorino was once again engulfed by those red-hot flames.

A voice stopped Lucas as he placed his hand on the bedroom door.

“...Lucas.”

The man’s muscular shoulders jerked up. Lucas turned around and met the man’s violet gaze. “Leorino...”

Leorino extended his hand toward Lucas once more.

“Lucas...the gates are closing. Come, quickly.”

Lucas could only stare. The tone of his voice, the power in his eyes.

It can’t be...!

Returning to the bedside, Lucas fell to his knees. Fair fingers caressed his leathery cheeks and traced the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes.

“...That day, I thought I could just tell you the next time I saw you.”

“Ionia...?”

Violet eyes watched Lucas. “You’re...on the other side of the gate...stopping Vi from risking his life, protecting him.”

Hearing that, Lucas’s boulder-like frame began to tremble. “You noticed me...? You knew I was there?”

“Thank you for protecting Vi on my behalf...Luca. You kept your promise to me.”

Lucas suddenly dug his teeth into his fist. He stifled the urge to scream.

The bite was deep enough to draw blood. Still, it did nothing to stop the tears rolling down his cheeks.

Ionia is here. He's returned. The soul I'd been chasing for so long is finally here.

But Lucas knew this was a dream that would not last. Leorino's mind was clouded by dreams of his past life. In this trance-like state, Leorino reached out and cupped Lucas's cheek.

“...Luca.”

Leorino brought his face closer. And then his feverish lips touched Lucas's blood-stained lips.

“...!”

Lucas closed his eyes.

“I was going to tell you next time I saw you.”

“What...? Ionia, what were you trying to tell me that day?”

A smile bloomed on Leorino's lips. “I realized it then. I realized that I...I love you, too.”

At that moment, a fiery red hue returned to Lucas's gray world.

“I can't let go of you. Am I being selfish? Still, I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“...You... No...” Clenching his fists, Lucas pressed his forehead into the bed to hide his sobs. It wasn't enough. “Ionia...I knew you loved His Highness.”

Ionia inclined Leorino's head.

“...But I wanted you so badly. I thought I had forced you into a relationship you didn’t want. I’ve always felt guilty about that... I had resigned myself to the thought that you would never love me.”

A gentle touch descended upon his hair.

“...I know, but...”

Lucas looked up at the fair face and saw Ionia smile.

“...you’re the one who always filled in the missing pieces of my heart...Luca.”

“Ionia... Why did you have to die...? Why? Why didn’t you come back to me?”

After eighteen long years, he finally had Ionia’s answer. This was what remained of their romance—what would disappear the moment he left the room.

The agonized roar of the beast holding his remains was Ionia’s final regret.

“All you had to do was survive...! I didn’t care if you spent the rest of your life loving His Highness... If only you had let me stay by your side and support you, I would have been happy with that... Why did you have to die and leave me behind...?!”

Lucas gazed into Leorino’s violet eyes with all the emotion in the world.

He then tearfully pleaded with Gravis who had been silently watching over them.

“Your Highness, please let me have this... I beg you. I’d give my life for this one moment. Just this once.”

The next moment, Lucas climbed onto the bed and claimed Leorino’s lips.

“...Lu...”

“Io... Ionia...”

The kisses, filled with eighteen years’ worth of sentiment, took over all of Leorino’s senses. At the same time, an arm reached out from behind him and

grabbed Lucas's shoulder.

Gravis's hand gripped Lucas's shoulder so hard it shook, but never tried to pull him away from Leorino.

"Ionia... Ionia..."

The sound of their hot, wet breathing filled the bedroom.

I love you, Ionia. I'll always love you.

In the arms of the man Leorino loved, the lips of his significant other from his past life lingered on his.

Tears streaming from the man's eyes lingered on his fair cheeks.

The early summer rain lingered in the air, as if to quench the still-burning flames.

Leorino was dreaming of that night of flames again. Except, something strange happened today. Could this not be Ionia's memory?

It was raining. The rain was nothing short of a blessing. It doused the flames burning his body. Eventually, the flames sputtered out, leaving only a gentle afterglow on the plains in their wake.

When Leorino awoke from his dream, he saw before him a lone beast, wounded and exhausted.

"Luca... Lucas...?"

The beast shed a single tear. His knuckles were covered in blood.

Looking up, the other beast also looked down at Leorino with wounded, exhausted eyes.



“Vi...? What’s wrong?”

When his eyes met Leorino’s, Gravis smiled and reassured him that it was nothing, and once again steadied his back.

Lucas gently stroked Leorino’s cheek.

“Leorino...are you happy with His Highness?”

Never again would Lucas touch Leorino that way.

This was the last time they would ever touch each other.

Despite feeling awkward in front of Ionia’s significant other, Leorino nodded honestly, making his feelings clear.

“...Yes. If I can, I wish to stay by his side until the day I die.”

“I see.” Lucas smiled softly. His smile was like the sun, warming anyone it fell upon.

Leorino gently pressed a hand to his chest.

Why did it feel like he was still out in the rain?

“If you’re happy, that’s all that matters. If it was possible, I always wanted you to be happy by His Highness’s side.”

“But Ionia was happy to be with you, Luca.”

Lucas’s eyes widened at those words.

“...You’ll always be Ionia’s partner in crime.”

“...I see.” Lucas offered him the brightest smile. “Then I must continue to walk the path Ionia left for me.”

With that, Lucas finally stood up.

“Leorino, you did very well. Thank you for telling me.”

At that moment, Leorino's heart was struck by some strange, savage sentiment. His chest ached. It hurt as if he was being ripped apart by some large beast.

Leorino pressed his hand to his chest.

"Next time you dream of Zweilink, I want you to tell Ionia something."

Lucas made a strange request. Leorino inclined his head.

"I wonder if I can... But yes, I will try. What should I tell him?"

Lucas bent down and pressed a kiss to Leorino's forehead.

Leorino felt a spot of heat on his forehead and brought his hand to the spot before he could help it.

It was at that moment that he realized his body suddenly felt lighter. The fever that had tormented Leorino for so long had somehow subsided.

"...Give him this kiss, and tell him..." The lionlike man said with a smile and pressed his hand to his heart.

"...Ionia, now that you are free from the flames, return to me so we may rest together."

The Result of Romance, the Fulfillment of Love

The morning after Lucas's visit, Leorino's fever vanished without a trace.

Gravis watched Leorino tenderly, the young man clearly happy to be feeling better.

"Do you remember speaking with Lucas?"

Leorino thought for a moment and then gave a small shake of his head.

"I might...? I do remember the last part. I'm sorry."

"I see."

Gravis's fingers brushing his hair back from his forehead and his deep voice put Leorino at ease. He sighed at the comfort of it all.

Lucas had visited him last night. He was so feverish that he could hardly recall most of their conversation, but he clearly remembered Lucas's final words and the sensation of his lips on his forehead.

"He asked me to deliver a message to Ionia."

"He did."

"...He wants him to come home already."

"Yes... Please let lo know, if that's something you can even do. He... Lucas has

been waiting for eighteen years now.”

“I’m not present in my own dreams—I’m always Ionia. But I will try.”

At that moment, Leorino suddenly arrived at a thought.

I wonder what Vi thinks of Ionia.

He could see in Gravis’s eyes the same sort of liberation that Lucas had shown before he left, but Leorino could not bring himself to ask what that transparent emotion meant.

Leorino was to be returned to his family residence the following afternoon.

When Gravis informed him that morning, Leorino desperately insisted he did not want to leave.

“...Vi, I know what you’re thinking.”

“What am I thinking?”

Violet eyes pinned Gravis with their gaze. “I know you are trying to keep me away from the Marquis of Lagarea.”

Leorino was right. But Gravis couldn’t risk putting Leorino in danger.

“Are you saying you can’t follow my orders?”

“...Well, still! I think I have a right to be involved in this.”

Sitting next to Leorino, Gravis cupped his small cheeks. He brushed his thumbs over Leorino’s downcast eyelashes and wiped the tears of frustration from the corners of his eyes.

“I’m well aware that you have a right to be involved in this.”

“Then why?”

Seeing his imploring gaze, Gravis replied with sincerity. "I don't intend to exclude you. I'll keep you up to date on what we know. But I can't allow you to face the enemy directly."

"Is that because...I can't defend myself?"

"Yes."

Gravis used a finger that had been stroking his cheek to free the lip Leorino had been biting.

"Don't bite. You'll draw blood."

Leorino kept his eyes downcast.

Gravis sighed and placed his hand on the backrest of the settee. He lifted Leorino's chin.

"Leorino. This is war."

"...I know."

"Then you should be able to understand. In warfare, there is a place for everyone."

"Yes."

"You don't send an amateur soldier who can't fight to the front lines. It's just like that."

"...Yes, I know. But..."

Gravis urged him to continue with his gaze.

"...knowing doesn't make me feel any less useless, and I hate it."

This was Leorino's pride.

"But it's the best option."

"But I'm putting everyone in danger when I don't even have any evidence... I can't just sit in the safety of my own home..."

"It's precisely because we know so little. If your memories are stolen, or if,

god forbid, you're taken hostage, we'll be helpless—you understand, don't you?"

Leorino considered it for a moment and finally nodded.

"Good boy."

"...I am not. At least let me return to my duties at the Palace of Defense."

"No. You don't have to stay near me. I'll inform you of our progress, so you can stay home."

"But I've accomplished nothing! Everything I wanted to do in the royal capital remains unfinished."

"That's fine. You will have another chance to finish everything in due time."

Seeing Leorino hang his platinum head in frustration, Gravis bit back a sigh.

Leorino must not have been convinced by that. He likely only remained silent because there was little more he could say to change Gravis's mind.

Leorino's fragile appearance really didn't convey how stubborn he could be.

"There is another reason."

"Yes?"

"I want to officially take you as my spouse. To do so, I must return you to your family, as is customary."

Leorino had cast his eyes down, but now wore an expression Gravis had never seen before.

"S-spouse...?" He seemed unable to even process the word.

"I want the right to keep you by my side in both name and substance. Do you not want that as well?"

"No, I didn't say that. But what must I do to become your spouse...?"

"I'm asking you to marry me, to leave the Cassieux registry and take the name

of Fanoren as my spouse.”

“...What?” Leorino finally understood what Gravis was saying and clearly struggled to take it all in. “M-marry you...?!”

“Yes. What did you think I was asking for?”

When Gravis rolled his eyes and pinched Leorino’s nose, Leorino’s face turned red and his voice faltered.

“I just... I would have been happy to just be accepted as your significant other...”

“You think I announce my significant others to the world at my age? I would never have laid a finger on someone as sheltered as you if I wasn’t ready to make it official.”

“If you’re proposing to me, does that mean I’ll...be your husband?”

“Yes, in a sense. You’re a man, so officially you’ll be ‘the spouse of the king’s brother,’ but you’ll receive my name, which means you’ll be my officially recognized life partner.”

“...The spouse of the king’s brother. Officially recognized...”

“That’s right.”

But Leorino’s face suddenly paled. A look of despair came over him. Gravis furrowed his brow, wondering what the matter might be.

“You don’t want to be my spouse?”

Leorino shook his head frantically. “...No, I do!”

“Then what’s the issue?”

“I’m a man. I’ve heard that royalty does not marry members of the same sex.”

“There’s no law prohibiting same-sex marriages. It’s simply never been done before.”

“I see...”

But that didn't seem to assuage Leorino's concerns.

“If you have something on your mind, you can tell me.”

“I just... I'm sure Her Majesty the Queen Dowager will object again.”

“Ah, that.” Gravis understood. He remembered that Ionia had been summoned by the queen and thoroughly put in his place.

“It's different now. I won't let the queen dowager interfere, so don't worry. Come now, don't make that face.”

Gravis scooped Leorino into his lap.

Leorino had hung his head again.

Gravis almost struggled to believe he was holding a full-grown man in his lap. Despite his height, Leorino was light as a feather.

“Come, Leorino. Lift your face.”

Encouraged by his voice, Leorino timidly looked up.

“Did I startle you? I realize this is sudden.”

“No... Yes. You surprised me.”

“Leorino, I want you to give me a clear ‘yes’ or a ‘no.’”

Leorino tilted his head hesitantly. Gravis cupped his fair cheek. Despite its smooth, china-like appearance, his skin was warm.

“Do you love me?”

Leorino's cheeks immediately took on a darker shade. “...Yes. I love you, Vi.”

“Then would you like to stay with me?”

“Yes... If I may, I would like to stay with you for the rest of my life.”

Hearing his answer, Gravis grinned.

Leorino saw Gravis's smile and felt warmth bloom in his chest.

"Then will you marry me?"

"...Yes, b-but—"

"No 'buts.' It's 'yes' or 'no.'"

Leorino hesitated for a moment, and finally, with earnest eyes, he insisted.
"Vi, I...I can't replace Ionia."

"Now, where did that come from?"

Leorino recalled what happened the night before last. Lucas did not want Leorino. Even if he found comfort in what remained, he loved Ionia more than life itself.

If Vi is just like him... If he's only fixated on me because he still loves Ionia...

By the look on his face, Gravis seemed to realize what was troubling Leorino.

"Your conversation with Lucas made you doubt yourself."

"I..."

"Come here. Let me show you how much I love you."

Gravis swiftly kissed Leorino on the lips.

The quiet sound of the kiss brought relief to Leorino's heart.

"I don't want you to replace Ionia. I want you, Leorino. Please believe me."

Tears welled up in Leorino's violet eyes.

"But...Luca saw Ionia in me until the end."

"That you possess Ionia's memories is something we can't change, but it is

also what makes you who you are now, isn't it?"

"...Yes. I suppose it is."

"I was not the person who should have been by Ionia's side. Even if he had survived, I would not have been able to make lo happy."

"That's not true...!" Leorino raised his voice. It couldn't have been true. For both Ionia and Leorino, the man sitting before him was the only thing they lived for.

But was that really so?

Was a reason to live the only thing that kept a person alive? Could they still be happy, knowing that their love would never come to pass?

What appeared in Leorino's mind was the vague sensation of being kissed by a man with the appearance of a lion.

Was it really Leorino's memory? Or was it Ionia's?

"I want to make you happy. I want you to be able to smile by my side. Is that not enough?"

Leorino gathered his courage and looked Gravis squarely in the eye.

What more could he ask of him now?

Leorino had made up his mind.

"...No. No, it *is* enough."

Leorino threw his arms around Gravis's shoulders.

"I want to stay by your side... I don't want to leave you anymore."

"Then why don't we make it official?"

"Vi..."

Gravis lifted Leorino's fingers. "Leorino, accept my marriage proposal."

Leorino nodded yes, tears spilling from his eyes.

“Don’t cry. I wish to make you smile.”

In response to his plea, Leorino blinked away the tears and smiled.

He hoped it would put Gravis at ease, if only for a moment. No matter what might happen, he wanted to keep smiling.

“Please let me stay by your side until my dying breath,” said Leorino.

Gravis breathed an uncharacteristic sigh of relief and tightly embraced Leorino’s thin body.

Fruit to Be Plucked

“...I really think I’d rather stay with you. I don’t want to go home,” Leorino insisted again, trying to get the man whose proposal he had just recently accepted to somehow reconsider.

Gravis was surprised by his persistence. “I thought we had an agreement.”

“I’ll take good care of myself. I promise. So please let me stay in your palace.”

“No, keeping you here any longer would be ill-advised. This conversation is over.”

“But, Vi... Mnf?”

Gravis covered Leorino’s lovely but overly chatty lips with his own.

This time, the kiss was far more intense than the light touch he had previously bestowed upon Leorino.

“Mm... Ah...”

Leorino protested by frantically patting his shoulder. Gravis assumed he didn’t want the kisses to distract him from the topic at hand.

But such feeble resistance meant very little to the man.

“Mm... Vi...”

“...Leorino.”

The man’s tongue lapped at the sensitive areas of Leorino’s mouth.

Inexperienced as he was, Leorino was helpless against the man’s wiles.

Despite his whimpering, he was soon swept away by the pleasure Gravis brought him.

Leorino seemed unaware of it, but his body was particularly sensitive. He was easily aroused and easily sobered, which made for an exceptionally lewd disposition.

But he hadn't recovered quite enough for full-fledged intercourse yet. It was Gravis's responsibility to keep Leorino from overexerting himself.

Gravis knew that. He knew, and yet he could hardly hold himself back. To him, Leorino's presence was just that tantalizing.

When he finally pulled away, Leorino was clinging to the man's muscular neck and struggling to catch his breath.

"Vi... Vi..."

His voice was tinged with arousal. Calling Gravis's name, Leorino unconsciously rubbed himself against him like a kitten. Gravis attempted to placate Leorino as he writhed beneath him.

"I apologize. Now calm down."

"I can't calm down... I can't go home like this, either."

Leorino looked at him with resentment. He lowered his eyebrows and grimaced. He looked like he was about to cry.

"...Vi, you did this to me... You should help. You're just awful."

Leorino looked as seductive as ever. He seemed raring to go. The man struggled to keep his hands off his beloved, although it was true he could hardly return him to his family in this state.

"...I can already hear the stern talking-to I'm going to receive."

"I wouldn't do that. I'm asking you for this."

"Not from you, from your strict family."

Leorino shook his head. "I don't intend to show the marks you left, so they won't know."

Gravis was tempted to tell Leorino he wouldn't need to show anything to anyone for them to put two and two together.

He didn't want Leorino to be embarrassed by the act of making love. He wanted Leorino to accept his desires without shame, the way he had until now.

With the way matters were progressing, the members of the Cassieux family would find out that Gravis had been intimately involved with their son sooner or later, and when they did, he could count on the family's over-involvement in Leorino's affairs. Maia should provide him with the necessary education.

"Vi... Please."

Leorino was openly begging for his touch. Gravis was also more aroused than usual.

"...Fine, I'm prepared for Lord August to pummel me." Gravis chuckled.

He could hardly rid himself of the desire to make love to his slender body one more time before letting go of Leorino for the time being.

Leorino's cheeks took on a darker shade and he smiled as Gravis reached his fingers to his shirt and began undoing the buttons.

"Vi... So you'll help me?"

"Not 'help.' Make love."

"...Of course. Please, make love to me."

The man sighed. Leorino didn't question a thing.

Gravis slowly exposed his china-like skin.

Leorino's fair skin was dotted with love bites the man had left on him. Looking at the faint marks, Gravis furrowed his brow.

"...Your skin is too soft. I didn't realize the marks would take so long to fade.

I'll be careful next time."

"I don't mind. By all means, leave some more."

"It would be a shame to bruise such beautiful skin."

Leorino looked terribly disappointed. "Hundert told me that these red marks are a sign of love, so I would like you to leave even more."

"...You discuss such matters with your attendant?"

"He told me to ask Your Highness to teach me everything I don't know about intimacy. Hundert encouraged me not to be ashamed of my inexperience."

"Ha! He encouraged you... What joy to know your attendant supports our bedchamber affairs. Now that's a first."

Gravis grinned, looking truly amused.

It was a rare sight.

"Your attendant is one of a kind, I hope you know that."

"You think so? Next time, please teach me how to bring you pleasure... Ah!"

Before Leorino knew it, Gravis threw his trousers open and pulled down his undergarments.

Leorino looked down at his body and blushed.

He must have been embarrassed to have his arousal exposed like that.

Leorino covered his groin, but Gravis took his hand and brought it to his shoulder instead.

"Keep your hands here. Don't move them."

"R-right. But...wh-what should I do...?"

"You don't need to do anything. Just relax so you don't exhaust yourself," Gravis said, and took a long look at Leorino's body, bare, with his clothes disheveled in his lap.

Leorino's violet eyes were filled with arousal and anticipation. His cheeks were stained bright red.

His fair skin—still marked with love bites—was slightly tinted. The sight of his pale nipples seemingly melting into his skin, and his exposed nethers, was so indecent and yet innocent at the same time.

Gravis thoroughly enjoyed the beautifully lewd view.

Leorino must have felt his ogling gaze, because he twisted around to avoid it.

Keeping his hands on the man's shoulders, as he had been told to do, Leorino desperately pleaded with Gravis. "V-Vi... This is embarrassing. Please don't stare."

"You have nothing to be embarrassed about. Every last part of you is beautiful." Gravis whispered, slowly running his hand up Leorino's shaft.

"Mm... Ah..."

Gravis then proceeded to rub Leorino's tip with the pad of his thumb. Leorino seemed unaware of it, but he clearly enjoyed being touched in this manner.

"Ah... Ahh..."

Gravis slowly rubbed his slit until a clear fluid began to leak from his bloodshot flesh.

"...There, that's the spirit. Good boy."

Gravis audibly stroked his slick length. Leorino's breathing began to grow erratic.

"Does it feel good?"

"Mm... Yes... So good... Don't stop... Ah... Ahh..." Leorino's gaze slowly became more hazy and unfocused.

Gravis's other finger teased the rim of his sensitive entrance, and Leorino began to whimper from the sheer pleasure of it.

“...Your father might just invade the royal capital when he learns of this.”

Leorino's mind had given itself to pleasure, but he still did his best to argue. “Ah, ah... My father...w-would never do such a thing.”

“I wouldn't be so sure. He resents me for taking his favorite son all for myself.”

As he spoke, Gravis hastened his hand. Leorino's flesh looked innocent enough, and yet it was clear he had made use of it in the past.

“...Sometimes I wish my hand had been the first to touch you.”

“D-don't say such things...” Leorino flushed bright red.

To make him imagine the act, Gravis spread the wetness all over Leorino's shaft, wrapped his large hand around it, only to pull back the skin as he rubbed him there and back.

“Ah... wait... mm! Th-that's so...”

The intense pleasure quickly brought Leorino to his limits.

His flesh was as stiff as it could get.

Gravis was lost in his own licentious thoughts, wanting to suck Leorino into his mouth and not let go until Leorino, through tears, begged Gravis to stop.

As Leorino had never been treated to oral sex, Gravis imagined just how delicious his reaction would be.

“You look absolutely delectable.”

“Delectable...?”

“Don't you remember? What you tried to do to me.”

Gravis's expression was fiercely erotic. He licked his lips.

Leorino nearly stopped breathing.

“Someday, I’ll bring you to tears with pleasure.”

Gravis stroked Leorino’s smooth chest as he worked him below. The small buds were already rising, as if awaiting the man’s loving caress. He touched them with his hard fingers. They felt adorably small under his fingertips.

“Ah, mm... Ah, there...”

Gravis arched his back and brought his face to Leorino’s chest.

The man’s breath fell on his nipples. Leorino shivered at the sensation.

“Mm...”

“Once you feel better...I’ll be able to put my mouth to good use all night long.”

“Mm... Ahh... Vi, wait...”

The moment Gravis licked him, the bud sent intense waves of pleasure throughout Leorino’s body. He suddenly wrapped his arms around the man’s head.

Leorino might have thought it disrespectful if his sense of reason was still working.

“You’re so sensitive... Would you like to climax with your chest alone?”

“I...I don’t know...”

“They’re so small, I can’t quite do all I’d like with them.”

As he ran his tongue over the area, Leorino noticed a change. For some reason, he felt a throb deep inside him.

Surprised by his own reaction, Leorino complained to the man who brought about the sensation.

“Vi... Ah, when you touch my chest, I...I feel something inside.”

“Ah... Toying with your chest makes you crave it inside?”

It took only two encounters for Leorino's body to recall the pleasurable sensations of penetration when his nipples were stimulated.

His body was as frank as his heart, and had fully learned Gravis's lesson.

"Yes... Inside... But why? I want it... Ah, ah, ah..."

"We're not doing that today."

"No... I'm fine, so please, p-please... Oh, please."

"I won't tease you anymore... Just focus down here."

His nipples had turned a darker shade from the man sucking on them. The tender flesh was puffed up alongside the areolas, making them look just like flower buds.

After giving Leorino a final tickle with the tip of his tongue that made him squeal, Gravis released his nipples.

"Today, you *will* climax with your manhood."

"B-but..."

"It's fine. That's how men tend to finish. I'm glad you're so eager, but this should feel good, too, see?"

"Ah, mm... Ahh."

With that, Gravis rubbed Leorino's stiff flesh harder to bring about the desired outcome. His shaft was covered with his own fluids, making a wet noise with every stroke.

Sobs began to enter Leorino's labored breathing.

"You must be really enjoying yourself to get quite so wet. I want to lick you so badly."

"Oh... Oh... My chest... Vi, don't stop."

“You’re so lewd, Leorino.”

Leorino looked at Gravis, as big, fat tears suddenly rolled down his cheeks.

“I-I’m sorry... I know it’s wrong... B-but...”

“No, there’s nothing wrong with being lewd. Now, just relax and come.”

“...Ah! I can’t... I...”

Leorino sobbed in pleasure.

“It’s fine... Come.”

Leorino unconsciously shook his head, but his mind could only last so long.

A sweet moan turned into an impassioned scream. Overwhelmed by the intense pleasure, he could no longer breathe.

At the same time as his hand worked the heat in his abdomen, Gravis closed his lips around Leorino’s again, swallowing his scream.

Leorino’s anxiety slowly dissolved into a world of white. But he already knew what lay ahead. If he dared surrender to pleasure any further, he was likely to be robbed of his sense, even as the man’s liquid love dripped down his delicate skin.

The moment he fell from the summit of pleasure, Leorino sucked hard on the man’s tongue. Gravis smiled, filled to the brim with love, as he enjoyed the sweet tongue urging him to fall with him.

The Return of the Prodigal Son

When Gravis brought Leorino back to the Brungwurt residence in the royal capital, they were surprised to find his father August waiting for him.

“Father...! What brings you to the royal capital?”

“You fool! I came to check on you, of course!”

Leorino was so surprised and delighted to see him that he jumped into his father’s embrace like a child. August’s body, still large and strong even in his old age, did not waver when he picked up his slender son.

Slightly flustered, August embraced his beloved youngest son for the first time in months.

“Rino, won’t you greet me as well?”

His petite mother, Maia, appeared from behind his father’s back.

“Mother!”

Leorino released his father and took his mother’s hand, kissing it reverently and smiling.

“...My, Rino. What...what have you...?”

“...? Mother?”

Maia raised her shapely brows as soon as she got a proper look at Leorino.
“Rino, you come here right now.”

“...? Excuse me?”

“Why are you so... What is this? Your Highness, Prince Gravis.”

Maia hid her youngest son behind her slender back as if to protect him and glared at Gravis pointedly.

Understanding what Maia was upset about, Gravis forced a smile and apologized. “I didn’t know how to explain. I hope you can educate him.”

“If you tell me you have exposed Leorino to others while he’s in this state, I will forever resent Your Highness for humiliating my son.”

“No, I didn’t expose him to anyone.”

The soldiers of the Royal Army were not included in that statement.

Leorino looked up at his father in confusion, wondering what about his current state was so humiliating. August looked at his youngest son’s curious face with a sour expression.

Although Leorino was unaware of it, every time he gazed at Gravis, he scattered his youthful sexuality all around him as if it were flower petals.

The members of the Cassieux family were shocked by this. Their precious baby boy had become an adult in both name and substance.

“...Leorino. It’s true, you should not show yourself to others like this. Now follow Maia.”

“Sh-show myself?”

“Yes, you look awful.”

Leorino was shocked by his father’s words. “But Vi— His Excellency...”

His mother was about to pull him away with a surprising amount of force, and Leorino looked to his beloved, his gaze begging him to do something. But Gravis

only looked at the mother and son with an indescribable expression, as if he was trying to stifle a smile.

“Leorino, go with Madame Maia. I need to speak with Lord August.”

“B-but...”

Gravis offered a soft smile to reassure his young partner. “Leorino, don’t worry. Everything will be all right.”

Leorino was still anxious, so he carefully peeled off his mother’s hand and rushed over to Gravis, with an “Excuse me.”

“Come now. Listen to Madame Maia,” Gravis said, but still opened his arms and Leorino wasted no time jumping into his embrace.

All who witnessed the scene were stunned speechless.

“...R-Rino, you’re...?”

For what it was worth, the king’s brother clearly had no intention of hiding his infatuation. It was clear how much Gravis cherished Leorino from the way he held him in his arms.

Leorino, on the other hand, clung to the man’s chest with an obvious, coquettish air, unaware of it entirely and therefore unable to conceal it.

“I really want to stay with you. I don’t want you to go.” Leorino was expressing his love for Gravis in the purest, most innocent way possible.

Among members of high society, such behavior would be considered too immodest and therefore outrageous, but Gravis accepted it without reproach.

Everyone except for the couple let out an indescribable snarl.

A scene unlike anything they had ever seen was unfolding before their eyes. Combined with the two men’s out-of-this-world beauty, they struggled to believe the sight was real at all.

Leorino was so taken by his first love, he could hardly control himself. His

entire body seemed to be expressing his fondness for the man. Josef was more obtuse than most people, but even he was staring at them with a blush on his cheeks.

“Vi...please let me stay by your side. Please don’t exclude me. Please.”

Gravis forced a smile at Leorino’s unrelenting insistence.

“You really are persistent, aren’t you? Look behind you. See the look on your father’s face.”

Leorino turned around and looked at his father. August’s face was flushed red and his clenched fists were shaking.

“...Father? Your face is all red.”

“Leorino, y-you... You’re obscene.”

“Obscene?”

August was too shocked by the scene before him to speak.

When the king’s brother had told him that he genuinely wished to marry Leorino, August assumed Gravis had one-sidedly fallen in love with Leorino, and was using the past as a means to embellish the nature of their relationship.

But they’d rushed their carriage here as quickly as Maia’s health would permit and this was what they found.

While the king’s brother was nonchalant, Leorino was ready to cling to him for dear life, not wanting to leave his side for even a moment. In fact, Leorino was already practically clinging to him.

His youngest son had seemed so little when he left Brungwurt, but had now become dizzyingly mature in several ways. The father couldn’t help but avert his eyes.

Leorino stared at his father, the corners of his eyes stretched taut.

“Father. I understand that you made His Excellency promise to return me

home.”

“Yes... Yes, I did.”

“And as promised, here I am. It was a pleasure to see you.”

“Leorino...what are you saying?”

“I shall explain. I have returned home, so I think His Excellency has fulfilled his part of the promise.”

August was stunned speechless by his youngest son’s strained logic.

“I have other matters to attend to with His Excellency, so I will return to his palace with him.”

“You...you can’t be serious!”

“I was very happy to see you. I assume you plan to stay in the capital for the moment? I will see you again before you leave. Enjoy your stay.”

“...What are you saying, you fool?!”

August finally exploded.

“What... Ah, Vi!”

With a loud huff, August peeled Leorino out of Gravis’s arms and handed him to Johan. Leorino had no time to resist before Johan lifted him from the ground.

“Johan?! Please put me down. I’m going back to the palace with His Excellency. I’m staying with him!”

“Leorino. I’m upset with you, too, though not as much as Father... God, what’s gotten into you? Whatever happened to my sweet Rino?”

The smile on his brother’s face was rather frightening.

Desperate, Leorino looked to Gravis for help, but Gravis simply watched him silently with a faint smile on his lips.

“Johan! Lock Leorino in his room! Maia! You’ll go to him, and, you know...just,

give him a stern talking-to!”

Hearing his father’s angry voice, Leorino protested, stretching out from his brother’s arms.

“Father?! Why? His Excellency has kept his word!”

“That’s not the issue!”

“What? You are not taking me back to Brungwurt, are you? I will not go. I’m not going back!”

“I am not!”

“Then what are you so upset about? I am an adult now. Why don’t you just explain it to me?”

August’s angry voice echoed through the foyer. “...Oh, just shut your mouth! Adult, my ass! Johan, just take the boy away!”

August and Gravis moved to the study. August looked exhausted as he sat on the settee and stared at the king’s brother across from him with murder in his eyes.

“Your Highness... You’ve done it now. As a parent, I resent you.”

The dignified old margrave was overcome with indescribable emotion, and Gravis laughed out loud for once. He was not at all afraid of the man’s glare.

“Ha! I’m glad you got to see that Leorino is doing well. He really does perk up around his family.”

“He’s so ignorant of the world, and yet you dared to... I hate to even put it into words.”

August heaved a heavy sigh, but his whole body was still emitting a murderous aura.

“I have laid my hands on the treasure of the Cassieux family. I deserve a punch or two.”

“I am your subject. I could never do such a thing to Your Highness. But as his father, I would like to strangle you to death right about now.”

Despite the gross disrespect, August’s frankness made Gravis laugh again.

“I hope you now understand that I am not forcing him to do anything he doesn’t want to do.”

August nodded at that. Leorino was clearly loath to be separated from Gravis.

“As much as I hate to admit it...he seems to be more in love with you than you are with him.”

“The feeling is mutual, of course. I wouldn’t blame it on his age, that’s just how Leorino is. I’ve honestly never seen anyone show affection so openly.”

“He doesn’t know any better...”

“No, I enjoy it. But, as Madame Maia said, he can’t be seen in public like that.”

“...I can’t apologize enough.”

Gravis suddenly remembered a question he had intended to ask. “How did you expect him to fall in love with the Duke of Leben’s son when you’ve kept him so isolated from romance?”

August was dumbfounded. “...Just, naturally.”

“How convenient. Not only does he not know how to play the game of love, but for a man, he barely knows how to act in the bedchamber. Must have you been so puritan in his upbringing?”

“Ugh... But who wants to listen to their parents talk about such things?”

Gravis heaved a small sigh. But he wore a smile on his lips. “Please teach him what he needs to know. He will be my spouse one day. I don’t intend to parade him around the city, but I must still make sure he lives up to certain standards. Madame Maia would be well suited to educate him.”

“So then...you intend to marry him after all?”

“Yes. I wish to wed him officially. Are you still against it?”

August recalled his youngest son’s earnest love for the king’s brother. And how the two of them had always been naturally drawn together, as if they had always been a pair, as if their age and status had never mattered at all.

Looking back, he and Maia hadn’t been all that different.

They had been attracted to each other from the moment they laid eyes on each other. Maia was seventeen years old, a pure, innocent maiden who had not yet reached the age of majority, but was not intimidated by August, ten years her senior, when her intense passion was concerned.

Considering that, Leorino could well resemble Maia.

“I will no longer oppose you. It is his wish to be at your side... I formally accept your proposal, Your Highness.”

Gravis looked relieved to finally receive August’s blessing. The king’s brother also seemed to have become much more expressive since he met Leorino.

“He insisted on returning to your palace, but that wouldn’t be wise, would it?”

“Yes, he was making quite the fuss about it before we arrived. But until I officially marry Leorino, I want him to stay with his family. Once we make it public, it will be easier for him to get in and out of the palace, so he’ll have to be patient for now.”

August sighed deeply. “At this rate, I wonder if he’ll be willing to listen... Well, it’s not as if he can do much on his own.”

“Then make him listen, Lord August,” Gravis insisted with a humorless expression. “For Leorino’s safety, I want you to protect him with the entire might of Brungwurt.”

August straightened his back at these words. “Is this about the memory he regained?”

“Yes, that’s what I would like to discuss today. I wish to talk; can you spare me the time?”

August nodded. It was why he had come to the royal capital at all.

“Good. I would prefer it if Leorino could tell you himself, but there is a problem.”

“A problem?”

“The memories of Ionia Bergund, of his past life, are too much to take. Every time he digs up those memories, he gets sick with a high fever...and I suspect this has happened to him before—falling sick with high fevers for no discernible reason.”

August grunted, as if something came to mind.

“Indeed... The boy has been frail ever since the accident, but contrary to his appearance, he had always been a healthy child who never even caught a cold.”

“Perhaps this is due in part to the dreams Leorino has been having. Especially around the time he started dreaming about Zweilink, he must have been getting sick more often.”

“I see... I had assumed that was due to the leg injuries.”

“That may well be the case. I’m not a doctor, so I can’t be certain, but...I still think Ionia’s memories must be quite a burden on his body.”

They were silent for a moment.

“Since his arrival at my palace, he has been feeling unwell because of the many times I’ve made him talk about what happened. I want him to stay here for a while to rest, without being directly involved in the search for the truth.”

“And what is the truth?”

Gravis nodded. "I know you will likely find some of this hard to believe, but I want you to listen and make up your own mind."

"...Yes, sir."

"But first, do you have alcohol?"

August was blindsided by the man's unexpected words. "Your Highness?"

"This might take a while. And perhaps...you may find you need the drink."

Nothing but Love

Having listened to Maia's explanations, which had been as careful as they were thorough, Leorino returned to his room for the first time in days only to find himself writhing in shame on his bed. Now that Hundert had other matters to tend to, he was left to his own devices. He resorted to rolling around on the bed with a pillow clutched in his arms.

I want to die... I'm so embarrassed, I could die...

He hadn't realized he had shown himself to people with the words "I had sex" practically written all over his face.

He had never thought his behavior could be inappropriate for a nobleman. Most of all, he hated the thought that his forwardness could have brought Gravis shame.

Leorino was chagrined by his own ignorance.

But one could hardly argue Leorino's gaffe was his own fault. The only young couple Leorino knew was his eldest brother, Auriano, and Auriano's wife, Erina. But Auriano and Erina were the very image of restraint, and their extreme modesty meant showing only glimpses of mutual affection and respect. They never even hinted at their intimate affairs before their innocent younger brother.

There was little Leorino could learn about the etiquette of love in such an environment.

At first, he struggled to comprehend what Maia was implying at all. Finally, Maia spelled out the issue by saying: “You look like you’ve been dancing in the sheets.”

Leorino tilted his head. “What do you mean...?”

“Oh, please. Your expression says it all—you wasted no time in consummating your relationship, that much is clear.”

Maia’s frank phrasing seemed to affect Johan more than it did Leorino.

“H-how can you tell...?”

“How? It’s all over your lovely face, dear. Your entire body seems to be yelling ‘I desire His Highness carnally.’”

“N-no, it’s not!” Leorino protested, turning red.

“No, it is. There is nothing wrong with your love for His Highness, but our society considers it shameful to express such feelings so openly.”

With tears in his eyes, Leorino turned to his brother, who stood there with his arms crossed. Johan watched Leorino silently, as if he had been sick to his stomach the entire time.

Leorino was saddened by the thought that his brother was also ashamed of him.

There was nothing shameful about his love for Gravis. What was so wrong about letting it show?

Was he not allowed to show his affection, when he adored Gravis so?

Was keeping up appearances truly that important for nobility?

Leorino did not understand what was wrong with the natural expression of joy in loving someone and being loved in turn.

All he knew was that his time with his beloved would end abruptly and without notice.

It was so easy to think there would always be a “next time,” a “tomorrow,” but who knew how long that would last? Every moment spent with a loved one was a miracle.

Why could people not rejoice and honor such a miracle when it was right before them?

But if it's embarrassing and obscene to let it show...

Seeing Leorino's dampened spirits, Maia sighed and patted him on the back.

“Leorino...I need you to understand.”

“Mother...”

“Listen, dear. It is your virtue to be honest and unpretentious. But you see, there are many people in the world who might abuse that. You've already learned as much after arriving in the royal capital, haven't you?”

Leorino nodded, his eyes downcast.

“Your love for His Highness is a beautiful thing, and your wholehearted devotion to him is just as admirable. The time you have to spend with your beloved is limited, after all.”

Hearing those last words, Leorino looked at his mother with a start. Maia nodded.

“But you see, you have to consider the position His Highness finds himself in.”

“Does his position...have anything to do with my behavior?”

“It does. His Highness Prince Gravis can not allow anyone to take advantage of him. You are his weakness. I fear that someone might try to abuse your earnest feelings in the future.”

At long last, Leorino understood Maia's lesson.

It was all to protect his love for Gravis.

Her teaching was to protect one's feelings from being warped for wicked reasons—and if maintaining appearances was what it took, he would do just that.

“...I understand, Mother. Revealing that I am in love with him would pose a danger to His Highness, wouldn't it?”

“I'm glad you understand.”

“Have I been an embarrassment to His Highness?”

Come to think of it, he had met Dirk and Ebbo in this state. Leorino wanted the earth to open up and swallow him whole all over again.

Maia worried she had been too blunt and stroked the back of Leorino's hand to soothe him.

“At the risk of repeating myself, your feelings are a wonderful thing. When you're alone with His Highness, you're free to express them as you wish. But you see, it's just like bedchamber affairs... You should only show those feelings to His Highness. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand. But...how exactly should I act?”

Maia could not help but dote on her youngest son, new to all aspects of love.

“Whenever you feel your heart race at the thought of His Highness, imagine your father's angry face. The face you just saw. Replace His Highness's face with your father's. That should solve everything.”

Leorino chuckled at the thought and took his mother's lesson to heart.

No wonder they don't want me leaving the house. Of course Vi wouldn't let me help search for the truth like this.

It was a completely misguided assumption, but as a result, Leorino gave up on returning to the palace and involving himself in matters any further.

After dinner, a knock sounded in Leorino's bedroom.

"Leorino, may I come in?"

The voice belonged to his father.

"Yes."

Leorino rushed to sit up and fix his disheveled bed. As he was putting on his slippers, his father entered the room, led by his attendant.

The moment he saw his father, Leorino reflected on the "obscene" state he had just shown him.

"Father...I'm sorry for everything. I—I..."

"Oh, that's all right. Maia taught you all you need to know, didn't she?"

Leorino blushed and nodded, understanding exactly what his father meant.

"Then all is forgiven. You look far more decent now. Now, we haven't seen each other in so long. Let me embrace my dearest youngest son again."

Leorino was relieved to hear that.

Ever since he returned home, their conversations had mostly consisted of his father's yelling.

Leorino leaped into his father's arms.

"Father..."

August pulled him into a tight hug.

His father carried the familiar scent of Brungwurt. The nostalgic scent filled Leorino's heart with joy.

"Father... Father, I missed you."

"I missed you, too, Leorino. I'm glad you are well. I know you've been through a lot."

His voice was trembling slightly. It was then that Leorino realized why his father had come to see him.

"...His Highness told you about Ionia's memories."

"Yes... He told me everything."

"I should have told you myself, but His Highness said I must prioritize my health."

"I know."

Leorino looked up at his father anxiously. "...Do you believe it? I know it sounds absurd."

"Of course I believe it."

August looked into his son's eyes and nodded. His blue-green eyes, lightened from age, glistened with tears.

His large hand cupped Leorino's cheek.

"I had no idea how much pain you've been through... I'm sorry."

The warmth of his father's hand on his cheek made Leorino smile.

"I believe I may have been born to you in order to carry on these memories."

August's wrinkled face crumpled further. "I also heard about Bruno."

"Oh, Father... Father, I'm so sorry. I'm accusing the Marquis of Lagarea, who I know is your good friend..."

It pained Leorino to think that his confession had caused his father grief.

“No, I should be apologizing to you. I am a fool for being so blind to your suffering this entire time.”

“Father...”

“...I do not remember Edgar Yorke’s final words, either. Forgive your useless father.”

Leorino shook his head. “I now believe it all had to happen the way it did.”

“...Even your near-death experience at the Zweilink that day?”

Leorino nodded, smiling again. “Yes, everything.”

Leorino clung tightly to his father’s shoulders. Suddenly, August lifted him the way he had when he was a child.

“...You’ve grown so big.”

“I’m too old for this...but I do enjoy being held by you, Father.”

Indeed, Leorino had become surprisingly grown-up. His heart and his spirit had significantly matured.

But August lied at the same time.

His beloved youngest son weighed even less than when he was in Brungwurt.

He was so light for a full-grown man. He must have fought many battles of his own... Likely, many were still to come.

His angel had become so fragile that August feared he might return to heaven at any given moment.

“What do you make of the Marquis of Lagarea?”

August nodded. “I didn’t want to believe it, but if he is your enemy, he will be mine, too.”

“Father...I am sorry for the pain I have caused you.”

“May I share this with Auriano? I will keep it a secret from everyone else,

especially from Maia.”

“Yes.”

Then August took his youngest son off his lap and sat him down beside him.

“May I tell him about you and His Highness?”

“Yes.”

“Are you certain you truly want to marry him?”

Leorino inclined his head, considered for a moment, and nodded yes.

“It won’t be the same as marrying Julian. Once you become royalty, you can never return to the name of Cassieux again. Do you still want it?”

“I don’t know if I want to be royalty, but...I wish to stay by His Highness’s side.”

“There is the significant age gap. He is second only to the king... In some ways, he carries the burden of this kingdom even more than His Majesty. If you’re to be his spouse, you must truly commit to that decision. Do you still want it?”

Leorino replied to his father’s words with a smile.

“...Father. I have memories of Prince Gravis when he was eight years old. Back then, His Highness was younger than me... He was only a boy.”

“Uh... Right.”

August was privately dismayed. As his son spoke of the memories of his past life, he felt like an entirely different person.

“Yes. In those memories, he’s a curt boy with a beautiful face and dark eyes.”
Leorino smiled gently, in a way unlike anything his father had ever seen.

“...How did you meet?”

“I assumed he must have been a nobleman—I couldn’t have known he was a prince. I later found out that, at that time, Vi wanted to avoid a battle for

succession with his elder brother, but he couldn't ignore his mother's wishes, either... So he was torn on what he should do and was suffering in silence."

"...I see. I can recall that time."

"In my dream, I...Ionia didn't know anything about what Vi was going through, but from the moment he saw him, he wanted to make him smile."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. And I feel the same way. That is my only wish. I know I've been causing you nothing but trouble, but I wish to make Vi happy."

For some reason, August felt like crying.

His youngest son had spoken so much of pain and love, and now he had found his other half and wished to make him happy. It felt like nothing short of a miracle.

"I know His Highness's hardships and the solitude, the anguish he has experienced. I have felt them through these memories...right here." Leorino placed his hand on his chest.

"His heart is yours already, isn't it?"

"If I may stay by his side, I am prepared to become royalty and lose any hope of returning to the Cassieux family." With these words, Leorino smiled once more.

"...I see. Would you give up Brungwurt for His Highness?"

"Yes."

August was pained to see his youngest son nod without the slightest hesitation.

"I want to be by His Highness's side. I want to devote my heart and loyalty to him and spend our lives together. Would you allow me to do that?"

Having listened to him in silence, August lovingly stroked his youngest son's

soft hair.

“I want you to be happy, but I also wanted you to always be able to return to Brungwurt if anything ever happened.”

Leorino shook his head calmly. “All I wish for is Vi’s happiness. I need nothing else. As long as Vi wants me...I’ll gladly discard my life for him.”

August’s heart ached.

In every word, he could see glimpses of Leorino’s unconscious self-sacrifice and his overwhelming devotion.

“No regrets?”

“None. Never.”

“...I see.”

August accepted Leorino’s decision with a sense of resignation. The strong will in his violet eyes made it clear that Leorino had already resolved to leave the Cassieux family.

The only thing his family could do now was let their son spread his wings.

“I shall officially decline Lord Julian’s proposal in that case... As for your brothers, well...they might be the greatest pain of all. God, I’m getting a headache as we speak.”

When August sighed emphatically, Leorino grinned.

“Well then, we shall have to make a formal proposal to the royal court regarding your engagement to His Highness.”

“Thank you so much.” Leorino bowed his head. With that, a smile bloomed on his face.

Important Allies

“Josef...I missed you. I’m sorry for worrying you.”

Josef tightly embraced his cherished master.

“Josef! That is not an appropriate way to greet Master Leorino...”

Hundert bristled behind him. But Leorino was pleased with the embrace.

“It’s all right, Hundert. I’m happy to see him, too.”

Leorino hugged Josef’s slender body in return.

“...I was worried about you... You’ve been so reckless.”

They remained in the embrace until Josef was satisfied, and finally loosened his arms and peered into Leorino’s face.

Josef’s eyes had welled up ever so slightly.

“I’m glad you’re back in one piece.”

“...I’m sorry, Josef. I haven’t been able to get in touch with you this entire time. You must have been worried.”

“I was, but it’s fine now. You’ve lost some weight. Have you been eating?”

Leorino’s cheeks relaxed. He had missed Josef’s blunt voice.

“I’m fine, Josef. But I need to speak with you... This might take a while, so why don’t you sit down while you listen?”

Josef nodded and sat down across from Leorino. Hundert immediately

prepared tea for both of them.

“Hundert, I want you to listen as well, so you should sit with us. We can have tea together if you like.”

“My lord, servants are not allowed to sit with their masters.”

The old man was unusually flustered. Leorino looked between Hundert and Josef in confusion.

Josef was his guard, which meant he was *supposed* to be a servant of the Cassieux family, and yet he was nonchalantly sitting on the settee and had already begun to sip his tea before his master.

Looking at Josef, Hundert heaved a sigh, his face wrinkling further. He was not helping him make his case.

“Josef...you’re truly...”

“Ha-ha, rules don’t apply to Josef, it’s all right.”

Leorino laughed. He then turned to his attendant and once more pointed to the space next to Josef, asking Hundert to sit down.

“Oh, but before that, would you mind locking the door? I don’t want anyone to hear.”

Josef quickly stood up, approached the door, and locked it. While he was at it, he leaned his face against it and listened.

“All clear. There should be no one nearby.”

When Josef sat down again, he eagerly lifted his teacup.

“You really like your tea, don’t you?”

“Mr. Hundert makes great tea. He always reserves the best tea leaves for you.”

Sitting next to him, Hundert wore a sour expression.

The scene felt so familiar, Leorino was relieved to finally be back home.

“There’s something I’d like to tell you. The first issue is more of a request, actually. It’s about His Highness Prince Gravis.”

Josef immediately looked ill at ease. “...Lord Leorino, I know you, uh. You...like the general, don’t you?”

He must have been remembering what they looked like when they arrived. He was being uncharacteristically hesitant, considering his usual audacity.

Leorino simply nodded. “Yes. He means the world to me. I love him.”

“R-r-right... When did that happen?”

Josef straightened his back.

He sipped his tea as if trying to conceal his nerves as he waited for his master to continue.

“Well, one thing led to another. I’m going to marry His Highness, so I’ll have to leave this house sooner or later. When I do, I would like both of you to come with me.”

Josef spat out his tea.

“Ah, Josef, watch out!”

“...Wha... Wha...”

Hundert quickly picked up a tea towel and instantly wiped the mess clean, remembering how Sasha had also spat out his tea in this very room in the past.

Hundert himself was not particularly surprised by Leorino’s words. He had been convinced that this was coming sooner or later ever since he had seen the couple at the palace.

If anything, he was relieved that the matter would be settled so quickly.

But for Josef, this was a bolt out of the blue.

Josef stared at his master with the most stunned expression Leorino had ever seen, tea dripping down his chin. He looked like a cat that had fallen into a pail of water.

Hundert could not bear to look at him any longer and spoke up. "Josef, calm down. And wipe your face already."

"...H-h-how can I be calm?! What the hell happened?! Just when I thought the general had abducted Master Leorino from the training grounds, and I hadn't heard from him for almost a whole week, when he finally comes back, he says he l-loves him...and on top of that, they're getting married?!"

Josef's eyes demanded an explanation.

Leorino simply nodded.

"This is difficult to explain, but I've been in love with His Highness for a long time. I simply thought nothing would ever come of it."

Aghast, Josef instinctively turned to Hundert.

Hundert was also surprised.

"S-since when...?"

"Since we first met."

"What?"

"From the moment we met, I was hoping he would develop feelings for me."

Josef tilted his head.

All he could say to that was, "Why?"

If anything, all Josef could recall was the general being obsessed with Leorino and controlling his every action at the Palace of Defense. Not to mention, Leorino had also been avoiding the general since his return from the general's detached palace, as though his original stay had been an unpleasant experience.

Where in the history of their interactions had there ever been a moment leading to such a loving relationship?

“Was all I’ve ever known a lie...?”

Hearing Josef’s stunned murmur, Hundert chided him quietly. “...I understand your feelings, Josef, but you must let Master Leorino finish.”

Josef nodded. “R-right, so... When did the general tell you that he liked you?”

“When I was staying at his palace. Even before then, he had kissed me several times, and we’ve done other pleasant things as well.”

“...Ugh.”

“But it was my first time, so everything was new to me and I was scared, and too stubborn to understand how His Highness felt, so...”

“Aaaaah!”

Leorino was alarmed by Josef’s cry. Josef was lying prostrate on the settee.

“J-Josef? ...Hundert, what happened to Josef?!”

When he looked at Hundert, he noticed that even the old servant had scrunched up his face.

Leorino was alarmed. “H-Hundert? What’s the matter? You’re all wrinkled!”

“Master Leorino...please keep your bedchamber affairs to yourself.”

“I am? This was before we made it to the bedchamber.”

“Aaaaaaagh! Stop!” Josef screamed again and threw himself onto the table.

“My... My young master has... What has the world come to...?”

“Are you all right? Did I startle you?”

Swaying, Josef raised his face. “...I’m sorry I got upset. Wh-what then?”

Leorino nodded and resumed his explanation.

“What then? Then... Well, when he took me back to his palace from the training grounds the other day, we were finally able to have a proper conversation. I asked him how he felt, and I told him how I felt, and that’s how we learned our feelings were mutual.”

Leorino smiled faintly.

“Then he asked me to marry him, and I said yes.”

“...You skimmed over the most important parts...”

“Hm?”

“...No, go on.”

Maia’s lesson must have had an immediate effect on Leorino, seeing as he actually did keep his bedchamber affairs to himself.

“My father accepted His Highness’s proposal and gave us his blessing. Now we can proceed with the formalities.”

Hundert smiled. “Congratulations.”

Hundert already knew that his master’s future husband loved him more than life itself.

Leorino also felt as comfortable by the prince’s side as he had been in Brungwurt. He didn’t shrink back at the differences in status or age, either.

Above all, there was no better man in the country to protect someone as special as Leorino as his ultimate guardian than Gravis.

Hundert was convinced that the man would make his master happy, despite the many hardships that becoming royalty would surely bring.

“Father informed my brothers and mother at the dinner table just now, so I thought I could tell you as well.”

“...Oh, I wish I’d been there to see *that* mess unfold.”

“Yes, my brothers are rather overprotective, after all. They were a little

surprised and worried, but I was most scared of what Mother would say.”

Hundert had been present as his attendant.

The dinner had been hell incarnate, to give a conservative description.

Johan and Gauff, who had come running at the news of the sudden arrival of their parents, were certainly more than “a little” surprised.

“I wanted to tell you as soon as I could,” Leorino admitted and grinned.

His flowery smile cleared away the men’s surprise, and their cheeks finally relaxed.

“I see... Master Leorino will be a bride.”

“I’m not a *bride*. I’ll be the spouse of the king’s brother. Hm? Is that a bride? Hundert, am I the bride in my relationship with His Highness?”

“Since you’re a man, you will not be a bride, my lord.”

“If you ask me, it’s all the same. Well... What do you say at a time like this anyway? Congratulations, Master Leorino.”

“Thank you.”

Josef finally collected himself and smiled at Leorino. His eyes were so kind, like those of an older brother.

“It’s super rare for a noble to be with the love of his life, isn’t it? I’m happy for you.”

“Is it rare? But yes. I’m glad we can promise to always be together from now on.” Leorino cracked a smile and added, “There is one more thing I wanted to tell you.”

“Is there more happy news?”

“No, no more happy news, but I want you to listen to me anyway. Except for my father, you are the only two people from Brungwurt who will learn about this secret of mine. I want your support going forward, so...please hear me out. This might take a while.”

Hundert and Josef nodded.

With that, Leorino began the story of another secret.

Leorino's story continued late into the night.

He told them he had been dreaming about Ionia for a long time. He told them what happened at Zweilink, of the secret he had found there that would shake the country to its foundations, and how he had carried it to the royal capital. He told them everything.

When he finally finished, Hundert and Josef were silent, tears rolling down their cheeks.

Josef stood up and tightly embraced Leorino, the same way he had earlier that night.

"Coming out to the royal capital was worth it, huh? I'm so glad you got to meet the general," Josef whispered as he hugged his master's slightly feverish body.

Leorino nodded. "Josef, will you fight with me from now on?"

"Yes. Of course I will. I'll go with you when you get married. I will be with you, Master Leorino, for the rest of my life."

"So will I, Master Leorino... My lord. To think you have suffered so..."

"...Hundert."

"I shall gladly serve you for the rest of my life, short as it may be."

Leorino was at a loss for words. He only murmured a single "thank you," and shook the hands of both Josef and Hundert.

Josef wiped the corners of his eyes and sat back down on the settee.

"...For the time being, I'll just, you know. I'll go where Master Leorino can't go."

"Thank you. In all honesty, I'd love to go with you, but His Highness forbade

me from doing so.”

“Well of course he did. You stand out like a sore thumb. Hard to engage in any covert missions like that.”

Leorino nodded at his words, clearly dejected.

“Not to mention my obscene appearance would only bring shame upon His Highness. So I’ll stay put.”

Josef tilted his head at that, but wisely decided to let it go.

Leorino staying put would be best for everyone, Josef figured.

“And by the looks of it, you’re not fully recovered yet, are you? You gotta be healthy if you’re gonna be a bride.”

“I thought we agreed I’m not a bride. Besides, my marriage with His Highness is still a long way off.”

“Is it?” Josef looked to Hundert. Hundert nodded solemnly, affirming his master’s words.

“First, we have to get approval from the royal court, and then we have to prepare for the wedding... Father said it may take six months at least, possibly even a year.”

“Wow! Marriages between royals and nobles sure are a pain in the ass, huh?”

“Josef, please. You truly have no idea what it means to marry into the royal family.”

“How the hell am I supposed to know that?” Josef sulked. “I hope you can get all that out of the way as soon as possible and be happy with the general.”

His words were so candid and simple that they put Leorino’s heart at ease.

He wished love could be so easy, without any unnecessary restrictions.

That was why Leorino liked Josef’s completely unpretentious nature.

“Josef...I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Oh, I know. You want me to get in touch with Dirk and join him in his search, right?”

Josef was unburdened by manners and called Dirk by his first name without a second thought.

“I want you to move with great caution. And if His Highness finds out, he might get angry, so could you apologize to Dirk first?”

“Sure, I’ll take care of it.”

Leorino was relieved to have a trusted ally in Josef, even as he worried if he and Dirk would get along.

“And you’ll stay put, Master Leorino?”

“Yes. I’m not even allowed to go to the Palace of Defense for a while.”

Josef looked disappointed. “You were almost finished with your research.”

“I know. But...I heard from my father that His Highness said as much. I’d like to apologize to Dr. Sasha, but I was told I shouldn’t call on him out of the blue, since it might look suspicious.”

“So what’s the official line?”

“I fell ill at the training grounds. His Highness brought me to safety, and after I finally recovered, I returned home to recuperate. My parents were worried about me and came all the way from our domain to see me, is the story we’re going with.”

Josef nodded in approval.

“I see. Well, it’s true that you’ve been in pretty bad shape. You should take your time and do your bridal training.”

“Bridal training? I’m not a bride, what am I supposed to train?”

“Well, you know... Ah, come on. Learning how to sew and cook and stuff?”

“I’ve never done that. Do I need to?”

Leorino asked the attendant with his eyes. Hundert shook his head sternly.

“You are not expected to do anything Josef mentioned. Madame Maia will take care of everything. All you should do is study. You will have to relearn the history and political situation of each country in our region, as well as Frankish, the mother tongue of the queen dowager. But I’m certain you will be all right, since the madame can teach you basic ceremonial etiquette and the responsibilities of royalty.”

“Wow. That *does* sound super royal-like. Anyway, just stay home and stay put for now. But if you want to go out, I’ll of course accompany you.”

“Hundert, do I have any upcoming plans?”

The attendant remembered there was a matter he had intended to ask his master about.

“Next week, you are invited to a soiree hosted by the Duke of Leben. We have already replied that you will attend, but given these circumstances, it may be necessary for us to decline.”

“That’s true... No, wait.”

Leorino considered it for a moment.

The Duchess of Leben was the sister of the Marquis of Lagarea. He was told to stay out of trouble, but he hesitated to dismiss this opportunity to gather information.

Above all, he had to decline Julian’s marriage proposal.

“I wish to attend after all.”

“Lord Leorino... What are you thinking? What happened to staying put?” Josef chided his master in a harsh voice. “What are the chances the marquis will attend the soiree?”

“Hundert, could you look into it? If the Marquis of Lagarea is attending, I won’t go. But I can’t have Lord Julian escorting me any longer... Are my brothers

available?”

“Unfortunately, your brothers have other plans for the day, made under the assumption that you would be escorted by Lord Julian.”

“Of course... What should I do, then? I certainly can’t go alone, can I?”

Hundert considered it.

The attendant was familiar with the most recent schedules of his master’s family members, as well as relatives and the servants with whom he interacted. As Leorino’s full-time attendant, it was Hundert’s job to always be in touch with the butler, the steward, and the family attendants to enable his master to take action at a moment’s notice.

“The Duchess Dowager of Wiesen and the current Duke and Duchess of Wiesen are scheduled to attend the soiree.”

“Grandmother and my uncle and aunt will be there?”

The Duchess Dowager of Wiesen was Maia’s mother. She was the sister of the king before the last, and a princess who had married into the ducal family.

“In that case, Hundert, could you discuss the matter with the house of Wiesen?”

The face of the king’s brother, his master’s husband-to-be, flashed through Hundert’s mind. He wondered if he should listen to his master without any pushback.

“If they won’t take me, I’ll let it go. If I don’t learn how to school my expression by then, I shouldn’t be out there anyway.”

“I still don’t understand what’s so wrong with your expression,” Josef muttered.

“...Yes, my lord. However, you must abide by Madame Maia’s decision. Her only condition is that you must be in good health by then.”

Leorino nodded meekly at that.

However, Leorino did not know.

He did not know that the engagement between two high-ranking nobles should have been settled by the heads of both families. There was no need for him to apologize or to decline in person.

Julian had had feelings for him, after all, and Leorino felt the need to personally apologize to him and decline his proposal.

The Housekeeper of the Yorke Family

Dirk heaved a deep sigh.

An old friend of Ebbo's had found the house of Edgar Yorke's elder brother and sister-in-law, who had lived in the royal capital. The brother and his wife had already passed away. However, the man found an old woman, a former housekeeper, who had worked in the couple's home.

The woman had been summoned in secret to an inn in the commoner district with the promise of payment. Since Ebbo was too conspicuous with his huge frame and scarred body, it was up to Dirk to meet with the woman.

Yes, Dirk was *supposed* to go alone.

"So Lord Leorino told you everything and...you're here in his stead? Is that your idea of a disguise?"

Dirk had removed his royal army uniform and was dressed in a way that made him look like he belonged in this part of town. The only issue was the young man in front of him, standing with his arms crossed, looking very proud of himself.

"What's wrong with my disguise?"

"No, it's perfect, really, but aren't you taller than most women?"

Before Dirk stood Josef, his distinctive sandy-colored hair concealed by a long brown wig.

"Hah? I ain't disguised as a woman! I'm just wearing a wig because my hair

stands out!”

“Ah, well, when you put it that way, yes. I assumed you were dressed as a woman because your face is already on the feminine side... Ugh!”

Josef thrust his fist into Dirk’s abdomen.

“Did I ask? Let’s go.”

“...Ugh, you little... Is that how you’re asking to join me?” Dirk staggered to his feet and sighed in exasperation. “Ah, why did Lord Leorino have to involve you...? His Excellency won’t like this.”

“Oh, Master Leorino was worried about that, too. So I’m supposed to say sorry and give you his regards.”

Dirk wondered what he was getting himself into. Even if Leorino had Ionia’s memories, in many regards, he was still a kid.

“Listen up. You’re basically Master Leorino’s little brother, right? Then I’m like your big bro now, too.”

“...Wait a minute. Are you forgetting how much older I am?”

“What difference does it make?”

“I’m eight years older than you!”

“Geez, don’t yell. All right, all right. You can be my big brother, then. Let’s go, my dearest elder brother.”

“Oh... S-sure.”

Dirk was suddenly acting bashful for some reason, and Josef looked at him coldly and scoffed.

“God, you’re so easy. You’re even worse than Lord Leorino.”

“...Dammit, fine. Now, come.”

Dirk grabbed Josef by the top of his wig, peered into his face, and sneered. “Look. I’ll do the talking. You keep your mouth shut. If you can’t promise me that, I’m not taking you... Is that clear?”

Josef nodded with an inscrutable expression. That certainly didn't inspire trust.

Dirk rubbed his throbbing temples.

He couldn't keep the woman waiting much longer. Dirk began walking, reluctantly taking Josef with him.

Soon, Dirk was awfully impressed by the way Josef carried himself. Despite his large, muscular build, Dirk was good at blending in with his surroundings, but Josef was simply divine.

He was so natural at it that even walking beside him, Dirk found himself struggling to follow Josef with his eyes as he weaved his way through the crowd.

"...You really are like a cat, aren't you?"

"I've been known to roam."

"Yeah, I figured."

Josef narrowed his eyes at Dirk. Without his usual sandy hair, something about him felt wrong.

"You know where we're going?"

"Are you forgetting I'm *from* the commoner district? I know this area like my back porch."

"Huh... Oh, that reminds me, Master Leorino wanted to visit your parents' house. If you ever get a chance, show him around."

Dirk grinned. "My parents would be shocked to see someone so beautiful on their doorstep. They'll be shedding tears of joy when they learn Lord Leorino has my brother's memories."

"I think that'd make Lord Leorino very happy."

They arrived at the inn before long. Its ground floor was home to a tavern.

Dirk noticed a small, middle-aged man and approached him.

“Hello, Mr. Sharrow, I’m sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Ah, Elric. Who’s this?”

“He’s my brother.”

Apparently, Dirk was “Elric” in this scenario. Josef curtly bowed his head.

“Hey pops, I’ll need a room for a business meeting.”

The innkeeper nodded silently. It seemed that they had come to an agreement in advance.

The man led Dirk and Josef upstairs and stopped in front of the room at the end of the corridor.

“This is the room. The old housekeeper is already inside.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sharrow. I appreciate it.”

“I’ll be in the neighboring room. If anyone approaches, I’ll knock on the wall. When you’re done, knock on my room and leave. I’ll lead the lady out afterward.”

“All right. I owe you.”

“Oh, please. I’d do anything for Ebbo. I owe him more than I can ever repay.”
With that, the man hid in the adjacent room.

“Josef...”

“I know. I’m supposed to keep my mouth shut. I’m here to be Master Leorino’s ears. Ears don’t speak.”

Dirk nodded.

Inside the room, an old woman sat idly. When they entered, she offered no word of greeting.

“Ms. Delia, thank you for coming.”

“No need. I came because you promised me money. You want to ask me about Mr. Yorke and his family, don’t you?”

Dirk sat down in front of her with a radiant smile. “Yes, and about his brother who lived with them. When did you start working as a housekeeper in Mr. Yorke’s house?”

“When Mr. Yorke got married.”

“Who lived with him then?”

“His newlywed wife and his mother... Sometimes Mr. Edgar came home as well. After he joined the Royal Army, I only saw him once in a while.”

“Ms. Delia, was the Yorke family from the royal capital?”

Delia thought for a moment and quickly shook her head.

“Well, I never asked. I suppose not. They said they were from the south. Mr. Yorke’s mother once mentioned that they used to live somewhere warm, and that the winters in the royal capital are cold.”

“I see.”

