

# **Table of Contents**

**Color Gallery** 

**Title Page** 

**Copyrights and Credits** 

**Table of Contents Page** 

**Chapter One** 

**Interlude: Dirk** 

**Chapter Two** 

**Chapter Three** 

**Interlude: Andreas** 

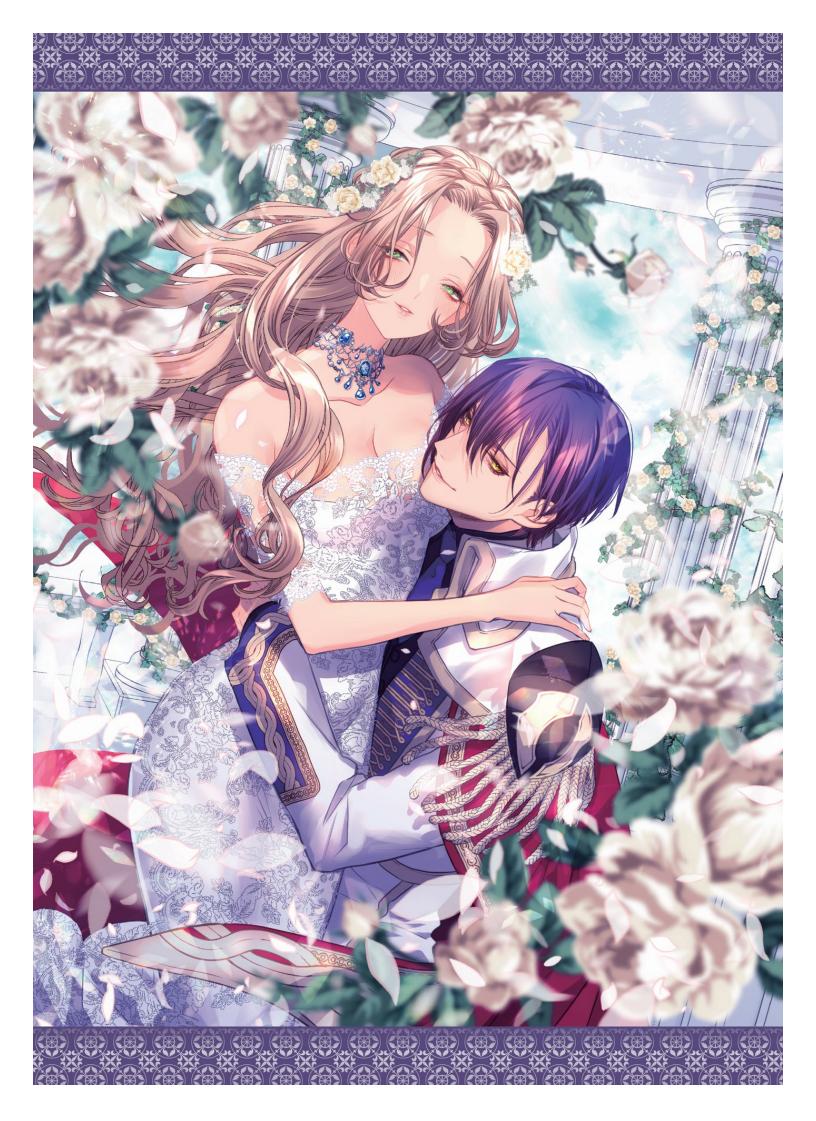
**Chapter Four** 

**Chapter Five** 

**Special Short Story** 

**Newsletter** 





# THE SCAINESS VAND DEMONATION THE SCAINESS THE SCAINESS VAND DEMONATION THE SCAINESS T

NOVEL



Written by **NEKOTA** 

Illustrated by

**ASAHIKO** 



Seven Seas Entertainment

Akuyakureijo to kichikukishi VOL. 2 © 2021 Nekota / Asahiko. All rights reserved. First published in Japan in 2021 by Ichijinsha Inc., Tokyo. Publication rights for this English edition arranged through Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lauren Hill at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager Kristine Johnson at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Christina Chesterfield ADAPTATION: Kathleen Townsend

cover design: H. Qi

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Catherine Pedigo PROOFREADER: Imogen Vale

EDITOR: Laurel Ashgrove, Lorin Christie

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Salvador Chan, Jr., April Malig, Jules Valera

MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-89160-887-0

Printed in Canada

First Printing: February 2025 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# **CONTENTS**

ONE

**INTERLUDE: DIRK** 

**TWO** 

THREE

**INTERLUDE: ANDREAS** 

**FOUR** 

**FIVE** 

**SPECIAL SHORT STORY** 

## **Chapter One**

**D**ESPAIR CREPT UP on me silently.

By the time I noticed it, it had already spread behind me, taking hold of me with a mocking smile.

It trampled the most vulnerable parts of my heart and snatched away the remnants.

It stole that which is most precious, most important to me...

I, Cecilia Cline, was reincarnated into an otome game and found myself playing the role of the villainess who had her engagement publicly and spectacularly broken off by the second prince, Felix, who had fallen for the heroine, Mia Meyer, the daughter of a count. As if falling from grace in that fashion weren't enough, I ended up in a brothel, though I somehow managed to claw my way back to being the fiancée of the second prince.

However, I wasn't engaged to Felix this time. He'd been stripped of his inheritance due to his terrible conduct. I was instead engaged to Lucas Herbst, the second son of a prestigious duke. His mother was a princess who'd been married off to a duke in our kingdom, and the sister of our current queen. That was why Lucas had taken over Felix's place as the second prince. His family was renowned in the kingdom of Bern, known as the royal family's "shield" due to their long history of military prowess.

Lucas was said to be the strongest in their illustrious lineage. He was the youngest member of the Imperial Order to become the vice-captain, had grown to be a handsome knight of unmatched beauty and skill, and was said to be the next generation's Hero. Lucas and I found ourselves fulfilling a childhood promise, although in a different manner than we'd expected, leading to our engagement and mutual affection.

Our engagement ceremony was in a few weeks, and I was staying at the Herbst estate for my own safety. Well, to be more accurate, I was actually staying in Lucas's chambers and benefiting from his overwhelmingly generous hospitality. It felt a little self-indulgent. After all, the duke's mansion was vast; it was hard to believe there were no other guest rooms available. I'd only recently been allowed to leave Lucas's chambers at all.

Lucas, the capable (and yandere) knight, had been busy with work, and I expected him to return late today. So, I took advantage of the situation and returned to my family home to gather some personal belongings.

I was about to climb back into my carriage after packing up my things when I froze and stared into the interior. An extraordinarily handsome man in a Black Knight's uniform was seated there, his long legs crossed, looking at me with a slightly weary expression.

How does he look so good with his long hair tied back? Wait, that's not the point! He was supposed to be on a campaign! Why is he here?!

Sensing my unspoken question, Lucas spoke first.

"Welcome back, Cecilia. If you'd taken any longer, I planned to go in and retrieve you myself. Did you get everything you needed so you won't ever have to go back to the Cline household again?"

He sheathed his sword and gave me a faint smile.

"S-sorry for the delay. I'm back now. And welcome home, Lucas."

Wait, should I have said "welcome home" first or told him I was back first? Which is more appropriate? And why did he bring his sword with him to fetch me? What's this about never returning again? This is still my family home, and I'm still Lady Cline, daughter of a marquis!

Lucas had told me to buy anything I needed, and I knew he really didn't like the idea of me coming back home, but was a sword really necessary?

I felt a mixture of confusion and anxiety. He smiled softly, narrowing his

golden eyes, and extended his hand, which I took out of habit.

He pulled me onto his lap, not the seat next to him, and before I could react, the carriage door closed behind me. Through the window, I noticed my maids playing rock, paper, scissors, leaving me all the more confused.

"Yay! I get to start first!" Anna said.

"Woo-hoo! No hellish training schedule for me!" Elsa said.

"Damn it! Why does the game of rock, paper, scissors even exist?! There's no way we can catch up before we reach the duke's estate with Anna and Elsa getting a head start..." Kate said.

"Ugh. Looks like we have a rough schedule."

While Kate and Finn lamented, Anna and Elsa glanced at each other before suddenly crouching down.

"Ha ha ha. This is the hundredth time we've met here. Time to settle our score, Elsa," Anna said.

"Ha! You think you can beat me in a race? Think again! The snack shall be mine!"

"Not on your life, Elsa. Ready, set...go!"

"She's hungry, so you know she's serious. One... Two... Three..."

After Kate's lazy countdown ended, Anna and Elsa vanished in a flash. Finn counted to ten before he and Kate disappeared, too.

How did it go from rock, paper, scissors to ready, set, go?

"Let's go," Lucas said. Apparently, he didn't care that his attendant and my maids had vanished.

He's so calm. I feel like I'm the only one who's confused right now. I feel so dumb. I can't even ask what's going on!

The carriage rattled as it jerked into motion. I slumped over, suddenly exhausted, unable to keep up with the ducal family's pace. Lucas then took my

chin. I shrank back at the dark look in his eyes.

I've got a bad feeling about this...

"Welcome back, my beloved fiancée." He kissed me on the cheek, then nipped at me softly. I quickly whipped my head around to look at him straighton.

You want me to kiss you, right? Fine, but please stop biting me!

"I-I was really looking forward to your return." I stammered, boldly kissing his handsome face, my cheeks flushed. I did my best to ignore how gorgeous he was despite being planted directly on his lap.

I endured my embarrassment and kissed him on the cheek for quite a long time. Just as I was about to pull away, his fingers hooked into the neckline of my dress. He tugged on it lightly and pulled it down, revealing my corseted bosom, which pushed over the fabric of the dress. I grabbed his hand, panicking slightly.

"E-eek! L-Lord Lukie?! St-stop, we're in a carriage right now!"

What in the world is he thinking? Oh my god, he's so overpowered that the thick fabric of my dress is starting to rip!

"We're not outside," Lucas said calmly, trying to reassure me, "so I'm not breaking any promises."

I shook my head frantically. "B-but we're in a carriage!"

He tipped his head to the side as though to say, So what?

His nonchalant attitude almost made me doubt myself. *Hmm, maybe it really is okay to do this in a carriage...?* I was being swayed by a pervert's logic.

As I pondered this, Lucas narrowed his golden eyes and brought his face close to my ear.

"You waited for me so earnestly," he whispered in a low voice. "But now you're satisfied with just a kiss on the cheek?" His words implied he wanted me to prove it. Despite my reluctance, I complied with his request.

It's not cowardice. I swear it's a strategic decision!

I felt simultaneously annoyed and elated at his demand. I lowered my lashes, focused on his thin lips, and leaned in. The moment our lips met, he grabbed the back of my head and made another demand without changing position. "Open your mouth, Cece."

I hesitated, but he tugged at my neckline again, and I heard a slight ripping sound. Mini Cece yelled, "I'll gladly fulfill your request!" so I quickly complied. Ugh, why does he always win?

Despite my frustration, the stimulation of his wet tongue on mine drew from me a sweet moan, contrary to my protests.

"Ngh, mmm... Ah, mmm!"

His intense kiss made me cling to him, breathless.

Lucas's overwhelming love and happiness were conveyed through his kiss, which melted my stubborn heart. I bashfully pulled him closer as he caressed my flushed cheeks affectionately, as I desperately avoided thinking about the fact that we were making out in a carriage.

Just then, he pulled away.

I let out a sigh, trying to vent the heat. My lips were wet with saliva, and I shyly wiped it with the back of my hand. Lucas gently moved my hand aside and kissed the damp spot on it, then frowned slightly.



"I was worried when I heard you stopped by the marquis's house instead of attending that tea party you mentioned, Cece. I promised to return to you, but then you weren't home. I was afraid something might've happened, and I was anxious you wouldn't come back."

I was originally supposed to return home immediately after the tea party with my friends, and that's what I had told Lucas. But on the way back, I made an impulsive decision to pick up my things from my parents' house, so we made a detour.

Of course, I'd gotten permission to go to my family home from my guards, but I did change plans without telling Lucas first. Now I realized I'd worried him. "Ah, I'm so sorry!" I hastily apologized. "I was hoping to be back before you returned, Lord Lukie."

"Well, that's a relief. So you were going to wait for me?"

"Yes, of course! Um, I mean..."

His golden eyes softened tenderly at my apology, and his gentle voice made my heart ache. I found myself blurting out my honest feelings without even realizing it. Then, Lucas gave me a seductive smile and loosened the collar of his uniform.

Uh-oh, I messed up! I should've downplayed it!

Argh, sometimes I hate being in love, I inwardly lamented.

"Heh. I'm so happy, Cecilia. I wanted to see you so badly that I used Eckesachs during the campaign. It was so exhilarating that I had a hard time calming down afterward. Since I don't have to be at the castle until tomorrow afternoon, I need to stay with you until I feel better. Let's get warmed up on the way home," Lucas, the black-hearted knight, said as he eagerly voiced his desires.

My eyes widened in surprise as he uttered those ominous words. He leaned closer, a mischievous smile on his face. The simultaneous sensation of his lips meeting mine and the sound of him swiftly drawing the curtain sent shivers

down my spine.

I knew this was not the place for such naughty conduct, and I ended up crying because my demon knight ended up teasing me even more than I imagined.

"Eek! Ah, n-no! Wait, Lord Lukie! Please, no more!"

"All I did was kiss you, and your panties are already soaked. Your body is so honest, Cecilia...so naughty."

Lucas pushed up my skirt, his hand making suspicious movements beneath the fabric. His fingers arrived at my panties, which were stuck to my skin due to the wetness of my slit.

```
"No, I... Nngh!"
```

He gently caressed my sensitive nub through the fabric. Even though I didn't want to admit that it felt good, I involuntarily spread my legs and arched my back.

Lucas tugged down my corset to fully expose my breasts, lapping at my hard nipples with his tongue.

"Ahh, mm!" My lust-filled moans were mortifying. I pulled the hand that had been pushing against him away, covering my mouth with it instead.

"You're not going to stop me? You want more?"

Hearing him say it made tears spring to my eyes. You're so merciless, Lucas!

```
"N-no, I..."
```

"You what?"

```
"l... l..."
```

There was a mischievous look in his eyes as he kept accosting me.

You're so mean! I thought, giving him my best frustrated glare. My sadistic side just smiled brightly. My cheek twitched.

I just know he'll say something terrible next!

"All I did was lick you a tiny bit, and you moaned so loudly. Does that embarrass you? I barely touched you, and your nipples are so pink and engorged. They look delicious."

"D-don't say that! Ah, stop! Lord Lukie, don't make me—ahhh!"

Eeeeek, he's so mean! He put his fingers inside!

A loud, wet noise echoed in the carriage as he spread open my slit and plunged his fingers into my wetness, making my hips jerk violently.

"Mmph!"

I desperately tried to clamp my hand over my mouth so I wouldn't moan. At first, he inserted his fingers gently, pausing to gage my reaction, but then he started pushing them deeper.

I felt the pads of his fingers pressing against my inner walls as the base of his palm rubbed against my sensitive nub, which had swelled. Against my will, a cry of pleasure escaped from my covered mouth as he thrust faster.

"Nngh! Haah, mm! No, not there! No, ohh!"

Pleasure spread through me. My stiff, sensitive nipples trembled invitingly as I panted and clung to Lucas's knight uniform. Even though I'd just come, he kept going.

He pushed one of my breasts up and pulled it into his mouth, sucking on my nipple and nipping at it tenderly. At the same time, he rubbed my inner walls, which were still spasming from my orgasm. My hips bucked helplessly, and even though I didn't want to, I let out another ecstatic moan.

"Nnghh, ahhh! Ooh... Stop! Lord Lukie, stop, I already came!"

"I know. You're so tight I can't even pull out my fingers. You're still aroused, aren't you?"

I'm not going to agree with him!

I gasped a protest in response to his sadistic question and shook my head,

tears streaming down my cheeks. He licked up the teardrops with a smile. How can he smile while thrusting his fingers inside of me?! While I'm crying, at that!

"I feel like you've been more sensitive lately. So sensitive. It's so cute, I can hardly stand it. You're soaking wet, Cece. Can you hear it?"

Even though my skirts had many layers, the carriage was small, so I could hear the echoes of my wetness as he penetrated me with his fingers.

I writhed, trying to escape the sensation of his fingers relentlessly massaging me. Then I felt his thumbnail scrape against my sensitive nub. My vision flickered, and I saw sparks. Pleasure built inside me until it felt like it would explode. My entire body trembled, and my hand nearly flew from my mouth.

"Mmph! Nngh! No, I can't... No more! I can't stop moaning!"

Every time he made me come, my orgasms grew deeper and more intense. It was a frightening sensation. I frantically tried to press my spasming thighs together and pleaded tearfully for him to stop, but my sadist only pulled me closer, sweetly and tenderly. Then, he mercilessly peeled my hand away from my mouth.

How dare you! I suppose I shouldn't have expected a demon to play by the rules!

"Hey, Cece? Both of my hands are full right now, unfortunately... I don't want anyone else to hear your adorable moans. So what should we do?"

"Wh-what?!"

He gave me a dramatic frown, then kissed my lips. The little smooch basically said that I didn't have a choice in the matter. I grit my teeth in response, utterly frustrated.

Wh-why on earth would I only have the option of something so indecent and completely unhelpful, like demanding a kiss?! Obviously, I'd rather choose to end this immediately!

"Th-that's not nice. You're being mean. Ahh, eek!"

Couldn't you at least let me finish talking?! I'm telling you to stop because I'm going to be loud. Why are you getting even rougher?

Another finger slipped inside of me despite my resistance, gently rubbing the sensitive spot deep inside of me to teach me a lesson. I arched my back, struggling to stop myself from climaxing yet again. Lucas panted with excitement.

"I love that so much about you. How about I be mean to you?"

His golden eyes darkened. That fierce look spreading across his beautiful face made my strength drain.

Weren't you already teasing me?! You're already being so mean! I absolutely can't handle any more!

"You're coming faster and faster now. I can feel you spasming and clenching around my fingers. You're about to come again, aren't you?"

"Haah, nngh! L-Lord Lukie! P-please cover my mouth!"

He grinned as he slowly pressed his fingers against my sensitive spot. I cried and pleaded with him when I had to announce to this sadist that I was close to another climax.

I know how important self-defense is, but...

This fiendish knight was demonstrating his knightly strength in some very untoward ways.

"Does that mean you want me to kiss you, Cecilia?"

I paused. "Yes!" I shamefully replied, my cheeks flushed.

You don't have to ask me to say it, you know! Suddenly, Lucas grabbed me and pulled me toward him, only stopping when he was right next to my mouth.

"Then would you please surrender your mouth to me, my darling?" he said, grinning.

"What...?"

"You're pleading for mercy, aren't you? And you want me to cover your mouth, don't you?" he asked in a low whisper.

I found myself staring at his impossibly handsome face as he kept accosting me. Surrender is something a knight says before battle, not to his beloved! Plus, you just got home from a campaign, so why all this talk of surrender? Wait, that's not important... Um, he wants me to surrender my mouth to him, not my lips, so...he wants me to kiss him with tongue?!

Now that I realized what he wanted, I flushed, embarrassed. Lucas gazed at me with a puzzled look and rubbed my soaking wet, sensitive honey pot, beckoning me to hurry up. *This is a cowardly tactic, Sir Knight!* 

"Eek?! Ahh, no... Nngh!"

Oh, to hell with it! I squeezed his hand in return and then plunged my tongue inside his open mouth.

Dignity was obviously useless here! But please, I'm begging you—enough with the embarrassment! I can't bear the thought of anyone hearing my moans coming from this carriage. I'll totally die of shame!

As our tongues intertwined, he pulled mine into his mouth even further as he delicately caressed the outline of my earlobe.

It felt more like foreplay than a kiss, and my body immediately reacted. After another inadvertent, tender moan, I opened my eyes and glared at him to try to get this over with. Lucas merely gave me an easygoing smile and said something rather ominous.

"Does that desperate look on your face mean I'm not giving you enough stimulation?"

What in the world is he talking about?! Mr. Bully knows very well that I'm glaring at him! He's optimistic about the most unusual things.

He sighed happily, and I was dumbfounded as he pushed his fingers all the way inside of me. My inner walls clamped around them joyfully. He slowly

pulled out his fingers, and I felt a tight knot of pleasure in my lower belly.

"Haah?! O-ohhh!" I moaned.

"So honest..." He praised my body's open reaction. But it felt like he was pointing out something very embarrassing, which only made me swell with anger.

Honestly, I can't let this perverted, nasty knight get away with anything else!

Lucas's passionate words melted the disparaging words rising up in my throat, and they vanished in an instant.

"I love you, Cecilia. I want to make love to you so badly it physically hurts. Help me, please."

He's begging now?! You've got to be kidding me. Also, I'd really appreciate it if he stopped frantically smooching me on the cheek and making my heart explode in the process!

Sweat beaded on my skin because I was so flustered. He rubbed my temple, and I felt my legs, which I had previously tried to clamp shut in protest, relax and fall open.

I'm too weak against Lucas. And it's incredibly unfair of him to be so sweet to me all of a sudden.

One of my shoes, which was already halfway off my foot, fell to the floor of the carriage. I met the golden gaze of my fiancé as it clunked to the floor; his eyes were filled with love and desire.

"Cece... Cecilia..." He cradled my cheek in his warm palm and called my name pleadingly.

I hesitated for a moment, then said his name in return. "Ah... Lord Lukie..."

He lifted me up and made me straddle him, facing him on his lap. I let out a shriek when I felt a certain rock-hard sensation between my legs and quickly gripped his shoulder. I got up on my knees and shook my head vehemently.

```
"You're not ready? Even though you're soaking wet?"

Nooo! I mean, yes, but noooo!
```

He held my waist firmly so I wouldn't escape. My face was bright red as I pleaded for him to wait. "I-I'm not emotionally ready!"

```
"Emotionally?"
"Y-yes!"
"Ready?"
"Yes...!"
```

Why is he so damned adorable asking me those questions with big, wide eyes?

Damn it!

"I-if we do this here, I'll be so mortified I won't be able to leave. So please, let's wait a few minutes..."

As I trailed off at the end of my sentence, Lucas suddenly stopped moving. "I see."

His brief reply combined with the way he immediately relaxed his grip on me seemed suspicious, so I snuck a peek at his face. It was flushed a deep red.

Why is he embarrassed? I don't understand what's making him embarrassed!

As I was frozen with shock, the stunning beauty unleashed another adorable attack. "Sorry... I was just so happy." My fiancé bashfully covered his mouth, his voice soft. "And I thought you would say no. I never thought you'd actually say yes..."

The sight of it hit me with such force it felt like someone was squeezing my heart. On top of that, I wanted to hide under a rock when I realized what I'd said.

I only told him to wait! I have to properly refuse! What happened to my

education as a noblewoman?!

Now my body was flushed even more with shame after I realized I had subtly conveyed that, in fact, I didn't mind at all.

For some reason, Lucas was quieter now as he watched me.

```
"I see... Emotionally ready..."

"Y-yes..."

"Okay. Well then... Um, I'll wait..."

"O-oh, okay..."
```

A strangely bittersweet mood filled the carriage. Our lewd act had been interrupted by romance. I was just about to give in and say, "Enough already!" But then Lucas gently caressed my cheek, his touch featherlight.

"I love you so much, Cece. I want to lock you up and keep you all to myself. I want to break you."

"Oh!"

His words were so intense and heartfelt that I felt my entire body go limp as I leaned into him. He hugged me tightly, and my breath became shallow.

Wh-what should I do? My heart is pounding, and I don't think it's because I'm scared! I never thought I'd fall in love with a yandere!

Lucas chuckled softly as I blushed and trembled.

"That's a shame. Looks like we're home."

"Huh?" I turned my gaze to the window as he pulled back the curtain. The carriage jolted to a stop, and I realized we'd entered the grounds of the Herbst estate as the gate faded into the distance.

As I stared dazedly at the familiar scenery, Lucas quickly helped me fix my disheveled clothing. Then, he cradled my cheeks in his hands and kissed me.

"Nngh... L-Lord Lukie?" I called his name, chasing his lips as he pulled away.

"Don't worry, Cecilia," he answered with a seductive smile, his voice so sexy it made me break out into a cold sweat. "We're not done yet. I'll make sure you crave me and only me. You won't need anything else. I'll make love to you until you're only a single breath away from breaking. So just relax, okay?"

How could anyone relax after hearing that?!

\*\*\*

I was caught up in a whirlwind of happiness, but the rumors of an ancient dragon that had appeared from the depths of the border forest shattered those peaceful days.

It had all begun when a magical beast appeared at the barrier between the royal capital and the forest, which should have been impossible. It was a vánagandr—a mutated type of Fenrir considered a divine beast in the neighboring Egrich Empire, which was located on the other side of the border forest. It was a very dangerous magical beast.

It was Class S, too, meaning it was as difficult to beat as a salamander. However, I heard the only reason it was categorized as such was because the higher class, SS, was reserved for ancient dragons.

It was a very dangerous beast, and it had appeared near the barrier, so word spread quickly.

To make matters worse, smaller magical beasts driven away by the vánagandr had infiltrated the royal capital and caused a temporary commotion, but thanks to the efforts of the marshal and the Order of Black and White Knights led by Lucas, the situation was quickly resolved.

Shortly afterward, the royal castle quietly acknowledged the appearance of an ancient dragon in the boundary forest and quickly decided to dispatch the Hero and the knights. This was done so quickly, in fact, that it seemed everything had been planned.

My hands went limp when I heard the news, and I dropped my embroidery.

The concerned voices of Anna and the others seemed muffled, almost like I was underwater.

No one at the estate knew any details yet. In an act of desperation, I dashed off a letter to my family home. I received a reply from my father, who was a government official working under the prime minister. He said it hadn't been decided whether Lucas or the marshal would go as the Hero yet. His handwriting seemed hesitant, and he added a book recommendation if I wanted to learn more about past campaigns. I ignored Anna's protests and immediately searched the estate's library for the book.

What I learned made me tremble uncontrollably.

Campaigns to slay ancient dragons occurred every few centuries, and most of them had ended in mutual destruction. Although the dragon *might* be defeated, the Hero rarely survived; nearly all of them died during or after the battle.

The book fell from my hands with a dull *thud*. As I kneeled to pick it up, my toes caught on the soft carpet, and I fell to my knees. The book had landed open on the floor, and the word "death" on the page caught my eye. I gasped for air, turning my face away from the tome as I desperately sought oxygen.

"Ah!" Emotions welled up from deep within my core and materialized as tears spilling down my cheeks. Unable to scream or cry, I instead merely laughed for no reason.

"Wh-why...?" I gasped, pain stabbing my chest. My body felt odd. All the warmth had been sucked right from it. I looked toward the light, seeking warmth. A goddess smiled down at me from glimmering stained glass, but right now, it looked like a mocking grin.

"This isn't a laughing matter," I muttered, angry for some reason.

I knew this was true because I was the second prince's fiancée. I had only forgotten because I had been engaged to Felix. *They have the same status, so why him?* My emotions continued to spill out through my tears, distorting my view of the goddess's smile.

"It's...no...laughing matter..." My lips trembled so much I could barely form words. I let out a bitter chuckle despite myself.

How long had I been basking in comfort? Since I'd arrived at the ducal estate?

Deep down, I knew this to be true, but I had been so happy I'd forgotten it.

I forgot that even though Lucas was the second prince, he was also a Hero. He was a singular knight of unparalleled strength in the kingdom of Bern who was capable of wielding the legendary sword Eckesachs. Although Captain Webber was the current Hero, Lucas had already been recognized as his successor to the title. He was effectively already the Hero, having mastered Eckesachs and undertaken numerous campaigns using it.

No matter how dangerous the mission, even if it were deadly, he couldn't disobey a royal order. That was the Hero's duty and responsibility, after all.

I knew all that, and yet...

I was so foolishly in love that I had forgotten what being a Hero meant in this kingdom and that my very own fiancé was that Hero.

### Interlude:

### Dirk

 ${}^{\prime\prime}$   ${}^{}$   ${}^{}$  ONESTLY, THIS GENERATION of royals is so high-maintenance," I said.

"Not really. If anything, Felix is the only idiot."

"You sure talk a lot, Niklas."

"If I didn't, you'd be talking to yourself. Consider it an act of kindness."

"Oh, should I be thanking you, then?"

"Please do! Reward your loyal servant, my lord," Niklas said with a cold, sidelong glance.

I let out a heavy sigh and continued walking. Why has he become so cold? He used to be so kind. Or is that just my imagination? I stared absently at my attendant Niklas as he knocked on the door, then sighed again.

The king had summoned his royal shield. I'd reluctantly dragged myself to the castle for the sake of my beloved younger brother, only to find the area around the royal villa in complete chaos. I caught a knight's attention and asked what was going on, only to learn the absurd reason behind the commotion—that idiot Felix had lost control of his magic and was tearing apart his room in the royal villa. His powerful royal magic was too much for the court sorcerers; even they couldn't handle him.

I sighed once more, utterly exasperated. Have the court sorcerers been neglecting their training? I don't care if their opponent is a member of the royal family or not! They dare call themselves sorcerers when they can't quell a mere magical outburst at all? I thought as I headed inside the palace. I could feel the remnants of magic lingering at the entrance, which surprised me a bit.

As I walked down the corridor, I saw a man rush out of a room in a panic, presumably startled by Felix's magical powers, as well as Mia, the ditzy woman

who had seduced and deceived Felix.

"Hello," I said, greeting her. "Looks like the two of you are getting along quite well, just as I heard."

Beside me, Niklas muttered, "My lord, that's mean," but I pretended not to hear him.

I didn't think it was particularly mean-spirited. After all, I only intended to reprimand the man who had dared to lay a finger on my precious brother's sweetheart, as well as the girl who used her childhood friend to show off as a mere accessory. Anyone who harmed either the royal family or our ducal family had to be dealt with.

Once I reached Felix's room, I found a magical barrier at the threshold, which had presumably been constructed by the sorcerers. The open door showed signs of having been shredded by a vortex of magical power. What a spectacle, I thought to myself as I ignored the sorcerers' attempt to stop me. I dispelled the barrier with a wave of my hand and entered the room.

Niklas followed behind, quickly reconstructing the barrier at the threshold as he crossed it. I applied a protective shield to both of us once he'd entered the room.

"It's unusual for you to shield me as well, my lord," he said.

"It looks like things are rather drastic here, and although I'm sure you'd be fine without one, I'd prefer not to take any chances," I replied.

"Even though he's rotten to the core, he is still a royal."

"Hey, now. I know you're irritated, but those types of remarks are off-limits inside of the palace. If the guards hear, you'll be in trouble."

"Of course. My apologies."

I shrugged off Niklas's sullen apology and continued into the room, which was a complete mess. We found Felix huddled by the balcony, his magic completely out of control. I approached quietly, narrowing my eyes at his words. I quickly

added Felix to my mental shit list.

He looked clearly dangerous as he muttered various threats involving Lady Cline. And if something were to happen to her, I knew that Lucas's wrath would turn toward the royal family.

And that'll spell disaster for the whole kingdom.

Honestly, my brother was already beyond human capabilities. No one would be able to handle him.

He was adorable, even from a young age. His desperation when it came to Lady Cline, on the other hand, was really something else—a desperation that had even overturned Father's decision.

The Duke of Herbst's greatest achievement had also been his greatest weakness.

Lucas was a rare genius, even for our family. He had immense magical and physical abilities that embodied the phrase "the shield of the royal family."

Due to their emotional deficiencies and difficulty using self-control, however, people like him were usually dealt with in early childhood, before their powers fully matured. That was why there was little information available in the records about the full extent of their abilities.

The only remaining record was of a certain legendary individual who had commanded ancient dragons.

Everyone in the room held their breath—including Mother, myself, and the attendants—when Father suggested Lucas may be such a person. Father clenched his fists when I asked what he planned on doing about it, then gazed out the window. Lucas was outside, effortlessly climbing the giant tree in the courtyard and peeking into a bird's nest.

He heard Finn's worried voice below and tipped his head, then suddenly let go of the branch and began to fall. But then he grabbed a branch in mid-air, swung around, and lightly landed on his feet. "What is it?" he asked Finn in a cute voice.

Lucas was around four years old then and already displaying incredible abilities. Although he was still a child, he never cried or laughed. But he was a kind child. I think he must've sensed that he was different somehow.

Our mother hugged him, teary-eyed, on his birthday, reassuring him that he was fine just the way he was. Lucas pinched his face, struggling to show any emotion at all.

People like him were enigmatic, their very existence dangerous. And we knew so little about them.

Once he grew up, Lucas could become an unrivaled force, one beyond the control of even the most powerful duchy in the kingdom. He could even become a Hero.

So, should we nurture such a being? Or should we eliminate him now? Father delayed his decision due to insufficient information and had Lucas learn martial arts, only to be astounded by his terrifying talent. His teachers resigned every fortnight, their faces etched with fear, though they always expressed their gratitude before leaving.

Mother pleaded with Father as the decision day approached. "If he *does* get out of control, the Hero could still stop him," she pleaded. "*Please*, he's such a gentle child. Let him live a little longer!"

And so, Father entrusted Lucas to Andreas, who was then vice-captain of the Imperial Guard.