“Mr. Yorke’s wife was from the royal capital. She was from the merchant family who owned the Moirlud Trading Company. She was a fancy young lady who didn’t like housework, so they hired me.”

“Were Mr. and Mrs. Yorke well-off?”

The old woman pondered for a moment.

“They certainly had enough to go around. Their house was rather large.”

“Huh. What did Mr. Yorke do for a living?”

“I don’t know exactly. He had a wealthy wife, so he lived a fairly comfortable life. He had some mercantile aspirations, but I never learned how he earned his money.”

Dirk glanced at Josef.

“How convenient.”

“It’s true.”

“Do you really have no idea how Mr. Yorke made his living?”

“Not really,” said the old woman, considering it again. “Hmm, well, I think they came from old money. I suspect Yorke’s mother was wealthy.”

“Yorke’s parents? Do you happen to know their occupations?”

“When I started working for them, Yorke’s mother was already retired. I don’t think his father was ever in the picture.”

Dirk didn’t know what to make of that. “His father wasn’t around?”

“No... Oh, wait, I remember now. Mr. Yorke was a bad drunk. He would get so loud in his drunken ranting that even his wife wanted nothing to do with it and would run right out of the house, so I would look after him instead.”

“And? What did you remember?”

“This was when Mr. Yorke’s mother passed away. After the funeral, he got drunk and told Mr. Edgar, ‘It was thanks to Mother that we can live so comfortably.’”

“Thanks to his mother... You mean his mother earned the money they lived off of?”

“Yes, that’s what he said. I’m certain of it.”

“What did his mother do?”

The old woman answered immediately. “She was a midwife. She used to be an apprentice when she was young, she told me as much. She didn’t do anything after coming to the royal capital, though.”

“A midwife? Is being a midwife really that lucrative?”

And with that midwife apprenticeship, she apparently made so much money that she could move out to the royal capital and live in a nice house. Things

weren't adding up for Dirk.

Delia's face turned sulky. "I wouldn't know. You asked me, so I'm just telling you what I remember."

"...I know, I apologize. I was just thinking out loud. What else do you remember the mother saying?"

"That she was exceptional for an apprentice. She boasted that she had delivered a noble all by herself."

Dirk and Josef exchanged glances.

"What was the mother's name? And, Ms. Delia, can you try to remember where she was from?"

"Ms. Greta. Her name was Greta. And where was she from? You mean where she was born?"

"Yes, that's right."

Delia pointed at the jug on the table, asking for water. Josef silently poured her a glass, and she sipped it and sighed.

"I'm not sure..."

Dirk was disappointed. Behind him, Josef released the breath he had been holding.

"So, ma'am." Josef spoke up suddenly.

Dirk glared at him silently, thinking how he had promised to keep quiet.

"Has the Yorkes' house ever been visited by a fancy man who looked like a noble?"

"Oh? A nobleman? No...I think not. Mr. Yorke certainly wasn't very influential. They weren't a major merchant family, either."

"So how about a kind-looking nobleman with gray hair?"

That seemed to jog the old woman's memory.

"A nobleman...nobleman... Perhaps... Oh, that reminds me."

"Was he there?!"

Dirk and Josef leaned forward.

"But he wasn't there to see Mr. Yorke and his wife. Mr. Edgar had brought home someone who looked like a nobleman."

"When? When was that?"

"...Hmm. I know this. I remember because it was the year Mr. Edgar graduated from school. The same year the former king's concubine fell ill. The concubine died at the end of that year."

The men exchanged another glance.

"...So who did Edgar bring with him?"

"He was wearing a hooded cloak, so I didn't see his face. Housekeepers aren't supposed to look guests in the face anyway, but I brought tea to the parlor. I think he spoke like a nobleman."

Josef bit his lip. That alone wouldn't be enough to identify anyone.

"But, hmm, yes. I think the mother knew him, too. When she saw him, she seemed shocked, and started making a fuss."

"Did she say anything in particular? Can you recall?"

"She was quite startled, you see. Sopé? Sopla? She said she had many memories of that place. But right after that, she seemed dazed for a while. Perhaps her age was finally getting to her. Though she wasn't *that* old at the time, either."

Delia shook her head.

"That's about all I remember."

At that moment, a knock on the wall came from the neighboring room. Someone was coming.

The men hastily prepared to leave.

“Thank you, Ms. Delia. You’ve been a great help.”

“It’s all right. You’re quite strange to ask me about my long-deceased employer, though I’m happy to get a little extra money.”

Dirk pulled a small, clinking pouch out of his pocket and handed it to the old woman.

The woman gladly received her payment.

“That reminds me,” Dirk added. “When did Mr. and Mrs. Yorke pass away?”

“Must be six years ago now. Mr. Edgar also died that year, somewhere out in the sticks, and, strangely enough, they were both hit by a horse-drawn carriage right after that.”

Dirk and Josef discreetly left the inn.

“...We didn’t find out much, did we?”

“...No, the old woman gave us some good information. At the very least, we now know there’s a possibility that the man Edgar brought with him was related to the Marquis of Lagarea, perhaps even the marquis himself.”

“How do you know?” Josef was puzzled.

“The last place the old lady mentioned, ‘Sopé’ or ‘Sopla,’ that Yorke’s mother was talking about with the guest, is likely Sopelana.”

“And where is this Sopelana?”

Dirk answered, walking quickly, “Sopelana is the capital of Lagarea’s domain. It’s possible Yorke’s mother was from Sopelana. Let’s investigate along those lines.”

Half of One's Heart

Having walked for a while, Dirk and Josef hailed a cab.

Inside the carriage, Josef removed his brown wig, revealing his familiar, distinctive sandy hair.

"I hope you don't mind if I tell Master Leorino about the old woman."

"Oh, I don't mind. We left with more questions than answers, but just knowing that Yorke's mother may have come from Lagarea's domain means a lot."

"And then there's the money."

"Yes. The most important question is where a midwife's apprentice got enough money to live in the royal capital all on her own. His Excellency's valet should help me look into it."

"The man who visited the house with Yorke...we still don't know if he was the Marquis of Lagarea, do we?"

Dirk nodded. "We don't. That one, I'm afraid, may forever remain a mystery."

"Why?"

"Everyone who lived there at the time is dead, except for the housekeeper. A royal palace is one thing, but no one keeps a record of visitors to a commoner's house."

"That's true..."

"Still, it *is* suspicious how the elder brother and his wife died soon after Edgar's suicide."

Josef's face twisted in annoyance. "They were permanently silenced, what else could it be?"

"...Yeah, most likely. The Marquis of Lagarea was leading the investigation—he could have easily tampered with the details of the accident which killed Yorke's brother and sister-in-law if there were witnesses."

Dirk stopped the carriage in a discreet place.

"...Right, thanks for the help."

As Josef reached for the door, Dirk grabbed his arm with a sober expression.

"Josef."

"...What?"

"Tell Lord Leorino to stay safe. And that applies to you too, now that you're acting in his stead."

"You worry too much. Lord Leorino is one thing, but you don't need to worry about me. You've seen how good I am with the sword, haven't you?"

But Dirk's face remained humorless. "I'm well aware of your skill, but we don't know what that man might do once he realizes what we're doing. You leave it to me to look into things. Is that clear?"

Josef laughed. As he did, his face appeared softer.

Dirk flicked him in the forehead. "Don't laugh, I'm serious."

"I know. Still, if there's something I can help with, I would appreciate it if you involved me. I'm sure Lord Leorino will be distracted enough to stay put with some new information."

"You're unusually obedient."

Josef scoffed.

"I know I'm useless at this sort of thing. I'm dense like that. I just want to let Master Leorino know how things are progressing, slow as it may be. That way he can do his bride training in peace. I hate to say it, but I don't think he should

be involved in this. If keeping him informed makes him feel a little better...that's enough."

Dirk was impressed with his coolheaded assessment of the situation. Josef glared at him.

"...What? You got a problem?"

"You're not dense, you just don't care much for most people. You are sensitive to Leorino's situation and feelings, after all."

Perhaps there was something wrong with his phrasing, because Josef suddenly turned his face away. He really was as capricious as a cat.

"...Right. I'll be off."

"I'll let you know if I learn anything."

Josef opened the carriage door, looked around, and, before jumping down, he flashed a glance at Dirk. "...Oh yeah. How's he doing?"

"How's who doing?"

"...That big old guy."

"You mean His Excellency Gravis?"

Josef was uncharacteristically hesitant. "No, I mean the lieutenant general. Is he...doing all right?"

"Yes. I often see him at meetings. He looks the same as always. Why?"

"Well, Lord Leorino had... No, it's nothing. I'm glad he's the same as always. Sorry for the weird question. Bye."

"Ah, Josef?"

Josef left those strange words between them and smoothly got out of the carriage with his practiced silence.

Josef reported his findings to Leorino when he returned home.

“So Edgar’s mother was a midwife.”

“Well, technically, an apprentice. She didn’t seem to have done any midwifery after coming to the royal capital.”

Leorino brought his hand to his chin and considered it.

“Why did she move out from Lagarea to the royal capital in the first place? Unless she was forced to leave, I don’t see why a single woman would move out to the capital all on her own. Especially as a midwife apprentice, her work prospects would be limited. I don’t think she would have chosen that path.”

“That’s true. If she was exiled for doing something wrong, it wouldn’t make sense for her to have all that money. Maybe she stole the money and ran away?”

They sat opposite each other and mulled it over. Hundert served them tea.

“She may have received a large sum of money as compensation,” Hundert suggested. “Perhaps one of the conditions was that she had to leave the domain?”

Leorino nodded toward Hundert. “Indeed... So, Josef. Edgar Yorke’s mother boasted that, even as an apprentice, she helped deliver a noble. And that Yorke’s brother said they lived comfortably thanks to their mother.”

“Did she receive a large sum of money as payment for that delivery? And then came out to the royal capital?”

“But would a nobleman ask an inexperienced apprentice to assist him in childbirth? What do you think, Hundert?”

Hundert answered. “If they wanted to conceal the birth, it would make sense. It is possible that she came to the royal capital because she was given hush money and was driven out of the region.”

“Conceal the birth...”

Josef slapped his knee. “That’s it. Could it be that she didn’t commit any

crime, but was given money and agreed to leave?”

“We won’t be able to investigate much beyond this... And we still don’t know if the Marquis of Lagarea and Edgar were connected in any way.”

“There was the man Edgar brought to the house just before he entered the army, but Dirk said it would be difficult to track him down. After all, the only witness was the old housekeeper.”

Leorino sighed in disappointment. “I’m sorry, Josef. It wasn’t worth the effort.”

“It’s all right. I’m glad to have anything to report at all.”

Leorino seemed satisfied with what little information he received. Josef sipped the tea Hundert had brewed with relish.

“More importantly, what are you going to do about the Duke of Leben’s soiree this weekend? Are you going?”

“I’m going. I heard that the Marquis of Lagarea won’t be there because he’ll be participating in our marriage deliberations.”

“Even without Lagarea, it’s not safe. I’m against it.”

Leorino calmed the fearsome look on his guard’s face with a smile. “I’ll be all right. I’m going with my uncle, aunt, and grandmother.”

“I’m not worried about how you’ll get there and come back, but the venue itself. I can’t enter the duke’s soiree. I can’t protect you.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll be with Grandmother at all times, don’t worry.”

Josef did not understand how that was supposed to bring him any comfort.

“Even though she married the Duke of Wiesen, she still holds the title of princess.”

“Huh? What does that have to do with the soiree?”

“Well, you see, holding a royal title means that, in the absence of the royal

family, Grandmother is the highest-ranking person in the room. She is, so to speak, quasi-royalty, and no one is allowed to speak to her unless she gives them permission.”

Josef was surprised to learn of such a rule.

“So as long as I’m around my grandmother, no one can talk to me, either.”

“Wow. Nobles really live in a world of their own.”

Leorino forced a smile at Josef’s exasperated expression. “That’s why Mother gave me permission to go.”

“I see...”

“According to Mother, my grandmother is quite elderly. So after speaking with some close friends, she will remain for half an hour as a matter of courtesy and take her leave. I will return with her as soon as I speak with Lord Julian. So don’t worry.”

“Fine. Can’t say I’m fully reassured though...”

Josef had accepted his decision, albeit reluctantly.

Leorino cracked a smile.

“Thank you. I will take my uncle’s carriage there and I’ll return with Grandmother in our family carriage.”

Josef furrowed his brow. “Lord Leorino...are you trying to look into things on your own? You really shouldn’t.”

“He’s right,” Hundert agreed. “My lord, please be reasonable.”

Leorino was startled when both men chided him. His main reason for going to the soiree was to apologize to Julian, but if he got the chance, he was hoping to ask something of the Marquis of Lagarea’s sister, the Duchess of Leben, that could lead him to the marquis’s secret.

But Leorino was well aware that he must not do anything rash.

“I know. I’ll stay with Grandmother for the most part and come back as soon

as I speak with Lord Julian. I'll only be there for half an hour or so. Is that all right?"

"...All right. I trust you, Master Leorino."

Both Josef and Hundert seemed to have finally accepted his plan.

With that, Hundert asked Josef to leave. He told Leorino his bedtime had arrived.

"My lord, you should be heading to bed. Tomorrow you are scheduled for an audience at the royal palace. I'm certain His Royal Highness wouldn't want you falling ill."

"Hmm? Yes, you're right."

Josef was also aware of Leorino's plans as his guard. He weakly waved good-bye and left the room in a hurry.

"Now let us get ready for a good night's sleep."

"Yes."

Tomorrow, before the marriage deliberations began, he was to have an audience with His Majesty the King, the crown prince, and the queen dowager, Gravis's very own mother. In fact, the deliberations would determine if they received formal approval, and they intended to ask the king to approve their marriage in advance.

Leorino felt a chill in the pit of his stomach as he recalled his only memory with the queen dowager.

When he silently placed his hand on his stomach, Hundert noticed his master's gesture.

"You seem nervous. Let me prepare some warm medicinal tea for you. It should help you unwind."

"...If it's bitter, I don't want it."

“It’s all right. There are no antipyretics in the tea, so it won’t be bitter. It will warm you up.”

“...Then I’ll have some.”

Leorino prepared for sleep and climbed into bed. Hundert soon brought him a cup of medicinal tea. It truly was just some clear herbal tea, slightly sweet and refreshing.

As it slid down his throat, he felt warmth spread through his stomach.

He lay down on his back and looked up at the wrinkled face of his attendant.

Seeing the gentle expression on Hundert’s face, the same one he had seen every night before falling asleep since he was a little boy, Leorino spoke of his anxiety before he could help it.

“When I was Ionia, I was once summoned by the queen dowager... She was queen at the time.”

“Is that so...?”

“I remember the face of the queen dowager. Vi’s fiancée was also there.”

Hundert pulled the covers up to Leorino’s shoulders, quietly watching his master.

“The queen dowager told me to keep my distance from Vi, and to advise him to pursue marriage.”

“What did Ionia think of this?”

Leorino gazed into the servant’s old, pale eyes.

“He decided that if marrying the duke’s daughter would be best for Vi’s future, then he would support him.”

“...I see.”

“Ionia decided that if he was only going to get in Vi’s way, then all he could do was distance himself.”

Hundert patted Leorino's shoulder soothingly.

"You don't need to worry about that this time. I'm certain Her Majesty will give you her blessing."

"...I don't know. Even if the difference in status isn't as great now, I'm a man, so...she might object to such a fruitless marriage anyway."

"I understand why you may be anxious, but please have faith in His Royal Highness."

"Have faith in Vi..."

Hundert nodded. He tenderly watched his master, young enough to be his grandson.

"My lord, are you comparing yourself to Ionia and concluding he was superior? ...Because I believe you're wrong."

Leorino's eyes widened.

"I see Ionia as an inexperienced young man, not so different from yourself, my lord. Of course, nothing could replace his courage and his accomplishments for our country, but that's another matter entirely."

Leorino had never thought of that.

"...What should Ionia have done?" Leorino asked quietly.

"Had faith in His Highness."

Leorino reflected on the words delivered by the servant's gentle voice.

"Ionia had pledged his allegiance to His Highness, but in return he had forsaken his heart. Ionia may have resolved himself to it, but what did it mean for His Highness?"

"What did it mean for Vi..."

"His Highness was searching for a way for the two of them to walk one path together, but I believe Ionia gave up on that possibility."

That may have been true. At the time, Ionia did not want anything more from Gravis. His own feelings were enough to make his world feel complete.

“My lord. Relationships require decisions from both partners.”

“Right...”

“To find a loving partner is to double the joys of life. It also means doubling life’s struggles.”

Leorino listened to the words of his attendant in silence.

“You will share your life with His Highness from now on. As such, it is not yours to decide alone.”

“It’s my life, but it is not mine to decide alone...”

“Yes. Love is a bliss that cannot be obtained alone, and yet it carries a despair that cannot be felt in solitude. It tests your courage to be yourself and still give half of your heart to the one you love.”

Leorino was growing drowsy from the warmth spreading through his body, but he continued to ponder Hundert’s words.

“My lord, do what Ionia could not do.”

“...Is there something I can do that Ionia couldn’t?”

“There is.” Hundert nodded. “You must have the courage to have faith in His Highness. He has decided to spend the rest of his life with you and is willing to break with convention to do so. Have faith in that feeling and give half of your heart to His Highness, my lord. This fight is won with your heart, not physical strength.”

Hundert gently patted Leorino on the shoulder once more in hopes of comforting him. With his eyes closed, Leorino felt the warmth of Hundert’s hand.

Faith. The courage to have faith and to entrust him with half of his heart. The courage to fight, not with brawn, but with the remaining half of his heart.

He wondered if he could do it.

“...Thank you, Hundert.”

“Good night, my lord.”

Hundert gently wiped away the single tear from the corner of his master's eye.

The Audience

Leorino was accompanied by his parents to his audience with the royal family.

Dressed in formal attire, Leorino sat before King Joachim, Queen Emilia, and Crown Prince Kyle. His prospective husband, Gravis, sat next to him, while his parents stood behind him.

There was no sign of the queen dowager, Adele.

“I see you look as angelic as always,” Queen Emilia said jovially when she saw Leorino. The queen hailed from the same kingdom of Francoure as Adele, and was particularly fond of Leorino’s porcelain doll-like beauty.

“Th-thank you very much.”

Leorino bowed deeply. He was so nervous that he stammered.

“My, aren’t you adorable. You have nothing to be nervous about, Leorino. We are going to be family sooner or later.”

“Mother.” Kyle forced a smile and doused the queen’s excitement. “The marriage deliberations are just beginning.”

“Oh, Kyle, don’t be so mean. Who could object to His Highness Prince Gravis wedding such an angel of a young man with such a fantastic pedigree? It’s only a shame you won’t be blessed with children.”

“...Yes, Your Majesty.”

Joachim chuckled at Emilia's innocent remark. The king had a gentle face, his brown hair beginning to show streaks of gray.

"Leorino, why do you want to marry Gravis? You and Gravis are quite far apart in age, aren't you?"

The king's question startled Leorino. Leorino looked up at Gravis beside him, asking for permission.

Gravis nodded, confirming that he should speak his heart.

Leorino didn't know the proper words. His mother had taught him to keep his emotions concealed, but given that they were to become family, Leorino looked into the king's eyes and answered with sincerity.

"I realize we're very different, but I love His Highness Prince Gravis from the bottom of my heart."

The royals' eyes widened. Leorino heard a quiet sigh behind his back.

"If you would allow me to stay by His Highness's side for the rest of my life, then I—I would humbly like to ask for your permission to m-marry him."

The king listened to Leorino in silence. Encouraged by this, Leorino nervously but desperately tried to string words together.

"I will do my utmost to serve as His Highness's spouse, to bring him happiness and to...to make him smile. I may be young, but please allow me the honor of his hand in marriage." Saying this, he bowed deeply.

After hearing Leorino's heartfelt plea, King Joachim slightly lifted the corners of his lips.

"Emilia, did you hear that? It sounds almost as if he wants Gravis to marry into *his* family."

Leorino was surprised by his words. That hadn't been his intention at all.

"...Your Majesty," Gravis said. "If I may interject, I will not be marrying into his

family.”

“Oh, I know. The Cassieuxs may be a pedigreed family, but I’m afraid I can’t allow my brother, a royal and the general of our army, to join another.”

Joachim’s teasing was lost on Leorino.

“O-of course. I cannot let His Highness Prince Gravis do such a thing, so I will gladly give up my family name.”

The royals all struggled to hold back, but seeing Leorino’s ever-so-serious expression, Kyle finally broke into laughter.

“Oh, Kyle. How dare you laugh at Leorino’s earnestness?” Emilia reproached her son, but a smile had appeared on her full face as well.

“No, Mother, I apologize. I simply couldn’t take it any longer. Uncle, he’s so pure, I’m impressed you managed to get your feelings across at all.”

Leorino raised his head and timidly looked up at Gravis, wondering if he had said something inappropriate.

Gravis smiled slightly and reassured him by stroking the hand Leorino had resting on his knee.

It must have worked, because a lovely smile bloomed on Leorino’s lips. Maia’s lesson to conceal his emotions vanished from his mind without a trace.

Seeing that innocent smile, Kyle laughed again. No nobleman had ever so openly showed their joy in front of the king.

The king also seemed surprised by Leorino’s pure smile.

“Emilia, you were right. It’s not simply his appearance—he’s an angel to his very core.”

“Well, of course. Isn’t he just? I knew it the moment I laid my eyes on him.”

Leorino heard another, louder sigh behind him.

It sounded like a compliment, but perhaps the king and queen were subtly

conveying that he had already failed.

Leorino was eager to know the meaning of his parents' sighs, but held back. Maia had instructed him not to look back, no matter what happened.

When Leorino began to anxiously fidget with his hands, Gravis finally laced his fingers with his, urging him to calm down.

"It's all right, Leorino. His and Her Majesty are simply impressed with your sincerity."

"Is that so? Thank you, Your Highness."

The queen's eyes lit up when she saw how affectionate they were.

"Madame Maia, you have truly brought an angel upon this world. It would be a great pleasure for the royal family to receive such a child."

Maia gracefully bowed to the queen. "Your Majesty, it is an honor. As you can see, he is ignorant of the ways of the world, and I would like you to offer him your guidance when he joins the royal family."

"Count of Brungwurt. We are well aware what it means for a Fanoren to marry a boy from the Cassieux family. It would be the first time a royal weds a man, and we realize that no son of the Cassieux family has ever given up the name of Brungwurt. Are you truly ready to accept this outcome?"

August nodded to the king and answered his question in a solemn tone. "I am purely concerned with the feelings of His Highness and my own son."

The true meaning of August's words was as such: This matter was an exception to which the love between Gravis and Leorino took precedence. Brungwurt declared that their men would not abandon the name of Cassieux in the future without an equally special reason.

"I see. So this decision was made out of respect for their wishes."

"The relationship between the royal family and ours will remain unchanged. We continue to pledge our loyalty to the Fanoren royal family."

“I see. Very well. And given they’re men, the proximity of their blood will matter not.”

The king then turned to Gravis.

“You will have no children, Gravis.”

“I have no need for children. We have Kyle.”

The two brothers had once been forced to fight for the throne by those around them. After eighteen years, Leorino could not imagine how they felt about each other.

But Joachim’s calm expression was inscrutable, as if he had been stripped of all emotion. The brothers did not resemble each other at all, but they had their inexpressiveness in common.

The king proclaimed his decision:

“Let us welcome the stronger bond between Fanoren and Brungwurt.”

The king had approved of their union.

Leorino was relieved.

Seeing his delighted expression, Joachim addressed him directly.

“Leorino.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

His voice was calm. “You deserve to know this. The men of the Fanoren family are fearsome in their passions.”

The king’s sudden words gave pause to everyone present.

The king, however, was unconcerned by the disturbance in the decorum he had just caused and continued matter-of-factly: “If you are going to be royalty, you must be prepared to accept it.”

“...Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Men of the Fanoren family may be driven to madness in the face of love. If you are to live as royalty of this land, you must accept it all, no matter what may come.”

“Your Majesty,” Gravis calmly interrupted his brother. “Leorino knows not what you speak of. He will never have to learn. Let that be the end of it.”

Joachim let the matter go with a simple, “Very well.”

“Leorino, I seem to have spoken out of line.”

“...No, Your Majesty. I appreciate your kind words, and will take them to heart.”

Leorino was desperate to understand the meaning of what the king had said.

Men of the Fanoren family may be driven to madness in the face of love.

Was he referring to his and Gravis’s father, the former King George? Or was he speaking of himself...or of Gravis?

As a silence fell upon them, Joachim nodded toward the back of the room. It was their cue to leave.

They all rose from their seats.

“We will meet again soon for the marriage deliberations. Good day, margrave.”

“I would like to thank Your Majesty for the honor of today’s audience,” August answered in a solemn voice.

Joachim turned at the door. “The queen dowager is waiting for you in another room, Leorino. Only you are to follow this man.”

With that, he pointed to a servant behind him. Leorino was puzzled by the

order, but had no choice but to agree.

Gravis asked his brother in a low voice, “Your Majesty, you intend for Leorino to meet my mother alone?”

“The queen dowager wishes it so,” the king said simply, and quickly left the room.

Seeing Gravis’s stern expression, Leorino nodded with a smile.

“It’s all right. I shall go speak with Her Majesty.”

Gravis bit back his displeasure and indignation and nodded in agreement. It would be unwise to disobey the king’s order before the deliberations.

But August and Maia also appeared concerned.

“Only a quarter of an hour,” said Gravis. “If it goes on any longer, I’ll come for you.”

Leorino nodded and steeled his resolve.

He followed the attendant waiting near the entrance and headed alone for the room where the queen dowager was waiting.

Leorino arrived at the room.

It was a small parlor-like room, surprisingly cozy for the royal palace. At the far end of the room, in an armchair, sat a woman who must have been the queen dowager.

Leorino gave her his lowest bow the way Maia had explicitly instructed him to.

“Come a little closer.”

Leorino stepped before the queen dowager with his eyes downcast.

“Raise your face.”

He remembered that voice. Leorino looked up, his palms sweating from the

nerves.

A woman with a cold, refined beauty—so reminiscent of Gravis—was sitting before him.

“I am Leorino Cassieux, the fourth son of August Cassieux, Count of Brungwurt.”

Adele reciprocated Leorino’s deep bow with the faintest movement of her chin.

“Sit down.” She pointed to the settee across from her. “Let me get a good look at your face again.”

Leorino summoned his courage and made eye contact with the queen dowager.

Adele, wife of the former King George and princess of Francoure, was agelessly beautiful, but had certainly aged since the last time he saw her. She had starry-sky eyes of Prussian blue with flecks of gold. They were the kind of eyes that only rarely appeared in the Francoure royal family. Even her face strongly resembled Gravis’s.

“Your eyes...”

The queen dowager’s eyes widened in surprise when she saw Leorino’s violet eyes up close. When she saw Ionia’s eyes, she had said they were a rare color, he recalled.

“I see... This must be what they call fate. The irony is not lost on me,” the queen dowager murmured to herself. “I will not object to your marriage to Gravis. Your family is of good standing and you’re quite beautiful yourself. You are still a child, but you may do as you wish with my son.”

“...Thank you, Your Majesty.”

For some reason, Leorino felt very hurt. He had been granted permission so easily, but he felt as wounded as Ionia had been that day.

“Did you know he was engaged to a daughter of a duke when he was about your age?”

“...No, I wasn’t aware,” Leorino lied, casting his eyes down.

He remembered, of course.

She was a flaxen-haired young lady by the name of Helena. She was younger than Leorino when she said:

“You will continue to stand in front of His Highness as his shield and protect him. As a commoner, you do not have the right to stand by his side. It is I, a noblewoman, who does.”

Those words had thoroughly reminded Ionia of his place in the world.

The queen averted her eyes from Leorino. “I wouldn’t expect you to know. After all, the engagement became null and void in the aftermath of the last war.”

Leorino was surprised.

“No, it did not happen on its own. My son made it so himself. He extinguished that ray of hope with his own hands, and now he has brought *you* before me, to my complete and utter despair.”

Her harsh words pierced Leorino’s heart.

He quickly turned his eyes to the floor, knowing he must not show his emotion.

“I am not against your marriage to my son. I only wonder what everything I have endured was for.”

The queen dowager heaved a deep, hollow laugh.

“It has been nearly fifty years since I married into Fanoren. It took thirteen years to finally produce flesh of my flesh, and now my bloodline will end for good with your union. You must forgive me for being a little bitter.”

Leorino raised his head and looked at the queen dowager.

There she was, a woman who had been the rightful queen but had never been loved by her husband, the king. The miserable queen who gave the throne to the son of a concubine.

And her son, the prince, whose noble blood was a fusion of the finest of two great kingdoms, wanted for his spouse a man who could not pass on that blood to the next generation.

In the end, the mother had been betrayed by her son as well.

This is the second time we rob the queen dowager of all hope.

“...Forgive me.”

The queen dowager quietly accepted Leorino’s apology. “What is there to forgive when His Majesty does not object?”

“If my existence is despair, then I should probably leave His Highness’s side... but...”

He met the starry-sky gaze of the queen dowager.

When he thought about the fact he would not be able to pass on these starry-sky eyes to the next generation, Leorino realized how much of an issue his sex truly posed.

The queen dowager must have been so proud when she learned her son had inherited those eyes, and for what?

“But I cannot leave His Highness’s side... Please forgive me.”

Saying this, Leorino bowed his head.

“...Leorino Cassieux. Raise your face.”

“Yes.”

Leorino did not look away. He faced the queen dowager, his firm gaze meeting hers.

“Do you know why I did not object?”

“...No.”

“You may not know this, but the royal court is as dark as it is glamorous. My esteemed son has always been forced to wade through the worst of it. It was I who made him walk through that darkness.”

The woman went on.

“There were times when I wanted to set him free. But in the end, as long as I was trapped, his freedom was not mine to give. I never thought he would live this long in solitude. That, too, was caused by my folly.”

Leorino did not fully understand what the queen dowager was saying.

But somehow he got the gist.

“This is resignation. The despair of knowing that my bloodline ends here and the resignation of realizing that I must accept a boy as a cure for my son’s loneliness.”

He was not expecting a blessing, but it was clear he was not welcome. Still, he should have been glad to receive her permission at all.

“There is no freedom in the royal court...nor in the royal family. One day you, too, will see the darkness of the Fanoren royal family. Still...will you stand by Gravis to the very end?”

“Yes. No matter what may come...I will never leave his side *again*.”

He looked up at the queen dowager with resolve.

“...I see.”

The queen dowager averted her eyes, stared into space, and murmured, “It’s

been eighteen years; I never thought I would see those violet eyes again. I suppose this is also my punishment.”

“Your Majesty... I, um...”

“I will allow you to marry. I will inform His Majesty to that effect. I am certain my son is growing impatient by now. I have said my piece. You may leave.”

He could say nothing more.

Leorino bowed politely and left the room, carrying an intense pain in his chest.

There he found not Gravis, but the crown prince, Kyle, waiting for him in the hallway.

“Judging by that expression, the queen dowager must have tormented you?”

“No, of course not.”

She did not torment him. It was only that he had learned of the anguish of the queen dowager and it did not change that he could not back down from his selfish desire. That was all.

The queen dowager was not a mean-spirited woman. She was a human being who had married into Fanoren and was struggling to find meaning in her life, unable to give half of her heart to anyone.

Leorino answered Kyle’s question with silence.

He would not tell Gravis the details of his conversation with the queen dowager, even if he asked.

Gravis did not need any more guilt about his mother in his life. Only Leorino, the “despair” that had put an end to her hopes, would have to live with it from now on.

He would live with the sin of leaving Adele’s life in solitude, at the mercy of fate, and of ending the bloodline that her son should have passed down to his children.

Kyle didn't ask any further questions.

"I apologize for waiting out here for you, but I've been wanting to have a little chat with you, too... Let me take you back to the room."

"Yes, thank you."

This was the second time Kyle had shown him around the palace.

They walked side by side.

Seeing him like this again, Kyle truly did look a lot like Gravis.

The resemblance was all the more striking because of Gravis's ageless appearance, but his nephew appeared slightly more cheerful.

"What is it that you want to talk to me about?"

"You don't have to be so tense. It's quite simple. I only wanted to tell you that I am against the marriage between you and my uncle."

"...Huh?"

Leorino stopped in his tracks.

Kyle turned and reached his thickly gloved hand toward him.

The Crown Prince always wore gloves, even when not in formal attire. Leorino's numb mind suddenly shifted his attention to such a silly detail.

"It's not your fault. You are perfectly beautiful, both inside and out. My only issue is that my uncle's seed poured into your womb will never bear fruit...and I want my uncle to have children."

Leorino clenched his teeth. He resisted the urge to cry. Pain pierced his chest all over again.

"During the deliberations, I will propose a condition that in return for accepting you as his spouse, he will take a concubine and have children with

her.”

Leorino could hardly believe his ears.

“Well, I doubt my uncle will simply go along with it, but it’s worth a shot. Depending on his answer, you may be hurt. I wanted to tell you in advance so you know that, even if he agrees, it is my fault, not my uncle’s.”

Leorino didn’t want to hear it. He was not expecting a blessing, but this made him feel horrible.

“...Will it be a problem for the royal family that we can’t have children?”

“Yes. At least for me.”

What did he mean by that? Leorino’s tired head tried desperately to understand the crown prince’s words, and simply couldn’t.

Seeing his heartbroken expression, Kyle’s face crumpled.

“Don’t look at me like that. It’s not my intention to hurt you...but there are some matters I can’t give up on. I’m not asking you to forgive me. You can hate me all you want.”

“Gloves...”

“Hm?”

“...Why is Your Royal Highness wearing gloves?”

Kyle looked at his hands at the sudden question.

“This is to prevent me from randomly touching strange places.”

Leorino tilted his head in confusion.

“There are many things you wouldn’t want to see in this palace.”

Leorino still had no idea what he meant.

After that, they walked in silence. They arrived at the room where they had just had the audience with the king and queen.

“Leorino, I know what I just said, but if my uncle chooses you alone, then I will give up. That, too, must be the fate of this kingdom.”

“...What do you mean by that?”

The young man who resembled Gravis looked at Leorino with the same eyes as the queen dowager. Why did everyone in the royal family have such lonely eyes?

“Be happy with my uncle. Make me believe that miracles truly do happen.”

Kyle had just spoken of making his uncle take a concubine so she could bear his children, and now he told Leorino to simply be happy.

The man who looked so much like the man he loved left Leorino’s heart stirring with his enigmatic words.

Before entering the room, he took a deep breath.

He did not need to feel so hurt. This pain in his chest was nothing compared to the pain of his entire body being engulfed in flames. It was a small price to pay to be happy with Gravis. It was a necessary rite of passage.

Leorino smiled and entered the room where Gravis and his parents were waiting.

The audience with the royal family ended with loneliness and a secret planted in Leorino’s heart.

But there was no turning back now, and he had no intention of doing so. He was willing to accept a body that could produce no children and the cold welcome he received.

Leorino had already realized that this path of solitude and secrecy was the only way to reach the man he loved.

To the Duke's Soiree

Leorino donned his evening formalwear for the first time in months.

"You look wonderful, my lord."

Hundert smiled at his master's beautiful appearance as he adjusted the ascot around Leorino's neck.

"You think so? It's perfectly tailored to my measurements so it's comfortable enough, but formalwear is heavier than I recalled. Is this new?"

"Of course, that's what makes it formal... But no, this one isn't new. Madame Maia had several outfits prepared when you arrived in the royal capital."

"I see. I've only worn three or so... I feel bad. Mother spent all that money for nothing."

The attendant did not mention that more than ten times as many outfits lay unused in the closet.

Since he no longer had the opportunity to wear his military uniform these days, Leorino spent all of his time in loose-fitting casual clothing. Having grown accustomed to such a lifestyle, the formalwear felt heavy and tight, despite being tailored to his body. Leorino was more concerned with whether or not he could move without strain than about the appearance of the outfit itself.

Maia saw her youngest son off with a somewhat anxious expression.

"Listen, dear. I can't say you'll enjoy being surrounded by my mother and her elderly friends, but at any rate, you must not leave the side of your

grandmother and uncle.”

“Yes, Mother.”

Leorino had gained the new radiance of a man in love, and was now more eye-catching than ever. His presence was even more brilliant now, while still retaining that ethereal aura that made everyone question if he was a mere mortal.

Maia at first opposed Leorino’s attendance at the soiree. She had no right to stop her son now that he had reached the age of majority, but she had been instructed by August not to allow Leorino to leave the house without a chaperone.

However, her brother and sister-in-law, the Duke and Duchess of Wiesen, had volunteered to accompany him. With their mother, the Dowager Duchess of Wiesen, also in attendance, no one would be able to get anywhere near Leorino. Such was her royal privilege.

So Maia gave him permission to go, if only for a little change of pace.

“After speaking with Lord Julian, you will return home with my mother immediately, won’t you?”

“Yes, Mother.”

When he told her he wished to speak with Julian, Maia agreed to this as well. She understood that Leorino likely wanted to settle things directly with Julian, given the great deal of affection he had shown Leorino.

The carriage of his maternal uncle, the Duke of Wiesen, was already waiting at the entrance.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting. Good day, Uncle, Aunt, and Grandmother.”

As Leorino climbed into the carriage, the Duke and Duchess of Wiesen looked

at their nephew with enraptured eyes. They were immediately reminded that their youngest nephew was an incredibly beautiful young man.

He was not feminine per se, but had none of the rawness of a man either. His beauty made it all too easy to mistake him for a faerie or an angel. Whenever he moved, they could swear he spread a sweet fragrance all around him.

Leorino flashed a surreptitious smile at his grandmother across from him. Eleonora responded with a smile in kind.

“Grandmother, it’s been too long. Thank you for allowing me to accompany you today.”

“I’m pleased to be able to spend time with you, Leorino. Though I’m afraid the old ladies will be bothering you tonight.”

His grandmother spoke with a gentle tone. Despite her advanced age, her mind and body were still in fine shape.

“Oh, I’m more concerned that the issue of my legs might cause you greater trouble.”

“Oh dear, you are so modest. I’m thrilled to introduce a beautiful boy like you to my friends.”

“Then I hope you’ll allow me to keep you company this evening.”

She graced him with a refined smile, a vivid reminder of the beauty of her youth.

Eleonora was a princess in every sense of the word. As former royalty, she was allowed to claim the title of *Her Royal Highness the Princess* even after marrying into the ducal family. She held the highest status of any woman among current Fanoren nobility. However, as the eldest member of high society, she rarely appeared at soirees in recent years.

“Leorino, Maia told us about your engagement. I hear that you are to be married to the king’s brother.”

“Thank you, Uncle. It has not yet been approved by the royal court and the congress, so we’re keeping it confidential.”

His uncle’s acknowledgement elicited a faint smile from Leorino.

“I can see why His Royal Highness is so smitten with you. Mother said it best, but you’re simply stunning. Your unique elegance must not have come from Maia, seeing how much you take after our mother.”

Leorino smiled bashfully at his uncle’s generous praise. The Duke of Wiesen nodded in satisfaction.

“When will the royal court and the congress give their approval?”

“His Highness and Father are at the palace as we speak, partaking in the deliberations.”

“I see. Well, the deliberations should end without issue. Official celebrations can wait until then. Same-sex marriages are unheard of in the royal family, after all.”

“Will my sex really pose a problem?”

“Legally, it is no problem, it is simply unprecedented. However, the king’s brother was expected to remain unmarried for the rest of his life, and it would be up to the congress to decide whether it would be acceptable for him to take a spouse of the same sex.”

A royal marrying a person of the same sex came with more obstacles than Leorino had expected.

“But His Royal Highness has made his decision. If August has given you his blessing as the Margrave of Brungwurt, the congress has no reason to complain, either. You have already obtained permission from His Majesty the King, haven’t you?”

“Yes, we have. The day before yesterday, we had an audience at the royal

palace and privately received his permission.”

Eleonora grinned. “That’s lovely, dear. If His Majesty has given his permission, there will be no issue.”

“Thank you, Grandmother.”

The Duke of Wiesen also smiled to reassure his nephew. “Of course, you also have my support. Gender aside, there are few ladies of noble birth in our country whose bloodlines could compare to yours. You are of Brungwurt and Wiesen blood, after all. Not to mention your grandmother is royalty. If you were a girl, you would have been a prime candidate to become Crown Prince Kyle’s queen, or marry into royal families of other kingdoms.”

“My bloodline... I don’t think that will matter much, given how I’m a boy.”

Leorino remembered the words of the queen dowager.

It was his sex that made him her “despair.”

He quietly spoke his mind before he could think better of it.

“I would have been happy in any position, really, if only I could be at his side. I never demanded marriage.”

Hearing those words, the Duke and Duchess of Wiesen fell silent. Eleonora was the only one who maintained her gentle smile.

“Oh my. Leorino...you’re truly in love with His Highness Prince Gravis, aren’t you?”

“I am. I truly am.”

That much he was certain of. When Leorino answered his grandmother with a small smile, Eleonora accepted her grandson’s pure emotion with a broad grin.

The Duke of Wiesen watched them with admiration.

Eleonora and Leorino were truly unique among their relatives. In terms of bloodline, Leorino shared the same blood as his older brothers. But only the

boy and his grandmother seemed capable of producing light with little more than a smile, carrying that otherworldly air, convincing anyone of the special nature of their blood.

“Leorino...looking at you, I’m certain you’re destined to become royalty. Even if there are those who oppose you, one look at you will close their mouths.”

“...You truly think so?”

Leorino wasn’t as certain as his uncle. He was all too self-conscious of the parts of him which were unfitting for nobility.

Recalling the noble conduct of the king and queen, he doubted he could ever live up to that.

“Hah, you’re just like Maia with the way you act when you set your mind on something. Don’t you think so, Marius?”

Addressed by his mother, the duke forced a smile. He recalled his sister’s insistence on wanting to marry August once upon a time, and how she had rushed headlong into that relationship and never looked back.

“She had been completely uninterested in all the other suitors, until one day she proclaimed she was in love with a man nearly ten years older than her, and brought before us the Margrave of Brungwurt. No relative had ever surprised us like that, before or since.”

“Speaking of which—Leorino. Isn’t it, um, a little awkward for you to go to the Duke of Leben’s?” The duchess, who had been listening to the conversation in silence until then, asked anxiously.

She must have been asking about Julian.

“Darling, he’s about to get engaged to the king’s younger brother, don’t rain on his parade.” The duke chided his wife.

“Oh, I’m sorry. You’re right, of course.”

“No, Aunt, it’s all right.”

In truth, he *did* expect his meeting with Julian to be awkward.

Leorino had for the longest time been convinced that Julian's marriage proposal had been rejected a long time ago. By now, Maia had already told Leorino that the proposal had simply been put on hold.

Considering that, it was no wonder that Julian had been so friendly. Leorino was also partially responsible.

That was why he felt the need to personally apologize to him.

"It is true that Julian had asked me to marry him. I had my father formally decline, but...I would like to offer him a proper apology myself."

"Looking on the bright side, the Duke of Leben may be relieved that his son won't marry someone of the same sex."

The duke's words were met with a nod from his wife.

"I wonder if it was originally the Marquis of Lagarea's idea. If so, that's rather unfortunate, but at least the duke avoided complicating the issue of a future heir to his title."

Leorino neither denied nor affirmed his aunt's words, keeping his eyes down.

"Yes, he is quite close to August. Perhaps he wanted to keep not only his niece, but also his nephew closely tied to the Cassieux family."

Leorino made a sad expression.

"Have I insulted the Marquis of Lagarea?"

He wanted to use this opportunity to learn a little more about the marquis.

"He *does* have a complicated relationship with the royal family. And you're his favorite, Leorino—your being snatched up by a royal can't have helped."

Leorino looked up with a start at Eleonora's words. "...Grandmother, what do you...?"

At that moment, the carriage ground to a halt.

“Ah, here we are. Leorino, escort your grandmother.”

“Y-yes, Uncle.”

When the carriage doors were opened from the outside, the duke was the first to leave and extend a hand to his wife.

Next, it was Leorino’s turn to escort Eleonora. He carefully dismounted from the carriage, making sure not to slip.

When Leorino stepped out of the carriage, cheers rippled through the air around them. Eleonora smiled and slowly got out of the carriage with Leorino’s help.

As they walked slowly, Leorino brought his lips to his grandmother’s ear and whispered: “Um...Grandmother, what did you mean by what you said earlier?”

“About what, dear?”

“I mean the Marquis of Lagarea. About his complicated relationship with the royal family...”

Eleonora gracefully covered her mouth with a fan.

“Oh yes. I’m certain he’s not pleased with what happened to his mother, but he has served this country well for so many years. He’s a good man.”

“The Marquis of Lagarea’s mother...?”

I don’t understand. What does she mean?

“If you mean the mother of the Marquis of Lagarea, I heard she was a low-ranking noblewoman from his region.”

“Oh, not at all... Why do you ask, dear?”

“Was that not the case?”

“Well, this was nearly seventy years ago, and few people know of what

happened back then,” said his grandmother. “But it’s a shame that the pedigreed marquis should be mistakenly thought to have a lowborn mother.”

Her words reminded him of what he had surmised from the testimony of the Yorkes’ old housekeeper.

Edgar’s mother had been a midwife apprentice in the Lagarea domain. She had likely lived a comfortable life in the royal capital with the money she was awarded for assisting in the delivery of a noble when she was young.

Taking advantage of the fact that people were watching him from a distance, Leorino walked as slowly as possible in an attempt to prolong the conversation with his grandmother.

Perhaps due to Eleonora’s presence, with every step they took, one by one, the guests would bow and make way for them.

Act natural... No one can suspect a thing.

He brought his face to his grandmother’s and asked quietly.

“Who was the Marquis of Lagarea’s mother? And why do you say the marquis has a complicated relationship with the royal family?”

Eleonora looked up at Leorino curiously. She tilted her head, covering her mouth with her fan.

“Where’s this coming from? You’re awfully curious about the past, aren’t you?”

“...It would be rude of me to be misinformed about Uncle Bruno. Not to mention, it may be important for me to understand his relationship with the royal family.”

“I’m glad to see you’re already preparing to become royalty. That’s very respectable of you.”

Eleonora laughed innocently, like a young lady. Leorino waited patiently for his grandmother to answer.

“The mother of the Marquis of Lagarea was not a Fanoren noblewoman, I’m rather certain.”

“Hm? Are you saying she was foreign?”

“Yes. You know, once upon a time, Lady Caroline lamented my brother’s behavior.”

“Who is Lady Caroline?”

They were almost at the entrance. There, the guests had formed a tight crowd to greet the Duke of Leben.

Leorino was in a hurry to learn as much as he could.

“Lady Caroline was my brother’s wife. My brother was not a good man... If anything, he was the lustful type.” Eleonora frowned, fanning herself with her graceful hands. Eleonora’s brother, Tyrone, had been the king of Fanoren before last. “He had many concubines in addition to Caroline, his wife. We were never proud of it. It was an embarrassment to the royal family.”

“...How are His Majesty King Tyrone’s concubines related to Uncle Bruno?”

How was the private harem of the former king, his grandmother’s brother, connected to the history of the Marquis of Lagarea? Leorino could not quite follow the leaps of his grandmother’s story.

But the next moment, Leorino was shocked by his grandmother’s words.

“Well, you see...a princess from some small country who had been chosen by my brother for his concubine was given to the Marquis of Lagarea at the time.”

“...No.”

Leorino stopped in tracks.

Noticing his grandmother’s confused expression, Leorino rushed to resume walking once more.

“...Grandmother, is that true? Do you know more about this princess?”

“No. I was very young, so I don’t know much about her. I only learned about her from Lady Caroline. She told me the princess had been summoned from a foreign country and immediately sent away to a place far from the royal family.”

“Then... Then the princess...”

Ah, we’re almost at the greeting line.

Leorino watched his grandmother. Eleonora looked up at her grandson, who resembled her so much, and smiled.

“Yes, if that princess did not divorce the former Marquis of Lagarea, then she must be the current marquis’s mother.”

“Princess Eleonora, Your Highness, thank you for gracing us with your presence.”

When Eleonora and Leorino arrived at the entrance to the duke’s home, the crowd parted like an ebbing tide and gave way to them. Eleonora advanced slowly, as she was accustomed to doing. The family of the Duke of Leben, lined up in a row, gave the deepest bow to the princess.

“Thank you for inviting me, Duke of Leben. I have brought my grandson with me today.”

The first to look up was Julian’s father, the Duke of Leben. Leorino bowed to him, trying to appear as calm and graceful as possible.

“Duke of Leben, thank you for inviting me here tonight.”

“...Thank you for coming, Lord Leorino. You look out of this world tonight. Please enjoy your time at our soiree.”

Leorino responded with a grateful smile.

He wanted to fully consider what his grandmother had just told him, but that would have to wait.

The next person to step forward was a young, elegant nobleman.

“Leorino, welcome to our home.”

“...Lord Julian, thank you for inviting me.”

Julian lifted Leorino’s hand and brought his lips to it, as if Leorino were a lady.

Leorino’s expression stiffened a little.

“Oh dear... What’s this?” Eleonora forced a smile.

The Duke of Leben warned his son to refrain.

The duke’s family must have already been informed of his engagement to Gravis. So why was Julian acting this way?

Julian whispered with a somewhat vacant, brooding expression. “Leorino... I’ve been meaning to speak with you.”

Marriage Deliberations

At the same time as the Duke of Leben's soiree, the deliberations on the marriage between Gravis and Leorino were being held at the Palace of Administration.

The reason for the rather late start was a sudden request for an audience from a messenger from the Kingdom of Francoure, to which Gravis, as the head of the Palace of Foreign Affairs, and Chancellor Ginter were forced to respond.

Gravis participated in the deliberations as the concerned party, and August as the head of Leorino's—his future spouse's—birth family.

The deliberators included King Joachim and Crown Prince Kyle representing the royal family; five nobles representing the congress; and from the royal court officials, the Marquis of Lagarea, the Secretary of the Interior, and Chancellor Ginter, as well as the head of the Palace of Heaven and Earth, which presided over state religion, and the head of the Palace of the Supreme Court, responsible for the law.

Royal marriages required the approval and consent of three parties.

The first was the approval of the king, who represented the royal family. Fanoren was, in essence, an absolute monarchy, and the king's approval was practically tantamount to a seal of approval.

The second was approval of the congress.

Why did royal marriages in an absolute monarchy require congress approval? It was for the sake of internal political stability. In order to prevent domestic

power from skewing in favor of a few nobles, a formal deterrent was necessary when considering the marriage between royalty and nobility.

The third was consent from the royal court officials. Although the approval of the royal court was not legally required, in reality, the opinion of the royal court had significant influence on the final approval of the king.

This was because royal marriages were regarded as an important part of national politics.

It was Chancellor Ginter, the man presiding over the deliberations, who opened the discussion.

“The marriage between His Royal Highness Prince Gravis Adolphe Fanoren and Leorino Viola Maian Cassieux, the fourth son of the Margrave of Brungwurt, must first be approved by His Majesty the King.”

King Joachim gave his permission without hesitation. “The royal family approves the offer of marriage between my brother and the son of the Margrave of Brungwurt.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Gravis bowed his head, his expression fixed.

Chancellor Ginter nodded and then turned to the Marquis of Hauffmann, the representative of the congress. “What says the congress?”

The Marquis of Hauffmann nodded with a somewhat hesitant look on his face. When Gravis stared at him, his forehead immediately broke out in a cold sweat.

Next, the marquis looked timidly at the Margrave of Brungwurt, still large and strong despite his advanced age.

“We must respect Your Majesty’s approval. With that in mind, we the congress approve the marriage proposal of His Royal Highness Prince Gravis.”

August nodded solemnly at the Marquis of Hauffmann’s words. With this, the marriage between Gravis and Leorino was approved under Fanoren national law.

The national law of Fanoren already recognized same-sex marriages. On the other hand, only male members of nobility were allowed to inherit the family title. The need for an heir was why noblemen, especially eldest sons, did not opt for same-sex marriages.

Nevertheless, the congress was shocked when the king's younger brother, who was expected to remain a bachelor for the rest of his life, suddenly announced that he wished to marry. Moreover, the person he wanted to wed was the youngest son of the Cassieux family, who had just reached the age of majority and was now renowned as the most beautiful man in the kingdom.

The men at the center of national politics were aware of the blood ties between the Fanoren royal family and the Cassieux family that continued unbroken for several generations. It was initially speculated that some sort of political arrangements might have been involved. Since neither family had any daughters of the appropriate age, it was suspected that the beautiful Leorino was offered to the king's brother instead.

Even if Leorino had never entered the picture, there was no unmarried noblewoman in the kingdom with a better bloodline than his.

Being of the same sex meant that no heirs could come from their union. This was the greatest and only problem, but the king's brother had already been expected to remain a bachelor for the rest of his life.

In addition, now that the head of the Cassieux family had announced that Leorino could leave the Cassieux family, the congress was afraid that a non-royal noble would acquire that precious bloodline and upset the balance of power.

After considering the situation from various angles and confidentially inquiring into His Majesty's wishes in advance, the congress approved the marriage.

“The marriage of His Royal Highness the King’s brother has been approved by the congress.”

Ginter began to prepare the paperwork. The engagement would be official once the king and the representative of the congress signed the official documents.

“Finally, as is customary in our kingdom, we shall ask the opinion of the royal court. Marquis of Lagarea, would you mind speaking for the officials of the royal court?”

Ginter looked at the old politician, who had long served the kingdom as Secretary of the Interior.

Here he comes.

Gravis closely observed the Marquis of Lagarea, wondering what he might say.

He was not likely to use his Power in front of so many people, but they could not afford to let their guard down. Leorino’s memories alone were not enough to know exactly what form his Power would take.

Not wanting to miss even the slightest sign that he was about to use his Power, Gravis gathered his strength in his core while maintaining a relaxed expression, as did August.

However, the words of the Marquis of Lagarea were not quite what August and Gravis had expected.

“The Palace of the Interior has no particular objections to the proposal of His Royal Highness the King’s brother. What say you, Minister of Faith, Chief Justice?”

The Marquis of Lagarea's gentle smile showed no sign of ill intentions. August inclined his head before he could help it and stared at the man who had been his best friend.

"What is it, August? I understand that just because my nephew was about to be betrothed to Leorino does not mean that you ought to turn down His Royal Highness in order to fulfill that wish."

At these words, the attendees began to stir.

"The Marquis of Lagarea's nephew, so the Duke of Leben's..."

"So the rumors about Julian's infatuation with the boy were true?"

...Ah, so that's his line.

The Marquis of Lagarea knew exactly what he was doing with that statement.

Julian was the heir to the ducal family of the highest standing in the country. Leorino was a man, and as such his chastity was not of great import, but even so, a royal spouse was expected to be faithful.

While the Marquis of Lagarea seemed oblivious to the implications, he was likely trying to give the attendees the impression that Leorino...and, by extension, the Cassieux family, had been leading on both the king's brother and the duke's son and weighed their options to see which one they should choose.

The nobles did indeed grow suspicious at the words of the Marquis of Lagarea. The fact that little was known about Leorino's character did not bode well.

Gravis felt a quiet anger rising in the pit of his stomach, but bit it back and considered how he should respond.

At that moment, the Crown Prince Kyle, who had been watching the situation unfold in silence, made his presence known.

“I must admit I can relate. I was so dazzled by his beauty that I once asked Leorino to marry me.”

“...E-excuse me?”

“Is that true, Your Royal Highness?”

Kyle looked around in amusement as he watched the people fluster at his statement. Gravis decided to wait and see what his nephew wanted to say.

“You all saw Leorino at the soiree after the Vow of Adulthood. What man wouldn’t desire him after beholding his beauty? Allow me, if you will, to question the state of their manhood. I had always considered myself an enjoyer of the fairer sex, and even I couldn’t help but stagger at the sight of him, so unparalleled is his appearance. If you believe such rumors, we’ll be here all night.”

Picturing Leorino in their minds, the men nodded in agreement.

“Naturally, Julian Munster must have also fallen in love with his beauty at first sight...,” Kyle went on. “Ah, but Leorino was too pure to realize that I was attempting to seduce him at all. Am I wrong?”

Gravis raised the corners of his lips slightly.

Kyle was trying to protect Leorino’s honor by using himself as an example.

“Having spoken with him, he’s an innocent boy from the middle of nowhere, new to the royal capital. That beautiful angel will marry my uncle, our national hero. To cast unjust suspicions upon him might call your good sense into question.”

The Marquis of Lagarea forced a smile.

“I had no ill intentions, Your Royal Highness. I only thought that my nephew would be disappointed. I’m sorry, gentlemen, if I gave you the wrong impression.”

The Marquis of Lagarea apologized for his earlier comment. That calmed the

assembly.

August made an apologetic expression and spoke to the Marquis of Lagarea. "It seems that Leorino was too immature to appreciate Julian's courtship. I am sorry for that."

"It's no matter. It was a good lesson for my nephew."

The old men smiled, their gazes meeting.

Ginter asked the Marquis of Lagarea again, "Does this mean there are no other objections to the marriage of His Highness Prince Gravis?"

The three ministers nodded. With that, Ginter lifted the documents prepared by the adjutant behind him, and handed them to the king.

"In that case, Your Majesty, please sign here."

Ginter offered him a brush. The king nodded, took the brush, and brought it to the document.

"Father. I would like to make a final comment."

The crown prince suddenly raised his hand.

The attendees stirred.

"Kyle. Say your piece." Joachim looked up and allowed his son to speak.

"I agree with my uncle's marriage to Leorino. However, no royal has ever married a member of the same sex. I accept the lovely Leorino as my uncle's spouse, but given the question of succession, I suggest a condition requiring my uncle to take a female concubine."

The crown prince's statement startled everyone present.

A deep furrow appeared in Gravis's brow, and August got to his feet with an indignant look on his face.

“...Kyle,” said Gravis. “I plan to take no other partner but Leorino for the rest of my life.”

While the attendees froze at the sight of Gravis’s ice-cold ire, the crown prince, his nephew, who resembled his uncle more closely than his own father, took his anger in stride.

King Joachim asked his son in a calm voice. “Kyle, please explain the intent of your remark.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I deplore the current situation in which the number of male members of our kingdom’s direct royal line is dwindling. Some royal families have been branching off for four generations. However, only one or two sons have been born every generation in our direct royal line since the time of my great-grandfather. Moreover, my uncle has been a bachelor, and I am the only male remaining in the direct line. Doesn’t this concern you?”

“You are right. Since the time of my grandfather, the Fanoren royal family has had very few sons.”

Kyle watched as his uncle seethed with anger.

“You don’t seem to take the crisis of our bloodline seriously, Uncle. That’s why I’m daring to rain on your parade.”

“Absolutely not,” Gravis dismissed the suggestion. “I will say it again. I will not take a concubine. You should be thanking me for bringing Leorino into the royal family. If I cannot marry Leorino, I will not marry anyone at all.”

The uncle and nephew with their striking resemblance glared at each other for a moment.

At that moment, August spoke in a solemn voice.

“Your Royal Highness, Brungwurt has no political ambitions. Naturally, it is only because of their feelings for each other and my son’s wishes that Leorino is

to be given in marriage to His Highness. Otherwise, I would not have gone through the trouble of offering him to the royal family, knowing he would face hardship, when the mere fact that he is of the Cassieux name is enough to guarantee his happiness.”

At these words, the assembly stirred.

“What are you trying to say, Margrave of Brungwurt?”

“I am telling you that Brungwurt is not to be trifled with.”

August quietly threatened the crown prince, the young man old enough to be his son. The northern man’s boulder-like body seemed to swell with an intimidating aura.

Gravis decided to let his future father-in-law handle the situation for the time being.

“Your Highness, I understand your duty as a direct male descendant of the royal family, but that has nothing to do with us.”

Kyle’s face turned serious at these words.

For the first time, the ruler of Brungwurt showed the royal family what he was capable of.

“These deliberations are only possible because His Royal Highness the King’s brother has shown his sincerity in respecting my son as his only partner for the rest of his life. I would advise you to carefully consider what you are proposing in my presence, if it means going against His Highness’s wishes and forcing my son to walk down a path of suffering.”

August was threatening the Fanoren royal family by saying that they could part ways with the kingdom at any given moment, and that Brungwurt had the power to do so.

The room turned bitterly cold.

August’s anger was real.

Gravis decided that any more would cause friction between the two families, so he continued after the man who would become his father-in-law.

“Kyle. I know my duty as heir to the royal bloodline. I know it, and I’m sorry. I cannot do what you ask of me. I will take no other partner but Leorino for the rest of my life...no matter what happens to Leorino in the future. Yes... Ginter, put that in writing.”

“But, Your Royal Highness.” Ginter faltered.

“Without that, the margrave will not be convinced. I do not wish to invite my future father-in-law’s ire, should he keep me from my beloved spouse. Now add it to the document.”

Ginter sought confirmation from the king with his gaze. King Joachim nodded calmly.

“Do as Gravis says, Ginter. You may add that sentence.”

“...Yes, Your Majesty.”

Ginter added a sentence at the end of the existing text and presented it to Gravis. Gravis read it over and nodded.

“That’s it.”

At that moment, Kyle threw his hands up in the air in defeat.

“...Ah, I knew that wasn’t going to work. And here I thought I could solve my greatest and only concern. Now I’ve lost that opportunity forever. I have failed miserably.”

“You lost, Kyle. You’re still no match for the margrave.” King Joachim chuckled at the crown prince’s complaints.

Kyle looked back at his father and shrugged with a sigh. “My concerns are serious, too, Father. Someone must carry on the rightful line of royalty.”

The king and the crown prince watched each other for a moment. Eventually, the king sighed. “Kyle...I believe your interests have never lay with men. You could simply get married already and produce an heir and a sufficient number

of spares.”

“Ah, that’s the one thing I didn’t want to hear.” Kyle’s face crumpled.

Instead of an apology, the king expressed his consideration to August.

“Margrave. I swear to you that Fanoren will respect your youngest son when he leaves the Cassieux family and joins ours. Would that be acceptable?”

The attendees stirred once more at the king’s words. The king had compromised with the Cassieuxs.

August took the opportunity to bow to the king. “I am deeply honored to hear that, Your Majesty. My family will never forget the favor you have bestowed upon us.”

August was willing to forget all about the crown prince’s suggestion. He had reconciled with the royal family, and the deliberations on the marriage between Gravis Adolphe Fanoren and Leorino Cassieux of Brungwurt ended without further incident.

Gravis spoke to August. “Thank you, Father.”

“Hah, I threaten Your Highness’s family and you thank me... Well, it was all I could do for my beloved youngest son. He does not have the strength to fight for himself. Consider it a wedding gift from his father.”

August’s show of force managed to make not only the royal family but also the congress and the royal court aware of Leorino’s value. Forcing the king to show his respect for the Margrave of Brungwurt was an achievement of its own.

Now, when Leorino became the spouse of the king’s brother, the congress and the nobles would not disrespect him because of his sex.

That was when the Marquis of Lagarea approached them. The two men were privately nervous, but they had both fought many battles to get to where they were now. They greeted the old nobleman with an air of ignorance.

“Marquis of Lagarea. I’m very sorry about Leorino. I realize it’s not fair to Lord

Julian.”

The kindly old man with gray hair and light brown eyes wore an inscrutable expression.

“No, I have resigned myself to the natural course of events. My nephew’s charm was no match for His Royal Highness.”

His kind, if forced, smile was still the same as the old best friend August had always known. But this was all a game of deception.

“I suspect Leorino is attending the duke’s soiree tonight. I wonder what he and Julian might be talking about.”

Hearing that, Gravis and August exchanged glances.

A Disturbing Misunderstanding

“Later,” Leorino whispered to Julian.

Leorino and his relatives stepped into the hall. The hosts around them sent them off with deep bows.

Julian’s words weighed on Leorino’s mind, but most of all, his thoughts were occupied by the shocking revelation he had learned from his grandmother.

Still, Leorino decided to stop pursuing that train of thought and focus on the soiree. He never got used to such events. He could not afford any careless mistakes that might cause trouble for his grandmother, or his aunt and uncle.

Accompanying Eleonora was very comfortable. She was the highest-ranking person in the room, and no one could talk to her unless she spoke to them first.

The Duke and Duchess of Wiesen had gone off on their own and were already talking to people. They indicated the back of the venue with a glance. They wanted Leorino to escort his grandmother there.

The Duke of Wiesen knew what he was doing. He was worried about leaving his all-too-beautiful nephew alone at the soiree, but he could rest assured if Eleonora were by his side. Eleonora was also thrilled to be able to show off her beautiful grandson.

Chairs lined the back wall of the venue. Eleonora promptly sat down on one of them.

As soon as she did, several elderly ladies gathered around. They bowed deeply before Eleonora and waited for her to speak.

Leorino's grandmother greeted them with a smile. They must have been close friends.

"Ladies, please lift your heads."

With Eleonora's permission, the ladies excitedly swarmed Leorino and his grandmother.

They seemed to be younger than Eleonora, but they were all older than his mother. Leorino was unfamiliar with high society and had no idea who they were.

Leorino meekly stayed close to his grandmother, smiling without saying a word. He was trying to keep his emotions from showing, as Maia had strictly taught him to do, and forced his face into an appropriate expression.

"I'm so glad to see you all. I'm glad I came."

"We are also pleased to see you, Princess Eleonora."

"It's such a shame we haven't been able to see you lately."

There was no doubt they were his grandmother's friends. They were calm enough seeing Leorino's beauty up close, but they still glanced at him with adoration and curiosity. When Leorino smiled in response to their glances, the ladies gasped as if they were several decades younger than they were.

"Princess Eleonora, please introduce us to your beautiful grandson."

Seeing her friends marvel at her grandson's beauty, Eleonora grinned.

"This is Leorino, Maia's youngest son. Leorino, meet my friends."

Eleonora introduced the women to him one by one. All of them were wives of high-ranking noblemen whom Leorino only knew by name.

"I am Leorino Cassieux, fourth son of August Cassieux, Margrave of Brungwurt. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

Leorino straightened his back and bowed, and all the ladies sighed in delight.

“Perhaps it’s rude of me to say this to a man, but your beauty is unlike anything I’ve ever seen.”

“What a gorgeous grandson you have.”

Leorino felt awfully self-conscious hearing these elderly ladies rave about his appearance.

He thought his grandmother and mother were much more delicate and beautiful, but it must have been unusual to see a face that looked so much like theirs on a man’s body.

“He certainly resembles Madame Maia as well, but he must have inherited his hair color and his aura from Princess Eleonora.”

Eleonora grinned. “It’s a shame for August, but Leorino has completely taken after his Wiesen blood. Brungwurt blood carries dark hair and blue-green eyes. He received his hair color from me, and his violet eyes come from my late husband. My husband’s eyes were more like Maia’s, perhaps a little more blue.”

The ladies replied with another admiring gasp. The innocent conversation between the old ladies was so trifling, it was almost as if they were young maidens again.

Meanwhile, the band began to play and the soiree began in earnest.

“Leorino, I’ll be here with my friends, so it’s all right. Go enjoy the party for a little while.”

“Yes, Grandmother. But...”

Leorino surveyed the venue and tilted his head in trepidation. There wasn’t much for him to enjoy—he didn’t know anyone here except for the Duke and Duchess of Leben, Julian, and his own aunt and uncle.

There were a few faces he had seen at the Palace of Defense, but he didn’t have the courage to talk to anyone he hadn’t been formally introduced to.

Not to mention, he could feel the passionate gazes of both men and women

on him from all over the room.

It was the same as at the Vow of Adulthood ceremony. While none of the attention felt malicious, Leorino's defensive instincts awoke when he saw the overt interest and the faint hint of desire in their gazes.

"Grandmother, shall I get you something to drink?"

"Oh, no, thank you, I'm all right."

So that was that.

Ugh, what should I do...?

At that moment, Leorino caught sight of a very large man. Walking with a majestic gait, the man looked like a lion.

"...Lucas."

As Leorino uttered his name in surprise, the man noticed his gaze and turned his head toward him. Lucas seemed equally shocked to see Leorino.

For some reason, he furrowed his brow, put on a stern expression, and strode toward him through the crowd.

Lucas was not wearing his usual military garb, but a highly decorated ceremonial uniform. He was a powerful, imposing man with a somewhat threatening air about him.

"Luc... Lieutenant General Brandt, how do you do, sir?"

Leorino was happy to see a familiar face. His smile elicited another sigh from the guests around him.

Lucas's expression, on the other hand, was rigid.

"Leorino, why are you here?"

"I'm accompanying my grandmother... Oh, here she is."

Eleonora watched Lucas from where she sat. Leorino rushed to introduce her, but before he could, Eleonora spoke to Lucas herself: "Have we met before?"

Lucas knelt down and offered her the deepest bow, afforded only to royalty.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Lucas Brandt. I am the lieutenant general of the Royal Army."

"Ah, you must work with His Highness Prince Gravis... I presume you're from the family of Count Hexter, given how you're a member of the Brandt family."

"Yes, I am. My brother currently holds the title."

"Yes. I was quite close with your father. How many years has it been since he passed away? I am sorry for your loss."

"I appreciate it."

It was the first time Leorino had seen Lucas behaving in such a proper, aristocratic manner.

He could only widen his eyes at the sight, which had not even been present in any of his memories.

"Princess Eleonora...may I borrow Lord Leorino for a moment?"

"Of course. Leorino, you're at a party. Go enjoy yourself a little."

"Yes... Thank you, Grandmother. I will be right back."

Eleonora offered them a smile that was very similar to her grandson's, and entrusted Leorino to Lucas.

"Lieutenant General Brandt, this boy is ignorant of the ways of the world. Please keep an eye on him."

"Of course, Your Highness."

Lucas understood the unspoken order in her gentle smile and bowed deeply. He quickly stood up and placed his hand on Leorino's waist.

“Come, Leorino. Let’s have a little stroll around the venue.”

The touch startled Leorino, and he tensed before he could help it.

“Of course, Lieutenant General Brandt. Grandmother, if you’ll excuse us for a moment.”

As Leorino began to walk across the hall, there was a stir among the guests, but Lucas and his fierce looks acted as a deterrent, and no one dared approach Leorino.

Lucas smoothly led Leorino to a more discreet location and spoke to him in a quiet voice so that the people around them wouldn’t hear.

“...I must admit, I was quite shocked to see you here.”

“And I to see you. What brings you to the soiree?”

“Oh...I’m here to do business on behalf of my brother—he hardly leaves our domain nowadays. Much like him, the Duke of Leben is a horse lover without equal. He owns several horses from my brother’s estate and is a close friend of our family. Sometimes one must fulfill one’s duty to the family.”

Come to think of it, it was at the horse auction that Lucas, Julian, and Leorino had met.

Leorino recalled that beautiful dapple-gray filly.

“How is Amancera doing? Who chose her in the end?”

“No one. I bought her. She’s too good to give to a half-hearted buyer. I’ll take you to see her sometime.”

“I’m very happy to hear that,” Leorino said, and suddenly remembered Lucas’s sophisticated behavior in front of his grandmother. “I didn’t know you could act like a true nobleman.”

Leorino cracked a smile. But Lucas only grimaced.

“Don’t you have greater concerns?”

“Concerns?”

“Why are you attending this soiree? Does His Highness know you’re here? And where’s Josef, that cocky escort of yours?”

Leorino was surprised by the barrage of questions. Just like with Gravis, he had a hard time keeping eye contact with Lucas when he was up close.

“...Don’t tell me you haven’t told His Highness you’ll be here.”

Leorino suddenly realized he had forgotten something very important. “I—I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? How can that be?”

“Um... I don’t know if my family informed His Highness.”

Leorino hung his head in remorse.

“You fool... Where are your priorities?” Lucas scolded him in an exasperated tone.

“I’m sorry...but I’ll be leaving soon.”

“That’s not the point. You *know* the issue at hand, and you seem to throw caution to the wind.”

“...I’m really sorry.”

Lucas sighed. “Are you really going home soon?”

“Yes, I am. After my grandmother meets with her close friends, she will leave in less than half an hour. After I speak with Lord Julian, I will go home with her.”

“And that cheeky guard of yours?”

“He’s waiting in the carriage. I accompanied my uncle and aunt here, and my guard will be there on the way back. I thought it wouldn’t be an issue since I would only be at the venue for half an hour or so... Was I wrong?”

“Yes. Your being alone without your guard is an issue all of its own. It has not been made public yet, but you are to marry His Highness. You must be more cautious than this.”

“...I can’t say anything to that.”

“I thought as much. You mean the world to His Highness...and to us as well. Please, don’t put yourself in danger.”

Leorino realized he had been in the wrong. But it had to be done.

“Josef can’t enter the soiree... I spoke with Kelios about it, but he said he wouldn’t be attending, so...I had no choice.”

He even got in touch with Kelios through Josef, but Kelios was from a lower noble house and had not received an invitation from the Duke of Leben.

“Yes. With his family background, he wouldn’t be able to enter the duke’s soiree, either. Why didn’t you ask His Highness to accompany you?”

“...His Highness is at the royal palace with my father today... I did not want to disturb the deliberations.”

Lucas heaved another deep sigh.

“I see. But why are you here? You don’t strike me as the type to revel in this sort of event. You hardly know anyone. I doubt there’s much for you to enjoy.”

Leorino did not come here to enjoy the soiree, but suddenly he was getting lectured. He deflated with remorse.

In truth, he hadn’t thought it would be particularly dangerous. He had heard that the Marquis of Lagarea would be taking part in the deliberations of the royal court, and he was reassured that he had no chance of running into him.

“...I wanted to properly speak with Lord Julian.”

“With Lord Julian? Speak about what?”

At that moment, a soft voice came from behind them.

“I wanted to speak with you as well, Leorino.”

Leorino turned to see an elegant young man, the next Duke of Leben.

“May I borrow Leorino for a moment, Lieutenant General?”

“...I have been asked to look after him by Her Royal Highness Princess Eleonora.”

Julian forced a smile. “This is my home, is it not? I can assure you on my family’s honor that Leorino is not in any danger.”

“Thank you for your concern, Lieutenant General,” said Leorino. “I will have a short conversation with Lord Julian and then return to my grandmother.”

Leorino wanted to fulfill his main purpose of the night.

He had already addressed his other goal with the valuable information he had received from his grandmother.

Lucas glared at Leorino with a stern expression, but Leorino asked for permission with sincere eyes.

Lucas felt the gazes of surrounding guests and held his tongue. The people around them were nonchalantly stealing glances at the three of them, wondering whatever the matter might be. It was only to be expected. They were all conspicuous in their own way.

Lucas weighed Leorino’s safety against his reputation. Leorino was about to announce his engagement to the king’s brother—he couldn’t afford to stir up trouble at the duke’s house now.

Lucas realized that he had no choice. “As long as it’s within my line of sight... Leorino, you understand, don’t you?”

Leorino nodded. Watching them, Julian smiled bitterly. The young man somehow looked less refined than usual.

“Oh my,” he said. “You have so many formidable guardians. There’s the Lieutenant General, and...His Highness, of course.”

Lucas raised his guard in alarm. The men glared at each other over Leorino’s head.

“In that case, Leorino. Now that we have your guardian’s permission, I will show you the room and then we can go get a drink... Now, if you’ll excuse us, Lord Lucas.”

The situation was strangely reminiscent of their interaction at the horse auction.

When the two gorgeous men walked side by side, they attracted the gazes of the guests without fail. Lucas watched the scene from behind, his eyes firmly fixed on them.

Julian offered Leorino another displeased smile. “How are we supposed to speak like this?”

“Lord Julian...”

“Come. It’s dark, but our garden looks quite lovely by the firelight.”

Julian placed his hand on Leorino’s back and led him out onto the terrace with a view of the garden.

Leorino was nervous, but the view from the terrace made him gasp in wonder before he could help it. Like the interior of the building, the courtyard, lit by braziers and candles, was lavish and breathtaking, clearly meant to flaunt the wealth of the Duke of Leben. Leorino glanced behind him.

Lucas was still in sight. He felt a little relieved to know that Lucas was looking at him, too.

Out on the terrace, the night breeze was pleasant. Realizing that Julian was watching him, Leorino rushed to say something. In the end, he could only come up with a few banal social pleasantries.

“I must say, your garden is very beautiful.”

“Thank you. It makes me very happy as the next head of the family to receive your compliments.”

Leorino’s nervousness melted away when he saw Julian’s smile and heard his

kind response. The next moment, however, Leorino's face stiffened.

"If *someone* hadn't interfered, this garden would have been yours."

"...Lord Julian."

A mix of emotions flitted through Julian's hazel eyes.

"I heard. You are to marry His Highness the King's brother. We received a letter of apology from the Cassieux family addressed to my father, saying our agreement was null and void."

Julian kept smiling, but his smile did not mean his heart was peaceful. Leorino knew that now.

Nobles did not reveal their thoughts so easily.

Julian heaved a sad sigh. "I suppose that means I've been well and truly rejected."

Leorino realized this was his moment.

"Lord Julian, I am grateful for the favor you have bestowed upon me. Unfortunately, I am unable to return your feelings. I'm truly sorry."

Leorino bowed deeply.

He did not expect the answer that came from Julian.

When Julian suddenly took his hand, Leorino was startled.

"Why?"

"...? Why what?"

"Why must you marry His Highness?"

...Must?

Leorino was puzzled by Julian's words.

“The king’s brother is so much older than you, you don’t really want to marry him, do you?”

“No, I do!”

What could have caused Julian to misunderstand him so badly?

There was something frightening about Julian’s kind but strangely feverish gaze.

Leorino sensed danger and immediately pulled away.

“...Lord Julian, please let go of my hand.”

Leorino asked Lucas for help with his gaze. Lucas seemed to notice it without missing a beat. He quickly strode toward them, his anger clear in his gait.

Glancing at the man approaching them through the crowd, for some reason, Julian sneered.

“First His Royal Highness, now Lieutenant General Brandt? ...Truly, you’re incorrigible. You betray me, and then you go around showing your affection to every other man. What a bad boy you are.”

Leorino could hardly believe his ears.

The next moment, Leorino’s mouth was covered by a large hand.

“...Mnf?!”

Julian’s hand covered Leorino’s face from the bridge of his nose to his chin. He couldn’t breathe, let alone scream.

With their backs to the room, Leorino’s body was completely hidden behind Julian’s.

Leorino struggled with all his might, but despite his gentle appearance, Julian lifted him with surprising force and carried him from the terrace.

By the time Lucas made it onto the terrace, the two had already disappeared into the darkness of the courtyard.

In the intricate, exquisitely landscaped garden, the trees were arranged to

cast beautiful shadows. Lucas searched for any sign of them, but the noise of the hall behind him drowned out any sound of footsteps and the rustling of the trees.

“God dammit...!”

Lucas regretted his choice.

He should never have left Leorino, not even for a moment.

Despite Lucas’s frustration, the venue was as lively as ever, seemingly unaware of Leorino’s disappearance. Lucas couldn’t search for Julian without any clues when the young man knew the structure of his own garden better than Lucas ever could.

“What is he planning to do to Leorino...?”

Julian thought of Leorino as a precious jewel. He wouldn’t do anything to Leorino in the garden. He would surely take him into some room.

Lucas turned back to the hall and, using his superior height, surveyed the venue until he spotted Julian’s father, the Duke of Leben.

Walking slowly enough not to raise suspicions, he made his way through the crowd and toward the duke. Hiding his frustration and anger, Lucas approached him from behind.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Your Grace. I have an urgent matter to discuss with you, if I may.”

“Oh, Lieutenant General Brandt. I’m so glad you could join us.”

The Duke of Leben, the wealthiest nobleman in Fanoren, smiled, his handsome face so similar to his son’s. In both hair and eye color, Julian took after his father.

“I have some confidential information about a horse I’ve put up for auction.”

The Duke of Leben, a known horse lover, was delighted by Lucas’s suggestion.

“Oh? I heard from my son that she was a wonderful horse. I would love to hear all about her.”

“Could we speak privately? I’m rather pressed for time.”

“Oh, I see. Well, gentlemen, if you will excuse me for a moment.”

The duke eagerly said good-bye to the guests surrounding him and walked off with Lucas. They left the reception hall and immediately entered a nearby antechamber.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Lucas abandoned his pretext. With a ghastly expression on his face, he drew toward the duke.

“Your Grace...there’s no time to lose. Julian has done something awful.”

“What...? I thought you wanted to speak about Amancera?”

“Unfortunately not. Julian kidnapped Leorino from the terrace.”

“...He did?”

The Duke of Leben’s mild face instantly turned rigid.

“Does he know Leorino is to marry His Highness Prince Gravis?”

“Yes, we have heard about it from Lord August. The day before yesterday, I showed my son the letter of apology for turning him down. After that, Bruno consoled him alone and I thought he had calmed down... I didn’t think he’d be that upset...”

Lucas’s expression stiffened. By “Bruno,” the man must have meant the Marquis of Lagarea.

The Marquis of Lagarea spoke to Julian...?

This did not bode well.

“Your Grace... Despite their age difference, His Highness and Leorino are not

getting married for political reasons. They are in love.”

Understanding the meaning of Lucas’s words, the Duke of Leben turned distinctly pale.

“You risk inviting His Highness’s ire. Should anything happen to Leorino, your entire family will be in danger, to speak nothing of Julian.”

“...What is he thinking?!”

The Duke of Leben’s anger at his son was clear on his face.

“I don’t want to damage Leorino’s reputation, so I need your help to find him discreetly. Is there a room Julian could have brought him to from the courtyard without garnering any attention?”

The Duke of Leben considered it.

“There are several rooms on the ground floor of the right wing, directly accessible from the courtyard. We must hurry. Come this way, Lord Lucas.”

Trying to maintain their composure, the two men headed for the right wing with the greatest haste. The Duke of Leben’s residence was vast.

“...Lord Lucas. Thank you.”

“It’s too early to thank me. If by any chance Julian harms Leorino...”

“...Our family will be doomed. I know from the last war what would happen if His Highness were to unleash the full extent of his anger.”

Not much time had passed since Leorino’s disappearance.

Lucas silently prayed that the Duke of Leben was right and that they would find him quickly.

Leorino was taken to a dimly lit room facing the courtyard. Despite his well-muscled build, Julian was a little out of breath from running through the courtyard with a grown man in his arms.

As soon as he entered the room, Julian released Leorino. Leorino staggered to

his feet and immediately backed away from him.

“Lord Julian...why are you doing this?”

Leorino looked around the room, searching for an escape route. Should he head for the courtyard, or the corridor? The room was not particularly large. Whichever direction he chose, his legs were still as feeble as ever and Julian was sure to catch him.

Lord Julian is a gentleman! Why would he...?

Leorino cursed his own stupidity. Julian had always been a kind and sincere man. He had wanted to settle matters with Julian personally. Leorino had thought he would be safe speaking with Julian for a few moments.

And, if all went well, he had hoped to obtain some information about the Marquis of Lagarea. Leorino wanted to prove that he could be of use to Gravis. He wished he could say he had no such foolish, childish ambitions.

But it never occurred to him that Julian could pose a threat.

Julian finally calmed down, sighed, and smiled with satisfaction. His usual gentle, refined smile was now particularly frightening.

At the same time, Leorino found something strange about Julian. He was always so sophisticated, but his behavior was completely out of character now. Not to mention he was making assumptions Leorino couldn't understand.

“I'm sorry I was so rough with you. I really needed to be alone with you to help you.”

“...To help me?”

Leorino didn't want to show how shaken he was, but he couldn't keep his

voice from trembling.

“I’m not going to let that cruel royal take you just because you are of noble blood.”

Leorino’s eyes widened at those words. Julian was gravely mistaken.

“I don’t understand what you mean. Taken...? How did you arrive at such a conclusion?”

“Alas, let us swear an oath here and now.”

Leorino visibly shuddered, a look of disgust on his face. “...I cannot. I’m returning to the soiree.”

Leorino could tell this “oath” would be of a sexual nature.

It was at this moment that Leorino stopped thinking of Julian as the polite nobleman he had always admired.

If Julian so much as attempted to do anything to him, this man would be Leorino’s enemy.

Julian approached with a smile. Leorino stepped back and discreetly searched his chest.

Leorino always carried a dagger in his breast pocket like a lucky charm. It was a short, thin, and narrow blade, but even such a meager weapon could take a life if thrust into his opponent’s neck.

He had been practicing with Josef whenever they found the time, albeit in small doses. Still, Leorino had never truly turned his blade on anyone.

He is my enemy. It’s not Lord Julian who stands before me. Recognize him as the enemy...

Leorino steeled his resolve.

If he hurt Julian, the heir to the duke, he could be punished. But on Gravis’s honor, he absolutely could not allow himself to be harmed.

His hands stiff with nerves, he clenched his dagger tightly.

“...Lord Julian, please. Don’t come any closer.”

“Don’t be like that. I truly, genuinely want to help you.”

Julian sneered at Leorino, making nothing of his threats. Leorino trembled with humiliation. Still, he tried his best to retort. “I will marry His Highness Prince Gravis. I have nothing to give you.”

Julian smiled and extended his hand toward Leorino.

Pulling the dagger from its concealed place on his chest, Leorino slashed at the young man’s hand.

The tip of Leorino’s blade pierced Julian’s flesh.

“...Ah! You...!”

Blood spilled through the air.

“...Leorino... You...!”

Julian held his palm in anguish. Blood dripped from between his fingers.

Learning the sensation of cutting human flesh with his own hands, Leorino trembled.

But strangely enough, he could feel it. The wound Leorino had inflicted was not enough to kill.

“If you come any closer, I *will* stab you...!”

The wound seemed to be enough to intimidate Julian—he was no soldier, no warrior. The nobleman’s beautifully coiffed hair was disheveled, his face twisting in pain.

“...Ugh, I can’t believe this. How could you cut me?”

“...I will not apologize. You brought me here by force. I will not say it again, Lord Julian. I belong to His Highness Prince Gravis, and I do not need you to save me.”

“...I see.” Julian instantly looked heartbroken. “I’m sorry, Leorino... I promise I

won't do anything else.”

He seemed to be truly sorry.

Leorino relaxed, but his heart was still pounding in his chest. Julian had hung his head and would not move. His pitiful state filled Leorino's chest with guilt.

He knew that feeling was uncalled for—Julian had kidnapped him—but unlike Ionia, Leorino was not a warrior.

Seeing Julian so remorseful, the boundary between enemy and victim quickly blurred.

Julian weakly fell onto the settee, holding his hand. Was the wound deeper than it appeared? The blood still hadn't stopped.

Leorino felt an ache in his chest. “...I'm sorry.”

“You hurt me, then apologize?”

“No... I don't apologize for using my dagger. I apologize for making you worry about me.”

They watched each other in silence for a moment.

“...Help me patch myself up, will you? Bring me that jug over there. I need to clean my hands.”

Leorino nodded, took the jug, and slowly approached Julian on the settee. Leaving some distance between them, he held out the jug and Julian inserted each hand into the water to wash off the blood.

“Thank you.”

“...Don't.”

Pulling the ascot from around his neck, Julian made a valiant attempt to wrap it around his wounded hand with the other. He did not get very far.

With a pathetic expression, he held out his hand to Leorino.

“I can't tie it with one hand. Would you mind tying it for me?”

“A-all right... Does it hurt?”

Leorino took the ascot and carefully tried to wrap it around his hand. As he did, he observed the wound.

It was too deep to be a mere scratch, but Leorino was relieved to see that it was a shallow gash that did not seem to damage the function of his hand.

Julian silently watched Leorino.

Leorino dared not make eye contact.

When he had finished wrapping the cloth around Julian's hand and tightly tied the ends together, he looked up at Julian to see how he was doing. Julian was smiling calmly.

That was when Julian extended his injured hand and stroked Leorino's cheek. Leorino instinctively avoided his touch.

"Truly, you're such a sweet boy."

"...I am not."

It was heartrending to hear that from the person he had hurt.

But the next moment, the man's expression changed completely as he grabbed Leorino by the shoulders and pushed him down onto the settee.

"...L-Lord Julian...!"

"So sweet, so foolish."

Julian looked down at Leorino with a smile, took something out of his breast pocket, and placed its contents into his mouth.

Julian leaned onto him and placed his mouth on Leorino's fearfully trembling lips. A liquid with a strange smell flowed from the gap between his lips.

"...Mnf!"

Leorino frantically tried to push Julian off. But his strength was no match, and his lips remained covered.

As he gasped for air, unable to breathe, the liquid that had been poured into his mouth slipped down the back of his throat.

Feeling that Leorino had swallowed, Julian wiped his lips, smiled, and sat back up.

Leorino suddenly clawed at Julian's injured hand.

"...Ow!"

Julian groaned in pain. Leorino took advantage of the opportunity and rolled off the settee.

He knew it wasn't very dignified, but he desperately tried to crawl away across the floor. Julian watched with a smile, even as his face twisted in pain.

"You look like an angel, but you're quite tough, aren't you? A son of the Cassieux family through and through."

"Wh-what did you...put in my...?"

"Nothing you won't like. Though there's only so much time I can dedicate to this."

Julian offered him that refined smile of his. Leorino trembled in fear and tried desperately to back away.

"...?"

But for some reason, his legs refused to obey.

Leorino wondered if he had hurt his legs when he fell off the settee, but he felt no pain. They just felt weak. At the same time, he felt as if insects were crawling all over his body. He shuddered before he could help it.

Leorino couldn't fight it any longer, and fell onto the carpet in a heap.

Julian slowly straddled Leorino and gazed down at him.

"What did you do... What did you do to me?"

"It's all right. Leorino, your reputation may suffer, but I will not give up on you. I'll save you."

With these words, Julian slowly leaned over Leorino, and...

The door slammed open.

“Leorino!”

“Julian!”

Recognizing Leorino on the floor and Julian straddling him, the Duke of Leben quickly closed the door behind him.

“You filthy...!”

His hair bristling in anger, Lucas did not hold back when he realized what Julian was attempting.

Julian went flying across the room, stopping only when his body hit the furniture.

Lucas lifted Leorino and held him in his arms. He quickly inspected Leorino’s body and noticed his clothes were undisturbed. The worst-case scenario had been averted.

“We made it... Thank God.”

“...Lu...ca...”

Lucas peered into Leorino’s face. His pale face was filled with fear and confusion, but no pain.

Meanwhile, the Duke of Leben was stunned speechless by the disaster his son had wrought.

“Julian...what have you done?”

Julian staggered to his feet.

“Father...why do you stop me?”

“Julian!”

Julian scratched his head with his uninjured hand. The young nobleman was not usually like this.

“...I only meant to save Leorino,” he muttered in a disappointed voice. He showed no remorse for what he had done.

Lucas and the Duke of Leben exchanged glances, sensing something strange about Julian’s behavior.

But Lucas was more concerned about Leorino.

“...Are you all right? Can you stand?”

Leorino shook his head weakly. His violet eyes were wide open and dazed.

“Luca... He poured something in my mouth... I can’t...”

His quiet voice startled the Duke of Leben and Lucas.

“Julian! What have you given Leorino?!”

“...I had to save Leorino. I had no choice, Father.” Julian looked at his father apathetically. “Leorino doesn’t want to be with His Highness. Only I, the heir to your title, can save him.”

“...Julian, you...”

Everything about Julian was strange. Duke Leben looked puzzled. To think he would confess so openly in front of one of the king’s brother’s close confidants.

Hearing this, the lieutenant general glared at Julian with unsparing eyes.

“I ask you again, Julian. What did you make Lord Leorino drink?”

“...Nothing that would endanger his life.”

Lucas removed his cloak and wrapped Leorino in it. The large cloth covered his body from head to toe.

He had to bring Leorino to a doctor as quickly as he could, but he could hardly let him receive treatment at the duke’s house.

“Your Grace, His Highness will inform you of his verdict in regards to your son.”

“...I cannot apologize enough for what he has done.”

Julian’s admission of guilt left him with no excuse. The Duke of Leben had resigned himself to his fate.

“I will take Leorino home. Tell the Duke of Wiesen and Princess Eleonora that Leorino has drunk too much and fallen ill... Above all, tell them that Lucas Brandt will be responsible for Leorino’s safekeeping.”

“...I shall. Lord Lucas, I am truly sorry for everything.”

“In the unlikely event that the truth should ever leave these walls...”

“I know. I am a duke, after all. I fully understand the implications of having my flesh and blood lay hands on the person who is to marry the king’s brother.”

Lucas nodded.

As he headed for the door, he glanced back into the dark room. Julian had lost all semblance of his usual nobility and sat in a daze, his legs spread carelessly. He covered his eyes with his hands.

“...I love Leorino. I only wanted to help him.”

Lucas’s face twisted involuntarily at the young man’s words.

He had no sympathy for Julian at all, but Lucas had also acted on his impulses due to his maddening love for someone. That was why there was nothing he could say.

Lucas had forcibly touched Ionia that day, and Julian had tried to force himself onto Leorino—they were on opposite sides of the same line.

The only difference was whether they were accepted by the other party or not. Nothing more.

Fortunately, the only person to witness Lucas carrying a human fully wrapped in his cape out of the residence was the Duke of Leben's butler.

Lucas quickly left the soiree in the carriage of the Cassieux family, which had been instructed to move to the end of the right wing of the building. Inside the carriage waited Leorino's guard. Josef panicked at the sight of Lucas suddenly climbing into the carriage with his master in his arms.

The carriage sped toward the center of the royal capital. The destination was not the Brungwurt estate, but the far end of the royal palace—the detached palace belonging to Gravis, the king's younger brother.

Aphrodisiac

Lucas decided to knock Leorino unconscious in the carriage as they headed for Gravis's palace. At the entrance to the inner gardens, a guard told him off for not announcing his arrival in advance, but Lucas forced his way through.

"Fine! You can reprimand all you want me later, just let me through now!"

Shouted down by the famous fearsome lieutenant general, the guard of the detached palaces opened the gates to the inner gardens. The carriage sped toward the farthest palace.

"Is His Highness Prince Gravis here?!"

As Lucas ran into the entryway with Leorino in his arms and Josef at his side, several palace guards rushed to meet him.

"Lieutenant General, what is the matter?!"

"I'm afraid His Royal Highness is currently out!"

Lucas clicked his tongue. He did not have the mind to look at the royal banner on the roof announcing when the owner was home. It was then that Theodor came running down the stairs.

"Lieutenant General Brandt! What brings you here so urgently? How did they allow you into the inner gardens?!"

"Theodor! I'm so glad you're here. I need to see His Highness posthaste."

Theodor glanced at what appeared to be a human body wrapped in a cloak in Lucas's arms.

"And that is...?"

Lucas brought his face close to Theodor's and whispered so that the nearby guards couldn't hear him.

"It's Leorino. Julian Munster drugged him at the Lebens' soiree."

Theodor's expression instantly turned grim.

"Is that why he's unconscious? Was it poison?"

"No, Julian said it wouldn't kill him. I knocked him out in the carriage on the way here for his own comfort."

"...I see. This way."

With Theodor leading the way, Lucas adjusted his grip on the cloak-clad body and turned to head for Gravis's bedroom.

But another issue appeared. Josef was stopped at the door by the guards, telling him they could not allow a stranger into the palace. He told them he was Leorino's guard, but to no avail.

"Lieutenant General...!" Josef shouted, his face pale. But they didn't have the time to wait for the palace guards to confirm Josef's identity.

"Josef! Wait there...! I'll come back and explain everything later!"

Josef looked heartbroken as Lucas hurried on with Theodor.

"Where is His Highness?"

"His Highness is still at the palace. At the deliberations."

"I see, so that's why Leorino mentioned he didn't want to disturb him."

Lucas clicked his tongue in distaste, questioning the odds of the marriage deliberations taking place at the very same time.

“The timing is unfortunate. Is it possible for His Highness to return right now?”

“It is possible. If I inform him what happened to Lord Leorino, he will return immediately.”

“And how exactly do you summon His Highness?”

Theodor shot him a look. “Do you truly expect me to answer that?”

“No... I was a fool to ask.”

The distance between the detached palace and the Palace of Administration was not insignificant. Lucas had simply been curious, but the royal family must have possessed some method of communication known only to them.

Theodor was the only person who could enter Gravis’s private chambers without permission. He seized a candlestick from a shelf and headed for the bedroom.

The bedroom was dimly lit.

“Bring him to the bed. Remove the covers and lay Lord Leorino down,” Theodor instructed as he lit the candles through the bedroom with the one he had brought from the parlor. Laid on the large bed, Leorino’s breathing was shallow and his face flushed. He had not yet regained consciousness.

“Do you know what Lord Leorino was drugged with?” Theodor asked.

Lucas knew little about drugs, but remembering the agitation Leorino had displayed in the carriage, he was rather convinced of the nature of the drug.

“Likely some kind of aphrodisiac. I didn’t want him to suffer, so I knocked him out on the way here.”

As an attendant, Theodor possessed a sufficient knowledge of the healing arts.

Perhaps beginning to regain consciousness, Leorino’s face twisted in anguish.

Theodor opened Leorino’s eyelids, inspected his pupils, listened to his heart, and measured his pulse. Next, he brought his nose to Leorino’s lips, sniffed, and

frowned. He poured a glass of water from the pitcher on the bedside table and washed his finger in it. He then inserted the finger into Leorino's open mouth and stirred.

"Hey, what are you doing?!"

Standing next to him, Lucas was startled by his sudden, strange behavior. Theodor pulled out his finger—now covered with Leorino's saliva—placed it in his mouth, and closed his eyes.

"...Theodor!"

"...It's not poison. This drug will not endanger his life. Indeed, it must be an aphrodisiac." Theodor rinsed his mouth. "Do you know when he was drugged?"

"Likely right before I found him."

"Then some time has passed. The drug must have been absorbed by now. When he wakes up, I suspect he will feel wretched."

Leorino seemed to be on the verge of consciousness. His calm breathing became labored.

"How much has he had?"

"I don't know. When I found him, he had already been drugged. But he was still conscious at the time. He began to act strangely in the carriage."

Theodor snarled uncharacteristically. "You should have given him all the water you could get your hands on when you found him."

"I'm sorry... I didn't think that far ahead. I only knew I had to get him out of the duke's estate and bring him here."

"No, considering Lord Leorino's honor, bringing him here was a wise decision. I did not intend to blame you... Who else knows of this?"

"Julian Munster, who drugged him, and the Duke of Leben. And me, of course."

Theodor nodded. “I shall leave you for a moment to summon His Highness,” he instructed. “In the meantime, I would like you to loosen Lord Leorino’s clothes and make him more comfortable.”

With that, Theodor left the room.

Following Theodor’s instructions, Lucas deftly rolled Leorino over and began to undress him as carefully as he could. Knowing this would help him, Lucas didn’t hesitate to undress Leorino, despite their complicated past.

When Leorino was left in nothing but his shirt and underclothes, Lucas could see that Leorino’s body was aroused.

Ever since that night, Lucas saw Leorino and Ionia as two entirely separate people. Although he felt a deep desire to shield Leorino from harm, Lucas no longer felt any lust for him knowing he was in love with the man Lucas served.

He sincerely wanted to protect this young man who had brought Ionia’s memories to the royal capital.

He wanted Leorino to lead a happy life with Gravis, the life Ionia never got to have. That was all he could ask for now.

“Mm... Ngh...”

“His Highness will be here soon... Hold on just a little longer.”

The sight of his fair, writing body inspired in Lucas not carnal desire, but intense pity.

Leorino’s body was so smooth, so gorgeous, it was hard to believe they were of the same sex. Leorino seemed too perfect to be a mere mortal. And yet, from his left knee down stretched a large, pale scar.

Lucas hadn’t known this was what had become of his wounds of six years prior.

He traced the scar with his fingers. Leorino’s body trembled.

“.....Ngh.”

“Leorino, you’re awake.”

His lashes quivered and revealed his violet eyes, but his gaze was vacant, trapped in something Lucas could not perceive.

“Ah... Hng.”

A moan spilled from his throat. His physical arousal must have returned as soon as he awoke.

“Ah... I feel so hot... N-no... Why...?”

“Julian drugged you with an aphrodisiac. Do you understand?”

“Aphrodisiac... Luca... Help... I hate this.”

Tears came trickling down Leorino’s cheeks. Lucas stroked his shoulder with a grief-stricken expression.

“Ow... Don’t...”

But even the slightest touch made Leorino visibly flinch. Tears flowed from his wide-open eyes. His body must have been far more sensitive than usual.

“Please... Help me, Luca... Vi, help me.”

“His Highness will be back soon. Stay with me.”

Theodor returned to the room. He carried a stack of towels, dragged a chair to the bedside, and piled the towels on top of it.

“Lord Lucas, I left some water in the parlor. Please bring it to me.”

“All right.”

When Lucas returned to the parlor, he found a washbasin, hot water, and a pitcher of drinking water with a glass. Just as he decided to bring the drinking water first, a pained scream came from the bedroom. Lucas rushed back into the room with the pitcher and glass in hand.

“What’s wrong?”

Gasping for breath, Leorino heaved heart-wrenching sobs. Theodor was sitting at his bedside, observing the young man with a severe expression.

“The water, please.”

Lucas handed him the pitcher, and Theodor poured a few drops of some liquid into the water. It turned a pale blue color.

“What is it? What did you add?”

“It’s a medicine that will dull his sensation. Using it once won’t hurt him. He has become too sensitive, so we must suppress it. Can you get behind him and help him sit up? I’ll give it to him then.”

Lucas did as instructed and lifted Leorino into a sitting position.

“No...no!”

Lucas touched him very carefully, but Leorino still shed tears of agony.

“It’s all right, Leorino. You’ll feel better soon.”

“No... No... Stop...”

Theodor brought the glass to his sobbing mouth. Leorino turned his face away in refusal.

“I’m so hot... Stop... Help me, Vi.”

“...Lord Leorino, please drink this. It will make you feel better!”

Theodor was at a complete loss when a hand snatched the glass from behind him.

“You want him to drink this?”

“Your Highness!”

Theodor rushed to make room, and Gravis took his place.

“Is it safe?”

“Yes.”

Gravis nodded. He then looked at Lucas, supporting Leorino from behind.

“Hold him down.”

“...Yes, sir.”

Lucas held Leorino’s jaw open, and Leorino let out a fleeting scream at the contact. He twisted desperately to escape Lucas’s grasp, but all he could do was strain his shoulders like a little bird in Lucas’s arms.

Gravis took a mouthful of the pale blue liquid and slowly pressed his lips to Leorino’s.

“Mnf, mmm.”

When Gravis had fed Leorino the entire glass, Theodor offered him another.

“This is just water. Please give him two more glasses. He’ll get dehydrated otherwise.”

Theodor was warning him of the torment Leorino was about to experience.

Gravis nodded with a rigid expression, covered Leorino’s tearful lips with his own, and fed him more water. Leorino struggled against him, but slowly, he drank the water he was given.

Then, perhaps running out of strength, Leorino fell unconscious again, his back falling limp against Lucas’s chest.

The men’s gazes met above Leorino.

“...Was it Julian Munster?”

“Yes. I suspect he was attempting to force himself on Leorino. He drugged him, though I wasn’t there to see it myself.”

Gravis heaved a deep sigh. He must have been holding back his fury. He clenched his fists so hard that his knuckles turned white.

“I’m glad you were there... Thank you.”

“I’ll say this for the sake of Leorino’s honor: I found him with his clothes

undisturbed. For what it's worth, Leorino didn't go down without a fight."

Gravis simply nodded, his expression unchanged, the fire of wrath lit up in the depths of his eyes.

"...Theodor, what do we do now?"

"Simply put, we combat the effects. Most drugs wear off in a day or so."

"Have someone find out what drug Julian Munster used. Tomorrow afternoon, summon the Duke of Leben to the Palace of Defense."

"Not here?"

"The duke is not a government official, so the Dritereich does not affect him. Inform Dirk as well."

"Yes, sir," said Theodor, and stepped away.

Lucas slowly relaxed the hand that had been supporting Leorino and laid his body on the bed once more. He stood from the bed and turned to Gravis.

"Do you plan to punish Julian Munster?"

"Quite frankly, I would chop his head off this very moment if I could. But considering Leorino's honor, we can't risk people asking questions. Not to mention his eldest brother is married to the daughter of the Duke of Leben. We can't punish them publicly...but we can do whatever we want off the record."

Hearing Gravis's nonchalant confession, Lucas felt a chill run down his spine.

Despite his cold appearance, Gravis was a deeply compassionate man. However, perhaps due to his royal lineage, he could be unfathomably ruthless as well. He would achieve his goals by any means necessary, and it was this coolheadedness that existed at the root of his thinking.

Lucas recalled the despair-filled look he saw on Julian's face as he left. He did not sympathize with Julian, but Lucas was all too familiar with a passion so

violent it could bring a man to do anything to get his hands on the person he loved—whether they wanted it or not.

“He...he realized Leorino would never be his. Can there be any greater punishment than that?”

“That’s awfully soft of you. The world would not mourn the loss of Julian Munster,” Gravis said bluntly, his expression blank.

He was incensed. Gravis had acted the very same way after Ionia was killed.

“Destroy Zwelf,” the beast had roared.

“I understand your indignation...but show him your mercy just this once, for Leorino’s sake as well as your own. Leorino attended the soiree—if Julian is punished, Leorino will suffer as well.”

Gravis’s eyes widened. He clearly hadn’t considered that.

“...I see what you mean, and I will give it some thought. In any case, Lucas, I’m in your debt.”

Lucas glanced at Leorino. He changed the subject, sensing they still had time.

“How was the Marquis of Lagarea during the deliberations?”

“He approved without a word of protest. Still, he did imply that Leorino had been eyeing Julian as well. This caught people’s attention. Perhaps I’m paranoid, but I suspect he knew what Julian was planning to do at the soiree.”

“I see. If Julian had succeeded in his scheme, Leorino would be seen as unworthy of you. At worst, your engagement would be rendered invalid... That was far too close for comfort.”

Lucas pondered this. He remembered the way Julian had behaved when they left.

“What’s wrong?”

“...No, I must be imagining it.”

“Tell me.”

Lucas answered, his brow furrowed. “Julian Munster was acting strangely. He insisted that he was going to ‘save’ Leorino from Your Highness. Where could that thought have come from?”

“...What?”

“According to the Duke of Leben, Julian had been left alone to speak with the Marquis of Lagarea after he was informed of your engagement.”

Gravis’s face suddenly turned rigid.

“...You mean that Lagarea tampered with his memory?”

“I don’t know. But I’ve spoken to Julian on one occasion. He treasured Leorino in his own way. For a young nobleman of such integrity, this act of violence and his incoherent assertions stand out as highly uncharacteristic.”

His words forced Gravis to consider it.

Indeed, his impression of Julian Munster was that of a cunning, careful planner, not a man who let his emotions control him in the spur of the moment.

“Would that man really go to such lengths, with no regard for his own fate?”

“Hm...”

“Not to mention Julian is a bloodline purist through and through. However deep his love for Leorino may be, knowing a royal like you will marry him, I highly doubt he would go against your decision.”

“...So Lagarea did this to prevent me and Leorino from marrying...but I don’t see why.”

“I think you may be right about his resentment toward the royal family.”

At that moment, a quiet moan escaped Leorino’s lips. He had awoken.

“...Lucas. Leave us.”

Lucas nodded, looked at the agonized Leorino with pity, and left the room.

Punishment

A powerful stimulus coursed through Leorino's body. He couldn't stop the noises coming from his own throat. He had lost count of how many times he had already spilled his seed that night.

"Oh... Oh... Wait, I'm sore... Wait..."

Having been continually rubbed in hopes of quickly dispelling the effects of the aphrodisiac, his shaft was swollen and red. However, it was still dripping a dilute, translucent fluid, clearly relishing the stimulation it was receiving.

The moment Leorino cried for him to wait, Gravis rocked his body ever harder.

When the man's hard abdomen brushed against his member, Leorino arched his back at the electric pain mixed with pleasure.

"Nn, ah...!"

"'Wait'? I don't think you're in any position to tell me that."

"Ah... I'm sorry...but that's...too much..."

His legs were spread wide open and his body was full to the brim with the man's shaft. The aphrodisiac had made Leorino's narrow entrance far softer, more pliable than ever.

After meticulously preparing him with his fingers, the man penetrated him with his massive length. He remained buried inside him ever since, subjecting him to an endless series of rhythmic movements, stimulating the walls of his hot, aphrodisiac-filled flesh without mercy.

“...What do you think would have happened if Lucas hadn’t been there?”

“I’m sorry... I’m, ah, ah ah...”

Slowly slamming his hips against his soft buttocks, Gravis savored the sensation of Leorino’s wet, lewd hole.

He had applied some artificial moisture, but by now, he suspected the aphrodisiac had caused Leorino to naturally secrete some fluids of his own. It felt different from lubricant, hot and slick in a way men’s bodies were usually incapable of.

His delicate, lithe body had struggled so much to accept him previously, but was now dramatically transformed by the aphrodisiac. The thought that, if things had played out differently, Julian could have seen him in this bewitchingly obscene state made Gravis’s blood boil with anger.

“A different man could have been doing this to you by now, have you considered that?”

“No, I... Vi, I only want you...”

Leorino frantically shook his head, his face stained with all the tears he’d shed. Gravis slammed his hips into him once more.

“Ahh!”

“...Or would another man’s cock have pleased you just as much?”

Gravis was livid.

He was livid with Julian, with Leorino, and most of all, he was livid with

himself for putting his beloved in danger.

The fury, regret, and relief raging inside him were spurred on by the soft flesh that so readily welcomed him inside.

His flushed, moist skin. His painfully swollen nipples. His slender, shapely hips leaping up in response to the man's every thrust.

His violet eyes were drowning in ecstasy. Filled with the man's impressive length, he awakened to the utter bliss of being taken so deeply.

Gravis tried to keep himself from taking out his unfading ire on Leorino's delicate body, holding on to what remained of his reason in his seething mind, but he would not stop his hips from striking. He didn't attempt to fit his entire length inside, but after confirming Leorino would be able to take it, Gravis no longer hesitated to drive himself into him over and over again.

When Gravis made use of his girth to work over Leorino's tender spots, Leorino climaxed, a cry of pleasure on his lips.

"Mn... Ah... Ahh..."

His grasp on time was long gone.

He felt like he had been rocked for hours. He had once struggled to receive a member of such proportions, but now that he did, the act of having his insides dominated by his thick, hot flesh felt incredible.

Leorino spilled his seed time and time again without even noticing. He was well and truly lost in the pleasure the man's thrusts granted him.

No longer able to even hold onto the man, Leorino lay with his arms splayed, his legs held up, and his body rocked like a doll.

"...Ngh."

"...Ahh..." Embraced by Leorino's hot, writhing flesh, the man finally spilled

himself deep inside him.

“...Aahh!”

The heat spreading within him pushed Leorino closer to yet another climax. But the man was far from finished.

“Oh, are you... Ah, ah...!”

Still rigid inside him, the man moved back and forth, coating Leorino’s inner walls with his liquid passion. Feeling the man rub his own fluids against his sensitive hole, Leorino climaxed once more through tears.

Gravis slowly released his hips. Leorino whimpered at the intense pleasure as the man pulled out.

Leorino’s body was beyond exhausted. He felt as if he was about to pass out, but at the same time, his hazy thoughts finally cleared.

Frantically gasping for breath, Leorino tried to remember what had happened.

At the soiree, Lord Julian drugged me, and Lucas saved me...and then... And then...

“You’ve come to your senses.”

“...Vi...? *Cough.*”

Leorino’s throat was hoarse. Gravis furrowed his brow, poured some water from the pitcher into his own mouth, and fed it to Leorino. The water was tepid, but it was exactly what his body needed.

Rehydrated, Leorino finally had the mind to observe his surroundings.

This was Gravis’s palace.

“Do you remember what happened?”

His body felt heavy, sluggish, and hot. Something inside him was still twitching. He was wet. He had let go of all shame and allowed the man he loved

to free him from the fire lit up inside him.

Tears welled in Leorino's eyes.

They were tears of regret, entirely different from the ones he had shed when he had yielded his entire being to carnal pleasure.

Gravis sighed and brought his hand to Leorino's face. He brushed back his sweaty hair.

Despite his gentle touch, his starry-sky eyes were cold and angry. But deep in his gaze, Leorino could see his boundless love and concern for him, and beyond that, relief.

The tense surface of tears in Leorino's violet eyes seemed ready to collapse at any moment, his throat quivering.

"...hic..."

"Are you in pain?"

Hearing those words, he finally broke down in tears.

Only his heart hurt. It had been a mistake caused by his own carelessness. His heart ached with the weight of it. Looking into Gravis's eyes, Leorino could tell just how much worry he had caused him.

"...I-I'm sorry."

Gravis was clearly upset, but he did not speak a word of blame to Leorino.

"Why are you apologizing? You didn't choose to be drugged."

"I'm sorry...that I went out at all, even though you told me it wasn't safe..."

He knew crying wouldn't get him anywhere. He fought to stifle his sobs.

"Why did you go to the soiree? Was it to spite me for limiting your activities?"

“N-no... I just...wanted to apologize...to Lord J-Julian...”

“Is that all?”

Leorino was frightened. He did not have the courage to face his true intentions and admit he had been wrong.

But Gravis must have seen through Leorino’s foolish pride.

“...*hic*...”

“Leorino.”

The man’s eyes allowed no deception. He silently watched Leorino, waiting for his confession.

“...I just... I wanted to help... I wanted to investigate on my own...”

There was nothing more he could say.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry.”

“I should be apologizing. I failed to protect you from your own reckless behavior.”

“...No.”

As soon as he heard Gravis’s response, Leorino’s vision went dark.

At that very moment, Leorino had lost Gravis’s trust.

“...It’s my fault for letting my guard down, for being so consumed with love. I almost lost you all over again.”

“I’m s-sorry...”

Gravis smiled for the briefest moment and abruptly changed the subject.

“Our marriage deliberations are over. We have His Majesty’s signature and the approval of the congress. Tomorrow, our families will announce our engagement to the entire continent.”

Gravis once more pushed Leorino’s thighs open, as they were now too

exhausted to move on their own.

The flesh the man had so thoroughly ravaged was still softly parted, the edges bloodshot. Leorino looked obscene, dripping wet with various bodily fluids.

“Oh... What... Ah!”

Leorino trembled, not understanding the meaning of the man’s actions. But he wouldn’t have the energy to resist even if he wanted to.

Gravis inserted several fingers into his hot, slick entrance. He began to slowly move his digits in and out, savoring the feeling of his flesh entwining around him.

“Ah, ah... Vi, wh-why...?”

The man’s hand mimicked the prior movements of his hips, and Leorino’s body, still under the sweet spell of the lingering traces of the aphrodisiac, was quickly set ablaze with want.

The man’s fingers checked the state of the area. Leorino seemed to be so sensitive that it hurt, but that should hardly have been an issue. His flesh was soft, having already mastered the art of accepting the man’s girth.

When Leorino felt his hips buck under the mind-numbing pleasure, the man’s hot length pressed against the spot he had just worked with his fingers.

“Ahhh... Ah, ah.”

Leorino arched his back at the sheer size of Gravis entering him all at once.

Leorino’s entrance gripped tightly, his moist inner walls coiling around him.

“...What a lewd hole you’ve got.”

Gravis slowly resumed his rhythmic movements.

“Oh... Vi, there...”

The sensation of hard flesh moving inside him defied description. The pleasure of it was overwhelming enough to make Leorino’s mind go blank.

That was when Gravis easily picked him up, laid himself down, and made Leorino sit in his lap. When he couldn't seem to keep himself upright, Gravis held him by the hips, securing him in place.

Leorino's body trembled from confusion and fright at this new position.

"Oh... Vi, this is...strange... Why...?"

Leorino noticed the man was sinking deeper into him under his own weight.

"Ah! That's so...deep..."

Gravis did not bother to explain. Leorino placed his hands on the man's stomach, struggling to support his body.

But even as he sought purchase, the man's muscular hips were too wide for his knees to reach the mattress.

"Oh... Vi...why this...?"

In tears, Leorino struggled to free himself from the unfamiliar position, and Gravis silently let him try. He wasn't going anywhere anyway.

Prepared for how stupid it made him look, Leorino bent his knees and tried to dig his feet into the bed. But with his legs spread so wide and the weakness in his limbs, Leorino could not lift himself out of the position.

"Mmm... Ngh."

As a final resort, Leorino thrust his hands into the man's hard abdomen. He curled his back like a cat and attempted to escape the girthy shaft that penetrated the depths of his body.

However, no matter how far he stretched forward to gain distance, he could not remove himself from the man's impressive length. The gap between their bodies was just that great.

Leorino despaired.

Without the man's help, he would be stuck in this position.

“...Please... This is too much. C-can't we go back to the previous position?”

Sobbing in confusion, Leorino desperately pleaded with Gravis.

Instead of an answer, Gravis silently rocked his hips, gently thrusting into him. Shocked, Leorino shed tears at the cold treatment.

“Ugh... Oh...God... So deep...”

The stiff shaft slipped ever deeper. It took his breath away. And yet, each time the man struck his depths, it brought him to the brink of ecstasy.

The man placed both thumbs on Leorino's nipples, now swollen alongside the areolas from all the sucking he had subjected them to.

Leorino nearly screamed from the intensity of the combined stimuli. His inner walls spasmed violently, his flesh tightly wrapping itself around the man. At that moment, Leorino climaxed with no additional assistance.

“...From tomorrow onward, you will be officially mine.”

Leorino's entire body rippled at the sound of his deep voice. His hearing had grown hazy, but the man's words scared him now. He was delighted, yet scared.

“...You will stay here for the foreseeable future.”

“Ahh... Ah...”

“Now stop thinking. Enjoy this.”

That was the last thing Gravis said before savoring the exquisite tightness of Leorino's lithe body.

Even after everything they'd already done, his tight passage was more than enough to please even the far more experienced man. Every time Gravis rocked his hips, obscene sounds leaked from where two bodies became one.



*

Leorino was falling into a deep sea of ecstasy, yet at the same time, he felt as if he was drowning in despair and regret.

Too much pleasure could easily become torture. This act was no longer for the sake of freeing his body from the drug. It was punishment through bliss.

Gravis was about to teach him a lesson he wouldn't soon forget.

The man was silently showing Leorino how helpless, how weak to pleasure, how physically fragile he was.

Gravis had been hurt as well.

Gravis had tried so hard to protect him.

What other choice did he have now?

Gravis easily sat up with Leorino on top of him so that they faced each other.

He mercilessly took Leorino's lips as he moaned, his throat trembling, stealing his breath away.

The hands on his chest did not cease their movements. Leorino's swollen shaft struck the man's hard abdomen with each deep thrust.

Leorino could only cry as he surrendered himself to the man in every sensual aspect of his being. He sobbed in time with the gentle rhythm of Gravis's hips.

The dizzyingly shameless sounds and the obscene scent permeated Leorino's skin and robbed him of all rational thought.

Leorino had lost all will to escape from the overwhelming cage that was his body.

Leorino lay on the muscular body of the man who was once again lying on his back. Gravis grabbed the back of his head and ravaged Leorino's mouth with his tongue.

"Mnf... Mm."

Matching the rhythm of Gravis's kisses, his length hit the sensitive spot inside Leorino. The long, slow strokes continued with no end in sight.

Leorino's consciousness began to fade, and he felt like he was losing hold of his own body.

Leorino was mere flesh now, the very embodiment of pleasure. It was only right that a stiff shaft should strike him over and over again.

When the man had finished his long conquest and had once again filled him with his liquid passion, Leorino possessed no more fluids to expel as he climaxed one last time, and finally lost consciousness.

Josef's Savage Valor

The following day, the betrothal of Gravis Adolphe Fanoren and Leorino Viola Maian Cassieux, the fourth son of the Margrave of Brungwurt, was publicly announced.

Being the first same-sex royal marriage since the founding of Fanoren, the announcement surprised the nobility, let alone the commoners. Bloodline purists welcomed the news.

The nobles who had already seen Leorino's extraordinary beauty were quick to accept that not even a member of the royal family could resist his exceptional appearance.

On the other hand, the city streets were astir with rumors that the union was a political ploy, given their age difference and the fact that they were of the same sex.

After everything that had happened at the Duke of Leben's residence, Leorino was not allowed to return to his family estate and remained in Gravis's palace. The Margrave of Brungwurt requested to return Leorino home once, but Gravis rejected the plea.

The Cassieuxs knew about what had happened at the soiree through Josef and wanted to see for themselves that Leorino was unharmed, but did not press the matter any further. Their engagement had already been publicly announced, and Gravis now had both the right and duty to keep Leorino safe.

The Cassieux family sent Hundert, his full-time attendant, as caretaker and

liaison, and Josef, as guard, to the detached palace.

Meanwhile, Leorino was confined to Gravis's palace with nothing to do.

The day after he was drugged and subsequently taken like a storm, he fell ill with a fever. Fortunately, his indisposition did not last, and he was able to leave his bed the day after that.

When Leorino finally left his bed, he told Gravis the secret concerning the Marquis of Lagarea's birth, which he had heard from his grandmother, Eleonora. He hoped against hope that by conveying this knowledge to Gravis, he could regain some of his trust.

He had been naive. Gravis merely nodded and said, "I see." That was it.

After that, he simply spoiled Leorino, consistently pouring pleasure into his body every morning and evening.

Except for their sweet nothings, they hardly ever spoke to each other anymore. Day and night, Gravis made love to every last part of Leorino's body, bringing him a truly overwhelming amount of pleasure.

Gravis did not try to break Leorino.

Leorino was not physically fit enough to match his pace in bed the way Ionia had. Their daily bedchamber adventures were already taxing for Leorino, and that was with Gravis holding back.

"Ah... There, yes..."

Leorino was on the settee with nothing but his shirt on, being fellated by the man. His entrance was occupied by fingers slick with lubricant.

Ever since the night when he helped free him from the curse of the aphrodisiac, Leorino had remained in his room, being pleased by Gravis every morning and night.

They barely had a chance to exchange greetings before Gravis was upon his lips. Today was no different. Savoring Leorino's mouth, Gravis slipped his hand down into his underclothes and wasted no time in reaching for his entrance. He had thoroughly fingered him just that morning.

Leorino trembled at the thought that the still-tender spot would be penetrated again with so little foreplay.

Guided by the intense pace of the man's caress, Leorino soon lost control of his body. Easily lifting Leorino's slender body, Gravis laid him on the settee. In no time at all, he disheveled his clothes and put his tongue and hands to task, surprising Leorino by his own body's immediate reaction.

His unwittingly lewd body was quick to respond. But Leorino's mind could not keep up with the speed with which his body was yielding to the man. His mind was left to wander.

For the first round, the man's tongue brought him over the edge, and for the second, he worked him from inside while holding him at the base, and Leorino climaxed without producing anything.

Gravis took great care in showing him his love with his lips and his fingers, teaching Leorino's sensitive body all about sexual intimacy.

"God... I can't..."

When Leorino complained through sobs of pleasure, Gravis gently stroked his cheek. Still, he said nothing.

Gravis hooked Leorino's legs around his muscular shoulders. Grabbing a slender ankle, he traced the scar on his left leg with his tongue. Even that had become arousing by now.

When Leorino broke into tears from the daze of it all, Gravis stroked his nipples soothingly, focusing Leorino's attention elsewhere, reminding him how

much he wanted Gravis's hard length inside him.

His hot flesh throbbed fiercely in demand of the man.

"Relax."

"...Mmm, hng, ah, ah..."

The man brought his tip to Leorino's entrance, which remained soft now that the act had become daily. Then he buried himself inside all at once.

Leorino's fair body stiffened before falling limp. He exposed his pale, slim neck to the man without reserve.

"Ah... Ahh... That's so...so deep..."

"You like that? You're so soft. Look."

"Mnn...!"

Gravis's tongue crawled along the ridgeline of his larynx as he rocked Leorino's sensitive body in a slow rhythm.

"Ah, ah, ah!"

The man's deep breaths and Leorino's labored gasps filled the room.

Over these past few days, Leorino's body had mastered the art of accepting the man's impressive length when carefully loosened in advance, and had learned to climax with no additional stimulation.

But his mind remained at a loss.

Along with his body, Gravis had occupied Leorino's thoughts, leaving him no room to think of anything but Gravis.

"Now come."

"Ah, ah, yes... Ah, mnn, hng..."

The man rocked his hips harder now. The pleasure of his deep thrusts made Leorino's mind go blank. Feeling the man slowly strike his depths, he climaxed

without ever touching his length.

Leorino's mind began to dissociate from his body.

He felt as if he was worthless, a nobody, a doll who would obey Gravis's every last command.

He had many things he wanted to tell Gravis.

He wanted to sincerely apologize for his foolish behavior and find a way to regain the man's trust.

Tears spilling down his cheeks, Leorino closed his eyes.

It was Leorino's guard, Josef, who finally took a stand against such a state of affairs.

Josef knew that Leorino was being ravaged by his fiancé day after day. He advised Leorino to have a proper conversation with the general, but Leorino only weakly shook his head in reply. Josef was heartbroken to see his master slowly drained of energy, hardly ever lifting his head anymore.

And today, too, he must have given Gravis free reign over his body first thing in the morning.

The act had been so intense, Leorino was unable to leave his bed.

Seeing Leorino refuse the breakfast that was brought to him, apologizing with a sheet-white complexion, Josef made up his mind.

Josef paced through the large detached palace in search of the man. When he found him with his valet Theodor, Josef summoned his courage and approached them.

"General...I need to speak with you!"

Gravis turned at the sound of his trembling voice. Acknowledging Leorino's guard, he asked calmly: "Josef. What is it?"

“It’s about Master Leorino.”

At that moment, Gravis’s cool expression turned ice-cold.

“I will not discuss Leorino with you.”

His legs trembled at the quiet intensity of the man’s presence, but Josef endured the intimidation for the sake of his beloved master. It was the least he could do for him.

“...Master Leorino is very sorry for what happened. S-so, I—I don’t think it’s right for you to treat him like that.”

“Your Highness, you do not owe him a response. Back off, Josef.”

Theodor attempted to dismiss Josef with a stern look. Gravis stopped him by raising a hand.

“Such savage valor. But I’ll honor your courage and listen. What is your issue?”

“I agree that it was...unwise for Lord Leorino to be alone with Lord Julian at the soiree. But if this continues, it will break Master Leorino.”

Gravis silently urged him to continue.

Josef stammered, struggling to string words together. Speaking had never been his strong suit.

“He’s depressed whenever you’re not around. Master Leorino loves you, so he silently accepts everything you do. But this is wrong. Other times, he barely lifts his head and he doesn’t eat much anymore.”

Gravis looked to Theodor in silent question. The valet sighed, but affirmed Josef’s words.

“...Indeed, he has lost his appetite.”

“I see. Josef, thank you for your report.”

Gravis was about to turn on his heel when Josef grit his teeth.

“Wait, please! ...General, what do you want from Leorino?”

“Back off, Josef! Know your place!”

Theodor was furious. To a bloodline purist like him, Josef's behavior was scandalous.

It was unheard of for a commoner to speak to a royal like Gravis in such a manner. His role as Leorino's guard didn't make it any more acceptable.

But Josef ignored Theodor's rebuke.

"Please!" Josef exclaimed, and fell to his knees in front of Gravis.

Gravis watched him with a sober expression. "...What do you think prostrating yourself before me might achieve?"

"I'll accept any punishment! B-but I'm not backing down...! Please, stop treating Master Leorino like that!"

Gravis's silent ire brought sweat to Josef's forehead. If Josef's natural instincts were correct, the king's brother was far more fearsome than the seemingly overbearing and fierce Lucas.

"Please...! Please have a proper conversation with Master Leorino. Locking him up like that... Treating him like that without ever speaking... I understand your anger, but at this rate, you'll kill the best parts of Master Leorino!"

Tired of the farce he was witnessing, Theodor stepped in front of his master and admonished Josef.

"Silence, Josef Lev! Now leave His Highness's presence before you can disrespect him any further!"

"...I will not be silent! Mr. Theodor, you know it's wrong, too. Stop pretending otherwise!" Josef shouted back at the valet and looked Gravis in the eye. "Master Leorino, he... Sir, you mean everything to him... He returned to this world for *you*."

"..."

Still, Gravis said nothing. Josef finally exploded.

“If that’s your idea of love, then you’re full of shit! ...Lord Lucas would never be so cruel to him!”

Gravis’s expression stiffened at that.

“I’m... What?”

“I’m asking you not to give up on Master Leorino! Love him tenderly the way he deserves...!”

Josef’s desperate plea brought the face of the lionlike man to Gravis’s mind.

The man who loved Ionia like a warm embrace, even when he dedicated his life to Gravis...Lucas Brandt.

“...Please. I know that you care for Master Leorino more than words can say. Master Leorino knows it, too. That’s why he regrets betraying your trust. That’s why he won’t object to anything you do, no matter how scared or embarrassed he might be. He endures it all as his punishment.”

“...”

“You understand, don’t you? ...Master Leorino loves you so much, he will accept anything you do to him.”

“...I know.” Gravis clenched his fists.

“We should have stopped him... We’re the ones to blame... Master August also truly regrets not doing his part, but Master Leorino wanted to help you in whatever way he could. He came all the way to the royal capital with only that goal in mind. Hasn’t he acknowledged his mistake and apologized already?”

“...Do you even realize how close he was to having his life ruined forever?”

Josef bit his lip and cast his eyes down.

“Yes, his *body* is safe now... But making love to his body and loving him as a *person* are not the same thing.”

“...”

“What do you expect Master Leorino to do with his feelings...?” Josef was running out of steam. “General...please speak with Master Leorino. Don’t force him to live in silence. Please.”

Having said his piece, Josef placed his fists on his knees, ready to receive his punishment. He hung his head, waiting for the verdict.

Gravis remained silent for a while, staring at Josef’s head.

“Did Leorino put you up to this?”

“Master Leorino would never do such a thing. He remains silent and wallows in guilt in his room. I chose to do this myself. So if you’re going to punish someone, please let it be just me... But please, give Master Leorino a chance to start over.”

Theodor warned him coldly, “Josef. If you intend to stay by Master Leorino’s side, you will correct your devastating manners and language.”

“...Yes, sir.”

Theodor sighed in exasperation and looked to his master. Silently looking down at Josef’s sand-colored hair, Gravis eventually answered quietly:

“I believe I see your point.”

Josef raised his head timidly. When his eyes met Gravis’s, he froze.

A chill ran down his spine as he gazed into Gravis’s ice-cold eyes. But when Josef conquered his initial fear and observed him closer, he saw that those starry-sky eyes were no longer angry.

“...Leorino is lucky to have such a good guard.”

“Your Highness, how will you punish him?”

“I will not. I forgive you for your rudeness. Josef, I accept your criticism.”

Josef anxiously looked up at Theodor. His gaze seemed to ask if he was really forgiven, and Theodor nodded silently with a forced smile.

“I’m sorry for calling you savage,” said Gravis. “Thank you for having the courage to advise me.”

“O-of course...”

It appeared his gamble had paid off. The general seemed to be taking it well.

Josef had been prepared to be harshly punished, but now, as the tension left his body all at once, he helplessly sank to the floor.

His approach had been reckless, but thinking about how Josef took a bold stance for the sake of his master, Gravis’s eyes softened.

“...I see you’ve been watching Lucas.”

“Huh...?”

“I’m impressed you could see the kindness in a man like him. I can see why Dirk likes you so much.”

Hearing that, Josef felt blood rise to his cheeks.

“...I’m cruel...,” Gravis said. “It hurts because it’s true.”

Josef suddenly deeply regretted his comment comparing Lucas to Gravis. He was in no position to speak about the men’s love or how they showed it.

Only Ionia and Leorino could do that.

“Leorino loves you. That’s why he puts up with it... He’s been putting up with so many things for so long.”

“I understand. I’ll take it to heart.”

Josef still struggled to address Gravis with the appropriate level of formality. Still, the young man’s feelings for his master were clear. Theodor couldn’t chide him for that.

“So then, will you listen to what Master Leorino has to say...?”

“...Yes. I promise that I will listen to Leorino.”

Hearing that, Josef finally relaxed his tense shoulders in relief, an awkward smile on his lips.

Sins No Death Can Cleanse

Theodor silently followed several paces behind Gravis. They had known each other for over thirty years now.

Theodor had been raised in the royal palace from a tender age to become Gravis's attendant. As his childhood friend, Theodor could usually surmise what his longtime master was thinking.

Gravis was exceedingly brilliant from an early age, and as a member of the royal family, he was the most perfect prince one could ever hope for.

Perhaps his greatest misfortune was that, as the second prince, he had been born with qualities superior to those of his older brother.

Theodor was likely the only person who knew how difficult Gravis's life had been.

The prince was caught between the expectations of the queen dowager, his attachment to his brother the king, and his loyalty to both sides, all between countless attempts on his life.

His sense of duty to protect the peace and stability of the kingdom was the yoke Gravis had been burdened with.

Besides Theodor, the only other person who had noticed Gravis's anguish was the late red-haired young man.

And it was this young man, Ionia Bergund, to whom Gravis was willing to devote his heart, even at the cost of his royal responsibilities.

His master had been walking in silence, but eventually murmured through a strained laugh: "I can't compare to Lucas, can I?"

"Lord Leorino loves you."

"I know he does. I do not doubt Leorino's feelings. I doubt if I am worthy of him."

The face of a man as radiant as the sun appeared in the servant's mind.

Theodor had loathed Lucas Brandt from the moment he met him.

He was a man of valor with an easygoing disposition, and was altogether a very charming human being. This made everything that came later all the more unforgivable to Theodor.

Ionia had been special to Gravis, but Lucas easily crossed the barrier of status and openly coveted him. No matter how much his master wished for it, he could not stand next to Ionia, but Lucas had done it with no effort at all.

In those days at the academy, Lucas stood proudly next to the red-haired young man without fearing what others might think. They walked in the light of day, shoulder to shoulder, laughing together.

Meanwhile, Ionia had been chosen to be Gravis's human shield, leaving Gravis alone in the darkness, tormented by the fear of losing Ionia.

Gravis could only spend time with Ionia under the veil of night.