It's not just Father's responsibility, though, I thought, sighing, as I shifted my focus to the man before me.

"Cecilia... I won't let you get away with this. I'll kill you, Cecilia! I'll never let you smile at Lucas!" Felix raged, his out-of-control magic fueling his unstable mental state.

I shot out a concentrated magic bullet and knocked him out. I sighed for the

umpteenth time as I watched Niklas nonchalantly shoulder Felix's limp body, wondering why Felix had never put in any effort.

Lucas observed how Alphonse flirted with Anika and learned how noble sons properly interacted with noble daughters. Eventually, he crafted a beautiful, practiced smile. I recalled his angelic smile captivating many noble daughters, which led to a flood of marriage proposals for a time. The ditzy Mia had boasted that Lucas was hers. It was that, combined with our mothers being friends, that had eventually quelled the proposals.

Despite Lucas's aversion to girls other than Anika and the maids, his desperate attempts to behave like a typical noble son were endearing. So endearing, in fact, that I had ordered Finn to carry a bag with a recording crystal in it to capture those moments.

"Why should a servant have to carry such a huge bag?!" Finn had yelled tearfully. I managed to pacify him with photos of Anna. I patted myself on the back for that one.

Lucas met Cecilia when he was thirteen, after she had been betrothed to Felix.

"Why are you grinning like that, my lord? It's quite unsettling." Niklas said.

"Oh, just reminiscing. Remember when Lukie barged into Father's study?"

"Ah, you mean the 'I found someone I want to marry!' incident?"

"Yes! He was so adorable. Even though he hadn't formally met Cecilia, and she was Felix's fiancée, he was so earnest when he asked Father if he could marry her. He said he'd even become the Hero or the second prince to do it. Father was initially dumbfounded, but then he got excited, saying, 'You've got a good eye for someone so young! Marquis Cline's daughter has a lovely reputation. You just leave it to your father. I'll go negotiate with the king!' Then Edgar, his attendant, had to stop him, and the study was unusable for a while..."

"That must be one of Lucas's most embarrassing memories, saying all that as

Finn used the recording crystal. I still remember Hannah and Lady Anika secretly watching it over and over again, squealing with delight."

"Mother didn't scold Father for destroying the study, either. Not that time, at least."

We walked through the castle, lost in fond memories of the adorable Lucas.

Supposedly, he lacked emotions, but because of Cecilia, Lucas had felt his first intense longing to protect someone and be with her.

"Lucas, you must realize you're not an ordinary person. If you don't learn to control your powers, you'll hurt those you care about. She's currently engaged to the second prince, Felix. You'll have to watch her be with other men for a long time. Even if you do win her hand, she might still harbor feelings for Felix or another. Could you accept that? Could you swear to protect her for life, no matter what?" Father had asked Lucas.

Lucas gritted his teeth. A maelstrom of jealousy, hatred, and anguish shone in his golden eyes. Father and I held our breath. When he imagined the pain of it, his small body trembled. Just as Father began to ask him to reconsider, Lucas lifted his head and said firmly, "No matter what happens, I will never let her out of my heart! I will protect whatever it is that she wants to protect!"

Once Father saw the determined light in his eyes, he finally made his decision.

That decision might cause immense harm to the kingdom. Father even felt it was unfit for a duke. But he believed in his son's heart and in his future nonetheless, all because Lucas had found someone he loved and wanted to use his formidable power to protect her.

It was a lenient decision, and there were still occasional troubles concerning Lady Cline. However, they were of the belief that would come about with any passionate affair between love-struck youths, this one just on a larger scale.

Most of all, Lucas's desperation for her was so endearing that the entire family had taken measures to protect Lady Cline. Preventing harm from

befalling her proved to be more challenging than managing Lucas's outbursts. But in doing so, we'd managed to influence other areas positively.

Things settled into the most reasonable outcome I envisioned. Lucas, who'd endured and persevered for so long, was finally on the verge of finding happiness. The king's summons honestly couldn't have come at a worse time.

Leon had likely been called up, too, and judging by the atmosphere, Marshal Webber had as well. I remembered a conversation I'd had with him about it. When he approached me about having Lucas inherit the Hero's Crest, I reminded him that Lucas was only nineteen. He laughed heartily and fixed his gaze on me. "Age doesn't matter," he'd said. "The title of Hero goes to the strongest. Right now, no one but Lucas deserves that title. Otherwise, who knows what the sacred sword Eckesachs might do? To be honest, even I can't control Lucas anymore. I never could, not even at my peak. Sorry, Dirk." He smiled at me.

Come on now. That's quite irresponsible, Marshal.

Despite his words about his ability to keep Lucas in check, Marshal Webber had rigorously trained him in all the necessary skills so he could wield Eckesachs in anticipation of a worst-case scenario.

He even provoked Lucas when he was spitting up blood. "Don't you want to get stronger?!" Marshal Webber had said. A furious Anika vented her anger about that on me, which was pretty rough in its own right...

Considering how adorable Lucas was, the fact that the captain was prepared to have Felix marry Cecilia but still kept the Hero title in reserve showed a distinct lack of loyalty to the royal family. Still, it was an advantage for our house.

Recently, Lucas had not only won Cecilia's heart, but also shared mutual feelings with her. His powers had finally stabilized, and he'd become more emotionally expressive, which probably put Captain Webber at ease.

I'd rather he didn't take out forbidden books and teach Lucas unnecessary

techniques, though...

At this point, asking Lady Cline to keep Lucas in check might be the quickest solution.

Come to think of it, she's had quite a tough time. First, she was relentlessly pursued and left with no escape, then she was saddled with one of the kingdom's most problematic boys, not once, but twice. Hang in there, Lady Cline! The future of the kingdom of Bern rests on your shoulders!

Niklas gave me a suspicious look as I inwardly cheered her on. "We're here," he said.

I lifted my gaze and sighed as I stared at the heavy door before me.

If they were to take Lady Cline away now that she and Lucas were engaged, the capital would likely face total destruction. Father and I might've managed him when he was younger, but not even the current Hero could keep Lucas in check now.

As Anika said before, only Cecilia Cline had that power, but it seemed the king had yet to grasp that. We needed to remove any lingering worries as soon as possible.

Niklas announced my arrival, and I entered the room with a smile. "I've come as summoned, Your Majesty," I greeted him and the others, whose presence I'd expected.

"You're late, Dirk," Leon said.

"My apologies for that. I was on my way here when some idiot's magic went haywire, and I was forced to lend a hand," I said.

"That was quite sarcastic," he replied.

"Why thank you, Your Highness. I'm honored you think so."

"I wasn't complimenting you." Leon made a sour face, but I shrugged him off.

The king spoke, his tone solemn. "How was Felix?"

"In a state of delirium. I think the excessive mana put a strain on his mind. He was being a pa—er, I had no choice but to knock him out with a magic bullet."

"You were about to say he was being a pain, weren't you?"

"Oh, come on, Leon. I said I had no choice. Maybe I used a *bit* too much force, but Niklas healed him. It should be all good, right?"

"I see..." the king said.

That's all the king has to say? He sure didn't choose his words wisely. Leon looks furious. He needs to show more concern. There's such a lack of communication in the royal family. They should take a lesson from my doting parents.

"So, what's the purpose of today's meeting?" I asked. "Lucas already reported on the investigation of the border forest, and the arrangements for the engagement and inheritance ceremonies have already been made for next month."

I nodded a *thank you* to Niklas, who silently served tea, and turned my gaze to the king.

"Is it true that Lucas has inscribed the Promise Mark on her?" the king asked hesitantly.

I felt a sigh rising within me. Why would they give Lady Cline to Lucas and then try to take her away? If they care so much about Felix, they should've taught him to be a better person.

The royal family had been relieved when Leon had shown promise as the crown prince, but since they'd been so busy with other matters, they'd hardly ever corrected Felix's bad behavior. And when things had gone wrong, they'd pushed the responsibility of reprimanding him to the young Lady Cline.

If they really thought that would work, then the king and queen are incredibly naïve about parenting...

The queen had been particularly incompetent; I felt like she was a lost cause.

She seemed to think her job had ended at childbirth.

For six years, things had only been held together because of Lady Cline's tireless work. Felix could've realized his feelings for her at any point. But you're telling me neither the king nor Leon noticed Felix's feelings until now? Are they stupid?

And judging by the way they'd phrased it...

"Your Majesty, surely you don't intend to tell Lady Cline about Felix's feelings now?" I asked.

"Dirk!"

"Stay out of this, Leon. Well, Your Majesty?"

How cunning to try to appeal to Lady Cline's emotions and bring her and Felix back together. However, if she was ever to waver between the two of them, the kingdom of Bern would be doomed.

We had decided not to deal with Lucas before his powers grew. That was on us. However, it was *their* decision to introduce Lucas and Lady Cline as a contingency after debating what to do with the second prince. We'd provided them with the next Hero and a capable second prince. That should even things out. In fact, the work had progressed much better with Lucas than it had with Felix.

If they pull something like this now, it won't end well.

It was when I was considering that it might be better to separate the king's head from his body that Andreas intervened.

"Stop it, Dirk. I'm still stronger than you," he said.

"Please, Marshal. I'm not a child anymore."

"You still haven't shaken off your old habits despite your age. I heard Hannah scolded you again."

I paused. "Did Anika tell you that?"

"You guessed it. I saw her at Alphonse's place recently. She mentioned you made Cecilia cry, and Lucas was furious," he said with a laugh.

I let out a sigh and looked at the ceiling. "Yes, you say that, but our family is relieved that Lucas has finally found someone he loves. I can't help feeling angry this disaster has been thrust upon us," I said.

"Oh, yes! Leon told me already, but is it true? Is Lady Cecilia really in love with Lukie? I thought those two had never even held a conversation before."

I wanted to shoot a suspicious look at Andreas, who was chatting away in a nonchalant tone, but instead, I just let out another sigh.

"And who was it again who introduced her to Lukie while she was Felix's fiancée?" I asked.

"Me and him."

"Your Excellency, the person you're jabbing your thumb at is my father, the king," Leon said.

"That's right. The marshal and His Majesty acted as go-betweens to bring the two of them together. And thanks to that, Lukie fell in love with her at first sight," I said.

Show some remorse for your actions! I narrowed my eyes and gave the king and Andreas my best glare.

"Yeah, but when we introduced them, Lucas was using transformation magic to be 'Lukie,' right? Lady Cecilia didn't really *know* she was meeting Lucas. Even if she had a thing for Lukie, she wouldn't think it had anything to do with Lucas, would she? So then, how did the two of them fall for each other?" Andreas asked.

His considerate tone of voice made it seem like he'd been eagerly awaiting the day when he could hear about Lucas's romantic exploits. I couldn't help but stare at him, exasperated.

"You didn't tell him, Leon?"

"Well, I was terrified that Lukie might find out if I did. You do it, Dirk!"

"I'm scared, too!"

"He's your own little brother!"

"He's your cousin!"

"The only reason Lady Cline found out was because your sister Anika blabbed! And since Lukie is always kind to Anika, we're gonna be the ones who shoulder the consequences!" Leon protested.

Oh, Leon... I don't want Lukie to hate me either, I thought as I turned my gaze toward Andreas.

"She seems to have remembered Lukie. Well, apparently, she learned that he was Lukie after she fell in love with Lucas, but I don't know how or why she fell for him. All Anika said was that when Lady Cline discovered Lucas was Lukie, she was overjoyed. There must be a specific reason, though," I said.

"Seriously? So I really was their go-between?" the king said.

"Don't get too cocky, Your Majesty. This is all thanks to Lucas's efforts."

"You're quite the doting brother, Dirk."

"Like you're one to talk. You dote on him like a father instead of a mentor, Your Excellency. Who was it again who trained Lucas to become the next Hero as an insurance policy?" I asked.

"Well, I did."

"Yes, that really saved us. Thank you so much," I said.

With that settled, I sipped my tea and glanced over at the king and Leon. I couldn't help but let out a deep sigh as the king kept stubbornly grumbling.

"But it's not my fault that Felix developed feelings for Lady Cline!"

"You sound like a child, Father, and not in a cute way. By the way, Dirk, when did you realize that Felix liked her?"

"Why didn't you notice that Felix was so wrapped up in Lady Cline? He behaved in that cliché pattern of picking on the girl he likes and then being sad when she starts to hate him!" I said.

"Then why didn't you say something?"

"Why would I go through the trouble? I'm on Lukie's side, you know! Why would I back my little brother's romantic rival? The Herbst family may be the royal family's shield, but it's not like we're in charge of your education. What right did I have to say anything? You should've been the one to notice!" I retorted. A speechless Leon hung his head.

"You're harsh, Dirk. But you're right," Andreas said, delivering the finishing blow. Even the king hung his head in shame.

Serves you right, I thought.

"So, Lady Cline won't come back to Felix then, will she?" the king asked, disappointed.

"Lukie's heart would break if she did. It would be one thing if this was a one-sided affair, but now he knows the joy of having his love reciprocated. He swore to love and protect Lady Cline for the rest of his life. If something happened to her, he would be crushed. He's the kind of talent that only shows up once every few centuries. If he were to go on a rampage, he could destroy half the kingdom."

"Sounds like he's the same Class as an ancient dragon!" Andreas said with a guffaw.

I sipped my tea and smiled pleasantly in return. "That's true."

"The second prince, an ancient dragon, eh? By the way, how is Lady Cline's security? Shall we send some more guards from our side?" Leon asked.

"What is my family again, Prince Leon?" I said.

"The royal family's shield."

"That's right. The kingdom of Bern boasts the strongest warriors. We have

three people—well, I'm not sure you can call one of them a person—who are top-tier martial artists serving as maids. Aside from them—and Lady Cline doesn't know this—but she has at least four guards accompanying her whenever she goes out. If anyone wants to hurt her, they'd need a squadron, and one from the Imperial Guard at that!" I said.

Leon leaned back in his chair weakly. "So she has better guards than the crown prince? And even a squadron from the Imperial Guard might not be enough to kill them? And what's this about one of them who isn't a person?"

"There's one kid Lukie took in who's kind of special. We thought they'd be a good guard for Lady Cline at some point, so we trained them, too. If they really went all out, I think they could take the Black and White Knights, including Carl and Al, and maybe even Marshal Webber."

"Seriously? That's scary." Leon said.

"Oh, that kid! I remember when they were young and could barely communicate," Andreas said.

"Yes, we had our hands full with them. But thanks to Hannah's special touch, you'd never know they were the same person," I said.

"Hmm, now I'm really curious about this kid."

"I'll tell you all about them soon, Leon. But it's still a secret for now. It'll have to wait until after Lucas and Lady Cline get married and things calm down," I said with a laugh.

Leon let out an exaggerated sigh. "Can they really get married? We're planning on canceling the engagement ceremony..." Leon muttered in a low voice.

"We're not canceling it. It's just postponed," I replied.

"You do know how many Heroes never came home from campaigns like this one, right?" Leon said, giving me a pained look.

"Nearly all of them."

"Then how can you be so calm?!" Leon yelled.

I looked at him and was about to say something, but Andreas beat me to it.

"It might be because of Lukie's special circumstances," he said.

"You know about that?"

"It's part of the ducal family's bloodline. I had a hunch about it, but he's been very stable since he got together with Lady Cecilia. I think that's probably what it is. I never thought I'd see it happen during my lifetime, though," he said, biting into his snack.

"You can't be sure. Lucas himself said that the ancient dragon was quite large."

"Yes. Don't you agree, Dirk?" he asked.

"I've seen how crazy my brother can be, but I also think it's unusual that he can estimate the size of an ancient dragon after only a survey expedition," I said, looking at Leon.

"More secrets?" Leon looked truly exhausted. "I swear, the ducal family's bad nature is really something else," he said as he furrowed his brow.

"That's quite rude. You know we can't report on vague things," I retorted sharply.

"You'll find out when the time comes. There's no need for a report," Andreas said.

Although he's strangely perceptive, his inability to read the room is quite troubling, I thought before I replied to him. "There's no need to say such things, Your Excellency."

Leon flopped back into his chair. *Terrible manners for a crown prince,* I thought.

Then he gave me a sidelong glance. "So?" he said. "You have something, too, don't you? Involving the three of them?"

I smiled back gratefully. Leon grimaced. That's not very nice, I thought.

"Yes, about that..." I said, taking out a recording crystal. "Thomas Mueller, Maximillian Wagner, and Mihael Howser... Well, it's probably not him, but we can take the other two under our care, can't we? And I'd like to have Felix, too, if possible."

When I added the last part, the king's eyes widened and Leon shot to his feet.

"He already apologized for barging into the ducal residence without permission! I even wrote up a contract saying he would never see Lady Cline again! And he's been banished to the royal villa to boot!" he said.

"True, but when I saw him a few moments ago, what he said was quite troubling," I said, shrugging.

"What did he say?" the king asked.

"He said that he was going to kill Lady Cline. That's why I'm reluctant to let him go."

"You have Herbst's guards on him, don't you?"

"Yes, but I'd rather avoid any risk if possible. He's already done the unthinkable by breaking off the engagement. Who knows what he'd do next? If anything happens to her, Marquis Cline will be truly furious. I assume the royal family would want to avoid that, correct?" I looked between the two of them as I spoke.

Leon bit his lip and looked down while the king let out a deep sigh. "Sorry, Dirk. But we can't hand over Felix. Despite everything, he's still of royal blood. We can't just dispose of him so easily."

"I figured as much."

"You're giving up pretty easily, Dirk."

"Miserable old man..." I muttered.

I looked at Leon, who glared at the king. Then, I replied to Andreas.

"I thought we should have backup plans upon backup plans in case something happens to Lucas, and because Leon has no heir at the moment. Unfortunately, I'm not engaged yet, either. And it'll be a few years before the princess from the neighboring kingdom comes to marry you, right, Leon? As for Felix, I was thinking we shouldn't deal with him until Lady Cline bears at least one of Lucas's children." If Lucas keeps him alive that long, that is.

Lucas's hatred for Felix, who had Lady Cline all to himself for six years, had to be beyond imagination. In fact, not killing him after he intruded upon the ducal estate was quite the exercise in restraint, though that had been due to Lady Cline's noble sacrifice. She was truly the goddess of the royal family.

"That's why I'll give up on this occasion. But if Felix makes another blunder, I expect you to hand him over to us...and to Lukie." I stared at the king and Leon, sending them the message, Surely you don't want to die by the legendary sword Eckesachs?

The pair looked down and only said, "Understood," quietly.

All right. I'm all done here for the day, I thought as I stood up.

"I'll go ahead and take the two of them, then."

"Not Howser's son?"

"I'd like to take care of him, too. He doesn't show up clearly in the crystal recordings, though, and he can use magic to an extent. He must be holding onto a shred of his good sense. The footage of him frolicking with the ditz doesn't cross the lines of indecency, so I'd have to get more evidence in order to really shut the church up. But if we could get him into the royal villa, that would be two birds with one stone. Honestly, to think a man of the cloth is so consumed by desire," I said to Leon.

He grimaced. "I swear, nothing good comes from that woman."

I wouldn't take the bait. Instead of getting hung up on that, I wondered if they'd leave guarding the villa to the Herbsts. However, I knew how much he loved his little brother. It was probably for the best if I just retreated for the day.

I should drive the point home once more, though.

"Please keep a close watch on Felix during Lucas's absence. The Azure Knights' security seems rather lax lately."

Of course, if Felix made another blunder, disposing of him would be much easier for us, and that was just fine with me.

## **Chapter Two**

**D**UE TO THE APPEARANCE of the ancient dragon, the engagement and succession ceremonies that had been scheduled for two weeks from now were currently up in the air. Lucas was unable to return home due to the knights needing to organize in preparation for the campaign, so I wasn't able to see him. However, he sent me small bouquets of flowers and a card with a loving message each day, making me realize that he'd known about the deployment for a while now.

"You're useless!"

"Are errands all you're good for?"

"Be more of a workhorse!"

"I'm doing the best I can!" Finn said.

A mysterious quarrel unfolded nearby, background music as I opened the card from Lucas that Finn had handed me. This had become part of my daily routine. I expected today's card to be just like the others, but the slight difference I found took me aback.

The usual words of affection were there, but then there was a hastily scribbled, "I want to kiss you." A rush of sweet affection surged within me, and for the first time in a while, I let out a soft giggle.

"Lady Cecilia?" Kate said hesitantly.

"Oh, it's nothing. It's nice to see Lucas hasn't changed," I replied as I stared at the card.

Finn filled me in on the current situation. A campaign to slay an ancient dragon was a legendary tale to the people. There was the usual anxiety associated with needing to protect their lives, possessions, and loved ones, of course. But it was the appearance of smaller magical beasts that had slipped through the barrier into the capital which had thrown the city into chaos.

Coordinating the knights' response proved to be quite the challenge.

The Black and White Knight orders tirelessly pursued the small magical beasts day and night. Meanwhile, the Azure Knights scrambled to maintain public order and prevent citizens from turning into rioters.

Evacuation notices had been issued to the citizens living near the boundary forest. This naturally fell onto the shoulders of the second prince, who'd been working late into the night.

"I'm sorry I couldn't arrange a meeting with the two of you. My master truly wants to see you, though, so he's working hard at trying to arrange something."

"There's nothing for you to be sorry about, Finn. I know that Lord Lukie has a lot on his plate at the moment. I just want him to take care of himself. That's the most important thing to me right now."

Lucas frantically worked alongside everyone right now, so I couldn't be selfish and demand to meet him at a time like this. I didn't want to pretend to play the role of the understanding woman, but it was a mixture of calculation and my genuine feelings.

Not wanting to burden Lucas with unreasonable demands, and mindful of my duty as the second prince's fiancée, I answered in a formal tone and smiled. Finn seemed relieved. Meanwhile, I felt a detached sense of reassurance that my response had been the correct one.

I bid farewell to Finn as he returned to the castle, my heart in turmoil.

Despite the absence of official duties due to the lack of availability of escorts, my social obligations hadn't disappeared. Ever since the banquet following the successful campaign to slay the firedrake, Lucas had kept his promise to allow me to go outside. I'd been gradually fulfilling my duties as the second prince's fiancée and daughter of Marquis Cline.

Perhaps because of this, I struggled to suppress my growing anxiety at being invited to more and more tea parties, where the hosts tried to extract

information and undermine me. The tea parties started with flattery and friendly conversation before turning into a cutthroat game of information warfare.

We discussed the latest trends and gossip in high society first. Then, the topic naturally shifted to the one everyone had been talking about lately—the campaign to slay the ancient dragon. The girls gleefully cast glances at me, implying that I was a pitiable pawn in a political game and might have to find a new fiancé yet again.

The day of the departure ceremony was likely set. Rumors had spread that the second prince's fiancée was growing depressed due to the lack of official duties. As a result, families with eligible daughters sought meetings with Lucas, hoping for their opportunity.

However, the royal family—especially the queen—sympathized with me and wished for me to remain the fiancée of the second prince, even if something were to happen.

I couldn't afford to remain ignorant. Knowledge was power, after all. Since I understood the importance of this, I suppressed my anxiety and impatience. I made sure to keep an ear out, listening to unwelcome information and conversations. I could keep smiling, hide my anxiety, and even laugh off snide remarks without difficulty. The skills I had honed through suffering became my strength and my shield; I was quite proud of myself. I was proud to stand firmly at Lucas's side as his fiancée.

But at night, alone in my large bed in the spacious bedroom, unwanted thoughts filled my mind.

"Lady Cecilia, didn't you spend six years with Prince Felix?"

"So, you see, the queen mentioned that if something were to happen, you might return to Prince Felix's side once again..."

"Since the crown prince's marriage won't be for some time, the royal family likely wants to ensure their lineage."

```
"And of course Marquis Cline's highly favored daughter is perfect for the role!"

"I'm so jealous."

"Ngh..."
```

I pulled the pillow close and pressed my face against it, ensuring no sound escaped, as had become my daily routine.

I'd vowed to devote my body and soul to Lucas, and his name was engraved on me. I couldn't even imagine the possibility of losing that, let alone bearing a child with someone other than him.

Their envious chirping was nothing but a source of misery for me. What if they were right and something *did* happen?

```
"No..."
```

What if his name disappeared from my body?

"No!"

I knew that I could be reduced to a mere political pawn, as I was still only a fiancée. I clutched Lucas's card to my chest and curled up in fear and frustration. The sound of the card crumpling in my trembling hands made my heart shatter. All I could do was bite my lip. Skilled as I was at maintaining a façade, I was still powerless against reality. I'd lost count of how many nights I'd welcomed the morning after a night spent crying.

Each time I received Lucas's daily gift, I was torn between joy and the pain of not seeing him, causing my heart to scream in agony.

I traced the words "I want to kiss you" with my finger and exhaled softly, hoping no one would notice my inner turmoil.

My breath felt heavy, and I smiled at Anna and the others.

"There's nothing else scheduled for today, so may I rest for a bit?"

"Understood. I'll prepare some tea. Please call if you need anything."

"I will, thank you."

I was grateful for my attentive maids, who instantly understood my need to be alone. They smiled reassuringly in response to Anna's concerned look. Anna took her leave and quietly closed the door. Now that I was alone in the silent room, I let myself collapse on the sofa.

"I want to kiss you..." I murmured, tracing the letters on the card.

No, that's not it, I thought to myself.

I was greedy. I didn't just want a kiss. I wanted to make love to him and for him to do the same with me. I yearned for him to gaze at me with those golden eyes filled with madness that desired only me. I wanted him to love me so intensely that my anxiety melted away, and we became one. And I wanted him to forgive me for silently berating him for becoming a Hero.

I wanted him to accept and love this selfish, ugly side of me while he continued to love me unconditionally.

The armrest was cold against my cheek. I wondered vaguely how many tears it would take before my eyes ran completely dry.

I kissed the words on the card in front of me softly. "It's still not right," I whispered.

More than anything, I wanted to see Lucas and hear just one thing from him.

"Please say it one more time, like before. Say that you'll come back to me."

That alone would be enough to make sure that, no matter what happens, I will always be yours.

\*\*\*

Even when the dark nights come, a new day begins when the sun rises. Today, life will go on as usual, I thought absently as I stared at my chattering maids.

"I can't wait any longer!" Elsa said, about to jump out a window. "I'm going!"

"If you're going, then take this! It'll come in handy!" Kate said, stopping Elsa and handing her a map.

I have no idea what they're planning, but it doesn't seem like anything good. Should I stop them?

I glanced at Anna, who laughed. "Don't worry, Lady Cecilia," she said. "Since the useless ones aren't doing their jobs, we thought we'd take on the mission ourselves."

Honestly, I had no idea what Anna was talking about. But I had a bad feeling about this and was quite scared. *Someone, please, help me...* 

A loud noise sounded, and someone suddenly appeared. I blinked in surprise, unsure if they were here to help.

"Hey, Useless Finn! You'll break the window! Be more careful!" Anna shouted.

Why did she call him Useless Finn? Then I saw him literally jump through the window, panting heavily. I stared at him in confusion.

I glanced at Elsa, who'd rolled to a stop by the sofa, and then Kate, who'd retreated from the window. Had their plot had been foiled? I turned my gaze back to Anna.

"You're late, Useless Finn. Elsa was just about to do it instead!"

"Please, not Elsa... At least send Kate." Finn said, struggling to respond as he panted.

I froze as a realization hit me. I'd grown so accustomed to the maids' clandestine activities that I almost found comfort in someone saying hello from the window. The fact that I didn't blink an eye at this situation showed that I may no longer be a normal person. As I lamented this, Finn silently held something up. I couldn't help but leap from the sofa in excitement.

I quickly took the bouquet and the card, which was larger than usual. I excitedly read the card and felt my cheeks flush and my lips tremble. I turned around to ask when we could get ready, but then I remembered how unusually competent our servants were and smiled.

"Leave it to us! Whether it's a day trip or an overnight stay, your bags are

already packed! We're perfectly prepared!"

"Let's get you changed right away! There's no need to redo your hair and makeup. You look beautiful just as you are! After all, cuteness is justice!"

"The carriaaaaaaage!" Elsa yelled.

"Elsa, go through the window. It's faster that way!" Anna said.

"Aye aye, sir!"

"Hey, Anna? She broke the window. Is that okay?"

"Fix it, Finn!"

"I figured you'd say that!"

"Come on, Lady Cecilia!" they shouted.

They were so excited you'd have thought something good was happening to them, not me, which made me laugh and cry simultaneously. Although I was a bit embarrassed, I couldn't help but feel grateful.

"Thank you. Could you help me change, then?" I asked.

"As we said, cuteness is justice! We'd be delighted!" they replied enthusiastically.

"Great job, Finn. Now get out of the room, you slowpoke!"

"Slowpoke?! How about a little appreciation here? And stop kicking me!"

I finished getting ready at lightning speed and headed to the castle for the first time in weeks, eager to hear that one sentence from Lucas.

\*\*\*

I stared at Anna's hand as she knocked on the door of the reception room, then tightly clasped my own hands together.

"Who's there?" a voice from inside asked.

My shoulders trembled slightly, and I forced a smile to hide my nervousness. I was anxious. This reception room for the second prince reminded me of Felix,

which made me uncomfortable. Every time I had met him here, he'd berated me, so I couldn't help but be on guard. But most of my anxiety today stemmed from something else.

I couldn't truly prepare myself until I heard directly from Lucas. I willed my trembling legs to be still, stood up straighter, and fixed my gaze on the door.

As I stepped inside, I was momentarily frozen. The room's appearance was completely different compared to when I'd last been here with Felix. The walls were now a deep ocean blue, like the books I'd seen from Eastern Europe in my past life, and the floorboards were maple. The curtains on the window were whitish-gray, and dark brown leather sofas were arranged in the room. Fresh flowers were placed throughout, creating a vibrant, welcoming atmosphere.

The castle's reception rooms were usually decorated with dignified, glittering embellishments. This room, however, was refreshingly bright and open, unlike any I'd seen in the castle before. Still in a daze, Anna urged me to sit on the sofa.

"Lord Lucas will be here shortly."

"Okay."

"Is something the matter, Lady Cecilia?"

"Oh no, it's just... This room has changed a lot, hasn't it?" I said hesitantly.

Anna nodded. "Oh yes, indeed."

She explained that one of the first things Lucas had done as second prince was renovate—or rather, destroy—the interior of the second prince's rooms.

Huh? I don't quite understand. That phrasing was a bit odd. She corrected herself, changing "renovate" to "destroy." But destroying the place doesn't make sense! Is she saying that Lucas went on a rampage and destroyed the whole room?

I was speechless and blinked in bewilderment—it was hard to believe that any violence had happened here based on the current interior. Anna and the others

continued, smiles on their faces.

"Unfortunately, he couldn't burn it down since this room is in a government building, but he did make sure to smash the furniture to smithereens!"

"The second prince's wing of the palace, where you will be staying, has been thoroughly cleaned. The furniture, wallpaper, curtains—everything that had been here before—has been removed and burned. The room was also purified using Lucas's Fire magic."

"It was incredible! He stopped just before burning the wallpaper with Water magic, then dried it with Wind magic, and then finally repaired everything with Earth magic! He finished all the rooms in less than half an hour!"

"I see..." I said.

This is the royal castle, right? Even if purification rituals are involved, is it really all right to burn down a section of the castle just to change the interior?! Surely, that can't be okay! Even if it's the wing belonging to the second prince himself, I can't imagine Lucas would be allowed to burn it!

Not only that, but Anna and the others sounded excited, like girls gossiping at a sleepover. But what they were saying was completely crazy! *Getting giddy over burning down rooms is beyond strange. They're downright dangerous!* 

But why does Lucas have to burn things to change the interior? That's no method of cleaning. Oh, wait! I know! It's the same as when he tore up my dress and stabbed it with a knife the first time we met!

Cold sweat ran down my back as I recalled similar methods Lucas had used. I looked around the room, desperate to switch topics. My eyes landed on a heavy, elegant teak bookshelf. The books on the shelves covered not only our kingdom's economy and history but books about neighboring countries as well. I was amazed at the variety.

Those weren't here when Felix was second prince. Considering that the ducal family holds a claim to the throne, I suppose it's not unusual for them to receive

such an extensive education. But aren't these sorts of books used for a crown prince's education? I thought Lucas always aimed to be a knight. How long has he been studying such matters?

I trembled once again at his unexpected, overpowered qualities. Suddenly, the sound of the door opening jolted me from my reverie. Startled, I stood up and searched for the noise, only to be frozen at the sight of Lucas talking with Finn. It almost felt like time had stopped.

"The Azure Knights' formation isn't finished yet? The remaining Black and White knights will handle the entrance to the capital from the border forest, as I've said. The ducal family will put up barriers around the castle, so tell them to maintain the usual security within the capital. And didn't I tell you that these documents need the seal of that useless mast—uh, that useless marshal? Why did you bring them to me?"

"I don't think that correction really made anything better. I have the seal here," Finn said.

"That miserable old man... I swear, he never does his job. Fine, I'll check it later. Just leave it on the desk. Also, pass all of these on to Oliver. I've reviewed and approved them. Housing and food for the evacuees in the problematic district are..."

Lucas placed the documents on the desk by the bookshelf. I averted my gaze.