At the time, the three-year age difference between them must have been significant. Without realizing that his feelings were love, and unable to give them a definite form, Gravis blindly pursued Ionia.

And still, Lucas became Ionia's significant other, taking away what meager time they had together from Gravis.

The second son of a count, renowned for his valor, and a prince in the midst

of a struggle for the throne. Lucas had continued to inadvertently flaunt the freedom of being able to be with the person he loved to his heart's content right to Gravis's face, and Theodor despised him for it.

Gravis had long since accepted his fate. If anything, he seemed to have forgiven Lucas after Ionia's death.

Gravis had given up on freedom and love, and Theodor had watched it all unfold more closely than anyone, ever since they were children. That was why Theodor continued to hate Lucas in his master's stead. He had no other choice.

But what Theodor hated more than anyone else was himself.

He had been the one to smother the love between Gravis and Ionia.

If any sin could be said to be eternally irredeemable, it would be his.

It was Theodor who told Adele, the queen dowager, that Gravis had feelings for someone.

Theodor believed that Gravis was the most appropriate candidate for the throne. To place Gravis on the throne, Ionia's existence, and his status as a commoner and a man, would only get in the way.

Ionia could alleviate Gravis's loneliness, but he also stood in the way of his ascension to the throne.

Theodor's heart went back and forth, and eventually his feelings tangled themselves into a knot he could not begin to unravel.

Should he protect his master's heart, or the future of the throne? Theodor ultimately left the decision to Adele.

As he had expected, the queen hastily arranged a betrothal for Gravis and went to put an end to Ionia's feelings herself. She wanted Ionia to replace his yearning with loyalty to Gravis, who was to become king.

Ionia accepted the queen's words and was sent away to the most remote region, effectively erasing him from the royal capital. At that point, everything seemed to be going according to plan.

That was, until Ionia's life was cut short at Zweilink, and his master's heart turned to stone for good.

After the war, all the soft, warm parts of his master's heart had been left barren. Only the mission of defending the country left behind by Ionia had taken root in that scorched earth and kept Gravis's soul attached to the world of the living.

Gravis most likely knew that it had been Theodor who told the queen dowager about Ionia, but he had never blamed Theodor for any of it.

One day, Gravis had brought back Ionia's sword—the only thing he left behind—from Zweilink and delivered it to his parents' blacksmith shop.

Theodor could remember his master's back as he silently accepted the tearful words of pure venom from Ionia's father.

It was then that Theodor became aware of the gravity of his own sin.

He was a mere mortal. Who had given him the right to tear apart two souls that had been so naturally drawn together? The royal and the commoner...the difference in their blood, the same sex that could produce no children—he had ruined so much for such trivial reasons.

But the soul of the young man had returned to his master. His personality, his appearance—in every way, he was completely different than before.

But Theodor could tell. Their love for Gravis was the same. He could tell, because he had watched, from closer than anyone else, that presence that touched his master's heart.

From the moment Leorino appeared in his life, Gravis regained his tender feelings before Theodor's eyes.

His master was haunted by the fear that he might lose his beloved all over again. Even if that were his fate, Gravis refused to accept it. That was why, as in the present case, any danger that Leorino found himself in made Gravis lose his grip on his anger and caused him to turn to extreme measures.

But Theodor did not possess the words to change his master's mind.

"I must have made a mistake."

"...No, my lord, that's not—"

"I wanted him to stay in my hands without having to worry about anything. It was all one-sided, and I thought I could make him happy the way I saw fit...just as I did with Ionia. 'Full of shit' might just be an accurate description."

Gravis laughed at himself dryly.

"This is the only type of love I'm capable of. It's all I know."

Theodor understood the meaning behind Gravis's words.

"...Is my Fanoren blood at fault?"

Theodor listened in silence, his heart crying out in protest.

Gravis faced the darkness that had taken root in his heart.

"I wanted Leorino to spread his wings. I still do. But I can't. Now that I have him...I don't want to lose him again."

Gravis wanted to enclose Leorino in his hands and protect him from the slightest hint of wind. Gravis didn't want Leorino to grace anyone else with his gaze. And of course, he would never allow anyone to take Leorino away from him.

The person he loved, and everyone else. He was aware of the cruel balance between attachment and indifference in his heart.

Gravis loathed the blood that flowed through his veins. It was as if he had the same qualities as his father, the king, who was obsessed with his concubine and neglected Gravis's mother, his queen, and her son.

Gravis cast his gaze off into the distance.

"I thought I had taken after my mother's...after Francoure's blood. The blood of Francoure, strict in our duties."

"Half of you consists of Fanoren royal blood. If that blood makes you who you are, then you must accept it." Theodor's voice was quiet as he answered. "You should consider having a sincere conversation with Lord Leorino as Josef suggested."

"And what if my heart refuses to budge after we speak? What then?"

"Then please be honest with Lord Leorino and simply tell him you don't wish to lose him."

Gravis looked into the eyes of his faithful servant.

"...Did you not object this time because Leorino is a nobleman?"

Theodor gazed back at his master with calm eyes.

The history of unspoken anguish between the master and servant, treading the same path since childhood, was laid between them.

"I realize that one life is not enough to atone for my past sins."

With these words, Theodor slowly bowed his head.

Leorino closed the book he was reading to keep his mind occupied, thinking it was nearly time for Gravis to return home.

The thought of sleeping with Gravis again today brought both melancholy and joy to his heart.

These feelings confused Leorino, but by now he accepted them as a matter of course.

Ever since he had been brought to the palace, he had nothing but time to think.

Day after day, Gravis's intense touch fell upon him without saying a word. He poured pleasure into him, nearly to the point of overflowing, but Leorino was already aware of Gravis's fear lurking behind these acts.

Gravis was more afraid of Leorino getting hurt than Leorino himself.

He had told him many times to take care of himself. But Leorino had not expected the feelings behind those words to be so sincere.

The kisses all over his face he felt when he was on the verge of losing consciousness. A voice fondly whispering his name. A long arm that tightened around him, knowing he was hurting Leorino and yet unable to let go. Gravis's silent pleas had poured into Leorino's body, and finally, Leorino arrived at an answer.

The choice to leave everything in his hands.

The courage to admit his own weakness and inability to fight.

He would wait for Gravis somewhere safe, to assuage the fear of losing him that had taken root deep within. Leorino had quietly made up his mind to do just that.

If he was honest, it hurt Leorino to admit that he was a weakling who needed someone's protection.

But the most important thing to him was Gravis's heart.

Leorino had to discard his pride as a man and his desire to fulfill his own ambitions. He didn't mind being helpless, or their love being entirely physical. If anything, he wanted Gravis to love him more, to desire him harder.

Leorino had finally come to believe that if this would reassure Gravis at least a little, then it would be the right choice.

It appeared that Gravis had actually returned. The attendant made his presence known first, and the man he had been waiting for entered behind him.

"I'm back."

"Welcome home." He rushed to greet the man and was as usual embraced by Gravis's long arms.

Leorino unconsciously relaxed his body to accept him. Although Gravis would usually immediately lay his hands on Leorino, his lips didn't touch him once, and his clothes remained untouched.

Leorino had buried his face into Gravis's chest, but now raised his head and asked with his gaze if something was wrong. Gravis looked down at Leorino with a somewhat pain-stricken expression.

"Vi?"

"...Your guard scolded me. He said I was trying to kill your heart."

"Josef... He told you that? What could he mean? Did he bother you?"

"He told me to speak with you. And that locking you up like this and having my way with you will break you one day."

Leorino was surprised. He rushed to bow his head.

"Josef must have been concerned... I apologize for him."

"No, I don't blame him. On the contrary, he hit the nail on the head."

It had been a long time since Leorino had exchanged so many words with

Gravis. Their twinkling starry-sky and violet gazes met.

“I’m sorry, Leorino. I must have scared you.”

“...Vi.”

“I can hardly control myself when it comes to you. I have come to realize it all over again.”

Leorino clutched at his chest.

“No, I’m also to blame... I wanted to prove to you that I could be as useful as Ionia, and I did something reckless. I really, really regret it.”

“I don’t expect you to be the same as Ionia.”

Leorino nodded. “I’m aware. But somewhere deep inside, I was still putting on airs...and in my foolishness, I betrayed your trust.”

“I can tell you’re sorry. I heard that you fought back. You were doing your best to be strong, but I ignored that. You must’ve worked hard.”

“But in the end, I couldn’t defend myself.”

“Still, you obtained valuable information from Her Highness Eleonora. I’m having Ginter look into it now.”

“No, I, uh, I shouldn’t have interfered. I’m sorry.”

Hearing Leorino express so much remorse, Gravis furrowed his brow. He then embraced Leorino’s thin body and apologized himself.

“...I’m sorry. I never intended to hurt you. I didn’t want to let you out into the world. I didn’t want anyone to take you away from me.”

“Vi.”

“My eyes have been opened. I realize now that what I should have done was to suppress this selfishness of mine.”

They had both been thinking about giving the other what they wanted at the

very same time. Leorino got the strange impression that their hearts had aligned perfectly with this coincidence.

“...I almost wished I could stay here so you could make love to me for the rest of my life, Vi.”

Leorino wondered if Gravis had felt the same way. His hard, strong body relaxed. Then he made a small noise deep in his throat.

“Are you saying you were prepared to go along with this crazy obsession of mine?”

“Prepared... I just realized that no matter what happens, I’d be happy as long as I got to be by your side.”

Gravis finally spoke the words that had been plaguing his mind.

“I’m afraid of losing you. That’s my greatest fear.”

“...I know.”

“If I lose you, I might succumb to despair for good this time. I realize it’s pathetic for a man my age to admit this... Nevertheless.”

Gravis wanted to cherish Leorino and give him a reason to smile for the rest of his life. Those feelings were real. But he could never let go of him. Leorino understood the man’s sentiment.

“I know.”

Leorino put all his strength into his arms as he returned the embrace.

“...Vi. Gravis. I’m really sorry for worrying you. I realize that I am foolish and immature. I promise not to do anything reckless again.”

“Please, don’t ever leave my arms again.”

Leorino rubbed his forehead against Gravis’s chest and agreed.

“It would appear that I belong at your side.”

“Leorino, that’s...”

Leorino looked back into his beloved’s eyes with all the affection he could muster.

“If my being safe makes you strong, then let me stay in your arms forever.”

Gravis’s face crumpled.

Leorino’s soul was willing to give up its freedom for Gravis’s sake. He had offered to tie himself to the yoke on Gravis’s neck.

“...Will you accept me, even though I cannot allow you to live as freely as you may wish, the way Lucas would?”

“...? What does Lucas have to do with anything?” Leorino tilted his head.

“Lucas would have allowed you to live true to yourself, without any restraints, and loved you all the same.”

Leorino wanted to tell Gravis that the comparison was based on the wrong premise.

He had never desired to live true to himself. He only wanted a reason to stay at Gravis’s side the way Ionia had.

“Ionia was happy being loved by Lucas, but I am happier being with you like this, no matter what it takes.”

“...I see.”

They remained in a silent embrace for a while longer.

Gravis finally felt the fear of losing Leorino slowly calm. He was relieved that his maddening obsession had not completely destroyed the brave soul who was trying so hard to be there for him.

It was that guard who had opened his eyes.

“I’m sorry I ignored your feelings in bed. I understand if you...don’t want me to touch you anymore.”

Leorino immediately shook his head.

“I hated being unable to speak with you. But...other than that, I enjoyed it. I’m glad I can accept you fully now.”

So keep making love to me, he implied, his cheeks blushing.

“Forgive me for my foolish behavior. Please allow me to stay by your side.”

Gravis hugged him tightly, careful not to break the lovely being in his arms.

Leorino also tightened his hands around the man’s back as best he could.

“I hope to become half of your heart one day.”

The Hidden Destination of the Flower

Gathered at Gravis's palace after receiving his summons were the men who knew about the allegations concerning the Marquis of Lagarea: August, Margrave of Brungwurt; Lucas, the lieutenant general; Chancellor Ginter; Dirk, the general's adjutant; and Ebbo Steiger.

Gravis's valet Theodor, as well as Leorino and Josef, were already waiting at the palace. Leorino was allowed to attend their meeting for the first time.

Gravis had given his permission.

He regretted being so overprotective and was giving Leorino a chance after all the time he had spent in Gravis's chambers.

The hour was already close to midnight.

Leorino sat with his hands clasped nervously and an anxious look on his face.

As soon as Ginter saw Leorino, the chancellor smiled in a way Leorino had never seen before. Ginter eagerly approached him, gently lifted Leorino's slender hand, and peered into his stiff face.

"Leorino, I'm so glad to see you're doing well."

With his grayish hair and tall, slender body, he looked much the same as he did when he was a boy. Nevertheless, his face was different now. Ginter was a year older than Lucas and had been chancellor for nearly ten years now. In that time, he had become a respectable man with a dignified appearance.

“Good evening, Chancellor Ginter.”

“Please, call me Marzel. You are special.”

“But...isn’t that rude?”

Ginter had been this way with Leorino since reuniting with Ionia, whose memories dwelled within him.

Leorino was puzzled as to why Ginter was so friendly with him.

“I’m jealous you’re on first-name basis with Lucas. Please, for old times’ sake, call me by my name, too.”

“A-all right.”

Hearing him insist on it, Leorino wasn’t left with much of a choice. He nodded politely and smiled. Ginter watched him with fondness as if he couldn’t get enough of the sight.

The men who knew Ginter’s usual disposition could only chuckle. He was doting on Leorino like a loving grandfather. Only August, Leorino’s father, watched him with an inscrutable expression.

The atmosphere was awfully relaxed, as if they weren’t about to discuss what each of them had found out about the alleged treason of the Marquis of Lagarea.

But the men could tell. Ginter had noticed Leorino’s nerves at a glance, and was trying to help him relax.

Lucas calmly smiled at Leorino. “Leorino, just let him pamper you. Marzel can’t help but adore you.”

“Of course... Thank you, Marzel.”

Leorino nodded and looked up at Marzel, placing his free hand on top of the one Marzel was holding. Ginter intently gazed into the violet eyes of his late friend, a pleased smile on his lips.

Ginter’s behavior was not an act. He truly had a soft spot for Leorino.

Watching them together, Lucas remembered the time he told his best friend about Leorino's secret.

Usually extremely pragmatic, Ginter readily accepted that Leorino was the reincarnation of Ionia. Without a moment's hesitation, he believed Leorino's story and offered to help.

Since then, every time he saw Leorino, he couldn't help but dote on him.

Lucas once asked Ginter why he was so quick to trust Leorino.

Once upon a time, when Ginter had taken a liking to Ionia, it was also in the span of an instant. He wondered what the two of them meant to Ginter.

Ginter's answer was succinct.

He dealt with the ugly desires and ambitions of human beings day in and day out, and he found the presences of Ionia and Leorino healing.

Ginter had been born into a distinguished family that had produced chancellors for generations, and sensing people's intent had become second nature.

Although Leorino and Ionia were different in both appearance and personality, the selfless loyalty and devotion that lay at the core of their souls were the same. Lucas's longtime friend said that every time he saw them, it restored some of his faith in humanity.

Lucas knew exactly what Ginter meant.

Selflessness. That one, irreplaceable value.

"Leorino, it's all right. You deserve to be here. We shall expose the truth you brought before us of the betrayal eighteen years ago."

"Of course... Marzel, thank you."

"Yes. Please keep calling me Marzel. That's perfect."

Leorino smiled.

Noticing Ginter's concern, Leorino looked at him with gratitude, and Ginter patted him on the shoulder in encouragement.

Leorino's nerves seemed to have eased. The men watching him breathed a sigh of relief.

"Ginter, it's about time for you to stop bothering Leorino and take a seat," Gravis ordered, glancing at Ginter with gratitude in his eyes. Ginter gave a small nod in return.

"Forgive me. I don't get to see Leorino very often, so you see, I simply got carried away."

Ginter stood up reluctantly. When he told Leorino he was looking forward to chatting with him again, Leorino enthusiastically nodded in response.

"Let us begin."

As Gravis's words signaled the start of the meeting, the men instantly turned their focus to the topic at hand.

Leorino's shoulders tensed once more as the room turned solemn.

Josef placed his hand on Leorino's shoulder from behind to calm him down. From the perspective of the experienced, mature men, Josef was still too unreliable to take their eyes off of him. Nevertheless, it was clear that, in his own way, the young man paid much attention to the state of his master's heart.

Gravis decided to leave Leorino in Josef's capable hands and continue the conversation.

"Ginter, tell us what you have found out in regards to what Leorino heard from Princess Eleonora."

"Yes. Then, if I may."

Ginter nodded. Leorino swallowed.

“The seraglio records are overseen by the Palace of the Interior, so it would have been difficult to examine them under the watchful eye of the Marquis of Lagarea. For that reason, I checked the records from the relevant time period from within the Palace of Foreign Affairs, which as we all know is under the jurisdiction of His Highness Prince Gravis, to see if they mentioned any foreign princesses being accepted as concubines. The documents were old, and not particularly informative, but the relevant records remained.”

“Well done. Did you learn anything?”

“Yes. It is true that sixty-eight years ago, a royal princess from a small northern country was sent to King Tyrone’s palace as a hostage, so to speak. This is consistent with Lady Eleonora’s testimony.”

“From which country?”

“A land called Lürik. We have a record of her name. The princess was named Marfa Ladoga.”

Lucas frowned in thought.

“Lürik? ...Can’t say I’ve ever heard of such a country.”

August, the oldest of the group, seemed to recall something at the name. “At your age, I certainly wouldn’t expect you to. Lürik faded into obscurity long ago. I’ve only seen it on the maps of my youth. It was one of the small northern countries annexed by Zwelf. It was smaller than Brungwurt, and at the time it was cozying up to both Fanoren and Zwelf, trying to decide whose side to take.”

“The princess of Lürik was sent to the palace of King Tyrone, the grandfather of His Highness. The princess was then given to the former Marquis of Lagarea, and later gave birth to Bruno Henckel?”

“But why is it said that the mother of the Marquis of Lagarea was the daughter of a minor nobleman? If they had said she was royalty, small as her country was, his royal lineage could have benefitted him.”

When Dirk raised the question, the men groaned and fell silent. At that moment, Theodor opened an old book he had brought with him and showed it to his master.

“Your Highness, we received this from the spy you had sent to the Lagarea domain. He delivered the relevant church records after disguising them by switching the covers... Here are the marriage records of the former Marquis of Lagarea.”

The men peered into the old book on the desk. The records were nearly seventy years old. The paper had deteriorated to the point where the text was difficult to read, and the ornate script made it illegible.

“It’s old calligraphy. I couldn’t read it if I tried.”

Dirk gave up and pulled away. The others did the same. Theodor held out his hand and offered to read it out to them, but Gravis lifted the book himself and began to examine the records.

“...Indeed, I see a record of a marriage between the former Marquis of Lagarea and a woman named Marfa, but Marfa was not a ‘Ladoga.’”

“And her age? How old was this Marfa?”

“It says she was seventeen.”

Gravis replied to the chancellor’s question. In return, Ginter showed him the records from the Palace of Foreign Affairs.

“Marfa Ladoga is listed as sixteen years old. If she was given to the Marquis of Lagarea within the year, that could explain the discrepancy.”

Lucas visibly wrinkled his nose. “A concubine at the age of sixteen...? No one should have to do that for their country.”

But August groaned in a hoarse voice. His expression was grim. “No... If you think about it, if Marfa had been a concubine in the first place, it would have been impossible for her to marry the Marquis of Lagarea.”

“What do you mean, Lord August? Wasn’t Marfa taken to the palace as a

concubine?”

“She couldn’t have been, Lord Lucas. Which means...Marfa may not have been King Tyrone’s concubine at all.”

Ginter nodded with a frown. “Lord August is right. If Marfa had become an official concubine, it would have been impossible for her to have been given to the Marquis of Lagarea in the first place.”

“...What do you mean?”

“The Royal Marriage Act.”

When the men made it clear those words clarified little, Ginter carefully explained.

“According to the Royal Marriage Act, men of the royal family are not permitted to divorce their partners, unlike nobles and commoners. Instead, they are given the privilege of having multiple concubines in addition to their spouse. If King Tyrone had broken that law, it would have become a major scandal. But we know for a fact that did not happen...which means...”

“Princess Marfa was not given the status of a concubine, so she could have been given to the former Marquis of Lagarea as his wife,” August finished in disgust. The men’s expressions all turned somber.

No matter how small her country, a royal-born princess had been summoned to the king’s personal harem, was denied the status of a concubine, and was passed on to a vassal instead. Whether or not the king had laid his hands on her, she had been treated like a royal mistress. For all it mattered, she could have been a common whore.

Leorino also seemed to have arrived at that conclusion.

“Then they treated Lady Marfa like a... She was only sixteen, and a princess... That’s dreadful...”

Hearing his heartbroken murmur, the men fell silent. If it was true, the king’s

status would not have made the decision any more acceptable in terms of diplomacy or morality. It was heinous behavior, utterly worthy of contempt.

Lucas looked at Gravis. But it was his valet, Theodor, who responded to the man's gaze, unconsciously filled with disgust and pity for the royal family. Theodor glared back at Lucas with a deadly glint in his eyes.

But Gravis himself did not seem particularly bothered by the slander befalling his grandfather's conduct.

"...Perhaps it was because of the way King Tyrone treated the princess that Lürik had chosen to join Zwelf instead of Fanoren."

At the sound of August's hoarse voice, Ginter nodded.

"It's certainly possible. The princess was sent to the palace on the assumption that she would be taken as a concubine. Not only was that promise not kept, but within a year she was passed on to one of the king's vassals. I can't imagine the humiliation and wrath Lürik must have experienced. If only their kingdom had been stronger, they would have declared war on the spot."

"Small country or not, the pride of its royalty must have suffered. If the royal line of Lürik lives on within Zwelf...we are beginning to see a possible connection between the Marquis of Lagarea and Zwelf."

Ginter summarized everything they had learned: "They changed the princess's surname and disguised her as the daughter of a minor nobleman, likely to keep the matter concealed. 'Ladoga' was the family name of the Lürik royal family. At the time, many people likely knew the Lüriks, small as their country was... Denying her the status of a concubine, treating her like a royal mistress, and then sending her away to a vassal would have caused an instant scandal."

Gravis pondered it for a moment and began to flip through the church records.

"Your Excellency? What are you looking for?"

“The birth records for Bruno Henckel.”

“...Do you suspect that the time of the marquis’s birth is in question?”

Everyone looked to Ginter. The men had guessed what his words meant, their faces turning rigid.

The sound of Gravis flipping through the pages in silence echoed through the quiet room.

“Considering his age, it should be around here, but...this is strange. The son of a feudal lord, yet the date of his birth is not recorded in the church records of his domain? How could that be possible... No, wait.”

With that, he continued to flip through the old pages. Eventually, he found the entry he was looking for.

“There it is. An entry for the date of the baptism of Bruno Henckel, son of Samael Henckel and Marfa. Theodor, when do baptisms usually take place?”

Theodor answered immediately. “The nearest Sunday six months after the date of birth.”

Gravis nodded and calculated in his head the time between the marriage and the baptism. After a moment, his face grew ever more severe.

“...If my calculations are correct, then Marfa gave birth to Bruno Henkel seven months after her marriage to the former marquis.”

Except for Leorino and Josef, the faces of all the men in the room went slack. Eventually August murmured in a hoarse voice, “Your Highness...this is serious.”

Leorino looked between Gravis and his father, unable to follow the conversation. He was shocked by the words that left Gravis’s lips next.

“Yes. The months don’t add up. It is possible that Marfa was already pregnant when she was sent away from the palace.”

Gravis’s starry-sky eyes flashed darkly.

“If what these records show is true, the Marquis of Lagarea may be...the illegitimate son of my grandfather, King Tyrone.”

What Was Once Love

Gravis's voice rang out in one of the rooms of his palace in the middle of the night.

"It makes sense now that he would have a special ability that so often manifests in royalty. If he's the half brother of my late father, that means he's an uncle of mine and His Majesty's. It's no surprise he would possess a Power... Being the half brother of the king, he was just like me."

"Your Highness, you are the son of the queen dowager! The Marquis of Lagarea was born out of wedlock. You are nothing like him. You must not lower yourself to his level," Theodor argued vehemently.

"Theodor, I am simply describing the nature of the relationship."

The faithful servant reluctantly nodded at his master, who urged him to calm down.

Josef spoke to Dirk, seeming to have remembered something. "That old housekeeper told us that Edgar's mother had delivered a nobleman once. And Edgar's brother said they could afford a comfortable life because of their mother."

Dirk nodded. "Yes. That's it. Edgar Yorke's mother must have helped deliver Marfa's baby when the timing of her pregnancy wasn't adding up."

"So you think they entrusted the princess to an apprentice instead of a proper midwife because they wanted to keep the birth a secret?"

"Most likely. In return for her help in the secret birth, Yorke's mother received

a large sum of money. And to keep the entire ordeal a secret, she was driven out of the domain and came to the royal capital... It's all coming together now."

"I see. So that's the connection between Edgar and the Marquis of Lagarea."

Ebbo knitted his brows at their speculation.

"You're concluding that simply because his mother was a midwife, and Edgar hadn't even been born at the time? That's supposed to be his connection to the Marquis of Lagarea?"

Leorino hesitantly answered Ebbo. "I imagine that if the Marquis of Lagarea knew about Edgar's mother, he would one day come to erase her memory to keep the circumstances of his birth a secret."

Dirk hummed and brought his hand to his chin. He recalled what else the housekeeper had mentioned. "From what the Yorke family housekeeper told us, I believe that the Marquis of Lagarea or someone related to him visited Edgar before he entered the army. It was the year Lady Brigitte passed away, just as Edgar was coming of age."

Ebbo nodded. "It was right around that time that I was approached by the Royal Army. When the marquis found Edgar's family in the royal capital, he may have learned of Edgar's ability. That's when he figured he might have some use for him."

Gravis stopped the group before they could get too far into the realm of conjecture.

"It's obvious that the connection between the Marquis of Lagarea and Edgar is Edgar's mother, who had served as the midwife. But as for the Yorke family, further speculation is futile. We will likely never find evidence for any of it. Dirk, continue to investigate the connection between Edgar Yorke and the marquis along other lines."

"Yes, sir."

Gravis clapped his hands to regain the men's attention.

"To summarize what we have learned so far: The Marquis of Lagarea is of Fanoren royal blood and likely knows his origins. That much we know. But he has been loyally serving our kingdom for decades, so we can assume the issue of his bloodline is not his primary driving force."

The group considered this.

It felt as if they were close to the essence of the matter, but they were still unable to find any conclusive evidence of the motive, which left them beyond vexed.

Leorino timidly opened his mouth.

"Vi...I think what the headmaster said might be relevant after all."

Gravis looked at Leorino, his brows knitted. Lucas also considered it.

"At this point...it could be."

"What is it, Lucas? What are you referring to?" Ginter asked on behalf of everyone else.

Lucas answered, "The headmaster leaked this information to Ionia at the time. The Marquis of Lagarea was in love with Lady Brigitte, the mother of the current king, before she got married."

"Leorino, is that in Ionia's memory? He heard that Lady Brigitte, King George's concubine, was in love with Bruno?" August had never heard of this before, and questioned the authenticity of the memory.

Leorino nodded toward his father. "Yes. It may not have been so blatant as to be an overt rumor, but the headmaster was a bloodline purist and said that it made her unfit to be the mother of the next king... I'm sorry... It was a scandalous thing to say."

Leorino wisely refrained from saying anything further. He recalled how the headmaster had made an impassioned speech on how Gravis was deserving of

the throne.

“The former king’s affection for Lady Brigitte is well known, but do you think the rumor about the Marquis of Lagarea could be true?”

“...I don’t know. This was before I was born...but my late father and the marquis were only one year apart in age. One, the crown prince, the other a bastard child rejected from the royal family... The marquis may well hold a grudge if he lost the woman he loved to my father, given the circumstances.”

Ginter once more outlined their theory.

“The Marquis of Lagarea’s mother was Princess Marfa of Lürrik, who had been sent away from the royal palace while pregnant with King Tyrone’s child. We suspect that the princess secretly gave birth to the king’s illegitimate son, who then became the heir to the former marquis. He is the Marquis of Lagarea we all know. How he learned the secret of his own birth remains unclear. In his adulthood, he lost his significant other to his half brother, the crown prince, who took her as his concubine.”

It was certainly a complicated relationship. What twisted tale of love and hate had brought the marquis to this? Leorino brought his hand to his throat and bit back the emotion welling inside him.

Theodor continued. “Lady Brigitte was adopted by the marquis in order to marry into the royal family. In other words, she became the adoptive sister of the Marquis of Lagarea.”

“The son of a woman who was royalty but could not become a concubine had given his significant other to the king as a concubine, not to mention making her his adoptive sister... If this is true, then he had lost his royal status, his significant other, everything that ever mattered to him, all at the whims of the royal family,” Lucas spat, his words weighing heavily on the hearts of the men in the room.

Gravis clasped his hands together and took a deep, slow breath. “I suppose his motive is a grudge against the royal family after all.”

No one dared speak.

“So, grievance as the motive for betrayal. The reason may be as simple as that. But simple as it may be, people easily fall into madness when they are deprived of love.”

The men responded with silence. They could not find the right words to say to Gravis.

“If everything we just discussed is true, it is we, the royal family, who owe the Marquis of Lagarea an apology.”

“...Your Highness.”

“My grandfather, my father... I wonder if they realized their throne was built on sacrifice and sorrow. The thought that their blood flows through me makes me sick.”

It was Leorino who reacted to his words. Walking up to Gravis’s side, Leorino clasped the man’s hand and dropped to his knees. He silently gazed up into his eyes.

Gravis smiled faintly, as if to say he was all right, and squeezed Leorino’s hand back.

The men watched the two of them in silence.

“The last war began when the marquis’s half brother—the king, my father—fell ill. To destroy the country, he joined forces with Zwelf, who had annexed his mother’s country of origin—that must be the truth behind the betrayal of the Marquis of Lagarea.”

“Vi...”

Hearing Leorino's concerned voice, Gravis once more nodded to assure him he was fine. Then, with a calm expression, he urged the chancellor to continue. "Ginter. What we need is more solid evidence of treason."

"Yes, sir."

"What about the flow of iron out of our country, and the financial situation of the Marquis of Lagarea?"

"Unfortunately, as far as domestic tax payments are concerned, this, too, is under the jurisdiction of the Palace of the Interior. I was unable to investigate in detail. However, regarding the amount of iron flowing out of the country that can be ascertained from the Palace of Foreign Affairs, I have reviewed all the records since the last war, and the total amount of iron produced, distributed domestically, and exported abroad matches the total amount recorded for the entire country."

"I'd like to see some hard evidence of treason, but I suppose it won't be that simple..."

Everyone sighed deeply.

Gravis mulled it over.

"Theodor, I don't care how trivial it is. Did the spy find anything suspicious in Lagarea's domain?"

"No, my lord, nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary. The marquis's domain is a source of iron, but there seems to be no change in the amount of iron produced. There was, however..."

"However?"

"Now, it might be completely unrelated, but I was told that in the last few years, working men have been going missing in the mines of that region, and that the residents refer to it as 'the curse of the mines.'"

Gravis's eyebrows twitched.

"The curse of the mines? Did anything similar happen outside of the mines?"

Theodor looked over the report.

“No, I’m afraid the disappearances were... No, one moment, please. Outside of the mines, there have been a few disappearances here and there. Only men. Of prime working age.”

“Are there any records of the occupations of those who went missing?”

“...? Would their occupations be of import, sir?”

“Just tell me.”

“We lack the information for some of them, but... Wait... This is...”

Theodor’s eyes widened. When he looked at his master, Gravis’s eyes urged him to continue.

“They all seemed to be miners or...blacksmiths.”

At that moment, Gravis exchanged glances with his adjutant. Next, he looked to Lucas and Ginter. They, too, nodded, their expressions rigid.

“...That was our blind spot.”

Dirk groaned. “Dammit... Is this what my father was worried about?”

Leorino reacted with a start. The father Dirk was referring to was David Bergund...Leorino’s father from his previous life.

“Vi, Dirk, please tell me. What does the missing people’s occupation have to do with this?”

It was Gravis who answered. “It was not *iron* that the Marquis of Lagarea was sending abroad.”

Leorino’s violet eyes flickered with anxiety as Gravis brought him to his feet. He then took both of Leorino’s hands in his.

“...Leorino, listen. There are signs that Zwelf will soon wage war with us. By the end of this year, or in the spring at the latest, we will likely be at war with Zwelf again...a repeat of eighteen years ago.”

“...Is this really happening?”

Leorino was shocked. The men watched his paling face with concern.

“Yes, it’s all true. War is coming. And this time, our opponents will be fiercer than before.”

“Fiercer...?”

“According to the information we acquired, Zwelf has hired the mercenary state of Gdaniraque. They obtained the necessary funds through iron.”

Leorino was surprised.

He looked at his father, August, who apparently already knew. He nodded with a stern look on his face.

“Zwelf sent arms via Gdaniraque to the warring Jastanya Islands in the east. That enriched their treasury and provided the money to hire Gdaniraque. But there is a limit to the how much iron is in Zwelf’s possession. So we suspected that the Marquis of Lagarea, with his iron mines, was secretly sending iron out of the country. But...”

“Lord Leorino,” Dirk spoke up, “my father told me that recently, in the blacksmith’s union in the royal capital, there’s been talk about union members disappearing. Men who never got into any trouble suddenly vanished without a trace.”

“What does the iron have to do with blacksmiths going missing? You don’t mean...”

Leorino looked at Dirk with wide eyes. Dirk nodded.

“Perhaps it is not iron that the Marquis of Lagarea has been secretly sending abroad, but ironworking technology...which is to say, human beings with the skills to make weapons.”

“No...! But to kidnap so many people without anyone noticing... If these kidnappings are taking place not only in the Lagarea domain, but also in the royal capital, there must surely be witnesses. And yet, that doesn’t seem to be an issue. How can that be possible?”

Sudden disappearances in the Lagarea domain.

Blacksmiths going missing in the royal capital. Vanishing without a trace.

Theodor added in a grim tone, “According to the report, the men who went missing disappeared abruptly, just as Dirk’s father described.”

At that moment, Leorino had an epiphany. Then his face turned sheet white.

No way, no way, no way.

Leorino looked to Ebbo, who had also gone pale. Ebbo’s face was filled with anguish. They had come to the same conclusion.

Next, Leorino turned to Gravis.

He could see that the same answer was already forming in Gravis’s mind.

Yes, Vi had said the same thing. Someone among our enemies had the same Power as him.

Eighteen years ago, that boulder had suddenly appeared to block the gates of Zweilink.

Who could have done that?

After the war, Fanoren had been enjoying peace and stability. However, behind the scenes, the enemy had already been steadily encroaching on their daily lives.

It was tempting to turn his eyes away from reality, but even so, he couldn’t help but confirm his suspicions.

“Vi...the disappearance of the blacksmiths, was it the work of someone with the same Power as you?”

His face rigid, Gravis pulled him closer.

“The same person who brought that boulder before the gates that day is...still with the Marquis of Lagarea, kidnapping our craftsmen for the next war?”

Hearing Leorino’s heartbroken murmur, the men clenched their fists tightly. Gravis’s arms also tightened around him.

“If it comes to war...will the fighting reach Zweilink again...?”

“Yes. But I will not let that land turn to a sea of fire again. I promise. You can rest assured.”

So many lives will go up in smoke again.

The flames of that day flared in Leorino’s mind.

Were the flames that took the lives of so many soldiers that day caused by the vindictiveness of a man whose life had been toyed with by the royal family?

No flames... Please, not again.

But Leorino’s wish was in vain. The footfalls of war were already steadily approaching Fanoren.



The Footfalls of War

Gravis and Leorino's wedding ceremony was set to take place on an auspicious day of the coming spring in accordance with the conditions set by Leorino's father, August.

This was done out of concern for Leorino in the event that something should happen to Gravis in the upcoming war. He was, after all, the general of the Royal Army. Once Leorino became royalty, he would not be permitted to divorce and would never be able to return to the Cassieux name again. In that case, Leorino would end up under the custody of the royal family, and the Cassieuxs would not be able to regain guardianship of their youngest son in case of an emergency. This was what August feared most of all.

Leorino had already been returned to his family estate.

When his father told him the reason for the timing of the marriage, Leorino watched him with sadness in his eyes for a moment. Finally, he lowered his gaze and bowed his head, saying only: "I understand."

The possibility of Gravis never returning was the last thing Leorino wanted to imagine. But given his position, it was a reality they all had to consider.

After uncovering the secret of the Marquis of Lagarea, Leorino's heart became shrouded in layers upon layers of darkness.

Underneath the glamorous glimmer of the royal court lay countless tears and anguish.

Beneath the peace and stability, betrayal and hatred had spread like insects multiplying under floor stones.

Leorino had already realized that nothing could be simply divided into good and evil.

Childish longing was not enough to stand side by side with Gravis. It was a poison that would eat away at his heart, and he needed the resolve to drink it regardless. He needed the resolve to stand next to the man he loved, his chin held high, undaunted, unmoved by that poison.

The day before August and Maia returned to Brungwurt, Gravis paid a secret visit to the Brungwurt residence.

The family had already eaten their farewell dinner. No one mentioned the upcoming war, cherishing the last meal they would share for the foreseeable future.

August, Leorino, and Gravis gathered in the study.

Ever since he had learned the secret of the Marquis of Lagarea, August appeared shaken.

“Father...did you ever sense what the Marquis of Lagarea was hiding in his heart?” Leorino summoned his courage and asked his father.

The Marquis of Lagarea’s betrayal was inexcusable. But Leorino was still searching for some hint of human emotion in August, despite knowing it would only make things harder.

“...Bruno and I are on a first-name basis, but in truth, he is nearly ten years my senior. We grew closer when...Maia and I requested our marriage be considered by the royal family.”

“Did you and Mother also need to go through the royal court’s deliberations when you wanted to get married?”

August nodded.

“Indeed. I met Maia by chance, and it was love at first sight. I would have done anything for her to be my wife.”

It was the first time Leorino had heard the details of how his parents’ relationship came to be.

“Maia’s father, the Duke of Wiesen, had a grandmother who was royalty, and Maia’s mother is Her Royal Highness Princess Eleonora. You see, the royal blood in Maia is very strong. My grandmother also hailed from the Fanoren royal family. The Fanoren blood shared by our families makes me and Maia second cousins... Leorino, we’re just like you and His Highness Prince Gravis.”

August sighed deeply.

“...Perhaps we should be glad you’re a man. If you were a woman, your blood would have been too closely related and you might not have been able to marry His Highness.”

“Is closely related blood an issue?”

“Yes. Children born to blood relatives often struggle to grow, or are born with some weakness in mind and body.”

Leorino looked up at Gravis with anxious eyes.

“This is all hypothetical,” Gravis said. “You are a man, and our blood will not be passed on to the next generation. It’s not something you need to concern yourself with.”

“I see...”

“Yes. But the issue was that Maia and I could have children. We were considered a suitable match, but there was always the possibility that we would not be allowed to marry due to the proximity of our blood. It was Bruno...the Marquis of Lagarea, who had already been working at the Palace of the Interior, who backed our decision.”

So, without the support of the Marquis of Lagarea, Leorino and his brothers

would have never been born.

At that moment, August stared into the distance as if he had suddenly remembered something. Eventually, he heaved a deep sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose tiredly.

“Father...?”

“...I remember now. At the time, Bruno had said: ‘If you raise them with love, surely your children will be happy.’”

Gravis and Leorino gasped. August continued in a trembling, hoarse voice. “I took those words as a blessing for our future children.”

Leorino rushed to wrap his arms around his father. August hugged Leorino back.

After a moment, August pulled away and looked up at Gravis, who had been watching them in silence, the old man’s wrinkled face twisting.

“Your Highness...when I leave this room, I will regard Bruno—nay, the Marquis of Lagarea, as a traitor...but for now, I must apologize. I want to mourn the loss of...a friend.”

August asked to be left alone. The two men agreed to leave the study.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Leorino leaped into Gravis’s arms. He rubbed his forehead against Gravis’s, trying to hold back the tears pressing at his eyelids.

“I thought I could never forgive the man who killed Ionia, the traitor who brought war upon this country.”

“...Indeed.”

“But now...I don’t know if I can simply loathe that man...!”

“Leorino.”

Was the man his father had considered a close friend for so long just another lie crafted by the Marquis of Lagarea?

He was a kind nobleman who had doted on Leorino since he was little. He could hardly believe that the man who had told his father that his future children would be happy had a heart filled with loathing and betrayal.

“I don’t believe that a man who wished for me and my brothers to be born would lie to my father... I don’t want to believe it...!”

When did the Marquis of Lagarea learn the secret of his own birth?

Did his parents love him?

The former marquis likely realized that the child was not his, yet he still made Bruno his heir. Leorino wanted to believe he loved both the mother and child.

What about his mother, Princess Marfa? Was she still able to love the son of a man who had treated her like a whore and sent her away to his vassal?

Leorino could not imagine how much resentment and anguish the Marquis of Lagarea had hidden behind his mild expression.

But not even the most lamentable personal history could justify betraying his country.

Still, it was all so wretched. If all of this was due to the misdeeds of two kings in a row...

“...Vi, my heart hurts. I don’t know how I should feel anymore.”

He recalled the words of the king and the queen dowager.

Leorino understood that this was the dark side of royalty that had maintained its grip on Gravis from the day he was born.

The blood flowing through Gravis’s veins kept him bound, and the shackles Ionia had only glimpsed grew heavier and more vivid as they weighed on

Leorino.

And yet, Leorino possessed no solution. He was completely helpless.

“...Are you afraid to abandon the Cassieux name?”

“...No.”

“Do you regret your choice to become a Fanoren?”

“No!”

The arm on his back tightened around him. Leorino shook his head.

“I don’t regret anything. I choose to walk this path with you... It’s only that...it hurts.”

With an anguished expression, Gravis embraced Leorino’s slender body.

“I didn’t want you to see this side of the royal family.”

“...I still want to be with you.” And yet, Leorino couldn’t help the tears stinging in his eyes. “But somehow, this is heart-wrenching.”

How do you define “evil”? What is betrayal anyway?

If evil was born of loneliness and despair, who did the souls of its victims hate, and how could they be saved?

Throughout those peaceful days, there were happy times and there were sad times.

One came not long after Leorino’s parents had returned to Brungwurt. It was the news that Erina, the wife of Leorino’s eldest brother, was pregnant.

Erina planned to wait until she felt better before moving to the royal capital, where her family resided.

But rather than a homecoming, it was an evacuation to prepare for the war against Zwelf.

What cast a shadow over Leorino's mind was the fate of Julian Munster, after what he had done.

Gravis of course knew that Julian had drugged Leorino and attempted to assault him. The Duke of Leben made no excuses and was prepared for his entire family to be punished.

As it turned out, however, neither Julian nor the Duke of Leben received any official punishment.

There were three main reasons for Gravis to withhold severe punishment.

Firstly, he did not want to damage Leorino's reputation by making the incident public. The second reason was the possibility that Julian had been manipulated by the Marquis of Lagarea, although this was not something they could openly discuss. The third was the duke's contribution to the country. Julian was acquitted in recognition of his father's loyalty, including the provision of funds for the expansion of Brungwurt's military.

Still, Julian would never be allowed to see Leorino again. If he was found to have done so, he was told that he would be exiled, no questions asked.

Soon after, Julian's engagement to a princess from another country was announced. It was an entirely political marriage. That was Julian's punishment.

At a soiree held at the end of the summer at the royal palace, Leorino saw Julian from a distance. For Leorino, it was the first soiree he had attended since it was publicly announced that he was to be Gravis's spouse.

Neither Gravis nor Leorino had much interest in social gatherings, but when

they were hosted by the royal family, they had no choice but to partake.

Julian was the center of attention as he appeared accompanied by a foreign princess to whom he had just gotten engaged. Standing near the throne, Leorino watched them.

All the guests were eager to congratulate Julian and Leorino on their respective betrothals.

It happened when both their companions' attention was elsewhere.

Leorino turned around at the intense gaze he felt from afar.

For that brief moment, Julian and Leorino's gazes met again.

They were so far apart that their voices couldn't possibly reach the other. Julian looked straight at Leorino, and moved his lips, forming them in the shape of a few short words.

There were dozens of people between Julian and Leorino. But the words that Julian pronounced alongside his piercing gaze reached Leorino's ears regardless.

Leorino closed his eyes.

He wished he had not thought of going to see Julian to apologize that day. If only he hadn't done so, the days would have simply passed, the Marquis of Lagarea never getting involved, and Julian might have given up on Leorino and eventually found someone else to love.

But there was no point in thinking about what might have been.

Leorino's foolish, reckless behavior had brought about this conclusion. There were no happy endings in sight, only Julian's ruin and despair.

But Leorino also knew that it would be arrogant to assume that everything had been his responsibility.

He recalled Hundert's words.

“Relationships require decisions from both partners.”

Just as Leorino had made a mistake, Julian had erred as well.

Leorino considered Julian part of his extended family. Julian should do the same and give up on him. Even if they never crossed paths again, they still had the rest of their lives ahead of them.

Leorino cast his eyes to the ground for a moment, as if to free himself of the plaintive gaze cast at him from afar.

Eventually, he lifted his chin again, as if nothing had happened.

Standing beside him, Gravis squeezed Leorino's hand. Leorino looked up at the man, wondering if he had noticed. Gravis met his gaze and said nothing. He remained silent and tightened his hold on Leorino's hand just a little to reassure Leorino he trusted him.

At that moment, the warmth of Gravis's hand put an end to Leorino's regret and doubt.

Half of my heart is already in Vi's hands.

Leorino squeezed Gravis's large hand back.

After that, peaceful life in the royal capital ostensibly continued as usual.

Leorino regularly traveled to the royal palace to receive education from Queen Emilia and Theodor on his future role as a royal spouse. In the absence of a wife for the crown prince Kyle, Leorino's status as a royal spouse made him

second only to Emilia, despite the difference in gender.

Emilia was Adele's niece. For two generations in a row, they had married into the Fanoren royal family from the neighboring country of Francoure. However, she was a plump woman with a kind smile. She did not look much like Adele, who had a slender figure and brilliant beauty.

Unlike Adele, Emilia did not have a great influence on national politics, but she was aware of her responsibilities as a member of the royal family, which was a clear sign of her Francoure lineage. She was a wonderful queen to her country in a different way from the queen dowager.

Leorino grew fond of the gentle queen who would soon become his sister-in-law. That being said, she was almost the same age as his mother, so she felt more like an aunt than a sister. Emilia also doted on Leorino, who was much younger than Kyle, as if he were her own son.

Out of consideration for his frail constitution, Gravis had already instructed the royal court to unburden Leorino of any official duties. For that reason, Leorino was only expected to learn the necessary etiquette for royal ceremonies and diplomatic formalities.

In the quiet days that followed, Gravis and his men secretly sent a scouting party into Gdaniraque to obtain solid evidence of the Marquis of Lagarea's treachery.

They believed that the ironworkers kidnapped by the Marquis of Lagarea were kept confined somewhere in Gdaniraque and forced into labor.

It was the royal family's prerogative to punish the Marquis of Lagarea on circumstantial evidence alone. But in order to do so, the craftsmen who had been abducted and forced to manufacture weapons had to be rescued first.

According to Ginter's secret nationwide research, they could confirm over thirty craftsmen from the Lagarea domain and nearly twenty from other areas had gone missing in the past three years. Even so, the full extent of the abductions was something they likely could not verify yet.

The first step was to locate the craftsmen. However, Gdaniraque was a mercenary state and did not have a clear national entity. The search for where the kidnapped were being held was extremely difficult.

One day, Alois, Gravis's other adjutant, burst into his office.

"Your Excellency, Francoure and Gdaniraque have finally clashed on Francourian soil!"

Tensions ran high among the leadership of the Palace of Defense at the news.

An emergency meeting was held. Upon hearing the report, a deep frown appeared on Lucas's fierce face.

"Francoure and Gdaniraque are already at war?"

"I don't know if war has been officially declared yet. Besides the main route to our country, Francoure has suffered considerable damage from Gdaniraque, including skirmishes at the port. It appears that the king of Francoure couldn't stomach it any longer."

Gravis stood up.

"I'm leaping to Francoure to discuss matters with my uncle."

"Sir!"

"I'll be back the day after tomorrow. Lucas, you'll be in charge while I'm gone."

"Yes, sir."

Gravis looked back at Dirk. "Tell Theodor to contact Leorino."

"Yes, sir."

“Alois, you’re coming with me. Hold on to me...we’re leaping!”

Fanoren and Zwelf had been on the brink of a confrontation.

But it was the clash of their respective allies that became the initial trigger.

Erina's Evacuation

The short summer in the royal capital came and went.

Gradually, the days grew shorter, and cooler air blew in from the north. As the trees in the capital changed colors and brown leaves began to fall, Erina arrived in the capital with a slightly rounded belly.

"My dear sister, I'm so glad you're here! I can't imagine the trip was a comfortable one."

"Oh, Leorino! Thank you for coming out to meet me. Fortunately, we took our time on the way, so I've been feeling all right."

Pregnant with her first child, Erina looked healthy and radiant. Leorino was thrilled to welcome his sister-in-law's safe arrival to the royal capital.

No one seemed particularly concerned about whether the newborn would be a boy or a girl. The child would be the new hope of the Cassieuxs. They would surely be a joy and comfort to all members of the family.

"But Leorino, we have more important matters to discuss. You have decided to marry His Royal Highness the King's brother. I knew you were different from others but...I certainly wasn't expecting this. Congratulations."

"Thank you. Was Auriano surprised?"

Erina laughed softly, remembering Auriano's face when he heard the news.

"He locked himself in his study all day and refused to come out. When he finally left it the following day, he looked positively wretched—I think it came to

him as quite the shock.”

He could imagine Auriano’s reaction. His eldest brother was strict, but he adored Leorino as much as his father did.

“My brother must have been heartbroken. Is that why he accepted Julian’s marriage to the Lambardian princess?”

Hearing Erina sigh, Leorino smiled without a word. Perhaps sensing something from his reaction, the wise Erina grinned and went on without mentioning Julian again.

“In the final month of pregnancy, I will return to my parents’ house. Until then, I’ll be staying here with you. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Of course. It’s been a long time since you’ve been back in the royal capital, so I hope you’ll get a chance to spend some time with your close friends and get plenty of rest until the time comes.”

“Thank you, dear.”

Leorino could sense the resolve in Erina’s smile.

Typically, as the due date drew nearer, many noblewomen retired to their domains. Nevertheless, Erina understood that she was sent back to the royal capital in order to keep her safe, given the likelihood that Brungwurt might soon become a battlefield.

Her husband, Auriano, remained in their domain. There was a chance she would never see him again. But Leorino was impressed by Erina’s courage as she tried her best to act in her usual cheerful manner, and realized all over again how strong of a woman she truly was.

Erina was to spend some time at the Brungwurt estate, and, welcoming the future margravine into its halls, the mansion suddenly felt bright and beautiful.

When she first returned to the capital, Erina actively invited her friends to the Brungwurt estate, enjoying their company for the first time in a long while, but eventually, the visits stopped. She was concerned about inadvertently troubling Leorino, as she could sense some of her friends wanted to use the opportunity to connect with him only because he would soon become royalty.

Instead, she was regularly visited by his mother. She also did some shopping for her baby, which mostly helped to dispel her boredom and the occasional bouts of depression.

Recently, even Gauff, who lodged in the Imperial Guard's quarters, had started showing up surprisingly often.

The men of the Cassieux family were determined to provide Erina with anything she might need, given her role in passing on their bloodline to the next generation, and they pampered her as if she was their greatest treasure.

It was one month after Gravis visited Francoure. The men who knew about the betrayal of the Marquis of Lagarea once more gathered in secret.

Leorino and Ebbo Steiger were not there. Leorino voluntarily declined to participate in the meeting, saying that he had told them everything he knew and that there was nothing more he could contribute. Meanwhile, Ebbo had been reassigned and was already stationed at Zweilink in preparation for the coming war. Such was his wish.

“We have found out where the missing craftsmen are being kept.”

The men tensed at Gravis's words. Dirk spread a map of the continent on the table.

“Are they somewhere in Gdaniraque, like we expected?”

“Yes... Here. The place appears to be called Merhelique, it's on the eastern edge of Gdaniraque.”

Gravis pointed to an area in the far east of Gdaniraque, near the edge of the

Agalean continent. It wasn't labeled on the map.

Dirk investigated the map for a while, nodded, and pointed to a spot.

"Look. This is a tributary of the river that flows from the mountain range on the border between Zwelf and Gdaniraque. And see, it connects here to...the Marzwal River, which flows into the Gdanis Sea, where the Jastanya Islands are located."

The men looked at the map and hummed in agreement.

"They transport the iron from Zwelf by boat, then have craftsmen turn it into weapons here. The weapons are then shipped back up the river."

"According to the report, Zwelf's craftsmen are also forced to work here."

The men nodded in disgust, wondering if Zwelf was forcing even its own citizens into labor, with no regard to appearances.

"To think that our own people are being forced to work so far from our kingdom..." Ginter groaned.

Lucas's expression also turned irate as he clenched his fists. "We must rescue them immediately."

But Gravis shook his head. "We're not sending in troops yet."

"Why not?!"

"I want to leave the Marquis of Lagarea at large for a while longer. If we rescue them now with a major combat operation, Zwelf or Gdaniraque may contact Lagarea, so we will wait until the war begins."

The men hummed at the general's decision. It was the correct strategy. But on an emotional level, they wished to rescue the workers as soon as possible. Gravis nodded reassuringly at the men's torn expressions.

"When war breaks out and the lines of communication are disrupted, I'll bring

the craftsmen back all at once.”

The men stirred at that.

“All on your own...? That’s too dangerous!”

“I’ll be fine. I can carry a few dozen people at a time. I hate to leave my people in danger until the war, but we’ll have to remain patient a little longer.”

“...Sir.”

“That is the most efficient strategy. I’ve already leaped to Merhelique. I have the location right here.” Gravis pointed to his own head.

The men’s eyes widened. His adjutant could hardly believe his ears.

“Sir...you mustn’t do such reckless things without telling us. To think you were out there all alone... That’s too dangerous.”

“Not at all. My feet didn’t even touch the ground. Nobody saw me.”

“Hm? What do you mean by that?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

The plan for the rescue mission was as such: Gravis would use his ability to send a scouting party to Merhelique and infiltrate it beforehand. After that, he would divide the craftsmen into several groups and have them escape to pre-designated rendezvous points. That would be the role of the scouting party.

From there, Gravis would first move each group to a secure location in Gdaniraque. The multiple long-distance round trips would otherwise be too great a drain on his stamina.

Once all the men were gathered in one place, he would bring them back to Fanoren in one final leap.

The men sighed.

They would not be of any use if the plan was something that no one but Gravis could carry out. In truth, they realized that the most efficient way to

organize the operation in the distant Merhelique without the enemies noticing was to rely on the general's special ability.

"The craftsmen will then remain in Lord August's lands until the war settles down. Brungwurt is a good place to hide a large number of men."

"I still wonder if the men were abducted by someone with, well, the same unusual ability as you, sir?"

Gravis nodded at that.

"Yes. I had prior contact with one of the kidnapped craftsmen. According to him, a tall man with the appearance of a kindly merchant approached him. He testified that the scenery suddenly changed and he found himself in Merhelique."

"A tall man with a kindly merchant-like appearance...?"

Dirk bit his lip in frustration.

"A man with the same unusual ability as Your Excellency would be difficult to catch. I hope we can at least get a better idea of what he looks like..."

Gravis nodded toward his adjutant once more.

"If he's the same man who transported the boulder to Zweilink eighteen years ago, his Power must be impressive. It's no small feat to kidnap people without leaving a trace."

"...Wouldn't that mean Your Excellency could just as easily kidnap someone if you wished to?"

Gravis raised his brow at his adjutant's words.

"It would. I could even bring the King of Francoure here in an instant."

The men exchanged glances. If it came down to it, he could abduct the King of Zwelf and imprison him. The thought that this might be a way to avoid this war crossed their minds for a moment.

"But if we are to make effective use of this Power, we need a base of operations."

“A base...? What do you mean?”

“It means I can’t simply leap to an unknown location. I have no bases in Zwelf.”

“Of course...?”

“If I want to abduct the king, I need to know the structure of the royal palace in more detail. I could leap to the capital, but... I see, I should try to infiltrate the royal palace of Zwelf to get a better grasp of it.”

“Please don’t do anything rash.”

“It doesn’t need to be rash. Leap with a few soldiers and solve several issues in one fell swoop—it’s not entirely out of the question.”

The general began to seriously consider it, but his second-in-command suddenly interrupted his train of thought.

“If you can leap to their capital... Sir, you don’t mean you’ve done it before?”

“I have. During the last war. I was going to kill that war criminal Vandarren, but I couldn’t find where he was imprisoned, so I ran out of time and gave up.”

“...Your Highness. What the hell have you been doing without our knowledge?” Lucas asked in exasperation. Gravis had just admitted he had once leaped to the capital of Zwelf intending to kill the king.

“...How could you risk such a thing?!”

Theodor’s lament was met with a forced smile from Gravis, who waved off his concern by saying that it was a long time ago.

“How did you get to Merhelique this time?”

“I start from a place I’ve been before and leap in the appropriate direction. I repeat the process little by little to get a better understanding of the area. That’s also what I did this time.”

“...Good to know?”

“I don’t know what I will find when I leap. First, I leap high above ground.

Then I try to descend to the roof of a building or a safe place in my sight.”

Theodor reproached his master with an even more frightening expression. “So you mean to say that you have been to Gdaniraque many times before. Our kingdom has no formal diplomatic relations with that country, so...when was this?”

“I was young and stupid. I simply thought it couldn’t hurt to prepare a good number of bases for leaping purposes. I didn’t do anything dangerous.”

Hearing that, the men heaved another deep sigh.

They knew physical distance mattered little to Gravis due to his special ability. He must have been traveling around the continent all by himself, unbeknownst even to his valet. It was beyond reckless.

“...What does the Agalean continent look like in your mind, sir?”

A person without any special abilities could not comprehend how the world must have appeared to Gravis.

Gravis pondered the question for a moment, wondering how best to explain it.

“Let me think... We all have a sense of direction, don’t we? North, south, and so on?”

They all nodded.

“If I am the center, all the places I’ve leaped to in the past are flickering in my mind. In all directions.”

“...Flickering?”

“Yes. It feels as if all the locations are flickering in my mind, in front and behind me, left and right. They’re not quite glowing, but when I connect them together, they more or less form the shape of the continent. Does that clarify anything?”

It didn't clarify much at all.

Lucas had closed his eyes, seemingly trying to recreate the sensation.

"Each location has its own distinctive flicker, with the nearer locations being brighter and stronger, and the more distant ones weaker. They are scattered in all directions from where I am standing, and the lines connecting them form a net. If I follow the structure of that net, I can leap wherever I want to... Does that help?"

The answer was no, but at the very least, the men understood that Gravis existed in an entirely different world from everyone else.

"What happens when you run out of Power?"

"The lights grow dim, and it feels as if the thread to my desired location has been cut. That's when I sense I can leap no farther."

"Pardon me. I might as well ask now, but what did you mean when you said earlier that you would leap high above the ground and then move on from there?" Ginter asked.

"...It'll be faster to show you. This is what I meant."

With that, Gravis suddenly vanished from the men's sight. They were all startled.

"I'm here."

A voice came from above. They looked up in a panic and saw Gravis holding onto a ceiling beam.

"Whoa!"

"This is how I leap above ground, though I usually leap many times this height."

Everyone looked up at the ceiling, their mouths open. The next moment, Gravis vanished once more. He suddenly appeared at roughly the height of

Ginter's head.

Ginter instinctively flinched away. Then the man disappeared again.

"...?!"

And then Gravis was back to where he had been standing, as if he had never moved at all.

"Just like that. I leap high into the air, and before I hit the ground, I look for a safe place to land, then leap again. That's what I always do when I go somewhere new."

The men exhaled in unison. They had all been exposed to unusual abilities before, but seeing Gravis's Power in action always reminded them that it was incredibly special.

"In truth, it's more difficult than simply leaping long distances. The finer the travel, the more it wears me out, but it's also safer."

"...I'm realizing all over again that special abilities are truly superhuman Powers, a blessing from God."

"I wouldn't be so quick to call it a blessing from God. The abilities are used at the cost of one's life. Overuse kills the user. The reason Ionia was stabbed by Edgar Yorke that day was...because he used too much of his Power and was unable to move."

The men were silent. The special abilities made the unthinkable possible, which made them tempting to rely on, but at the end of the day, human bodies had their limits.

Gravis forced a smile. "Carrying a few dozen men out of Merhelique will not be an issue. I will bring back the abducted people safe and sound."

"I understand that we must keep the Marquis of Lagarea in the dark. We shall leave the rescue operation to you, Your Excellency."

Dirk looked around at the men and raised his hand. "Your Excellency. I have

something to report as well.”

“What is it?”

“You once said that the plan for the Special Forces that Ebbo Steiger and my brother were in was drafted during General Stolf’s time. So I asked the Stolf family about it.”

General Stolf had passed away fourteen years ago.

“The family introduced me to his second-in-command, who is still alive. I found some rather interesting information at his house... Here it is.”

With that, Dirk presented a thick stack of papers.

“What are we looking at?”

“A record of General Stolf’s activities. It describes when the plan for a special unit made up of ability users was drawn up thirty-five years ago... Here, it says that he consulted the Palace of the Interior about gathering information about our citizens to find people with special abilities from among the commoners.”

The men stood from their seats. Dirk nodded.

“There’s our connection,” he said. “It says here that the person consulted at the time was Bruno Henckel, who was then second-in-command to the Secretary of the Interior.”

It was not definitive evidence.

But the suspicions concerning the Marquis of Lagarea only deepened, and the facts leading to the truth about the betrayal were connected like a net.

“The Marquis of Lagarea knew in advance of the plan to select people with special abilities and create a special unit...”

“It is possible that this was also when he learned of Edgar Yorke’s existence.”

Dirk nodded at Ginter’s words.

Lucas gritted his teeth. “He personally gathered the commoners with special abilities...and sent them to their deaths. Just like with the craftsmen, does he

think the lives of commoners are his to toy with?”

Gravis looked around at the men he had gathered. “Yes. There can be no justification for sacrificing innocent people for the sake of revenge against the royal family, no matter how valid the marquis’s reasons may be.”

The men nodded. Gravis declared in a low voice, “We will win the coming war. And we will hunt down the Marquis of Lagarea, expose his crimes to the world, and serve him the fate he deserves.”

As the trees in the royal capital lost all their leaves, the clashes between Francoure and Gdaniraque intensified. By now, the people of Fanoren were beginning to hear rumors of an upcoming war with Zwelf.

Anxieties about the impending war swept over the royal capital.

At long last, Zwelf declared war on Fanoren.

All before full-blown winter could arrive on the Agalean continent.

Departing For War

“I will soon be leaving to rescue the kidnapped craftsmen.”

Gravis was visiting Leorino in his bedroom. His visits were always unannounced and sudden, but that was why Leorino longed for the moments he would arrive.

In recent times, it was only once every few days. Gravis would come to see him before bedtime, for half an hour at most.

Leorino always sat on his bed, waiting for the moment to come.

It reminded him of the time Ionia lived in the dorms, back when Gravis was still a boy and came to visit him every night before bed.

Now they were nineteen years apart in age.

Leorino was glad to be able to spend the same sort of time with him, creating his own version of Ionia's memories.

But today, the man's visit was painful.

“So you've discovered where they are being held?”

“Yes, at long last. It's a village, too small to even be on the map. They are being forced into labor processing iron. It's in the far east of Gdaniraque. I must get them out before the season turns cold.”

Leorino understood how Gravis's mind worked by now.

“I suspect you've already been there in person.”

Gravis smiled. Ionia's memories had taught him all about the man's nature.

"Yes. We have already made arrangements for the rescue operation."

He could vaguely remember Gravis's fighting style.

Given his position, the man rarely saw any actual combat. But even if he found himself crossing swords with an enemy, Leorino knew that he was quite the skilled warrior.

Above all, his special ability was unparalleled.

That was why Leorino believed Gravis could bring back the kidnapped people. He would never be defeated.

Still, the uneasiness in his chest was not something that could be solved with reason. Its cause was Leorino's frustration with his own uselessness, his inability to fight by the man's side.

After executing the rescue mission, Gravis would go straight into battle and head for the frontline command.

Given Gravis's non-committal relationship to physical distance, he might even return to the capital once in a while.

But Gravis was the general of the Royal Army.

Once the conflict was well underway, he would not have the luxury of coming to see Leorino. It would be a while before they could meet like this again.

"...Can we win this war?"

"Of course. I do not envision us losing."

Leorino hoped that the words of the man who didn't even consider defeat an option would wash away the anxiety in his heart.

"I realize they have raised funds, but is Zwelf in a position to fight a war?"

“I can’t say for certain. They paid reparations to our country for over ten years, then they built up their military for this war. The last war was an invasion due to starvation caused by the cold snap... The people of Zwelf likely still live in poverty.”

Leorino felt crestfallen. War required money. When he thought of the innocent people starving under a foolish monarch, he couldn’t help but wonder if there was anything they could do to stop this war.

That was the one major difference from when he was Ionia. Only after losing the ability to fight did Leorino begin to wonder if there was a way to resolve the issue through dialogue instead of combat.

“I believe this war is actually being orchestrated by Zberav, the general of Zwelf’s army, using King Vandarren as his puppet. I am told that he is a man of great loyalty to the king...but if we were to capture someone, he would be the first man I would look for.”

“What about Gdaniraque?”

“It’s hard to say. It is a country in name only, where mercenaries from groups of different sizes come together and call themselves a nation. It does not have explicit diplomatic relations with any of its bordering countries. In truth, there is very little about them we know for certain.”

Leorino knew just as little about Gdaniraque.

“What’s certain is their strength. Gdaniraque has no monarch. Instead, the man who controls the largest group of mercenaries is named the general. The man on the front lines of this war won’t be him, but the leader of the second largest group, Lieutenant General Hannibal Barca.”

Hannibal Barca—an unfamiliar foreign name.

“We don’t know who he is or how he fights, but he is rumored to be a ruthless man. The battle at Zweilink will likely be fought by the Gdaniraque army under his leadership.”

“I see.”

Leorino was dejected. He thought he had come to terms with needing to be protected, but it was still frustrating that he could not fight on his own when push came to shove.

He wanted to go with Gravis. He wanted to have the Power required to be entrusted with Gravis’s back. Even without Ionia’s unique ability, if Leorino had at least been blessed with a strong, robust body like his brothers, he would have been able to fight by his side.

Leorino looked at his helpless hands and muttered, “Vi, I’m afraid of being apart from you.”

“...I’m afraid of leaving you, too.”

Leorino lifted his gaze and watched Gravis.

“Vi...”

“I’m sick with worry at the thought that a man with the same Power as mine is among our enemies. To think that such a dangerous man is on the loose... The mere thought he could find and kidnap you sends chills down my spine.”