That's odd. Am I seeing things? Is that not really him? No, that can't be. This is the second prince's reception room, and Finn is right next to him. That has to be Lucas, right? I'm just flustered because it's been so long since I last saw him. I need to calm down. There's even a chance there's a misunderstanding!

I pressed my hand against my rapidly beating heart and took a deep breath.

Then I glanced at Lucas again, only to be left in shock at today's surprise, totally breathless.

It's not a misunderstanding at all! H-he really cut his hair!

His hair is neatly trimmed above his ears and neck, giving him a sharper, more elegant look! And the way he's holding those documents with his knight's uniform sleeves rolled up is hitting me so hard right now!

Every fiber of my being was paralyzed. I was completely unable to move. All I could do was stare at Lucas, knowing that all of my internal mini-Ceces were dying right now.

W-wait, you didn't tell me about this! Isn't communication important? You should've at least mentioned you cut your hair in one of those cards you send me every day!

My heart pounded loudly, and I felt my body heat rise. I can't handle this! I need to get out of the room! I thought. But the moment I took a step forward, Lucas turned toward me.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Cecilia. Ah, leave the tea there. You may go," he said, dismissing the maid who was preparing tea. He adjusted his rolled-up sleeves and looked at me.

I stared at my fiancé's face, trying to moisten my parched throat.

Now he's speaking all formally to me, making him even more handsome! Is this some kind of trial?!

Flustered, I desperately tried to blink away the tears that threatened to spill. I tried to curtsey, to greet him as the second prince ought to be greeted, but when he placed his coat on the back of the sofa, I couldn't get any words out for some reason.

Is this some kind of new attack magic?! It should carry a warning that it's only effective on good-looking people! This visual assault is too much!

Putting my inward screams aside, I resolved myself to give the most beautiful curtsey I could muster. However, Lucas silently approached me and grabbed my chin without warning.

"I've missed you, Cecilia," he said, shifting from his stern prince façade to a

sweet smile that could rival even the sweetest of sugary confections. His sudden change left me frozen; I was completely mesmerized by his otherworldly beauty.

Ah, he's pulling me close by the waist. What do I do?! I can't handle this! He's too close! My heart feels like it could stop. I can't even look directly at him!

I was so shaken that I tried to gently remove Lucas's hand from my chin. A shiver ran down my spine as he called my name in a low, heavy voice.

"Cecilia?"

The moment I felt his strong arm tense under my impulsive grip, he forcefully tipped my face upward.

"Lord Lukie..."

"It's been such a long time, Cecilia. Why won't you look at me?"

His slow, deliberate words drew my widened eyes to his perfect face, now twisted with a sinister smile and filled with a maddening blend of obsession and love.

Did I unknowingly flip his switch to Sadist Mode? I didn't notice it at all. Then again, it's undetectable to the average person by design. There's no helping it if it's already been switched...

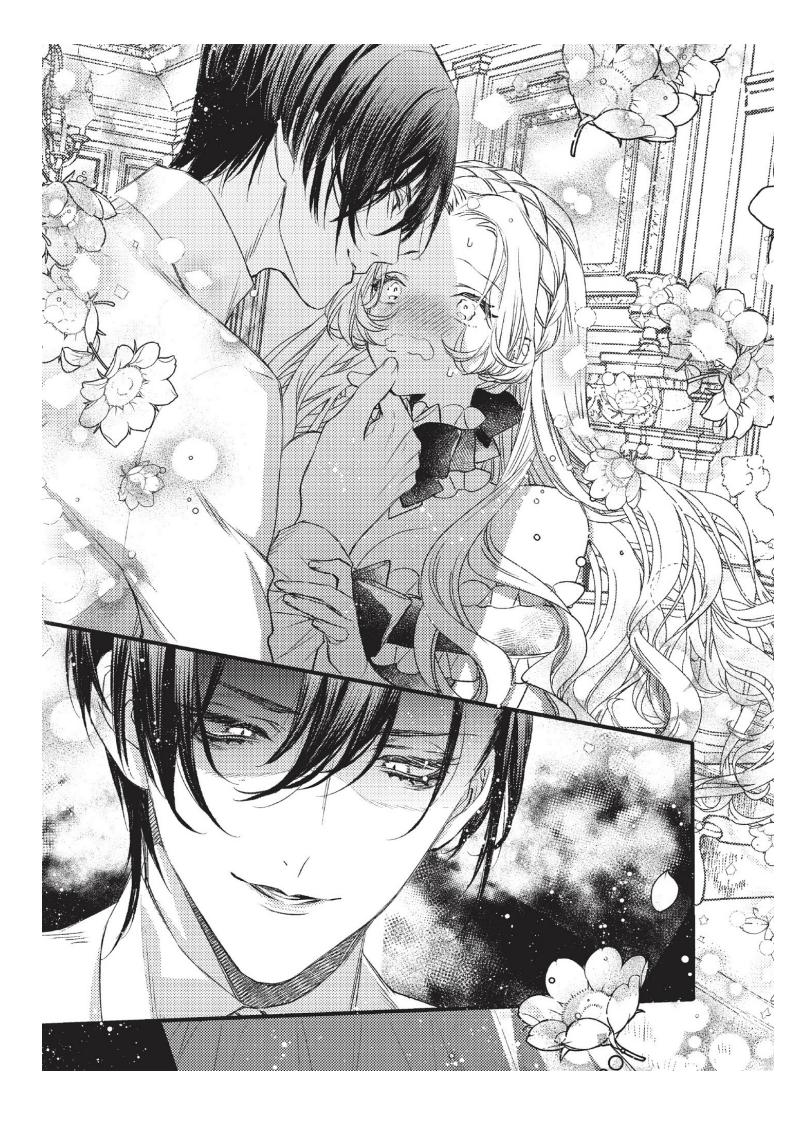
As I pondered this absentmindedly, my arm moved on its own. The warmth of his skin beneath my fingertips, the unwavering presence I'd longed for since we'd been apart. His eyes brimmed with a love so intense it bordered on madness. I realized that the person I longed for was indeed right here.

My weary heart gradually relaxed, filling me with a sense of relief. *I'm* probably beyond saving now... I smiled faintly.

Seeing him with shorter hair made me feel like I'd fallen in love with him all over again, and his shifting expressions as he looked at me filled me with intense joy.

The strength of his grip on my chin. The firmness of his arm around my waist.

His attitude, which seemed to say he wouldn't let me go. It all made my heart tremble uncontrollably.



All I did was avert my eyes, and he reacted so possessively. This terrifying man loves me so much, and I'm already lost. I used to think I was just an ordinary person, but now...

I let out a sigh and stared into his golden eyes, which were filled with a desire reserved only for me. Maybe it's okay to give him a little trouble.

Do you really think you're the only one who was pining? Do you know how I cried? How I longed for your promise? How terrified and anxious I was? How desperately I wanted to see you? How much I loved and missed you? I wish I could open my chest and show you, even if doing so drove you to madness every time I merely avert my gaze!

If just imagining it makes me so happy, I must be quite abnormal myself now.

A smile slowly came to my lips as those thoughts ran through my head. Tears ran down my cheeks, and I finally realized I was crying. I hadn't intended to cry; apparently, I'd been more stressed than I thought.

But seeing Lucas panic over my silent tears made me think it was okay.

"Cecilia?! S-sorry! I just missed you so much that I...I'm really sorry!" Lucas frantically apologized.

I glanced over at Anna and the others, who stood at the edge of the room with deadpan expressions on their faces. They understood my message and quietly excused themselves, saying, "Please call if you need anything."

It was the first time I'd ever seen someone actually disappear with a whoosh. They were technically maids who were assigned to me, but none of the maids I knew besides them disappeared through windows. Well, I should stop worrying about it. They're always so helpful, anyway.

"Cecilia..." He called my name in an anxious voice, and I slowly turned my gaze back toward my flustered fiancé.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Lord Lukie."

```
"It's been a long time. I'm glad to see you're looking well."

"Oh, uh. Yes."

"By the way..."

"Yes?"

"I was so anxious."
```

"Ah...!" Lucas took a deep breath. He seemed shaken by this, but I held steady and continued.

You can handle it, can't you?

"I missed you so much. Not being able to see you was so painful."

But I wanted to protect your honor and stay by your side. I shot him a look that attempted to convey that, and he quietly and affectionately wiped away my tears.

His large hand cradled my cheek, and I nuzzled it softly as I told him how I felt. "The only reason I made it to today was because of what you wrote in the cards you sent me every day," I said, gazing at him steadily.

His handsome face crumpled. "Yes," he murmured, "and that'll never change."

I didn't know what he meant, so I gave him a questioning look. He smiled shyly, a determined look in his eyes. "Thank you." Then he swept me up in his arms, holding me tight, and whispered his love to me. "I love you, Cecilia. I love you so much. You're the only one I'll have for my whole life. Thank you so much. You're the best," he murmured softly. Then he inclined his head to steal a kiss from my tightly closed lips. I swiftly put a hand between our faces to block him.

```
His startled face is so adorable. But we can't!

"Mm, Cece?"

"We can't."
```

"Mmph?"

"Don't ask me why. Because we're in the reception room."

"Mmph, mmph. Mmph mmmph!"

I don't know what he tried to say after "Who cares!" But we obviously can't be kissing in the reception room. Wait, is that why he sent everyone away? Was it on purpose?!

"Well, I care. This is the royal castle, and—eek!"

Lucas peeled my hand away from his face and suddenly pushed me down onto the ebony desk. A stack of papers flew into the air, and I was suddenly overcome by a rush of embarrassment.

"L-Lord Lukie!"

"That was definitely the mood for a kiss."

"Wha?"

What in the world are you talking about? Of course I stopped you! Why are you making it seem like I'm the one who can't read the room?! You're the one who tries to initiate things at the most inopportune times, not me!

"I even wrote in the card that I wanted to kiss you."

"Y-you did, but this is the reception room! There are guards right outside the door!" Who knows who might come in? I was about to say that last part when he pinned me down, his eyes intense once again.

His pupils are all dilated! What did I say that was wrong? Also, I love him, but I can't help what I'm scared of, and I'd really rather not be pinned to this desk like a specimen from someone's butterfly collection! Surely you can't push me down anymore!

I kept my mouth shut out of fear, but inwardly, I gave him a piece of my mind. My skin burned at the touch and intense gaze of this impossibly beautiful man, and I found myself shrinking back, my resolve crumbling. The alter ego in my

brain said, "Stop resisting! Just admit you want it! Accept the naughty behavior!" She was so insistent I almost listened to her, and tears welled up in my eyes. I still managed to glare at him.

Lucas's face slowly drew closer to mine. "I came to see you, and you're more concerned with the knights in the hallway, Cece?"

Of course I'm concerned! There are guards and knights right outside the door! If we do something vulgar in here and they find out, I might not survive the scandal!

"N-no, I'm not...!"

Ugh, I hate that I'm such a coward sometimes. But I can't help it! I need to protect myself, okay?!

"The idea that other knights saw my beloved before I did today frustrates me so badly that I might just lash out at them. So why don't you at least give me a reward to help make it up to me?" he asked in a sultry tone of voice. His words were terrifying, however, and his eyes were dark, without a hint of cuteness.

He's pinning my wrists against the desk, and his fingers are digging into the wood! This is ebony, right? Isn't ebony one of the hardest woods in the world?! How can his fingers dig into it?! And the way he's sulking is too scary! But I'll do my best!

"W-we just can't."

"Just a little? We won't go any farther here."

"O-of course we won't!"

What is he even suggesting?!

"Of course... Well, fine." Why is he tipping his head to the side like that? Oh, I know that look. He's going to ask some kind of terrible favor from me, isn't he?! I will absolutely, positively not have sex with him on this desk! It one hundred percent will not happen this time!

Despite my inward resolve, Lucas continued to speak with a sullen look on his

face.

"Not even a little?"

"Not even a little."

"What about a minuscule amount?"

"My answer is the same."

"What if I promise not to put my tongue inside?"

"L-Lord Lukie, knock this off at once!"

And what do you even mean by "a little"?! I have a feeling your definition of a little and my definition of a little are completely different. We need to be on the same page! I thought to myself.

Lucas climbed on top of the desk and brought his face close to mine and his body even closer. So, I decided to take a little pity on him and express my girlish heart.

"It's been a long time, so I don't want to do it here. I want to do it properly, slowly. So I'll wait for you to come back home."

I can't take it anymore! I'm so mortified I could die! I wish I could dig a really deep hole and just crawl into it!

It definitely sounded like I was seducing him, without a doubt. But I just couldn't accept doing something here while he was in the middle of work, both as a lady and as the second prince's fiancée. My first instinct was to redirect him, but it didn't come out at all how I'd intended.

Oh no, has my maiden's heart become that corrupted?! Well, it's better than doing it in the second prince's reception room, right? I'm starting to lose confidence. Someone tell me it's better! And why is Lucas sighing?! I don't get it!

"You know, Cece..."

"Yes, Lord Lukie?"

His eyes were filled with turmoil, but in the end, he never finished his

thought. Lucas just sighed again and replied, "All right." He picked me up and kissed my fingertips. "Taking you directly will be bad for your reputation. I know it's a hassle, but could you please go through to the second prince's consort's quarters?"

You were about to tarnish my reputation, weren't you? I thought to myself, but I nodded nonetheless.

"The room is ready, so...please go there and wait for me, Cece."

"All right," I said, frowning.

His beautiful face drew nearer. "I'll be there as soon as I finish the rest of my work, so get ready." He stroked our intertwined fingers and whispered lustfully. For some reason, my body began to tremble so much I could barely stand.

Lucas let out a soft, breathy laugh. He swiftly picked me up and placed me on the sofa, then gathered the scattered documents that had fallen on the floor. "See you later," he said, smiling as if nothing had happened. And with that, he left the room.

\*\*\*

I looked at my reflection in the full-length mirror attached to the closet door adjoining the second prince's chambers. I tilted my head, wondering how things had come to this.

The pearls woven into my braided hair made soft, delicate clinking sounds as I moved. My hair was adorned with white roses interspersed with tiny blue and yellow flowers that were arranged into a crown of flowers around the back of my head. My dress was a mermaid shape with an off-the-shoulder, lace scoop neck. Delicate floral embroidery decorated the elegant lace sleeves. The dress clung to my waist and hips before flaring out dramatically. The fabric draped around my legs, intricate embroidery covering the bottom half of the dress. The train was much longer than those on my usual dresses and was decorated with matching lace.

It had probably been custom made since it fit me like a glove. I looked down at the dress again, tipping my head once more as my maids spun around me, checking every detail. For some reason, they formed a huddle and whispered excitedly to one another.

"This is amazing. The masterpiece of the century! A gem! Honestly, it's like a goddess has descended. Her beauty is so otherworldly! Is she even human?"

"Otherworldly? No, she's perfect! She's not human. She's a goddess! What should we do? I feel like I should worship her, but I might get a nosebleed if I look directly at her!"

"Roasted, roasted goose! A roasted goose, right?!"

I don't even know where to start with that. All three acted strangely, but the one babbling about roast goose was particularly baffling. And quite creepy, if I were honest.

Despite the hubbub, Elsa was the only one Kate reprimanded with a harsh, "Be quiet!"

As I watched them, I pondered once more.

An official tryst before Lucas's departure was permitted, but dressing up like this felt a bit excessive. I wondered what kind of extravagant dinner awaited me. The thorough bath and massage were over-the-top as it was. Even the snack I had was quite substantial. I glanced down at my dress again. Anna had averted her eyes while she tightened the laces. I wondered if I'd lost some weight, making my collarbones more prominent. My chest was still ample enough, but did I look too thin?

Then I remembered how Lucas's voice had filled with desire earlier. His words were like a slow-acting poison that heated my body and made my heart race. I pressed a hand to my chest and took some deep breaths to calm myself. Was I like this just because it had been a while? Or was he simply nervous?

As I took a deep breath, feeling a bit embarrassed, I realized the maids were

watching me with their hands clasped as if in prayer.

"Oh, the blushing goddess! She's truly divine!"

"She's glowing! We must be grateful for this beauty. Ack, I have a nosebleed."

"Lord Lucas will be in for a treat! And then I'll get to meet the sacred goose, the goddess's envoy!"

Although I was still quite nervous, my tension eased a bit thanks to them. Their silly statements, nosebleeds, recognizing a goose as an envoy...

What should I do? This is too creepy. Would a healing spell help? I unconsciously traced a sigil with my fingers. Anna noticed, though. She cleared her throat conspicuously and gestured toward the door that led to the terrace.

"Excuse us. Shall we proceed to Lord Lucas?"

I expected to see him out on the terrace, but he wasn't there.

"The sky is clear tonight. The moon looks so beautiful," Anna remarked as we exited through the terrace doors and walked a considerable distance.

We must have been taking a different route to avoid being seen by the castle staff. They were pushing walls and opening hidden doors, after all.

I couldn't help but wonder if using these hidden passages was really okay. I kept those thoughts to myself, though. I was the second prince's fiancée and therefore bound by strict confidentiality agreements. Leaking the existence of secret passages would mean saying bye-bye to this world.

Besides, the fact that the ducal house's servants used the royal castle's secret passages so nonchalantly meant there must have been some kind of understanding between the royal and ducal families.

There must be, right? After all, they're the shield of the royal family. They must've gotten permission to access the blueprints of the castle they're holding, right? No, don't think about it too hard, Cecilia. Turning a blind eye to their antics is self-preservation...

I quietly traveled down a path I'd never be able to find again without help. The passage suddenly opened up, and I squinted against the brightness.

Anna stopped and bowed her head. My heart raced. "Thank you," I whispered, looking ahead.

We must've reached an upper floor, though I hadn't noticed any incline. The air had been still on the terrace, but a breeze now brushed against my cheeks, cooling my nervous, flushed body.

The soft, swaying sound of my pearl hair ornaments encouraged me. I gathered the hem of my dress and took unsteady steps toward the tall figure standing there silently.

The twilight sky was a blend of bluish-purple and orange. Thin white clouds stretched out like open arms, darkening as they extended. Tiny stars had already begun to twinkle, adorning the dim sky with an otherworldly, magical beauty man could never recreate. Lucas's golden eyes, peeking through his shortened bangs, captured the orange light and shone with an enchanting glow. A crimson cloak, used only for ceremonies, fluttered behind him. His knight's uniform, white with bluish-purple accents, seemed vaguely familiar. It suited his tall frame perfectly.

Faced with such perfect beauty, I felt strangely calm. It was so surreal that I couldn't believe it was happening.

Whether it was his inhumanly good looks or the rugged appeal of his new haircut, seeing Lucas in his knight's uniform was so incredibly attractive. *Are you trying to kill me?* I suddenly felt the urge to scream as my girlish fighting spirit drained. I imagined my inner self curling up and writhing in embarrassment.

Then, I placed my hand over Lucas's outstretched one.

It felt like a relief not to have to compete on the same stage. *Your goal is to complete your objective!* I tried to encourage myself. Usually, Lucas immediately clasped my hand tightly or stroked it with his thumb, but he didn't move this time. I stared bewilderedly at the decorative buttons glittering on his uniform.

## Do I look strange somehow?

He stared at me so intently that I thought he might burn a hole through me. Though his eyes were on me, we weren't making eye contact. His gaze swept from my face to my neck, chest, waist, and down to my feet before slowly returning upward and staring at me. Enduring the relentless gaze of a man so perfectly handsome was tough. I grew increasingly embarrassed as he stared and stared. Eventually, I couldn't help but speak up.

"What's wrong?"

Having the man I love point out my flaws would crush my tender heart. Please, maids! Help me, even if you're creepy! I looked at the stone pavement until my eyes glossed over like a dead fish.

"Cecilia?" He called my name questioningly, making me blink in surprise.

Why does he sound confused? It's me, Cecilia... Surely, I'm not unrecognizable, am I? Wait—do I look so awful that he doesn't even recognize me? Am I okay? Am I really okay?

"Yes, it's me. It's Cecilia," I responded in a trembling voice.

"Is this a dream?" Lucas muttered. "An illusion?"

Worried he might be in a state of confusion due to overwork, I looked up only to find him looking utterly baffled. "L-Lord Lukie?"

He didn't respond.

"Lord Lukie?"

Still, I was met with silence.

Is he okay?

I moved closer and squeezed his hand. "L-Lord Lukie!" Then I placed my other hand on his porcelain cheek, calling his name frantically. His long lashes fluttered. The scattered light in his honey-colored eyes shimmered back to life, our gazes finally meeting.

"Thank goodness!" I said, sighing in relief. "What's wrong, Lord Lu—"

Before I could finish speaking, he slowly pulled me close and kissed me.

Huh? Wait, what's happening?

As I stood there, stunned and frozen, Lucas continued to kiss me passionately. Finally, he pulled back, satisfaction on his face and an embarrassed look in his eyes.

"You're so beautiful. I thought I had died and gone to heaven."

I let out a very unladylike, "Whuh?!" Lucas didn't seem to care, though, and continued, saying things I felt were quite unsuited for a romantic tryst.

"I didn't think I could pass out just from staring. But you could kill me with your beauty, Cecilia. I'd die happy if it were by your hand."

Being so completely vulnerable was a new experience for him, and he looked positively delighted by it. On the one hand, it felt like he was praising me. On the other, I was being accused of being an assassin, so I couldn't help but give him a slightly exasperated look.

His eyes softened affectionately. "My goddess," he said, "would you give me a moment of your time?"

Lucas squeezed my hand and kissed my fingertips before leading me to the hanging gardens. This place was open to everyone during the day, but due to my busy schedule, I had never gotten the chance to visit. The walkway, presumably paved with stone, was completely covered by grass and greenery.

"Oh, my..." I exclaimed in awe.

As Lucas led me by the hand through the garden, the light sound of our footsteps clacking upon the stone echoed softly, lifting my spirits. We chatted about recent events, our conversation light. I felt slightly shy, but now and then, when our gazes met, his eyes filled with warmth, making me incredibly happy.

I wish this moment could last forever. I wish that time would just stop. That thought lingered in the back of my mind as I smiled. But I know it can't last.

The sound of our footsteps changed abruptly, and I instinctively tightened my grip on his hand. A strong wind blew, and he pulled me close.

"Are you all right, Cecilia?"

"Yes. The wind is just so strong." I turned my face toward the concerned voice above my head.

"What is it?" he prodded gently, his short hair swaying in the breeze. When I looked into his calm eyes, I realized our time together was ending.

I pressed my hand against his chest and thanked him, pushing him away gently to hide my rapid heartbeat. He let me go easily. My heart panged as I lowered my gaze to obscure my tear-filled eyes.

Don't cry. Don't cry. He hasn't even said anything yet.

I blinked the tears away and forced out the words through the lump in my throat. "Y-your hair..."

No, don't stutter. Smile, Cecilia Cline.

"You cut it."

You are the fiancée of Lucas Herbst, the second prince and future Hero.

With pride in my heart, I took a small breath, smiled, and looked at him. He squinted slightly, as if pained. Then he smiled at me with a mix of longing and concern.

"Yes. Our campaign will be a long one, and it's easier to manage short hair," he explained.

I'd guessed correctly. I opened my mouth to speak, but I couldn't make a sound and forced a smile instead.

Lucas began walking again, and I followed, letting him guide me along the path. The sound of our footsteps on the pavement pierced through the night.

"I'll be leading the campaign." His voice was calm and emotionless, like the surface of a still lake.

A storm raged around me, obscuring everything. I could no longer feel the warmth of his hand. Suddenly overwhelmed by fear, I looked up at him.

"I know it's sudden. It was only decided at this morning's meeting. We leave the day after tomorrow. Large beasts are fleeing the border forest toward the capital, which is making the situation even more dangerous. It'll take at least a week and a half to reach the depths of the forest. We haven't made this information public yet, but there isn't just one dragon. Andreas and I have decided that I will wield Eckesachs. It's the safest, most efficient way," he said calmly.

Those golden eyes, usually watching me with affection, weren't looking at me now. Lucas gazed toward the border forest that lay beyond the castle walls, his eyes filled with conflicting emotions.

My hand slipped from his in my shock and bewilderment. I stared at his arm as it moved away, unable to reach out and cling to him. It felt like I'd been struck by lightning.

Why?

The sound of our footsteps sounded far away.

I thought you loved me.

The sound stopped. I stared at the pavement, trembling.

Won't you even ask me to wait for you?

I forced myself to swallow.

The moment seemed to stretch for an eternity. Only the distant sounds of everyday life sounded around us. I couldn't hide my dismay and slowly raised my pale face.

And I shivered at what I saw, my words failing me.

Lucas had led me to a small chapel that sat at the end of the hanging garden. It was a gazebo-like structure that overlooked the castle town, constructed by the former king as a place of solace for the castle's servants. Though it served as

a chapel, it had little decoration since it was built like a gazebo. The structure was simple: an arched dome and white roses winding around the marble and granite columns. The only decoration was the floor, which bore the design of a sword wrapped in a vine, symbolizing the goddess, and a sword with the Hero's emblem in the center of it.

I widened my eyes at the sight of the sword with the dragon at the center and crosses in the corners.

This is the chapel that enshrines the Heroes, I remembered as I looked at the back of Lucas's crimson cloak. The white knight's uniform with the blue accents is the Hero's formal attire!

Lucas stood quietly in front of the chapel as if declaring it his own will.

I wanted to leave, to turn on my heel and run away from the terrifying words I feared would come next. But my feet were glued to the ground, and I couldn't look away from Lucas.

This transitionary period between night and day made him blend into the darkness. His bright blue hair turned pitch black, and his golden eyes reflected the pale moonlight, shimmering like dark water.

My heart ached as if it were gripped by an iron fist while I watched him transform into someone I hardly recognized. Yet at the same time, a part of me watched with resignation.

No matter what he said, I had both the right and duty to listen until the end.

He'd uplifted me. He'd shown me overwhelming happiness, what it felt like to be loved and to love in return.

I had to stand there and listen until the end, no matter how pitiful I appeared. Because nothing would pain me more than losing him. I could only stand there foolishly, neither pursuing him nor fleeing.

"I promise I'll return to you," Lucas said gently, his words resolute.

Those words ignited a fire within me. My throat quivered and my ears rang.

Lucas's voice sounded distant and far away. The overwhelming urge to shout, to beg him to say it again, filled me, but all I could do was tremble, completely useless.

"I promise to return to you and only you. But..." Lucas fell silent, his face contorting as if pained. He looked away from me and sighed bitterly. "I shouldn't dwell on the things I can't do," he said softly. He looked up suddenly. My stomach clenched, and I froze.

He must've thought I was frightened because he narrowed his eyes slightly. "Don't move," he said, his gaze piercing.

I silently called his name with my quivering lips, longing for him. Although I knew he couldn't possibly have heard my silent call, I saw him smile sweetly. His golden eyes, illuminated by the light of the moon just seconds ago, darkened ominously.

"Forgive me, Cecilia. But I've fallen so deeply in love with you that I can never let you go. I can't bear to give even a fragment of you to anyone else. A promise alone isn't enough to reassure me," he said in a self-deprecating tone.

Then he extended both hands pleadingly and abruptly kneeled.

"I, Lucas Herbst, love only you, Cecilia Cline. I swear on my name and emblem to the goddess that I will continue to love you and only you. Cecilia, will you become my wife and share my life with me?"

Your wife? I stared blankly at the moonlight shining on the hem of Lucas's cloak as it billowed in the breeze, trying to process the situation. My mind felt sluggish, dulled by my feverish thoughts. Then I realized something.

The distance between us was the same as if this were the formal procedure for a proposal.

A suitor didn't touch the person they were proposing to. They had to maintain a distance that ensured they did not appear too forceful and simply kneel. Then, they waited for their partner to approach them. If the proposal was

rejected, they must not immediately reach out.

I recalled how my love-struck friends blushed and explained this process as they described their fantasies of future proposals. I fixed my gaze on Lucas, who remained motionless, and stared at his outstretched hand.



He'd already given me the words I wanted to hear more than anything. And since I had that reassurance now, I knew I could wait.

I, Cecilia Cline, who loved Lucas Herbst, could wait forever.

Nothing more could happen. Or should.

"Cecilia..."

His sweet yet commanding voice made me shiver, and I met his gaze.

This is like a dream, I thought dazedly. My body began to move, drawn to his love-filled golden eyes.

But the education I had received as a marquis's daughter tried to hold me back. Even though I was already the de facto second prince's fiancée, and even though he was a Hero facing death, a member of the royal family must not formally propose without the king's permission, nor should such a proposal be accepted.

Such an act was only permissible before the king.

You shouldn't take his hand, my mind screamed, warning me that I might lose everything I'd built. You'll never be able to go back. Even though I knew this, I couldn't stop myself. I reached a trembling hand out to his firm palm.

"Cecilia," he said, calling my name as if trying to tell me it was all right, that he wouldn't let go.

His low, sweet voice reminded me of the superstition my nanny had told me when I was little, probably to caution me since I was a rambunctious child. If someone calls your name in the night and you answer, they'll capture you. That's why you should never answer them. Otherwise, they'll hold you captive for the rest of your life.

Even though I knew nothing would happen, the words echoed strangely in my heart, amplifying my emotions like ripples across a lake.

If he captures me, it'll be for life... If I take his hand, will he be mine forever?

My turbulent, unstoppable emotions must've shown on my face.

Lucas smiled invitingly and called my name again, overcome with emotion. "Cecilia."

Forever mine.

"Yes, Lord Lucas."

I placed my hand in his. Lucas squeezed it so tightly that a jolt of pain shot through me. But that pain reassured me that I wasn't dreaming. I kissed his forehead in acceptance without bothering to wipe away the tears of joy that wet my cheeks. I watched my teardrops fall onto Lucas's cheeks, his golden eyes glistening.

"I love you too, Lucas Herbst," I said, struggling to express my love.

My smile was probably far from perfect, and my carefully applied make-up was most definitely ruined. But I was the happiest person in the world. I sobbed as I watched Lucas kiss my left ring finger, and my eyes widened with shock.

"What?"

He slipped a golden ring onto my finger in the same spot he kissed.

Seriously, is this a dream? An illusion? I can feel the cold metal of the ring, though...

Confused by the surreal situation and the unbelievable speed at which everything had occurred, I sniffled and looked up at Lucas, then at the ring, then back at Lucas again.

I hesitantly opened my mouth. "Um..." I said.

"Here, Cecilia."

Lucas placed a slender golden ring—probably a counterpart to my own—in my palm, his eyes sparkling.

I picked up the ring, confused and overwhelmed, and looked to him for guidance.

Should I put it on his finger? It's so slender... Surprise overshadowed the previous emotional impact, and I wanted to savor that feeling a bit longer. Please explain, Lucas!

Lucas smiled shyly. "That one's mine," he said.

I nodded, still baffled. Wait, I can't keep up with all these developments!

I understood that our engagement had now been formalized, according to custom, even if it wasn't official. And I also understood the meaning of a ring on my right ring finger. The ring was clearly on my *left* hand, though. I expected Lucas to apologize for his mistake, but no such thing happened.

So it's not for an engagement? But this...this is... No way...

As I drowned in a torrent of Lucas-made confusion, he asked me to put the ring on his left ear, his face filled with joy.

"I can't wear it on my finger because I have to wield Eckesachs. And if I wear it on a chain around my neck, it might break and get lost. But I won't lose it if it's on my ear. Not unless I take a direct attack to the head, at any rate. So," he said, his request gentle and sweet. "Fasten it to my ear."

Despite the rather violent reason for its necessity, I carefully put the earring on him with trembling fingers and clasped it firmly. The earring fastened with a small click. I let go and looked at Lucas, then down at my own ring finger. Lucas took my hand again and kissed the ring as I stared at him in a daze.

I'm wearing a ring, but is this really okay? An engagement proposal is forbidden, yet I'm wearing a ring on my left hand. This feels like we're about to get married... Isn't this strange? I'm not dreaming, am I?

Despite my complete bewilderment, I heard Lucas's words perfectly.

"It's okay."

I gasped at his reassuring words. Lucas, still kneeling, pulled me into his arms and onto his lap as he caressed my trembling lips.

Once again, he laced our fingers together, telling me he wouldn't let me go.

"It's okay. Just trust me," he said. "Let's get married."

My tears stopped.

Married? As in, marriage marriage?! Why? How?

All sorts of questions swirled in my mind, none of them very coherent. The engagement ceremony was postponed, making marriage seem like an impossible dream. A proposal shouldn't even be permitted, yet he'd proposed nevertheless. Lucas even gave me a ring. And now marriage? What in the world was he talking about?

But marriage is impossible!

I stared at Lucas, who urged me as he caressed the ring. No way, I thought.

He said he didn't want to give me to anyone else.

What the queen had said about wanting me to remain the second prince's fiancée, even in the worst-case scenario, came to mind. That meant I was still just the daughter of Marquis Cline. Since I was unmarried, my fate could change with a single word. My position was unstable and tenuous.

But if we got married...

Even if it wasn't formal, being the wife of a Hero who stood beside the king couldn't be easily overturned. Not even by the queen.

How far will he go to protect me? I wondered, trembling.

It felt like my very self was disappearing and I was being remade. I gripped his knight's attire tightly.