Leorino exhaled.

He was not alone in his fear.

Physical strength was of no importance. Both Leorino and Gravis were afraid to leave the other because they had already entrusted half of their hearts to each other.

Hadn’t Ionia been afraid? How could he have chosen to part from this man after that last night in the dorms, when their bodies had been melting into each other?

“...Come here.”

Gravis extended his hand to Leorino. As he approached, Gravis pulled his

slender body close and held Leorino fast to his chest.

The next moment, they were standing in the bedroom of his palace.

Leorino tightly embraced Gravis's muscular body. Gravis squeezed Leorino's thin body back. Then both of them moved, their lips meeting.

"...Vi... Vi... I love you. So much."

"Leorino, shall we make love?"

When Gravis lifted him, Leorino keenly clung to his neck in a sign of approval.

Leorino also wanted to feel him.

He was laid on the bed, and his body was opened more fiercely than ever, as if at the mercy of the elements.

Accustomed to the man's touch, Leorino was quickly brought over the edge.

"Oh... Vi... Ah, ah!"

Overwhelmed by the heat spreading through his body despite his climax, Leorino shook his head, tears welling in his eyes.

He felt himself softly melting under the caress of Gravis's fingers, the touch of his lips. Leorino had already been sobbing with pleasure from the moment Gravis brought his tongue to his entrance.

Now he was being rocked on top of the man's strong, firm hips, with Gravis's girth deep inside him.

Each time he frantically attempted to catch his breath, he clamped down around the fullness of the man's flesh, driving himself ever closer to release.

In the bedroom, Gravis was always gentle and exceedingly careful, taking into account their difference in size, but tonight, he ravaged Leorino to his heart's content.

Gravis took him far more artlessly than usual, but Leorino felt no pain. If anything, the bliss of it all was mind-numbing.

Accepting everything Gravis had to give, Leorino desperately endured the overpowering pleasure.

“This position again? Could we, perhaps...”

Leorino wasn't partial to being placed in the man's lap during the act.

The inability to escape on his own aroused an instinctive fear inside him. Having all his erogenous zones stimulated in this state, he could quickly feel his mind slipping away as he fell into deep ecstasy.

When they had made love in this position before, the pleasure was so immense that Leorino could hardly tell left from right by the end. That memory returned to him with no small amount of shame.

He shook his head, tears spilling down his cheeks, but tonight, that meant very little.

Gravis had not climaxed yet. His already impressive length was stone-stiff, as it rammed Leorino's sensitive inner walls, making him sob with no end in sight.

“I want you to enjoy this. Here, I'll help you. Try moving yourself.”

“Ah... Ah, that's so, deep... I... God!”

Leorino's rational mind was desperately trying to resist, but in reality, his body had already accepted the pleasure, relishing the fullness deep inside him.

“You love being fucked, don't you? ...You look so innocent, but a little unraveling and...look what becomes of you.”

As if spurred by Gravis's words, Leorino had begun to sway his hips on his own.

“Ah... Ah, that's so good... Vi... Yes.”

“You like it here, too, don’t you?”

“Ah... Yes... Mmm, mnn.”

Gravis rolled his thumbs over Leorino’s nipples. He whimpered and arched his back. Each time he did, his insides would twitch and contract, making Gravis squirm with pleasure.

Leorino’s entrance held him tight at the base, but his bloodshot inner walls were hot and tender as they enveloped Gravis’s flesh. His depths were twitching, sucking on Gravis’s tip like an eager lover.

Ever since the first time Gravis meticulously made love to Leorino and taught his body the tune of the act, it took very little to make him sing.

Gravis drove his hips harder than before. Leorino frantically clung to him with strengthless arms.

“Ah, you’re...so...deep...”

His soft, wet flesh lay agape as the man’s tip slowly pried open his narrow depths with overwhelming force.

“Ah... Ahh...”

Leorino endured the breathtaking sensation with tears streaming down his face.

The moment Gravis entered him deeper than ever before, Leorino tumbled into a world of white.

All anxiety, all helplessness vanished. Only the wave-like sensation of being rocked by the man remained.

The moment Leorino climaxed with a wordless scream, Gravis slammed his length into Leorino’s sweet, soft depths.

“...Ngh.”

“...Ah...”

Gravis slowly pushed Leorino's slender body onto the bed, remaining inside him. Gravis's length still rigid despite his release, he swayed his hips in a comfortable rhythm and stole away Leorino's every last breath.

"Oh... Vi...I can't..."

"Just...just once more."

The man stiffened again as he moved his hips, spreading his liquid passion inside Leorino.

Gravis spread Leorino's legs wide open, lifting his hips as they rested against Gravis's thighs. Gravis then resumed his preferred rhythm. Leorino sobbed.

"W-wait... Vi... This is..."

"Does it hurt? ...Your body would suggest otherwise."

It didn't hurt, but there was something frightening about achieving such deep pleasure only from within. The impossible depths of his body Gravis had reached were twitching shamefully, savoring the man, happily devouring him.

"Leorino... Leorino, I love you."

"Ah, agh... Ah, ah..."

Leorino's thin body was passionately rocked over and over, only his shoulders and head touching the bed.

No longer touching Leorino's chest, nor his member slick with fluid, Gravis used only Leorino's sweet hole, thoroughly ravaging him.

It was a sweet and suffocating time. But Leorino was delighted. For the first time, Gravis was indulging in Leorino's body without restraint and without reason. That made him happier than he could say.

Gravis's labored breaths in his ear, the rhythm of his hard thrusts. Every time Leorino gasped, Gravis cast aside another handful of his reason.

As if to burn his partner's sweet, lewd appearance into his mind and soul, Gravis thoroughly savored his body.

Despite the overwhelming difference in their stamina, Leorino kept pace with Gravis's desires, ravaged until dawn, when he finally fainted.

Leorino could still feel Gravis's gentle embrace, the sensation of his lips on his skin.

He thought he heard Gravis whisper, "I must go," in his ear.

When Leorino woke up the next morning in the palace, Gravis had already left for his rescue mission in Gdaniraque.

With a contingent of skilled men, Gravis leaped to Merhelique on the far eastern edge of Gdaniraque.

That night, the mission had been a success, and nearly fifty craftsmen were placed under the protection of the Royal Army.

Gravis brought them to Brungwurt. August promised to shelter the craftsmen until the end of the war.

When Gravis returned to the royal capital and reported on his success, the men privately shouted for joy.

Finally, word arrived in the royal capital from the allied Francoure Army that the Gdaniraque forces were approaching the Zweilink border. In addition to the border defense forces that had been dispatched earlier, the Royal Army set up a large battle formation behind Zweilink.

In response, the Brungwurt Autonomous Army also deployed a considerable number of troops to the border of its territory.

The two main battlegrounds would be Zweilink on the northeastern border and the Baedeker Mountains in the northwest. The clashes between the Royal

Army and the Zwelf-Gdaniraque allied forces began at Zweilink, just as the Royal Army had predicted.

Leorino spent his days in the royal capital stricken with worry, woefully uninformed of the progress of the war.

The Kidnapping

Erina and Leorino had become good friends and had gotten into the habit of chatting twice a day. After breakfast, they would discuss their respective schedules, and after dinner, they would talk mainly out of concern for Erina's mental health.

After Zwelf declared war, Fanoren marched into conflict for the first time in eighteen years.

Erina had been depressed for a while, thinking about the husband she had left behind, but that was to be expected.

Leorino understood how she felt all too well. They may have been at war, but the royal capital was as peaceful as ever. Nevertheless, Leorino's home province and Erina's new home of Brungwurt would quickly become a battlefield if Zweilink was breached.

Their family was there, preparing for war. For the Cassieux family, the war had already begun.

Gravis had hardly returned to the royal capital. The Royal Army had sent additional troops toward Zweilink, and at the same time redeployed the mountain troops to the other border, the Baedeker Mountains. Gravis and his men literally leaped from base to base, bracing for battle.

One day, letters arrived from Auriano and August.

Auriano asked Leorino to take care of Erina and to make her days as enjoyable and carefree as possible.

His father's letter was about Maia. Originally, he had planned to send Maia away with Erina to the royal capital. However, Maia was adamant in her refusal. She insisted that whatever may come, she wanted to stay with August until the end.

August's letter contained a plea: "If the flames of war should spread to Brungwurt, I would like you to humbly request His Royal Highness to use his Power to rescue Maia."

Leorino accepted both his father's and his mother's wishes with a sense of anguish. He was beyond frustrated that he was helpless to do anything but wait in the royal capital. But now was the time for both Leorino and Erina to be caged birds and remain safe in a secure location. That was all they could do for their loved ones.

The Brungwurt estate was under even stricter security. His third brother, Gauff, had been coming home every night for some time. This seemed to be yet another request from the royal palace.

Even now, Josef slept in Leorino's room, and Erina's guard with her. The two were practically never left alone except when they slept.

This situation did Erina's nerves no favors. Her quickly approaching due date took a toll on her body, further deepening her anxiety, all of which caused her to suffer insomnia.

For that reason, Leorino set aside time every evening after dinner to talk with his sister-in-law. It had become a time of solace not only for Erina, but also for Leorino.

Erina had primarily kept herself distracted by shopping. The other day, she happily told him all about what she had recently bought—the vast majority of it intended for the baby. Sometimes she also gave Leorino small gifts, such as an embroidered handkerchief, and the like.

From Erina's point of view as a first-time parent, she could never be too prepared. She distracted herself with thoughts of a brighter future.

Leorino watched on, hoping that her shopping spree would be enough to keep her thoughts from the anxiety of war and childbirth.

“Ah, fancy meeting you here.”

It was a day like any other when Leorino passed a man who appeared to be a merchant in the hallway of the Brungwurt estate, led by a butler. Leorino was awfully surprised when the stranger suddenly spoke and knelt before him. Leorino had never seen him before.

Josef stepped in front of Leorino. The butler who had been escorting the merchant also scowled when the man addressed Leorino.

The man, however, appeared unbothered as he bowed.

Unable to ignore him, Leorino had no choice but to speak.

“I'm sorry, who are you?”

“It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Smirnov of the Moirlud Trading Company. I've been doing business with Lady Erina.”

“...Well met.”

Leorino responded to the greeting, thinking the name sounded familiar. The merchant, Smirnov, bowed deeply.

“Judging by your dashing, radiant appearance, you must be Lord Leorino Cassieux. I have heard rumors of you.”

“I see.”

“I could not be more honored to finally meet you in person... To think I could be graced with the presence of the future spouse of the king’s brother.”

Judging by Smirnov’s frivolous way with words, Leorino intuitively sensed he would not find himself getting along with the merchant. But now that Erina was nearing the full term of her pregnancy, she had only a handful of diversions she enjoyed these days: choosing items for her baby, selecting fabrics that would suit Auriano, tailoring them into various personal items, and sending them to Brungwurt.

Leorino observed the man again and wondered if he was Erina’s favorite merchant, who had been visiting her as of late.

He was a tall, thin man with no distinguishing features, but he possessed a certain shrewdness about him, like any good merchant.

“Thank you for the recommendations you offered my sister-in-law.”

Leorino offered the merchant minimal courtesy and immediately attempted to leave.

The man bowed deeply as Leorino walked away, and spoke to his back.

“I am very glad I got to meet you here. I am certain we will meet again.”

“So today I was picking out the lace for the baptism clothes.”

“Is that so?”

Leorino watched his sister-in-law with a smile as she went on excitedly.

Perhaps the reality that she was about to have a child still hadn’t quite sunk in yet. Leorino felt like it was still a little early to prepare for an event that would take place six months after birth, but if it made his sister-in-law happy, he could only share that joy.

“This baby might be Brungwurt’s heir, after all. I sent a letter to my mother-in-law asking her if we could borrow the clothes she had used for my husband. She told me that they had already been used four times between my husband, your brothers, and you, Leorino. She suggested it was the right time to have some new ones made.”

It was a real relief to see Erina so invested in something. If it would distract her from the anxiety of war and childbirth, she could order all the baby clothes in the world.

Suddenly, Erina held her belly and groaned softly. Leorino and the servants in the room gasped.

“Sister, are you in pain? Shall I call Dr. Willy Jr.?”

“No, I think I’m fine. My stomach is a little upset... It happens a lot these days. The doctor said I should be relaxing now that my baby will be due soon.”

Erina’s maid quickly approached and rubbed her lady’s waist. Then she offered Leorino a pointed look.

Leorino understood exactly what her gaze meant, and stood up to let Erina rest.

“Well, then... Sister, I think we’ve talked enough for today. Let me help you to your room.”

Erina stood up from her chair, her hand on her belly. Leorino and a maid assisted her.

“Thank you. The baby is so big now, I must look quite pathetic.”

Leorino smiled, supporting Erina as she tottered along. “You always look beautiful, now most of all. Since Auriano can’t, I’ll have to commit this sight to memory myself.”

It wasn’t mere flattery—he really meant it.

Leorino would never be able to give Gravis children. Not to mention, Erina

was quite literally glowing with the joy of becoming a mother, even if her belly looked ready to burst.

Erina also grinned, as if she knew that Leorino was sincere.

“I don’t care if the baby looks like my husband, I just want them to have a soul as beautiful as yours.”

“I only wish for my nephew or niece to be born healthy, that’s all I need.”

The siblings-in-law smiled at each other.

At that moment, Leorino suddenly felt a presence and looked ahead. Someone stood at the end of the hallway.

“...? Who goes there?”

As Leorino frowned at the unfamiliar figure, the shadow approached him. “... You, I know you.”

“Smirnov, why are you here at this hour?”

It was the merchant he had met that afternoon. How did he get into the estate at this hour?

“We meet again, Lord Leorino. And Lady Erina, thank you for your patronage.”

The man’s mouth turned up at the corners. Leorino felt a chill run down his spine.

At that moment, Leorino quickly pushed Erina toward the two guards behind them.

“Josef...! Hold my sister!”

It all happened in an instant.

“...Wahh!”

The two guards held Erina as she staggered backward.

The next moment, the man who called himself Smirnov closed the distance between them with extraordinary speed and grabbed Leorino from the front.

At that moment, Leorino already knew who the merchant was.

It's him...!

The man whispered in Leorino's ear. “...I was going to take that woman with us, but I suppose you'll do.”

“.....Master Leorino!”

Josef extended his hand toward Leorino.

Leorino twisted around and reached for his guard. But his hand grasped only air.

The moment he was taken by the enemy, Leorino shouted the name of the man he loved in his heart.

...Vi!

In an instant, the man and Leorino vanished into thin air.

“No...!”

Erina's cry echoed through the hallway.

“Master Leorino!!!”

Josef's outstretched hand closed around nothing at all.

Leorino had been kidnapped from the Brungwurt estate.

A Roar

At that moment, Gravis stiffened from the chill that ran through his entire body.

“Leorino!”

The military leadership, gathered during the strategy meeting at the Palace of Defense, were startled by Gravis suddenly shouting his fiancé’s name.

But it was Dirk and Lucas who immediately reacted to his cry.

“Sir!”

“Hold on, Your Highness! I’m coming with you!”

The two men quickly placed their hands on Gravis’s arms, aware of how unthinkable it would have been in any other circumstances. They knew what Gravis would do next.

The three of them leaped.

They arrived in the hallway of some mansion. Immediately, they heard a young woman crying. A pregnant woman was supported by her servants, bent over and bawling. There was also Josef, Leorino’s bodyguard.

“Wait, this is...”

“Josef? ...We’re in the Brungwurt estate!”

Josef looked at the three men who had suddenly materialized before him, his face white as paper.

“Master Leorino has been kidnapped...”

“...What?!”

“Suddenly, this man appeared... He had the same ability as the general. He grabbed Master Leorino and leaped somewhere.”

Gravis clenched his teeth. Then Leorino’s voice had been a cry for help the moment he was kidnapped?

“...Who was it? Did you know him?”

The people of the Brungwurt estate reflexively looked to Erina. Erina was clearly distraught, weeping with no end in sight.

“I’m sorry, madam. Could you help us?”

Erina answered, clutching her belly and heaving with sobs. “A—a merchant who had been visiting me recently was standing there and he...he took L-Leorino...”

At that moment, Gravis’s uncontrollable anger hung in the air, thick enough to cut with a knife.

The maid, Erina, and the guards were so overwhelmed by the man’s palpable fury that they turned pale and began to tremble.

“Sir! Control yourself! You’re in front of the lady!”

“Your Highness! Please!”

At Dirk and Lucas’s appeal, Gravis immediately focused his strength inside him, regaining control. It lasted only a moment, but the blood had drained from Erina’s face.

“I apologize, madam... You said the man is a merchant. How long have you known him?”

“N-not very long... A friend recently introduced him to me... That’s why he’s been coming to see me as of late, and...”

Partway through her answer, Erina reached for her belly.

The men suddenly tensed.

“Madam! Your Excellency...! Please, she can’t do this.” The maid cried out to the men.

Gravis nodded in understanding. “Get the lady a doctor!”

“Y-Yes, sir...!”

Erina’s bodyguard ran down the corridor. He went to fetch the resident doctor, Dr. Willy Jr.

“It’s all my fault... I invited that man, Smirnov, here, and now...”

“Madam...!”

Erina fell to the floor and broke into tears. Her eyes slowly turned vacant.

“It’s because of me that...Leorino is...”

“My lady, you must calm down... Think of your baby. Please, calm down.”

“How could I have... I’m sorry, I’m sorry, Auriano...”

Apologizing to her husband in their distant lands, Erina finally fainted. The maid screamed.

“My lady!”

“Lady Erina!”

Noises came from every direction in the Brungwurt estate, footfalls approaching.

“Your Royal Highness...! What brings you here at this hour?”

The first to arrive at the scene was Leorino’s third brother, Gauff.

Of all his brothers, he resembled August the most, with his large, muscular physique. He was startled by his youngest brother’s fiancé and the men of the Royal Army suddenly appearing in the family residence in the middle of the night.

Lucas answered on Gravis's behalf.

"...Leorino has just been kidnapped."

"He...what? What happened here?!" Gauff was in a panic, struggling to understand the situation.

In the meantime, Erina's guard returned with Dr. Willy Jr.

The doctor examined the unconscious Erina with a stern expression.

"Is my sister all right?" Gauff demanded.

The doctor stood up and nodded. "Both she and her baby are all right. However, she seems to have suffered a great deal of heartache. She must rest."

"Thank you, Dr. Willy. I'm sorry to bother you before bedtime, but would you mind staying with my sister for now?"

"Of course... I'm sorry, but I'm going to need you to carry Lady Erina."

The guard lifted Erina. Gauff watched with concern as he took her to her room.

The men who remained looked uneasy, their faces pensive.

"...If I may, I would like you to explain what happened," asked Gauff, his face pale.

Lucas answered again on Gravis's behalf. "We don't know either. But His Highness heard Leorino's voice and leaped here."

That was when Johan came running from his room, having heard the commotion.

"Your Royal Highness! Lieutenant General...?! What is the matter?"

"Lord Leorino was kidnapped by a merchant... Josef, could you describe what happened in detail?"

At Dirk's request, Josef nodded, his face pale. "Erina and Leorino were having

their after-dinner chat, as usual. Then Lady Erina said her stomach was upset, so they decided to call it a night... When we went out into the hallway, a man was there.”

“Who was he?”

“We met him in the hallway earlier today. He greeted Master Leorino out of the blue, without even asking permission. He’s a merchant who has been seeing Lady Erina recently...and for some reason, he was standing in the hallway just now...”

Josef then pointed to the darkness of the hallway, a dozen paces from where the men were standing.

“...Why would a merchant be in our private quarters at this hour?”

The Brungwurt residence had been under even tighter security ever since Leorino’s engagement was finalized. How, then, could the Cassieux brothers be taken by surprise like this?

“He has the same special ability as His Excellency.”

“...What?”

“Jo, is that true?”

Josef nodded in reply, his face bereft of color.

“...So what else can you tell us about this man?”

There was something horrifying about Gravis’s voice as he urged Josef to continue.

“The man suddenly appeared in the hallway, and in the blink of an eye, he was beside Master Leorino. When I realized it was his Power, he had already grabbed Master Leorino, and...in an instant, they were gone.”

Gauff and Johan groaned in anguish. Learning their beloved youngest brother had been kidnapped, they blanched in fear.

“...I think that man was trying to kidnap Lady Erina as well.”

“What...?”

“Master Leorino must have understood at that moment who the man was and what he was about to do. To stop Lady Erina from being taken with him...he turned to us and yelled ‘Hold my sister!’ and pushed Lady Erina toward us... By the time we caught her...it was already too late.”

The men all snarled in unison. It was a small mercy that Erina was spared, considering her advanced pregnancy, but they wished Leorino had cared more about his own safety.

Gravis clenched his fists tightly, trying to contain his anger. Dirk and Lucas watched him anxiously.

“...Do you know anything about this merchant named Smirnov that the lady mentioned earlier?”

“The man referred to himself as Smirnov of the Moirlud Trading Company earlier today.”

The moment he heard Josef’s words, a tremendous rage filled Gravis once more. Josef felt him emit a visceral pressure and reflexively backed away.

“Calm down! Your Highness!”

“How do you expect me to remain calm?!” Gravis glared at the lieutenant general, his eyes glistening with gold. “...Don’t you remember the Moirlud Trading Company?!”

“And you do?”

“You heard it in Dirk’s report! Edgar Yorke’s brother and sister-in-law were from the Moirlud Trading Company!”

Lucas and Dirk gasped at Gravis’s words. The information had seemed so trivial at the time that they had forgotten all about it.

“...A shady merchant with connections to Edgar was frequenting Leorino’s home?”

“Why was this man at the Brungwurt estate?”

“He was learning the layout under the pretext of doing business! He has my Power, he was attempting to establish a base! From the very beginning! To kidnap Leorino!”

Gravis punched a wall in anger. It made a horrid noise, leaving a dent. He seemed ready to break his own bones.

“Sir! Control yourself, please!”

“Stop!”

Dirk and Lucas rushed to hold the man from behind. Dirk, however, was flung backward as Gravis forcefully shook him off.

The men all paled at the ferocious anger of the usually calm man. Johan and Gauff in particular felt their knees tremble at the sight of the king’s brother’s wrath.

Lucas remembered the events of eighteen years ago.

He had more restraint than anyone, but when the cords of Gravis’s reason came loose, no one could stop him. It had been the same during that battle.

Lucas frantically held Gravis back from the precipice of his fury.

“Calm down! Anger won’t solve this!”

“Let go of me, Lucas! ...I know! I’m angry at my own inadequacies... How could I have missed it?! How could I let this come to pass... How could I let them take Leorino so easily?!”

How many times had this soul more important than life itself slipped through his hands?

How many times will I make the same mistake?

Gravis roared like a beast as Lucas held his arms behind his back.

“...Leorino! Call my name! Just one more time... Call me now!”

But Leorino’s voice never reached Gravis’s mind.

Leorino woke up shivering from the cold. He could smell the familiar northern air.

“I see you’re awake, Lord Leorino.”

Leorino slowly sat up. The room was shockingly cold. He instantly felt around his body. His legs were fine. No other signs of mischief. He was fully conscious.

Leorino pretended to cough and slowly brought his hand to his chest to avoid suspicion. He could feel the thin, hard object he always carried there. Leorino breathed a quiet sigh of relief. Thank God. No one had patted him down.

The dagger hidden at his chest was his ray of hope.

The man who kidnapped Leorino was a merchant who called himself Smirnov, though Leorino suspected that was only a front.

Observing the man, Leorino guessed he was about the same age as Ebbo. He looked young because of his slender build, but he might have been nearing fifty.

“You look so fragile, but you don’t scream, you don’t tremble—looks like you’ve got some guts after all. A true son of the Cassieux family.”

“...What do you intend to do with me?”

“Oh, I suppose my Power didn’t come as a surprise. Then again, I guess it wouldn’t. I have the same Power as your fiancé, His Royal Highness the King’s brother.”

“ ... ”

He truly hated the man’s smile.

This man is working under the Marquis of Lagarea. He kidnapped our people and likely brought that boulder before the gates eighteen years ago...

Leorino had already noticed. The rugged walls; the northern air, noticeably colder than in the royal capital.

This was Zweilink.

But he had no way of knowing if this was the inner or outer fortress.

Leorino looked around the room with trepidation.

“Where am I?”

“Zweilink. The border fortress near your family home,” the man answered simply.

Why was Leorino brought to Zweilink? This was the front line of the war, the hostilities still ongoing. If the Zwelfs wanted to kidnap Leorino, they should have taken him somewhere in Zwelf.

“Why did you bring me to Zweilink...?”

“Well, you see, my master hasn’t exactly sworn his allegiance to Zwelf.”

“Your master... Why does he want me here?”

The man scoffed at the upbringing that compelled Leorino to be so polite toward his own kidnapper.

“The allied Zwelf-Gdaniraque forces are currently clashing with the Fanoren Royal Army on this very border. My master wants to see that hero suffer when he sees what becomes of you, and how he will be powerless to stop it. As long as the general perishes, your country won’t stand a chance against Gdaniraque’s army.”

Leorino’s face paled further.

So it truly was a grudge against the royal family. Eighteen years ago, and now, the Marquis of Lagarea was always motivated by the single-minded desire to

destroy this kingdom.

Leorino's body shuddered as he hung his head. The man smirked, enjoying the sight of the fragile, flower-like young man's fear.

But Leorino was not trembling in fear. If anything, he was angry.

The man who had sent his friends to their deaths with Edgar's help eighteen years ago now stood before him.

Leorino wanted to kill him. He wanted to slit the man's throat with his own hands.

But the fact the man had brought him here... It got Leorino thinking.

Fighting to regain his composure, he looked up at the man and spoke.

"If this is Zweilink, that means...the fortress has been compromised."

He looked at Leorino, his brows raised. "...So you figured it out. I'm impressed."

"...The outer fort has already fallen into enemy hands."

"Aren't you clever? Yes, this is the outer fortress of Zweilink. It was taken over by Zwelf-Gdaniraque forces before I brought you here tonight."

"But how..."

"With my help, it took no time at all. When I was done, I leaped to the capital and kidnapped you... I worked very hard, I must admit. Although I'd rather not use any more of my power today... Still, everything's turning out delightfully well."

"Eighteen years ago, during the battle of Zweilink...we lost the outer fortress because of you, didn't we?"

The man burst out laughing.

"Yes, of course. Once I set foot in a place, I can leap there anytime I wish. A man took me on a tour of the fortress, giving me a chance to observe it at length. That day, and today, I took out the guards of the outer fortress one by one. After thinning them sufficiently, we sent Zwelf platoons throughout, and in no time at all, we were in control. Even the 'impregnable' fortress quickly kneels

in the face of my Power.”

“...I see. That explains much.”

It must have been Edgar Yorke who helped the man learn the structure of the outer fortress.

Leorino glared at the man, seething with anger. If eyes could kill, his would strangle the man to death on the spot.

“You’ve got such a pretty face. Don’t waste it on scowling.”

The man raised his hands to placate Leorino, but then his lips twisted into a wicked smirk.

“No, your pretty little face doesn’t scare me. If anything, that glare only accentuates your beauty... Such a waste to hand you over to Gdaniraque without getting an eyeful... You really are out of this world.”

He leered at Leorino’s body. His gaze gave Leorino chills of disgust.

“The lieutenant general of Gdaniraque appreciates good men and women alike. When I told him how famous you are for being the most beautiful person on the continent, he said he would love to see your face in person. You are one of the rewards my master promised Gdaniraque.”

Leorino was shaken to hear he was included in the rewards for Gdaniraque.

In other words, the Marquis of Lagarea had sold Leorino to the enemy.

Was that why the marquis wanted Leorino to marry Julian?

“It won’t even be your first time, will it? He also seemed interested in how someone as dainty as you could be with someone as large as the king’s brother... Gdaniraque men are rather large, you see. He was very much looking forward to seeing what he could do to you.”

The man looked at Leorino, saw him pale at the threat, and nodded in satisfaction.

“I’m afraid we can’t dress you up in silks, given the circumstances, but your angelic beauty should be reward enough. Please make yourself at home, then, until I come back for you tonight or tomorrow morning.”

With that, the man vanished from the scene.

The Courage to Fight

Left alone in the room, Leorino shivered from the cold. Zweilink was freezing.

It was no wonder. He was much farther north than the royal capital, and wearing nothing but the loungewear intended for a heated mansion. Underneath his soft, tight-fitting jacket, he wore only a shirt, and on his feet, soft slippers.

He breathed in the icy Zweilink air. His heart and mind wanted to scream in fear, confusion, and anger, but slowly, he calmed down.

He wondered if Erina was all right after he pushed her. That was not an appropriate way to treat a pregnant woman. He wondered if there had been any other way to handle the situation, though it hardly mattered now.

But at the time, it was all he could do. If she had been brought to a freezing war zone so close to term, the lives of both mother and child would have likely been in jeopardy. If the soldiers tried to hurt her, the lives of both Erina and her child, the hope of the Cassieux family, would have ended far too soon.

Please be safe.

He brought his hands together and prayed.

Leorino stood up and approached the cold window. Outside, the familiar shadows of the Zweilink plains he had seen in his dreams were dimly lit by braziers. Judging by the height, he must have been on the third floor.

He heaved a shaky breath and a white cloud formed before his eyes.

He placed his hand on the dagger on his chest. It was thin, small, and sharp. The man likely hadn't expected to find a weapon in Leorino's possession, given his helpless appearance. It was a small mercy that he hadn't inspected Leorino's belongings.

His only hope now was this dagger. He didn't think it would be enough to kill the man with the same ability as Gravis. And even if he got out of here, the enemy army—led by Gdaniraque—would already be in control of the outer fortress, if the man's words were to be believed.

But Leorino couldn't just sit and wait for the enemy to act.

He would fight. Fight as hard as he could, keep himself alive, survive until...he could see the man he loved again.

For Gravis's sake and his own, he would not die here. Never.

No matter the humiliation he would have to suffer, he would survive and see Gravis again, alive. Leorino didn't care if he didn't get to marry Gravis; he would hold on to his life until they met again, and in his last moments, he would be by Gravis's side.

This was what he had to do to protect Gravis's heart, after he had already watched Ionia die once.

...I won't let anyone break Vi's heart.

Leorino steeled his resolve to fight.

True to Smirnov's words, an enemy soldier arrived with a jug of water and a cup. He was a boy who looked younger than Leorino. In Fanoren, he would have still been in school.

The thought that Gdaniraque would let even such a child work as a mercenary broke Leorino's heart.

The moment the boy soldier saw Leorino, he was stunned into awe and stood dumbfounded in front of the door for a while.

"You..."

The boy rushed to lower his eyes as he approached Leorino, avoiding direct eye contact. His pure reaction nearly brought tears to Leorino's eyes.

What Leorino had to do to escape. What it would mean for this boy soldier. Leorino was horrified by how easily the thought came to him.

Help me... Ionia, give me the courage to fight like you.

He frantically prayed in his heart.

He couldn't let himself think about it as he desperately tugged at the memory, somehow managing to stay calm.

He remembered his training with Josef. Leorino had neither strength nor skill—he could only aim for his opponent's vitals from up close. If he couldn't finish the boy off in a single blow, Leorino would have no hope of getting out alive.

He made up his mind. He couldn't let fear get in the way of the fight.

"...Thank you for the water. Could you bring it over here?"

"...?"

Leorino extended his hand. The boy soldier tilted his head. It appeared that he did not understand Fanorenese. He murmured something in response, but Leorino couldn't understand him at all. Leorino didn't speak his language either.

Captivated by Leorino's beauty, the boy soldier swallowed as he approached.

Leorino's heart was pounding with stress and fear. Still, he tightened his grip on the hilt of his hidden dagger.

Josef, lend me your strength...!

As the boy soldier handed him the cup, Leorino grabbed him by the arm and pulled. He was lucky that the boy was not very strong yet. Even with Leorino's lacking strength, the boy soldier lost his balance. Leorino immediately wrapped his arm around his neck and pulled him close.

"...!"

The boy soldier tried to shake Leorino off.

The next instant, Leorino was thrusting his dagger into the boy's thin neck. He immediately closed his eyes.

"...Agh! ...ghh!"

The boy soldier held his neck, arching his back. He could still move.

Leorino had failed. He couldn't destroy his vitals in a single blow.

The boy soldier couldn't have expected this. He looked at Leorino in disbelief, his eyes wide with fear.

No, one more time. This time he had to strike true.

"...gh...gghh!"

Blood bubbled out of the boy soldier's mouth.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry."

Through tears, Leorino plunged his dagger into the boy's neck once more. Clinging to his body, Leorino dealt another blow. This time, he felt the blade sink deep.

The boy soldier's body spasmed violently. Each time it did, Leorino was sprayed with the blood gushing from the boy's throat.

"...hhh..."

The boy soldier collapsed, convulsing, and finally died with his eyes wide open.

I killed him.

Leorino brought his blood-soaked fist to his mouth, desperately choking back sobs.

"What have I done...?"

He was an enemy soldier, but he was just a boy who had brought him water. He killed someone so innocent just so he could escape.

He had just decided he would do anything—he couldn't fall apart now. But even with that thought in mind, he couldn't stop the tears.

Leorino recalled Ionia's memories. The nightmares Ionia had ever since he used his Power against a person came back to him all at once.

At the same time, Leorino realized just how coddled he had been until now.

But I've decided to protect Vi's heart, so...no matter what it takes...I'm going home alive.

Leorino wiped his tears.

He'd killed an enemy soldier. This was war. Now was not the time to think

about anything more than that. He had no time to wallow in pity.

I must go.

Leorino calmed his trembling breath and began to work his hands mindlessly. He removed the overcoat and gloves from the dead boy soldier's body. He may have been just a boy, but undressing him was no small feat.

In addition to the smell of blood, his clothes had not been washed for a long time and smelled acrid, which made Leorino nauseous.

But in order to escape, he absolutely needed to shield himself from the cold. Not to mention his current attire would be too conspicuous.

Leorino stripped the boy of his overcoat and pulled it over his clothes. Finally, he removed the boy's military boots and put them on over his indoor shoes, and still they were loose. He stuffed fabric into the gaps. It made it hard to walk, but it would prove invaluable out in the cold.

Leorino kept moving his hands in silence, not letting his mind wander. He hid his conspicuous platinum hair by wrapping it in fabric he obtained from ripping the sheets on the bed.

Looking through the window, the moon was quite high.

Leorino fought to dig up the structure of the outer fort from his memories. He would somehow have to escape the fortification teeming with enemy soldiers.

Staying here, I'd just be waiting for death...

Leorino forced his trembling legs to move and opened the door.

He glanced left and right before silently slipping into the corridor. After confirming his approximate location, he began moving toward the room he had in mind.

In the outer fortress of Zweilink, numbers were engraved on stone pillars at regular intervals. Leorino was lucky to have learned the structure of Zweilink during his research in the Palace of Defense.

He didn't know how the battle was progressing. If he was to believe Smirnov's words, not much time had passed since the invasion of the outer fortress. If that was the case, he should be able to reunite with the Royal Army once he reached the inner fortress.

The issue was the area in between. The Royal Army likely still had the upper hand, but he had no way to confirm it contained no enemy soldiers.

Traversing the buffer zone on foot would take a grown man over an hour—would Leorino manage to reach his allies in the inner fort? Would his legs, once broken and stitched back together, be able to hold up until then?

He was not Ionia anymore. Leorino did not have a strong, fit body like him.

But the situation was the same as eighteen years ago. Even if he was alone, Leorino had no choice but to try.

With the help of the moonlight, Leorino carefully sneaked down the corridor. Eventually, he arrived at his destination without being spotted. It was truly a miracle he hadn't encountered any enemy soldiers on the way.

He slowly placed his hand on the door, praying that it would open. It was unlocked.

"Thank God..."

He slipped into the dim room.

The room was small. It wasn't furnished except for the shelves lining the wall,

and it was hard to tell its purpose at first glance.

However, this was one of the most important rooms in the fortress. It contained a hidden staircase that led to the ground floor. This was the secret Ionia had learned when he was assigned to Zweilink.

It was the escape route he had used when he and his men escaped from the enemy-filled outer fortress that night.

He suspected that the enemy was likely unaware of the existence of the room, and it appeared he was right.

But he couldn't be certain about Smirnov. Edgar also knew about this hidden staircase. It was possible he had told him about this room.

He had to hurry.

Leorino peeled the rug off the floor, then he crouched down and carefully studied the patterns on the wooden grain in the moonlight.

"Should be...here."

He inserted his dagger into a gap in the exquisite woodwork. He held the dagger by the hilt like a lever, and when he pushed the tip of the blade up, he heard a creak, and a section of the floor opened.

Beneath was the hidden staircase. When he gazed inside, he found it covered in dust. There seemed to be no new footprints.

Before heading down, Leorino rolled up the rug and propped it against the wall, as if it had always been there. Otherwise, it would show traces of his escape.

This task alone was quite hard work for Leorino, who was unaccustomed to physical labor and had just exhausted his stamina wrestling a man.

But there was no time to rest. At any given moment, someone could notice

the dead body in his room. Once they learned a soldier had been killed, the search for the murderer would quickly begin.

Leorino inserted his body into the hidden staircase.

When only his head remained above the floor, he closed the wooden frame over him with great effort. The staircase immediately turned pitch-black.

He had no light source. He called on Ionia's memories. Leorino imagined a spiral staircase leading down. Yes, it was just a staircase. There should be no obstacles in his path.

Be brave...!

There should be an occasional ventilation hole in the staircase, the size of a stone.

Leorino descended the stairs little by little, checking the steps with his toes and fingers.

The occasional ray of moonlight through the ventilation holes soothed his frightened, tired heart.

Once he was on the ground, there would be more than just the moon.

In the clear winter night skies of Brungwurt, he would be able to see a sky filled with stars.

...I miss you, Vi.

His body felt heavy from the cold and stress. His cheeks felt strangely cool. When he touched them, he found that they were wet with tears. He wiped them away with his dirty sleeves.

But as soon as he noticed them, the tears just kept coming, and he was

helpless to stop them.

“...hic...”

He was afraid.

He was too frail to fight, and he had to survive alone in Zweilink now that it was a battleground.

“Ionia... Lend me your courage, your resolve to fight.”

He descended the slippery stairs, one step at a time, practically crawling. Leorino was alone in the darkness, heading for the ground floor.

He was beginning to think he would never make it, but finally he arrived at the exit on the ground floor. There was no sign of pursuers. Leorino was already exhausted, but still breathed a sigh of relief.

He already felt a dull ache in his legs from the three flights of spiral stairs, which his tense body had to grope around to descend.

The exit was half buried to keep it concealed and was fitted with an iron grate. From the outside, it must have looked like a water drain.

Through the grate, he could see what was going on outside. The air flowing in was cold. The area beyond the grating was dark, but the fortress itself was faintly lit by braziers placed at regular intervals.

Leorino made sure that no one was around and firmly pushed the grate.

“Ngh...”

It was heavy. The exit of the passageway was difficult to open, having laid unused for years. Leorino pushed with all the strength he could muster. His weakness made him feel pathetic. He clenched his teeth, an anguished groan spilling from his lips.

He continued to push with all his might when finally he heard a creak, and the bars began to move little by little. Leorino pushed even harder. His legs were

sore and he could not dig them into the ground, so he struggled to lift it.

“...Hng, come on, up...”

With a clang, the bars finally shifted. Leorino lifted himself up with his weakened arms and finally crawled out onto the ground.

He was out. He had escaped the fort.

He slowly crumpled to the ground. He knew he must escape immediately, but he couldn't bring his exhausted body to move.

In the distance, he heard a throaty voice. It spoke a language he did not recognize. It was an enemy soldier.

Leorino stood up slowly, scolding his trembling body, and returned the bars to their original position with some effort.

Finally, he was able to look up at the night sky.

The stars were so abundant, they filled his vision to the periphery.

This alone soothed Leorino's heart and gave him a little more energy.

He raised his heavy body and stood up. It was even colder outside. It wasn't snowing, but it was cold enough that if he stood around, he would freeze in no time at all.

Ah, the air of Zweilink.

Leorino took a deep breath to rouse his heart.

Then he took a step forward. His whole body felt heavy. More than anything, his left leg was already beginning to ache.

He wondered if he would be able to move under the cover of night.

Still...I must go as far as I can.

He would return to the man he loved, no matter what it took.

Dragging his feet, Leorino began walking through the night toward the inner fortress.

The Distant Flicker of Stars

Leorino was fleeing across the plains in the night.

If he were Ionia, he would have reached the inner fort by now, but the braziers of both the outer fort behind him and the inner fort in front of him still glimmered in the distance.

Some time had already passed since his escape. It was likely that Smirnov and the Gdaniraques had noticed his absence, but it would not be so easy to find him in the dark grasslands.

The darkness was his only ally now.

He moved his legs frantically, hoping to gain as much distance as he could before dawn.

Whenever he found a rock or a thicket where he could hide if he curled up, he would crouch down for a brief respite. Then he would resume his crawl across the cool, dew-dampened grass again.

His pace was frustratingly slow. Nevertheless, Leorino was making progress.

“Hah... Hah...”

There were several huts set up for both rest and surveillance in the buffer zone. But considering the possibility that the huts could already be occupied by enemy soldiers, he could not ask them for help.

“...Hah, hah... Ugh.”

Parts of his body were burning hot and numb, while the rest felt freezing cold. His feet felt heavy because of the two layers of shoes he was wearing. But if he took them off, he would freeze from the bottom up in no time. Even if it wasn't snowing, people could freeze to death in the cold.

“...Oof.”

He stumbled over something and fell. He had lost count of how many times he had tripped by now. It was too dark to see where he was walking, so there was little he could do to avoid it.

“Move, keep moving...”

Leorino scolded his legs.

He pounded his thighs with his fists to stimulate them, but he had already overworked his legs so much that they would not listen. Leorino's back shook at his own helplessness. As he lay on the ground, his body grew increasingly colder.

Tears welled up in his eyes as he wondered if this was the end of his escape.

Looking up to the heavens, he saw the dazzlingly beautiful starry sky.

I miss you...

But the flicker of stars was so distant, he could never reach them, no matter how hard he tried.

Leorino's body stiffened. The sound of several people's footsteps falling on the grass and voices came closer. He quickly grabbed a handful of dirt and rubbed it all over his face. He pulled down the cloth wrapped around his hair to

cover his face as best he could.

"<Hey, you there!>"

They must have noticed him. They called him from afar, their footsteps approaching.

"<Hey!>"

"<What are you doing here? Are you hurt?>"

The men had strong features and bearded faces.

Their language sounded just like what the boy soldier had spoken. They were Gdaniraque soldiers. His stolen overcoat must have made them think he was one of them.

"<You're scouting, too? If you're not feeling well, go back.>"

"<You'll freeze to death if you stay here.>"

He didn't know what they were saying.

He couldn't respond.

"<Hey, you listening to me?>"

He stood up with what little strength he had left.

Unable to understand Gdaniraquois, Leorino bowed his head in silence.

"<Hey... Wait. Something's wrong with him.>"

The man's tone changed. Leorino was startled.

The soldiers drew their swords one after another. Alongside the sharp metallic sound, the soldiers began shouting something to Leorino.

They wouldn't be fooled so easily.

Leorino brought his hand to his chest and grabbed his dagger.

But the enemies were soldiers from the mercenary state of Gdaniraque. He was surrounded by men of much larger stature than him, unlike the boy soldier from earlier. And it was three against one. With a single dagger, Leorino wouldn't stand a chance.

One of the soldiers poked Leorino in the stomach with the tip of his sword, as if checking if he would resist.

Thanks to his thick overcoat, the sword did not pierce Leorino, but his weakened legs could not hold him up any longer, and he fell to the ground again.

Seeing this, the men barked in a foreign language.

Leorino closed his eyes in despair, knowing this was the end. That was when it happened.

In front of him, the enemy soldier's eyes went wide, and he fell.

The remaining Gdaniraque soldiers collapsed one after another.

What had just happened?

Behind the Gdaniraque soldiers, several men emerged from the grass. Leorino panicked all over again.

But the next moment, he heard a voice that took his breath away.

"Another Gdaniraque soldier spotted!"

Fanorenese.

The Royal Army...!

Leorino could only stare.

The man was clearly a soldier of the Royal Army. He found Leorino lying on the ground and alerted someone behind him. Then, a strikingly large shadow

stepped into view.

“Then kill him already. We don’t want him calling for help.”

“Yes, sir.”

Leorino’s eyes widened. He knew that voice.

“...Ebbo?”

His voice was quiet. But the sword-wielding soldier and Ebbo Steiger froze when they heard it.

“Wait, Gehman! Don’t kill him!”

He rushed to stop his subordinate as he was about to bring down his sword upon Leorino.

“...No way.”

“Ebbo...”

Leorino called his name again.

Ebbo quickly pushed his subordinate aside and stood in front of the Gdaniraque soldier. He was a thin young man, covered in mud and blood. His face was almost impossible to make out in the moonlight.

But his voice was unmistakable.

“Ebbo...it’s me, Leorino.”

A mud-stained hand reached for him. Ebbo took the hand in disbelief.

“Captain... Why are you here...?!”

The young man Ebbo Steiger had found was the reincarnation of Ionia Bergund, his former superior in the Special Forces, with whom he had parted in the royal capital.

Why was this young man, who was supposed to be protected better than anyone in the royal capital, out on the front lines like this, all alone?

Ebbo reached out with both hands, trembling with fear, and lifted the young man off the ground. He was thin and light.

In the moonlight, Ebbo wiped his small face, stained with blood, mud, and tears, with the palm of his hand, revealing his delicate, lovely beauty that was in no way suited for the battlefield.

“But how...? God...!”

“Ebbo... Ebbo...!”

Ebbo’s men watched them, dumbfounded. To their great surprise, their superior officer was holding up a man who appeared to be an enemy soldier and weeping.

“Captain Ebbo...wh-who is that?”

“...This is not a Gdaniraque soldier. He is the son of the Margrave of Brungwurt, and the general’s fiancé, Lord Leorino Cassieux.”

The soldiers were shocked. They had never imagined that a young man wearing the uniform of an enemy soldier could be the general’s fiancé, but the young man did indeed speak Fanorenese, and Ebbo treated him with a certain reverence.

“...Wh-why is he here...?”

“We can figure that out later. We must get Lord Leorino to safety as soon as possible... Lord Leorino, I’ll carry you. May I?”

“Yes.”

Ebbo knew about Leorino’s legs. Realizing that he could not stand on his own, he lifted him off the ground.

Leorino could hardly believe his luck.

As soon as the big, strong man picked him up, his body felt as heavy as mud, and he relaxed in Ebbo's arms.

"Ebbo...I'm sorry. I can't move my legs anymore... It's hard for me to walk."

"It's all right. I will take you to safety."

Leorino nodded gratefully. Ebbo instructed his men in a hushed voice.

"Hide the corpses of the enemy soldiers in the tall grass. Cancel the reconnaissance. We're going back to the inner fortress."

The men did not fully understand, but they nodded at their superior's order regardless. They set to work concealing the bodies in the grass.

Ebbo's heart was still pounding in his chest. They had just found someone who had no business being in the middle of a war zone like this. Of course he was surprised.

He recalled what had just happened. Leorino had been found by enemy soldiers and was about to be attacked. It was a miracle that they were able to save him in the nick of time.

Ebbo and his men had noticed something strange in the outer fortress, so they gathered a small team to scout the area.

As they feared, Gdaniraque soldiers had already entered the buffer zone.

This convinced Ebbo that the enemy must have already seized the outer fortress in the same manner as on that day.

Whenever Ebbo and his men found enemy soldiers, they took them by surprise and disposed of them.

As they were making their way further toward the outer fortress, Ebbo and his men had found a group of enemy soldiers who seemed to be quarreling.

"...I'm glad we found you."

If Ebbo and his men had not spotted the enemy soldiers at that moment, if they had been even a little late, if they had not been able to reach them in time... The mere thought of it sent shivers down Ebbo's spine.

"Thank you for saving me. I really thought this might be the end back there."

Ebbo embraced the fragile body in his arms tightly.

When he confirmed that his men had finished concealing the bodies, Ebbo signaled for them to return.

"...It may not be a very comfortable journey, but hold on tight."

With Ebbo's superhuman strength, carrying Leorino felt like cradling a twig.

The men ran back across the predawn grasslands toward the inner fortress at an impressive pace. The braziers of the outer fortress grew farther away with every step.

"Lord Leorino, please tell me what happened."

Holding Leorino in his arms, trying to keep him as still as possible, Ebbo sprinted across the plains in the dark night.

"I was in my home in the royal capital when I was kidnapped... Ebbo, I met him. The ability user who carried that boulder eighteen years ago."

"He kidnapped you?"

"Yes. He called himself Smirnov, though I doubt it's his real name. The owner of the same Power as Vi kidnapped me from the royal capital, and...I was held captive in the outer fortress until now."

"...I'm glad you managed to escape."

Your body being the way it is, was the part he kept to himself.

He looked down and met Leorino's sad eyes. He was entirely different from Ionia, but his eyes were undoubtedly the eyes of a man who had once fought by his side in these lands.

"When I was trying to escape, I killed an enemy soldier who was not much

older than me... I had no choice.”

Ebbo looked at Leorino’s filthy face. Were those bloodstains the blood of an enemy soldier?

He was not particularly shaken to learn that Leorino had killed an enemy. If anything, he was impressed Leorino had managed it at all with his thin arms.

“You should be proud of yourself. You may not be a warrior, but you have done well. You must not show mercy to enemy soldiers. That’s how warfare works.”

“...I know. But the feeling of thrusting a sword into a person’s body is indescribable. In my dreams, I must have killed enemy soldiers countless times...but even though I have Ionia’s memories, in reality, it feels...far stranger.”

“It’s a world you will never be a part of, Lord Leorino. You can forget about it now.”

Leorino shook his head.

“It doesn’t erase what I’ve done. And...I won’t forget it. Not yet, Ebbo.”

Violet eyes looked up into Ebbo’s wrinkled, scarred face.

“As long as that man lives, we will never know a moment’s peace. It’s just like eighteen years ago.”

“So the outer fortress...”

“Yes. I think it’s already under their control, just as it was eighteen years ago. That man confessed that, eighteen years ago, and again tonight, he...he threw the guards off the top of the fortress walls. And he transported enemy soldiers in for the takeover.”

Ebbo held him tighter. It was a miracle Leorino had made it out of the outer fortress at all.

“God...I’m so glad you’re safe and well.”

“I escaped using the hidden staircase, but my legs wouldn’t last much longer... When you found me, I couldn’t move anymore. If not for your help, I would have died there. Thank you so much.”

“Is your body all right? I mean...”

Ebbo asked hesitantly. Leorino noticed Ebbo’s concern and hugged his thick neck to reassure him.

“Yes. I can’t move because I overworked my legs and because of the cold. Otherwise, I’m fine. I mean...they didn’t hurt me, so don’t worry.”

“...Thank God. We must somehow let the general know that you’re safe.”

Leorino nodded.

The men continued running toward the inner fortress.

“Where is the main battlefield now? Here or in the Baedeker Mountains?”

“We are deployed to both, but the Baedeker side is still under observation. His Excellency is regularly at our main camp. Our enemy here is mainly Gdaniraque.”

“How many Gdaniraque troops do you think they have?”

“I’m not sure. It is said that Gdaniraque’s army is ten thousand strong, but they are a mercenary state. It’s unlikely they would lend their entire force to Zwelf, so His Excellency estimates that half at most would be used for this war, of which one-third would be sent against our ally, Francoure, and two-thirds against us.”

That would mean that some three thousand enemy soldiers were likely waiting beyond that outer fortress.

“And our army?”

“Three thousand men are encamped behind Zweilink. Combined with the fortress guards, our numbers are about even with Gdaniraque’s.”

“I see. What about my father?”

“I don’t know the details, but it seems that he has already deployed nearly half of his troops in the rear. The rest are meant to defend the castle of Brungwurt.”

Leorino nodded.

Half of the Brungwurt Autonomous Army, roughly two thousand soldiers, were deployed at the border of their territory. That’s where his eldest brother, Auriano, or Josef’s father, Lev, would likely be preparing to intercept the enemy forces if Zweilink were to fall.

“As of last evening, we were still watching the enemy from the outer fortress. The assault had begun, but it was localized.”

“It’s the same as that night. Until night fell, the outer fortress was under our control, but it was taken over in the blink of an eye.”

“It’s because of that ability user. The Power to leap is fearsome and beyond human understanding.”

“Yes... Just a handful of people can turn the tides of a war... It really is terrifying.”

Leorino imagined the face of the man with the same ability as Gravis, the most special of supernatural abilities: the ability to leap.

“...I don’t want to see people suffer the way they did that night again.”

His voice was so tired.

Leorino’s words sounded like they were coming directly from Ionia. Gently, Ebbo tightened his grip around Leorino ever so slightly in an attempt at comfort.

“...Why were you there, Ebbo?”

“Same reason as eighteen years ago. I came here to scout. Someone noticed something was wrong with the outer fortress.”

Leorino forgot his fatigue and took a long hard look at his former subordinate. Talk about déjà vu. There seemed to be a hidden meaning to Ebbo’s gaze.

“Hey, Bosse! Come here!”

Ebbo called to the man running behind them. It was the young soldier who had just nearly killed Leorino. The soldier sped up and ran alongside Ebbo.

Hearing his name, Leorino looked up at his former subordinate with a start.

“Bosse... You don’t mean...?”

“Remember Tobias Bosse with the good hearing? ...This is his son.”

Leorino stared intently into the face of the young man running beside them. It was too dark to see, but the young man did indeed resemble the man who had fought and died with him. Leorino’s chest felt tight.

“My God... He really looks so much like...Tobias.”

“...Did you know my father?”

The young soldier inclined his head, understandably suspicious. The general’s fiancé was younger than him, and yet he called his father’s name with the sort of familiarity that implied they’d known each other, even though his father had been killed in battle in these lands eighteen years earlier.

“...What’s your name?”

“Sir. My name is Gehman Bosse.”

“And just like his old man, he has the unusual ability of particularly sensitive hearing. Right, Gehman?”

Leorino looked up at Ebbo’s rugged face with shock. A soft smile appeared on the scarred face.

“Talk about wild coincidences...eh, Captain?”

Leorino with Ionia’s memories, Ebbo, and Tobias Bosse’s son. The men with a shared history met in this fateful place once more, and just as on that day, they were running across the plains through the night toward the inner fortress.

“Captain Ebbo! Gdaniraque soldiers have appeared!” a soldier running in front of them warned. They all stopped.

No one had been there just a moment before, but now a group of Gdaniraque soldiers suddenly materialized. There were more than a dozen of them.

Leorino bit his lip and glared.

In the middle of the group of enemy soldiers stood Smirnov.

“We can’t let the reward run away now, can we? ...Isn’t that right, Lord Leorino?”

God Who Whispers of Blessings

Ebbo and his men stopped and faced the enemy soldiers.

“Ebbo...it’s him. That man in the middle is our enemy... He possesses the same special ability as Vi.”

“...So it’s him.”

Smirnov’s lighthearted voice sounded under the night sky. “I’ve been looking for you, Lord Leorino. I’m very tired tonight, and look at all the additional work you made me do.”

Ebbo shot the man a deadly glare.

He shifted Leorino to his left arm and instructed him to put his hands around his neck.

“Captain...please hold on.”

Ebbo drew his sword with his now empty right hand.

“But, Ebbo...I’ll only slow you down.”

“If they take you hostage now, you won’t get away a second time.”

Leorino nodded.

Of course. He had to return alive for Vi’s sake. This was no time to be considerate.

“You’re right... Thank you, Ebbo.”

“I’ll keep you safe.”

Leorino clung tightly to the large man's neck.

"I'm impressed you managed to get this far. I commend your grit and courage."

The Gdaniraque soldiers readied their swords and surrounded the Fanorens.

Including Leorino, Ebbo and his men numbered six. The Gdaniraque soldiers outnumbered them three to one.

"You're our reward to Gdaniraque, so we need you back posthaste. Besides, how else will we threaten the Royal Army...? With the exception of the young man in that soldier's arms, you have my permission to kill them all!"

With these words, the Gdaniraque soldiers raised their swords at Ebbo and his men. The battle began.

"Captain! I'm moving! Hold on tight!"

"..."

Leorino wanted to reply, but he was exhausted and weak, and he struggled to even hold on to Ebbo. He desperately tried to focus all his strength into the arms around his neck.

"Raaahhh!"

Ebbo's greatsword mowed down several Gdaniraque soldiers in one swing, sending them falling in all directions. The remaining men were all taken aback by the large man's superhuman strength.

While the enemy faltered, Ebbo's men killed the soldiers before them one after another. At the same time, Ebbo swiped at two torsos, then pierced through two enemy soldiers with his blade at the same time.

Despite holding Leorino in one hand, Ebbo lifted the soldiers' bodies with his sword. The blade was of such thick steel that no ordinary man could lift it.

He swung his sword, flicking off the men's lifeless bodies.

Smirnov watched it all unfold from the rear, looking impressed, of all things.

Five enemy soldiers remained. They were now even with Ebbo and his men.

“Kill them!”

The Gdaniraque and Fanoren soldiers crossed blades fiercely.

Ebbo whirled his sword arm back toward the man who swung at him from behind.

Leorino screamed as Ebbo caught the man’s sword with his gauntlet.

“Ebbo!”

When Ebbo’s fist connected, it crushed the man’s face and sent him flying. He was dead before he even hit the ground.

“Ebbo...! Ebbo...! Your hand!”

“I’m fine. It’s just my armor.”

The other soldiers of the Royal Army were also holding their own.

Ebbo had killed more than half of their opponents, but the other four were also disposing of the remaining Gdaniraque soldiers one after another.

The last man standing was Smirnov, still dressed like a merchant. The tables had turned.

But the man standing in front of Ebbo and his men showed no sign of fear. On the contrary, he was watching Ebbo with some admiration.

“That superhuman strength of yours... So you also possess a special ability.”

“...You were responsible for placing that boulder in front of the gates eighteen years ago?”

Smirnov gazed at him in unhidden surprise. The corners of his mouth lifted in

a grin.

“Oh? You were here that day, too? What a wild coincidence... We may both have special abilities, but that was the moment your fate took a cruel turn, wasn't it?”

Leorino clung tightly to Ebbo's body as he swelled with fury. Leorino bit his lip to hold back his own anger.

Leorino shouted at Smirnov.

“You... The language you speak and your features—are you not Fanorenese yourself?”

“...And what of it?”

“That day, many of your fellow countrymen were burned to death here! You were here, you must have seen their charred remains...! You would have heard the screams of men who might have lived had they not been engulfed by the flames! You saw it all unfold...and thought nothing of it?!”

But Smirnov's expression did not change.

“You say this as if you were there that day, Lord Leorino.”

Of course. I saw it with my own eyes. I burned to death here. Leorino bit back the urge to scream.

Smirnov scoffed.

“No, I didn't think anything of it. I thought it was only natural that I should betray the country that had decided my Power was evil and tried to eliminate me.”

Leorino and Ebbo shuddered at his words.

They realized that this man, who called himself Smirnov, was also a commoner who had been persecuted because he had been born with a special

ability.

“I was born in a small village in the south of Fanoren. Because of my unique ability, my father suspected my mother of infidelity and kicked us out of the house. Do you have any idea how a child with a disgusting Power and a woman suspected of infidelity were treated in that village?”

Leorino didn't know. He couldn't even imagine. When he was Ionia, he had been fortunate to never have been ostracized by the people around him.

But Ebbo seemed to relate. His rocklike fists were shaking.

“All thefts, all wrongdoings were blamed on me, and my mother could only sell her body to raise me. I told her we should run away. I told her we could go anywhere with my Power. But my mother wanted to stay close to my father. To be near him, even after he had abandoned us, mother and child! It never made any sense to me.”

But even so, Smirnov would have stayed in that hellish village until his mother's death.

“It was only when I reached adulthood that I realized how valuable my Power truly was. It was my master who came for me... He told me my Power was a priceless thing, and showed me his.”

That must have been the Marquis of Lagarea.

“He erased the memory of the villagers, placed me in the care of a trading company in the royal capital, and gave me everything: education, warm meals, clothes.”

Leorino imagined a lonely soul enthralled by the first person to treat him like a human being.

“But when I started working for my master, I understood. It was a funny thing to realize that the king's brother, the unmatched prince, now celebrated as the

hero of the continent, possessed the same Power I did. When I learned of this, why, I was in stitches.”

Smirnov looked up to the heavens and laughed.

“What is the difference between royalty and commoners anyway? What did God, who whispered ‘Blessed be the king’s brother,’ ever do for me?!”

For a moment, Leorino saw the flames of eighteen years ago behind Smirnov.

Smirnov’s cold gaze pierced Leorino’s heart.

“You can’t blame me for wanting to make His Royal Highness’s first battle thoroughly miserable, can you? I wanted to prove that the man with the same Power as me was more powerless than I. And in fact, I did. So many Fanoren soldiers died that day, didn’t they?!”

Leorino bit his lip.

“How dare you...”

“The prince’s frenzy was a sight to behold. Well, after that, the wretched Zwelfs were beaten to a pulp by the vengeful prince... I’m simply happy that I got to wound him. All that remains...is to fulfill my master’s wishes!”

Smirnov’s voice was devoid of all emotion.

“...And Edgar agreed with you?”

Smirnov inclined his head at Ebbo’s question.

“Oh...? Edgar, no. My master also had high hopes for him, but he wasn’t much to speak of. Money, greed... He was a cunning little man without a cause to call his own. But he was of great use to me that night.”

“Was the fire your idea...?”

“My master’s orders, to be precise... Ha-ha! I remember that wind, oh, that wind! Edgar really outdid himself that night. I praised him profusely when I secretly visited him after everything was said and done.”

Smirnov roared with laughter once more.

Leorino and Ebbo were shocked to learn the truth like this.

There was Edgar and Smirnov, and then there was Ebbo and Ionia... They were all born with special abilities, but where had their hearts diverged so badly?

Smirnov finally calmed down.

“Now...enough about the past. I think it’s time for me to retrieve Lord Leorino. He’s quite filthy, which makes it difficult to appreciate his beauty, but I’m certain he’ll be fine after a good scrub. He’s a reward for Gdaniraque, after all.”

“I won’t let you take Lord Leorino.”

Ebbo tightened his arm around Leorino and raised his greatsword.

“It’s no use... Look.”

The next moment, Smirnov’s sword was penetrating Ebbo’s body. The blade had instantly leaped behind Ebbo and pierced him through the abdomen from behind.

“...Gah ...hah...”

“What did I just say?”

“Noooooooo! Ebbo!”

Leorino screamed.

“...gh...”

“Captain Ebbo!”

Ebbo collapsed, but he held Leorino fast in his arms, trying to protect him.

“Out of respect for a fellow ability user, I’ll let you live. Now hand over Lord Leorino.”

“Hell no... Gahhh...”

Ebbo swung his sword again, desperate to a fault, but it would do nothing to a man with the Power of leaping.

Smirnov’s sword made a small leap to avoid Ebbo’s arm, reappeared in his blind spot, and pierced Ebbo’s body from a different angle.

Tears of despair welled up in Leorino’s eyes.

“Noooooooo, Ebbo! Ebbo, let go of me!”

“Captain...”

“Let go of me, Ebbo! That’s an order! Let go of me now!”

Only then did Ebbo’s grip loosen. Leorino desperately grabbed Ebbo’s shoulders as he fell, trying to hold him up, but Leorino was forcibly yanked away from behind.

“Augh!”

Some of the nails that he dug into Ebbo’s shoulder were nearly left behind.

“Tch... Wouldn’t want to hurt the merchandise... Now Lord Leorino is coming with me.”

Smirnov was done with the courteous tone he had adopted until now.

Ebbo reached for Leorino. Blood spilled from his mouth.

“Cap...tain... gh, Lord Leorino...”

“Ebbo... Ebbo... Please don’t die! You must live... You must!”

Smirnov pulled back Leorino’s chin as tears streamed down his cheeks and peered into his eyes from above.

“If only more people were like you, perhaps it wouldn’t have come to this...”

Leorino pleaded through tears. “Smirnov...please, stop. Don’t hurt Ebbo...or Fanoren anymore.”

Smirnov scoffed. “It’s too late for that now. My master and I... There’s no going back for us. This time we will destroy this country.”

Smirnov brought his fingers around Leorino’s neck and squeezed. Without the blood flowing to his head, his vision grew darker.

The stars in the sky grew farther and farther away.

He thought he was getting closer. He thought he was so close to returning to the man he loved.

Vi...! Vi...!

In a moment of fading consciousness, Leorino reached for the stars above.

No Matter What Happens

At that moment, Gravis caught a glimpse of a stronger glow from among the stars scattered across the continent.

His starry-sky eyes glowed gold.

“Leorino...!”

Gravis pressed his clenched fist to his forehead.

“Your Highness...! Did you...?”

“...Yes, I found him...!”

He had been waiting for this moment.

The men who had been waiting with Gravis got to their feet.

“Where is Leorino?!”

“Zweilink. He is at the fort! ...Lucas, Dirk, Josef! Hold on! We’re leaping!”

Gravis prayed to the stars flickering in his mind.

Please let me arrive in time. I don’t want to lose his irreplaceable soul again...!

Please, it can't be too late.

Gravis leaped with his companions to the buffer zone of Zweilink, close to the inner fortress.

“...?! Ebbo!”

Ebbo Steiger was on the ground, bleeding. His men were frantically holding his wounds.

“Steiger, are you all right?!”

Dirk rushed toward him. It was too dark to see clearly, but it appeared he had been stabbed several times.

“...gghh...gahh!”

“Stay with us!”

Lucas, second in size only to Ebbo himself, supported his large body. Ebbo coughed blood.

He was bleeding internally. Gravis met Lucas's gaze and nodded.

“Sasha is waiting in the main camp. We'll carry him there.”

Just as Gravis was about to lift Ebbo and help him stand up, Ebbo's rocklike hand gripped his forearm.

“Sir...I'm all right... Please, save Lord Leorino.”

The men gasped.

“...Leorino has been with you until now, hasn't he?”

Ebbo nodded, his lips smeared with blood. “Leorino escaped...from the outer fortress... We found him, but the man kidnapped him again...”

“Leorino was taken back to the outer fortress?”

Ebbo nodded between effortful breaths.

“Its status is...?”

“It’s the same as that day. Lord Leorino said the enemy forces have already taken it over...and it’s all because of that man.”

“The man who kidnapped Leorino, does he have the same Power as me?”

Ebbo nodded once more.

Gravis turned back at his men.

“After delivering Ebbo to safety, I’m going to leap to the outer fortress.”

The general was planning to personally charge into the outer fortress, knowing he would be surrounded by the enemy.

Dirk’s expression was grim, but Lucas didn’t stop him.

“I understand.”

“Lieutenant General...?!”

“Dirk, it’s time for us to make up our minds, too.”

Lucas looked at the general’s adjutant and urged him to make a decision.

What Gravis needed now was to break free from the chains binding him.