Marriage was supposed to be a contract between two families, especially since he was a member of the royal family. And even if it wasn't formal, this shouldn't happen without the king's consent and a high priest's blessing. We should never carve each other's names and the emblem of our marital vows onto the rings, either, because that would be a clear proof of marriage.

Yet here we were, all by ourselves, doing just that without anyone's

permission.

I stared blankly at Lucas, who continued without a care in the world.

"Cecilia."

"Lucas?"

"Give me your answer."

My answer? I want to say yes. Of course I do. But I shouldn't answer yet, should I?

I had a ring on my finger, but it was almost like it had simply appeared there without my knowledge. It didn't seem like it would come off anytime soon, either. More than likely, it would remain there until the day I died.

And I can't hide a ring like this, either. Does this mean Lucas already arranged everything? There's no way... Is there? I thought frantically.

I stared back at Lucas, who urged me to answer quickly.

He couldn't possibly have arranged this. It was Lucas, after all. If he really didn't set things up properly prior, I might not be able to recover from this—my neck was literally on the line.

Just stay calm.

It was still possible that everything had been planned, but it would be really bad without further explanation.

I thought answering would be alright as long as Lucas explained first, and I was about to tell him so when he interrupted me with a kiss.

"Ahh, nng! Mmm!"

"Answer."

"A-ans—mmmph!"

"Answer me, Cecilia. You do know how to answer, don't you?" he asked, his dark smile looming in front of me. I realized I shouldn't say anything besides

"yes." My cheeks flushed, leaving the rest of my face pale. "Hmm, I'm pretty good at controlling my blood flow," I thought vaguely as my mouth trembled.

"I told you I wouldn't let go, right?" Lucas said, his intense voice and gaze piercing me. "You'll stay by my side as Cecilia Cline, and then you'll change your name."

His implicit message that this was a necessary vow made tears stream down my cheeks once again.

Why does he always say exactly what I want to hear precisely when I need it?

There couldn't possibly be another person like him in the entire world. The person I most desperately wanted to stand beside in the whole world was Lucas. I knew in the depths of my heart that all I needed to do was trust him. I gazed at his darkened, golden eyes, then nuzzled against him.

His unwavering gaze removed all my doubts and fears. His pure, natural strength and the way he affectionately (yet forcefully) teased me filled me with such love that I couldn't help but let out a breathy giggle.

I couldn't finish my sentence. When I tried to say his name, it was swallowed by his kiss.

"Haah..."

His tongue entangled with mine and then suddenly withdrew as he exhaled a hot breath against my chest. The words of blessings whispered between kisses melted my brain into a gooey mess.

I traced the delicate engraving on Lucas's earring, my fingertips trembling. Tears I'd already shed countless times welled in my eyes again.

Even up close I couldn't make out the details, but I imagined that the earring was engraved with entwined branches along with wings, the symbol of our wedding vow, and my name. "I'm so happy," I murmured when the intricate patterns engraved on the ring came into view.

Lucas tightened his grip around my waist. The strength of his arm and the

warmth of his palm on the back of my head made it impossible to think clearly.

No, it's not enough. I want to kiss more.

Lucas leaned his forehead against mine and let out an almost pained groan. "I want to take you to my room right now..."

When he said "room," I remembered the marital bedroom I'd been shown earlier, which lay beyond the adjoining room of the second prince's chambers.

If we go there, can we do more?

"I've held back so much and worked so hard, haven't I?" he muttered.

And just as I was about to wrap my arms around Lucas's neck and tell him not to hold back...

"No, Lucas. The marquis is furious. Lady Cline may have accepted your proposal, but you still shouldn't say such things in front of her parents," a familiar voice reprimanded.

My too-hot brain instantly cooled. My heart pounded for an entirely different reason now, and I flushed again. I couldn't help but turn toward the voice and think, What is happening? This is too unexpected!

"Cecilia, you too," another voice continued, this one my father's. "Step away from that man immediately. You are still my daughter. The daughter of Marquis Cline!"

"Oh, my goodness! Young love is so wonderful, isn't it?" sighed my mother.

"F-Father?! Mother?!"

Noooooooo!

Uh-oh, all the voices in my head are harmonizing...

I couldn't even scream. I just stood there, my mouth hanging open in a very unladylike manner. I mean, can you blame me? What in the world is going on?

But the shocks only kept coming.

"Lucas is even more passionate and wonderful than I've heard..." my mother said dreamily.

My jaw hit the floor. I trembled with shame as I tried to reject the sight before me. This can't be real! Not only did my parents see me kissing, but they also saw me begging for more! That's impossible!

"Well done, Lucas," said a male voice.

"I agree, Father, but perhaps now isn't the best time. Look, the marquis is glaring at you," Dirk said.

"Oh, Cecilia is so beautiful! Love certainly changes a woman!"

"Mother, please be quiet. Lady Cline is about to cry," Dirk said with a sigh.

Uh-oh. Dirk's having a rough time here. That's surprising... Wait, that's not important right now!

It didn't matter what Dirk was going through or that the image I had in my head of the duke and duchess was crumbling before my eyes. *That in and of itself is amazing, but that's not what you should be focusing on, Cecilia!* 

What mattered was that I'd just exhibited the most unladylike, disgraceful behavior imaginable in front of both my parents and my fiancé's parents. I had accepted a proposal. I wore a ring. And I'd lost myself in his embrace without parental consent.

Oh, no. It's all over for me...

I suppressed the urge to hang my head and tried to salvage this bizarre, incomprehensible, potentially life-ruining situation. I was about to drop to my knees and beg for forgiveness when Lucas, as usual, kissed me again.

"L-Lord Lukie?!"

What are you thinking?! Read the room! Aren't you the son of a duke?!

"Oh, don't mind them. They're just here to observe," he said.

Just here to observe? My hunch was right. Lucas's words caused quite a stir

among the adults. Please, just stop talking.

"That's no way to speak about your father, Lucas," the duke said.

"That's right, Lukie. You've been working so hard to prepare for this. And *I've* worked so hard to persuade my difficult brother. So, please, show me our lovely daughter-in-law. Also, may I hug her?" the duchess said.

"It was mostly me who persuaded that troublesome man, Mother. Stop hogging all the credit. Lukie, your brother worked very hard, and don't you forget it. You should show more respect," Dirk said.

"Prince Lucas, because I've caused you so much trouble, I won't interfere with my daughter's wishes. But as a parent, I'm still not convinced. Release my daughter at once! If you do anything more, I won't forgive you, boy!" my father said.

"Careful, your true feelings are slipping out. Shall I tell them how you cried in secret, saying you'd never seen Cecilia look so happy? She's a grown woman. Stop getting in their way. It's pathetic," the duke said.

Wow, the duke really is strange...

I tried to keep my gaze from darting between Lucas and his father. I suddenly understood why Lucas had turned out the way he had.

Meanwhile, my father ground his teeth furiously. My mother scolded him, an exasperated look on her face. I, on the other hand, stood there, stunned.

Did my father just call Lucas "boy"? He also referred to him as "that man" earlier. Isn't that disrespectful? Lucas and the duke don't seem to care, though, so maybe it's okay? No! It's definitely not okay! And did my father really cry?! My father, the stern marquis?

"You already told them?!" Father said.

"Who do you think has been supporting you all this time, when you were unable to show your true feelings to your daughter because you couldn't refuse the royal family's engagement proposal?" the duke asked.

"You... But..." Father started.

"This is a rare opportunity. Act like a father. She's clearly distressed. Won't you say anything?" Mother interjected.

"Hmph!"

I was totally confused. While my parents continued arguing fondly—well, I'm not sure I'd even call it an argument, since my mother was so much stronger—I suddenly realized something as I sat on Lucas's lap.

Wait, something's off with me, too. Maybe it's because I'm so confused, but I'm still on his lap... It's not the most comfortable seat, but it's very stable, so I didn't even notice.

I should get off... I pushed against his arm, which was wrapped tightly around my waist, but it didn't budge at all. I felt like crying.

Sitting on my lover's knee in front of all our parents was ruining my image. *Please let me go...* I looked at Lucas with pleading eyes and saw that he was staring at my father with an annoyed look on his face.

"Lord Lukie?"

"Cecilia has accepted, Marquis. She is already my wife." He grabbed my left hand and showed the ring off in full view of everyone, making me blush deeply.

His wife! What a wonderful sound! I thought I might get scolded and quickly glanced over at my father. But he wasn't looking at me; his deep green eyes glared sharply at Lucas.

"Wife? Stop speaking nonsense, Prince Lucas. I very reluctantly allowed you to put that ring on Cecilia's finger because you said it was to protect her. Reluctantly, I say! And I'll reluctantly admit that I'm grateful that you at least went to the trouble of procuring a white dress for my daughter. But despite the wedding rings, Cecilia will always be my daughter. Now let go of her and return her to me! Cecilia, come here."

"Um, er..."

Before I could react to my father's declaration that I would be his daughter forever, I looked down at my dress and turned bright red.

I wondered why Lucas chose this color. I thought it was unusual that he'd pick a white dress for me, but I guess he did it on purpose. I looked up at Lucas, my eyes filled with joy, and met his golden gaze. He smiled so sweetly that I had to cover my face. I'm so happy. And embarrassed...but happy!

He pulled me closer to hide my face. I was so hot I wondered if steam might be coming off of the top of my head. Then, I turned to my father in calm defiance.

"No," Lucas said. "Both the royal family and the ducal household, as well as Marquis Cline himself, have witnessed this. Though our marriage vows haven't been submitted to the temple yet, Cecilia is undoubtedly mine. I've made sure the ring won't come off, either."

"Do you want to die, boy?"

I quickly looked up at the sound of my father's dangerously low voice despite still being in a daze.

*Eek!* His eyes were filled with a murderous gleam, and his words were even more dangerous and disrespectful than before.

"Oh, my! This is just like that classic 'Give me your daughter's hand!' 'No, I'll never let you have her!' scenario! It was so boring with Anika because she was attached to Alphonse from such a young age. I never expected this from Lukie, though!" Lucas's mother gushed.

"Mother, with all due respect, please don't treat a significant moment in someone else's life as your own personal event."

"Alphonse was still a child back then, so I couldn't yell at him. But I do recall wondering how I would handle it," the duke said.

"Father, please stop talking. I'm exhausted. Lucas, Leon will summarize the situation, so let Lady Cline stand," Dirk said with a sigh.

Lucas reluctantly nodded and helped me to my feet, placing gentle kisses on my cheeks.

"I'll kill you! Don't stop me, Claudia!" My father's menacing words echoed, but I was too distracted by everything else to scold Lucas for the kisses or even to thank him.

Honestly, you shouldn't be doing that right now! Lord Dirk, did you just say...?

Eeeek! The person who's suffered most of all has arrived! One of the few rational ones! Finally, someone with common sense!

I slowly turned my gaze to the area slightly behind Lord Dirk.

There stood Crown Prince Leon. Finn held his arm, leading him into the room.

"P-Prince Leon?"

Um, is he alive? The poor thing's eyes look dead. Wait, is this my fault? There's just too much craziness happening right now. None of this makes any sense! Help me, O sensible one! I wanted to cry out like the mini-Cece inside of me. Instead, I instinctively went to curtsey to him, but Lucas stopped me again for some reason.

"You don't have to do that, Cece. He's just a witness, too."

"Huh?"

"I'm not just a witness, Lucas. I'm the crown prince! And you and your attendant are being way too disrespectful! You don't have to literally twist my arm up like this. I said I wouldn't run away!"

"I had no choice," Finn said. "You're the most important person here right now, and we couldn't risk anything ruining this big moment for Master Lucas."

"You certainly looked like you did it willingly, Finn! You flew down from the ceiling with a huge grin on your face! And stop using the royal family's secret passageways so casually!"

"Leon, you'd better explain quickly."

"You owe me for this, Lucas," Leon said, his voice dripping with resentment.

"Hmm," Lucas said. He sounded unbothered, which made me panic.

Hey, he's the crown prince! You can't just respond to him with a hum!

Although, it is kind of cute... No, no! This is not the time to swoon! Get a grip,

Cecilia!

I tried to summon all my rationality, but I only managed to blush slightly and sigh in relief.

"Basically," Prince Leon said, looking at me as he spoke, "Lucas has been tirelessly working behind the scenes to get me, the crown prince, to witness this. That was the hard part. There were many twists and turns..."

The prince's expression suddenly looked lifeless, like a fish out of water. It was so shocking that I felt the blood drain from my face. *The future king looks so exhausted. I'd better not ask what happened.* 

"Anyway, this is practically a formal marriage. Everything's been coordinated and approved by both families, and I'm here as a royal witness. Congratulations. I wish you two the utmost happiness."

Prince Leon's congratulatory words were delivered with a smile befitting of the crown prince. They did not reveal his true feelings, however, which left quite an impression on me. After listening to him, it really did sound like Lucas had been using his overpowered qualities to his advantage.

Both families would stay in the royal castle's guest rooms for the night, and we all parted ways from there.

\*\*\*

After saying goodbye to my parents, Lucas and I returned to our room, feeling light and happy, only to be met with another surprise.

Flowers were strewn everywhere, decorating the room, and the central table was laden with snacks and drinks.

Huh? Is this the wrong room?

Dazed, I looked around at everyone in the room, trying to understand.

The loud *bang!* of a party popper suddenly sounded. Elsa burst into some weird song while doing acrobatics and scattering flower petals, leaving me stunned into silence.

"Congratulations on your marriage!" the maids and Finn shouted. "Woo-hooo!"

I thought only Elsa made noises like that. Now everyone's doing it.

I must've been exhausted because I couldn't help but chuckle at the scene.

I wasn't expecting to be celebrated like this. It made me so happy. I thought about how much I'd been crying lately and smiled, thanking everyone. But then Anna axe kicked Finn, which frightened me so badly the tears instantly dried in my eyes.

Anna, what's gotten into you?

"You don't have the right to see Lady Cecilia's tears, Finn! Only the goddess's maidens may witness them!"

"You almost killed me!" Finn protested. "I don't get it. What's with all the smiling while being violent?!"

"It's because I'm just so happy!" Anna said.

"And you do axe kicks when you're happy? That makes no sense! That doesn't make your victim very happy!"

"I'll pick up your happiness, shred it to pieces, and throw it into the incinerator!" Anna declared.

"At least keep it safe in your heart!"

What was that? Did Finn just let something slip? While I stared at the two of them, Kate and Elsa inched closer to the door.

"Someone's being careless..." Kate said.

"What should we do about this atmosphere?" Elsa responded.

"Maybe you can just say you got caught up in the mood set by Lord Lucas and Lady Cecilia!" Kate said.

"If you want to get married yourselves, then why don't you just go ahead and do it?!" Anna shot a deadly glare at the two smirking maids, then cracked a whip. The pair screamed and dashed out of the room.

"Run for it, Elsa! Grab the roast goose and drinks! Let's meet in the usual room!" Kate yelled. "And congratulations on your wedding!"

"Aye aye, sir! Congratulations!" Elsa screeched.

They vanished again. They were near the door, but they didn't even use it.

Lucas pulled me into his arms after hearing their words and planted kisses on my temple and forehead, looking rather pleased with himself.

Well, I couldn't exactly criticize him since I was blushing myself. *Still, how can he be so casual in a tense atmosphere with Anna cracking her whip?* It was very impressive.

"It's over," Finn, who had gone pale, muttered. "I'm dead meat..."

Someone, please help him...

Just as I began to tremble with fear, Anna smiled gracefully, which was unexpected.

"Now, Lord Lucas and Lady Cecilia. Please enjoy your time together. Finn, would you come with me for a moment?"

"I apologize. Good night. Please forgive me," Finn said.

The pair disappeared again. Why don't they just use the door? Oh, so those two are... Hmm, Finn is like Alphonse. Now it all made sense.

Quiet settled over the room, and a different mood filled the air. It felt like a ferocious beast was right behind me, ready to pounce. I instinctively tried to turn around, but a large hand pressed against the nape of my neck.

Its rough, calloused texture after many years of wielding a sword made it feel like I was being licked by a beast's tongue. My back arched in response, and a heated breath escaped my lips.

"Ahh..."

The mask of decorum was stripped away from that little touch alone, exposing my hidden desires. Embarrassed and a bit scared, I tried to turn around. Lucas's hand had moved from my neck to my chin, though, holding me in place. His other hand traced my shoulder, arm, wrist, hand, and ring. Finally, Lucas clasped my hand and pulled me closer.

His warmth engulfed me as he embraced me from behind, and I felt like crying for some reason. The simmering desire inside of me ignited.

I wanted to hold him, to kiss him, and more. I wanted to feel everything about him tonight. Being so bold was embarrassing, but I knew our time was limited. I gathered my courage and tried to turn around, only to be stopped by Lucas.

"Stay still, Cece." His single command easily stilled my body, making me painfully aware of my obedience.

"L-Lord Lukie?" I called his name, needing to hear his voice.

"I'm just removing your hair ornaments," he responded, snapping me back to reality. "Don't move."

Honestly, I didn't even think of that. How long have I been waiting for this moment? Calm down! I'm so embarrassed... Oh, right. The maids left, so of course Lucas has to help me with my dress and hair ornaments. But his face is so close!

"Eek! L-Lord Lukie, wait!"

"Hmm?"

I heard a wet sound in my ear, and I realized he'd started licking it. Startled, I gasped. Lucas responded by pushing his fingers into my mouth.

"Nngh, mmph!"

He said he was removing my ornaments, so why put his fingers into my mouth? Stop! Don't pinch my tongue with your fingers! It's too much!

I arched my back in response, losing contact with his warmth. The air chilled my skin. Sensing my reaction, Lucas immediately pulled me back to him.

"Don't move, Cecilia. It's too hard to remove your ornaments that way."

I almost sighed in relief when his warm touch returned, but then I realized something was off. Why does he keep telling me not to move? And is he really removing my hair ornaments? He's just nibbling on my earrings, not taking them off. And why does he need to put his fingers into my mouth to do that? Plus, he's licking my ear, and the sound is echoing in my head!

I writhed, trying to escape the lewd noises. Lucas kept a firm grip on me, though, pulling me even closer. I was unable to move. The sensations grew even more intense because of that. A shock ran through my entire body, right down to my tiptoes, when his tongue moved from my inner ear to my earlobe.

"Nngh!"

I hate how sensitive my body is!

Okay, I admit that I've been dreaming about feeling Lucas like this and wanting to do even more. I didn't think it would start this way, though!

I knew that the sensation of him lapping at my ear had flipped a switch in me, which made me want to cry. However, Lucas was undeterred and kept moving his fingers around in my mouth as he continued to nibble my ear.

"Mmph! Nngh!"

My body twitched as the pleasure built up. Lucas stopped moving his fingers, seemingly satisfied, and removed my earrings with his teeth and spit them out on the carpet.

My face flushed with shame. My panties were wet all because he had licked

my ear. I crouched forward, my shoulders heaving as I tried to catch my breath.

Honestly, I just don't understand this! Why would he remove my earrings in such a lewd way? And then he just spit them onto the carpet! I want to stop him for a moment and speak my mind! What is going on?!

I turned toward Lucas, my eyes filling with shame.

"I'm not done yet, Cece," he whispered, my body trembling from his words alone. "I have to do the other side."

He held my face in place again and lectured me as he might a child. My eyes widened in surprise. What is he saying?

I stood there, frozen in surprise. Lucas's fingers moved in my mouth again. This time, he licked my other ear.

"Nngh, ahhh!"

"I love you, Cece. I missed you so much. I even dreamed about touching you, my Cecilia."

Lucas's fingers were still in my mouth, and his love lingered in my brain like poison. The emotions that swelled up in me poured from my eyes in the form of tears, and I surrendered my body to Lucas as if accepting the poison.

He touched me gently; it wasn't painful. I couldn't control my saliva due to his fingers being in my mouth, so it dripped from the corners of my lips, down my chin, and onto my throat and breasts.

Wet spots formed on my white dress, which clung to my skin and grew transparent. It was all so filthy that I impulsively sucked on Lucas's fingers.

"Nngh, mm..."

His body stiffened, and his fingers stilled.

I frantically gulped down the saliva that had pooled inside of my mouth, panting as I sucked on his bony fingers.

"Hnn..."

The noises from my mouth instantly changed into sweet, tender moans.

It's so dirty. It's so naughty. It's so embarrassing. But...

When I lapped at his fingers with my tongue, his grip on my waist tightened, making me happy. I pushed my shame aside and gave into my emotions, sucking on him as hard as I could.

"Damn it... You can't, or I'll..."

"Ooh! Mm, haah! Nngh, mmph!"

Muffled screams erupted from me as he flipped my body around, his thumb pulling at the corner of my mouth. He plunged his tongue into my mouth so roughly I thought he would eat me up. It swished around in my mouth as he sucked hard on my tongue. He suckled and caressed it so many times my tongue began to throb. Suddenly, he bit it tenderly, then pulled away.

I thought he was done. Then he licked his wet lips. My body understood the meaning of his gesture, and I felt a chill down my spine. Even though I knew it was bad, I stuck my tongue out, begging for more.

"Ahh!"

He thrust the tip of his tongue against mine, then planted little kisses on it. His eyes softened happily, encouraging me to do the same. All the while, all I could think in the back of my mind was that we were behaving like animals.

"Haah, mm!"

"Cecilia..."

But Lucas wouldn't stop there. The way he called my name seemed to say he wanted to pull me into the depths along with him.

I cast aside all reason.

He pushed his tongue so deep inside my mouth that it was like he was suffocating himself. I clung to his neck frantically. Then he changed his method of attack and gently licked me all over. The sensation of his lips gently biting

mine and his thick tongue ravaging my mouth felt all-consuming, a hot knot of desire forming in my belly. It felt so good that I pressed my lips against his and begged for more.

"I love you," Lucas mouthed against me silently.

I was so absorbed in being kissed and kissing him back that my mind wandered, but suddenly I pulled away from him in surprise.

"Oh!"

I was so lost in our kisses I didn't even hear him removing my jewelry! Why does my good sense choose to leave me in these moments? My face flushed as I lectured my sense of reason. I looked down, trying to hide my red cheeks. I pretended I was trying to catch my breath and lifted a trembling hand to remove my remaining earring, but Lucas caught my wrist.

"Cece," he called my name in a passionate voice.

I'm so sorry for blocking you, common sense. I apologize. Lucas is my weakness...

I thought I heard a voice coming from somewhere, saying, "You'd better be."

Meanwhile, I couldn't defy Lucas's pitiful voice and turned toward him. His golden eyes were darkened and narrowed painfully as he apologized to me, making my body shiver.

"I'm sorry, Cece."

"Huh? For what?" I struggled to speak clearly. Perhaps my tongue had gone numb from the intense kisses.

Lucas gently removed my earrings and dropped them onto the nearby table without even glancing at it.

"I know this may be a burden to you since we haven't seen each other in so long, but I don't want to leave you today. I have no intention of letting you go."

"Lord Lukie?"

The contrast between his warm fingertips and even voice made me look at him questioningly, but he moved his hand without replying. He kissed my hair, which I'd pushed to one side, then pulled me closer and loosened the laces of my dress.

He touched me carefully, as if he were handling something precious and fragile. My heart pounded so hard I could only stand there obediently.

As he pulled apart the back of my dress, I found it much easier to breathe, unconsciously sucking in a deep breath.

I've lost so much weight, I thought, shoulders slumping.

"W-wait!"

Lace slid off my shoulders, revealing my bare breasts to the chilly air. I opened my mouth to try to stop him, but he spoke in a sweet, soothing voice.

"I can wait. But I'm not going to stop."

Since he said he would wait a little, I decided to ask him a small favor. "Um, can we turn off the ligh—"

"No."

That was fast! And he said no!

"What? But, um..."

"I want to see everything." He gave me a look that seemed to say, "What are you thinking?" The blood drained out of my face.

"E-everything?"

He wants to see everything?! N-no! I've lost so much weight! I'm positively scrawny now! It might not even feel good to hug me!

If I were no longer attractive in his eyes, I would definitely cry. I'd never recover. He might even leave without saying a word! *Noooo!* 

My mind jumped to the worst-case scenario, so I quickly gathered my dress back up and shook my head. I took a few steps backward and was about to tell

him I wanted him to turn off the lights again when he let out an ominous chuckle.

"Cece. May I rip off your dress? Like that one time." The way he softly spoke those words made my mouth clamp shut.

Lucas, what are you saying? You're supposed to carefully remove dresses, not rip them off of people!

Mayday, mayday! Watch out for landmines! Warning! Sadistic Mode: Activated! My inner voices all screamed in agreement. Yes, his pupils have dilated again!

"L-Lord Lukie..."

"Since it's our first night together, I'll try to be as gentle as possible."

Yes, please be gentle! I nodded eagerly, but the phrase he used caught my attention.

"O-our first night?"

Our first night together? Why would this be our first night after all the things we've done together? That's mortifying! Mini-Cece ran around in a panic inside my head, so I couldn't ask for help. Meanwhile, my face had gone from being drained of its color to flushed a deep red. I trembled as I stared at Lucas.

"Our first night as a married couple. So I have no intention of letting go, stopping, or giving up. And if you won't undress yourself, then I'll help," he said with a dark, sweet smile. A familiar silver object was in his hand, and my eyes welled up with tears.

I feared my husband was intent on repeating the dress-slashing incident from our first encounter on our wedding night. At the same time, I realized I was also thrilled by his intensity and bowed my head.

I've really left the realm of normalcy. But this dress is important to me, so I want to protect it.

I gathered the courage in my honest maiden's heart from Lucas's maddening

love and spoke with a trembling voice.

"I-I love you, Lord Lukie."

"Cece?"

"I love you, so please...say you love me too. Then I can do it."

The moment I whispered my plea, he pulled me close, our noses touching. His golden eyes glowed with a fierce intensity, making me swallow nervously.

"I love you, Cece. I love you and only you. I'll say it over and over again until I die," he said, voice gentle. "What's wrong?"

It was the question I most feared. My heart ached and my true feelings spilled out.

"I-I've lost weight."

"Okay."

"So... It might be uncomfortable cuddling or holding me."

"I see."

"S-so please don't hate me, Lord Lukie." I stifled my sobs, somehow managing to get the words out.

Lucas stayed silent, his mouth shut.

Strange. Why isn't he talking? Isn't this where he should say, "Of course I won't hate you!" Does he not want me anymore?

As I grew anxious, he blushed faintly and spoke. "Are you trying to turn me on?"

"What?"

"I said I won't let go. If you push me, I really won't be able to hold back. Even if you cry and beg me to stop, I'll make you cry out and scream tomorrow too."

Tomorrow? Not just tonight?

His insistence on not letting go was alarming, but more than that, his words

about making me cry and scream felt strangely ominous. Was what I'd said dangerous?

Part of me dwelled on the question. The rest of me let out a sigh of relief, joy rising inside of me.

"So, you still want to make love to me?"

"I'm going to make love to you until you break. Don't worry."

His firm tone echoed in both my ears and heart, my heart felt at peace, although I didn't know where that reassurance came from, and I inwardly mocked myself. As that self-mockery turned into a soft, sweet laugh, Lucas smiled happily and kissed me.

"Are you still anxious? I can't hold back any longer. Well, it might be more accurate to say that I simply can't hold back," Lucas said with an embarrassed chuckle. His eyes were filled with affection, reflecting nothing but me.

I slipped my arm out of the lace sleeves and reached out to him. "I love you, Lord Lukie. You don't have to hold back. Make love to me as much as you want."

And with that, my beautiful beast's golden eyes gleamed as he leaned over to devour me.

\*\*\*

I wondered if it was normal for the five senses to be this acute. All my nerves were directed straight toward the sensations given to me by one person, to the point that it felt like the meaning of my entire existence was to feel him.

His hands, his skin, his gaze, his breath, his lips, his voice calling my name.

It was like he was trying everything he could to imprint himself upon me; to turn my body into a gooey mess so I would never forget him, even while we were apart.

He licked my toes, slowly rubbed my calves, and licked the insides of my thighs while he gently kneaded my rear end and leg.

"Nngh, haah!"

"Cece, don't close your eyes. Just look at me."

"L-Lord Lukie! Nngh!"

He repeated the process with my other leg, and everywhere he touched grew warm and throbbed painfully until that pain traveled to my stomach. I panted frantically, trying to release the built-up knot of pleasure while he gazed at me affectionately. But he didn't stop; he kept touching me mercilessly.

He licked my belly button, nipped sweetly at my hips, and lapped up the sweat from beneath my breasts while caressing my areolas with the rough pads of his fingers. The stimulation made me thrust my breasts out toward him as if begging for more as I writhed and clutched the pillow tightly, my face flushed. Sometimes he kneaded my breasts softly, other times roughly. Crimson marks scattered across my soft skin, proof of his possession of me.

Lucas let out hot sighs that pushed me toward climax. My nipples hardened, erect with anticipation.

I was so pent up that it was painful, but Lucas never touched me directly.

"Hngh, Lord Lukie!"

I arched my back and cried out shamefully. I wanted him to touch me and make love to me. The corners of his mouth turned upward into a seductive smile.

"You're so good at pleasing me, Cece."

The sight of his gorgeous, relaxed face, his narrowed golden eyes, and the sex appeal that seemed to drip off of him as he teasingly grinned at me created an incredible effect. All I could do was tremble and swallow my tears. It's no good... I can't win against him at all! It's kind of sad.

Overwhelmed by the disparity in power and emotion between us, I couldn't find the words to respond. All I could do was let out a small sigh, my cheeks burning with embarrassment as I turned my face away, instantly regretting it.

Why did I turn away? What am I doing? I'm such an idiot. Lucas looks so surprised! We're finally reunited and have the chance to be together. I just said I want him to make love to me as much as he wants. And now I'm acting like this? I know it's not right, but...! I love him so much, and I want him to touch me more.

But because I love him, it's unbearably embarrassing.

It was incredibly difficult to turn my face back to him.

I regretted my behavior so much that my eyes welled with tears. A soft chuckle came from above. Before I could even look up, Lucas placed a gentle kiss on the nape of my bare neck and smiled happily.

"I love that look on your face. How can I make you want me more, my precious wife?"

His words left me dumbstruck, my body frozen with shock. Wait, why now? Why did he wait until now to call me his precious wife?! Oh, this is too much! Mini-Cece collapsed dramatically.

I wish I could pass out for a bit too. No? I can't? Ugh! How cruel! Why do you always tease me like this? You're so unfair!

Despite the torrent of words swirling in my mind, all that came from my mouth were shallow breaths. My heart pounded so hard it felt like my whole body was trembling.

I couldn't move or make a sound. The heat swirling around me made my whole body flush. My eyes were fixed on the dark, sweet, golden color of his eyes. The bed creaked under Lucas's weight as his skin grazed against my nipples.

"Eeek!"

The hard muscles of his chest pushed my nipples up from the base. The stimulation was too painful to be called pleasure, causing me to arch back and let out a high-pitched cry. Then he began to deliberately, slowly shift his body,

pushing against my breasts as he stimulated me and sucked hard at the base of my throat.

"Ngh, noo!"

I didn't know what he was doing at first, so I unconsciously turned my face away to try to escape the pain. It was only when he sucked hard on another spot that I realized he was leaving a mark.

"Ah, L-Lord Lukie! You promised..."

You promised not to leave a mark where anyone could see! I wanted to say it out loud, but he interrupted me with a deep kiss. The protests died in my throat, and I let out a sweet moan instead.

"Nngh, ahh, Lord Lu—!"

"You're the one who said not to hold back, remember?"

He bit into my shoulder. His fingers combed through my pubic hair, and when I tried to squeeze my thighs together to hide my wetness, he wrapped his tongue around mine again. The pleasure made my legs go limp and fall back to the side.

"But-nngh! Ahh!"

"You told me to make love to you as much as I wanted, right?" He slipped his finger between my open legs, caressing my wetness several times until his fingers were dripping with my honey. Then, Lucas inserted his fingers very slowly, purposely beckoning sound from me.

He rubbed my erogenous zone on my lower belly while he fingered me. My hips bucked as I basked in the pleasure.

"Ahh, stop... Lord Lukie, Lord Lukie! Ahhh!"

After he used my own words against me, he had cornered me with no escape, picking up on my deepest desires. I gave him a pleading look, and he returned it with the same intensity.

"I want you so badly. I'm going crazy, Cecilia, so I won't take no for an answer tonight. So, please...want me back."

Despite the ominous words, he slipped his fingers through mine and kissed my wedding ring with a sweet smile. I felt a tight contraction deep inside me and writhed in response, pressing my face into the pillow to muffle my pleas.

\*\*\*

I, Cecilia Cline, was being pushed to my limits.

I had sorely underestimated my body's capacity, to be honest. Whether it was too sensitive or my orgasms felt too good, I wasn't sure—but the feeling was closer to pain than pleasure, and I was breathless.

"Ah, that was close... Are you okay, Cecilia?"

"Nngh! I-I'm fine... Eek! Noo! Haah!"

"Do you want to take a break?" He looked down at me with concern, gently pushing away a lock of sweaty hair that was plastered to my cheek. This only made me feel sorrier for him.