Now was the time to give him the freedom to act on his instincts as a man like the rest of them in order to recover his beloved.

“I understand... Sir, your orders?”

Lucas and Dirk were prepared to accept the potential consequences.

That was when the lionlike man smiled. “But I will not let you go alone. I’m coming with you, Your Highness.”

Gravis stared at Lucas. “...Lucas.”

“This is Zweilink. But this time, we’re past the gates. Your Highness...there is only one thing for us to do, isn’t there?”

They would retrieve that precious, irreplaceable soul this time.

Gravis nodded.

“I’ll go with you.” Josef offered, his expression fixed. “I have a job to do, too, and it is to protect Master Leorino.”

The men exchanged glances, wondering what to do. Then Dirk backed Josef up.

“Please take him with you. Josef’s skill with the sword is unmatched by anyone in the Royal Army. He will be of great service to you.”

Gravis nodded in agreement.

“Dirk, the battle will begin before dawn. We must get the buffer zone under our control. I’ll bring you and Ebbo to the main camp, so make preparations for that... May I count on you?”

Dirk slapped his chest.

“By all means, sir. We will endure these hours without you. Sir...be sure to bring Lord Leorino... Bring my brother back, please. Alive this time.”

“I will...”

Then a young soldier, who had been holding Ebbo’s wounds, raised his hand gingerly.

“Sir, please take me with you. I believe I can help.”

“And you are?”

Ebbo replied in a hoarse voice instead. “...Please, take him with you... Tobias Bosse had particularly sensitive hearing, back when he was in the Special Forces with Captain Ionia and me, before he was killed in action, that is... This is his son.”

They looked at him in shock.

The soldier, who wore a deeply earnest expression, was clearly intimidated by the general's imposing presence, but he held his gaze without fail. He certainly had a backbone.

"I have inherited my father's Power. I've just learned the sound of Lord Leorino's voice, and I can already make it out from others. As long as I can get close to the outer fortress, I know I will be able to locate him."

The men who knew about the events of eighteen years prior couldn't help but think of it as a truly fateful encounter.

Here stood yet another ability user whose destiny had been twisted by that battle.

"I'll ask you again. What is your name?"

"Gehman Bosse. Sir."

Gravis nodded at that. "All right, Gehman. We can use the help."

The flames of eighteen years ago returned.

The fire they once could only watch from outside the gates was now inside them. Gravis and Lucas were no longer bystanders. They were now standing on the grasslands Ionia fought upon.

"...I will not let that day repeat."

Gravis stood in Zweilink not as a general, but as a man protecting his country and his beloved.

Lucas nodded. They exchanged glances.

"...Your Highness. Alongside Leorino, let us reclaim the souls of Ionia and the men who died here."

"We shall."

Leorino regained consciousness. He was lying on a cold, hard surface.

The overcoat he had taken from the Gdaniraque soldier had been stripped off. With the cold mercilessly creeping up from the stone floor, Leorino feared he would freeze.

“You’re telling me this filthy man is the fiancé of the Fanoren king’s brother? He’s a mess. Where’s this unmatched beauty you spoke of?”

The man’s voice was unfamiliar. He was speaking in heavily accented Fanorenese.

“He’s filthy from his escape attempt. If you dress him up, Your Excellency will see that his beauty has no equal on this continent.”

“Hmm. Fair enough.”

When Leorino heard approaching footsteps, someone violently pulled his head off the floor.

A thick palm roughly wiped his face.

“...”

“Oh... I suppose I can sort of see it? I don’t know. He’s too dirty. Hey, bring me some water!”

Leorino was fully awake now. Quickly, he pulled out his dagger and thrust it into the hand of the man gripping his head.

“You son of a bitch! What the hell are you doing?”

“...ghh!”

But Leorino’s arms were too weak, and his blade had only grazed the man’s skin.

The enraged man mercilessly kicked Leorino across the room. His head hit the stone wall with shocking force.

“Gah... Hah...”

His chest hurt fiercely from the kick. He couldn’t breathe. The side of his head

throbbed with pain. Soon, one side of his vision was stained red.

Leorino crawled slowly, curling his body into a ball to stave off the pain. Both inhaling and exhaling hurt. His ribs must have been broken.

“My God. How can you hurt such a precious gem?”

“This filthy brat hurt me first! I could kill him if I wanted to!”

Leorino looked at the man who had kicked him, his eyes blurred with pain.

He must have been the leader of Gdaniraque who wanted Leorino as his reward. The beard covering the lower half of his face made it difficult to tell his age. He was a large man with a wild air about him.

A small young man, who must have been a page, brought a wooden bucket filled with water.

The man approached Leorino, grabbed him by the neck from behind like a puppy and lifted his face. He couldn't breathe.

“I can't see his face properly with all that blood.”

“Owww...”

The man plunged Leorino's head into the bucket. It happened so suddenly that Leorino accidentally swallowed the water.

His chest hurt like it was about to burst. He couldn't breathe.

The man watched Leorino's hands thrash in anguish with a sadistic smile.

Eventually, when Leorino went limp, his head was pulled back.

The water in the bucket quickly turned brown with mud and blood. With the

exception of the blood flowing from the side of Leorino's head, the filth slowly melted away. His platinum hair glistened.

"Wipe his face."

With a nervous hand, the page wiped Leorino's dripping wet face.

Unable to resist any longer, Leorino coughed violently and resolved himself to his fate. His wet upper body was losing heat by the second.

The mud and blood were finally removed from Leorino's face. The man's expression changed from discontent to delight as Leorino's fair, pale skin was revealed and his incredibly delicate, flawless features came into view.

The man's hands took hold of Leorino's small face, turning it to admire it from every angle. The lust was growing increasingly visible under his beard.

"Ho-ho... You were right. A beauty worth admiring."

Leorino hated being touched. He never wanted to be touched by anyone other than Vi.

He had been ready for it, but he was so disgusted that he pushed the man's hands away in a desperate attempt to resist.

Then a fingernail that had come loose before he was taken from Ebbo must have caught on the man's clothes.

"What a pain."

Irritated, the man artlessly plucked the nail from Leorino's slender fingertip.

"Ugh..."

He already had wounds all over, yet the shock of having his nail ripped off was so great, it seemed to consume his entire body.

"Ha-ha, how beautiful is that face twisted in pain."

His sadistic side thoroughly awakened, the man licked his lips and pinched the fingernail of his ring finger, which had also begun to come off.

Leorino gritted his teeth.

Live... I must live. No matter what happens to me... Until I see Vi, I must...

“...Now, scream for me.”

“...Agghh!”

He ripped it all the way to the base in one go and reached for the next pink nail, tearing it out without mercy.

Leorino’s eyes widened, tears spilling.

The men who had leaped with Gravis stood close to the outer fortress. Gehman crouched down, closed his eyes, and listened.

“Any progress...Gehman? Did you find him yet?”

“Shh, my apologies, sir. I require a little longer... I’m still not catching Lord Leorino’s voice.”

If Leorino called Gravis again with his mind, or even made a single noise, they would know where he was.

“A scream... A faint scream, stifled...”

The men’s bodies swelled with rage at Gehman’s murmur. Gravis clenched his fists.

Frowning, Gehman listened again, and the next moment he shouted: “I have located Lord Leorino!”

Peering into Leorino’s violet eyes, glazed with tears, the man grew ever more excited.

“Oh, what a unique eye color you have... Yes, it is wonderful indeed. How glorious he could be with a little effort.”

“That’s why I told you, Lieutenant General Hannibal Barca, not to damage such a rare gem. Just look. It’s broken and dying because of you. It has lost half its value.”

“Doesn’t bother me. Tell your employer that I have been paid. Zwelf has also sent me my fair share. As for the rest, well... I can’t wait to see this great nation succumb to the might of Gdaniraque.”

Leorino was dazed and could no longer make out the men’s conversation.

His wet body was losing ever more warmth on the cold floor. His head was still bleeding.

Gdaniraque’s lieutenant general lifted Leorino’s face again and, after gleefully admiring it, left him where he lay.

“Treat him so he doesn’t die.”

Leorino was dumped on the floor like an old doll. Watching this, Smirnov seemed to hesitate.

“It will be dawn soon. The battle shall begin. By the end of the day, we will occupy Zweilink. Once we break through here, it will only be a matter of time before we invade Fanoren.”

Smirnov knelt before the man. “What do you plan to do with your reward?”

“I’d love to savor him now, but regrettably, he’s too filthy. I can already tell he will be a real stunner when he’s clean. He can wait until I conquer the fortress. In the meantime, wash that muddy mess off.”

Smirnov looked again at the young man lying on the floor. Something was clearly wrong with Leorino, but the lieutenant general of Gdaniraque did not seem to care.

The handover had been completed. Smirnov distracted himself with the thought that it was no longer his problem.

“How will their hero take this humiliation? We will see in the morning sun.”

Hannibal Barca erupted in laughter.

Suddenly, a darkness fell before his eyes, casting a shadow on him. Hannibal Barca looked overhead, where there should have been nothing but air.

“You will not.”

A man clad in darkness suddenly appeared and swooped down on top of him.

Hannibal Barca was known to be dauntless, but even he could do nothing but stare at the man with his mouth agape.

“You will pay for this with your head.”

At that moment, Hannibal Barca, the lieutenant general of Gdaniraque, heard the bells announcing his own death.

“...What...?”

A blade flashed in the air. As Hannibal Barca stood stunned by the appearance of the attacker, Gravis sliced clean through his neck.

The head of the Lieutenant General of Gdaniraque separated from his body.

The last thing his eyes saw was the face of a man as beautiful as the god of death.

The lieutenant general's huge headless body slowly collapsed, blood gushing from his neck.

The sudden attack and death of their leader sent the Gdaniraque soldiers in the room into a state of panic.

"Eeeek!"

But the man had brought three others with him, who also appeared out of thin air.

The men caught the soldiers who had been standing around the lieutenant general with the tips of their swords. Within a moment, all the Gdaniraque soldiers in the room were dead.

Smirnov immediately realized what was happening. The general of Fanoren had appeared. A man with the same special ability as himself had come to rescue Leorino.

The general himself was behind enemy lines.

Smirnov quickly lifted Leorino off the floor. He picked up the dagger and placed it against Leorino's drooping neck to stop the approaching general.

"...General Fanoren. How did you find us?"

Gravis turned around, his whole body erupting with such fury that air seemed to distort around him.

"You piece of filth... I'll kill you."

Gravis began to measure the distance between them. Smirnov sensed the particular tension in his muscles. It was a subtle movement that only a fellow ability user would recognize.

Smirnov immediately pressed his blade against Leorino's neck. It bit into his throat, causing Gravis to stop. Gravis glared at Smirnov indignantly.

"...Get your filthy hands off Leorino."

“Hmm, I suspect you fight the same way I do. You couldn’t take him from me if you tried.”

“You are Smirnov of the Moirlud Trading Company...the war criminal of eighteen years ago?”

Smirnov felt a thrill of joy at the general calling him by name.

He felt a strange elation, as if he had finally met the person for whom he had one-sidedly yearned for so long.

Two people with the same special ability, but diametrically opposed in every other way. It was a twisted sort of joy to have the man who was everything Smirnov was not recognize his existence.

Smirnov smiled faintly, planning his escape. He had already used much of his Power today. He couldn’t fight Gravis on equal terms.

But how did the general, who was supposed to be in the royal capital, learn of Leorino’s whereabouts?

Smirnov did not expect this turn of events and regretted that he had not saved any energy for this.

“General, something is wrong with Lord Leorino...!” Josef shouted suddenly.

Leorino appeared to have fully lost consciousness. He was so pale that he looked virtually lifeless.

“Master Leorino! Wake up!” Josef screamed.

Gravis assessed the distance again.

“Oh? If you get any closer, I’ll just disappear with Lord Leorino again.” Smirnov immediately pressed the tip of his blade to Leorino’s neck again.

“...Let him go.”

Gravis looked at the man holding Leorino. Smirnov was just as pale as the young man in his arms.

“Look at you... You’ve used too much Power. You can no longer leap very far.”

Smirnov twisted his lips bitterly. It was true that today, with the capture of the outer fortress and kidnapping Leorino from the royal capital, he had used his Power to its limits. The search for Leorino after his escape couldn’t have helped either.

But he could leap just once more within this fortress.

“I *can* still throw Lord Leorino off the top of the fortress walls.”

Gravis’s face filled with rage. Just seeing that expression gave Smirnov a tremendous sense of accomplishment.

Yes, that might just work.

The man who wanted Leorino as his reward was dead. In which case, it no longer mattered if Smirnov killed him. The next leap would be his last one, anyway. If he could not escape, he wanted to give this general one last taste of despair more painful than death.

That’s right. That’s what his master would want.

Gravis felt a slight tension in Smirnov. He did not have a moment to lose.

Leorino...!

In the next instant, Gravis leaped, closing the gap, and thrust his sword

toward the man. At the same time, however, Smirnov also gathered what remained of his strength and leaped with Leorino in his arms.

“...O general! Time for you to see hell all over again!”

Gravis’s sword pierced the void, and his outstretched hand grasped only air.

“...Leorino!”

The Prayer at Dawn

Lucas was yelling.

“Go, Your Highness! Go after him!”

“But I can’t leave you...!”

The outer fortress was under enemy control. Gravis hesitated for a moment, concerned about the safety of his three companions, but Lucas offered him an undaunted smile.

“We’ll be fine. We don’t plan on dying here!”

“Lucas...!”

“Go save Leorino. I can’t do it. Your Highness...you’re the only one who can!”

His words contained eighteen years’ worth of anguish that only the two of them could understand.

Then a slender young man stepped forward.

“I will protect the lieutenant general.”

Josef implored Gravis and Lucas with his eyes, startling the men with his words.

“No one can beat me in a sword fight. I won’t let him die here. So...General, please save Master Leorino.”

“I can fight, too! I will avenge my father.” Gehman also stepped up.

Having made up his mind, Gravis nodded.

“Give me two... No, give me one hour to send reinforcements from the main camp... I need you all to come out of this alive.”

The three men nodded in reassurance.

“Go on, Your Highness!”

In the next instant, Gravis leaped into the skies above Zweilink, where he could see the entire fortress.

He had to rely on his instincts.

Smirnov’s pallid features were proof that his life had been sapped to its limit. In which case, he could not have gone far. He must have been somewhere within this fortress.

The man threatened to throw Leorino off the fortress walls. That told him where he must have gone. But did he mean the outer or inner fortress? That, Gravis didn’t know.

As he was about to fall, he leaped again to his previous height. Over and over.

He strained his eyes from high above, desperately searching for the two of them. He could feel his life draining away in real time.

Leorino...! Leorino, call me just one more time!

At that moment, the sun emerged from beyond the horizon.

Dawn had come.

Then, at the top of the inner fortress walls, something glinted in the morning sun.

“There...!”

Gravis leaped toward that platinum gleam.

Leorino suddenly regained consciousness. He thought he had heard Gravis's voice.

"Ah..."

"You're awake."

He was on the walls of the inner fortress. The crisp predawn wind crawled up the fortress walls, whipping against him and his captor.

The winter winds were relentless against his soaked skin, sapping away what remained of his body heat. Leorino could no longer stand on his own without Smirnov's support.

"...Ngh."

Smirnov also struggled to stay upright. He had already used up all his strength. Their bodies swayed unsteadily on the fortress walls. They were enemies, but now, of all times, they were forced to lean against each other for support.

"Smirnov..."

"It appears that...this is as far as I can go."

Leorino's foggy mind raced as best it could.

Smirnov couldn't leap anywhere anymore.

His ability could rival Gravis's, but as long as he continued to use his Power at the cost of his life, he would eventually reach his limits.

"...Now, shall I leave you here and make my escape, or shall I push you off and let that man taste despair?"

"...S...mir..."

“You can barely even speak... I suppose you’ll die one way or another.”

Leorino suddenly focused on his stomach. Something hard was pressed against him. Smirnov’s hand was holding Leorino’s dagger, the same blade he had dropped earlier.

Forgetting the pain and the cold, his mind became strangely clear. The proximity of death filled Leorino’s chest. It was a familiar feeling.

This man had no intention of letting Leorino go. Leorino knew it. His wet and wounded body was losing blood and warmth. His life wouldn’t last much longer.

But...I will not lose. Even if I can’t win, I refuse to lose...

Leorino slowly placed his hand on the man’s fist pressed against his stomach and weakly wrapped his hand around it.

“...What is it?”

The man, his face bereft of color from the overuse of his Power, looked down at Leorino in confusion.

Leorino looked up to the heavens.

The sky was bright at its edges. Dawn was near. The stars overhead would soon be out of sight.

...I’m sorry, Vi.

He put the last of his strength into his fist. Leorino gripped Smirnov's hand and jerked his own body toward the fixed dagger.

"What...?!"

Leorino felt the dagger pierce his flesh.

He felt no fear. His freezing numb body registered no pain at all.

He had been stabbed in the stomach with a much thicker sword in the past.

"You... Have you lost your mind?!"

Startled, Smirnov loosened his hand in a panic. He was about to kill him, but now, it all felt so laughable.

But Leorino had been waiting for that moment.

He gripped the hilt of the dagger in his stomach and pulled it out.

The next moment, Leorino thrust the blood-soaked blade into Smirnov's chest, putting all of his weight into the blow.

"What...?"

Smirnov's eyes widened in shock. He looked down at the dagger in his chest in disbelief.

"...You have chosen...the wrong path."

Leorino caught the wretched man's gaze and smiled with misty eyes. Smirnov gaped back.

"Your master, the Marquis of Lagarea, chose...the wrong path..."

Smirnov's lips quivered at the name.

Leorino had been raised by a family that loved and protected him, and would never know the extent of the hell this man had seen. Smirnov hardly needed Leorino's sympathy either.

But there was one thing Leorino did know.

These men had not been loved by those who should have loved them.

The solitude and wails of such men became a flame of vindictiveness that eventually took the lives of many, mass-producing more miserable people who had been deprived of their loved ones.

He wanted that vicious cycle to stop for good.

Oh... That's why Ionia gave his life for Vi back then.

He felt like he truly understood Ionia's feelings for the first time.

Who should be held responsible for the loss of someone's love?

Who had been paying the price for it all along?

It had been the same that day. He didn't want to burden Gravis any further. This wound was the price for the loss of love.

His eyes met Smirnov's.

Peering into them up close, the man's eyes were a soft brown like Amancera's. He had been hurt so many times that little could be learned from them by now. They were the eyes of a child left behind.

Oh, poor thing. You poor, poor, lonely, wounded soul.

“Smi... Your suffering...ends here...with me...”

“You...”

If only he could make up for this man’s loneliness and suffering with his life.

Leorino put more weight on Smirnov, who looked down at him in a daze. Their powerless bodies slowly pitched together beyond the walls.

In his fading consciousness, he could see the sky getting brighter. He thought he heard the voice of the man he loved.

His limbs entangled with Smirnov’s, Leorino plummeted from the fortress walls.

Right before Gravis’s eyes, a slender body was falling, taking Smirnov with him. Leorino seemed to have placed his weight on the man.

“Why?! Leorino!!”

He had no time to hesitate. Gravis kicked the wall and leaped toward the earth.

Reach him...!

Gravis accelerated to close in on the two falling men, but his timing was off. He leaped through the air, further gaining speed. His life drained away with every second.

A few moments before they hit the ground. All sound had stopped.

A few inches more, a lunge, and he would be there. The ground was closing in.

...Come back...!

Come back to me, back into my arms.

With the wind piercing his entire body, Gravis's hand closed around something.

Almost unconsciously, he pulled it close with all his might, and at that moment, he screamed from the bottom of his lungs.

"Gaaaahhhh!"

Gravis burned through his life with reckless abandon.

Just before they hit the ground, the three men suddenly vanished.

A star flickered brightly in his mind. Aiming for that spot, Gravis leaped again.

When his vision returned, the ground was right in front of him. He was unable to adjust his position. It was all he could do to protect the thin body he held in his arms from the impact of the fall.

The other man he had grabbed fell by the wayside.

Gravis could only think about protecting the life in his arms. Holding on with both arms and legs, he twisted his body to place himself underneath and plunged into the middle of the Royal Army encampment.

Leorino...! Endure...!

Violently slamming into the ground, Gravis prayed in his heart for the safety of his beloved.

A large mass suddenly appeared in the camp of the Royal Army of Fanoren.

The suddenness of the event flustered the Fanoren army.

It landed with a loud noise. Rolling across the ground with great force, the mass finally stopped.

Emerging from the dust was General Gravis.

“...General?!”

His muscular body was breathing erratically. He remained where he fell, holding something in his arms. Perhaps it was the impact of hitting the ground, but he seemed unable to get up.

The first to understand the situation was Dirk, his second-in-command. While the soldiers stared at the man dumbfounded, Dirk rushed to the general's side.

“Your Excellency!”

Gravis finally got up at the sound of his voice. Then he rushed to examine the thin body in his arms.

“Leorino...”

Leorino was in his arms. He had retrieved him. He had made it in time.

But the moment Gravis saw Leorino, his heart sank in fear.

He touched Leorino's cheek with a trembling hand. It was cold as ice. With his thumb, Gravis traced Leorino's bloodstained cheek and purple lips. He couldn't feel Leorino's breathing at all.

Gravis called to him, his voice quivering.

“Leorino, open your eyes...”

The soldiers recognized the filthy figure the general was holding as his fiancé, Leorino Cassieux.

Leorino's appearance was nothing short of horrific.

No one dared make a sound at the sight of the ghastly state he was in.

His hair and clothes were soaking wet despite the cold, and his entire body was covered with blood and filth. Half of his face was stained reddish brown from the blood flowing from the side of his head. The tips of his limp fingers were also bleeding. Some of his fingernails were missing, likely the result of torture.

Leorino must have been kidnapped by the enemy. The general had rescued him himself.

Finally understanding the situation, the soldiers surrounding them suddenly began to clamor.

"Someone call Dr. Sasha!" Dirk shouted.

Meanwhile, Gravis continued to call Leorino's name. But the battered body lying on the ground showed no signs of life.

Everyone present thought that the young man whom the general loved had already breathed his last. All they could do was watch them with heartbroken eyes.

"Get out of the way!"

Pushing the soldiers aside, Sasha and his second-in-command rushed to Gravis's side. Gravis looked at the military doctor with a somewhat dazed expression, as if all emotion had left his body.

"...Sasha, it's Leorino, he—"

"Sir, let me see him... Excuse me, please."

Gravis looked like a cornered beast whose mate had been wounded. Trying not to provoke Gravis, Sasha slowly approached Leorino and touched him.

He searched for any sign of life. Sasha brought his face close to Leorino's mouth and placed his hand on his chest. He hovered around his mouth once more and checked his thin wrists.

At the faint touch of a single moist exhale, Sasha lifted his head.

"He breathes...! Sir, Lord Leorino is still alive."

"Alive..."

Gravis looked at the thin body in his arms, stunned speechless.

Sasha further inspected Leorino's body. After checking his head injury, he touched his chest, frowned, then looked at his abdomen and paled.

Then he turned up his soiled jacket.

"...!"

They both gasped at the fresh blood staining his wet shirt. The blood was spreading before their eyes.

"Leorino!"

Gravis roared, looking up to the heavens.

Hit by Gravis's swelling rage, Sasha paled.

"Sir! Calm down!" Sasha yelled, grabbing Gravis by the arm. "Several ribs are broken. He's in bad shape. His body temperature is too low and his breathing is faint. If he stays like this, his heart may stop. Every moment counts."

"...Help Leorino, Sasha."

Sasha looked into Gravis's despairing eyes and nodded resolutely to reassure him.

"I will do my best. But right now, we need Madame Maia's Power. Please take us to Brungwurt!"

Sasha's words brought a glimmer of hope to Gravis's eyes.

He carefully lifted Leorino. He pressed a clean cloth to Leorino's stomach and head to stop the bleeding, while Sasha stood and came close.

"You look pale. You've overused your Power... Are you certain you can leap to Brungwurt?"

"Yes, I can... Dirk. That's the man."

Gravis gestured with his chin at the man who had fallen a short distance away. Leorino's dagger was deeply embedded in the man's chest. Dirk nodded.

Reason had already returned to Gravis's eyes.

"That man is the proof of the marquis's betrayal, and Leorino risked his life to capture him. If he lives, do not kill him."

"Yes, sir."

"Do whatever you must so he can never leap again. Do not let him escape."

"Yes, sir. I swear on my life."

Gravis exchanged a few meaningful glances with his second-in-command.

"...Begin the recapture of the outer fortress. Lucas and Josef are still there. Don't wait for me. Dispatch soldiers."

"Yes, sir!"

"One hour. I'll be back in an hour... Until then, I'm counting on you."

"I'm at your service. I still have time to fulfill the promise I made earlier."

"Now!" Sasha shouted.

Carrying the wounded Leorino, Gravis disappeared, taking him and Sasha with him.

Dirk exhaled. The surrounding officers cautiously checked the situation.

“Adjutant Bergund, the general’s fiancé was supposed to be in the royal capital—how did he find himself in a place like this...?”

Dirk pointed to the man lying on the ground. “This man is an ability user with the same Power as the general. He kidnapped Lord Leorino from his home.”

Dirk’s explanation caused a stir among the soldiers.

“Lord Leorino escaped from the outer fortress on his own, found our soldiers, and tried to seek refuge in the inner fortress. But he was recaptured by that man.”

The officers remembered that a large, wounded soldier had been brought in with Dirk just half an hour earlier.

“The general and the lieutenant general ventured into the outer fortress and rescued Lord Leorino.”

“Lord Leorino’s injuries... Clearly, he was tortured...”

Dirk recalled Leorino’s sorry state. The thought that someone could simply hurt the frail body of a civilian made him want to scream in indignation. His fists trembled as he attempted to hold back his anger.

One of the soldiers tried to comfort Dirk. “But by the looks of it, fortunately, his chastity remains—”

Dirk’s rage finally erupted. “‘Fortunately,’ my ass! Didn’t you hear Dr. Sasha? It’s barely been half an hour! In that time was beaten badly enough to break several ribs, hit over the head, stabbed in the gut, and had his fingernails ripped off! How could they do that to someone so frail...?”

He understood what the soldier was trying to say.

He wanted to say that there were no signs that Leorino had been raped. Leorino’s whole body was wet, and his clothes were covered in blood and mud, but the way he was dressed certainly showed no signs of sexual assault.

The soldier turned pale and immediately apologized.

“I’m sorry. I just...”

“I understand what you’re saying. Just the thought of that possibility is horrifying... I’ll make you regret this, Gdaniraque.” Dirk barked orders to the men around him. “Dispatch troops to the outer fortress. Send reinforcements to the lieutenant general and Josef of Brungwurt who remain in the outer fortress! If you encounter enemy soldiers, you may kill them immediately!”

“Yes, sir!”

Dirk’s eyes were ablaze. The flames of anger spread to the men. “We won’t need to trouble His Excellency. How can the Royal Army remain silent when our general and his future spouse are demeaned? Go!”

“Yes, sir!”

The soldiers scattered. The battle was about to begin.

But first, Dirk approached the unconscious man. He was still out cold, but appeared to still be alive. Dirk beckoned Sasha’s second-in-command, Omar.

“Check on him. Will he live?”

Omar checked the man’s chest wound, then the rest of his body. and nodded.

“His breathing is weak, but he will not die. The wound in his chest is shallow. Lord Leorino couldn’t have inflicted a fatal blow.”

“If possible, I’d like to keep him immobile all the way to the royal capital. Can you do that?”

“...You mean without breaking his mind? What about his body?”

“I don’t care what happens to his body, but he needs to be able to talk. When we make him confess, we’ll use drugs again. He needs his memory intact.”

Omar nodded and left to get the drugs.

Dirk pulled out the blade from the man’s chest. It was Leorino’s dagger. Leorino had struck back at his captor at the very end.

Dirk carefully wiped the blood from the tip of the blade, wrapped it in a cloth,

and tucked it into his uniform. Instead, he pulled his own dagger from the sheath at his waist and ordered the soldiers around him to lay the man on his stomach.

“Show me his ankles.”

As the soldiers obeyed the order and exposed the man’s legs, Dirk unceremoniously severed the tendons in both of the man’s feet.

The man’s unconscious body jerked as blood came gushing forth.

The soldiers felt a shiver run down their spines at the cruelty of the general’s second-in-command, who had now abandoned his usual mild expression.

“...He won’t be walking anywhere like this, though he can still escape if his Power returns. Stop the bleeding and keep him alive. You don’t need to treat him.”

Omar, the second-in-command of the health department, opened the man’s mouth and fed him a few drops of two different liquids.

“That should paralyze him. He’ll stay unconscious for a good while.”

“Keep him restrained like this. Have a medic keep an eye on him with the drugs, just in case. Make him bleed just enough to keep him alive, but be sure not to kill him.”

“Why?”

“Abilities require life energy. If he’s just barely alive, he can’t use his Power to escape.”

“...Even if he escaped, he wouldn’t be able to walk.”

Dirk looked down at the living corpse of a man, his gaze cold.

“He does not need to walk. We will keep him just alive enough to bring him back to the royal capital. This man is the key to exposing all the treachery that

has taken place until now.”

Lips Whispering of Doom

“Master August!”

August had risen with the dawn and was getting dressed when his butler burst into the room in a panic, not even bothering to knock.

“What’s wrong?!”

The usually calm butler’s face was paler than he had ever seen, the man overcome with grief.

“Please come quickly! His Highness Prince Gravis is here! ...Master Leorino is very badly injured and needs Madame Maia’s Power!”

“...What?”

August immediately halted what he had been doing and knocked on the door leading to Maia’s room. She must have still been asleep. The loud noise roused her.

“Yes, dear...?”

“Maia, please come. Leorino and His Highness are here. Leorino is injured. He needs your Power.”

Maia leaped out of bed. She donned a thick winter coat over her nightgown and held out her hand to her husband.

“I’m too slow on my own, so please carry me.”

“Hold on.”

Maia was even smaller than Leorino, slender and light as a twig. August may have been approaching old age, but even he was able to carry Maia with ease.

August was led by the butler as they sped through the castle.

“Where are His Highness and Leorino?!”

“In Leorino’s bedroom! I have already summoned Dr. Willy.”

“Call Auriano, too!”

August ran at a speed that belied his age and burst into the bedroom with Maia in his arms.

“Leorino?!”

He was hidden behind Gravis’s large body, but August could see Leorino’s platinum hair fanned out on the bed. He rushed to his side.

The moment they beheld his body, Maia let out a bloodcurdling scream.

“No!”

“Leorino...!”

August was speechless.

Leorino appeared virtually lifeless. Nothing about his appearance suggested a living human being.

Maia rolled out of August’s arms and crawled over to Leorino.

The beloved youngest son of the margrave and his wife lay on his bed, his face white, perfectly still.

His whole body was covered in blood and mud.

“Arghhhhh... Ahhhh. Rino, Leorino...”

Sasha spoke to the butler in a low voice while holding Leorino’s head and stomach. “Where’s Dr. Willy?!”

“He resides in the castle. He will arrive shortly!”

“Madame Maia, please pour your Power into Lord Leorino as you did that day. His heart won’t last much longer!”

Shedding tears, Maia took Leorino's hand and pressed it against her forehead. When she noticed that his hand was stained with blood and that the nails on his pinkie and ring fingers were gone, Maia released another horrified shriek.

August also looked at Leorino's hand and found himself unable to say anything at all. This was how he learned his son had been tortured.

"Oh... Oh my god, my baby... What have they done to you...?"

"Madame Maia, please be strong! If we lose you now, Lord Leorino will not survive!"

"Who could do such a terrible thing to my child... God..." Maia was so distraught that she nearly collapsed.

"Maia, please! Stay with us!"

August steadied Maia and gave her a firm shake. Maia nodded bravely even as tears streamed down her cheeks. She took Leorino's hand and placed it against her forehead as if in prayer, and began to pour her Power into it.

That was when Auriano burst into the room. He was so horrified at the sight of Leorino that he nearly collapsed, just like his parents.

"Who...who did this to Leorino...?!"

No one responded to Auriano's wail echoing through the room. They were all desperate to save Leorino.

Sasha instructed the men to remove Leorino's wet clothes. As Gravis and Auriano carefully lifted Leorino's wounded body, August cut his clothing with his dagger.

Leorino's body, now fully exposed, bore marks, likely from being punched or kicked, spreading across his chest. Blood still trickled from the stab wound in his abdomen. The bleeding from the side of his head had not stopped either.

Clutching her son's hand, Maia began to sob.

Remnants of horrible violence covered Leorino's body. It was not a sight a woman should be forced to behold.

Sasha and Willy cleaned the wounds in Leorino's head and abdomen, tended to his fingers, and treated him to the best of their ability. There was nothing they could do about his broken ribs now.

Leorino's body was chilled to the bone.

Heated stones were prepared, and firewood was stoked in the fireplace. After wiping the dirt from his body with a cloth dipped in warm water and wrapping him in clean bandages, Leorino was laid down on a fur-lined bed and the hot stones were placed around his body.

Maia held Leorino's hand the entire time, hanging her head as if in prayer, murmuring in a hoarse voice.

"Wh-who could do something so awful to my son...?"

Gravis replied quietly. "Last night, while he was in the Brungwurt estate in the royal capital, he was kidnapped by the enemy's henchman."

"...From our estate? How could that be?"

"A man from a merchant family who frequented the estate was the kidnapper. That man possessed the same gift as me, and took Leorino to Zweilink."

The entire Cassieux family was shocked.

It must have been Erina who had invited the merchant into their home.

"Erina... No, she would never do such a thing."

When Auriano denied his wife's involvement, Gravis met his gaze and nodded.

“Your wife is equally a victim. They were almost kidnapped together, but Leorino protected her.”

And this was the result?

Auriano was stunned speechless.

But even though he wanted to hear more about what had happened, Gravis made no further eye contact with anyone.

He only kept silently rubbing Leorino’s uninjured hand.

By the time the two doctors had done all they could, it had been nearly an hour since Leorino had been brought to Brungwurt.

More wood was actively added to the fireplace, turning the room hot. The two doctors were sweating despite the season.

“...His body temperature may be improving a little,” the doctor said, but Leorino’s face was still sheet-white. His lips were purple.

He had lost both blood and body heat.

Raising his temperature too quickly would also prove dangerous. Sasha knew he had to take measures to raise it gradually, even if it frustrated him to no end.

“Now, as long as his heart keeps beating...once he regains consciousness, he will live. Until then, we must keep him in this state...”

Listening to the doctors’ words, Gravis continued to stroke Leorino’s hand.

He stroked it over and over, as if attempting to warm him up. The warmth returning to Leorino’s cold body ignited the fire of hope in Gravis’s despair-chilled heart.

But the time had come for Gravis to return to the battlefield.

Sasha could tell.

“...Sir, you should be heading back.” Sasha addressed Gravis.

He intended to inform everyone present why Gravis had to leave when his significant other was on the brink of death.

“...I know. Thank you, Sasha.”

Gravis’s complexion was also pale as a dead man’s, giving him a ghastly appearance.

Sasha did not miss the slight sway in Gravis’s muscular body as he rose from the bed.

“Your Excellency...I realize you must go, but I’m concerned about your wellbeing.”

“...I’ll be fine.”

Sasha was about to say something when Gravis stopped him with his hand.

Gravis stood in front of Leorino’s family.

“Lord August, Madame Maia, I must return to the front. The battle against the Gdaniraque army has already begun at Zweilink.”

August bowed his head in silence. He understood the weight of responsibility of a man in charge of countless lives.

“...I’m sorry I failed to protect Leorino, Madame Maia.”

Maia’s eyes, red and swollen from crying, glared at Gravis with reproach.

Maia, of course, understood Gravis’s position. If anything, Leorino’s kidnapping was caused by an oversight of the Cassieux family.

And yet, Gravis still apologized to Maia.

In doing so, he became the emotional outlet for a mother whose son had been tortured and who was fighting for his life.

“Zweilink will soon be in full-scale combat. I will not be able to return here until the battle against Gdaniraque forces is over... Please take care of Leorino.”

Until then, please keep Leorino alive.

The man’s unspoken words were heard by everyone present.

At that moment, Auriano spoke up.

“Father, according to the agreement between Fanoren and Brungwurt, the borders of Zweilink are within the defensive purview of the Royal Army. But here, we have generals of both armies. Then why don’t we, by which I mean our Brungwurt Autonomous Army, tentatively come under the command of His Excellency the General and participate in the defense of Zweilink?”

“Auriano... You...”

August looked his son in the eye. Auriano wore the most relentless expression he had ever seen.

“Father. The treasure of the Cassieux family has been harmed. I will find the man who did this to Leorino and avenge him. Neither Zwelf nor Gdaniraque... will ever get away with this!”

Auriano wept in fury. He had always been the calmest of his brothers, but was now so furious that he had lost all reason.

Gravis patted Auriano on the shoulder.

“Lord Auriano. I doubt this will be much comfort to the Cassieux family, but I have already beheaded the man who tortured Leorino.”

The Cassieuxs’ eyes widened at Gravis’s words.

“But I would certainly appreciate the help of the Brungwurt Autonomous Army. Gdaniraque is a mercenary army. Even without their leader, they can continue to fight. Not to mention this war will be different from eighteen years ago. Our objective is no longer simply the defense of our kingdom.”

“Your Highness... You don’t mean...”

August visibly shuddered.

“I have decided to destroy Zwelf.”

The men of Brungwurt, even the doctors tending to Leorino behind them, held their breaths at Gravis’s declaration.

Destroy Zwelf.

Gravis had actually spoken those words.

“After we take back the outer fortress, we will invade Zwelf territory. It will be a battle for the north. Please lend my army the strength of Brungwurt.”

“Your Highness... You...you can’t be serious!” August paled as he implored Gravis.

“Sasha, Madame Maia. I leave Leorino in your care.”

But Gravis did not respond. Instead, he approached the comatose Leorino once more and gently pressed a kiss to his cold forehead.

“I love you... Please wake up. Let me see your beautiful smile once more.”

With the same lips that declared he would destroy Zwelf, Gravis whispered his love to Leorino.

With a final press of his heat to Leorino’s lips, Gravis vanished from the scene.

Under Dirk’s command, the Royal Army of Fanoren had already begun the operation to retake the outer fortress.

After Gravis returned, they invaded in earnest. After a fierce battle, they

recaptured the outer fortress that evening. If not for the ability users, it would have been just another battle. The Royal Army knew Zweilink inside and out, and had the advantage on the ground.

Lucas and Josef endured until reinforcements arrived, and defeated many an enemy within the fortress in the meantime. In particular, Josef's contribution was said to have been extraordinary.

When the reinforcements arrived, Josef finally collapsed from exhaustion and Lucas carried him back to camp.

The next morning, a war council was held in the camp. Brungwurt was represented there by the eldest son, Auriano Cassieux, and Josef Lev, the son of the army commander. Josef appeared somewhat tired, likely still reeling from last night's battle.

Gravis announced to his officers, "We are going to invade the forest beyond the border and attack the Gdaniraque camp."

The officers were shaken.

"What...? You mean we're not simply defending ourselves, we're going to attack Zwelf?"

"Yes, that is my intention."

The officers' eyes went wide. If they went through with this, it would be the first time in nearly two hundred years—when Fanoren acquired its current territories—that it invaded another country.

"What does the lieutenant general think of the general's decision?"

Lucas had been silently listening to the general. Finally, he opened his mouth.

“Your Highness, our army is not accustomed to fighting in these cold lands. Winter is coming. I do not intend to risk our soldiers’ lives more than is absolutely necessary. What do you say to this?”

Gravis nodded lightly, a sign that he understood the problem.

“I’m aware. That’s why we will finish the fighting in the forest before the snowfall. The Brungwurt Autonomous Army has agreed to participate in this invasion. I’ve asked Lord Auriano to come here as a representative of Brungwurt.”

“...!”

Auriano stepped quietly forward.

Despite his youth, he already carried an aura similar to his father, August. He was a worthy successor.

“My father August, the leader of the Brungwurt Autonomous Army, has allowed our forces to provisionally enter the command of the general of the Fanoren Royal Army.”

“But Lord Auriano...”

“We see no reason why our army should enjoy peace and quiet while the Royal Army is fighting. Not to mention, we have valid reasons to invade Zwelf, even if Fanoren were against it.”

With that statement, the officers understood.

This was a declaration of revenge. Now that the apple of its eye had been harmed, Brungwurt was finally drawing its blade.

But both Gravis and Auriano appeared calm at first glance. Having witnessed Leorino’s horrific appearance, the men were concerned about his condition. One of the officers hesitated, but finally summoned the courage to ask.

“Your Excellency...how is Lord Leorino?”

Auriano and Gravis exchanged glances.

Gravis answered.

“Leorino is still fighting.”

With these words alone, the men knew that Leorino’s life was still in danger.

How much anguish did Gravis feel behind these simple, unadorned words? The men remembered his laments and roars when he rescued Leorino, and only hung their heads, unable to say anything more.

Josef buried his face in his hands. Eventually, he began to shake.

Dirk and Lucas placed their hands on his shoulders and silently comforted the young man weeping for his master.

“We are grateful to have the Royal Army’s own Dr. Sasha treating my brother. On behalf of the Cassieux family, I thank the Royal Army for your kindness,” Auriano said, and bowed his head.

Gravis looked at Lucas.

“The Brungwurt Autonomous Army has more experience in northern battles than we do, so with their help we can put an end to this before the snow piles up... Lucas, does that answer your question?”

“Yes, that should be enough. I’ll go along with Your Highness’s decision.”

The officers were surprised when Lucas readily agreed.

“Lieutenant General...! Are you not opposed to this?! If we are forced to fight in the snow, we will be at a tremendous disadvantage!”

“Whatever’s the issue? Do you suddenly fear the enemy now?”

“No, sir! But isn’t it too reckless a gamble to attack at this time?!”

“It will only be as reckless as you insist on making it. I will abide by His Highness’s decision.”

“Lieutenant General...”

Lucas scoffed at the officers with a brazen smile. “I’ve yearned to do this for a very long time. For eighteen years, in fact.”

“Our army will not be inferior in strength to Zwelf or Gdaniraque,” Dirk argued to reassure the officers. “With the addition of the Brungwurt Autonomous Army, our forces are now overwhelmingly strong. In addition, our ally, the Kingdom of Francoure, has already begun to move its troops toward their border with Zwelf. If we can settle this early, we have a chance to win this war... Isn’t that right, sir?”

“Yes. Our objective is not to expand our territory. We have decided that any land we acquire will be ruled jointly with Francoure, on the premise that we sign a separate non-aggression pact with Brungwurt. On top of that, as far as Zweilink is concerned, we will transfer our rights to Brungwurt after the war.”

The officers understood the implications of handing over border rights to Brungwurt.

Despite Auriano’s presence, an officer didn’t hesitate to sternly point out, “Don’t you think you are giving Brungwurt too much power?”

To which Auriano calmly replied, “I thought our stance since our founding made it perfectly clear that we are not interested in expanding our power.”

“That is true, but...”

“That will not change. We only wish to protect *our* land. We have given our youngest brother to the royal family. You must understand that this is a sign of our unchanging loyalty to Fanoren.” Auriano looked at his brother’s fiancé. “But that is only if...my brother lives to see another day.”

Together

Gravis met Auriano's gaze, then looked around at the men and said in a calm voice, "For the sake of peace in this country and on this continent, the Zwelf royal family must be destroyed."

Lucas and Auriano agreed.

The officers groaned. Many of them were familiar with the tragedy at Zweilink eighteen years ago. This time, they were able to retake the fort without ever being assaulted by flames. But their feelings regarding the operation had not taken shape just yet.

"If we choose wrong, the same thing will happen all over again," Gravis said. "Who can guarantee that a third tragedy will not take place at Zweilink? We are the only ones who can prevent similar things from happening in the future. Think about it."

The officers made up their minds.

Gravis, Lucas, and the Cassieux family had already settled on which path they should take.

Not to mention, they all lived to fight. It didn't take much to ignite the flames of their fighting spirits.

The men saluted Gravis.

"We will do as you wish, Your Excellency."

"Good. We will dismantle Zwelf so thoroughly that they will never dare to

turn their fangs against us again. Until we force them to withdraw from the forest, we will engage in all-out warfare. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

Gravis looked at the lieutenant general with somber eyes.

“Lucas, make sure that Gdaniraque is thoroughly disciplined so that they will never again think of interfering in our affairs with Zwelf.”

Lucas responded with a ferocious smile. “Disciplining those barbaric mercenaries, huh...? Very well. Leave it to me.”

“Now, we have one month. Within a month, we will tie up all loose ends on the front in the forest. If we can beat them here, the next major battleground will be the mountains in the northwest.”

The men responded with something of a war cry.

“Dirk,” Gravis called.

“Sir?”

“You should go back to the royal capital for now. When my Power returns, I will take you there. You’ll work with Ginter once you’re back. I will come for you again in two days.”

Dirk did not object, but couldn’t help tilting his head at his superior’s order. Why should he leave his side now of all times?

“I entrust you with the *evidence* that Leorino risked his life to bring us.”

Dirk looked up with a start.

“Hand him over to Ginter. But until then...I’m counting on you.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Leorino remained unconscious even ten days after he had been brought to Brungwurt.

Just when his body temperature had returned to normal, he developed an intense fever from his wounds.

The fever lasted for several days. Leorino's small face became gaunter by the day.

His life was poised on the edge of a cliff.

Sasha and Willy worked day and night tending to him. No one knew when Leorino might tumble into eternal sleep.

Maia was also gaunt and worn out, but every day she used her Power for as long as she could, rested, and returned to Leorino once more.

It was on the tenth day after Leorino was brought to Brungwurt that his fever began to break.

But Leorino still did not awaken.

On the twelfth day, Maia's body finally gave out. She could no longer get up and needed several days of bed rest.

From this point on, her son would have to heal on his own. Leorino's battle had begun.

When Josef returned from Zweilink, he went back to his original role as Leorino's guard.

Josef burst into tears when he saw the sleeping, emaciated face of his master.

"Master Leorino, we have recaptured Zweilink. It didn't burn, and...we protected the border. It was all thanks to the general and lieutenant general."

He reported to Leorino at his bedside, tears spilling down his cheeks. But Leorino did not react at all.

"Right now, they went further, they're fighting in the forest... Lord Auriano is with them. They're all protecting the kingdom. So wake up already...Master

Leorino.”

Josef did not leave Leorino’s side, as if fearing he might be deprived of his master again.

Many times during those long days he would look at Leorino’s sleeping face and talk to him, relieved that his breathing was steady, praying for his recovery.

Just like after the incident six years earlier, it was a dark and stifling time.

On the fifteenth day, Hundert, Leorino’s full-time attendant, returned to Brungwurt by carriage from the royal capital.

“Mr. Hundert!”

Josef welcomed Hundert, feeling as if he had gained a heartening ally.

Despite looking tired from the long journey, the attendant rushed to Leorino’s bedside in his travel attire. With tears welling in eyes faded from old age, Hundert gently placed his hand on Leorino’s dirty hair.

“...Master Leorino,” Hundert addressed him as usual. “Hundert is here. I hope you have been well taken care of in my absence.”

Josef stood next to Hundert, watching Leorino, desperately praying for him to wake up.

“...We are all waiting for you to wake up, my lord.”

“Mr. Hundert...”

Hundert lifted Leorino’s hand.

Seeing his bandaged fingertips, his wrinkled face crumpled further.

“Please wake up, my lord, and let Hundert see your lovely smile again. Please...please.”

Hundert’s thin body trembled. Josef was also crying.

Eventually, the faithful attendant composed himself and said he would take

care of Leorino to ease the burden of his recovery.

He donned his servant's uniform and began to tirelessly tend to Leorino.

Trusting that his master would wake up, Hundert carefully washed Leorino's sleeping body, looking out for his broken ribs, and exercised his limbs in the manner Hundert had learned six years prior to keep them from wasting away. He continued to take care of Leorino, never leaving him for a moment, so that he would be as comfortable as possible when he finally woke up.

Josef also helped. They talked to Leorino as he slept, waiting for their master to wake.

Leorino had a long dream.

It was not the dream of the flames. In the dream, the plains of Zweilink were not on fire. On the contrary, they did not appear to have been invaded by the enemy at all.

He was standing on the walls of the outer fortress. On the Zwelf side of the border, a forest extended as far as the eye could see.

For some reason, he kept watching this forest in this dream. He found himself watching it all day and all night.

He felt bored sometimes, but somehow he still felt that there was something beyond the deep, dark wood. He always found himself looking at the vast forest from the top of the fortress walls.

He felt like he had to watch over it. He was waiting for someone.

But the dream was different from how it had been before. He realized that he was dreaming. The texture of the stone walls of the fortress felt strangely real.

Leorino looked at his hand.

It was different from his usual dream, a helpless hand for a man.

Huh? This is my hand.

Leorino found himself thinking the obvious.

Once again, he looked down at the forest. The forest leading into Zwelf would be even colder than Zweilink. Were they freezing? Was anyone injured?

He didn't know why he thought that. He only kept watching the entrance to the forest from the top of the fortress.

He was waiting, hoping and praying for someone to come back soon. And for some reason, he felt that today was the day they would really return.

As proof, he could see figures among the trees. One by one, they stepped out of the forest.

Ah, see? I knew it.

Leorino smiled. He had been right to wait here. He was so excited that he tried to wave to them, but that was when he realized he was holding someone's hand.

A large hand. Before he knew it, someone was standing next to him.

He looked up and saw a young soldier with a strong, lithe body. He was a young man with fiery red hair. He looked familiar.

He, too, was staring at the forest.

When Leorino looked up to see who it was, the young man turned his head toward Leorino, as if noticing his gaze.

When his eyes met the young man's, Leorino was surprised to see that he had

violet eyes just like Leorino's own. Pleased by this revelation, he smiled, and the young man smiled back.

Leorino wondered why the young man was holding his hand, but the warmth of his touch was not unpleasant.

In each other's grasp for so long, he almost felt as if their joined hands had become one.

Are you waiting for someone, too?

Leorino boldly asked.

The young man smiled and nodded. Then he pointed to the edge of the forest.

Many soldiers had already emerged and crowded outside the edge of the trees. Leorino didn't know who he was pointing at.

He leaned forward to get a better look, and nearly fell off the top of the fort.

But thanks to the young man pulling Leorino back into his arms, he did not fall.

Now you won't fall again, Leorino.

The young man called his name.

Do you know me? Leorino asked, looking up at him. The young man smiled at him as if to say, *Of course*. Leorino felt at ease and rested his back against the young man's strong chest.

His stomach felt hot. He looked down to see a sword embedded in his

abdomen. The sword went through Leorino's belly and also seemed to have pierced the belly of the young man behind him.

It made them fit even more snugly together.

When Leorino said he was waiting for someone, too, the young man once more pointed to the edge of the forest as if to say, *Here they come*.

Many men emerged from the forest.

Leorino strained his eyes. He saw two men who seemed to sparkle. They were even larger and stronger than the young man he was leaning against.

Two men, one with dark hair and the other with hair like the sun.

Which were you waiting for? Leorino asked, leaning his back against the red-haired young man. The young man laughed and pointed.

Leorino couldn't tell which one he was pointing at.

I'm waiting, too.

Leorino pointed, and the young man nodded.

Leorino was impressed that he could recognize the person he was pointing at among the crowd.

I'll be back soon. I have to go down and meet him.

When Leorino said this, the red-haired young man looked a little sad. Leorino tugged on the young man's arm.

Before he knew it, the sword in their bellies was gone.

They will be back soon. Let's go meet them together.

Hey, Ionia. Let's return to them together.

When Leorino opened his eyes, he saw a familiar wooden ceiling. His body felt terribly heavy.

He managed to tilt his head to the side and look out the window. The sky was a light purple. He wondered if dawn had broken.

He heard the door open and someone enter. Judging by the sound of his footfalls, it was Hundert.

“Now, my lord, it's about time you woke up.”

Leorino thought he had nodded. But Hundert didn't seem to notice.

He wanted to get his legs moving as soon as possible. Despite everything, he had survived. He didn't care if he couldn't fully walk, he only wanted to be able to stand on his own legs and go places.

He felt a sigh building as he wondered if he would have to go through his exhausting training again today.

“Josef will be here shortly, so let's get moving again, even if only a little. I've been feeling a little weak lately, and I haven't been able to offer you the care you deserve, my lord... Truly a sad state of affairs.”

Josef? The son of Lev?

Wondering if Josef was coming to see him, Leorino thought he had asked out loud, but it appeared that Hundert did not hear him.

Leorino thought he should speak louder as his mind became a little clearer.

“The wounds in your stomach and head are closing up nicely. All we have to do now is wait for your ribs to set.”

The wound in his stomach? Ribs? Leorino was confused for a moment, certain that it was his legs that were injured.

“If you don’t get well soon, you won’t be able to welcome His Highness like this, will you?”

“N-no.”

Leorino agreed, thinking that was the last thing he wanted.

Of course. He had woken up to meet someone after all.

Leorino’s voice finally seemed to reach him. Hundert’s response contained a laugh.

“Of course not. I knew you’d say...so.”

Their eyes met.

Leorino idly thought he had more wrinkles than usual. The attendant was stunned, looking incredulous for some reason.

“My lord... You’re awake...?”

Leorino nodded, and thought he called the attendant’s name, but no sound came out.

The next moment, the old attendant fell to his knees on the spot, clasped his hands, and leaned onto the bedside.

“God... Oh, God... Thank you.”

His thin shoulders shook. Leorino had never seen his attendant display so much emotion.

He wanted to call out to Hundert somehow, but his voice failed him.

Hundert finally stood up and peered in to see his face better. His wrinkled face was wet with tears.

“Welcome back, my lord.”

“...unde...rt...”

When Leorino called his name in a hoarse voice, the attendant burst into tears again. He quickly wiped them away and smiled tenderly.

“...His Royal Highness recaptured Zweilink.”

At that moment, Leorino’s mind shook off the last of its slumber. At the same time, everything that had transpired came back to him all at once.

He was kidnapped from the royal capital. He had escaped, but was caught again. The violence he suffered there. And finally, he had stabbed Smirnov and fell from the fortress walls.

Leorino wondered how he was even alive.

“I-I’m...alive...”

Hundert nodded happily. “Yes, yes, of course. You’ve been asleep for a long time.”

“Ugh...”

“His Royal Highness rescued you, my lord. Now he is fighting beyond Zweilink.”

So when he thought he had heard Gravis’s voice just before he fell, that was not his mind playing tricks on him.

He saved me. I’m going to see Vi again.

There was much Leorino wanted to say, but having just awakened from the long coma, his body was already reaching its limits.

Before he ran out of energy, Leorino asked about something else that he truly needed to know.

“Is my sister...all right...?”

“Yes, rest assured. Lady Erina is safe and sound, and so is her child. She has returned to her parents’ home in the royal capital.”

Leorino’s mind was finally at peace.

Once again, he was rapidly dragged back to sleep.

He wanted to take stock of his body, but could not keep his eyes open any longer.

But he was not afraid to fall asleep anymore, because he no longer had to fight alone. Just before he was swallowed by that peaceful darkness, Leorino felt a strange sense of certainty.

Gravis and Lucas would return soon. They would leave that forest and come back.

After a long, dark night, morning had come to Brungwurt. Leorino finally awoke on the morning of the twentieth day after his return.

Although Leorino could not get up right away due to how long he had spent in a coma, his condition was stable and his wounds were healing well.

His life was no longer in any immediate danger, much to the relief of the doctors and his family.

By the time he was able to sit up in bed and eat on his own, nursing his broken ribs, it had been forty days since he had left the royal capital.

Show Me Spring

That day, Leorino awoke before dawn.

He slowly raised himself and stood up, rousing his weakened legs. He had recently recovered enough to be able to walk on his own within the confines of his room.

The wounds in his head and abdomen had closed up. His abdomen ached only occasionally. His chest still throbbed with pain when he moved. He was told the pain would continue for a while longer until the bones were fully set. A thin, curved board was placed around his chest, with bandages holding it tightly in place.

With every passing day, the sky beyond his window took on the dull hue of winter. It was still dark, even though dawn had already broken. As he approached the window, he saw that it was snowing hard enough to obscure his view.

The same snow would be falling in the forest beyond Zweilink.

At that thought, Leorino was suddenly struck by a strange impulse.

He picked up his dressing gown, put it on, and slipped out of the room.

The corridor was cold.

With his atrophied body, he still struggled to walk. Of course, he had not been allowed to leave his room yet. He knew it was irresponsible to sneak out of his

room alone in his current state without assistance.

But his heart would not stop screaming that he had to go right now.

Leorino staggered along the freezing corridor.

A few dozen steps outside of his room, he was already out of breath. His broken chest ached, his breathing shallow. His legs had completely wasted away while he was in a coma and were already shaking. His only comfort was that at least it didn't hurt.

But despite his body's immediate complaints about its limitations, the urge to go, to move, would not subside.

With his hand against the wall, he managed to move his legs and reach the stairs to the entrance hall.

But with his weakened limbs, descending the stairs felt like a major obstacle.

He made up his mind and sat on the first step. Using his hands, he slid down the steps, one by one.

The bandage wrapped around his hand was slowly growing dirty. Rubbing against the stairs, his buttocks were likely suffering the same fate.

"...Almost there."

With labored breathing, he encouraged himself.

Why was he doing something so irresponsible? Leorino instinctively understood the reason behind this urge.

I'm coming for you.

Finally, his feet reached the floor leading to the entrance. With nothing to lean on, he crawled forward, moving only on his hands, but still making his way toward the entrance.

Just when he had finally made it halfway down the hall, he heard a cry from behind him.

“Master Leorino?”

He turned around to see a maid carrying a jug, staring in surprise at Leorino dragging himself down the hall.

The brass jug slipped from her hands. It made a horrible noise as it hit the stone floor in the quiet early morning air.

“My lord, you’re still recovering! What are you doing here?!”

It happened just as Leorino was about to make an excuse.

A loud creak suddenly echoed through the hall as the grand doors opened. Powdery snowflakes came flying in through the crack.

“Ah!”

His vision was suddenly tinged with white.

Shielding himself from the snow with his arms, Leorino cast his gaze beyond the door.

The world outside was even more hazy white. In that world of white stood men armed for winter warfare.

As Leorino gazed at the men in surprise, they in turn stared in disbelief at Leorino splayed on the floor.

His eyes met those of the taller man in the center of the group.

“...Leorino?”

The next instant, Leorino resumed his valiant crawl. He struggled forward, relying only on the strength of his arms. His mind screamed at him to move faster, but there was only so much his arms could do.

A large shadow fell in front of him. In an instant, the man closed the distance and knelt in front of Leorino.

The scent of a midwinter forest enveloped Leorino.

Oh...

He was lost for words.

The man also smelled like a wet beast. The thick animal pelt he was wearing was damp with snow.

His damp black hair was a little longer than Leorino remembered, and his cheeks were sharper.

“...Leorino.”

The man removed his gloves. The moment his cold, trembling fingers touched his cheek, Leorino’s whole body exploded with joy.

Truly, he could find no words to express how he felt. Instead, Leorino looked up at the man with all the affection in the world contained in his gaze.

Something dripped at him from above. Remnants of the snow that had dampened the man’s bangs. And then, spilling from his starry-sky eyes, countless tears.

Leorino felt the tears wetting his cheeks. One by one, they soothed his heart.

Finally, he called the man’s name with his entire heart.

“Vi...welcome back.”

Gravis embraced his thin body on impulse and pressed his cold lips to Leorino’s.

“Leorino...”

With his lips, with his fingers, Gravis made sure that he wasn't dreaming—that Leorino was truly there.

He gently lifted Leorino's skinny body. He was as light as a twig, but his flesh was warm, his heart pumping fresh blood all over.

A smile bloomed on his gaunt face. The smile that Gravis thought he might never see again was now right in front of him.

Overwhelmed with emotion, his words failed him.

Gravis closed his eyes and embraced the irreplaceable half of his soul.

Leorino resolutely wrapped his arms around the man's back and hugged him with all the strength he could muster.

The squeeze was painfully feeble. The moment Leorino's fingers tugged at his cloak, Gravis let out a shuddering exhale from the pit of his stomach and remained motionless, his forehead resting on Leorino's shoulder.

At long last, the two filled the missing halves of their hearts with each other's presence.

Everyone left Gravis and Leorino to themselves.

Gravis accepted the hospitality with gratitude.

Still recovering, Leorino could not remain out of bed for long, and Gravis would soon have to return to his command on the front. Although distance was hardly an issue for Gravis, they would be given little to no time together until the war was over.

As Gravis accompanied Leorino to his bedroom, Lucas and Auriano took over

reporting on the progress of the war to August. Gravis's second-in-command, Dirk, was also present.

On Brungwurt's side, in addition to August, were Lev—the commander of the Autonomous Army—and his son, Josef.

“With the help of Lord Auriano and the Brungwurt Autonomous Army, we were able to defeat the enemy in the forest. On behalf of the general, I would like to offer you my deepest thanks.”

“I am glad my son and my troops were of use to you,” said August. “Auriano, you did well.”

Auriano nodded silently. He still carried a wild air about him from his time in the war, but now that he had returned to the castle, he seemed to be regaining his earnestness and reticence.

“Gdaniraque is a mercenary nation, and each unit is a formidable opponent,” said Lucas. “But faced with a large-scale operation, they were no match for Fanoren and Brungwurt.”

Auriano nodded and continued. “The fact that we had Francoure reinforcements was also a major factor. By attacking from both sides, we were able to take most of the Gdaniraque soldiers as prisoners of war.”

Gdaniraque's national asset was people. The country was poor, and most of its citizens earned foreign currency through selling their mercenary services. The country would not be able to survive if most of its soldiers were taken captive.

“Will bail negotiations for the prisoners of war be underway?”

“Francoure will represent us in negotiations with Gdaniraque. At the same time, we will inform Zwelf that we and Francoure will jointly take effective control of the area leading up to the Gdaniraque border.”

August breathed a sigh of relief.

The war with Zwelf would continue, but eliminating the threat of Gdaniraque from the enemy's arsenal was significant. The Brungwurt side of the border had escaped the ravages of war for the time being.

“The next major battlefield, then, will be up in the Baedekers. I presume the mountain troops will take it from here.”

Lucas nodded. “We will leave about a third of our forces at Zweilink to handle the remaining work in cooperation with Francoure. From now on, the majority of our army will be deployed to the northwestern mountains, where I will take command.”



Josef looked up and stared at the lionlike man. Josef didn't seem to notice that Dirk was observing him.

"The Baedeker Mountains are experiencing heavy snowfall," Lucas said. "We may experience some one-off clashes, but we expect full-scale battle to break out when the snow melts. We won't be able to return to the royal capital until at least early spring... Then again, I've been itching to put my skills to use for a while now."

Lucas smiled belligerently. He was not planning on losing.

"And one more thing. We would like to speak with Lord August alone from now on, if that is all right."

"Very well. Lev, Auriano, thank you for joining us. I hope you can get some rest today. As for Zweilink, we will continue to help defend it. Until this war is over, we cannot let our guard down."

"Yes, sir."

Josef was about to leave when Lucas stopped him.

"Josef, you stay. You should hear this as well."

After watching the two men leave, Lucas immediately got to the point.

"Lord August, it's about the Marquis of Lagarea."

"...Are you finally apprehending him?"

August had been prepared for his once-close friend to be arrested sooner or later, but his face did not hide his mixed feelings on the matter.

"No, not yet," Lucas said.

Dirk took over the explanation from there. "By His Excellency's instructions, we will leave the Marquis of Lagarea at large for the duration of the war. We don't want him to destroy any evidence while we are away from the royal capital. We are secretly gathering as much evidence as we can find under

Chancellor Ginter. In the spring...once we've dealt with Zwelf, we will finally hold the Marquis of Lagarea accountable."

"Are you certain he won't be able to talk his way out of this?" August asked.

Dirk looked at him.

"We have captured the marquis's agent, the one responsible for the attack on Zweilink eighteen years ago and kidnapping your son. It's all thanks to Lord Leorino."

"What...?" August stood up with a start. "This is the first I'm hearing of it. Whatever do you mean?"

"You already know that the kidnapper has the same gift as His Excellency. That's how Lord Leorino was kidnapped from the royal capital."

"Yes, His Highness Prince Gravis has told me all about it."

Dirk heaved a breath. "When you hear this, please don't scold Lord Leorino, but praise him for his bravery, sir."

"...May I ask you to elaborate, Mr. Dirk?"

"We have received a report from Dr. Sasha. Lord Leorino was stabbed in the belly by his own hand."

August was stunned speechless.

"When Leorino was taken to the top of the inner fortress, he stabbed himself in the stomach with the dagger his captor was holding. He said that was the only way to steal the blade. He wanted a chance to fight back."

"...What?!"

"He impaled himself, and when his captor flinched, he took the blade and stabbed him with it. Then, to finish him off, he was prepared to die when he... jumped from the top of the fort with the man in tow."

August covered his mouth with a trembling hand. Josef's lips quivered, having

learned about what had transpired for the first time.

“Just before they struck the ground, His Excellency narrowly managed to save them. As a result, we were able to capture the culprit, who will become our witness, alive. We owe this accomplishment to Lord Leorino.”

“...That’s rich! It was the accidental result of a desperate act he committed while intending to die.”

“Even so. Lord Leorino asked Dr. Sasha not to tell his family about this. Please keep it to yourself, Lord August, and don’t reproach him... He had no choice at the time.”

August clenched his fists to contain his rage. The mere thought that his son’s life could have ended if the scales of fate had tilted in the wrong direction was unbearable to a parent.

“...What of the culprit? If he has the same ability as His Highness, won’t he be able to escape?”

“Rest assured, we have him restrained to keep him from moving of his own volition.”

Dirk’s cold expression was deceptively reminiscent of his superior.

Gravis accompanied Leorino as he lay in bed and slowly stroked his platinum hair. The last time Gravis saw him, Leorino’s hair had been stiff with blood and mud, but now it was silky smooth and had regained its soft luster.

Having been scolded by his family and servants alike for his earlier stunt, Leorino was dejected.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“As am I.”

At the touch of Gravis’s fingers, Leorino’s face turned from remorse to a cheerful smile. It was a smile so lovely that it made Gravis’s heart ache.

Prompted by the fingers running over his scalp, Leorino showed Gravis the wound on his head. It had closed up nicely, although the scar was noticeable through his translucent, platinum hair. It must have bled so much due to its location.

“Let me see the belly wound, too.”

Leorino nodded.

Peeling back the bedcovers, Gravis undid the buttons of Leorino’s thick pajamas. His chest was secured with a hard board, attached to him with bandages.

Gravis ran his eyes over his flat, skinny belly. The vertical puncture wound, about the size of half a thumb, had formed a pink bulge on Leorino’s fair skin. It was located in the same place where Ionia’s scar had once been.

“Are you pleased?”

“Yes, your wounds have closed up nicely. Do they still hurt?”

“No. Except for my chest, I’m mostly fine.”

Gravis furrowed his brow as he refastened the buttons on his pajamas.

“...I almost let you die again. Forgive me for not saving you sooner.”

“You saved me, didn’t you? That’s why we’re here now... Thank you.”

Leorino lifted Gravis’s hand and kissed his large palm in gratitude.

“Sasha told me... You chose to die then, didn’t you?”

Leorino nodded honestly, making no excuses. “I knew then that I would not survive. If I was going to die anyway, I wanted to stop the cycle of hatred by killing that man.”

“...I see.”

Gravis was hurt nonetheless. Leorino couldn’t ignore this.

But he did not regret the choice he had made at that moment.

Leorino asked what had been on his mind.

“...Did that man, Smirnov, die?”

Gravis shook his head. Leorino looked relieved and disappointed at the same time.

“...Before I escaped from the outer fortress, I killed a Gdaniraque soldier not much older than me.”

Leorino showed Gravis his bandaged hand. A fair hand. White bandages. But once covered in blood, his hand was already stained with sin.

“...There’s no point hiding me from evil anymore. My hands will always be stained with blood. So...”

I will follow you wherever you go.

Leorino bit back those last words, but Gravis must have noticed the implied thought. With a somewhat pained expression, he stroked Leorino’s bangs once more.

“First, you need to get better.”

“I’ve been asleep for so long that my body has entirely wasted away. You saw that earlier, didn’t you? I can’t even walk around the castle.”

Leorino made no secret of his complaints, but in reality, he was in no hurry.

If he exercised, he would be able to walk again.

Above all, he got to reunite with Gravis, so he had nothing more he could possibly wish for.

“Vi...please give me one more hug before you go.”

Instead of granting his wish, Gravis gently captured Leorino’s small lips with

his own.

“...Mnf.”

When Leorino eagerly opened his mouth, Gravis inserted his thick tongue through the gap.

Gravis slowly, lovingly explored every inch of Leorino's mouth. Leorino responded in kind, and the two of them savored the sweetness of the embrace.

Faint gasps escaped Leorino's lips.

After a while, Gravis pulled away.

“...If you perished, my heart would have died with you.”

“Vi...I'm sorry.”

Gravis soothingly pressed his lips to Leorino's forehead, then to his eyelids, and finally left a peck on his lips one last time.

“I love you... Don't ever give up on life again.”

“I love you, too.” Leorino brought his own lips to Gravis's. “I'm sorry for worrying you. And...thank you for saving me.”

Gravis smiled a little at that. Seeing his smile, Leorino finally felt that they were truly reunited.

“When the war ends, I'll come for you.”

“Thank you. But if I may be honest, I don't want to be away from you anymore.”

But despite his words, Leorino looked at Gravis with a smile. If they were going to be separated again anyway, he only wanted to rejoice in the miracle of seeing Gravis alive again for now.

In response, Gravis smiled as well and also confessed his feelings.

“I'm afraid of leaving you, too.”

Gravis slowly lowered himself to the bed and embraced Leorino's fragile body.

With a soft sigh, Leorino wrapped his hands around the man's shoulders. They felt each other's warmth in silence for a while longer.

The ice around their hearts melted away.

They wished they could be locked in this sweet cage together forever.

It was so hard to say good-bye. Leorino felt like crying.

A cruel knock sounded on the door. It was time to part ways.

"...I will end this war by the spring. This will be the final time we fight Zwelf. Wait for me until then."

Another smile bloomed on Leorino's lips.

"Of course. I will have healed by spring."

Gravis watched him tenderly.

Leorino's life lit up the room.

No matter how gaunt his cheeks were or how emaciated he looked, nothing in the world could rival the beauty of Leorino's smile.

Gravis wanted to burn that smile into his mind.

"When this war is over, we will settle our score with that man. Just a little longer, Leorino."

"But first, you must come for me."

"I will, I promise."

Starry-sky eyes and violet eyes united in purpose.

Even as they were trapped in the falling snow, spring was approaching. Until then, they would continue their respective battles with half a heart.

They exchanged vows.

When spring came, everything would change.

The Fall of Zwelf

Lying on the northern border far from the royal capital, Brungwurt was closed off by thick snows during the winter.

Leorino spent every monotonous day slowly healing his wounded body and strengthening his atrophied muscles to regain his previous range of movement.

One day, happy news arrived from the royal capital. Auriano's wife, Erina, had given birth to a baby boy. Even in the midst of a war, Brungwurt was overjoyed at the birth of their heir.

Auriano had not yet seen the face of his newborn son. He was now guarding the border with the royal army, looking out over the forest beyond Zweilink, which now remained under the joint rule of Fanoren and Francoure.

Until the war came to an end and the baby could endure the long journey, they would not be able to see each other.

From the Baedeker Mountains in the northwestern part of the country, where Lucas had been dispatched with the mountain troops, news arrived of small-and medium-scale battles breaking out regularly, even under the heavy snow cover. Leorino continued to pray for Lucas's safety when he heard this news from his father. He also heard that Ebbo had recovered from his wounds and was back on the front lines.

While traveling back and forth between the royal capital and the battlefield, Gravis seemed to be secretly planning with Ginter on how to handle their other problem.

Gravis came to see Leorino in Brungwurt only once.

He stayed only half an hour, but they made sure the other was safe, exchanged a few quiet words, and for the remaining time, Gravis held Leorino in his arms.

Leorino waited patiently for spring in a world of white.

A few months after his arrival in Brungwurt, the lingering snow melted away, and a secret messenger was sent from Chancellor Ginter to Margrave August. Leorino barged into the study where his father and Auriano sat.

Leorino's complexion had improved recently, and he had regained much of the weight he had lost. His weakened legs had recovered enough for him to move around the castle without issue. His hair had grown longer, and Leorino himself had become a little more mature after the painful experience.

His father and older brother smiled at the sight of their youngest's newfound vigor.

"Father, what did Chancellor Ginter tell you?"

"He said that it was time to make arrangements to return the kidnapped craftsmen we're sheltering to their homeland. In other words, it is time to determine the victor of this war. That, and...he has also decided how to capture the traitor."

August handed Ginter's letter to Auriano. Auriano had also been informed of everything concerning the Marquis of Lagarea's betrayal. When he learned the truth, he was uncharacteristically furious.

Auriano quickly skimmed over the letter and returned it to his father.

"They will likely begin within the next day or two."

“Yes, it’s finally happening.”

“Brother? What is going to happen?” Leorino tilted his head.

“It’s just as Father said. The Royal Army has already pushed Zwelf out of the Baedeker Mountains. Quite a bit sooner than expected. The snows are still thick, but Lieutenant General Lucas and the mountain troops have done an impressive job.”

So then, Lucas and Ebbo had successfully defended the northwestern border. Leorino’s eyes lit up.

“So the war is finally over.”

“No, not yet. Soon the last major operation will be launched. Then His Excellency will finish off Zwelf in one fell swoop.”

“In the Baedeker Mountains?”

“No, beyond the mountains.”

Leorino did not immediately understand what his father meant.

“What do you mean beyond? If they have expelled the enemy from the mountains, why is the war not over?”

August took Leorino’s hand. He gave it a comforting squeeze as he gazed at Leorino’s anxious face.

“The Royal Army of Fanoren has already crossed the mountain range and the border into Zwelf territory. Soon they will reach the royal capital of Zwelf. You know what that means, don’t you?”

Leorino finally understood and paled.

“...So what Vi plans for Zwelf is...”

He couldn’t bring himself to say the word “destruction.”

“His Highness will not stop the invasion until the head of King Vandarren is separated from his body. The nation of Zwelf will soon lose everything it was.”

“No... Vi would only defend this country, he would not destroy another...”

“...You don’t know about His Highness’s wrath after the battle for Zweilink eighteen years ago. He wished for nothing but the destruction of Zwelf, but those around him were desperate to interfere. It was right after the cold spell, and Fanoren couldn’t afford the burden that Zwelf would become.”

Leorino was shocked to learn this.

“His Highness’s wrath was so great that they had to bring in the King of Francoure to persuade him to put down his sword for the sake of the continent and the peace of Fanoren. He would not have backed down otherwise.”

“...I had no idea.”

Leorino lowered his shoulders and his gaze.

He recalled records showing how many soldiers were killed in the last war. On both sides.

Even though he knew that warfare was not everything it was chalked up to be, he was choked up when he imagined the young Gravis giving a fierce order to wipe out the enemy.

Leorino had no way of knowing what Gravis had been thinking at the time. But he was certain that it was Ionia’s death that drove Gravis to the brink of despair.

“Will the people of Zwelf be spared?”

August rubbed his sad youngest son’s hand. The bandages had been removed from his fingers, but his nails were still missing.

“His Highness is not a cruel man. Even back then, he gave strict orders to minimize the harm to innocent people. I believe he will have more presence of mind this time.”

“Right.”

“If His Highness’s heart is still filled with anger and resentment at the thought of having you taken from him, it is your role to alleviate those feelings.”

“My role...?”

His father’s blue-green eyes caught Leorino’s gaze and gave him strength.

“Yes. If his heart strays from the right path, you should correct it. That is your duty as his spouse.”

Leorino looked up with a start.

Of course. Everything was different from eighteen years ago. Leorino was alive. He could speak with Gravis. He was able to understand and discuss what was in Gravis’s heart.

Leorino must not look away and accept the weight of the love of the man who determined the fate of his country.

“...Yes, Father.”

Leorino nodded.

A few days later, Leorino looked out from his room at the courtyard still covered with snow. He felt a presence behind him and turned to see the man he loved.

“Vi...!”

Leorino jumped into his arms.

Dressed in a fur-lined cloak, Gravis’s face was, as always, perfectly beautiful.

“I missed you...”

“As did I.”

Gravis cupped Leorino’s face in his hands and watched him intently to make sure he was all right.

Leorino couldn’t help but chuckle at the seriousness of the act. Then, as if relieved by the sight of his smile, the corners of Gravis’s eyes softened.

“You seem well. I see you’ve regained some weight.”

The arms holding Leorino were cold. The hem of Gravis’s cloak and his winter boots were slightly stained with mud.

“You leaped here from Zwelf, didn’t you?”

“So you’ve heard already?”

“Yes. From Marzel’s letter to my father.”

Gravis embraced Leorino again.

“...Tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, the country of Zwelf will disappear from the history of this continent.”

“...”

It was just as Leorino’s father had said.

His face buried in Gravis’s uniform, Leorino asked in a muffled voice: “Will the people of Zwelf suffer?”

“...The innocent have nothing to do with this war. We will try to keep the attacks to a minimum.”

“But...Vi, are you going to do something reckless again?”

Gravis gently covered Leorino’s lips with his own. Leorino was no longer able to say anything.

“I have realized something since we invaded.”

“Which is...?”

“Zwelf is impoverished because of the reparations they have been paying us and the military expansion of the past few years. I knew that. But seeing the damage in person was uncomfortable. That country cannot afford this war. The people are starving, all of them.”

“...No.”

“That bastard Vandarren. The first thing you should do with the contents of your coffers is fill the stomachs of your people... He is an unfathomably foolish man who dreamed of making Zwelf the most powerful country on the continent. Such is the end of a nation that has crowned such a foolish king.”

Rare as it was for him, Gravis expressed a mixture of indignation and sorrow. As a member of the royal family, he likely found this treatment of one's countrymen unforgivable.

"...Vi, please. The people of Zwelf are innocent. Please spare them."

Hearing Leorino's heartbreaking plea, Gravis smiled with a bitter expression.

"So Lord August told you about what I wanted to do eighteen years ago."

"..."

Leorino's face couldn't lie. He only stared at Gravis in silence, with a pitiful, pained look on his face.

"Fear not. Our purpose is to destroy the Zwelf royal family, the root of all evil. What form of rule we take will depend on future discussions, but we will take responsibility for the invasion. This is the last time we will make the people of those lands suffer. We will not let them starve any longer."

There was reason in Gravis's voice, and he was clearly thinking of the people of Zwelf. That was enough. Leorino relaxed his shoulders, realizing that he had nothing more to add.

"We have also detained a secret messenger sent to the Marquis of Lagarea by Vandarren's close associate, General Zberav."

Leorino looked up. Gravis nodded.

"It must be because we captured Smirnov. It seems that now he had to send his message by more traditional means."

"So that means..."

"Yes. We have strong evidence of betrayal, although it would be ideal if Lagarea's name was on it. Now we can denounce him. We have the secret messenger, Smirnov, and letters from Zberav. We have everything we need."

Gravis cupped Leorino's cheeks between his hands.

"Soon, Leorino."

After crossing the border of the Baedeker Mountains, the Fanoren army kicked up the slush of earth and melting snow and drove back the Zwelf army without fail.

The capital of Zwelf was only a few days away.

In the innermost recesses of his palace, King Vandarren of Zwelf was furious with his entourage, upset that nothing was going his way.

"Make Gdaniraque compensate us for not fulfilling our contract! Do you have any idea how much money we've wasted on them?!"

"Gdaniraque has lost half its troops, and our country has lost half its territory! We can no longer rely on them!"

"Fine, *you* think of some way to protect me! As long as the blood of the royal family survives, we can take back our lands when the time is right!"

"Your Majesty...you are truly..."

"What, you think it's my fault?! You are here to serve the royal family!"

The people of Zwelf still remained in the capital.

Vandarren could accept his people being trampled by the armies of other countries, only to flee himself? He had once been disinherited; perhaps they should have expected this when he usurped the throne again by killing the young king.

"...The people are starving and our treasury is empty. Countless soldiers died in the war. We have no more weapons to defend the crown!"

"Which is exactly why we take what we need from others! Why is there such a difference between our country and Fanoren, when we are neighbors?! It is Fanoren that should be destroyed for monopolizing such fertile lands!"

The entourage despaired at Vandarren's outrageous statement.

The vengeful king held on to the impossible fantasy of destroying Fanoren and making it his own. To realize this fantasy, he continued to funnel the country's funds to Gdaniraque, even as he starved his own people.

The aides finally saw the truth.

Their kingdom was not poor because the lands were barren. The destruction of the country had been looming over them since the moment they had installed as king a man who had no sense of honor or compassion as a ruler.

His entourage trembled with the fear of impending doom.

That night, in the innermost recesses of the palace, King Vandarren lay in terror, his cheek resting on the breast of his favorite concubine.

General Zberav, now the only one loyal to the king, knelt and advised: "I will devote the remainder of our forces to the Fanoren army. In the meantime, please flee to safety, Your Majesty."

"Y-yes... Zberav, you are a loyal man and my only ally."

"I have also asked *him* to ensure your safety."

The king lifted his head from his concubine's breast.

"The man with the uncanny powers who was in charge of communicating with you-know-who has not appeared recently, has he?"

"I have secretly dispatched a messenger, though it goes against the promise I made to Lagarea. Until the time is right, please take refuge in your palace. We should receive some news from him soon."

The king of Zwelf's bloated face glowed with hope.

At that moment, the shadow of a man appeared out of nowhere, visible through the thin decorative curtain. The shadow spoke to the king.

“I have news from Fanoren.”

At that moment, Vandarren thought that Smirnov, the liaison, had returned.

“Oh! ...We were just talking about you!”

King Vandarren beamed with delight. But Zberav paled instead.

“No, Your Majesty... That is not Smirnov’s voice!”

Just as Zberav warned the king, the curtain was lifted and three men suddenly appeared.

They pointed their blades at the throats of the pair.

The concubine screamed and fell off the settee. A red-haired invader immediately seized her throat with his fingers, knocking her unconscious.

“Eeek!”

“...! Y-You are...!”

The man holding the blade to the King of Zwelf’s neck stood on the settee and looked down at the king arrogantly.

“We meet again, Vandarren. It’s been nineteen years.”

King Vandarren looked up at the man with shock in his eyes.

He recognized his impossibly flawless beauty and cold, starry-sky eyes.

When he remembered who the man was, Vandarren began to tremble violently.

Of course. The man who had been at the trial after his defeat nineteen years ago.

“Gravis Adolphe Fanoren...”

The man nodded.

“That’s right. I have come for your head to pay for the war nineteen years ago, and to end this pointless war.”

Vandarren screamed and, like the concubine before him, rolled off the settee.

The king of Zwelf tried to flee the scene, but Gravis stepped on his back. Vandarren let out a yelp as he was pressed to the ground.

Leaning his weight onto Vandarren’s back, Gravis whispered to the king: “Rest assured. The people of Zwelf will suffer no more... Your life will redeem them.”

There was nothing kinglike about the man. Vandarren wailed pathetically.

The men of Fanoren felt a sense of emptiness, realizing this was the man who had declared war on them twice.

Gravis let out a small sigh and lifted his foot from the man’s back.

“...I won’t waste my blade on him.”

Relieved to be alive, the king of Zwelf tried to crawl away, weeping and drooling.

“Lucas.”

Gravis called the lieutenant general’s name.

“Yes, sir.”

The next moment, Vandarren’s head was easily separated from his torso by the lionlike man’s greatsword.

Zberav could only stare in dismay at the scene. The man who had beheaded the king with his greatsword turned the corpse with his blade to avoid the blood.

The general murmured in a weary tone, “This man’s head...is not enough to make up for the lives of Ionia and the soldiers who died in the war, is it?”

“I suppose not... It’s a shame. Then this one is next.”

The lionlike man once again held his sword against Zberav, flashing the blood-soaked tip of his blade.

From his distinctive appearance, Zberav knew that the man holding the sword to his flesh was the famously valiant Lieutenant General Brandt.

“What do we do with him?”

“Behead him.”

Zberav paled at the general’s answer.

“This man is effectively the war criminal who fueled that pig’s ambition, and the one who joined forces with our country’s traitors to start this war.”

“I can’t say it feels good to take the head of a man who offers no resistance, but if their heads mark the end of this foolish war, perhaps there’s a point to wetting my sword.”

If the sword at his throat was drawn back, it would be over. As Zberav closed his eyes, ready for the end, a red-haired man called out from behind him.

“I don’t know. Shouldn’t we let him live?”

“Hah? Dirk, I know you must be very proud of yourself for capturing that secret messenger on your own, but—”

“But he mentioned the traitor’s name. He is an irreplaceable living witness, even more unimpeachable than the messenger.”

The two men exchanged glances at the adjutant’s suggestion.

“Well, if we take that pig’s head and tie this man up and expose them both to the soldiers, the royal capital will fall with nearly no bloodshed.”

“Not a bad idea. But only if the man tells us everything.”

The men nodded.

“You can do as you please, Dirk.”

With the permission of his superiors, the redhead peered into Zberav’s face.

“General Zberav, what do you say? If you accept our terms, we will spare your life and the lives of all the women you’ve ever cared about.”

Hearing the terms, Zberav nodded in humiliation and anguish.

The next day, true to Lucas’s words, the Zwelf army lost all will to fight when they saw the general who had been taken prisoner and the head of King Vandarren of Zwelf.

When the Kingdom of Fanoren urged them to surrender, the soldiers abandoned their swords and gave up the royal capital without resistance.

On that day, the Kingdom of Zwelf disappeared from the map of the Agalean continent.

Answers

Leorino was strolling through the courtyard of Brungwurt Castle, accompanied by Josef. The days had ticked by, and winter slowly turned into spring. The lingering snow had begun melting away.

They walked slowly, Josef matching Leorino's pace.

Leorino's guard was very concerned about his master's recent low spirits. It began after the news of Fanoren's victory in the war reached Brungwurt.

Leorino was supposed to be looking forward to seeing his fiancé again after the long winter apart, so what was the melancholy Josef could still glimpse in his expression?

"Master Leorino, let's take a break, shall we?"

They sat down on a stone bench. Leorino's expression was cheerless.

"The general will be coming for you soon... Do you not want to see him?"

"No, of course I do. It's just..."

Josef was impatient by nature, but he remained silent and waited for Leorino to vent his feelings.

Leorino gazed at the rustic courtyard for a while, and eventually, looked up at the cloudy sky with a sigh. Little by little, he began to speak his mind.

"...I'm truly glad I'll be seeing Vi soon."

"Right."

“I’m really glad that the war is over and that we won.”

“Yeah, of course.”

He had heard the news of the victory from his father about a month ago.

He also heard that Zwelf was finally destroyed by Fanoren. In the end, they captured the royal capital with nearly no bloodshed after executing the king and his generals.

Now that the royal family of Zwelf had fallen, the vast territory to the north was occupied by Fanoren.

He was told Lucas would be stationed there for the time being to deal with the aftermath of the defeat.

It appeared that he was providing emergency aid—such as food for the starving people of Zwelf who were left destitute by the foolish rule of King Vandarren—while setting up a temporary governing system and maintaining public order.

“Josef...can I tell you how I honestly feel right now?”

Josef nodded.

“When Ionia’s memories returned to me and I remembered Zweilink...I loathed Zwelf for starting the war. If it hadn’t been for that battle, Ionia would still be alive.”

“I suppose...”

“But we won the war and dissolved the country that attacked us this time. Not that that was good or bad...but Vi and Lucas got their revenge...and I, for some reason, still didn’t feel satisfied.”

Josef nodded once more. Leorino began to speak of his feelings in depth.

“War is an ugly thing. But I also heard that the people of Zwelf were suffering under the tyranny of the foolish king, so perhaps the people of his kingdom will be happier if they are annexed by Fanoren.”

“...Maybe so.”

“Zwelf is no more. Gdaniraque will not touch Fanoren for a while. I think Vi made the right decision... But, even so...”

Leorino stared intently at a spot on the ground.

Ahead of his gaze, piercing the ground where the snow still lingered, a small yellow flower bloomed. It was still cold and frosty in the mornings and evenings, but the flower was strong and resilient. What was this flower called?

Encouraged by the flower, Leorino continued.

“But...I was thinking how hard it must be to be in the position to change the fate of a country.”

Josef guessed the meaning of Leorino’s words. “You mean the general?”

“Yes. To destroy one country in order to keep another alive. How difficult it must be to make such a choice...and to bear the responsibility of taking and losing so many lives in the wake of that decision.”

Leorino looked at his clenched fists.

“Killing and dying are not so different. Ionia’s death after he was betrayed by Edgar and my escape after killing the Gdaniraque soldier in the outer fortress were both deaths of one person. Once I realized that, I became afraid to stand by Vi’s side.”

“Did the weight of everything the general was carrying frighten you?”

“...No.”

“Did you lose confidence in your ability to be the general’s spouse?”

Leorino shook his head.

“That’s not what I meant... Well, yes. Perhaps. I was just wondering if I could be his other half.”

“Other half?”

“Yes. Half of his heart. I have already entrusted Vi with half of my heart, but I wondered if Vi would entrust me with half of his and let me protect it... I wondered if I could bring him happiness and make him smile in Ionia’s stead.”

The victory in the war felt empty. It was heartrending to think that Gravis had lived with this emptiness for so long.

“But you miss him, don’t you?”

“Yes...I miss him.”

Josef placed his hands on the stone bench and leaned back to look up at the heavens.

When he noticed the presence behind them, Josef stood up with a start.

Leorino looked up at his guard. “Josef?”

“I can’t help you with that...and I’m afraid thinking about it all on your own won’t bring you the answer.”

Josef’s words were always painfully honest. The guard stood in front of his master and looked down at him.

“Perhaps it’s too early to find that answer. Then again, what do I know?”

“What?”

“I think that you should live with the general, let the years go by, do your best to be happy...and then, at the very end, you can both figure out the answer together.

“So,” Josef smiled and pointed behind him. “...Go ask the general if that’s all right with him.”

Leorino gasped at his guard’s words and turned around.

A short distance away, the man he had been waiting for this entire time stood in silence.

“Leorino.”

The moment Gravis’s deep voice called his name, Leorino broke into a run,

forgetting all about his legs.

Tripping over his feet, he leaped into the man's arms.

Gravis's strong arms held him with breathtaking strength.

"I came for you, as promised."

"Vi... Vi..."

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting. It couldn't have been easy for you."

He shouldn't have worried.

In the end, Leorino's heart screamed beyond all reason to be in Gravis's arms.

"Please take me back to the royal capital with you."

Gravis must have overheard Leorino's doubts, so Leorino wasted no time in expressing the emotion filling his heart.

"I will never leave your side again, no matter what. I may be too hopeless to be your other half...but I'm confident I will love you more than anyone ever could."

"Leorino..."

"Lift me. Let me see your face up close."

Gravis's face twisted in something resembling pain, but he still picked Leorino up and brought him close to his face.

Leorino placed his hands on Gravis's cold, refined features and took his lips in his.

Sobbing, he put all the feelings in the world into the embrace as he kissed Gravis over and over.

"I love you. I want to return to the royal capital with you."

"Will you come back with me? Are you ready to give me one last answer?"

He really had overheard the conversation with Josef.

Even as he cried, Leorino made light of the situation.

“...If at the very end, you realize I wasn’t your other half and regret your choice, it’ll be too late to return me to Brungwurt.”

“I see. Then I must make up my mind now.”

Gravis’s large palm wiped away the endless stream of tears. His hand was warm.

“I will always carry a dagger with me, just in case we should have a disagreement and end up fighting,” said Leorino.

“Hah! Seems like I’ve met my match.”

Gravis broke into a broad smile as warm as the spring sun.

Leorino felt as if a large flower had bloomed in his heart.

He could not fight at Gravis’s side. He had been saved and could only wait for Gravis’s safe return.

Once upon a time, when Leorino had traveled from Brungwurt to the royal capital, he would have been ashamed of himself for being so helpless and always needing the protection of others. He would have considered himself unmanly, pathetic, and useless.

But now, he no longer deprecated himself.

His heart was enough for Gravis.

This desire to be close to him was enough.

All he had to do now was never let go of Gravis’s hand. Leorino would never again be ashamed of who he was.

“...Please take me back to the royal capital, back to where you are.”

Leorino clung tightly to his neck. Then Gravis looked into Leorino’s eyes

teasingly and laughed.

He laughed with joy, with all his heart.

Tears of joy welled up again in Leorino's violet eyes.

"I could take you home right this instant if you wish, but are you certain?" Gravis teased.

Leorino lowered his eyebrows in thought. "Well, I want to say good-bye to my father and mother and...my brother, and then to everyone else. And, and... Ah, can you take Hundert and Josef back with us?"

Gravis sighed emphatically.

Tears running down his cheeks, Leorino smiled.

The Final Battle

Leorino returned to the royal capital with Gravis for the first time in months. The city remained unchanged, as if the war with Zwelf had never happened.

Evidence of the Marquis of Lagarea's treachery had already been gathered. General Zberav of Zwelf, who was thought to have been executed, was secretly held in the cellar under the Palace of Defense as a living witness to the betrayal, joining Smirnov in custody. Zberav would be imprisoned for the rest of his life, but he agreed to testify in exchange for the lives of his family and retainers.

Perhaps the man who had made the King of Zwelf his puppet ruler and brought about the war that shook the continent had some humanity left in him after all.

According to Ginter, the Marquis of Lagarea did not seem upset in the slightest even after the fall of Zwelf. He acted as if he had never betrayed Fanoren, never losing his facade as a loyal subject.

Leorino wanted to hear the Marquis of Lagarea's sincere thoughts before capturing him, and to that end, he offered himself up as bait. He couldn't risk the other men losing their memories.

Gravis and Ginter were very much against it. But Leorino convinced them that losing his memories would not pose any problem for him and that he would always be able to remember what mattered most as long as he had Ionia's memories.

“Look, Leorino. The moment he says or does something suspicious, we will intervene, even if that means not getting any concrete evidence. Is that clear?”

“Of course, I understand.”

Thus, the Marquis of Lagarea and Leorino were given a carefully crafted opportunity to be alone.

The setting would be the king’s office.

On that day, the Marquis of Lagarea was waiting for Joachim to appear in the king’s office. After the defeat of Zwelf, a veritable mountain of documents was waiting for the approval of the king.

But the king did not appear at the usual time.

Then a knock sounded, and the king’s full-time attendant entered the room.

The attendant seemed surprised to find the Secretary of the Interior waiting alone in the office.

The attendant was leading someone into the room, whose eyes also went wide at the sight of the marquis.

“Marquis of Lagarea...?”

The person who walked into the office was Leorino Cassieux, who would soon become royalty as the spouse of the king’s brother.

Leorino looked up at the attendant with concern. The king’s attendant looked apologetically toward both of them.

“Marquis of Lagarea, if I am not mistaken, there has been a miscommunication about His Majesty’s plans for today.”

The gray-haired Secretary of the Interior calmly asked, “...You mean to say that His Majesty’s schedule for today has been changed?”

“Yes. His Majesty scheduled a private audience with Lord Leorino Cassieux on short notice and will have time for decisions on political matters after lunch. I

apologize for failing to inform you sooner.” The attendant bowed deeply.

“No, that’s fine... Leorino, it’s been a fair while.”

Leorino, with a somewhat hesitant look on his face, bowed to his father’s best friend.

“Uncle Bruno... It’s good to see you.”

“I’m glad to see you’re doing well. Your marriage ceremony to His Highness Prince Gravis is quickly coming up, isn’t it?”

“Yes, thank you. So, Uncle... Um...,” Leorino asked haltingly, concerned about the king’s attendant. “I hope Lord Julian is well?”

“Oh, yes. My nephew is about to get married. He’s faring reasonably well.”

“I see.”

Leorino seemed relieved.

“What business do you have with His Majesty today?”

“He said that he had something he wanted me to relay to my father concerning future matters with Brungwurt,” said Leorino.

The Marquis of Lagarea waved the attendant away. “Then I will keep Lord Leorino company until His Majesty’s arrival.”

“But to leave you unattended...”

The marquis forced a smile at the attendant’s unnecessary concern. “Are you expecting an old man like myself to do something unwholesome to him?”

“No, sir... I will ask His Majesty to come as soon as possible.”

The attendant bowed and left the room.

Leorino and the Marquis of Lagarea were left alone in the king’s office.

“Uncle Bruno... No, Marquis of Lagarea, I am late in thanking you for your permission to marry His Highness.”

The old marquis smiled kindly.

“I am glad to hear that His Highness, who was, after all, in command on the front lines, is safe and sound. As his fiancé, you must be relieved.”

Leorino nodded happily at his words.

“How does it feel to marry the greatest man, not only in our country, but on the entire continent, Leorino?”

“I am honored. I deeply respect His Highness and his willingness to work so hard, despite his noble rank.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” Leorino answered with a smile on his lips. “His Highness even caught the man who kidnapped me on your orders, Uncle. He is a partner I can rely on.”

The smile faded from the old nobleman’s face.

“...What did you just say?”

“I said that His Highness has captured the ability user who calls himself ‘Smirnov,’ and who claims you as his master.”

Ionia... Finally, we’re here.

Leorino spoke to his soul, then stared at the traitor with his violet eyes.

“You are making a terrible mistake, Leorino.”

Leorino inclined his head.

“I don’t see how. Smirnov worshipped you, saying that you found him and helped him escape his difficult life. He also said that your Power made him more confident with his own ability.”

“...You.”

The Marquis of Lagarea's mild expression drastically changed.

Realizing this was the man behind the mask, Leorino calmly watched him reveal his true nature.

"I suspect you will erase my memory after this anyway, so before that, please tell me something."

"...How much do you know?"

"Should I begin with the secret of your birth?"

At that moment, the "Marquis of Lagarea," who had served the royal court of Fanoren for decades, vanished without a trace.

His gentle expression changed completely to something dark and brooding.

Seeing Leorino clearly knew much more than he could have imagined, the marquis must have been calculating how to manipulate Leorino's memories.

The old marquis's eyes lit up.

"...What is the worst thing you can imagine?"

Leorino answered honestly, "Losing His Highness Prince Gravis."

"How honest you are... I will erase all memories of that man from your mind."

"...So you truly have the Power to manipulate people's memories, don't you?"

The Marquis of Lagarea smiled wickedly. "You knew that and recklessly decided to cross me regardless? Now...what shall I do? Make you forget His Highness and arrange an illicit love affair with Julian? He must still have feelings for you."

But Leorino laughed out loud.

"It's no use. You can't take memories of His Highness Prince Gravis away from me."

“...What?”

“I have memories of Vi that no one can erase, somewhere you will never be able to reach. As long as I have that, I will never forget Vi, or you, or even... Edgar Yorke.”

Leorino’s words came as a shock. “Why... How did you remember?”

“That’s a secret,” said Leorino. “What I want to know is your motive. Why did you join forces with Zwelf? Why did you betray our country?”

“Hah! What proof do you have that I am a traitor?”

“All your evil has already been exposed.”

“And your proof? Smirnov? He proves nothing.” The Marquis of Lagarea sneered.

“There is other, better evidence, but I don’t see why I should explain that to you. It is enough that you have revealed that you possess the ability to manipulate memories.”

“And why is that...?”

“Because your trial is already over and your guilt has been established.”

“What...?”

With that, men suddenly entered the room from the lounge attached to the office.

The Marquis of Lagarea sat up in surprise.

The men who entered the room were Chancellor Ginter; Lucas, the lieutenant general; Dirk, the general’s adjutant; August, the margrave of Brungwurt; and Gravis.

Last to appear was the calm-faced King Joachim.

Gravis beckoned Leorino over.

While the Marquis of Lagarea was shaken, Leorino rushed to the safety of Gravis's arms.

Chancellor Ginter calmly offered the old nobleman his verdict.

"Bruno Henckel, Marquis of Lagarea. You are guilty of, among other things, treason in the war that took place nineteen years ago and of kidnapping craftsmen and forcing them to work for the enemy. For your crimes, you are relieved of your position as Secretary of the Interior and stripped of your noble status, effective immediately."

The alarm on the old marquis's face disappeared.

"...Well, this is awfully one-sided. Do I not get to defend myself? ...What proof do you have anyway?!"

The Marquis of Lagarea looked around at the men, his eyes finally landing on his best friend.

"August...say something. Do you believe me to be a traitor...?"

Hearing the Marquis of Lagarea's appeal, August's expression was that of agony. But he nodded in silence.

"August...why?"

August answered the astonished marquis with a plaintive expression. "I am sheltering the kidnapped craftsmen who were forced to work in Gdaniraque, Bruno."

"...!"

"Why would you do such a terrible thing to the innocent? Simply for your own ambitions? ...You, who once sheltered the people we evacuated from my lands during the cold spell, with your other hand you invited the enemy into Zweilink... Why?! Why, Bruno?!"

August's heartbreaking appeal turned the men's faces rigid.

But the Marquis of Lagarea refused to admit his guilt.

“But what proof do you have that I did it? I have contributed to the development of this country for so long, and you punish me without proof?! Since when does this kingdom allow an act so inhumane?!”

“You are the one who has been acting inhumanely this entire time!” Lucas barked in reply. “We will never forget the tragedy of Zweilink nineteen years ago. We will not forget this war, either.”

“What...?”

“Do you think our army survived unscathed? Many soldiers lost their lives out there! The people of Zwelf were also hurt. And it’s all the result of your treachery!”

Ginter also harshly denounced the marquis.

“We have ample proof. We have the kidnapper with the special ability, alias ‘Smirnov,’ in custody, and we have already obtained his confession... Marquis of Lagarea, you cannot talk your way out of this.”

Hearing they had Smirnov, Lagarea’s eyes widened. “How in the world did you capture that man...?”

“Oh. So you admit that you knew of Smirnov’s ability, Bruno Henkel? We have also received testimony from General Zberav of the Kingdom of Zwelf.”

Lagarea was beyond flustered. “...I was told that man was executed in the final battle of Zwelf.”

“Officially, he was. But he lives, and he testified that the man he communicated with was you, Bruno Henkel. We also have in evidence a petition from him to you for the rescue of the king of Zwelf.”

The old marquis staggered. “What...? I can’t believe this. This can’t be happening... It can’t...”

Gravis signaled, and Dirk stepped forward. It took little to no effort for a warrior like Dirk to restrain the old marquis.

Tied up, Lagarea finally fell to his knees.

“Marquis of Lagarea—no, Bruno Henckel. As Leorino said, we have a hypothesis regarding your birth. Was the treatment of your mother, Princess Marfa, by my grandfather, King Tyrone, the reason for your betrayal of our country?”

Sluggishly lifting his head, the Marquis of Lagarea did not answer Gravis’s question, but asked in a hoarse voice: “...How do you know that? I have erased the memories of so many people.”

“Princess Eleonora, Leorino’s grandmother, remembers what happened then, as told to her by King Tyrone’s queen. She told him there was once a princess from a small kingdom who was summoned to the palace of her brother King Tyrone and later given to his vassal.”

“What...? Lady Eleonora... Hah-hah, I couldn’t have predicted that...”

Then King Joachim, who had been watching the situation in silence until then, quietly stepped forward.

“I’m certain that’s not the only thing you have against the royal family.”

“Your Majesty...”

“The loss of my mother to my father must have contributed to your resentment.”

The Marquis of Lagarea glared at the two royals with his suddenly aged, sunken eyes glistening.

“...Your mother was a whore, Joachim.”

Hearing the marquis’s slander, August and Ginter yelled in anger.

“Bruno! How dare you...!”

“That’s no way to address His Majesty!”

The king, seemingly unoffended by the insult regarding his mother, locked gazes with the Marquis of Lagarea.

Gravis tried to stop him. "Brother, he's dangerous."

"It's all right. What can a tied-up old man do now...Marquis of Lagarea? Let me hear what you really mean when you call my mother a whore."

The Marquis of Lagarea hung his head.

"...That woman, Brigitte, promised me her future. Not formally, but in secret, we were engaged."

So the rumors the headmaster told Ionia were true.

"I knew from an early age that the former Marquis of Lagarea was not my real father."

The men were silent.

"But...I still thought myself lucky. My father had no choice but to recognize me as his heir. That way I could inherit his title... But then I developed this ability, so I took away my father's memory to...to be his true successor."

The men gasped at the old marquis's confession.

"Until then, I had held out vain hopes. If my true father, King Tyrone, had known that my mother was pregnant with me, he might have taken her as his concubine. I consoled myself with this thought and lived my life. But..."

Lagarea's old eyes flared with loathing.

"But King Tyrone knew of my mother's pregnancy, and instead of making my mother his concubine, he gave her to my father with his own child in her womb."

"Bruno..." August looked at his best friend with a pained gaze.

"...Which made my mother no better than a whore, slandered for opening her legs and getting pregnant with the first man she met..."

Leorino's chest ached violently. When he looked up at Gravis, the man's face was also stiff with anguish.

"My mother was not some loose woman who would deserve such treatment...", the marquis went on. "Even in my childhood, she was a kind, tenderhearted, helpless woman. If she had been allowed to bloom in her northern lands, she would have been happy...but she was violently trampled on by Fanoren... By Tyrone!"

Gravis asked, "...How did you learn that my grandfather knew?"

"Hah! Thanks to your despicable father. King George knew I was his half brother, and he was kind enough to go out of his way to inform me of that."

The Marquis of Lagarea looked into the distance.

"When we first met, during the Vow of Adulthood, he said to me: 'You are the unblessed seed who sprouted in the north...the seed of my father.'"

His confession shocked everyone.

"He also told me why King Tyrone abandoned my mother. 'A woman and her child from a country that wags its tail to Zwelf would be nothing but a source of strife.' ...Do you understand? After taking my mother as his concubine, he thought it would be too much trouble if Zwelf annexed her homeland."

"No..."

"Yes! Can you imagine a more absurd reason?! ...He got the cause and effect the wrong way around! If only King Tyrone had not abandoned my mother, her motherland would have chosen the path of annexation with Fanoren! That man blamed my mother's birth for all the consequences of his own ugly desires!"

The Marquis of Lagarea pounded the floor with his fists. Over and over.

"...He reaped what he sowed. As a result, my mother's country chose Zwelf. George also told me this: 'You are a bastard who has no right to live as a nobleman in this country, let alone royalty.' ...How could there be such a

difference between George—one year older than me and promised the path to kingship—and me—born out of wedlock, whose mother was treated like a whore...?!”

Leorino closed his eyes, unable to watch the old marquis’s resentful tears.

“If that was all there was to it...I would have retreated to the countryside. If that had been all...I would have nursed my grudges far away from the capital... but George was interested in Brigitte. She was the simple daughter of a minor nobleman from the countryside, and despite having just married his rightful queen of such illustrious lineage and beauty...that man became abnormally fixated on Brigitte.”

Men of the Fanoren family may be driven to madness in the face of love.

It was King Joachim who had once said so to Leorino.

“I loved Brigitte for her naïveté and lack of pretense, but she jumped from me to George as easily as a common whore! As if our relationship had never happened...!”

The Marquis of Lagarea tore at his gray hair.

“Ha-ha, isn’t it ironic? My mother was royalty, but she was treated like a whore and sent from the royal palace. Later, a woman with the heart of a whore became royalty as a concubine. Let it be known! This is the shameful conduct of the kings whom you look up to as supreme beings! ...Beasts have more humanity...! What lengths won’t you go to to ruin my life, you Fanoren filth?!”

His dry laugh was the lament of a long-suffering man’s life.

“...I decided then that I would destroy everything that had to do with Fanoren, especially the future of its men. I would take everything away from them so they couldn’t ruin the lives of any more women, and no one would ever have to see women reveal their true nature the way I had...! I would take away all that George had inherited from my real father!”

The old man turned his eyes, gleaming with hatred, on Joachim and Gravis.

“I wanted to make his sons, you...and you! I wanted to make you all miserable!”

How could he have concealed such loathing in his mild demeanor? Leorino was heartbroken.

“...Was that why you started that war while my father was dying?” Joachim asked. “To keep me from succeeding this country...and to take something precious from my brother?”

“Yes...but your younger brother was the problem. Because of you, I failed to destroy this country nineteen years ago, but I succeeded in taking from you the one person you cared about most!”

The marquis’s confession brought all the men who knew Ionia to despair. The marquis roared with laughter, his eyes bloodshot.

“...Your Highness, Prince Gravis. How did it feel to watch that man die? How did you enjoy the agony of not being able to save him when he was right before you?! ...Yes. You look so much like George. Whenever I saw you, I thought to myself: You should suffer the pain of having someone you love taken from you...!”

The roar of a beast echoed through the office.

It was not Gravis who screamed. Lucas was wailing to the heavens.

Joachim stepped forward and knelt in front of Lagarea. The men were startled by the king’s unexpected movement.

“Your Majesty?! Please, stand back!”

“Brother!”

Joachim stared into the old traitor’s light brown eyes with a calm gaze.

“...You have supported my reign for nineteen long years. You supported me, even when everyone said I was mediocre compared to my brother. Even before that...you were never cold to me, even when I was a child. In fact, you have been more affectionate to me than my father.”

“Your Majesty...”

“Why did you serve me so long if you carried all this hatred the entire time? ... You could have just poisoned me. That would have been easy for you.”

Joachim inclined his head.

“...Is it because I look like my mother?”

At that moment, Leorino saw an equal amount of hatred and heartbreak welling up in Lagarea’s old eyes.

“...Yes. Because you...looked like Brigitte...!”

The twisted love of an old man who now held his face in his hands and wailed. The resulting hatred.

“I loathe that woman who left me and chose that foolish king. I loathed her with all my heart! But when you were young and as you grew older, you bore the face of Brigitte when she was perfect... I could not bring myself to loathe you.”

Why was it that he had wanted to kill Joachim so badly, but could not do so directly? Why did he want him to be destroyed by the enemy?

His sincere friendship toward August and his protection and support of the king were also what this man had originally wanted to be.

Leorino could no longer bear to witness the consequences of decades of

twisted love and hate.

Gravis tightly embraced Leorino's shoulders.

Not wanting anyone to see his tears, Leorino rested his forehead on the man's chest. Gravis's lament poured into him from where their bodies touched.

Gravis showed no tears, but he must have been crying deep inside.

Both August and Lucas were crying with unspeakable frustration.

Pointless.

The reason why the Marquis of Lagarea committed the horrible crime of selling his country to its enemies. The lives of those who became his victims.

It was all so painful and so pointless.

When they reached the end of the treachery that Ionia's memories had revealed to them, they found nothing at all.

There was no sense of accomplishment, no relief, nothing.

Only the pointlessness of it all, lying there like a corpse.

It was Chancellor Ginter who dealt the final blow.

"Bruno Henckel, you are under arrest for treason for having betrayed our country for so many years."

Thus, Bruno Henckel, the Marquis of Lagarea, who had long enjoyed great prosperity as a high-ranking official of the royal court, was apprehended.

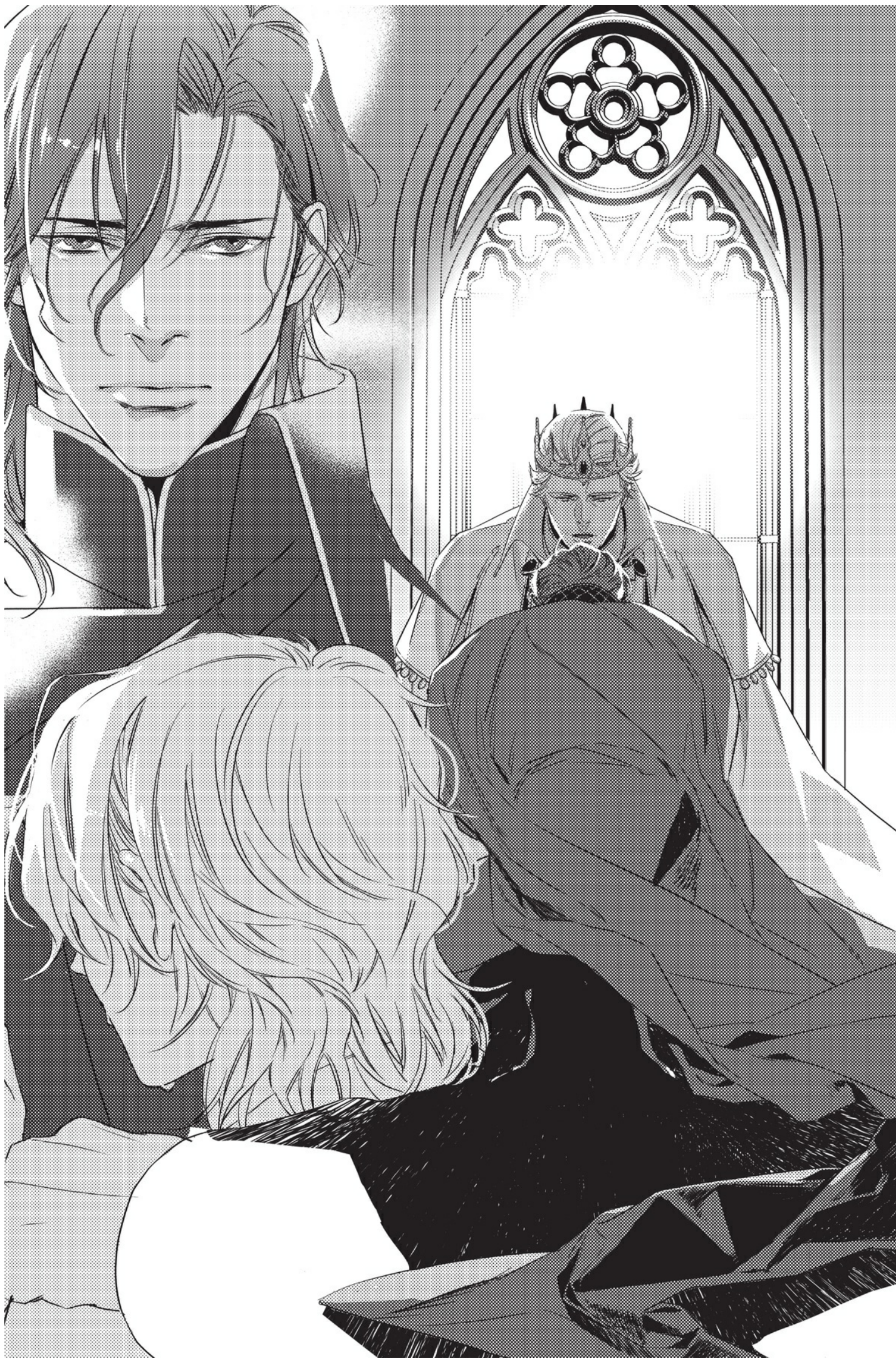
The arrest of a leading nobleman sent shockwaves throughout Fanoren.

Bruno Henckel was imprisoned in the palace dungeons and given special treatment to prevent him from using his Power as he awaited his punishment.

He would likely not escape the death penalty.

As for his accomplice, Smirnov, his real name and his origins were never discovered. The man was also sentenced to death, and no one came to his defense.

In the midst of the rush to deal with the aftermath of the war at home and abroad, Leorino had already left the Brungwurt estate and moved with Hundert and Josef to Gravis's palace. Leorino and Gravis discussed the matter and petitioned the king and Chancellor Ginter to hold only a small wedding ceremony, unusual for the royal family.



While still dealing with the aftermath of the war, everyone was gradually returning to normal when Gravis received a letter from a certain person summoning him to a certain place.

When Gravis checked the location, his eyes widened in surprise.

The Tombless Corpse of Love

In the dungeons of the Palace of Administration, an old man was being held captive—the same man who had been a war criminal nineteen years prior and had repeated the same misdeeds just recently.

The old man's tongue had been burned and his eyes gouged out. These measures were taken to prevent him from utilizing his special ability.

In immense pain, his mouth foaming with blood, the man's ears caught the sound of quiet, familiar footsteps.

"You seem to be in a lot of pain, Marquis of Lagarea."

The voice belonged to King Joachim of Fanoren.

"...ngh...ngh..."

As the man struggled, the chains attached to his hands and feet jangled.

"Are you surprised I'm here?"

"...ugh, gghh...!"

The sound of footfalls approached him. Joachim's cool, woody scent hung faintly in the rotting dungeon.

"Oh, how you've fallen, Marquis of Lagarea. For so many years you took pride in your power as a relative of the king, and now here you are chained up in a wretched place like this."

Joachim's dispassionate voice echoed through the dungeon. The Marquis of Lagarea was the only criminal currently imprisoned there.

But the dimly lit dungeon, illuminated only by the occasional candle, was filled with the smell of blood and filth from the many criminals who must have met their end there since the founding of Fanoren.

That smell was now wafting from the old criminal before him.

It was the scent of death.

"Oh. You're going to die soon, aren't you?"

"...gghh!"

His wrinkled hands, chained and trembling, clawed at the stone wall.

"I have come to tell you a story from the past before you die."

The Marquis of Lagarea's wrinkled face was now that of a nightmare. There was no trace left of his gentlemanly appearance. His mouth, where his tongue had been burned, was swollen and blackened. The bandages over his eyes were also stained with blood.

Joachim stared quietly at the man and murmured, "Bruno Henckel. You are a traitor who betrayed this country in revenge for the loss of my mother to my father."

"...Gahhhh...!"

"You never needed to betray your country, but you were too foolish to realize that."

Joachim's voice echoed quietly through the dungeon.

Bruno Henckel, the former Marquis of Lagarea, recalled the violent emotions

of his past.

The memory of the whore who had abandoned Bruno as if their love had never existed and became the king's concubine with a pleased smile on her face.

"You once slept with my mother, didn't you? You hated my mother for abandoning everything you had, pretending that those memories had never even existed. Isn't that right?"

"Ghh, ughhh!"

The memory of his grudge came back to the Marquis of Lagarea in the darkness filled with his immense pain. But the next moment, Joachim's calm voice tore that darkness to shreds.

"You could not forgive my mother's choice, could you? You said she was a power-hungry whore. Did you truly resent the woman you had once loved? You are certainly half brothers with my father. You have much in common, even in your presumptions."

Lagarea's swollen face turned to the ground.

"But you knew that. My mother was the simple daughter of a minor nobleman. Did you truly think that such a woman would have such wild ambitions as to become the concubine of the king who had just made a Francourian princess his queen?"

With empty eye sockets, Lagarea desperately followed Joachim's voice. His groans seemed to ask him for an explanation.

"You should have questioned it then. You should have trusted my mother to the very end."

"...gh."

"You've been by my side all these years and you didn't see a thing. Did you not wonder why Gravis and I look nothing alike? ...Oh, you can't see anymore. Then imagine it."

The Marquis of Lagarea could no longer see. But the image of Joachim, whom he had served for many years, was still vivid in his mind's eye.

King Joachim's hair had begun to turn gray in recent years. But the original light brown hair and eyes of the son of the woman he loathed and loved to the point of madness were...

"You yourself would have recognized my hair and the color of my eyes better than anyone...every day. In the mirror."

The criminal began to tremble.

Consumed with jealousy, his mind refused to look at it objectively.

But King Joachim's hair and the color of his eyes...

"...Ughhh...ugahhhh...!"

Lagarea shrieked wordlessly.

No, no, nononono.

"Like I said, you betrayed this country when there was no need for revenge."

At that moment, the man once known as the Marquis of Lagarea screamed hard enough to split the corners of his mouth open. He coughed up so much blood that the striking coppery smell filled the air.

"The same blood you now spit has been staining the throne for nineteen years already." Joachim continued to speak in his calm voice.

"...What is the meaning of this, brother?"

Joachim looked behind him with a gentle expression. There stood Gravis,

whom Joachim had summoned himself.

“Gravis, you’ve arrived.”

“Brother...please answer me. What do you mean by what you just said?”

Joachim turned away and looked at the old man behind the bars of his cell, coughing up blood in agony.

“Exactly what you think. My mother, Brigitte, had secretly slept with this man. Our father knew that she was not a virgin, but he still forcefully took her and made her his concubine.”

“But Lady Brigitte...”

“Yes, she adored our father. Do you know why?”

Gravis felt his throat tighten.

“You know what this man can do. Our father also possessed the power to manipulate memories. Coincidentally, it’s proof he’s related to our father. Ironic, isn’t it?”

Gravis was shocked. He had never known about his father’s ability. That was just how estranged he had been from his father, King George.

“How...? How did you learn of this, Brother?”

“Because my mother found her own diary. Mother’s wet nurse had hidden away her diary from before she lost her memory.”

“...!”

“Mother did not die of illness. After discovering her diary and regaining the memories that our father had stolen from her, she chose to commit suicide in despair...after confessing everything to me, that is.”

Joachim gave a small smile.

“Before she hanged herself, she looked at me and said: ‘How glad I am the blood of that devil does not flow through your veins, my dearest son.’”

Gravis’s face paled.

So Joachim's real father was...

“Mother despaired at having betrayed this man, even though she did it only because she had been robbed of her memories. She turned to me and said, ‘You must avenge him. You have that man’s blood in you—you must succeed the throne.’ In the end, however, my mother failed in her attempt on her life and became bedridden, unable to speak. Six months later, she died without ever regaining consciousness.”

The old beast’s screams echoed from inside his cell.

“That’s what I meant when I called the man a fool. There was no need to betray his country—his vengeance would have been accomplished by my ascension to the throne. He could have replaced Fanoren blood with his own, even if only for a generation.”

Gravis’s fists shook with the fury welling up from the depths of his heart.

Could what his brother was telling him really be true? Or was it all a fantasy of the late concubine?

Then, before he knew it, his brother’s eyes were fixed behind him.

“...Isn’t that so, Queen Dowager Adele? That’s why a strict woman such as yourself wanted Gravis to take the throne by any means necessary, even if it meant bending the rules of first-born succession. Because he was the legitimate heir, the only one carrying our father’s blood... Is that not so?”

Gravis turned to look behind him with a start. Why hadn’t he noticed her presence?

There stood Adele, Gravis’s mother and the late King George’s wife. Like Gravis, she must have been summoned by Joachim.

“Mother...”

Her chilling beauty bore a striking resemblance to Gravis’s. But now, perhaps because she had seen the wretched state of the criminal chained in the dungeon, her face was pitifully pale and she appeared very old.

Gravis immediately searched for any other presence behind the queen dowager. He found no one. She must have come to the dungeon alone.

“...Mother. Did you also know the secret of my brother’s birth?”

“Gravis, I...”

“Mother, please answer me... I must know!”

It was Joachim who chided Gravis for hounding his mother.

“The queen dowager had likely been fed the rumor by her bloodline purist retainers. But back then, Mother was still in love with our father. Rumors were just that—rumors—and soon faded away.”

Gravis recalled the rumor that the headmaster had told Ionia.

“I don’t believe it. What did Father think of you? He thought of you as his own son, brother. Isn’t that why he made you the crown prince?”

“At first.”

“At first...?”

“Our father’s love for Mother was something akin to deep-seated delusion. Since I took after Mother in my features, he naturally didn’t doubt that I was his biological son.”

“Of course. There is no proof that you are not our father’s son.”

“But when Mother committed suicide, our father’s suspicions were aroused as to whose son I was. Of course, our father knew that my mother had not been a virgin when she married him, and confirmed as much in the bedchamber—and he had made her his by force regardless.”

Joachim laughed at himself.

“The queen dowager must be familiar with this. She knows how presumptuous our father was, and how cruel he was to all but those he loved.”

Adele trembled, but remained silent.

“Back then, Lagarea’s hair was not yet as gray as this. Our father, comparing me to this man as I grew older, must have gradually had his suspicions concerning my birth, eventually falling into madness. The decisive factor was my mother’s death.”

Gravis recalled his father in his final years. He was told that the king had died of illness, but in those days, Gravis was rarely allowed to see him.

“But when his doubts began, I was already betrothed to Emilia, Princess of Francoure. There was little Father could say then. I was an illegitimate child because the woman whom he had so triumphantly taken from this man had already been carrying his half brother’s child in her womb. I was not his son. He could disinherit me.”

At the time, Gravis was just shy of eight years old.

“He must have been too proud to say anything. If he had, it would have exposed Lagarea’s true lineage and the fact that he had forcibly taken his fiancée.”

“I must insist...there is no proof that you are not of our father’s blood, brother. It could all be Lady Brigitte’s delusion.”

“I know. But what do you think, Gravis?”

He couldn’t stop shaking from the sense of despair welling up from the depths of his body. Even Gravis could not deny the possibility that what his brother was telling him was the truth.

“I loved you, Gravis. But I had my reasons for not giving up the throne.”

Gravis clenched his fists. When had his brother, who had always been so kind, begun to distance himself from him?

Of course. Around the time Lady Brigitte became bedridden...and Gravis met Ionia.

“I thought you were the rightful heir to the throne. I fully intended to make you the crown prince. You, with your dark hair, your royal blood of Fanoren and Francoure...until my mother died, leaving me with her will.”

“Brother...”

“I finally made up my mind when Kyle was born.”

When Kyle was born. That was the year Gravis started school.

“What in the world does Kyle have to do with this...?”

Joachim did not answer his question.

Clutching the rusty bars of the dungeon cell, Joachim continued to stare at the criminal who might have been his father.

“Kyle looks more like you than he does me, doesn’t he? Why do you think that is?”

“...Because dark hair is common in our royal bloodline, of course.”

“Even though I look nothing like our father?”

Gravis and Kyle looked more alike than any uncle and nephew should.

At that moment, he heard a small sob behind him. Adele brought her fist to her mouth and burst into tears.

Doubt and fear filled Gravis’s mind.

“...What are you trying to say?”

He didn't want to hear it.

He didn't want to hear what his brother had to say. He no longer wanted to peer into this dungeon of filth hidden beneath the resplendent palace, this horrifying royal secret.

“Kyle is not my son. He is your half brother.”

“...No.”

“Yes. Our father, King George, stole Princess Emilia's memory of how he violated my mother until his seed quickened in her womb.”

“No!”

With his hands still on the bars, Joachim slowly looked back at his half brother.

“Gravis. If you want to think it's all conjecture, that's fine. You can conceal the truth with that. But listen carefully.”

“Brother...”

“Once there was a girl, royalty of the north, who was treated like a whore by our grandfather and birthed his bastard son. She was the mother of this corpse of a man. There was also a woman whose memory was stolen by our father and who was made his concubine before she could help it. She was this man's beloved and my mother.”

Gravis's heart broke.

“Finally, there is the woman who was raped by our father, left with no memory of it, and gave birth to your half brother, whom she thinks is my son. She is my queen... Three generations in a row, and what did they ever do to deserve this?”

Gravis wanted to cover his ears. But he could not.

Because Gravis had to know the hidden truth. The truth about the purgatory that held Joachim captive. He had to face his own foolishness in not seeing the truth.

“...How do you know that Kyle is not your son?”

While Gravis’s voice trembled with despair, Joachim’s was impossibly calm.

“I have never performed my duty as a man with Emilia. Not once.”

“What...?”

The queen dowager began to tremble at Joachim’s confession. Her face was white.

“Our father was absolutely obsessed with my mother. Beside the man who had sunken into mad love, there was I, whose hair and eye color were the same as this old man’s, but whose face bore a striking resemblance to that of my mother. At the time, my betrothal to Emilia had already been arranged, and yet...our father would come to my bedchamber every night and call me Brigitte.”

At that moment, something within Gravis shattered entirely.

“Our father was a man of impressive physique, just like you... There wasn’t much I could do to resist. He no longer thought of me as his son. He took the memories of the attendants and destroyed the evidence, but he never took mine.”

Joachim’s ever so calm face.

No. It was not calm.

It was the face of a man who had given up on life.

“So you see. Ever since, I have been unable to fulfill my role as a man.”

From the depths of the dungeon came the roar of a beast.

It cried in agony, attempting to tear off its chains.

The beast roared in despair at the monstrous treatment the man who may have been his own son had received.

“Emilia is fortunately unaware of this. She has endured my absence in the bedchamber since our wedding night and is fulfilling her duties as queen. As one would expect from the princesses of Francoure, all of them are noble and brave...just like you, queen dowager.”

“Your Majesty... I...”

The queen dowager was trembling.

“I know. You knew that your niece was being raped by your husband, but you did not know that I myself had become a substitute of my mother to my father.”

Gravis froze. He looked back at his mother.

“Is that so unthinkable? That our father raped and impregnated his son’s queen? And that the queen dowager had given her tacit approval?” Joachim smiled calmly.

“Mother...you knew?”

“I wanted to ask you the same thing, queen dowager. Emilia is your niece. Why did you, the noble and precious treasure of this land, allow your husband to rape your niece and steal her memory?”

Adele broke down in tears.

Gravis’s fists trembled in shock knowing that what his brother had told him was true and that his mother had done nothing to stop it.

“You could not allow the blood of the bastard Lagarea to inherit the throne of

this land, but if Gravis's *younger brother* were a mixture of Francoure and Fanoren blood, and were to inherit the throne as my son, did you think that would solve everything?"

"No... I did not."

The queen dowager's face was pale. But her gaze never wavered from King Joachim.

"His Majesty King George no longer hid his madness in the palace by then... That man did not tamper only with my memory. It was because he knew I would not be able to tell anyone anything anyway."

"Why... Why, Mother?! Why did you allow such an atrocious thing to continue?!" Gravis reproached his mother, at the same time blaming himself for never noticing any of it.

Finally, Adele screamed through sobs.

"It was because His Majesty told me that you were not needed! That you, the son I birthed, were a hindrance!"

"...What?"

"Why do you think I left you in Stolf's care and sent you off to school...?! It was His Majesty who wanted to kill you. That's why I wanted to put as much distance between you and the palace as possible—it was I who instructed them to give you a human shield at the academy."

His head throbbed with pain.

The pain was so intense that Gravis's face crumpled.

"I didn't realize what had happened to Emilia until after she was pregnant. I did not approve of it tacitly or otherwise...!"

"Why...?"

"Why?! His Majesty King George told me: 'I don't need two proofs of

friendship between Fanoren and Francoure. I have sowed my seed in Brigitte, and now in Emilia'... It was only then that I learned Emilia had been raped by His Majesty...!"

Hearing the queen's confession, Joachim cocked his head in comprehension.

"I see. Our father thought he had fathered a child with my mother by raping me and impregnating my queen. He truly was a madman."

But even Joachim, who spoke of his madness so matter-of-factly, already seemed to be losing his footing. His instability concerned Gravis.

"His Majesty doubted Joachim's birth," said the queen dowager. "If that is true, then...you are the only legitimate son of His Majesty, Gravis. But that man loathed me, and you, the son I birthed...! But many wanted you to succeed to the throne. So, in order to get you out of his way and to leave his own descendants in power, he set his eyes on Emilia..."

Every single thing, all of it—everything his brother and mother told him about the past bordered on insanity.

"If I had denounced His Majesty's wrongdoing, that man would have taken my life with no concern for what Francoure might think. I was powerless to stop it. If I were gone, Gravis, there would be no one to protect you, and you were still so young... I only wanted to protect you, no matter the cost."

A single tear trickled down from Gravis's eye and fell onto his trembling fist.

Knowing the true anguish of his noble, cold mother, Gravis no longer felt anything but despair.

“Mother... Mother!”

“I suffered, too. I wanted to help Emilia...but what could I have said to her? Tell Emilia the truth, when she remembered nothing, and send her to hell? Tell her she was raped and impregnated by her father-in-law? That the child she held in her arms is the son of iniquity?”

“Don’t call Kyle the son of iniquity!”

“But it is true, Gravis! Both His Majesty and Kyle were born out of wedlock. They are not the *rightful* heirs to the throne.” Adele raised her voice. “Both Emilia and I are proud Francoure royalty. You want us to reveal that we have been humiliated twice by a Fanoren man? If I could have waged war on this continent, I would have done so long ago!”

“...Mother.”

“But we were sent to this country for the sake of peace on the continent. Then it was our duty to endure, as it was the duty of royalty to bring peace! If the rightful heir does not ascend the throne, then why... What have we been sacrificed to the royal family of this country for?!”

The roar of her soul.

The scream of the heart of a mother who had endured for so long, of a lonely woman who had been thought to be heartless and cruel, was laced through her words. Desperate solitude, and her love for Gravis.

Adele crumpled where she stood.

“...Forgive me. I was only trying to protect your life and your position...by staying silent... Gravis, I tried to protect you at all costs. I also wanted to place you on the throne and correct everything wrong with this country.”

Joachim asked Adele simply, “If I may ask, queen dowager, were you aware of what our father did to me?”

Adele looked at Joachim with her tear-stained face and shook her head. It could have meant anything.

“Emilia told me that you had not come to her bedchamber at all for several years...and I remembered His Majesty’s words, ‘I have sowed my seed in Brigitte, and now in Emilia’...”

Joachim offered a small smile of admiration.

“Oh? Our father’s incomprehensible rambling was enough to lead you to that conclusion. I suppose you have always been the Wise Queen.”

“No! Your Majesty... I—!!”

“Was that why? After the war, when Gravis declared that he would not succeed to the throne, you gave up so easily.”

Adele turned away.

“Was it out of pity for me? No, the country always came first for you; you carried no such pity for me. For even if he is a son of iniquity, Kyle has legitimate Fanoren blood, and the blood of Francoure also made it to this country through him.”

“Your Majesty...”

“Above all, you wanted to keep Gravis alive. You also tacitly approved of what I did to *weaken* our father in his final years... That way, he would no longer be able to hurt Gravis. So I was your compromise.”

Their father had abruptly grown weak. That was the reason Gravis had hardly been allowed to see him in the final years of his life.

Adele was silent.

Knowing that silence was answer enough, Gravis despaired once more.

Gravis staggered and dug his teeth into his trembling fist. Tears of anguish and regret burned his cheeks.

“...No...”

He couldn’t do this. It was all so much to take in all at once, even breathing hurt.

“Don’t cry, Gravis. I truly loved you once. I thought of you as my real brother.”