As he showered me with love and caresses, he took his time to prepare me with his fingers. I was soaking wet, but perhaps because it had been so long, it was still too tight to accommodate him. I'd come so much that my inner walls were swollen. On top of that, every little touch made me cry out with ecstasy and climax. And each time, Lucas patiently waited for my breathing to settle.

We were facing a problem. He couldn't fit inside me.

I was so happy when he told me to want him that I had cast aside all my shame and reason to the point where I had completely opened up to him. The before and after were truly shocking.

I'm so sensitive it hurts, and I can't even be penetrated! I don't need this overly sensitive body! Lucas even has to give me water to drink. Doesn't that make me a completely useless wife?!

My emotions were about to explode, so I clamped my mouth shut to suppress

them. He took another sip of water from the pitcher, raked a hand through his damp hair, and chuckled at me.

"Why are you making that face, Cece? I told you we'd take it slow, since it's been a while."

"But isn't this hard on you, Lucas?" I started to apologize, but he silenced me with a passionate kiss.

"Mm, mm..."

"Don't worry about me," he murmured. "Besides, this is exciting in its own way."

I stared at him in surprise as he wiped the water droplets from my mouth with his thumb, licking them with a seductive smile.

"Huh?"

"Your shyness reminds me of the very first night we spent together. It's amazing. Watching you try so hard to take me makes me feel like I'm experiencing your first time over and over. Not only that, but every time I get deeper inside you, I get to watch you dissolve into pleasure. I can't think of anything in the world that would make me happier."

Hearing those words come out of a man so beautiful only made me blush and tremble from head to toe.

I-is that really how you see me? I dissolve into orgasms? I'm that naughty?!

I was shocked and embarrassed. I wanted to suggest taking a longer break, but when I shook my head and pleaded with him, his golden eyes darkened with desire. A wicked smile came to his face.

"I want you to drown in this, so that's not an option. Besides, knowing that I won't have to hold back once I'm fully inside makes it worth the wait."

"Eek! Ahh!"

With that, he lifted my legs and began to move his hips again. The stimulation

was too much. Tears welled up and ran down my cheeks.

"Just hearing...you moan makes me want to come... Your breathing's steady now, right? Just a little more..."

"No! Please, Lord Lukie! Stop, or I'll..."

He pinned our intertwined fingers to the sheets, watching me with a smoldering gaze as my body convulsed and my hips bucked wildly beneath them. His eyes were filled with a maddening love that seemed to lay my soul bare.

"No, don't look!"

Look at me.



```
"Don't touch me like that!"

Touch me more.

"Stop! Ah!"

Go deeper.

"L-Lord Lukie! Please!"

Tell me you love me.

"I love you, Cecilia."

"Ahh!"
```

How far will you lift me up? Without you, I wouldn't even be here now. My body is yours. Only yours.

"Lord Lukie, I love you! I love you!" I wrapped my arms around his neck and called out to him with all my love while he held me tightly.

"Thank you for wanting me, my wife, my beloved," he whispered into my ear. His words were so filled with warmth and joy that I knew he meant it with all his heart. I pulled him closer and whispered back through my sobs.

"I love you, my husband."

His hot breath brushed against my ear as he turned my face toward his. Our lips met, our skin melted into one, and he carried me away to a white, blissful world.

\*\*\*

I slowly awakened to the sensation of sunlight hitting my face. I felt a warm touch on my skin and gently opened my eyes to find a strong, muscular chest. Gradually, I shifted my gaze upward.

Sunlight gleamed on his handsome face as he slept peacefully. Lucas looked utterly adorable. I just barely managed to suppress the urge to squeal, "How cute!"

So amazing... Even when he's asleep, he's beautiful! It's incredible!

Also, this is a rare sight, isn't it? He always wakes up earlier than I do, so I rarely get to see his sleeping face. I can't miss out on this opportunity.

I eagerly leaned in to get a better look at Lucas.

Wow, wow, wow! His skin is so smooth! And his lashes are so long!

Even when he was asleep, there was a sexy quality to his eyes. His slightly messy hair gave him a youthful, almost boyish look, creating a mysterious aura.

Honestly, "beautiful" didn't even come close to describing him. I couldn't help but feel like I was losing as a woman in comparison.

I hadn't removed my makeup the night before, so I couldn't bear to objectively assess my current state. I felt like it was almost presumptuous to even feel upset, though. I was slightly dejected, but then my eyes focused on something else.

Faint scratches were on his neck. The realization of what they were hit me. My head nearly exploded.

This can't be... Please, someone tell me it's not what I think! I screamed internally. I covered my face with both hands as the reason for the scratch dawned on me, bowing my head in embarrassment.

I think steam might be coming out of my ears! Someone help me! I could just die of shame!

If someone else sees that mark and realizes how it got there, I think my soul might leave my body on the spot. I wouldn't even want it to come back! It's all because this wickedly handsome man wouldn't stop despite repeated pleas for mercy. I clung to him out of pure desperation! It's not my fault. So why am I the one feeling so embarrassed?!

Tears welled up inside of me. I quietly spread my fingers and peeked through my hands to look at the scratches once more.

Ah, they're still there! What should I do? Maybe the scratches will disappear if

I wish for it! Wait, that's it. I can heal it!

I couldn't believe I'd gotten so flustered that I'd forgotten healing was my specialty. It was like a light had dawned on me. I immediately brightened and leaned in eagerly to check on Lucas again. But then our eyes met in the sunlight, and I froze.

"Good morning, Cece. Having fun?"

Oh, he's awake! Was he only pretending to be asleep? Now that he's awake, I'll have to explain and get him to let me heal him. Why do I have to endure even more embarrassment?!

I was too flustered to even return the greeting and just glared at him, my face turning bright red as he sat up.

He met my gaze with an amused look. "Mm, I slept well. So? What were you planning to do to me while I was asleep?"

It was first thing in the morning, and he was already saying inappropriate things. Sex appeal oozed from him, making me want to throw a pillow at him with all my might.

Why do you always say things like that? Do you want me to stuff a pillow in your mouth?

"Nothing nefarious!"

I swung my pillow down with a satisfying swoosh, but Lucas easily caught it and snatched it from me.

"Oh, really? Well, can I attack you anyway?"

"Hey, give me back my pillow! Wait, what?"

What is he talking about? I'm angry, but he's ignoring that fact and talking about attacking me? How dare he? My inner thoughts really didn't make much sense, either.

Then he touched my breast, causing me to jolt.

Seriously?!

"Here's your pillow." He politely handed me back the pillow.

"Ah, thanks," I said, hurriedly covering myself with it. "I-I mean, Lord Lukie, you idiot! You pervert! You're a creep!"

I glared at Lucas while he laughed, making my heart ache and my cheeks flush.

Even though he's a pervert and a meanie, I still love him. I hate how crazy in love with him I am sometimes!

"H-honestly..." I tried to finish my feeble protest, but he was as unbothered as ever.

"Perverted creep, huh? Well, maybe I am, but only for you. By the way, weren't you the one desperately clinging to this pervert?" He flashed me a mischievous smile as he tapped on the scratches on his neck.

I screamed into my pillow. That's so mean!

"I'll erase it! I'll heal it right now and make it disappear!"

Too embarrassed and angry to notice that I was no longer addressing him politely, I started to trace a healing sigil with my fingers.

Lucas just waved his hand. "No, you can't."

The spell dissipated. My eyes widened in surprise. Lucas shrugged and smiled, placing a finger on his lips.

Mm, he looks so handsome.

No, wait! What just happened? He canceled my spell with a wave of his hand! That's beyond overpowered! No one would believe me if I told them!

Forgetting my anger, I just stared at Lucas, who smiled wryly.

"It's a mark you gave me, Cece. If you erase it, I'll lose my motivation."

"Motivation?" I asked, confused. For what?

"For the campaign, of course," he said.

I buried my face in the pillow, trying to hide its rising temperature.

A Hero using marks made in the bedroom as motivation to fight ancient dragons? I can't understand the mind of someone that crazy. And yet, here I am, blushing at his words, so I guess I don't have any room to talk.

With that, he picked me up in his arms. "Let's take a bath first. Oh, and what were you planning on doing?"

I mumbled into my pillow that I was just trying to erase the mark.

"No one will see it," he reassured me. "Don't worry."

Reluctantly, I backed down.

At the door to the bath, he tossed the pillow aside. I silently screamed and glared at him, turning red. "You're making that face even though I've already seen everything," he whispered, his grip on me tightening. "Do you want to go back to bed?"

"N-no, I'll take a bath!" I squeezed out a response, desperately trying to protect myself.

Lucas raised his eyebrow at me as if to say, I knew you'd say that.

Ugh, so frustrating!

Then he carried me to the bath and washed every inch of me so thoroughly that I was left breathless. He picked me up again and headed toward another door, smiling. "I think you'll like this, Cece," he said.

He sat me down in the outdoor bath. "Oh, wow!" I couldn't help but exclaim at the sight before me. I looked up at him in excitement despite thinking how improper it was. "This is amazing! But why an outdoor bath?"

Small stone steps lead to the bath from outside. I wondered why it was designed that way. Entering from outside would be too dangerous, and even though he was the second prince, I was surprised it would be allowed.

Lucas hugged me from behind with a satisfied smile and gave me an unexpected reason that left me speechless.

"Oh, this? It's so I can bathe right away when I return from campaigns and things like that. When you kill a bunch of enemies, you get covered in blood. And if I come home covered in blood without a way to bathe quickly, I'll get things dirty," he explained with a sweet yet troubled expression.

I managed to smile without my cheek twitching. "Thank you for your service to our kingdom," I said.

I must say, that was quite an accomplishment for me. A testament to my ladylike upbringing! But using my refined manners in such a way feels rather unsatisfactory. And honestly, I'm not even sure that was the right response here.

But I had no idea how else I should respond. Proper etiquette never covered how to respond to someone who told you they were drenched in blood.

Come to think of it, I'd forgotten that Lucas embodied absurdity. The reason for this new renovation was both extremely practical and extremely dangerous! I thought it was risky to have a bath accessible from the outside, especially for the second prince, but this was on a whole new level!

What did he mean when he said, "and things like that"? It sounded like the second prince was doing dangerous things out there, so having an accessible bath wasn't a big deal. He was already the most dangerous thing around...

I'm sure the people who manage the castle were greatly conflicted about whether they should approve this renovation or not. I really do appreciate their hard work, though.

My body relaxed against Lucas as I gazed at the open scenery. A few birds flew high in the clear blue sky. The sound of rustling leaves came to my ears. The wind that caressed my flushed cheeks and shoulders felt wonderful. The water wasn't too hot, and Lucas's embrace soothed my fatigued body. I unconsciously let out a soft sigh and closed my eyes in contentment.

Lucas kissed my cheek. "Are you tired?" he asked.

I couldn't help but respond somewhat sullenly. *After all, you're the one who exhausted me!* 

"Yes, I'm very tired. Someone wouldn't let me go at all..."

I turned around, but seeing his beautiful face closer than I expected—that mischievous smile and gleaming, lust-filled eyes—made me trail off.

You wicked prince...

What am I even saying? Complaining that he wouldn't let go of me is so obvious. What happened to my training as a noblewoman? I screamed internally.

My attempt to glare at him was interrupted by my eyes moistening with embarrassment.

His golden eyes flickered seductively. I walked right into that one...

"I told you I wouldn't let you go from the start, remember?"

Aaaaarrrrghhhhhh!

Yes, he did say that! But who would've thought he meant it seriously?! It was just our first night together! I thought it was some sweet, romantic line! Maybe I should've known better, given his history. And it was my fault when I told him not to hold back! But to be continuously, erm, ravished all night isn't something a typical noblewoman would ever imagine! Even if my love-struck brain can handle it, it's not my fault! Absolutely not!

Oh, and it's hard for even a normal person to—I told my logical self to shut up and turned my flushed face away in a huff. I heard him chuckle with amusement, which made me frown in a mixture of frustration and affection.

I don't wanna lose this battle! I'm gonna fight! I turned back to face him, ready to retaliate, but I couldn't take my eyes off him.

"If you're that tired, how about I make you feel better?" He gave me a wicked

grin and looked at me expectantly, his eyes sparkling with anticipation. My anger fizzled out, and I inwardly lowered my raised fist in defeat.

Ugh, I'm so weak against him. Even when he playfully touches my breasts, all my protests melt away! And that devilish smile of his is way too unfair!

I remembered he said I'd enjoy the bath, and he was right. I tried to hide my flushed cheeks before reluctantly answering him.

"Well then, please do."

"All right, I'll do this for you. Cece. How about this?"

Huh? I gave him a look of confusion as he tilted his head cutely to the side and looked at me.

"Eek!" I let out a high-pitched scream as a jolt ran through me, leaving me trembling and covering my mouth in shock.

What was that? No, I know what it was, but it was way more intense than I expected. I underestimated my own sensitivity! Ugh, this is so embarrassing! I'm gonna die!

My skin tingled from the sensation and my body trembled. The sound of water splashing came to my ears. I covered my mouth as I panted and blushed, then looked down to see Lucas casting some kind of spell that caused the water to ripple.

Huh? What was that? Nothing seems to have changed...

As I looked at the water that splashed around the edge of the tub, I tilted my head slightly in confusion. I wasn't overly familiar with any other forms of magic besides healing magic, so I was unable to comprehend his overpowered magic. Yet I was disappointed in myself because I could sense a terrifying shift in the atmosphere behind me.

"Huh?"

I felt Lucas's scorching gaze on my back; all my nerves tensed with fear.

I have a bad feeling about this! What was that bone-chilling noise he just made?!

In response to my inner cries, my rational self sighed and said, "The best strategy out of thirty-six possible ones would be to retreat, if possible. But that's the one tactic we absolutely can't use!" I wholeheartedly agreed with this conclusion.

Yes, I think so too. But what should I do, then? I shook my head at the impossible situation.

A low, sweet voice called out to me, numbing my lower belly—however, I couldn't tell whether it was from fear or anticipation.

"Cece?"

"Y-yes?" I asked, barely managing to respond as I breathed shallowly.

I stiffened as he smiled and pulled me closer, not letting me escape.

"Heh. Come on, Cecilia. Let's warm you up. You're tired, aren't you?" he whispered seductively into my ear, making my skin tingle.

Then he lightly splashed water over my shoulder and slowly trailed down, making me shiver. When I tried to pull away, an invisible shock ran through my outstretched arm, making me squeal like a frightened puppy. That made me blush even more.

"Eek!"

"You're so cute, Cecilia."

He kissed my reddened temple, holding me tenderly in his arms. From an outsider's perspective, we probably looked like a loving couple who couldn't bear to be apart. The truth was that inside, I was trembling with fear over the humiliation about to befall me.

Honestly, I felt like crying. Never did I imagine that techniques I knew from my past life could be used in such a way. Tears of frustration welled up inside of me.

As I trembled, he began to explain, his hand grazing my skin.

"My father, the duke, discovered this technique by accident." I didn't know what he meant by "discovery," but he said it with a gleeful glint in his golden eyes as he sent a weak electric current through the water.

"L-Lord Lukie, stop it!"

"He was drinking in the bath and tried to keep his drink ice-cold. But he overdid it and ended up freezing part of the floor along with his drink. He panicked and pried the glass off the floor."

"Seriously, st-stop! Angh!"

Why are you giving me electric shocks while you're explaining?! I said, stop! Listen to me! Also, the duke's antics are just too much! I feel like Lucas has inherited way too many of his free-spirited traits! It's a nuisance!

I ignored the splashing water wetting my hair as I desperately tried to break free from Lucas's grasp. Only, I was paralyzed, numb, as his hand pressed against my skin.

"Ahh, nngh!"

"Then, my mother walked in, furious that my dad was drinking in the bath. She saw the cracked floor and unleashed her lightning magic. After that, his nagging shoulder pain was gone, much to his surprise, so he taught it to me."

Did they seriously discover an electric hot bath by using real lightning magic?! That's shocking—pun not intended!

Even though I knew electric massages could improve circulation and aid in recovery from my past life, it seemed far too risky. I wish the duke hadn't told Lucas!

Tears threatened to spill as the absurdity of this situation combined with my own predicament overwhelmed me.

"L-Lord Lukie..."

"Hmm?"

Grr, this naughty prince really looks like he's enjoying this!

I glared at him with tear-filled eyes. He chuckled and increased the intensity of the electric shocks.

"Eek! Th-that's enough!" I pleaded through tense lips. "I've had enough!"

"Are you sure? You're not tired anymore?" he asked, eyes narrowed.

The hardness I felt against my rear end made my heart pound loudly. There's no way we'll do it in the bath! If I let this happen once, he'll do it again and again. I should stop him now! Good luck, Cece!

I jumped at Lucas's question without a second thought, not realizing that was my biggest mistake.

"I-I'm not tired anymore. Eek!"

The moment I raised my hips to refuse, a current of electricity ran through me with a crackle, making my legs tremble and my senses dull. The numbness was so intense that I couldn't even feel myself kneeling. I gritted my teeth and was about to say, "I told you I wasn't tired anymore!" when I felt his fingers parting my closed labia to check if I was wet down there. My eyes widened in shock.

"You love feeling good, don't you? I can tell you're wet, even underwater," he whispered into my ear.

Liar! Why are you lying?!

"N-no, I'm..."

I was so shocked that I couldn't even finish my sentence. Lucas kissed my neck soothingly while he slowly drew circles around my sensitive nub. I gasped when I felt his hard erection slip through my slit.

"You're not? Then why is your cute little hole twitching so greedily? You want it, don't you?"

"N-no, it's not twitching! I can't..."

I shook my head in response to the outrageously naughty things he said, not caring that my wet hair was stuck to my cheek. Lucas brushed it away for me and kissed me on the cheek.

"But you said you weren't tired."

Th-that's incitement! And ridiculously effective! I exclaimed inwardly, inadvertently impressed. My mouth flapped open and closed as I felt another impact.

He looked at me sweetly, then quickly grabbed me by the chin, holding my mouth in place while he pushed his tongue inside. I wanted to run away, but I was too weak against his kisses. All the strength left my body, and my hips gradually sank back even though he wasn't holding me down.

My inner walls convulsed with delight as his hot cock penetrated me.

"Mmm, n-no!" I screamed, wanting him to stop. "Y-you promised me, Lord Lukie!"

"What promise? Oh, that we wouldn't do it outside?"

"Y-yes!"

That's the one! You promised me! And if you break it, I won't talk to you! I glared at him tearfully.

Lucas only laughed with amusement. "I didn't break my promise. There's a roof above here, so we're technically still in the palace and not outside. Plus, I've made it so no one can hear us."

This otherworldly, handsome man's casual declaration left me speechless.

Don't tell me that's the real reason he had this bath constructed like this?!

My throat tightened in shock, which was overtaking my annoyance. Then I stared at his smiling face.

Lucas's lips glistened with desire. He slowly flicked his red tongue over his lips, once again sending a crisp, crackling current through me.

"Eek! Ah, nngh!"

My skin went numb from the stimulation. My legs went limp, so I clung to him, his fingers interlocking with mine, and desperately leaned my upper body against him. However, my resistance was futile. My back slid down his hard chest. My rear end finally shifted back, and his thick head plunged inside.

"Nngh! Noooo, L-Lord Lukie!"

You're so mean! I shook my flushed face, and he spoke in a resigned tone. Why does it seem like I'm the selfish one, you nasty, wicked person?

"I made sure you weren't tired and didn't force you. You brought your hips down yourself, Cece. Right?" he said gently, nipping at my earlobe.

My eyes opened even wider, and he continued speaking with a happy, delighted look on his face.

"Besides, I told you I'd make you scream and cry again today, didn't I? And you said I didn't have to hold back, remember, Cecilia?"

He smiled as if I had readily agreed. When I gritted my teeth and glared at his beautiful face this time, he gave me a malicious grin.

How dirty! He's so beautiful on the outside, but his insides are pitch black! Pure evil! No one's ever been more demonic and eviler than him! It's shocking, actually!

My escape route was completely blocked. To top it off, he brought up what I'd said the night before, so I couldn't help but feel frustrated and angry. Not only was my numb body completely useless, but it was slowly accepting him.

"Ah, noooo!"

"You're so adorable. You're adjusting better than you did yesterday."

"You...you're such a mean, perverted jerk! You...you evil prince!" I could only resist him with my words now, but I still moaned desperately. Lucas just laughed softly and held me closer.

"How harsh, Cecilia. Shall I be a little meaner to meet my adorable wife's expectations? The room's soundproofed, so you can cry out for me as loudly as you want."

"No! Let go of me, you perverted..." I desperately tried to push away his hands as he fondled my breasts. But the ominous words he said finally clicked, startling me. "Huh?"

At the same time, he pressed his fingers against my swollen, engorged bud, sending a sharp shockwave through me.

"Ahh!" The high-pitched sound of my scream echoed as my vision turned white.

It took me a minute to realize the scream had come from my own mouth. I arched my back violently, like a fish out of water.

"Did you come? Ah, you're so wet now. It's so much easier to get inside."

"Nngh, Lord Lukie... Please..."

I could no longer support my trembling body and voluntarily accepted his hard cock, shaking my head as I lowered myself onto him. I felt my insides stretch painfully but without much resistance. I slumped against his body. The pleasure that had been building deep inside of me exploded at his touch, and I arched back, screaming once more.

"No, stop! Noooo!"

The shock of my orgasm made my body shiver uncontrollably, my inner walls contracting. My vision flickered as the heat in my head threatened to boil over. I called out Lucas's name through my moans, and he gently traced his fingers over my nipples and whispered seductively in my ear to make me whimper.

"Does it feel good, Cecilia?"

"Ahh, no, Lord Lukie..."

"Well, it feels amazing to me. It isn't fair if I'm the only one getting pleasure. I want you to feel good, too."

He squeezed my hard nipples, coaxing the words he desired from me.

"Nngh, it feels good... It feels so good...!"

My walls squeezed Lucas tightly, reacting to his throbbing manhood. The surge of happiness I felt from that caused me to tighten around him further.

"Nn, this is amazing..." he whispered in my ear.

My dazed mind was filled with joy, all protests dissolving instantly. A tight knot formed in my lower belly. My body begged for more, though shame kept my mouth closed. Lucas sensed this, embraced me lovingly, and kissed me.

"Ah, mm... Nngh..."

"I love you Cecilia..."

"Ah, Lord Lukie... Mm...!"

As his tongue entwined with mine, my pussy quivered in surrender.

"Let's feel good together, okay?"

"Mmm, L-Lord Lukie!"

Unable to take the pleasure he was giving me, I called out his name, seeking comfort. His golden eyes filled with joy. "Do I need to be a little meaner for you, to be honest?" he teased gently.

He helped me let go of my inhibitions. I looked at him with teary eyes, which only made him smile at me warmly.

"You're so mean..."

"And you're the cutest, Cecilia. Let me meet your expectations, my precious wife." He had an expression of endless love on his face as he lifted my trembling legs and kissed me deeply and captured my moans in his mouth.

\*\*\*

We held each other, kissed, and whispered our love. We laughed and slept together.

The sweet yet intense day came to an end. The next day, my knight kneeled under the clear sky and kissed my hand, making a vow.

"I swear by our kingdom and my beloved goddess that I will bring back the dragon."

The surrounding crowd erupted in cheers, but I had to fight the urge to shake my head. *I don't need a dragon!* I thought. Instead, I forced a graceful smile.

I kissed his forehead to pray for his safety, then spoke words reserved only for his wife.

"May fortune be with you in battle. My soul will always be by your side."

His eyes widened slightly at my words. As I smiled and mouthed my love for him, he relaxed and murmured, "I love you too."

My throat tightened with emotion, so I forced a smile. Smile, Cecilia.

As our eyes remained locked, I struggled to keep my emotions from overflowing, reminding myself to smile.

You gave me love.

You made promises.

You gave me a ring, a place for my heart.

I will stand as Cecilia, someone you could be proud of, and hold everything you've given me in your heart.

Smile, Cecilia, for the person you love the most in the world. Smile your best smile.

Lucas's golden eyes softened sweetly as I continued to smile, a sense of relief in my chest.

"Take care. I'll be waiting for your return."

I squeezed his hand once, then let go.

He stood, his cloak fluttering around him. "I'm off," he responded confidently.

I watched his fearless gaze and confident stride, resentful for it now more than ever. But I quietly gave thanks for the person I would spend my life with, and I hoped he didn't see me cry.

Goddess, please, I beg you. He's the only one. My only person. I don't care what else I lose. Even if the story demands it, I'll become a villainess if I must.

But please, I beg you. Protect my one and only.

## **Chapter Three**

**N**O MATTER HOW MUCH I cried, the days passed by as usual. It was very difficult to keep standing tall in my colorless world, but the golden band around my finger always offered me solace.

I spent my days gathering information at tea parties and soirees, protecting my position and solidifying it even further so no one could intrude upon us. So that, when Lucas returned, I could leap into his arms without hesitation.

Living through those monotonous days without him was difficult, and I couldn't help but sigh when I received a summons from the queen.

Even with gloves on, some people noticed. Only one ring was meant for the ring finger of the left hand, and nobles needed to be perceptive to survive. Since the groundwork had already been laid, information spread gradually, like water trickling down.

And as rumors began circulating in the palace about Lucas and me being effectively married, whispers of the queen visiting the villa more often also began. It was then that I received an invitation to a tea party from Her Majesty. Here we go, I thought, as I looked down at the letter.

"I have a hard time believing she'll behave herself," I muttered.

"That trash—er, idiot—is probably up to something," Elsa said.

Did she just call him trash? Correcting it to "idiot" isn't much better. Or maybe it does slightly soften the blow... But Felix was an idiot, so I let it slide.

"I wonder if the queen still hasn't given up," I said.

"Yes, and she can't force you to do anything now that you have the ring. I think she's using this tea party to confirm you're wearing it and to appeal to your emotions, Lady Cecilia."

"After six years together, she might brazenly claim that she isn't entirely

opposed to the idea," Anna chimed in.

"Yes, I can definitely see her saying that."

I sighed, imagining what the queen would do. She was originally from a neighboring country, married into this kingdom, and possessed that combination of arrogance and innocence characteristic of royalty. Her use of authority was slightly immature, and she often made insensitive remarks because she judged everyone by her own standards.

She hadn't even spoken to me when her son abandoned me, yet now she was audaciously suggesting I reconsider my relationship with him. It was absurd by any measure.

I gripped the letter tightly, not wanting to believe it would come to that.

Lord Dirk had sent me a letter, mentioning that Felix had feelings for me.

I opened it and read it. I figured there was no point in stressing out over the letter when I'd crumpled it up and threw it away. The maids didn't even pick it up after I threw it until I gave it another glance!

Love? Are you kidding me? Has he gotten amnesia? Is he completely unaware of how he belittled me over the past six years? Did he hit his head?

My vision darkened when I remembered how horribly Felix had treated me while I was his fiancée. And who could blame me? He never escorted me at tea parties. He never even offered me a seat. How many times had I stood the entire time? He never responded to my invitations or letters. Even at soirees, he merely dropped me off and immediately disappeared. He never gave me gifts of dresses or jewelry at events sponsored by the royal family, which you'd expect, being engaged to a prince.

Okay, just thinking about it is making me see red.

Where had the budget for the future queen gone? I bet he'd spent it all on the women he'd been screwing around on me with. They always had smug looks on their faces. I lost count of how many times I heard, "You poor thing. You're engaged to the prince, but he doesn't even love you," whispered into my ear. Even Lady Mia said it to me.

My hand clenched around the letter.

I'd never once wished for Felix's love, but being mocked by people who didn't know how hard I'd worked at being his fiancée was infuriating. So of course, I retaliated, just as a proper lady would.

Who in their right mind would believe their partner loved them after being treated like that?

I don't have a masochistic streak. Well, maybe a little when Lucas teases me, but... No, I really don't have one! I inclined my face to hide it, realizing I was making excuses to myself, and pressed my hands against my flushed cheeks. Elsa rolled on the floor with laughter for some reason, saying, "Even remembering's making her blush!" which only made me flush deeper.

I should've taken care of it sooner...

"A goddess has descended!" Elsa crooned nonsensically. Surely she's not doing this on purpose. She's not intentionally making me feel embarrassed, is she?! Kate, I'm trusting you to take care of this!

I looked at the letter again.

Even Lord Dirk's way of writing was infuriating. He wrote, "Since you chose Lucas, I'll make an exception and tell you," putting his sinister personality on full display. He was basically saying, "Don't change your mind."

I wanted to sarcastically reply, "Your dear brother is already my husband. Too bad!" That would be improper, though, and would probably backfire.

I folded the letter again, letting out my frustration, and raised my head.

"Well, I suppose we'll just have to make Her Majesty understand," I said with a smile.

My maids nodded vigorously, their eyes filled with such determination I had

to chuckle.

"Leave it to us! We're ready!"

"We've chosen lace gloves that show off your ring."

"We're ready to go at any time!"

How reliable. But Elsa...you really don't need to bring that hidden weapon! It's just a tea party! Put that away!

I couldn't help but give a strained smile.

\*\*\*

It was the day of the tea party.

As we walked through the somewhat desolate castle toward the party venue, Kate suddenly said, "Pardon me for a moment," before disappearing. Once she returned, her voice was filled with anger. "I have something to tell you."

I nearly tore the tassel off my fan when I heard what she had to say. "Are you joking?" I asked.

"No, I'm certain of it. Lady Meyer is also attending and is already at the party."

"What is Her Majesty thinking?" I sighed frustratedly, forgetting we were in the hallway.

Why in the world would she invite her son's ex-fiancée and his current fiancée to the same tea party? Not to mention, his current fiancée was the *cause* of my broken engagement. It was simply absurd. *Does she* want *to see a catfight?* 

Well, it's ridiculous to think I'd fight over Felix anyway. I don't want him. I'm sorry to say there's not one bit of affection for him left in my heart, even after six years together.

I could say that with certainty because I'd given all my love to Lucas. No matter how much the queen hinted at Felix or tried to unsettle me by inviting Mia to events—even if Felix himself confessed his feelings to me—my heart

would never waver. My heart belonged to only one man.

My eyes softened when I saw my precious gold band through the lace glove on my left hand. Lucas's voice from last night echoed through my mind, and I felt a rush of warmth.

"Cece, open your mouth for a goodnight kiss," he said over the long-range transmission magic while Elsa was still in the room! That man is seriously strange! And he even said things like, "I want to feel your tongue on mine," and, "I want a deep kiss." How can he create such a naughty atmosphere with just his voice?!

The moment he said, "I want to kiss you somewhere else, too," Elsa and I both turned red and shook our heads.

"No, don't listen, Elsa! Cut the connection! Please!"

"I'm sorry," Elsa said, "but I really can't because Master Lucas scares me! I can't cut it off!"

Instead, we just ended up clutching our pillows and cushions against our faces, completely mortified. Anna and Kate had pressed their foreheads against the wall, making perfect right angles. Their spirits appeared to have left their bodies.

My face felt like it was steaming once Lucas's obscene phone call ended. I couldn't even move. When I could speak, I screamed disparaging things about him into my pillow.

The maids were also bright red, and their eyes were rolled up into their heads. That man is a dangerous beast! He captures my heart in so many ways...

Lost in those embarrassing memories, Kate's angry voice pulled me back to reality.

"Shall we say you're unwell so you won't have to attend?" she asked.

"I agree! I believe it's completely reasonable to abstain after such unreasonable behavior."

"Tell Lord Dirk—" Elsa started.

"Shush. Remember, this is the castle," Kate cautioned.

Nice job, Kate, I thought, giving her a small nod. Some things shouldn't be said in the castle, Elsa. Keep your mouth shut.

"No, I'll attend."

"But..."

"If I don't go, it may be seen as denying the rumors altogether. They invited me to confirm the situation. We should make sure we know where we all stand and build a good relationship," I said. "Also, I haven't had a proper conversation with Lady Mia. She's Lucas's childhood friend, isn't she? I've been wanting to speak with her."

"Oh, that's nice of you, Lady Cecilia!"

"I love that confrontational expression on your face!"

"Pfff!"

"Quiet." Kate clamped Elsa's mouth shut.

"Thanks, Kate," I said, chuckling.

I touched my cheek and tilted my head. *Am I wearing a confrontational expression? Perhaps I am.* 

I didn't plan on bringing up the broken engagement. If Mia wanted Felix, she was more than welcome to him. But she *had* approached Lucas...

That's really unacceptable. If she still fancies herself the heroine, then I'll do my best this time.

That's really what I thought, but...! I inwardly lamented as I gently placed my cup back on the saucer. What a dreadful tea party this is! I underestimated that ditz, Mia. I can't believe you've gone and gotten yourself pregnant! Is this an 18+ game?! Oh, wait. Maybe it is. Lucas is a real sadist. Still, it's enough to make me cry!

Even if she didn't know Felix had been magically castrated, shouting about the loss of her chastity in front of the queen, her future mother-in-law, made me want to bury my face in my hands.

"So you see, there's no need for Lady Cecilia and Lord Lucas's engagement! The future of the royal family is already in my belly! Don't you agree, Your Majesty?! Besides..."

I turned my gaze away from Mia, who was now shouting that Lucas cared for her deeply and was protecting her, and his campaign was all for her sake.

Honestly, her lack of decorum and education as a noblewoman is positively shocking.

Her words didn't matter. Lucas was a national treasure. He was a Hero. To speak of him as one's personal possession so openly was beyond naïve. Speaking about Lucas, the Hero, so casually had turned the knights' gazes so cold it was like a blizzard had blown through. Not only that, but she was Felix's fiancée.

Mia had been sequestered to the royal villa, so whose child could it even be? If it was one of her groupies, it could be the captain of the knights. Or the prime minister's son. Even the cardinal's son! I would hope not since the latter was a man of the cloth...

No matter how this scandal turned out, the idiocy of whoever's son was responsible would lead to their family's downfall, or even worse, their complete dissolution. *Oof, rest in peace...* 

Wait, if the prime minister is in trouble, then my father, his advisor, might be too! How infuriating! Honestly, all she does is cause trouble! I thought, stealing a glance at the queen.

She signaled to the knights behind her with an icy gaze.

"That's enough. Take her away to the dungeon."

"Wh-what? Why should I be taken to the dungeon?! Felix's child is—mmph?!"

Despite being a noblewoman, Mia had challenged the queen. Therefore, she was being hauled away to the dungeon, unable to resist.

I lowered my gaze. I couldn't forgive her for what she had done. Had Lucas not saved me, protected me, my dignity would have been shattered. My efforts, my pride, my entire life—had all been reduced to nothing.

I'd never considered taking my own life, but honestly, I didn't know if I could've endured it.

However, this wasn't the ending I'd wanted. Watching a pregnant woman being dragged away as a criminal brought me no joy. A terrible sense of self-loathing welled within me as I sat there, unable to defend her. I knew I could do nothing to protect her.

Even though Felix had lost his claim to the throne, he was still a legitimate member of the royal family. And Mia had deceived him and committed adultery. She falsely claimed her unborn child was Felix's. That was practically treason, considering he could not have children. Being charged with a crime was inevitable.

Still, seeing her being used like this to try to persuade me...

It filled me with overwhelming guilt and nausea. I couldn't accept what Mia had done, but at the same time, her unborn child was innocent. My heart ached, stabbed by a hundred needles.

The queen was trying to elicit my sympathy by showing me how Mia had betrayed Felix. And the fact that they had removed her from the villa meant that Felix must've approved of it. Honestly, I never thought he could be so selfish and arrogant.

I took a deep breath, my eyes still lowered, and caressed my ring to steady my emotions.

You and your son are both incredibly pitiful. I pity the two of you for not understanding how to love.

I carefully crafted my expression to show no emotion and then looked at the queen. Her face faltered.

"Your Majesty," I said as slowly and gently as possible, tilting my head slightly to the side. "Could you please instruct the knights not to handle her so roughly? The sight of a pregnant noblewoman being dragged to the dungeon is just too pitiful."

The queen frowned deeply as she stared at me.

I lifted my cup and gave a troubled smile, but showed no sign of agitation. I won't fall for your schemes. It may sound hypocritical, but the dungeon is truly out of the question. I'm sure it's terrible there. Sending me to a brothel would be mild in comparison. It's too horrifying to even imagine!

This tea had been prepared by the queen's top maid and was supposed to be of exquisite quality. However, it tasted bland, given the distressing scene I had just witnessed. Nevertheless, I maintained my composure.

"You feel sorry for that woman?" the queen asked.

"Yes," I said, looking at her. "It's truly a shame things have come to this. She must've loved Lord Felix once. Where did it all go wrong?"

Perhaps your son is at fault, my tone implied. Plus, Felix must've ignored Mia's infidelity.

After all, Mia insisted it was Felix's child, so they must've had a physical relationship. Although Felix seemed unaware of the castration spell, he probably intended to abandon her, regardless of whether she bore a child.

I don't think such treatment is appropriate for a woman he supposedly cared for.

"That woman never loved Felix. Don't you agree?" she said.

"Both Lady Mia and Lord Felix publicly declared their true love for each other. Anyone who attended the academy knows that. I thought you knew as well, Your Majesty."

After all, didn't you abandon me because your son claimed he'd found his true love? I implied.

"Cecilia!" The queen to raised her voice. "You spent six years with Felix, yet you don't feel sorry for what just happened to him?"

"Your Majesty, it is precisely *because* I spent six years with him that I support his true love! That's why I beg of you to show some mercy upon poor Lady Mia." I smiled sweetly and sighed behind my fan.

She really wants me to pity Felix?

You want me to pity Felix, but you didn't pity me when I was abruptly discarded after a six-year-long engagement, falsely accused, and then shoved in a carriage to be sent off to a brothel. You don't pity Mia, who was cast aside just as easily despite them having a physical relationship.

So how can I pity Felix, who is merely facing the consequences of his own actions? I'm sorry, but I'm not that generous. I can forgive, but only because Lucas rescued me. I have no feelings for Felix now.

I tried to convey this by narrowing my eyes. The queen feigned a noble expression.

"I see. Felix regrets how he treated you, and he wishes to apologize. He's a good boy at heart. I think it might be your lack of effort, Cecilia, that let him be ensnared by a bad seed, like that Mia."

Excuse me?! I wanted to blurt out, but I kept myself in check. I was proud of my restraint. She can't be serious! This is outrageous! Despite my agitation, my training as a lady dictated my response.

"I did try my best, but I apologize for my inadequacy."

"Yes. If you'd done more to please him, he wouldn't have abandoned you, correct?"

"Please him, Your Majesty?"

Surely you don't mean physically, Your Majesty?

We were taught to remain strictly chaste until marriage as future princesses. Surely the queen knew that, too.

"I think you were thoroughly educated as a princess and worked hard for Felix, but all of that means nothing if he wasn't pleased. Now, I'm not saying you should be more like that woman, but a little more charm or affection would surely have made Felix treat you kindlier."

Okay, now I want to punch her. My fake smile faltered after hearing such an absurd argument, and I opened my fan to hide my expression.

The knight behind the queen gripped his sword, and the blood drained from my face.

Wait, wait! The girls behind me are merely maids! There's no need to draw your sword! Please don't kill them! Why am I the one who has to beg for my own maids' lives? It's sad!

"But I believe that Felix will do the right thing now," the queen continued, undeterred. She ignored my panic completely. "Because he—"

I snapped my fan shut loudly to interrupt her despite the disrespect it conveyed and forced a smile. "Your Majesty."

Stay strong, Cecilia! You have to keep it together in order to leave the castle with your maids in one piece!

"I apologize for my shortcomings and for failing Lord Felix. However, Prince Lucas has accepted me as I am. It's embarrassing to share this with you, Your Majesty, but the two of us exchanged vows before he left for his campaign."

I feigned modesty, covering my mouth with my left hand, and smiled happily. The queen's eyes widened at the sight of the ring on my left ring finger.

"Cecilia, you—!"

"We exchanged vows, just in case the worst should happen." I continued

smiling, forcing out those difficult words.

I had no intention of standing beside anyone but Lucas. And I certainly wasn't interested in hearing about Felix's feelings. I wouldn't deny how he felt, but it was far too late.

How can you say that now after spending six years by his side? How much more pain do you want me to endure?

Everything had an end, and the relationship between Felix and I had come to an end on that day of judgment. I might not have loved him, but I was sure that I'd had some sort of affection for him once. I hoped Felix could move on and not be held captive by those feelings, even if I had to end it here in a cruel way.

My gaze was filled with determination as I looked at the queen.

"I see... Well, then. I shall pray that the worst never happens."

"Thank you. I believe it's time for me to go." I stood up, quietly curtsied, and left.

"But Cecilia!" I heard her angry voice behind me, but I didn't turn around.

Once I was in the carriage, I finally sighed in relief and smiled at my maids.

"There are other ways to fight back, you know," I said.

"We'll follow you forever, Lady Cecilia!" Their raised fists and cheers made me burst into laughter.

\*\*\*

The rumors about me settled after successfully navigating the queen's tea party, and no more questions about my status arose. I continued my days receiving Lucas's messages from afar.

The day after he told me he was nearing the depths of the forest, a letter arrived that caused me to frown.

"Now it's Mihael Howser?"

He was one of Mia's groupies who had condemned me. A letter from him

certainly couldn't be good news.

"Let's burn it and pretend it never arrived!"

"I'll turn him and the letter into dust!"

"I'll be right back!"

Okay, see you later. Wait! Hey, maids! Where are you going with those weapons in your hands?!

I quickly called out to Elsa, who had put on some sort of brass knuckles with blades coming out of them that didn't match her maid's uniform at all.

"No, wait! Let's stay calm and *not* burn the letter. I'm curious about why Mihael wants to meet."

My maids groaned disappointedly.

How did they turn out like this? They're all so beautiful yet so abnormal. They're very professional when it comes to their maid and guard duties, but there's just something...off about them. Well, I suppose it can't be helped given the state of this ducal household, I inwardly concluded.

I reluctantly took the letter from Kate and opened it. I silently handed the letter to Anna and waited for her to finish reading it.

"Stay calm," I said.

"I am calm. Please grant me permission to kill him immediately, Lady Cecilia," Anna said.

"I can't do that, Anna."

She's so calm it's scary! And now Anna's getting weapons!

I gave her the letter so she knew the situation, but perhaps I should've just told her about it. Anna's weapon was a dagger as thin as a needle. Even Kate and Elsa were arming themselves.

"Please, calm down! Mihael is just a bit off. He isn't right in the head! He's crazy and rotten! Nothing he says is worth getting angry over, all right?" I felt

bad saying such harsh things about him, but there was no time to worry about that.

This is serious!

Despite explaining at the previous tea party that physical attacks weren't the only way to fight back, I was now desperately trying to calm the three of them down.

"Adorable as ever! But this request is unacceptable."

"Yes, it's too much."

Adorable? At least they gave the letter back and seemed to be calming down, thank goodness.

"So? Permission to kill him?"

"Denied."

Such a cute, pouty face. I returned my gaze to the letter.

"This is about Lady Mia, isn't it?" I asked hesitantly. "She wasn't really taken to the dungeon, was she?"

"I don't know."

The cold reply made my heart ache, and I gripped the letter tightly.

After the tea party, I wrote to Lord Dirk and Prince Leon about the situation. However, both of them seemed aware of the queen's actions but gently refused to get involved any further.

Even if I could ask for mercy, I still couldn't help her. I didn't have that kind of authority. Besides, I was about to marry into the royal family. Her pregnancy was an insult to the royal family. Thus, neither she nor her unborn child would ever be forgiven. I couldn't do anything about it.

Yet no matter how much I tried to rationalize it, the regret and guilt still remained. I had to accept it all. That was all I could do because if I didn't, it would cause trouble for my maids. I could tell by the strength with which she

held her stomach that, despite the coldness in her eyes, she'd been struggling with her emotions. That only made me feel guiltier.

"Just so you know," Elsa said, "she's alive, but—oof!"

Kate gently smacked Elsa's head. "That's enough out of you," she said.

"You're getting one less snack today, Elsa," Anna said with a wry smile.

As I watched this exchange, I was reminded once again that I was lucky to be in a place with such kind servants. It strengthened my resolve to be the kind of mistress who could embrace both the good and the bad with these three.

"Well, we should inform Lord Mihael that we know nothing about Lady Mia. Perhaps we should also point out his lack of common sense."

I smiled and told them to prepare the letter. My capable maids promptly complied.

However, Mihael was not at the Howser family residence.

So then, who sent that letter? When we inquired further, Cardinal Howser, Mihael's father, arrived at the ducal estate himself, looking very pale and apologizing profusely. He explained that Mihael had gone to the royal villa and not returned. Every inquiry he sent about his son had gone ignored. He begged us to ask Felix for help.

I figured the other noble families had refused to approach Felix, who'd been demoted from prince to quasi-royal status. But it was incredibly rude to ask me, his former fiancée. Lord Dirk immediately stepped in, so I thought that the matter had been settled.

"It's strange. I can't confirm that Mihael has been seen at the royal villa lately. There have been no reports of him since that young lady was sent away. Do you think Felix has done something? Doesn't this pique your interest, Lady Cline?"

You're asking for my agreement outright, Dirk. Does that mean you want me to investigate? It's rather hard to refuse when I'm living in your house!

Because of Lord Dirk's suggestion, I found myself heading to the royal castle

I looked up at the sky when I stepped out of the ducal family's carriage. "What dreary weather," I remarked.

Heavy clouds covered the royal capital, growing darker as they got closer to the border forest. My throat tightened. I pressed my hand against my chest, having felt uneasy all morning, and took a deep breath.

I'd spoken to Lucas the night before, and he'd told me he'd arrived at the depths of the forest. My heart had been racing so fast ever since that I couldn't sleep. Fear had taken root in me, and I hadn't been able to focus on anything since last night. Honestly, the last thing I wanted to do was have a tea party with Lord Mihael.

I'd planned to spend the day at the temple praying while Lucas was on his mission, yet here I was, searching for a man who'd both insulted and scorned me. It was so absurd I almost cried. Instead, I just repeated Lucas's words in my mind to encourage myself.

"Goodnight, Cece. I'll talk to you again tomorrow."

I wanted to believe those words.

So, it was okay if I didn't go to the temple, because it was Lucas. Even last night, he was in his usual perverted knight mode. I knew I would hear his voice again tonight.

I touched my ring and silently repeated, "It's okay" several times. My maids watched me with concern. They'd also been acting strangely since the previous night. We were all the same: worried and praying for Lucas's safety.

That was why I needed to fulfill my role properly. I stood up straighter and carried myself the way a marquis's daughter should.

It's okay. I believe in him, so it's all right.

"Well, shall we go?" I stepped forward, my gaze fixed on the crimson cloaks of

\*\*\*

I was startled by the distant rumble of thunder, though I saw no thunderclouds. But I couldn't muster up the courage to look at the sky. Instead, I kept my gaze on the reddish-brown liquid in my teacup.

I was in the gardens near the royal villa. It seemed almost certain that Felix was somehow involved, given everything Dirk had said. I looked up again, this time focused on the Azure Knights around the villa, then put my fan over my mouth and sighed.

Several Imperial Knights had accompanied us, and although they were out of sight, numerous bodyguards from the ducal house were present as well. To top it all off, my maids had traded in their usual attire and carried weapons today. Those dangerous objects didn't come with the dainty maid outfits, did they? Are you really going to the castle like that? It's the royal castle, you know!

When I saw how they were dressed, I was dumbfounded. The maids just smiled. "We will protect you," they reassured me. "Please don't worry."

Thanks, but that's not the point! I couldn't help but mentally protest.

I was grateful for their protection, but that wasn't what I wanted to ask. "Um, do you have permission for this?!"

"It's not a problem. Lord Dirk arranged it all," Kate said, who had a well-worn greatsword effortlessly slung over her back.

I could only respond with an, "I see..."

The royal family's shield is terrifying!

I tensed when I looked at Kate and Anna again. The crest on the weapons they carried bore the emblem of a shield with a sword across it, known as the Lebensklinge, or "living swords." It was the symbol granted to the Herbst family, the shields of the royal family. Only the "living swords" were allowed to wear the emblem. The shield was the Herbst family crest, and the sword represented

absolute loyalty.

Whoever wore that emblem had the authority to command all knights, except for Heroes and the marshal, even if they were Imperial Knights. It was even said that those who wore this emblem had the king's authority to kill anyone except the royal family.

Why is such an emblem necessary for a tea party? I knew it. I had a hunch, but I never imagined my maids, who double as bodyguards, would come guard me with that emblem!

I had been taught that it was only to be worn in emergencies authorized by the royal family. That was why House Herbst was allowed to keep "living swords"!

A tea party isn't an emergency, is it?! Or am I wrong? If they're going to such lengths for a mere tea party, does that mean...?

I instantly thought of the crown prince going pale and felt a wave of guilt.

What is Dirk thinking, making me go to such a dangerous tea party?! If things are that dangerous, shouldn't it just be called off?! I don't want Lucas to know his brother was practically treating me like bait, but it'll get back to him! Sure, I came here willingly, but they can't seriously be asking me to close the gates of hell again. Can they? Because it seems like they are!

I sighed softly in resignation and once more looked at my maids, or rather, the Lebensklinge.

"Oh, Elsa. You should take off your apron. It's hard to get the bloodstains out," Kate casually remarked.

I wanted to cover my ears so I couldn't hear their dangerously violent conversation. Is that why the maid uniforms are black? And what does it actually mean for them to be shields?

If the best offense is a good defense, and if being a shield was your motto, it was more like saying "kill or be killed." *Oh my, that sounds like a noble battle.* 

But in that case, I think swords or spears would be more suitable. A shield gives a gentler impression, doesn't it? Okay, okay, I understand. Ah, it's making me a bit teary-eyed...

I waited for Lord Mihael while fortified by the maids' defensive wall. I couldn't even really call them maids anymore since they were already in combat-ready mode.

A sudden cry from the direction of the royal villa startled me, and I jolted involuntarily.

"Lady Cecilia, please don't move until we confirm what that is."

My three maids armed themselves and surrounded me while Kate meticulously added an even more elaborate defensive formation. My eyes widened in surprise.

Huh? Double defensive layers? Add one more layer, and I wouldn't be any different from royalty, I thought, my brain once again retreating to escapism to stabilize my nerves.

Amid such tension, Anna suddenly opened a notebook.

"Cardinal Howser's son has been injured and exited from the royal villa. Would you like to go meet with him?" she asked without lowering her sword.

I paused for a moment. "Do you think it's all right?"

"We've checked the surroundings. There's no danger, so there shouldn't be a problem."

I nodded in agreement. "Thank you. I'll go, then," I said and rose from my seat.

I followed Anna and the others, then found Lord Mihael in a place near the palace. I was stunned. His injuries were worse than I'd imagined, his bloody appearance making my legs tremble.

"Lord Mihael," I called out to him. "Can you hear me? I'm healing you now, so please hang in there."

"M-Mia...?" He murmured faintly, mistaking me for Lady Mia.

It was a relief that he was still able to speak. I knelt beside him and activated my healing magic, drawing a sigil. Lightning flashed in the dark clouds, momentarily brightening our surroundings.

Startled by the sudden flash, I looked up at the sky and saw birds flocking above the border forest. I swallowed my rising anxiety. Streaks of lightning webbed across the pitch-black clouds. As I watched them abruptly dissipate, Lord Mihael stirred.

"...ch..." His pained voice reached my ears, and I quickly turned to face him.

"Lord Mihael..."

His weak hand reached out to mine, and I instinctively recoiled.

When Felix had broken off our engagement, Sir Maximillian, a knight in Mia's entourage, had held me down by brute force. But it was Lord Mihael who had forced me to stand before Felix.

Everything's all right. Felix is being held captive at the castle, so nothing like that will happen again. And Mihael is injured.

I realized that the incident following my broken engagement had hurt me more than I'd imagined. Now was not the time to be intimidated by the past, though, and I activated my healing magic once again.

After I healed Lord Mihael, I let out a sigh of relief.

"How surprising to see you here, Lady Cecilia," a voice interrupted.

It was Sir Rolfe Kummetz, one of the Azure Knights whom I'd met at a soiree. He approached me, ignoring the voices of the surrounding knights who urged him to stop.

Oh great, another troublesome person...

"Nice to see you again, Sir Rolfe," I replied calmly and without any emotion. I tried to return my gaze to Mihael, but Rolfe held out his hand. I glanced at it

and sighed inwardly.

Under normal circumstances I wouldn't think of exchanging greetings like this, especially when a knight on duty was being overly familiar with the second prince's fiancée. Most likely—no, it was highly probable that the Promise Mark would repel him. And if that happened, it would surely ruin his reputation. I already wore Lucas's ring, however, and the Promise Mark itself couldn't be hidden for long.

He had most likely approached me because Lucas was out on a campaign. *It's infuriating that he's still not doing his guard duty properly while Lucas is working so hard!* I thought, fueling my irritation. When I saw my maids giving me a thumbs-down sign, I reluctantly extended my hand toward him.

"Huh?"

I expected his hand to be repelled, so I was surprised when our fingers touched, my voice involuntarily breathless.

"I've sent you flowers many times since we met. I wonder if they pleased you?"

"I, um, well..."

I never received any flowers, I replied silently and felt the blood draining from my face.

Rolfe's gaze burned with intensity. I glanced toward Anna and the others, whose faces paled as they stared intently at our now-intertwined fingers.

Realizing the undeniable reality of this situation from their reactions, I struggled to suppress the spreading fear throughout my body.

Surely it's just my imagination! After all, Rolfe is just a knight! Just like Prince Leon proved that he wouldn't be repelled if I don't show any emotion, then surely Rolfe...

I bit my lip and covered it with my hand, but Rolfe seemed to misinterpret my gesture as shyness. He approached slowly and stared at my ring finger, which

was covered in lace.

"It seems what I've heard of the ring is true," he whispered in a devilish voice.

"But since I'm touching you like this...it appears the rumors about the Promise

Mark were lies after all."

His words froze me.

My heart pounded loudly. My chest burned like it was on fire, but everything else felt ice-cold. I was suddenly plunged into a world where I could hear nothing but my own sounds. Slowly, I turned my gaze toward the man, who stared at me.

But he was not the person I wanted to see, wrapped up in the color I loved so much. I couldn't believe that the touch of his fingers against my skin was part of my own body.

"It's not...a lie," I murmured, my voice barely audible.

"You impudent fool!" a low, angry voice said.

Rolfe suddenly disappeared from sight. The dark-clad maids had intervened, blocking my view of the unfolding reality in front of me. Anna had her sword drawn and glared angrily. Elsa had grabbed Rolfe by the neck and pinned him to the ground, restraining him.

"Don't ever say that again! If you dare insult our lord one more time, we'll kill you!"

"Argh! Why should mere maids speak to me like that?!" Sir Rolfe snapped at Elsa.

"Silence, Sir Kummetz!" an Imperial Knight said, angrily cutting off Sir Rolfe. "Obey the living swords, Lebensklinge!"

Elsa's swift movements and the guard's words silenced the surrounding knights, who stood up straighter.

Sir Rolfe still looked dissatisfied and glared at Elsa resentfully. He opened his mouth to speak. I didn't want to face reality and shamefully covered my ears.

"No! It's not a lie! It's real. He engraved it on me..."

The insides of my ears hurt. The back of my nose hurt. My throat felt constricted. I couldn't breathe properly.

This can't be happening. It must be some mistake. He promised to see me tomorrow. This has to be a lie! Nothing has happened that I should cry about. Nothing happened. It couldn't have! I'm just being anxious.

I heard Anna and the others saying something as I collapsed, but I didn't have the wherewithal to respond. I felt strangely detached from the situation. I refused to accept the reality in front of me. I was abruptly brought back to the present by Mihael coughing up blood again, my dress stained a bright, vivid red.

"Lord Mihael! But I healed him!"

My eyes widened at the pattern on his skin, which was visible through his wound.

Humans generally didn't try to enslave magical beasts. Unless the beast was intelligent, there was no way to communicate with them or control them, making it pointless to try to take them under one's power. Intelligence in a beast also meant strength, requiring the skill to capture without killing. Although the technique of subduing magical beasts existed, it was said to be practically impossible.

The technique of luring in magical beasts for subjugation had long been considered both inhumane and forbidden. That was because the technique was applied to a human, their wounded body used as a sacrifice.

"What?"

I gently moved the fabric aside and looked again. I couldn't believe what I was seeing; I was rendered speechless.

Why is Lord Mihael covered in blood?

Why is he telling me to run away?

Why does he have a pattern designed to lure in magical beasts engraved onto him? Why? How? I was so flustered my breathing became shallow, and my vision swam.

This is a dream. No, he told me to run away. It must be a mistake. I don't believe it. We made a promise. But then, why is my hand covered in red?

My chest tightened when I saw the golden band shining through the thick red liquid on my palm, and my heart pounded painfully. I bit my lip hard. That pain and the dull golden glow on my finger gave me the strength to move forward.

What are you doing, Cecilia? Get a grip! How can you falter when you stand beside a Hero?

Taking a deep breath, I rose to my feet and shouted. "Anna, Kate, Elsa!" "Yes?!"

"Magical beasts are coming! Call the Black and White Knights! Contact Prince Leon and—"

Before I could finish, the very air trembled and the ground reverberated, forcing me to crouch down. Touching Lord Mihael's blood-covered hand sent a shiver down my spine, and I averted my eyes. What I saw there captured my gaze. It was dripping crimson.

"It can't be... A Fenrir?!"

"Deploy the defensive wall!" Anna's said, her voice immediately ringing out.

"Restrain it! Attack unit, aim for its legs!"

A high-density defensive barrier enclosed the massive wolf.

"Elsa!" Kate yelled.

"I know!" Elsa said.

The red before my eyes transformed to silver.

"It's the magical cat Cath Palug this time?!"

"No way! That's the sacred beast of the western kingdom!"

Her hair seemed to grow and her slender limbs were suddenly covered in silver fur as her maid's uniform fell to the ground. Triangular ears sprouted from her now-larger head, and the fur on her wide back bristled intimidatingly, making her seem even bigger.

Like the Fenrir, the Cath Palug was a Class S divine beast, one not native to the kingdom of Bern. It stood in front of me to protect me from the wolf.

I was in a state of complete confusion as I watched Elsa's growing body. It suddenly felt as if I were floating, and I realized someone was lifting me up.

"Pardon my rudeness, Lady Cecilia, but Elsa will buy us ti—!"

Kate was cut off by a roar. My body whipped around as we suddenly changed directions, making me grit my teeth involuntarily.

I nodded slightly to Kate's anxious inquiry about my well-being and took in the garden, which had been torn up by the Fenrir's massive claws. I trembled at the sight.

The fragments of the shattered defensive wall sparkled through the air.

"Again!" Anna shouted.

Then an awful, earth-shaking sound reverberated in my ears.

"You're quite bold for calling me here only to treat me so harshly."

I bit my lip. My suspicions had been confirmed after I heard that voice.

"What do you mean, called you here?!"

"What's going on?"

I tried to calm the panicked surroundings, but Elsa leaped in with a snarl.

"What are you talking about?!" she asked. "It's your own fault for coming so easily when someone calls you!"

"And who are you? It's unusual to see a monster cat here."

"I am not a monster cat! And what about you? Why are you so injured? Gah?!"

"Hmph! That's why I came here. There was a feast laid out for me and quite a few tasty sources of magic!"

With that, the wolf opened its bloody jaws with a smirk and scattered its magic. The pressure was so overwhelming that the knights were unable to maintain their defensive walls. One by one, they fell.

Kate had been maintaining her barrier effortlessly until now, but I broke out into a cold sweat when she stabbed her greatsword into the ground to focus on her defense.

Although Elsa and Anna's attacks were connecting, they weren't very effective. The Fenrir blew them away with a roar and turned his fangs toward Lord Mihael.

The scene was so shocking that everyone momentarily froze, unable to move. The wolf's blood-soaked mouth emitted a voice filled with malice.

"Really, that annoying dragon's lightning strikes destroyed my lair and left me covered in wounds! Even if I devour all the humans here, I can't beat that black dragon, but at least my wounds should heal faster. I'll start with you first, woman! The one everyone's protecting!" it yelled, pointing its bloody claws at me.

I froze.

"Your magic is so pure and appetizing. Your body looks so soft, too. I'll eat you up whole!"

"You perverted wolf! Guh?!"

The Fenrir's claws struck at an unbelievable speed and blew Kate away, who was unable to fully defend us. She crashed into a tree and coughed up blood. Startled, I frantically tried to draw a healing sigil with my fingers, only to scream as I was pulled down along with the defensive barrier.

"Nooooo!"

"What a lovely voice you have. I'm pleased."

Its claws even pierced through the double-reinforced defensive barrier and right into my dress. I was immobilized. My teeth chattered in terror as the Fenrir opened its massive mouth.

I struggled desperately as the Fenrir tore open the front of my dress with its claws. Thin lines of blood bloomed across my exposed skin, making me tremble.

The Fenrir laughed with delight.

"Yes. Be afraid, woman!" it said, blood dripping from its mouth as it spoke. "You have no power. You're nothing more than food for me to devour!"

Hearing the screams of Anna and the others, who were continuously creating defensive barriers, filled me with anguish and sorrow. My vision blurred.

Why don't I have any power? Why am I always the one being protected?

Unable to fight or escape, I was captured, causing trouble for those fighting for me. The only thing I could do now seemed to be breaking the promise I made with Lucas.

He said he would return, so I had to wait. I wanted to wait, but... I also want to protect what he's trying to protect, as someone who stands by his side!

The stronger a magical beast, the crueler it was, and the more ferociously it tormented its prey.

If I can buy time until the White and Black Knights arrive... If I can buy time for Anna and the other knights to regroup...!

I clenched my teeth, barely able to breathe through the terror, and glared at the Fenrir in front of me.

"You said you were summoned here."

"Oh, you're surprisingly strong-willed! This'll be fun."

The way his expression changed in response to my question was strangely

human, which made me shiver. I couldn't stop trembling and kissed my ring to encourage myself.

"Y-you said you came because food had been prepared for you."

"Yes. It's been a long time since that spell was used. I was suspicious, though. Either the caster was terrible at it, or there was something missing from the spell."

"Missing?"

The Fenrir grunted, then chuckled, as if my doubts had been revealed to him.

"They probably tried to summon a low-level wolf-type magical beast, but they made a silly mistake with the drawing. Only someone like me would've noticed it, you know. You should be grateful for that," he said.

I gritted my teeth again. I wanted to lament my bad luck at how such a mistake would summon a Fenrir to attack me, but it seemed like he was enjoying this scary conversation, so I decided to keep it going.

"B-but aren't you supposed to live in the forest, on the side closest to the Egrich Empire?"

Even if he'd been hurt and drawn to me by magic at the same time, it was hard to believe he'd come such a far distance. And if it were a fight for survival, he would've taken immediate action to heal his wounds before traveling so far. Wouldn't he have gone to Egrich instead of Bern in that case?

I asked him such.

"I'm not going over there!" he spat angrily. "They're so bad at attacking, defending... Everything! They've made so many mistakes in their attempts to enslave me that it made me sick! Humans are lazy these days," the wolf growled, surprising me with his human-like emotions.

I wanted to cry out, "Saying that to me in this situation makes me want to cry!"

The reason he ended up here is terrible! But the information that the Empire is

trying to enslave the divine beasts will surely be useful to Bern.

A sudden crack sounded, and I felt another impact on my chest. My vision flickered red.

"Owww!"

"Well, I suppose it's time to end our conversation. Did that girl call someone? I've been patiently waiting. You should be grateful."

"Ahhhh!"

"Lady Cecilia!"

"Interesting. You're quite skilled at gathering the shattered defensive walls and reconstructing them. You mustn't move, though, or this girl's stalling will have been in vain."

"You damn wolf!" Elsa yelled, her furious outburst restrained by Anna and Kate.

My lungs burned with pain, and the lack of oxygen was giving me a severe headache. Thanks to the defensive wall Kate had frantically erected, I wasn't completely unable to breathe. The increasing pressure made me taste blood in the back of my throat, though, and I clenched my teeth.

I won't give up! Not until the knights arrive! Kate is desperately defending me, so I'll have to try my best!

"That's...why you came...all the way here?" I said, forcing my voice out in an attempt to distract the Fenrir. "Because...you were injured...by the dragon... And you were summoned here!"

What I said right now didn't matter, even if it was going to eat me. It was clear I was just trying to stall. But as long as I could continue a conversation, death wouldn't come immediately. Or so I hoped.

"You're a brave soul, and those women are definitely the strongest ones here. The Cath Palug is decent but still a kitten. I doubt any humans capable of defeating me will come, no matter how long I wait."

No, I'm scared! I wanna run away! Ignoring my fear-driven desire to escape, I desperately held up my golden ring before me and spoke.

"I-I mean, even if you say they're coming, they won't wait for me, will they? Even if I tell them you're going to eat me anyway?"

Fenrir roared with laughter, shaking the air. Saliva and blood dripped from its mouth as it tilted its head. "So basically you're saying you want to be tormented to death?"

"Ngh..."

The moment those cruel words were spoken, I gasped. Shards scattered, and a strong force was applied to my body, binding me.

"I like you. I'll leave that beautiful face of yours to savor last. I'll start slowly, limb by limb. Make sure to despair and scream beautifully for me, okay?"

"Ah..."

I gazed toward the brightening sky as I was released into the air at the same time as those words. It would soon be time for that person's color, tears streaming down my face.

I want to see you and hear your voice. I dreamed we'd live together. I wanted to go with you. Maybe then, we could've died together...

The sky was the beloved color of daybreak, distorted as it was by my tears. I reached out my hand and called his beloved name. My lungs hurt, and a sharp pain ran through my body.

As my consciousness faded, I was gently enveloped in a soft crimson. Then everything went black.

\*\*\*

It wasn't like before, when I was only allowed to see her smiling at other people. Our bodies had joined as one, and our hearts intertwined.

Seeing her finger adorned with the embodiment of love that I'd professed

countless times finally allowed me to relax, but I couldn't help but think that it was inevitable.