Gravis wanted to destroy the blood flowing through his veins, to erase his existence from the world entirely.

“In truth, I couldn’t care less about the throne,” Joachim said. “I always thought the crown should be yours, but I wanted to keep the crown for myself in order to fulfill my late mother’s wish. For that cause, I was willing to...let you die.”

Why did his half brother, who had been so kind to him when he was a child, turn away from him? Why had his half brother never said anything about the assassins?

All of those questions had finally been answered.

“The moment I wished for your death, I broke. I could not forgive the man who had raped my mother, my queen, and myself.”

“Brother...”

“I am not your brother. I am the son of that traitor and the woman whose affections were stolen by the king. I am the usurper of the throne, Gravis.”

“No, you are not!”

Joachim suddenly probed the entrance to the cell with something he had taken out of his sleeve. With a click, the door opened.

“Brother...what are you doing?!”

Joachim approached the old beast, whose mouth was still foaming with blood and screaming. Gravis couldn’t move.

“We don’t look alike. His eye color... Well, they’re gone, you can’t see them

anymore. But my mother looked at me before she chose death and said ‘You look a lot like him. I’m glad.’”

“Ughhh... gghhhh...!”

“Every time you stood next to me on political business, I used to think that you would someday recognize me as your son. I always thought you would...but the years came and went, and here we are now.”

Joachim touched the man’s bloodstained gray hair with his fingertips. He rubbed it between his thumb and middle finger. Over and over.

“I think I deluded myself into believing that you were my real father. I simply didn’t want to think of the mad king who had raped me and my queen as my father. I don’t know the truth. It’s all speculation... And Lagarea, you can’t talk anymore, or take away anyone’s memory.”

“Oah... oai... oaiu...”

Joachim looked sorrowful for the first time then.

“If you and our father had to take something away from me, I wish it had been my memories...so I wouldn’t have had to live in despair for nineteen years as an illegitimate king who should have never inherited the throne.”

Joachim wiped the tears of blood flowing from the old prisoner’s empty eye sockets with his fingers.

“I will send you to meet my mother, Lagarea. You are a traitor and thus I cannot clear your name, but I will put an end to this filthy bloodline.”

“Brother...please stop!”

In the next instant, Joachim took a dagger out of his pocket and artlessly slashed the Marquis of Lagarea’s throat.

The sound of the blade on skin echoed through the dungeon.

The striking scent of blood wafted through the air, overpowering the rotten stench of the dungeon. The queen dowager couldn't help but let out a shriek.

Dripping dark red blood from its throat, the body of the criminal collapsed on its side. The chains binding his limbs produced an unpleasant jangle.

Joachim stared at the tip of his blood-soaked blade.

"Is this the blood that flows through my veins? It's darker and dirtier than one would expect."

"Brother..."

Joachim looked back. His gentle face was speckled with blood.

"I knew I had no right to be king. I wasted nineteen years... I'm sorry, Gravis."

"Brother...come to me."

"A mediocre king ascended the throne, and as a result, I have allowed this old man to trample all over this country for so long. In that sense, I am the true traitor."

"Brother, you are no traitor. Please come out, come to me... Brother, please hand me that blade."

Gravis held out his right hand.

Joachim looked at his hand quizzically. He placed the tip of the dagger against his own neck.

"This bloodline will one day fade into history with me. Then perhaps it would be better if I, the true traitor, were to sever this bloodline here and now."

"I don't believe that... Brother, come."

Joachim smiled faintly. "You still call me brother. Even when I can only remain your brother for so long, now that the Marquis of Lagarea's plot has been revealed?"

"You will always be my beloved brother."

Hearing that, Joachim inclined his head. “Why? Why do you still call me brother?”

“Because the same blood of Fanoren delusion runs in you and me.”

Hearing that, Joachim’s gentle face took on a stern expression for the first time. It was the face of a man who had remained on the throne for many years. It was the face of a king who had ruled the country despite being scorned as mediocre.

Gravis knelt on the filthy floor of the dungeon and bowed to Joachim.

“Your Majesty. The delusional blood of the Fanoren royal family may one day bring this country to ruin, but it will not be today.”

“Gravis.”

“Kyle did nothing wrong. He is not a son of iniquity, I am certain of that. He is your son. He is the rightful heir of Fanoren.”

Gravis made a desperate appeal to his brother’s heart, afraid Joachim was about to go somewhere Gravis couldn’t follow.

“Kyle...”

“If Kyle doesn’t know the truth, then keep it that way.”

“Who can say? I don’t see how he would find out, but I can’t be certain. Emilia is not aware of it, either. I thought the only people who knew would be me and the queen dowager.”

“If that is the case, Brother, then please don’t let Kyle suffer the same pain you did.”

“Why not? Is he not the son of the mad king? Does he not deserve to suffer as you have suffered?”

“He is also the son of Emilia. Please... Brother, I beg you.”

Gravis stood up, approached Joachim, and held out his hand.

“Please protect yourself so that Kyle may inherit the throne from you... Now, the blade, Brother.”

“Yes... He is Emilia’s son. Then I suppose I must deceive them to the very end.”

Joachim nodded and slowly held out his hand, easily handing the dagger to Gravis.

“Can I ask you to handle matters from here?”

“Yes,” said Gravis. “I’ll take care of it... All will be well.”

“I am sorry to have surprised you, queen dowager. A noble lady such as yourself should not be forced to witness something so unsightly.”

Adele remained on the floor in a daze.

“Gravis. May I leave this country in your hands until Kyle becomes king?”

Understanding the meaning of his words, Gravis could not help the tear that trickled down his cheek.

That was the moment when Joachim, the thirteenth king of Fanoren, effectively relinquished his crown.

Joachim no longer had the energy required to rule the country.

For nineteen years with a broken heart, Joachim had borne the weight of the crown he had worn for revenge.

Out of kindness, out of weakness, and out of love.

But now that the Marquis of Lagarea had been captured, his heart had only enough left in it to cross that final line. The king himself was aware of this.

But even so, Gravis was saddened to think that, despite everything, his brother cared about this country to the very end the way a statesman should.

Gravis knelt to signify his assent.

“Of course, Brother... I live to serve Your Majesty.”

“Still, I’m sorry to burden you with this.”

“I will support this country until Kyle succeeds to the throne. So, Your Majesty... Brother, please live in peace from now on.”

“Oh yes. I’ve long wished to travel with Emilia. I would like to visit the remote palace in the lake region where she spent her childhood in Francoure. She has served this country well for many years.” As he spoke, a soft smile appeared on Joachim’s kind face. “Perhaps not immediately, but one day when things settle down. I wonder. Do I get to have that?”

“We will make it happen. I am certain the queen will be pleased.”

Joachim nodded and stared at the fallen corpse of the criminal. “You can deal with him as a traitor, but I would like to lay him to rest with my mother, if only a piece of him. Can you at least allow me that?”

Gravis nodded.

The next moment, Joachim’s hand caressed Gravis’s head as if he were a child again.

A modest, reserved touch. A gentle, slender hand.

“Gravis. Can you truly be happy with this choice?”

“Your Majesty...”

“You were always meant to wear the crown of this country. I will never be able to atone for my mistake of bending the royal path to carry out my own personal vendetta, but I want you to be happy.”

Gravis smiled reassuringly at his brother. “I, too, have someone I want to travel and lay to rest with in my final days. It is someone I could never have met had I not walked this path.”

“...I see. That’s a relief.” Joachim gave a small smile.

“Gravis, my dearest brother. It has taken me decades to tell you this...but please, be happy.”

Joachim brought his bloodstained face close, and pressed a kiss to Gravis’s black hair.

Then, in a faltering gait, he climbed the stairs leading aboveground.

The smell of blood and rusty iron.

Beneath the royal palace, where the roar of the beast had ceased, the memories of love and despair, which had never been taken away, lay exposed in the form of a corpse.

There, a mother and her child remained.

For Whom Do We Live?

Gravis watched the king's back as he climbed the stairs and lifted his dazed mother off the floor.

"Gravis... I..." His mother, the origin of his own beauty, was thinner, and older than he remembered.

"...Mother." A single tear escaped the man's eye as he gazed at his mother. "I thought I understood your loneliness, but I now see I understood nothing..."

"Gravis..."

"You did everything in your power to keep me from seeing true hell."

Adele let out a sob. Gravis's old mother was helpless and light, her usual dignity nowhere to be found.

"I am guilty of living my life without knowing the truth."

"Gravis... Forgive me. Forgive your mother."

"Mother... Forgive me as well, for forcing you to carry all the anguish and secrets all on your own."

Their starry-sky eyes met. Between them hung the unshakable bond between mother and child.

"I loved you. I still admire your strength, your nobility...and how you married into this country and endured the suffering throughout your reign, Mother."

Adele sobbed and clung to Gravis's neck. For the first time since he could remember, he felt the warmth of his mother's body this close to his own.

"How I wish I could have held you...just like this."

"Me too... Mother...I always wanted to make you happy...but..."

Gravis, too, buried his forehead in his mother's shoulder.

"...But we can't allow ourselves to be happy knowing what we know now."

"Gravis... I'm aware. We..."

The mother and son, who looked very much alike, gazed at each other with tears in their eyes. Eyes aware of their sins. The sin of ignorance. And the sin of silence.

"...I don't foresee us meeting again in this capacity."

They were a mother and son who continued to suffer from one man's madness.

But the other mother and son continued to live through a hell they couldn't even imagine.

What is "blood" anyway?

What was the meaning of a throne that had to be inherited at the expense of someone else?

"...I love you, Mother. But this is our atonement to my brother, to Queen Emilia...and to Kyle, who have all suffered so much."

Adele's eyes seemed to be pleading with him. Her slender fingers clung tightly to her son's shoulders.

“Gravis, my dearest son. Please be happy. Please find happiness with...that Cassieux boy.”

Gravis couldn't help the single tear that escaped his eye.

Oh, this woman is truly my mother. The woman who was clumsily carrying immense love under a mask of heartlessness is, without a doubt, my mother.

“Please...forgive me for refusing to let you choose a life with that young man with the red hair that day.”

At his mother's faltering words, Gravis closed his eyes tightly, tighter than ever.

They climbed the long flight of stairs and stepped out onto the ground.

They returned to the magnificent palace befitting the greatest country on the Agalean continent. But the royal palace, which he thought he had known since he was a child, had never felt more like an elaborate illusion than now.

He felt dizzy.

The dungeon, stale and filthy, must have been the true state of Fanoren. Was that hell, where the remains of countless tombless loves lay, not the most appropriate place for them?

Reality had not yet returned to Gravis's mind.

No. Now that he knew that his reality had been nothing but an illusion, the world Gravis had believed in was destroyed forever.

He handed the queen dowager to her attendants who had been waiting at the entrance to the staircase. The attendants were dismayed to see her so exhausted.

“The queen dowager has had a very difficult day. Take her to her palace and let her rest.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Gravis nodded silently, then quickly stood and turned on his heel.

“Gravis...my son!”

Adele’s cry echoed through the corridor.

Hearts that tore at the seams cried out to each other, wanting to once again be mother and child.

Gravis stopped and bowed faintly. “I love you, Mother... No, Your Majesty the Queen Dowager. Please continue to take good care of yourself.”

Gravis walked away with the sobs of the queen dowager at his back. He did not turn.

Leorino was waiting for him as usual in his room in his palace. When Gravis returned, Leorino approached, greeting him with a joyous smile.

“Welcome home.”

He never got tired of the sight of that smile.

The irreplaceable life he had very nearly lost a few months ago.

It was a miracle to see this being more precious than life itself alive and smiling at him.

Why did this miracle happen to someone as cursed as me?

Gravis could not respond. Leorino’s face quickly clouded over. He saw the look on Gravis’s face and realized that something was wrong.

“What happened?”

Gravis wordlessly embraced Leorino.

“Vi...?”

He was so feeble and fragile.

His wounds had healed, but his body was still thin and his fingernails had not grown back.

Gravis swore he would protect him, but he had hurt Leorino so much, both physically and emotionally.

“...Why?”

But somehow, this pure, innocent soul was now in his arms.

Why was only he blessed with such a miracle?

With the cursed blood of Fanoren running in his veins, he did not deserve to be happy.

Gravis could no longer bear the weight of happiness.

“...What’s wrong?”

Leorino placed his arms around Gravis’s back as the man continued to hold him in silence. Leorino was clearly asking what had happened.

But the words would not come.

Gravis could not put into words the feelings raging in his heart.

“Vi, tell me. Talk to me.”

“Leorino...I’m sorry. I can’t tell you.”

This pain was something Gravis had to bear alone. Leorino’s violet eyes darkened for a moment. But finally, he smiled and said: “If it’s something you can’t talk about, you don’t have to tell me... There isn’t much I can do to help,

but...

“I love you,” Leorino whispered. “So please let me carry half of your burdens.”

Saying this, Leorino pressed his lips to Gravis’s forehead.

At that moment, the wall holding back all the anguish of Gravis’s long life finally burst.

“...What was it all for?” Gravis fell to his knees where he stood.

“Vi? ...Ah.”

Leorino was pulled down to the ground with him. Gravis covered his eyes with one hand.

“Don’t bite your lip... You’re bleeding.”

When Leorino noticed that Gravis’s back was shaking slightly, he gently held Gravis’s head.

“...I hurt you, I hurt so many people so much...for what...?”

All because of this blood that runs in my veins?

In the end, there was nothing Gravis could do.

The despair had already been there, even before Gravis was born. No matter which path he chose, nothing he ever did could bring happiness to his mother and brother’s lives.

If only he had known that there was nothing to be found but despair in the past and in the future.

He thought of the anguish of his boyhood, when he had struggled to find hope. At the same time, he thought of his mother’s life, filled with humiliation and pain, and of his brother King Joachim, whose life had been warped by mad love.

His brother only ever had Emilia—he had never taken any concubines. There were likely physical factors involved, but more than that, he must have truly loved Emilia.

The son whose father had raped not only him but even the woman he loved. The agony of his brother who continued to love a woman with whom he had never had a physical relationship.

Here was yet another twisted sort of attachment.

Most of all, he pitied Emilia. And Kyle.

“...Kyle.”

Did Kyle really know nothing?

Kyle stubbornly refused to get married. At the same time, he had said the same thing so many times.

“I know who the right to the throne of this country belongs to.”

What did Kyle mean by the words he kept repeating?

Gravis could not stop his mind from sinking back into the swamp of despair at the possibilities that flashed through his mind.

Such filthy blood.

Even the Marquis of Lagarea had been a victim of the cursed blood of the Fanoren royal family.

Bodies and souls had been taken. The men of the Fanoren royal family in this infinite cycle. And the women who became its victims.

Gravis knew that this violent impulse lurked within him as well. A maniacal obsession that sought only one person, with no regard for status or position.

That was what had driven Ionia to his death and dragged Leorino, who could have been happy with Julian, through the depths of hell.

He couldn't stand it. It was too much to bear.

"Vi..."

The man's hold on Leorino was strong and a little painful for his freshly recovered body.

But Leorino endured the pain in silence.

Something had happened at the palace. Something so painful that this strong man could hardly stand it. Leorino did not ask questions, only kept Gravis in his embrace.

"Ionia was killed because of me, and Leorino...you very nearly died as well..."

"It's not your fault. Absolutely not... None of it was your fault."

Leorino's shoulder was wet.

Gravis was crying.

"Vi..."

"What has my life been for? Why did my mother have to suffer so much? Why did my brother... I should have let Ionia...and Lucas... I should have set them free...!"

A man who had carried so many responsibilities since he was a child, who had fought for his country and those he loved, cried that he was helpless.

Leorino fought desperately to hold back his tears.

“You’ve never done anything wrong. Why did you have to get hurt...?”

“I’m safe. I’m with you now... I’m all right now.”

Leorino gripped Gravis’s back.

“Vi... Gravis. I *choose* to be by your side. Please don’t deny me this feeling.”

Gravis lifted his face. His cheeks were wet.

“Leorino...”

“You and I...are the reason for our existence... Believe me. Please believe me.”

“The royal family, this blood of filth, is not worth defending. Why would you risk your lives for me...? For something so worthless?”

Leorino continued to gaze into the eyes of a man in despair, fighting back tears.

“I can’t speak to its worth. I just want you to be here with me... You’re my other half. You’re the one who told me as much.”

Leorino brushed his lips over the tears running down Gravis’s cheek.

The man’s thirty-eight years of anguish continued to trickle down his face. Even as Leorino wiped them away, they stained the man’s cheeks without stopping.

“I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t save anyone I cared about... I’ve lived this long, and I’ve saved no one.”

Gravis slammed his fist into the floor and, finally, brought it to his forehead. Over and over.

“Vi...”

“I wanted to make them happy... My mother, my brother...and Ionia.”

Leorino gritted his teeth.

“They knew how you felt. They knew and...still, there must have been some things they couldn’t compromise on. Ionia also refused to give up on certain matters. But...”

Leorino spoke to the lonely boy who had once upon a time called himself a “spark of mayhem.”

“But because you never gave up and found me... I was able to deliver Ionia’s final thoughts.”

Leorino continued to speak to the back of the boy who had been groping his way alone through a perilous balancing game, wanting to make both his half brother and mother happy.

“...Queen Dowager Adele and His Majesty, these people are still alive. You still have time...to find a way to make them happy.”



*

His thin arms enveloped the man's back.

"...It's all right."

His thin arms were not even close to enough. The man cowered and wailed, and Leorino wrapped himself around him, pressing his cheek to Gravis's back.

"I love you, Vi. I'm certain you will find a way. It's all right... It'll be all right."

Praying they reached Gravis's heart, Leorino continued to whisper words of love to his trembling back.

A Secret Agreement

Later, it was reported that while imprisoned in the dungeon, the Marquis of Lagarea had committed suicide in contrition for his crimes.

The title of Marquis of Lagarea was annulled and his lands were returned to the kingdom. The leading nobleman's betrayal that had shaken Fanoren to its core had come to an end.

The truth of the incident remained between those who had been in the king's office that day, and was otherwise buried in darkness.

Only Gravis knew that the hair shaved from the corpse of the criminal was placed in a small bag and handed to King Joachim. The king received it with an indifferent expression on his face and showed no particular emotion.

Gravis did not know where the small bag had gone.

Shortly thereafter, the thirteenth King of Fanoren, Joachim, officially announced to his court his intention to abdicate before his death due to health problems. Following the incident with the Marquis of Lagarea, this came as a great shock to the royal court.

As the next king, Crown Prince Kyle began preparations for his accession to the throne. The coronation itself would be held the following year.

The reason for the delay was the need for him to choose his queen. There had been no precedent for a king of Fanoren to ascend the throne without a queen.

At the same time, Gravis, the king's younger brother, was appointed to assist his reign.

The days passed by in a flurry of activity.

On an auspicious spring day, the private wedding of Gravis Adolphe Fanoren, the younger brother of the king, and Leorino Cassieux, the fourth son of the margrave of Brungwurt, was held in the great temple in the royal palace.

It had been a long time since the royal family had celebrated such an event, but since the war was still fresh in everyone's minds and the king had just recently announced his abdication, there were no banquets or celebrations, only an exchanging of vows in the great temple.

After the ceremony, Leorino renounced his Cassieux surname and the noble status it carried and joined the royal family as Leorino Viola Maian Fanoren. From now on, Leorino would be addressed by the style of "Your Highness."

"Uncle, how dare you. You're the only one who gets to be happy with the love of your life."

Sitting in his office, Kyle grumbled in frustration. Gravis deftly handled the documents Ginter gave him and handed only the necessary ones to his nephew.

"I should have the right to find my true love, just like you, Uncle. Oh, how I loathe a political marriage."

"Kyle. I also hope you can find someone you like. By choosing Leorino, I set a precedent. If you fancy them, we can handle any difference in status."

Kyle forced a smile as he accepted the documents.

"Do I amuse you?"

“No, I simply don’t know what difference in status you speak of. Leorino is of Brungwurt. Other than his gender, is there any issue at all? Given his bloodline, it’s like marrying a fellow royal.”

“I didn’t choose Leorino because he’s of Brungwurt.”

“I know.”

Kyle suddenly tossed the documents.

“Your Royal Highness! What are you doing?!” Chancellor Ginter uncharacteristically raised his voice.

“Why don’t you just take over the kingdom yourself, Uncle? You have the most beautiful spouse, a veritable angel, that one. You are a hero, the symbol of this country. Whatever’s the issue?”

“Your Royal Highness! What nonsense!” Ginter reprimanded him.

Gravis glared at Kyle with a stern expression on his face. “You are the heir to the throne of this country, and it’s high time you began to act like it, Kyle.”

“Hah. If you mean the *rightful* heir, I believe you’re most befitting of that title, Uncle.”

Gravis put down his documents and looked at Kyle. He assumed he must have been joking, but Kyle watched him with a serious gaze.

“I’m not sure I follow, Kyle.”

“I’ve told you countless times, haven’t I? I know who the throne should belong to.”

They glared at each other.

“...Are you suggesting it should be me? Because I’m the son of the queen dowager? That’s laughable. Whatever happened to firstborn succession?”

“You know that’s not the only reason, Uncle.”

“...Kyle.”

The crown prince, his face much like his uncle's, offered a small smile.

"Uncle—I *know*. And on that basis, I say we make a deal."

Gravis shot Ginter a look. Ginter bowed quietly and left the king's office.

"My, how fearsome. A glance from you is enough to command even Ginter himself. I can see who is truly in control of this country. I'm no match for you."

"Kyle...I'm in no mood for jokes."

"Who said I was joking? I couldn't be more serious about the future of this country."

The face Kyle made as he sneered resembled Gravis's.

"Let me be clear, *Brother*. It is not that I don't want to inherit the throne."

"...Kyle."

"Oh, please. We're alone...and this is the first time I've been able to call you that. Allow me this much." Kyle rested his chin in his hands.

"...How?"

"Hm? You mean, how did I know? I'm a member of the royal family, so let's just say I have a certain Power of my own."

Saying this, Kyle waved his gloved hands. Realizing that his faint fear had been correct, Gravis's eyes turned dark.

How long had he known? How did he learn?

But what would it matter if he asked about it now? Kyle already knew the secret of his birth. That was the most important part.

"But more importantly, when did you find out, Uncle?"

Gravis met Kyle's sharp gaze, but did not answer. Kyle saw the look of pain on his uncle's face and forced a smile.

"Don't look at me like that. I didn't understand it when I was little, but at my age, I've...come to terms with things, however reluctantly."

"...Kyle."

"Still, it doesn't change the fact that I'm the crown prince. No one doubts my parentage. Then why do I want you to succeed to the throne... Do you know, Uncle?"

"Why?"

"If you ask me if I truly don't want to ascend the throne, I'm honestly not sure. And I don't know if you can relate to this feeling, but...I fear I will one day destroy this country with the anger that continues to seethe deep within my chest."

Gravis would never forget the look on Kyle's face at that moment.

"I can't stand it. Sometimes I just want to start screaming... I want to...destroy anything and everything."

Kyle gazed out the window, his chin in his hands.

"There's a voice living inside me that whispers: 'The blood that flows in you is tainted... Destroy all who possess it.'"

It was an impulse Gravis was familiar with. The urge to scream at the realization of everything wrong with his own blood, the rot that festered in his heart.

"I wanted you to inherit this country, Uncle. There's so much I still want to do. I want Fanoren to be at peace... I don't want to destroy it."

"Kyle...I'm sorry."

Kyle looked Gravis in the eye.

“So, Uncle, I propose a deal.”

“...Tell me your terms.”

“I will ascend the throne and produce an heir if necessary. For once, an heir with no victims. In return, after I have fulfilled all my duties, you will set me free.”

Gravis narrowed his eyes. “What does freedom mean to you?”

“I want to leave this country. I want to live without the name of Fanoren.”

“How will you succeed to the throne of this country if you leave it?”

Kyle sat up. “I will endure for a few years. I will marry whomever. I’ll give you an heir. But after that, I want to be free of this country.”

“But that will only make you and your spouse miserable in the meantime.”

Kyle laughed at his answer. “It’s a little late for that, don’t you think? For us, the concept of a happy marriage is a mere fantasy, is it not?”

Gravis clenched his fists.

“Oh, except for you and Leorino. You were made for each other, and it shows. Only the fact that you can’t have children is...truly regrettable.”

“...You hate me, Kyle. For choosing Leorino and deciding not to rule over this country.”

Hearing that, Kyle inclined his head and slowly shook it. The gesture was somewhat reminiscent of Joachim.

“No. I want you two to be happy. I mean it.”

“Kyle...you can’t succeed to the throne and then hand it back to me.”

“I won’t ask you to ascend the throne. I know it’s not possible with Leorino. I will be king in name only.”

“You have all the qualities of a king. Is that not enough?”

Kyle clenched his fist, the one he wasn’t resting his chin on. “No. I know I’m going to bring this country to ruin... It’s a country that my father, unaware of

our grandfather's betrayal, worked so hard to protect. It deserves a better fate than that."

Hearing that, Gravis's chest ached. Both father and son were trying to protect the other. Kyle thought that his father, King Joachim, knew nothing.

But the king knew. Not only did he know, he was one of the first to experience that hell.

But what Joachim had suffered was a secret that Gravis and the queen dowager should take to their graves.

"In my absence, you can place a body double on the throne if it so pleases you. In reality, you will be the one in control, Uncle. You can even pretend I'm dead when the time comes. I'll give you an heir, so please raise him well... Those are my terms."

"Will that make you happy?"

Kyle smiled. It was a bright, cheerful smile. "Yes. I'll be free of this country in a way my father and mother never could."

The father Kyle was referring to was Joachim.

"Kyle, I want you to be happy."

"That's none of your concern, Uncle. I will fulfill my obligations. Just let me go once I'm done."

"I will. But I'm saying you don't need a queen to ascend the throne. Simply wear the crown as a formality. If you need the outside world, then do what you must. I will take care of the country in your absence. But when you...have completed your soul-searching...then and only then will you come back as king."

Kyle was blindsided by his uncle's words.

"Why? What is the point of a king with no heir? ...Why would you allow it,

Uncle?”

“For the honor of my brother and Queen Emilia.”

“The honor of Mother and Father...”

Gravis continued. “For the two people who have devoted their lives to this country. I want you to succeed to the throne and protect their honor. Please.”

“...You truly don’t need me to get married?”

“I do not. No man or woman should have to be miserable to extend the bloodline. And if you wish to leave this country, you are free to do so. Wear the crown, but be free to live however you please.”

“Uncle...do you mean it? In return, you will be bound to this country for the rest of your life while I escape my responsibilities.”

Gravis laughed bitterly. “It will be a burden on Leorino, but...it will be my atonement as well.”

“I don’t want to make Leorino’s life more difficult.” Kyle looked regretful, but Gravis smiled at him.

“Leorino will be there for me. So, Kyle, except for wearing the crown, you are free to live your life and find someone you truly love.”

“...Someone I love.”

“Yes. I know you’ll find them. Just like I have.”

Kyle rubbed his eyes.

“Ha-ha... I never thought I’d hear you speak so fondly of someone.”

“I’m a newlywed. I’m allowed to do that now.”

His dark hair swayed.

“Even if you never have children of your own, you can raise a child from some branch of the royal family with the right qualities and give up the throne to them... Well, I’m certain we can work something out. Just like you said, no one in this country can oppose me.”

“Huh. So the royal house of Fanoren may end with me.”

Gravis approached Kyle, as he lay facedown on the desk, and stroked his head. His black hair was composed of loose curls. It was much like his own.

“I will protect this country for however long it may take you to reconcile with your wild soul.”

“...It might just take the rest of your life.”

Gravis smiled. “I’m only nine years older than you. I think I’ll manage to hang in there a little longer.”

Kyle also smiled at that. He looked up at his uncle.

“...Without ever telling my mother anything.”

“Yes, I suppose so. Queen Emilia should be free to pursue the path of honor and happiness. I want her to live out the rest of her life happily with my brother.”

“...I really don’t want this cursed blood to survive.”

Kyle stood up and buried his face in Gravis’s shoulder.

“...Do we have the right to be happy, Brother?”

“Yes. When you find someone you love, you’ll understand.”

Gravis hugged his strong shoulders tightly.

“Kyle, you’re my nephew... My brother. Please be happy.”

They were the same words Joachim had spoken to his half brother.

And so a secret lifelong pact was made between uncle and nephew, between two half brothers.

Gravis returned to his palace long after nightfall. It was almost dawn.

But to his surprise, Leorino, whom he had assumed had long been asleep, was awake and waiting for him. He ran up to Gravis with an excited look on his face.

Gravis smiled back at his ever so healing smile and picked up his spouse.

“Welcome home.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be sleeping? What is Hundert doing?”

“No, I *was* asleep. But I woke up, so I got up and decided to wait for you. Besides, I wanted to give you some happy news.”

“Happy news?” Gravis’s eyes seemed to ask.

“Here. Look...! My nails have begun to grow back.”

Leorino held up a slender fingertip in front of Gravis’s eyes. Indeed, a slightly hardened cuticle was peeking out from the base of the nail.

“This is a fingernail?”

“Yes, they are soft, but they are nails. If they continue to grow properly, they will likely return to normal. Dr. Sasha said that in about six months, my fingers will be back to their original shape.”

“I see. You’re nearly healed, huh?”

“Yes!”

When he replied happily, Leorino offered Gravis a radiant smile. He adored that smile.

“Is your body all right now?”

Gravis’s worried tone also made Leorino smile.

Both of them knew that the weight he had lost had still not fully returned, but Leorino still nodded that he was fine. Gravis accepted his smile without saying anything more.

They could practically communicate without words by now.

Although Ionia had been avenged and his nightmares of Zweilink had been few and far between, Leorino was still unable to regain his full strength.

Even now, when he pushed himself too hard, he tended to fall ill.

Theodor, Hundert, and Josef were careful and meticulous in their daily care of Leorino, keeping a close eye on his physical condition.

But while Leorino's body remained weak, his heart grew clearer, and he had developed the strength and flexibility to be unaffected by trivial matters. He was steadily growing as Gravis's spouse.

Gravis thought about the secret agreement he had made with Kyle.

The burden Gravis would have to carry from now on. The sacrifices and devotion he would require of his spouse, who still looked like he could vanish at any moment.

Still, Gravis could never let go of his hand again.

And Leorino would never let go of Gravis's hand, no matter how difficult it might be for him.

He would fight alongside him, using his flexible, open mind as his weapon. That was why Gravis would continue to protect Leorino with all his might. He would continue to fight in order to walk hand in hand with this irreplaceable soul.

This was the life to which Ionia and Leorino had devoted their blood, their hearts, and their loyalty. No other weapons were needed to survive this world of suffering.

Gravis was grateful for the miracle he had finally reached at the end of his long, dark road.

In a few more moments, dawn would come.

“Shall we go back to sleep?”

Leorino twisted his head in thought.

“I don’t know, I might not be able to sleep.”

Then Gravis suddenly lifted Leorino.

“Leorino, let’s leap.”

“What, at this hour? Where to?”

Gravis smiled.

“It’ll be dawn soon... Shall we head to Zweilink?”

You Can Have My Back

Gravis and Leorino stood on top of the outer fortress walls of Zweilink.

The fort was located in the north, where the temperature was cooler than in the royal capital. Seeing Leorino shiver, Gravis rushed to pull him into his cloak.

“You’re warm.”

“You should feel better once the sun rises.”

“Yes... It’s already spring. It’s too dark to see, but spring must be here, too.”

Looking up at the sky, countless stars flickered in the heavens, just like that day when Ionia gazed at it nineteen years ago.

Beyond the fort stretched the forest that was now ruled by Fanoren.

Leorino recalled a dream in which he and a red-haired young man were looking out over this dark winter forest, back when he was stuck between life and death. At the same time, it brought back Ionia’s memories.

The smell of winter. The flicker of the stars as he looked up from the top of the fort while thinking of Gravis.

“Nineteen years ago, I was also looking up at the starry sky from here.”

“I see. The stars are amazing, aren’t they?”

“Even back then, I thought they looked like your eyes.”

“My eyes... I wonder, is the view here better than in the royal capital?”

“I can’t say.”

They remained silent for a while, gazing at the shimmering, indigo starry sky. The light of the stars gradually grew more distant as dawn approached.

“Leorino...my brother will abdicate in the near future.”

“I’m aware.”

“And even after Kyle succeeds to the throne, I will still be in charge of the affairs of this country.”

“What does that mean?”

Leorino looked up from the man’s chest and into his face.

“Simply put, I’ll be busier than I ever was. Just as I was planning to retire with you to our palace.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. But why? If you don’t mind my asking, what is the reason?”

“I can’t give you the details, but this is what Kyle wants. He agreed to be king in name only, but he does not want to take on the responsibility of this country.”

“I didn’t know that was an option.”

Gravis looked down at Leorino and embraced him tightly

“I’ll make it work. It is also what I want. Kyle will still bear the heaviest responsibility of all: being king. At the very least, I want his heart to be free... I want him to live with as much freedom as possible.”

“...Will the matter of an heir be an issue? And the fact that I’m by your side as your spouse...”

“It won’t be an issue. We will not force Kyle into marriage. He will ascend the throne without a queen.”

“Really...?”

Gravis pressed his lips to Leorino’s forehead.

“We don’t want royalty to force themselves down a path of misery anymore.”

“...I see.”

“Yes. We should be the last to be sacrificed for this country.”

Leorino considered it.

He didn’t know what sort of future their decision would bring about.

The glory of the great nation of Fanoren may one day fade away.

But that was the path that Gravis and Kyle had chosen for the royal family of Fanoren.

Gravis rested his chin on Leorino’s head.

“Well, we’ll make it work.”

“If you say so, I’m certain you will.”

“Of course. A person’s intended path in life should never be twisted for the sake of blood or country, even if they are royalty. That’s why I am setting Kyle’s heart free.”

Leorino smiled.

He did not offer him any details. But he did know one thing: Gravis likely chose to sacrifice himself for his country.

But he did not bother pointing it out. That was the way of life of the man Leorino loved—the man to whom his soul had pledged its allegiance.

Instead, Leorino deftly turned his body in the man’s arms so that they were facing each other and pressed himself tightly to Gravis’s strong chest.

“Then that means your heart is now free, too.”

“...I wonder. Is this what you would call free?”

“Yes. As long as your heart is free, you are no longer bound by anything... Your heart is enough.”

Gravis smiled.

“Yes...you’re right. You’ve set me free.”

Gravis softly rocked Leorino’s thin body. He was gentle and warm.

He felt his entire body fill with love.

“I wonder what you are to me.”

“You can call me whatever you want, Vi.”

“You were my best friend. And now you are my significant other, my spouse... my everything, my irreplaceable soul.”

“What a coincidence. That’s exactly what I was hoping to be.”

At Leorino’s joke, they gazed at each other and smiled.

“...I will always be with you from now on. I don’t care what my name is or what shape I take, as long as we can be together.”

Gravis smiled softly.

Every time he saw the man smile, a flower of joy bloomed in Leorino’s heart.

He didn’t want to miss that smile, not even for a moment. He didn’t want to

miss a single kiss, a heartbeat, not a single thing.

From now on, at least our hearts will be free.

Suddenly, Gravis picked Leorino up in his arms. Lifted up high by a man taller than him, Leorino panicked.

“Wah! We’re so far from the ground.”

“It’s all right. Don’t worry, you will never fall from these fortress walls again. I’ve got the hang of it now. If you fall, I’ll catch you every time.”

“Of course. I know you’ll always catch me, Vi.”

They smiled at each other again. Another flower of joy bloomed in Leorino’s heart.

“Leorino, I will ask as many times as it takes. Will you walk with me for the rest of our lives?”

Leorino nodded yes with a smile.

“I may end up going to battle again in the future.”

“I’m aware.”

“Everything should be fine for a while. But I don’t know how long I will be able to protect this country.”

Thin fingertips gently brushed back the man’s bangs.

“I can’t imagine you getting any weaker.”

“In two years I will be forty. That’s fairly old.”

Leorino held the man’s head tightly.

“You will still be able to defend this country. Luca and Dirk will be there. And I am certain that Kyle will be a good king.”

“Even though he will be a king in name only?”

“Perhaps, but I am certain he will be a better king than anyone expects. He is that sort of person. Don’t you think so?”

“Ha-ha, you may have a point.”

Gravis laughed out loud. Leorino brought his lips to Gravis’s forehead.

“And I am certain that...there will be no more war in Fanoren for some time to come. You have brought peace.”

“I see. Well... It took nineteen years. I certainly took my time.”

The man lowered the outer corners of his brows, perhaps tickled by the touch of Leorino’s lips, and his expression made Leorino fall in love with him all over again.

“Leorino.”

“Yes?”

Starry-sky eyes met violet ones.

“How much longer will we get to be together?”

“Always. We’ll be together the next time we leave this world.”

“I do enjoy the sentiment. You do realize I’m old enough to be your father? This time, I want you to live a long life.”

Leorino said nothing more and smiled.

“What’s wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing. I just love you so much.”

“Leorino.”

“I’m glad I inherited Ionia’s memories... I’m glad we got to meet again.”

Saying this, he tightly hugged the man’s neck once more.

Leorino already had a premonition. Even assuming Gravis survived to die of old age, he suspected Gravis would not be the first to leave this world.

Leorino's soul carried the burden of two entire lives. His body would not be able to cope with his fate for long—it was too much for mere human flesh to bear.

He had burned through his life to get to where he was now. That was the price Leorino's soul had paid to meet this man once more.

But if I can live with Gravis until the end of his life...

Leorino only prayed that his body would last until then.

At that moment, a ray of light pierced the horizon of the starry sky. The morning sun began to illuminate the plains of Zweilink in white.

Dawn had arrived.

"I love you, Vi."

"I love you. I can't say it enough. I adore you. I love you more than words can say."

Those words were enough. When or where they would die mattered not.

He had been born to love this man with all his heart, just the way he was.

Leorino had only one wish.

From now on, he wanted the life of the man he loved to be filled only with smiles and joy. That was all.

Considering the weight of Gravis's responsibilities, he knew it would not be an easy task. That was why he wanted to squeeze out every last drop out of his life and stay by Gravis's side until his final moments.

And when that time came, they would return to the heavens together.

To this twilight sky where the flickering stars and the light of dawn mingled.

"I will be with you at all times. So, Vi, please live as you wish."

"As I wish, huh?"

"Yes. Vi...you are the meaning of my soul's life. I want you to be free. I want you to smile."

The morning sun was turning the fresh verdure of the plains white. The two of them gazed at the dazzling view.

"If you stay by my side, I'm certain I will."

"Yes, please leave it to me."

Leorino nodded vigorously and Gravis laughed out loud.

"Such a dependable spouse I've found myself."

"From now on, you can count on me more than ever."

Gravis smiled and nodded.

His hands reassuringly held Leorino's back.

Leorino's hands were also firmly around Gravis's neck.

Their wishes melted into the Zweilink sky on the wind.

They would never lose each other again.



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Until the day they both perished.

Gravis brought his lips to Leorino's ear and whispered.

Calling his name teasingly, the man's voice sounded almost like a prayer, gently rocking Leorino's heart and then making it full.

"You can have my back from now on."

At that moment, the only thing reflected in the man's starry-sky eyes was Leorino's smile, glistening like a flower in the morning sun.

The end.

*The
Marriage
Vows*

The wedding ceremonies of the royal family were performed by the supreme bishop of the state religion of Fanoren, the head of the Palace of Heaven and Earth.

The wedding ceremonies themselves were quite simple. The bishop would recite a ritual prayer, each person would place an offering to the gods on the altar, and both would recite their vows, after which their names would be registered in the tome which maintained a record of the royal family tree, completing the process.

However, there was a tedious pre-ceremony ritual that had to be performed first. For ten days, each morning at dawn, a prayer and a new offering were required at the royal temple in the Palace of Heaven and Earth. The signing of the marriage documents itself had already taken place before this ritual began.

During those ten days, Leorino was treated as an apprentice of sorts, because despite being royalty in terms of status, he was not yet recognized under God.

It wasn't easy getting up at the crack of dawn every day, but Gravis and Leorino completed the ritual with solemnity.

Finally, the day of the wedding ceremony arrived.

"Hah... You look stunning, Master Leorino."

Josef beamed with joy the moment he saw Leorino in his formal attire. Dressed in pure white clothing embroidered with silver thread, buttons lining his chest, Leorino smiled bashfully.

Behind him, his full-time attendant who had served Leorino since he was little was smiling, looking very satisfied indeed.

"Mother spared no effort for the occasion," said Leorino. "It's really quite heavy, though."

“You’ll manage. Don’t you want to look pretty for the general? You’ll have to hang in there during the ceremony.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

Finally, Gravis also arrived in his formalwear. Seeing Leorino so beautifully dressed, Gravis could hardly believe his eyes.

“...I lack the words to express how breathtaking you look. Madame Maia knows exactly what clothes suit you best.”

“...Thank you.”

Meanwhile, Leorino was so captivated by Gravis’s flawless appearance that he could only blush, Gravis’s words of praise hardly registering at all.

Gravis’s formal attire was of a blue so deep, it appeared nearly black. It was modestly embroidered with gold thread on the cuffs, collar, and chest. Over this, he wore a cloak of the same fabric.

His general’s ceremonial uniform was easily more ornate than this. Overall, the design was so understated that it seemed almost too plain for the special occasion.

Fortunately, the man’s perfect masculine beauty compensated for this, radiating charm that left everyone around him in awe. He was the very image of a perfectly mature man.

There was a reason why Gravis’s clothing was so plain. The jewelry he wore over it was dazzlingly lavish.

His bangs were combed back to reveal his prominent forehead, adorned with a circlet. It was molded from thick platinum into the shape of thin vines extending from a cross-star, giving it a sturdy impression. In its center, a precious stone, the same color as his unique pupils, shone brilliantly like a third eye.

A luxurious necklace glistened on his chest, and a ring was displayed on his finger.

“Vi...you look marvelous.”

Seeing Leorino’s transfixed expression, Gravis smiled.

“Theodor.”

“Yes, sir.”

Reaching for the flat, cloth-covered box behind him, Theodor held it out to his master.

The box opened to reveal a circlet, necklace, and ring, all of the same style as Gravis’s jewelry.

“We prepared these for you. I hope you’ll wear them today.”

“...Thank you so much.”

Leorino was speechless at the opulence of it all.

The circlet was even more delicate than Gravis’s. The platinum was shaped into a delicate leaf fretwork, its flowers made of diamonds of various sizes.

Inlaid in the center of the forehead was a large precious stone of indigo with a hint of dawn.

“This stone...”

“This precious stone was chosen to match the color of your eyes. The artisans have truly shown their skill.”

Leorino was dumbfounded.

The necklace was so elaborate that it hurt the eyes. The choker-like piece around the neck was intricately ornate, and from it hung bead-like ornaments of various sizes.

Here, too, a number of purple precious stones had been used, even larger than the one in his circlet. The accompanying diamonds were too numerous to count.

The ring was engraved with the same coat of arms as Gravis's, only the stone in its center was different.

Lost for words, Leorino looked up at Gravis timidly, scared of how much money he would be wasting.

"I-I'm afraid I don't...have any money...at my disposal."

"...Pfft—"

Theodor brought his fist to his mouth and apologized as he stifled a laugh.

Gravis couldn't have expected Leorino would worry about how he would pay for the jewelry. He broke into laughter, thinking it was a very fitting reaction for him.

"Fear not. In this sense alone, you are not special. This sort of jewelry is always provided for royalty. You must wear it for the most prestigious occasions. Such are our customs."

It seemed excessive even with that explanation, but Leorino was at least relieved that no one would expect him to pay for it.

"Right... But it feels almost too luxurious to actually wear..."

"You don't need to wear it in your daily life. But today is special."

Leorino suddenly felt nervous.

Of course. Today was the special day when he and Gravis would officially be wed.

Gravis instructed his valet. "Theodor, help him put it on."

"Yes, sir... Lord Leorino, please sit down for me."

The valet sat Leorino down in a chair and ran a comb through his bangs, revealing his forehead just as he had done for Gravis. He placed the circlet on his head to hold the bangs that spilled softly from between his fingers in place.

Leorino's fair, round forehead glistened with the shimmering circlet.

“Oh...my lord!”

“...It truly suits you.”

Everyone cheered. Even the calm and collected Theodor sounded impressed. Leorino looked more mature just by exposing his forehead.

His dazzling beauty was even more striking now. Theodor also assisted him with the necklace.

Gravis's fingers gently cupped Leorino's chin.

“I instructed them to make it as light as possible for your comfort... How is it? Does it hurt or otherwise feel wrong?”

“No, it doesn't hurt. I can't see it myself, but does this gorgeous jewelry really suit me?”

Leorino brought his hand to his forehead anxiously, but Gravis only smiled fondly.

“It looks fantastic on you. You're stunning.”

“Thank you.”

Leorino's cheeks flushed. If Gravis thought it looked good on him, that was all that mattered.

Gravis took Leorino's right hand and fitted the band on his ring finger. It was not customary to wear jewelry for the sake of indicating one's marital status in Fanoren. For both of them, the rings were simply a symbol of their royal status.

“Perfect. Now let's head to the temple.”

“Yes, let's.”

Hundert helped Leorino put on his cloak as the final touch to his formal attire.

When he was ready, Gravis offered him his hand. Leorino swallowed and took it.

Leorino looked up at his beloved spouse and smiled.

Soon they would be officially recognized as married under God. He had thought of it as nothing but a formality, but there was something deeply moving about the thought of being ready, formally dressed, and recognized in the presence of God.

Then Gravis stopped. He addressed Josef and Hundert, who had been waiting with their heads bowed for the couple to depart.

“Hundert, Josef, you should also attend the ceremony.”

“What...?”

“...B-but that’s...!”

They were both taken aback.

It was truly unheard of for two commoners to be allowed to attend a royal wedding ceremony. At the same time, Leorino’s eyes lit up.

“Can they really attend?”

Gravis fondly looked down at his spouse, who looked up at him with gratitude, his cheeks flushed.

“No one will complain if you stay in the back. What do you say, Theodor?”

“As a bloodline purist, I see no issue.”

Leorino had tears in his eyes.

“Thank you...!”

Leorino looked back at his cherished servants.

From the frontier to the capital and then to the royal palace.

No matter how lonely the battle, these two had been there to help him get to where he was now.

Josef and Theodor were also trembling with emotion.

Tears welling in his eyes, Leorino turned to them with a radiant smile.

“It would be very heartening to see you there. Will you wait for us in the temple?”

“...Oh... Oh my... Of course, my lord.”

“I’d love to...Master Leorino. I’ll be watching as you become a beautiful, beautiful bride.”

“Thank you... I’m still not a bride...but all right.”

Gravis tenderly watched the master and servants tearfully gaze at each other and took his spouse’s hand.

“Theodor, take care of them, will you?”

“Yes, sir... Hundert, Josef, hurry up and put on some finer clothes. Their Highnesses will greet Their Majesties before heading to the temple. We will go to the temple and wait for them.”

In addition to the royal family, the families of the Duke of Wiesen and the Margrave of Brungwurt would also be present in the temple. Chancellor Ginter and Lieutenant General Brandt were also invited as witnesses.

In addition to the official attendees, Gravis’s second-in-command, Dirk, military doctor Sasha, the couple’s attendants, and Leorino’s guard, Josef, watched over as Gravis and Leorino exchanged vows.

The ceremony was solemn and simple.

Illuminated by the light streaming in through the skylight, the two men were as beautiful as an image plucked straight from a dream.

The sight of them standing side by side brought a variety of emotions to the hearts of those in attendance.

Leorino glanced up at the man standing next to him. Gravis looked down at him with kind eyes.

They felt no need to say anything other than their vows.

From the depths of their hearts, boundless words of love came forth, unvoiced.

Having overcome days of hardship, and finally allowed to nestle close, it was the moment the two souls would forever belong to one another.

Their silent prayer dissolved into the air like bubbles, becoming the light of blessing silently embracing them.

*A
Cage
of Sweet
Lust*

Leorino's expression stiffened slightly.

Leorino realized who the woman before him was at first glance.

She was much more mature and beautiful than he remembered, but there was no doubt that she was the woman who had once been his husband's fiancée.

Helena, daughter of the Duke of Müller, had married the third prince of the former king of neighboring Francoure not long after her engagement to Gravis had been broken off.

Helena was visiting Fanoren with her husband and son to celebrate Gravis and Leorino's union.

As royalty, Gravis and Leorino were of a higher rank. Helena, her husband Bernard, and their son, the prince, stepped forward to greet Gravis and Leorino.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Highness Lord Leorino."

"...The pleasure is mine, Your Highnesses Prince Bernard, Princess Helena, and Prince Michel. Welcome to Fanoren."

Leorino fought to keep his face composed. This was part of his official duties. Remembering Maia's lessons, he tried to keep his face as expressionless as possible, only raising the corners of his mouth.

Helena had retained the appearance of the girl from his memories, but had taken on an even nobler air. He had not expected her to marry into the royal family of a neighboring country, but it appeared to have been a good marriage for her as well. She was regally dressed in opulent Francoureish clothing.

Meanwhile, Leorino's outfit had been arranged to perfection by his attendants.

He wore the formal attire of a royal with no superfluous decoration, only perfectly tailored to fit his slender body. However, when observed closely, one could see that the fabric had been intricately embroidered and inlaid with tiny

jewels, and when approached, it subtly glistened.

Other than the jewelry that marked his royal status, Leorino felt no need to adorn himself with anything at all.

His medium-length hair hung loosely on the lower half of his head, while the rest of it was arranged in an elaborate updo and held in place by his circlet, making it appear as if he was quite literally glowing.

Standing alongside Gravis, his flawless masculine beauty on display, Leorino's appearance radiated an unconventional, unique aura.

The guests from Francoure looked on in admiration and astonishment at the boyish spouse standing next to Gravis.

Prince Bernard, Helena's husband, finally came to his senses and began to praise Leorino between his many sighs. Bernard was Gravis's cousin on his mother's side.

"Your Highness Prince Gravis...we have heard rumors of His Highness Lord Leorino in our country, but seeing him in person, I am frankly speechless. Such a gorgeous spouse you have. I feel dizzy simply gazing upon him."

Seeing Leorino up close, Helena's son, Prince Michel, was also lost for words at the sight of his pure, graceful beauty.

"...Father, you are right. I have never seen anyone so beautiful in my life."

Saying this, Prince Michel gazed at Leorino's beauty once more. The prince was two years younger than Leorino and would come of age next year.

Leorino smiled modestly.

"I am very grateful for your kind words. You have come a long way to see us."

"We were rather surprised to learn that His Highness Prince Gravis had pursued marriage," Helena answered gracefully. "He had been a bachelor for so long, we couldn't help wondering who he had chosen to wed in the end... We couldn't have expected to find such a beautiful young man at the end of our

journey.”

Sensing a certain implication in Helena’s words and her gaze, Leorino cast his eyes down for the briefest moment. Perhaps she intended no malice. But Leorino felt hurt regardless.

That was when Gravis gently placed his hand around Leorino’s back. Leorino looked up at his husband.

“We were forced to overcome many obstacles before I could marry Leorino. This included his father’s vehement protests... But at long last, we are together, and I wouldn’t trade him for the world,” Gravis said.

He looked down at Leorino and smiled tenderly. The smile faded quickly, but the three guests from Francoure were shocked at how far Gravis had come from the cold, expressionless man they had known.

At the same time, Leorino felt instantly encouraged by his words and was able to regain his composure.

Of course. I must keep my chin up. I can’t embarrass Vi.

“Lord Leorino, I believe you hail from the family of the Margrave of Brungwurt. Your mother is Maia from the Ducal House of Wiesen, is she not?”

Leorino inclined his head.

“...You’re familiar with my parents?”

The royalty of Francoure burst into laughter. All royalty from the surrounding countries were familiar with the Margrave of Brungwurt, not to mention that Helena had been the daughter of a Fanoren duke.

“Oh my... I see you are still young and ignorant of worldly affairs, aren’t you?”

Leorino found himself in shock again.

What had been so wrong about asking if she knew his parents? He worried if

it had been a foolish question or if the woman was laughing at his expense.

“Leorino does not possess the power of his family name. His value as a person is entirely his own. His blood is of no import.”

Gravis immediately offered a helping hand.

Perhaps realizing her mistake, Helena fell silent. She seemed ill at ease, but eventually said to Gravis: “I see Your Highness has married a truly sheltered son of a good family... How lovely. But considering his beauty, it’s no wonder.”

“He is certainly a sight to behold, but that is also not why I pursued him. It is only one of Leorino’s many virtues that hold me spellbound.”

This time Helena’s smile faltered completely.

“...I would like to congratulate you once again. Francoure wishes you both every happiness in the future.”

“Thank you, Princess Helena. We appreciate your well wishes.”

Leorino looked up at his husband.

Gravis wore a cold expression on top of his flawless beauty that made it impossible to guess what was going through his mind.

Despite his outward appearance, Leorino felt quite uncertain inside, worried about what Gravis was thinking when met with his former fiancée.

He looked at Helena again.

Their eyes seemed closer than he remembered, though it must have been because he had only seen her from Ionia’s point of view. She was by no means a woman so beautiful as to be intimidating, but she had an undeniable air of nobility about her.

Perhaps having noticed the uneasiness in Leorino’s eyes, Helena seemed to smile as she gracefully covered her mouth with her fan.

All these years later and still he could not stomach this woman.

That she affected him so negatively and there was so little he could do to stop it doused Leorino's spirits.

That night, Leorino had already taken off his formal attire and changed into his pajamas when he sat on the settee, holding the backrest and feeling melancholy.

As Theodor assisted him in removing his jewelry, his husband asked, "What's wrong? Are you tired?"

"...No, I didn't stay at the venue long."

After greeting their distinguished guests and making the rounds of the hall, Leorino was quickly allowed to return to their palace alone. Gravis was the only one who remained at the venue and entertained the guests until almost the end of the evening.

At any given soiree, Leorino rarely stayed longer than it took him to exchange greetings.

There were two reasons for this. First, they had to consider Leorino's physical condition. His overall frailty was part of it, but there was also his inability to stand or walk for long periods of time due to the injuries he had sustained in his youth.

The other reason was entirely the whim of his husband. He could not bear to leave his beautiful spouse exposed to the public for too long, knowing how much attention he attracted.

Gravis's intense desire for exclusivity resulted in his spouse being quickly hidden away in the depths of their palace.

"Now, come here."

“...Hmf.”

Back in his indoor clothing, Gravis scooped up his spouse from the settee. Leorino was not pleased.

Pressing a kiss to his platinum hair, Gravis rocked Leorino in an attempt to comfort him.

“What’s wrong? Why are you melancholy? What’s upset you so much? Meeting Helena?”

“No... Fine, yes. It upset me. It made me doubt myself.”

“Doubt yourself? Because she used to be my fiancée?”

“Yes... Frankly, I was hoping I would never have to see her again.” Leorino nodded honestly. There was no point in lying about his feelings.

Gravis forced a smile.

“Helena would hate to hear it, but I never had any feelings for her in the first place. You know that better than anyone, don’t you?”

“I never suspected you had feelings for Lady Helena.”

“Then what’s the issue?”

“...I’m just feeling upset and irritated! For no particular reason!”

“...We wouldn’t want that.”

Suddenly feeling possessive about his husband, Leorino wrapped his arms and legs around Gravis’s strong body.

“...Lady Helena still seemed to have some unresolved feelings for you, Vi. She called me ignorant, as if I were a child.”

“I agree, that was rude of her. But,” Gravis smiled, rocking Leorino’s clinging body, “objectively speaking, you *are* ignorant of the ways of the world, just as much as you are sheltered. Whatever she was trying to imply, I think she was simply jealous of your beauty.”

“N-no, I highly doubt that. I believe she still has feelings for you. Because, I mean, although her husband Prince Bernard seemed like a kind man, you’re still a hundred, no, a thousand times better, Vi.”

Such precious jealousy, Gravis thought, smiling at his spouse’s immature phrasing.

But Leorino’s next remark brought a serious look to Gravis’s face.

“The entire venue, women and men alike, were all looking at you, entranced and cooing!”

“...That jealousy of yours is adorable, and I see you’re still making an attempt on my life with these compliments, but...Leorino. You should learn to read your surroundings a little more objectively.”

“What do you mean?”

“People may fear me; they do not coo at me.”

That much was true. Perhaps things had been different when he was young, but even with his unrivaled beauty, Gravis was now the object of absolute respect and awe, and certainly not someone people would approach with the intent of casual flirtation. No one had the courage to even attempt it.

“Silly goose. Perhaps your princely upbringing has left you ignorant yourself, Vi!” Leorino complained, clinging to his chest.

Gravis was exasperated. Leorino was clearly trying to use him to vent his pent-up anger at being insulted by Helena.

“Let’s head to bed.”

Gravis lifted Leorino, who still clung to him, and carried him to bed.

Leorino vented his inner turmoil into his husband’s strong chest during the entire journey.

“I’m not going to let Lady Helena beat me. I won’t let her speak to me like that again...!”

“You’re fine. You’ve already won.”

“She laughed in my face, but before long, I will become less ignorant and more respectable, standing proudly next to you as your spouse... I won’t lose to Lady Helena!”

“I assure you, she will never stand by my side for *several* reasons.”

Gravis gently dropped Leorino onto the bed. He then held Leorino’s hands above his head, restraining him.

“You’re already my perfect partner. I love you, Leorino.”

“I love you, too. I love you *most* of all, Vi.”

Leorino then complained, wanting to be released. When his arms were freed, he reached up and tightly wrapped his hands around the nape of his husband’s neck.

Gravis stroked Leorino’s back, then peered into his eyes with mischief.

“...Are we heading to sleep?”

“No. I’ll prove to you how mature I really am...!”

Saying this, Leorino went for Gravis’s lips.

“M-make love to me... Vi. I want you to *feel* that we’re married.”

Gravis smiled sincerely, unable to resist the competitive spirit of his tender, passionate husband.

Gravis’s fingers were caressing Leorino’s soft inner walls, which he had just passionately penetrated.

His consciousness on the verge of bliss, Leorino was enjoying the faint pleasure of the sensation, his vacant gaze wavering.

“Mn...nn...ah...”

The flesh that had already been stretched to its limit gradually regained its original tightness as the man slowly moved back and forth. Gravis liked to take it slow and indulge him until it fully closed up.

Leorino mewled like a kitten, gasping at how good it felt.

Leorino's body had been trained to perfection by his husband, whether he was aware of it or not.

Accustomed to being carefully loosened and filled, he did not reject the tongue and fingers exploring the area.

With deliberate and sufficient preparation, Gravis's length could easily reach his depths now.

Gravis, satisfied that he had left behind proof of Leorino's pleasure, took his beloved's now-limp length in his mouth and laced his tongue around it.

"Ah...ah... No... Don't suck...ahh..."

Leorino liked when Gravis used his hands and his mouth at the same time. Becoming unable to climax without internal stimulation couldn't be a good thing for his body, so Gravis made sure not to leave his manhood neglected for long.

He slowly stiffened in Gravis's mouth.

But Leorino begged for a different sort of pleasure.

"Vi... That's so good. Give me more. I want it, um, inside."

Leorino watched absentmindedly with flushed cheeks.

A low chuckle escaped Gravis's lips and he shifted his body upward, planting kisses on his skin from the navel up. He took Leorino's slender fingers and brought them to the hole he had been teasing.

"Mn..."

"Go ahead and do whatever feels good for you. I'll make love to you elsewhere."

“...All right.”

The flush across Leorino’s cheeks spread further and he obediently followed the man’s lead, inserting a finger into his wet hole. Gravis held his wrist, helping the hesitant finger find its rhythm.

“Nn...ah, ah.”

When Gravis released his hand, Leorino could not stop himself from toying with his own sensitive hole.

As Gravis lovingly watched Leorino’s body writhe before him, the man wrapped his large hand around Leorino’s now fully erect flesh and worked it loosely.

At the same time, he rubbed circles into one of Leorino’s reddened nipples with his thumb while ravaging his gasping mouth with his tongue, which only made Leorino squirm further through tears.

“Mnf... Mnn, ngh.”

“...Ah, you’re adorable...”

Licking off the saliva dripping from the corner of his lips, he moved on to sucking on his free nipple indulgently. At the same time, he pinched the other so hard it hurt.

“N— Oww...!”

Tears spilled from Leorino’s eyes.

“Vi... Vi...help.”

“...What’s wrong?”

Leorino complained, his vacant eyes wet with tears.

“I need more, inside... I can’t reach far enough, the best spot is too deep.”

“Oh.”

Gravis smiled. Leorino opened his fair legs and implored the man for help.

When Gravis peered between his thighs, he saw that Leorino’s usually modest

entrance was now soft and loose, showing a slight glimpse of the flirtatious flesh inside as it twitched.

“Shall I lick it for you?”

Leorino refused, tears streaming down his face.

“N-no, that’s not deep enough. I want you to make love to me again with your fingers or with *that*. I need it deep.”

“Where exactly?”

“A-at the end of the passage... It tightens when you touch me...”

Hearing his spouse’s brave request for him to go deep inside, Gravis felt his love well inside him.

Leorino was so innocent and yet possessed such a lascivious disposition, finally utilizing the lewd vocabulary he had learned.

If Gravis were to be honest, he felt guilty for using Leorino’s inexperience to make him beg for sexual favors. Then again, Gravis wasn’t exactly planning on informing his spouse of just how indecent his words truly were.

“...So what do you want me to do?”

“Please, put yourself deep inside me and rock me. And go hard, don’t stop... Please, I need it so badly.”

Gravis indulgently claimed his lips with a smile and lifted the dazed Leorino from behind.

He then placed Leorino’s legs over his elbows.

“Mnn... Oh, uh, ah—”

Maintaining that position, he slipped his tip into his sweet, loose passage.

“Ahh...ahhhh!”

Using only his arms, he shallowly thrust there and back, running his hands along Leorino’s chest, massaging his red, swollen nipples.

“Ahh...ah, ah... Yes, oh yes...”

Leorino's body was perfectly suited to making love in every way.

His nipples had at first been too small to grasp, but having been licked and stroked on a nearly daily basis, they were now a pink color at all times.

His areolas had grown plump and full, and his nipples had grown to a far more accessible size. Even now, they stood at attention, lovingly rubbed by the man's fingers.

His narrow hole was now able to contain the man's impressive length. Usually, it was tight and closed, but its lovely, lewd rim was slightly raised, showing his recently gained experience.

As a product of the fine work of Gravis's tongue and fingers, it had even begun to moisten when stimulated, even if it wasn't built for that purpose.

His manhood was relegated to being sucked and caressed by the man. Its skin was always incredibly sensitive from all the attention Gravis paid it while softly holding down its base.

They could never engage in the act on all fours, given how much strain it would put on Leorino's legs.

They usually made love in the missionary position, but when Leorino became demanding like tonight, they turned to the sitting position to achieve deeper penetration. In this position, Gravis had access to all his most sensitive spots.

Gravis's massive member slowly pried Leorino's sweet, wet passage open. Leorino twitched without a word, whimpering as Gravis stroked his nipples with both thumbs.

"Look... I'm deep inside you, just like you wanted."

When Gravis buried himself a little more than halfway in, he quickly reached the depths of Leorino's slender body. By now, Leorino was dazed and wet, spilling various bodily fluids from the pleasure.

“Vi... Vi... Move, move inside me. Fuck me, make love to me.”

Hearing his desperate pleas, Gravis gently rocked his body.

“Ahh, ahn, ahn... Yes, ah, ahh...”

“Hah... You’re so good. You feel amazing in there.”

Gravis also shivered at the sheer sensation of Leorino’s narrow, wet passage. Despite his delicate appearance, his body seemed to be made for sex, as evidenced by just how good he was at giving and receiving pleasure.

With a shudder, Gravis pulled himself free of Leorino’s hot flesh just as Leorino climaxed, his fluids bursting forth.

Turning over his powerless, pliable body, Gravis plunged himself deep inside once more. He then proceeded to rock his hips rhythmically in pursuit of his own climax. Getting his fill of his wet flesh like this felt so crude, yet even this brought Leorino nothing but great pleasure.

Gasping for breath with a dazed look on his face, Leorino begged the man for his lips.

“Come... Come inside me...Vi...please, I can’t take it.”

“Leorino...ngh.”

Gravis’s muscles bulged as he climaxed, spilling his heat deep inside him. Leorino was also pushed over the edge for what seemed like the hundredth time that night.

“Haah, haah...ngh, ah...ahh...”

Gravis occupied his lewd passage with his persisting girth, massaging his liquid passion into his flesh from within.

Leorino loved to be sweetly ravaged by his husband. He was still twitching, his mind somewhere far away, unable to return from his climax.

Gravis moved his hips languidly, raining kisses down on Leorino’s face as he

was lost in pleasure.

“Vi... I love you... I love you so much.”

“...Me too. I love you, too...”

Having made love to his husband, having been unmade by the sweet, crashing pleasure, Leorino felt his anxiety finally disappear.

He felt suddenly at peace with the thought of never waking up again. This moment when he became one with the man meant everything.

Shedding tears, Leorino wrapped his limbs around the man he loved.

Finally, Leorino whispered into his ear: *Again*.

Afterword

Greetings. My name is Minami Kotsuna.

Thank you so much for picking up *You Can Have My Back*. It is truly a miracle that I have been able to deliver this story in this format.

For a long time, I held on to the desire to write a story in the back of my mind.

Then, out of the blue, I thought, “Okay, let’s make this story happen!” I impulsively wrote the first chapter of *You Can Have My Back* and submitted it to syosetu.com in September 2019.

From there, more people read my story than I could have ever anticipated. Encouraged by their warm support, I was able to write my first novel over the course of a year or so.

It’s a miracle that I was able to turn that momentary impulse into three volumes.

I am truly grateful to Mr. Y of the Kadokawa Ruby Bunko editorial department for reaching out to me that day. I also had the unbelievably good fortune to have Hitomi Hitoyo add color to this black-and-white world with her beautiful, majestic illustrations. I am still filled with gratitude.

I wrote this story on the theme of two questions that I have been holding onto for a long time.

The first was “Where does one find self-affirmation?” People sometimes lose sight of the meaning of their own existence and lose confidence in themselves, wondering if they are valuable to someone dear to them. I wanted to write about the process of healing from such despair to being able to affirm oneself for who they are once more. From this question Leorino was born, a young man who suffers from estrangement from his previous life.

The second was the contrast between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Even those who appear fortunate may in fact carry deep pain within. Superficial factors such as status or titles may not be enough to bring a person happiness. It was from these thoughts that Gravis was born.

Leorino and Ionia. Gravis and Lucas, and Smirnov. In this story, each character is a mirror image of another. None of them are truly correct, but each has his own truth, justice, and love. These are revealed as a result of their fate, taking on various forms throughout. That was the world I wanted to depict, and I put my all into this story.

I can only hope that this story will receive a small sliver of space in the hearts of its readers.

I may be asking for too much. But I am not ashamed to say that I wish for such a thing now, as if I were talking to myself back then, when I secretly had a story I wanted to tell in my heart.

Thank you very much for finding your way to the world of *You Can Have My Back*.

April 2021, Minami Kotsuna

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