Every time I got to know Cecilia better, I realized that binding her wouldn't satisfy my heart. I would forever lose the opportunity to truly understand her by binding her, even if it were my own doing. I couldn't allow that. Just thinking about that made my heart fill with dark emotions.

I loved her so much when she confessed her feelings with anxious tears in her eyes. She was a paragon of elegance, so crying in the second prince's reception room in the royal castle, where anyone could enter at any moment, was unimaginable for Cecilia.

I found myself wondering if any other person's tears could move my heart this much.

Honestly, I was terribly shaken and embarrassed. It felt a bit cruel to say that kissing her was not allowed after she began to cry. But the way she panicked when I pushed her down was so cute and innocent that I briefly considered having sex with her right there on the desk. Her pale neck exuded a fragrant allure, and when I exposed it, I couldn't help but feel murderous toward anyone who had seen it before me.

Although Cecilia didn't give me permission to continue, she said things that made me both happy and pained.

"It's been a long time, so I don't want to do it here. I want to do it properly and slowly, so I'll wait for you to come back home..."

I was overwhelmed by her surprised, embarrassed reaction when she expressed her true feelings.

Does she really understand how much I love her? When she cries for me, begs for me, says no to my kisses but then shyly says she still wants to do it with me... It's so frustrating. I want her to take responsibility for turning me on so much.

But she let out tears. It was an emotionality I hadn't expected to see. This was

Cecilia, after all.

I couldn't chain her. I had to bind her to me some other way. I wouldn't let her go until I died. Even if I did die, I didn't want to let her go. I wanted everything about Cecilia to be mine. No matter how much time and effort it took, I wished to hold all of her in my hands.

This wish had finally come true.

Cecilia was genuine. She was diligent, patient, and kindhearted. She'd stayed at Felix's side for six years, an impossibility for an ordinary young lady, who wouldn't have even lasted a year. Even though it was difficult for her position, Marquis Cline surely would've worked tirelessly to nullify the engagement if she'd said she really couldn't do it anymore.

But she never said a thing. Once she decided to stay by his side, she never complained or abandoned him.

Cecilia was truly genuine and kindhearted, to the point that it made my insides burn. That was why it was a gamble whether she would accept a proposal, or even a de facto marriage, from me.

Because of her upbringing as the prince's fiancée or possibly because of her innate disposition, she would probably imagine the damage her actions would cause to those around her. She was a rule-follower. That was why I was wracked with anxiety, knowing I couldn't explain that everything was arranged according to the marquis's promise.

She had to choose me. If she didn't, I was told the marriage wouldn't be allowed, and I couldn't put the ring on her finger. She'd return to the marquis's family. I briefly remembered feeling murderous when I told that.

"Prince Lucas, if the queen were to take extreme actions as you say, it is possible she might force the engagement between Cecilia and Felix to continue. That cannot be denied. We pledge our loyalty to the royal family."

"In that case..."

"But my daughter would never choose to reconcile with Lord Felix."

"I know that, too."

"Oh? So you realize that if that happens, she's prepared to discard the Cline name?"

I clenched my fists so tightly that my nails dug into my skin. "I'm sure she would."

The marquis narrowed his eyes as he squeezed out his words and fixed his gaze on me. "Prince Lucas, with all due respect, allow me to say this. If you understand all that, then give Cecilia the choice! You dare kidnap my daughter and then talk about slipping a ring on her without a proper proposal? I'll knock you out, you insolent brat! My daughter whom I've raised with my own hands won't be handed over to a man who treats her so lightly! I demand you return her to me right now!"

I felt the murderous aura of joy slowly spreading throughout me.

"Well then, if everything is in order, and she chooses for herself, will you permit the marriage?"

"Hmph! I'm sure you'll just threaten her. Can't you control yourself, you little brat?"

But his wife scolded him before he could say what he really wanted to say, and I almost laughed.

Marquis Cline, Cecilia's father, had firmly established his position inside the castle where demons and monsters roam. He was truly something else. I silently thanked him, knowing it was because of him and Marquise Cline that Cecilia had become such a wonderful young woman.

Well then, I thought as I silently handed over the prepared documents to the marquis.

"What's this?!"

"It's all in order."

The marquis was silent.

"Since everything is in order, please grant me permission."

"You little..."

"Marquis, grant it."

Even with such a demonic expression directed toward me, I'd never back down.

I don't have time for this. I have no choice but to be separated from Cecilia for half a month. I won't have the motivation to leave unless I fill myself up with her right before the campaign. What will I do if I want to go back in the middle of it?

I quietly waited for the marquis, who ground his teeth in annoyance.

"If you make her cry, I won't forgive you!"

Well, I can't stand to see her cry, either.

"Answer me!"

Cecilia was quite fragile when it came to tears, and she usually cried whenever we had sex... But if I told him that, he definitely wouldn't approve of the marriage. I'd take that secret to my grave.

"I will handle that properly."

"Hey, you brat! You must've been thinking about Cecilia. What do you mean you'll handle it properly?!"

How did he find out?

"Nothing in particular. I can't promise you that she won't cry, but I swear that I'll never leave her."

"Of course you won't. Once the campaign is over, we'll immediately reschedule the engagement ceremony. There's not a single person who doesn't believe you won't come back."

His gentle voice made me inadvertently relax, and my lips turned up in a

smile.

Until recently, I didn't care about anything but her. But now, the things that shaped her kindness were starting to become things I hoped to protect.

Well, the thing I wanted the most was to never see her cry over anyone else.

The marquis sighed heavily and stared at me more intensely. "Vow to make her happy."

"I will gaze upon and love only Cecilia all my life and with all my heart, and I vow to make her happy."

I don't need anyone else but Cecilia. For some reason, the marquis looked exasperated when I declared this. *Why?* 

"Your Highness, do you understand how heavy your burden is compared to others? You mustn't burden Cecilia with—"

"Then I shall take my leave."

I quickly judged that the conversation was likely to drag on and on, so I swiftly grabbed all the signed documents and leaped out of the window. I started back to the castle, ignoring the voice shouting, "Hey, wait!" behind me.

Thus, I arranged for the de facto marriage and sent a letter to Cecilia. Then, a thought struck me.

With her gentle heart, she would probably be happier marrying into an ordinary noble family rather than the royal family. Being a high-ranking aristocrat, she knew how to behave. But the royal family sat at the top of the kingdom, was saturated with filth, and shaken by trivial things. It might be a difficult place for her. In that respect, Cecilia would've been better able to live the life she wanted if she'd married into an ordinary noble family.

That was what I thought, anyway. But the thought of her belonging to another man was already unbearable.

So, please, Cecilia, choose me. I don't need anyone else but you. I swear to protect and love you for the rest of my life. You may not want to enter into

marriage like this, but I'm terrified that promises alone won't keep us together. Pathetic and shameful as it may be, I want to be the only one reflected in your eyes forever.

So please, bind us with a chain that will never be broken.

I begged her, and although she approached without hesitation, she chose me. She made a vow to spend the rest of her life with me. And I put a ring on her.

I smiled affectionately as I watched Cecilia, who was gazing at the golden chain of the ring that would bind her life to mine from now on.

Could anything make me happier than seeing how happy she is with a ring that binds her to me?

But seeing how she was only staring at the ring made me somewhat annoyed. It's just a ring, so please look at me now. I tightened my arms around her, and she smiled at me invitingly, her mouth trembling. I can't hold back anymore...

\*\*\*

She was so hot and tight inside every time we had sex. It felt amazing. That day Cecilia was even wilder than usual, and she squeezed me naughtily. She'd tell me to stop even though she was close to coming. Of course, no man could stop under those circumstances.

Besides, when she was melting with pleasure beneath me and moaning, "Stop..." I knew that she meant "Keep going," so I never held back. The reason I knew she wanted me to keep going was how she raised her hips, making it easier for me to thrust deeper, and how she cried my name when she climaxed. It drove me wild and made me want to fuck her even harder.

Why won't she just turn to face me instead of clinging to the pillow? I might tear that pillow away from you.

I gently ran my fingers through her hair and called her by that special name I'd been dying to use. Finally, she turned to face me, shaking her head slightly with embarrassment. Although she acted like she didn't like being called that, the

way her pussy tightened around me as she gazed at me tearfully gave it away. You love it when I call you my wife. Don't you, Cecilia? Honestly, my wife is so cute I don't know what to do with her. Or maybe she's the one spoiling me with her love.

When she trembled weakly and reached out to me with a bashful look on her face, I hugged her tightly, overwhelmed by love. Just the stimulation of her breasts pushing against me made her come again, and she pleaded for a kiss. I obliged, biting down on my cheek as I savored the sense of defeat.

Damn, it feels so good. I was trying to edge myself, but I can't hold back anymore. But I can't keep losing. That's not in my nature.

Cecilia always gave me another chance, and I always eagerly took it. She was a pretty competitive person, too. When I teased her to get her to admit to embarrassing things, she always glared at me in frustration. I loved it when her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were wet with desire. It was the best reward. Though she probably doesn't realize it.

When I teased her cute, swollen nub this time, I whispered, "Cecilia, you like it when I touch you here, don't you?" Her inner walls trembled, and she replied shyly, turning her face away.

Her reaction hit me right in the chest. Emboldened, I gave her a choice and watched her eyes waver with anticipation.

"Do you want to come like this or from me inside you?"

I was astounded by her honesty, stripped of all reason.

"B-both. Please? Lord Lukie, please touch me more."

She was trying so hard to push the words out despite her shame that I had to clench my jaw. *Hang in there. Don't come yet,* I told myself.

"Hang...on..."

Heat surged through me as I lowered my head to hide my flushed face. *Cecilia, you're merciless...* 

I felt her move beneath me, and she reached out and touched me gently. Surprised, I jolted, which only made me feel more embarrassed and unable to move.

I wish she would stop making me feel so pitiful. But when she touches me, I feel overwhelmingly happy. I've never felt such conflicting emotions all at once before. I don't know what to do with them.

Every word she spoke, every gesture she made, captured my heart and left me helpless. I only had feelings for Cecilia. She was the only one I could turn to for help. It was embarrassing, but she seemed to like it and turned to me with a happy smile on her face.

Then, she brought her sweat-covered fingers to her mouth in invitation, making my chest burn.

"Where did you learn that?" I asked, raising my voice slightly.

Damn it! I love her so much it makes me angry! I thought as I kissed her. Each time our tongues intertwined, she tightened around me and moved her hips slightly. She put her arms around my neck and pulled me closer as if she didn't want to let me go. I was crazy about her and couldn't stop kissing her. I wanted to give her what she wanted.

This is incredible, but take it easy on me... It's our first night, and I have some pride too.

I wanna come. I really, really wanna come. But Cecilia loves kissing, so I have to hold back. And I want her to come before I do, so I just gotta hang in there.

But seriously, can you stop clenching on my cock like that? It's too much. I'm not sure I've ever been so patient in my life. And I've never been in such a vulnerable state before, either. If Cecilia decided to kill me now, she could easily do it. She's incredible. She's the only person in the world who could kill me without any difficulty.

As I lifted her delicate, trembling body, I positioned myself to hit her weak

spot and pressed my thumb against her clit.

"Ahh! L-Lord Lukie?! But I just came!"

"You wanted this, didn't you? Don't tell me you're gonna say no now."

You're the one who asked for it, so I'll drown you in me even more.

"W-wait! Lord Lukie, I love you! Ohh!"

Her sweet moans as she called out for me stripped away my last shred of reason.

Cecilia, I am the chain that binds you. If you stay bound to me, I'll even go on that campaign I loathe so much, which I don't want to leave you for.

She never told me not to go; that had to have been her pride. In exchange, I would make her cry in my arms.

I can't apologize or explain, even if she asks. So, I'll convey my gratitude with all my heart.

Tears welled up in my eyes when I felt the love she shared with me.

My one and only. My life.

I'll never let you go. I'll never let you escape. I want you to feel the emotions I've put in this ring and want me even more. You've vowed to spend your life with me, forever...

\*\*\*

The cold ground felt nice against my flushed body.

For the past few years, I'd been holding back my power in battles, so I wasn't really sure how to use it to its fullest. Fighting an opponent without having to worry about holding back was fun, though. I couldn't help but chuckle to myself for enjoying it so much.

I shouldn't be lying around like this. I gripped Eckesachs tightly and sighed as I stared at the cloud-covered sky.

Right after we received the orders for the campaign to slay the ancient dragon, Andreas showed me the forbidden book that only Heroes were allowed to see. I used Eckesachs as a key to open the book and discovered the method to become the true Hero.

"I have to lose my memory?"

"Yes. Once you forget everything about the person who's more important to you than your own life, the power that dwells within Eckesachs will truly be yours, and the title of the Hero, Theoderic, will be etched onto your soul."

I guess the power of the Theoderic Hero fills the void left by the presence of your important person.

"The price to be paid is extreme, and it's probably a matter of one's character." Andreas spoke calmly and narrowed his eyes. "So far, only one person has become a true Hero. Hasn't Dirk told you? There was one person in the Herbst family who was able to successfully tame ancient dragons."

"Yes, I've heard. So it must take someone abnormal to become the Hero, huh?"

My master shrugged, which I took as an affirmative.

"Then losing my memory won't change my personality or core characteristics, right? So how do I become a Hero?"

"You're something else, Lukie. Ordinary people wouldn't accept this so easily."

"Well, I don't understand ordinary people. Honestly, I don't care about them either."

For some reason, he looked at me with pity.

"So? How do I become one?" I asked.

"Just keep wishing for the power to protect others."

"Isn't that a little too vague?"

"It might be easy, in your case."

Seriously, why does he keep looking at me with such pity?

"Also, if you tell anyone besides a Hero this information, Eckesachs might get upset and run away from home or even disappear from Bern entirely. So don't tell anyone," Andreas said nonchalantly as he handed me the book.

The book really did only say to keep wishing. But what bothered me was the repeated emphasis that one must not desire anything else.

"One more thing," I said.

"What is it?"

"It's nothing..."

The price was all of my memories involving Cecilia. But as long as the cost wasn't Cecilia herself, I could do it.

As long as the kingdom was next to the border forest, monsters would keep appearing unless we defeated the dragon. And that made it dangerous. Cecilia would be in constant danger, so I had to eliminate the threat.

Becoming a Hero was the fastest way to face the two dragons. I didn't particularly mind becoming one, but there was one thing I needed to resolve before I could gain that power.

I sighed back then, too, thinking the same thing.

I wasn't afraid of changing. I would just return to the colorless, slightly melancholic days before I'd met her. Back then, my body felt an odd sense of urgency if I wasn't in battle since it had been so specialized for combat. It felt like I was searching for something, and if I didn't get it, What I'd lose would be more precious than my life.

Now I knew that important thing was her.

Cecilia's sparkling, bright green eyes, her pale pink lips that spoke with resolve, and her heart that radiated strong, straightforward emotions. There

was no way my eyes and heart wouldn't be captivated by her. I could confidently say that nothing in the world could surpass her vivid colors.

I knew I would fall in love with her all over again. Even if I forgot everything about her, I would still be me as long as my essence remained the same.

I was more worried that she might be frightened and confused by the change in me or that Marquis Cline would be furious and cancel our engagement ceremony. Perhaps he'd say I'd made her cry and refuse to let us meet. In that case, I might end up breaking into their house and kidnapping her. That wouldn't be a good idea, though, so I'd better not do that. It would take longer to get her to open back up to me if I did.

But even if that did happen, I would start over with her again and again. She'd shown me enough love to make me believe that.

The metallic sensation in my left ear made warmth spread through my chest.

Even if I lost everything about myself that had been formed by her, even if I knew how much it would hurt her, I would not hesitate to sacrifice myself to protect her. Because no matter what happened, I knew everything would go back to how it was now once we started over.

As long as she wore my ring, she would remain my wife. No matter how much others tried to separate us or scheme against us, they could never take her away from me. And she could never truly push me out of her heart.

I think Cecilia will realize my obsession when she sees my ring. And then she would probably get angry. No, she'll definitely get angry.

Having her get truly angry with me would be quite a shock, but it was always a treat to see her eyes sparkling with emotion because she was so beautiful. I kind of wanted to see it.

Is it bad to think like this? No, it's her fault for attracting me so much that I can't let go. No, she'd get mad at this kind of thinking, too.

As I pondered those trivial thoughts, I remembered how she'd cried in the

reception room, and I reconsidered.

What if she cries instead of getting angry? What if they're genuine tears?

Just imagining that felt unbearable. I pressed my hand against my lips and felt them curve into a smile.

The fact that I felt pleasure just by imagining breaking her heart and letting her get hurt showed just how broken I was.

It was true that I wanted to cherish her. She was more important to me than my own life. Yet I still couldn't suppress the sadistic urges inside of me, making it difficult for me to handle her. And I hoped she'd accept even that. I wanted her to suffer because of me. I wanted her to look only at me and cry only for me. I wanted to be the only one in her heart. No one else should exist there. I wouldn't allow anyone else in.

"Sorry, Cecilia..." An unconscious apology slipped out, but I knew it was tinged with self-mockery and a touch of pleasure. I let out a soft chuckle.

I could be myself because of her. I could only be someone who endlessly pursued her. That was my reason for living. That was why I was fully prepared for the change.

Yet despite being pitifully thrown to the ground by the mightiest black dragon, I was just a man. The thought of the mark of my name that was etched onto her body fading away, or the thought that anyone else could touch her, or that she might be taken from me in the same manner I took her—it was all utterly terrifying.

"Hey. Don't you think you're a bit too strong?"

I wanted to hold her soft body against mine right this moment. The marks she had given me were already completely gone, and I wanted her to mark me again. The distance that prevented me from returning to her instantly infuriated me.

I pounded my fist into the ground in frustration. I immediately regretted it as

the earth caved in with a loud thud.

Now I'm all dirty.

As I brushed off the dirt and stood up, I heard a perplexed voice as the giant dark figure peered down at me, casting a shadow.

"C'mon, you're not even listening to me. Huh? Something's really wrong with you, y'know. I mean, I've been pretty serious here. If I mess you up too much, it'll just ruin the fun later. And I really don't want to hurt that beautiful face of yours. I want to see it twisted with pleasure."

I ignored the dragon, which was writhing and spouting nonsense like, "It'll be so hot! Nngh, so hot it almost hurts!" and dusted off my clothes again.

"Andreas said it'd be easy for me." I gripped the heavy sword and sighed deeply. "Come to think of it, that idiot never became the true Hero, either."

If I really tried my hardest, I could probably at least bring things to a draw.

Even if the opponent was the strongest there was, the black dragon, I could use all magical attributes. I wouldn't lose if it came down to magic. And since I could use healing magic, I thought I could manage if I hung in there for three—no, maybe five days. The only question was what my chances of survival would be. But unless it was one hundred percent, I couldn't take the risk.

I recalled how Cecilia looked when I made that promise to her, and I almost smiled. The joy from the promise of returning to her and the surge I got from a successful proposal made me feel euphoric. *Thank you, Cecilia.* 

I needed to become the Hero to ensure I survived and returned. *And I really want this dragon,* I thought, looking at it. I'd already told Finn to tell me to return to Bern immediately after this was all over.

I wanted to see Cece and reassure her, since she was waiting for me. I wanted to go home as soon as possible. And I needed to apologize to her and rebuild our relationship. I didn't know how long that would take, so having a way to travel anywhere I wanted whenever I wanted was crucial. That way, I could

return home quickly, no matter where expeditions took me.

In other words, the time I'd be separated from her would decrease significantly. And that was a wonderful thing.

If the dragon was female and had a good personality, I'd consider making it Cecilia's guardian. The dragon was a male, however, so I nixed the idea.

The female dragon I'd knocked out earlier was a small white dragon. She had a good appearance, but she was too weak despite her pride. She wasn't worth the trouble. But if I wanted to use a dragon as a means of transportation, I had to first make it my vassal, and I couldn't become the Hero until I did that.

Lame. I'm totally lame, I thought as I looked at the dragon and inadvertently hung my head. If I didn't hurry, the royal capital would suffer.

Even if they had Andreas around, I had Eckesachs. They would struggle with Class A or S monsters without it. That would just put more of a burden on Carl and Alphonse, who already had their hands full slaying magical beasts.

I didn't think there would be any emergencies since Cecilia was well-guarded, but the mere thought of the worst-case scenario was very unsettling. I wanted to finish this quickly and go home. And if something did happen, I'd use the power I'd gained to protect her and kill everything, even myself, if I had to. I really wanted this to end soon. Yet deep down, I knew that as long as I remained where I was, the Promise Mark wouldn't disappear on her. I believed it deep down in my heart. I didn't want it to disappear. Maybe that's why I couldn't become the Hero.

"Get a grip..."

Why did I go through the trouble of getting a ring and rushing the marriage?

To be prepared for when the Promise Mark disappeared, I reminded myself. Just then, a voice called out from above. Well, not exactly from above, but quite close by. I turned to look.

"Hey! You're ignoring me way too much! Didn't your parents teach you how

to keep up a proper conversation?"

"They did."

"They must not have been very good teachers!"

"I'm having a conversation with you, aren't I?"

What the hell is he talking about? The thought probably showed on my face. No, my expressions don't change unless I'm with Cecilia. So why does the dragon look so annoyed? I tilted my head, and the dragon frowned even deeper.

"Let me ask you a question," he said.

"What is it?"

"Why aren't you more surprised that I'm in human form? Is it not surprising? You should be shocked at how good-looking I am!"

"I'm not interested."

"Eeeek! I knew it! You're so beautiful. You must be so used to seeing your own face that you're not fazed at all. How annoying!"

"I'm not interested in my own face."

"And that completely uninterested attitude! There's definitely something wrong with you. No doubt about it! No one can act so casually in front of the strongest black dragon! You should respect dragons more!" the male dragon screeched.

This dragon is such a pain. I opened my mouth to respond to the roaring man who had turned into a dragon.

"Sorry, but I've always been abnormal. It cannot be fixed, so just give it up."

The dragon narrowed its eyes suspiciously. "Huh? What does that mean?" Despite the annoying way he spoke, his eyes shone with intelligence, indicating that he wasn't an idiot.

"People like me are sometimes born into my family. I'm optimized for combat but have issues expressing emotions." "I'm amazed you've managed to get so far."

"The others like me were disposed of when they were very young. I was just lucky enough to be surrounded by good people, so I avoided that fate," I said matter-of-factly.

"Whoa, hold on!" the dragon shouted, shocked. "That's way too heavy!

Consider how I feel, having that heavy stuff dumped on me all of a sudden!"

"You're the one who asked." I lowered my gaze and thought, *Man, this guy is a pain.* 

The dragon wailed dramatically. "So heavy! So tragic! I hate this. It's too much!" He dropped to his knees. I swung Eckesachs at the back of his head, but he deflected it with his claws, as I'd expected.

"Hey, read the room! You seriously are abnormal. It's almost sad how weird you are."

Now a dragon pities me.

I wasn't particularly troubled by it. I thought exposing one's vital points like that was a mistake, but I kept silent.

Then, the dragon looked up hesitantly. "Hey," he said. "Are you one of those things called nobles?"

Hmm, I'm impressed he knows about that. I nodded.

"Huh? Then could it be...that you're from the such-and-such duchy?"

"I don't know which one you're talking about, but I'm from the ducal family, Herbst."

"In Bern?"

"You really know a lot. Yes, the Herbst duchy in the kingdom of Bern."

"Is that you, Sigelinde?"

"No, I'm Lucas."

Who the hell is Sigelinde?

"Eek, what a coincidence! The guy from the ducal family that Gramps mentioned is here! I'm scared now! What should I do?!"

Gramps? Who the hell is that?

The dragon pretended to cry dramatically. I tipped my head and waited silently. He shot me another sympathetic look.

"You really are abnormal. I'm crying here. This is where you should offer some words of comfort or ask if I'm all right. Got it? Read the room, y'know?"

The way he talked irritated me, and I gripped Eckesachs tightly.

"See?! That's exactly what I'm talking about! Gramps also said that Sigelinde didn't listen to anyone at all! Are all the abnormal kids in your family like this?"

"I dunno. Maybe."

"Right?! Well, they're all gone now anyway, so sorry for asking! Can I ask one more thing?"

I used the momentum of swinging my sword to spin around, kick the dragon, and then block it as it flew away. I then threw Eckesachs like a javelin, kicking off the ground to chase after it.

"Whoa! You're kicking and throwing swords?! Aren't you a knight?"

"Technically."

"Technically? What does that mean?!"

"I recently became a prince. So that's my main job right now."

"What does having your main job be a prince even mean?!" he shouted, trying to create flames with his hands.

I waved my hand, extinguishing one of them, which startled him. I used this to my advantage, summoning my sword and slashing at him.

"Whoa! Wait, how did you extinguish my flame?!"

"Aren't you asking too many questions?"

"No! It's your fault. I'm not to blame for encountering such an absurd creature!"

I imbued my kick with wind magic. He dodged it with minimal effort, even though I didn't think he could evade from that position. He slashed his claws toward me, and I realized that he was pretty impressive despite his tendency to blab.

We put some distance between us and the dragon.

"Sorry, but can you wait a bit?" he said, letting out another dramatic sigh.

"What's the matter?"

"Well, it's just that being so earnest despite your abnormal nature is such a jarring contrast. How can you make a dragon's heart flutter? And how can you extinguish my flames? I'm the strongest black dragon, you know. It's beyond weird for an ordinary human, even if he *is* a prince and a part-time knight, to dispel my magic with a wave of his hand!"

I didn't understand why he was so angry, so I answered his question.

"I only managed to extinguish one of your flames. Plus, I'm enough of a Hero that I was granted the divine weapon Eckesachs. And like I said, I'm a bit special. You're also strange but quite remarkable."

"Strange?! I'm a black dragon, you know. Show me some respect, human!"

The atmosphere shifted suddenly, the air around us heavy. I shrugged. "Are you done with your questions?"

"A Hero, huh? I thought it was odd for someone to visit me wearing such light armor. If you're the Hero chosen by that divine weapon, then I guess it makes sense. At first, I thought you might be here to seduce me, wearing nothing but a shirt and a leather breastplate. But alas, I was wrong."

"I hate wearing armor. It's cumbersome and hot. Besides, I doubt any armor can protect against a dragon. I only wore the breastplate because someone

begged me to," I said.

The dragon burst out laughing with a fierce grin. "Amazing! Not only are you good-looking and tough, but you seem perfect to have some fun with and torture! I might fall for you! You've ignored all my advances so far. Do you have someone special?"

With that, he scattered his fighting spirit and transformed his arms into their dragon forms, causing the ground to collapse. Then he disappeared.

The air stirred, so I braced my legs with a defensive barrier and kicked upward.

"Whoa! Not only can you defend, but you can fight offensively without your sword? You really *are* a knight. Um, and what else are you, again?"

"Prince and Hero."

"You're juggling too many roles! From today on, just being my lover will suffice!"

"What?"

I didn't understand what he meant and put all the emotions inside of me into my fist instead.

"Huh?! You...? You just tore through my aura!"

I stared at the dragon's shocked expression. "What did you say before?"

"Huh? I said you'd be my lover. No, wait. What? Are you really human? I've never seen or even heard of a human capable of such malice."

Lover? His lover? Is he planning on stealing me away from Cecilia?

"Oooh, does Lucas have a short temper? Your beautiful face is so intimidating."

"I thought that white dragon was your lover?"

"She's just a servant. There's no way I'd consider someone so noisy and weak to be my lover. I haven't found my mate yet. But until I do, I'll adore you and take good care of you!" he shouted joyfully.

I felt Eckesachs stick to my palm. My body felt heavy, and my movements slowed.

He punched me, but I blocked with the sword. However, his claws slashed at my shoulder and tore through my flesh. Yet, the overwhelming emotion dulled the pain.

Lover. Mate. Adore... Does he mean to take me away from her? Away from Cecilia? But if he takes me away, I'll never see her again...

"What's wrong? Got your hands full defending? Don't worry if you're still hung up on the person you left behind! After I beat you, I'll go to Bern and turn everything to ash!"

*Ash...?* 

I pictured Cecilia being burned, and I saw red.

The sensation of the sword that I should be gripping vanished, and I felt something slithering within me, capturing the feelings that formed my essence along with it.

If it takes over, Cece's Promise Mark will disappear.

What he said was unforgivable. He said he would turn her to ash. My Cecilia? I'm here to protect her, and he'll burn her to ashes?

No, no, no, no, no, no! I'll never allow it! Never ever! I'll never forgive someone who would take Cecilia away from me, even if it was myself!

Lightning struck my body, scorching me, but the fear of losing Cecilia overtook the pain.

"Ahh, ahhh, ahhhhh!"

"What? Wait, what's that?" I heard the dragon ask.

I don't need it.

I don't need anything else. Not as long as I have her. If I can protect her,

nothing else matters.

As that wish went through my mind, the image of Cecilia in my heart was blotted out by black. In its place, a familiar sense of urgency gnawed at me. I tried to stand up, but I was kicked and sent flying. I twisted my body in mid-air, braking with my feet and wiping the blood from my mouth with my thumb as I glanced around.

The blood isn't red. Has color vanished from the world?

I slowly raised my eyes, which widened slightly at the world's faint, hazy colors.

It used to be so beautiful... Wait, used to be? What does that mean? It's always been like this. Why do I feel strangely nostalgic?

There was a tumultuous feeling in my chest, annoying me greatly.

I need to find it quickly and reclaim it. Wait, reclaim what? I've never possessed anything that could make me feel this urgent. So I must...

"I have to enslave you."

"The rumors about your family being crazy were true, huh?"

I quietly stared at the sweating dragon, summoning Eckesachs in all directions to prevent its escape. As I stepped forward, the dragon cried out in panic.

"Hey, wait! I have to ask. Who are you right now?"

"I'm Lucas."

"Really?"

"Lucas Theoderic Herbst." I responded with the name that felt right, grabbed a nearby sword, and threw it at the shouting dragon.

"I knew it! Damn it! A real Hero! Gramps said it wouldn't be easy, but he was lying!"

He dodged. I instantly moved to the dragon's new location, dropping my heel on his head. My attacks finally seemed effective, and for the first time, the

dragon kneeled. He opened his mouth, aiming for me. I blocked it with a barrier and watched as the color drained from his face.

"Hey, hey!" the dragon yelled. "That was almost point-blank range! How can you block my roars with such a flimsy barrier?! You've gotta be joking. Your mana is on a whole different level than before!"

I admired the complex magic he conjured as I backed away, then dissipated it with my hand. I created the same spell with both hands and cast it at the dragon.

"Here you go."

"Gaah! You erased it without even moving your hands?! Wait, wait! What's with that enormous sigil?! I-it's an enslaving spell? Are you kidding me?!"

The dragon tried to escape the spell, sprouting his wings. But I pinned him to the ground with Eckesachs and surrounded him with a barrier.

"Eeeek! No, wait! Seriously, wait!" the dragon shouted noisily.

Suddenly a question came to mind, and I tilted my head. "Why are you speaking in such a high-pitched voice all of a sudden?"

"I'm bisexual, okay?! It was a strategy for living a long and interesting life.
That's not important right now, is it, though?! Seriously, gimme a break! Why
on earth would you want to enslave a dragon?"

Why?

"Because it seems convenient for travel."

"That's your reason?! I'm a dragon! I was expecting something more epic!
Cooler. Like conquering a kingdom! My purpose feels so pointless now. I'm just shocked!"

"Flying fast can save time, you know?"

As the dragon's mouth opened in shock, I tipped my head again.

Why do I want to save time? Why do I care so much about reducing my travel time? So I can see her more often, right? See her? See who?

I was lost in all the swirling questions and inadvertently poured too much mana into my spell, causing a gust of wild to blow away the dark clouds.

"Don't boost your spell while tilting your head like that! Why am I being enslaved to a human for such a nonsensical reason? I'll be a disgrace for generations to come!"

"A lot of fancy words, coming from you."

"The old man who obeyed your Sigelinde was my grandpa! He was a totally different person when he came back! What did you do?"

"I apologize, but I'm counting on your service from now on."

"I'll never agree, even if you're polite! You've really gotta be kidding! I'm a black dragon, you know! Me? Bow my head to humans? I'll—"

"Fine."

I sighed in response to the chatty dragon's complaints and temporarily lowered the defensive barrier he put up.

The dragon trembled when it saw me putting my frustration into my mana and expelling it. "Why did you take it down?"

"Now do you see how much stronger than you I am?"

"Argh!"

I manipulated my mana forward with my fist, applying pressure to the dragon's core and squeezing it. He trembled and braced against the ground. Then I gently opened my hand. The dragon stared back tearfully, resigned. Then I withdrew my magic, wondering if I'd overdone it.

"Not only have you destroyed my pride, but now you're enslaving me?! My master's a handsome devil with dilated pupils, and he's totally my type, but I can't even attack him by force! I'm so unlucky!" the dragon ranted loudly.

Satisfied, I released the sigil onto the dragon and called out the name that appeared. "Barnabash Zvonek, submit to me, Lucas Theoderic Herbst!"

"Damn it! Fine, I'll follow you during your short life... Owwwwie!"

Maybe I made it a bit too big.

I stared at my fist when I looked at the dragon that had collapsed under pressure, thinking perhaps I didn't know my own power. *Well, I should practice holding back my power like I did before.* I reconsidered, healing both the dragon and myself. I sheathed Eckesachs and then looked back at the dragon.

"Don't pretend to be asleep. Wake up."

"I'm heartbroken. Just give me a moment. Be a bit nicer to your servant..."

"I healed you."

"You're the one who caused my wounds!" He paused. "Nothing. I'm sorry for making fun of you, even though your personality changed, Gramps," the dragon muttered.

I told Finn we were heading back to Bern, and he came running toward me, clearly relieved.

"Lord Lucas! You're safe!" Finn frowned when he saw Barnabash sitting at my feet with his head hanging. "Wait, who is that?"

I told him it was a dragon, then took my cloak from him and put it on.

"A dragon?! Master, did you tame it?!"

"I'll explain later. The barrier around the castle has been broken. Hurry up, Barn."

"Yeah, yeah. You're a workhorse already, Master," Barnabash muttered as he turned back into a dragon.

Finn was shocked at the sight, but I urged him to get on. "B-But Lady Cecilia is at the castle right now!" he said. "We have to—whoa!"

In just a few seconds, we were soaring in the sky, flying quickly on

Barnabash's back. I told him to head toward the faintly visible spire of the royal castle.

"Who's Cecilia?" I asked Finn, my heart pounding.

"Huh?"

"The person you're talking about. Who is she?"

I don't know anyone by that name, I thought, digging through my memory. I asked again.

Finn stared at me in shock and tilted his head to the side. "Huh? What? Master Lucas?"

"What's the matter? Barn, to the right!"

"Yes, sir. Oh? Isn't that the Fenrir? Whoa, torturing a woman like that is in bad taste!"

I had no idea why, but I suddenly jumped off Barnabash's back, Eckesachs aimed toward the Fenrir.

## Interlude:

## **Andreas**

ALWAYS THOUGHT HE had the potential to become a Hero. But returning the very day he reached the depths of the forest? That was quite extraordinary.

Was it the tense atmosphere that prompted his fury? Or was it perhaps the anger stemming from the fact that Lady Cecilia, whom he shouldn't have had any memories of, was wounded?

The unbreakable defensive barrier made the Fenrir furious. That, and the fact that he could no longer use his voice. He kept trying to use his magic, only to wind up hurting himself.

"Don't waste your energy. You won't be able to break through it."

The Fenrir remained silent, shocked.

"You seem quite wounded. Well, it'll take more than that to kill you."

After he said that, he suddenly healed the Fenrir, then surrounded it with a defensive wall. He ignored the voices of confusion around him and summoned Eckesachs, stabbing the wolf in all of its non-vital points.

"You seem to be suffering. Rest assured, I won't kill you. Not yet. Again."

Lucas healed again, then cut it up with wind magic, then healed once more.

Cut it. Healed it. Cut it. Healed it.

The Fenrir could not voice his plea for mercy because he was lost in endless, unrelenting torture. Even his attempts to cast a spell to kill himself were constantly thwarted by Lucas.

I couldn't help but feel dread for the future of my beloved apprentice as I witnessed Fenrir's increasingly anguished and desperate expression as its core was being slowly chipped away.

I had taken him in when he was a tender ten-year-old boy. Lucas had a beautiful face but never showed any emotions. Although he was alive, it almost seemed as though he felt bad that he was living. His eyes seemed almost lifeless as they observed other people. Occasionally, I'd seen him staring off into space like he was searching his memory.

He was smart. He had an earnest personality and wasn't a bad kid. And his competitive spirit made him suited to be a knight.

As was told in the stories, Lucas showed tremendous growth during training sessions. He was almost on par with the palace knights by the time he was thirteen.

There was just one issue. To be a knight, he needed to have convictions—something he wanted to protect. And Lucas lacked that.

He made efforts to do what was asked of him, but he didn't ask for anything in return. Even though he looked like he was searching, he didn't seem to want anything. He had neither anything he wanted to protect nor anything that was important to him. But he was a Herbst.

That was why he continued to train. His golden eyes were more beautiful than any other royal's, yet they didn't carry any light. He was burdened with so much more than the average person. Or perhaps one should say he was blessed.

But when I looked at Lucas, I couldn't help but think that he wouldn't be happy unless he found something important to him.

When I explained the colors of the different knights to him, he told me he didn't understand because he couldn't see those colors. But then I remembered the moment when his golden eyes finally began to sparkle, and he began to see color.

Because Prince Felix was so cruel that the king and queen decided to introduce him to Lady Cecilia, one of the potential candidates to become the second prince's wife. I still remember thinking how arrogant the royal family

was for that. Lady Cecilia was given no choice between Felix and Lucas. All that mattered was that she bore a child.

Well, I thought it wouldn't hurt to say that it would be great if she could become the person Lucas wanted to protect, but perhaps that had been a mistake. If Lucas ended up falling head over heels for Lady Cecilia and she married Felix as planned, I'd feel too sorry for my apprentice. *No way that'll happen to Lukie,* I thought, but Lucas, who usually remained composed and polite, was acting strangely.

Hey, hold on... Could it be? Are you sneaking glances at her by chance?

I saw the moment my precious apprentice fell in love.

The other knights who witnessed that moment were struck by the touching sight of our usually calm and slightly irritating apprentice knight completely flustered in front of Lady Cecilia.

"Obstacles are just a part of love!" an older knight said, getting in his way.

Lukie looked somewhat down and was in a bad mood after that. Honestly, I thought the sight of those idiots smirking in delight was plain disgusting. And on top of that, his love life was full of obstacles. *Just leave him alone.* Of course, Lukie kicked his ass afterward. Those idiot knights had now established an absolute monarchy centered around Lukie.

I tried reprimanding him, but nothing worked.

Lukie was even more devoted to his training than before in order to keep his promise to Lady Cecilia. His relentless pursuit of her made me wonder if he might become a Hero like that other Herbst. Therefore, I made his training even more rigorous.

The results were as expected, but his actual abilities surpassed even my expectations. I never dreamed that a dragon of the highest order, a black dragon, would appear or that Lukie would become strong enough to control it.

Just as the bloody barrier containing the Fenrir was complete, a man I'd never

seen suddenly jumped down from a tree and unleashed a vast amount of magic, throwing the garden into chaos. It was immediately clear that his magic was even more dangerous than Fenrir's. Just maintaining the defensive barrier under that pressure was all I could manage.

However, Lucas calmly responded, his expression unchanging even in the face of such tremendous magic.

"Hey. Whose cat is that?" Prince Leon asked.

"First, calm your magic. Also, Elsa is under contract, so don't eat her," Lord Dirk said.

"Contract? Is she yours?"

"I found Elsa in the forest. She's under Herbst's protection."

Prince Leon and Dirk built a defensive wall against what was likely a dragon—and a black dragon at that, judging by the scattered lightning and incredible mana. They stepped back.

"Wh-what is that thing?" they muttered fearfully. "No way, is that Lukie? I figured it might be possible, but..."

Meanwhile, Elsa, who was a bit further away, was crying and screaming behind one of her fellow maids, whom she used as a shield.

"Hey, your claws! Your claws are out! That hurts! Using me as a shield is terrible, Elsa! You're going to bed with no dinner tonight, for sure!"

"What in the world did Lord Lucas bring back this time?"

"It's terrifying! It's impossible! So scary! Its voice is creepy. Its eyes are creepy. And if it catches me, I'll probably die! Please, help me!"

I figured Lucas had probably succeeded in taming the beast, based on Elsa's reaction, but we needed to get it to suppress its mana quickly. Otherwise, even the unconscious Azure Knight might not survive being exposed to it.

Just as I was about to call out to Lucas in a panic, he sighed.

"Calm down," he said. "Anna, Kate, take Elsa back and get her changed. Barn, what happened to Elsa?"

"I found her, my mate!"

"What?"

"No way, she's adorable! But you can't be serious. She's a cat?! And so young. I'm worried I might break her. But it should be fine since she's a magic cat, right? This went from the worst day to the best day ever!"

Lucas pointed to the bloodstained box which contained the Fenrir, making the excited dragon freeze in place, its face filled with fear. "Shut up, or I'll put you in there, too."

"Please, forgive me. I am a good dragon," the dragon apologized brokenly.

I never thought I'd see such a sight in my life. Though I realized with a sigh that I'd likely see it many more times from now on. I felt a headache coming on.

Dragons are supposed to be incredibly proud creatures, yet Lucas had managed to completely shatter that pride. *My apprentice really is incredible*. I almost wanted to tell the black dragon he *wasn't* my apprentice.

After that, Lucas pulverized the typically indestructible core of the Fenrir and incinerated it, erasing all trace of the beast. Everyone paled at the sight. Then, he disappeared with Barnabash to fetch the knights he had left behind in the depths of the forest.

Before he left, he handed Lady Cecilia, whom he had rescued and had been carrying all this time, over to a nearby member of the Imperial Guard.

Although he hesitated for a moment, seeing Lucas, with his usual expressionless face, handing Cecilia over to another man, made Finn and Cecilia's maids freeze. The color drained from their faces. Even Prince Leon and Lord Dirk looked visibly shocked.

Even though he had lost his memories, Lucas had assured us everything would be fine if they met again. I wondered what had happened and felt like heaving a sigh.

Normally, you wouldn't know if you'd fall in love with the same person twice. Even if your core self doesn't change, you might choose a different path with someone else. The other person might not be strong enough to rekindle a relationship with someone who has forgotten all about them and the memories they shared together.

Even if they did decide to try again with no memories, there was no guarantee those feelings would be reciprocated. They might be rejected and forced to watch the one they loved smile at someone else, causing immense pain. That would make the most sense.

And if someone was so important to you, even imagining what might happen could prevent you from becoming a Hero. You mustn't wish for anything other than to protect them.

It was almost like becoming a Hero required you to abandon your old self and live a different life. But perhaps that wasn't the case. Some potential Heroes had written about coming close to becoming a true Hero and failing because they felt like their hearts were being exposed.

It seemed like Eckesachs only chose those who were truly steady, those who sought nothing but the one they cherished. Lucas undoubtedly saw Cecilia as his one and only. And if losing his memories hadn't changed that, he would surely fall for her again, given the right circumstances.

According to Finn, Lucas had immediately shielded Cecilia with his cloak and healed her wounds, not allowing anyone else to see her. He didn't even use Barnabash, and his pupils were dilated with rage as he made the Fenrir suffer. Finn said he also gently rested his cheek on her forehead through the cloak to confirm she was alive, clearly relieved. When Marquis Cline showed up in a panic, his face pale after hearing the commotion, Lucas made the effort to ask him, "Is this your daughter?" despite normally being uninterested in others.

That atmosphere was intense; it gave me goosebumps.

His eyes were frighteningly dark as the Imperial Knight carried Cecilia away.

Had there been a trigger?

Cecilia had been on the verge of being eaten alive by Fenrir, and Lucas had just barely made it in time. If their meeting at thirteen had been the trigger, then Lucas might still see her as just another noblewoman since they hadn't exchanged words or even made eye contact this time.

But then, that didn't explain the reason for his actions earlier. I was completely baffled.

Lucas's expressions had only recently started to change. Now that he had lost his memories, he'd returned to his original state. Honestly, I felt like he was even more impassive now. I sighed deeply.

With Lucas and Lady Cecilia's sacrifice, the problem of the ancient dragon was resolved.

I'd like to say the adults could now step in and handle things from here, but I'm not very good at this sort of thing.

"What's going on here?"

The marquis was angry. Who could blame him? He'd tearfully married off his daughter, and now, his new son-in-law returned from the campaign with no memories of her.

I wasn't sure I could make Marquis Cline understand. He might grasp the situation, but accepting it was another matter entirely. I sighed again. *This'll be tough to explain*.

"We're back."

Lucas returned with Finn and Barnabash. Relieved, I waved them over. "Lucas, put up a soundproofing spell around this entire room."

"Can't you do it for once?"

"Yours is better. Okay, done. Now, introduce yourself properly."

"Lucas Theoderic Herbst."

Don't look at Marquis Cline like that! What kind of introduction is that? It's really hard to tell with his face showing no expression whatsoever.

"Prince Leon, Dirk, and Marquis Cline, as you can probably guess from his name, Lucas has truly become a Hero. He has successfully defeated and tamed the dragon. Before we even get to the matter of him inheriting the Hero's crest, there's another matter I need to discuss. Lucas is the sole bearer of the Hero name Theoderic. No one else is permitted to claim the title. The sacred weapon Eckesachs will not tolerate it. Please make this clear to everyone."

I need to ensure no one else calls me Hero anymore. Well, Prince Leon, Dirk, and Marquis Cline should be able to handle that. Lucas's achievements are indisputable.

I glanced at the two, who nodded in agreement, then turned my gaze to Marquis Cline. Ah, that deep frown on his face. Does he know what I'm getting at?

"Due to an accident during the process of becoming a Hero, Lucas has suffered some memory loss."

"An accident?"

Don't smirk sarcastically like that, Dirk. You're probably furious with yourself for not verifying things with Lucas earlier.

Marquis Cline's knuckles are turning white. He looks terrifying.

"Most of the knights present were Imperial Knights, but even they won't be able to conceal Lucas's memory loss. We need your cooperation on this matter."

"I have no objection. However, there's one thing I'd like to confirm, Marshal."

"What is it, Dirk?" I followed Dirk's gaze and found he was looking directly at Lucas.

"You knew this would happen. Didn't you, Marshal?"

Silence is the best response to this question! This alone should convey to these three just how significant this accident was.

Dealing with smart individuals is easy in moments like this, but it's not easy on the nerves. I understand that this role is mine to bear as the one who placed this burden on Lucas. But it's still tough.

Seeing Dirk's pained expression as he looked at Lucas, Prince Leon let out a long, deep sigh.

"Lucas, do you have any memory of what happened before and after you became the Hero?"

"Mostly, yeah."

"What about other memories? Like when you became second prince or from your childhood?"

"Yeah."

Prince Leon paused. "You really haven't changed at all, have you? Especially how you answer with so few words," he said with a shrug.

I inwardly shared his sentiment. Just then, Marquis Cline finally spoke up.

"Well then, Your Highness. What about your memories of my daughter?"

Straight to the point—Marquis Cline is extraordinary! And that intense glare!

"I have none," Lucas said after a pause.

"Do you know her name?"

"Her name is Cecilia. I overheard it when I was rescuing her."

"Is she married?"

"I noticed a ring."

"And do you know who she is married to?"

Lucas considered the question. "I do not."

Wow, Marquis Cline is relentless. I almost feel sorry for Lucas.

"Do you know that my daughter was originally betrothed to Lord Felix?" Marquis Cline asked.

"She's Felix's fiancée?" Lucas suddenly clutched his head.

"Calm down, Lucas!" I called to him, quickly erecting a defensive barrier. "You'll destroy the room!"

"Hey, hey..." Prince Leon groaned.

"My brother has finally stopped being human, hasn't he...?" Lord Dirk said.

The quality of Lucas's overflowing mana was unlike anything before, and it now carried an intense malice. *I wasn't even this scared facing the black dragon earlier!* Even the defensive barrier the three of us put up together started to shatter under the pressure. The windows and walls began to crack. It was only Marquis Cline's calm voice that brought him back from the brink.

"I told you to keep it in check. If this is how you act with more power, I regret marrying my daughter off to you prematurely."

"What?"

That's all you can say? Lucas, that man is your father-in-law, remember? Also, could you please dissipate that magical mist around your feet? It's making me break out into a cold sweat!

Also, Marquis Cline revealed the marriage a little fast... He's so cold he's frightening me too!

The three of us watched Lucas and Marquis Cline intently, holding our breath and covered in an icy sweat.

"Prince Lucas, you have a ring in your left ear, do you not? You are already, in essence, married to Cecilia. Are you listening, Your Highness?"

"The Earring of Union... I'm married?"

"It's not official, so her name hasn't changed yet. However, I will not let you

see her."

Oh, his eyes narrowed slightly. Still expressionless but a bit more readable now.

"I can't believe how scary Marquis Cline is," muttered Prince Leon.

"That 'not letting you see her' seems rather personal," Lord Dirk whispered as they watched Lucas's composed demeanor.

"Is it because I don't remember her?" Lucas asked.

"Yes. I need to explain your condition to her first. Understand this: You have returned as a Hero who tamed a dragon. Starting tomorrow, the entire kingdom will be in an uproar. It's unprecedented for the second prince to tame a dragon. Officially, you haven't even had an engagement ceremony, so other kingdoms will surely start making inquiries. All of this needs to be handled without revealing your accident. I would dearly appreciate your cooperation, Your Highness," Marquis Cline said, his eyes glinting as he glared at Lucas.

He's definitely angry, even though he knows it's not Lucas's fault. He must be thinking about how much this will hurt Cecilia.

Lucas and Lady Cecilia's engagement was already widely known throughout the kingdom; they were essentially married. But with Lucas having no memory of her—and because he was the Hero and the second prince—opportunists would undoubtedly appear, hoping to take advantage of the situation. Even if they couldn't become his legal wife, they'd offer to become his mistress.

A heavy weight settled in my heart when I saw Lucas's emotionless face as he stared at Marquis Cline.

Barnabash's bored yawn echoed through the stillness of the quiet room.

Lucas lowered his gaze slightly. "Understood," he said, voice devoid of emotion.

"Thank you. Lord Dirk, can you handle the magical beast issue on your end?"

"Of course. Let the Herbsts take care of it. I have some concerning

information as well."

"What is it?"

"I'll explain it to Leon later," Lord Dirk said after a pause.

"Oh, great..." Prince Leon muttered. "Now I'm really scared to find out." His face contorted in dread at Lord Dirk's cryptic comment.

"Ah, one more thing," Marquis Cline continued, addressing Dirk again.

"Although this has ended rather unsatisfactorily, the danger is gone for now.

Considering Prince Lucas's memory issue, I will be taking my daughter back to my household."

"Yes, I know this result was unexpected, but things are resolved for the time being. It shouldn't be a problem as long as she has proper guards," Lord Dirk said.

"Dirk, don't say that in front of Cardinal Howser..."

"Of course, I won't."

Their conversation reminded me that Lady Cecilia had been staying at the ducal estate for her protection. The reason was due to Felix and others causing trouble after the broken engagement, harboring resentment and possibly targeting her, as well as Lucas being the second prince and future Hero.

Removing her from the ducal estate now made me feel sorry for her. She would need time to process everything. It was likely best for her to be away from Lucas for now, under the guise of recovering from the Fenrir incident.

I felt anxious for Lucas, who remained silent.

What color is your world now?

## **Chapter Four**

**D**REAMS ARE ALWAYS SO HONEST.

I knew the person who stood before me shouldn't be there. I understood this was just a convenient fantasy. But I reached out, trying to grasp it.

I wished for something I never dared to voice, clinging to it despite its impossibility. No matter how many people supported me, no matter how important his role and pride were, I couldn't help but think I'd give it all up to stay with this one irreplaceable person.

Before me stood a man with a bloodstained sword. He was covered in even more blood than his dripping sword was. A dark reddish-black pool of the stuff was at his feet.

But the man—Lucas—stood still, his gaze never straying to the countless corpses around him. He wiped the blood from his sword and tightened his grip on it. He knew that overlooking what needed to be killed would lead to his greatest regret. Therefore, he never looked down. He was unafraid to be stained with blood. His stance was resolute, unwavering, and filled with a powerful will that made my throat, body, and heart tremble.

"You really are annoying. How can you look so cool, even in a dream..." I muttered, letting out a self-deprecating laugh.

"I know. I'm here because you kept protecting me. That's why I am who I am today."

I clutched my chest tightly. He had been staring straight ahead in profile to me. Then Lucas turned toward me. His golden eyes, which were more beautiful than anyone else's, shimmered and curved in a gentle arc, conveying deep love. An overwhelming surge of emotions filled me. Perhaps because it was a dream, I couldn't hold back my emotions and spoke to him more roughly than I usually would.

"I know... The reason you keep standing there is because of your will, and protecting is your pride. That's why I never tried to stop you... I didn't give up either. I kept my promises. I kept trying. I tried so hard!"

So why then?! The words spilled out of my constricted throat, almost like a sob.

"Why won't you come back?"

My own words made my chest ache, and I crouched down, unable to bear it.

I wasn't prepared at all. No matter how much I tried to hold it together, I was just a woman in the end. My dark, ugly emotions spilled out.

"You don't have to..."

I knew I shouldn't say it. It was tantamount to insulting him. And yet, I couldn't stop myself.

"You don't have to protect me! So just...please... Please live!"

The hand I reached out wasn't brushed away. It was grasped gently but firmly, as if to say he wouldn't let go. The strength of his grip and the warmth of his lips pressed against my ring finger was too real to be a dream, pulling my consciousness back rapidly.

"No, no! No, stop... Just a little longer!"

I shook my head like a child refusing to wake up, clinging to a dream because reality was too harsh and terrifying. Lucas smiled faintly, almost painfully.

"I'm sorry...but I still love you."

"Nooo!" I screamed, trying to cling to his fading warmth and the raspy voice that seemed to hold something back.

My own voice jolted me awake, and I saw my trembling hand outstretched in front of me through my blurred vision. Wet tears streamed down my cheeks endlessly. When I felt every inch of my body trembling, I finally realized I was alive.

Wait, I'm alive? My hands, my feet... They're still intact. Am I safe? The fear of living my life alone overwhelmed me. The relief that I was safe couldn't even sink in.

I raised my hand to cover my face, only for my faintly glowing golden ring to catch my eye.

"Huh?"

It should've been a dream, a fantasy born from my wishful thinking. He should've been in the depths of the border forest. *This must be the residual effect of the royal court magician's healing spells.* I tried to convince myself of this, but the warm, tranquil magic that coursed through my body made my heart pound uncontrollably.

I know this magic. I know it! But how? No, I can't hold onto hope! If this turns out to be a false hope, I might abandon my promise to wait for him and chase after him instead!

"Lady Cecilia! Oh, you're awake! Are you in any pain?!" Suddenly, a voice called out over the thunderous sound of my beating heart.

I turned my stiff neck toward the sound. Anna rushed to my bedside with tear-streaked cheeks and knelt down. I reached out to her instinctively, and she tightly grasped my hand.

"I'm so sorry!" She apologized. "I promised to protect you, yet this happened!"

I stared absently at her once I realized she also didn't seem to be injured. "Oh... No, it's fine, really..."

"How can you say it's fine?! I'm so sorry!"

"It's all right, Anna. We're both safe. Everyone is safe, right?" I couldn't help but ask, feeling guilty despite her apologies.

She shook her head slightly, dismissing my worry. I squeezed her hand back and stared at her.

If both you and I are safe, surely that means someone saved us, right? Someone capable of fighting a Fenrir must've appeared. I was on the brink of being eaten alive, after all. Even Marshal Webber might not have made it in time.

So who was it? Was it him? My person?

I was trembling and covered with a cold sweat due to my anxiety. Anna opened her mouth hesitantly, but she wasn't the one who answered my question. Instead, it was my father, who had just entered the room.

"Calm down, Cecilia. Everyone is safe. No one was lost, thanks to the time you bought us."

"Everyone?" I repeated as I tried to absorb its meaning. My mouth was as dry as cotton.

Father nodded reassuringly, though I thought I saw a hint of something else in his gaze. He can't mention Mihael due to the forbidden magic involved, I thought in the back of my mind.

"Who defeated the Fenrir, then?" I continued, frantic.

Did...he...defeat it?

I was too afraid to ask, but Father answered my question quietly as he approached me.

"Prince Lucas was the one who saved you from the Fenrir. He successfully defeated the ancient dragons as well, without any injuries. He's currently giving his report to His Majesty and Marshal Webber."

"Oh!" Hearing the words I'd so longed to hear, hearing his name echo in the room, made my heart soar with joy. I felt like I might collapse and struggled to support my body in bed, hot tears dripping onto my hands. My throat tightened with emotion, and I kept silently calling his name over and over again.

Father gently stroked my head. "Cecilia, calm down and listen to me."

Puzzled, I raised my tear-streaked face and tilted my head to the side. The

fear that had disappeared resurfaced, and the pained expressions of my father and Anna made me force a shaky smile.

Why? Why are you making those faces? Lucas is safe, isn't he? He's back, safe and sound. So why are you avoiding my gaze?

"F-Father?" My cheek twitched as I called out awkwardly.

My father took a deep breath. "During the battle, Prince Lucas had an accident. As a result, he has lost all his memories of you."

"Lost his memories...?" I repeated, unable to comprehend what he'd just said.

My mind couldn't keep up as the meaning sank in. "What do you mean, Father?" I asked again.

I felt strange; disjointed, like my body and mind were out of sync. My father's mouth seemed to move in slow motion. And when I finally understood his unwelcome words, my tears dried up.

"He has become a true Hero by taming the black dragon, but he has lost all memories related to you. The engagement remains intact, of course, but there will be a gag order regarding the prince's conditions. Things may get quite chaotic. He used his magic to heal your wounds, so there's nothing to worry about on that front. However, you will stay at our family home to recuperate until everything is settled. So you won't be able to see Prince Lucas for a while."

"I won't be able to see him?"

Can't see him? What do you mean I can't see him? Because he has no memory of me? That means I shouldn't go to him? And Lucas won't come to see me, either?

I suddenly couldn't breathe as I was faced with this harsh reality.

The blood drained from my face, and my vision wavered. I couldn't even feel the cool sheets clenched in my fists.

I collapsed onto the bed. The color drained from Anna's face, and I saw her run out of the room in the periphery of my vision. I couldn't bear it any longer

and closed my eyes.

Oh... Is my Lucas never coming back to me?

\*\*\*

As my consciousness slowly began to return, I absently wondered if the cost of my wish was me having to make my exit as the villainess.

When I tried to reach out to the figure before me, the words I'd heard so many times echoed in my mind. Those words urged me to give up on love, whispered with mockery and pity when I was Felix's fiancée. They told me I existed only to fulfill my duties as the legitimate wife. He would find true love, and I would be abandoned, just like back then.

I woke up abruptly, overwhelmed by fear and seeking comfort when I was surrounded by a familiar, comforting scent. I was holding onto a white shirt, and I didn't need to look at it to know whose it was or who had brought it to me.

My body felt heavy as I sat up and rang the bell on my nightstand to call for a maid. When the maid rushed in, I asked for some water, drank it, and then asked how much time had passed. My face tightened.



The maid watched me with concern when she saw my strained expression. "I'm fine." I forced out a shaky voice. "I'll just try to go back to sleep again," I said and dismissed her.

Alone again, I took several deep breaths and recalled what had happened since I had returned to my family home.

Once I arrived, I was told that it wouldn't be proper to have the maids from the ducal estate here. I watched as the two of them, who were always smiling and standing together—this time without Elsa—silently bit their lips. That memory filled me with guilt.

They must be so worried about me.

It had already been four days since the Fenrir attack and Lucas's return.

The castle must be in chaos. Well, not just the castle, but the entire kingdom. After all, a Hero who had tamed a dragon had appeared. Normally, his fiancée would receive countless invitations. Heroes stood alongside kings. But that was only in times of crisis.

This was a true Hero who could even control dragons. The nobles who tried to curry favor with him needed to be scrutinized to find out whether they were honest and useful or just desired power. Groundwork needed to be laid to show that he had no intention of rebellion or committing treason, even though he had the power to do so.

I had an essential role as Lucas's fiancée. I should be telling everyone the details of the battle and demonstrating to both myself and the kingdom that our relationship was unchanged.

Instead, I was bedridden and had failed to do any of it. I always thought I was resilient, but perhaps I wasn't as strong as I thought.

I gazed at the white shirt. I appreciated Anna and the others' kindness, the strength draining from my body.

Father said I wouldn't be able to see Lucas for a while. But how long is that?

He was back, and our engagement was still on. I wore this ring. Why couldn't I see him? Does that mean he won't allow me to see him?

The only memories he lost were of me. I can't even see his safe return because of that.

That terrifying thought sent a chill down my spine, making my lips tremble.

"He's forgotten me."

Does that mean he doesn't love me anymore?

The golden ring glittered in the dim light, catching my eye. I couldn't hold back anymore.

"You idiot! You liar! You said you loved me! You said you'd come back to me!"

I knew it was unreasonable. He had returned, after all. He'd fought multiple dragons, succeeded in taming one, and returned as a true Hero.

It must have been a harsh battle.

He had chosen to become a Hero because of our promise because the kingdom and its people would remain in danger if the dragons weren't defeated. He had made that choice. If he hadn't become a Hero, the Fenrir would've killed me that day, and I wouldn't be here right now. If he hadn't come back a Hero, he might not have come back at all. The image of losing Lucas crossed my mind, sending a shiver through me.

The mere thought of losing him froze my heart with terror. It was a fear I never wanted to experience again.

I was genuinely happy that Lucas was alive. I was grateful from the bottom of my heart. He'd protected me, saved me. He came back and then saved me again.

I should be grateful. He only lost his memories of me; I was the only one gone from his world. So it was wrong to blame or be angry with him. I knew that the only reason I could feel this way and be angry at him now was because he was still alive. So I had to just accept the happiness that I had now.

The selfish part of me can't help but think it's cruel, though. He knew this would happen!

"I won't change. Ever," Lucas had whispered.

I believed those words when I finally saw him before he left for battle. He definitely said that.

He said he wouldn't change. How much emotion did he put into those words?

I glared at the ring on my ring finger and slapped Lucas's shirt with all my might.

"You're so cruel! You knew everything! You did it all to keep me! That's why you gave me this ring!"

Such an intense sense of obsession was tied to this ring that it was almost frightening. It made my heart feel like it would break.

The greedy gold ring bound me tightly, telling me he never intended to let me go, even if he had forgotten me. I trembled with both anger and longing, and my throat constricted painfully.

```
"Ahh, ah..."
```

It was so painful I couldn't breathe. Tears fell onto the ring as I clutched his shirt, the glittering drops reminding me painfully of his eyes. Unable to bear it any longer, I grabbed the ring. But no matter how much I tried to pull it off, the ring wouldn't move, and my tears wouldn't stop.

```
"It's just cruel!"
```

Lucas's voice sounded in my ears as his words came back to me. *I love you. I love you, Cecilia*, he'd said. *Want me more.* 

```
"You're so unfair..."
```

I love you. I love you so much.

"Get ready, because...I'll start over...with you!"

I'd start over with Lucas as many times as it took. I'll fall in love with you again, no matter how many times it takes! And this time, I'll be the one to make the first move!

You loved me enough to carve the Promise Mark onto my skin and yet thought it was okay to lose your memories of me. That must mean that my love and my vow reached you.

The ring I wear is proof of our connected hearts. It's also a chain to keep us together and a guide for our future.

I kissed the ring gently, as if in prayer, murmuring his beloved name with longing in my heart.

You came back to me... You returned alive... I'll try harder because I love you. You said nothing would change, so I'll believe you.

I will stand before you. I will make the first move to get you to look at me. I'll convey my unchanging love. So please... Please allow me to cry for the you of the past just a little longer.

\*\*\*

How many tears had I shed onto the shirt I was holding?

I sniffled, lifted my face from the damp shirt, and let out a long breath. I felt somewhat refreshed, perhaps because I had cried while cursing Lucas.

Crying's important. But the shirt is so soaked now that it no longer smells like him. I need a new one. Silly thoughts like that ran through my mind.

There was a soft knock at the door. I quickly wiped my tears, quietly sat up, and tilted my head as I looked at the door.

Wait, that wasn't a knock on the door...

I wondered if it was just my imagination. Just when I was about to call out, I heard the knock again, startling me. I turned toward the sound.

"What?"

My eyes widened. A figure stood on the balcony, his black cloak spread like bat wings, a large moon behind him.

Am I dreaming? Did I cry myself to sleep? Ooh, I bet I did...

That was my first thought when I saw such a shocking sight, but the wind caressing my cheeks and hair made me realize I was awake.

I tilted my head questioningly. The figure began to speak, his gold eyes glimmering beneath a black hood and a smile on his lips.

"Good evening. I apologize for being so inappropriate, coming through the window. The moon is so beautiful tonight. Would you like to come here and stargaze with me?"

I said nothing, unable to speak.

"Oh, forgive me! I haven't introduced myself yet. I am Lucas Theoderic Herbst. It's a pleasure to meet you. What is your name, beautiful lady?" He smiled and gave me a polite, knightly bow. I could almost hear his beautiful face relaxing. Surely no one would blame me for standing there dumbfounded with this impossibly gorgeous man in front of me.

Wait, this is strange. Am I really dreaming? This doesn't make sense otherwise. Did he just say his name was Lucas?

Theoderic was a name given only to the true Hero of Bern, and the only one who could bear that name now was Lucas, since Father told me he'd become a true Hero despite not yet inheriting the Hero's crest.

My mind raced as I tried to make sense of it.

Lucas Theoderic Herbst? Then it really is Lucas? Well, there's no one else as divinely beautiful as Lucas. But Lucas doesn't remember me. He doesn't remember anything about me... That's why I was crying just moments ago. But now...

My mind was filled with confused thoughts, but my mouth moved to reply to his greeting out of habit, another testament to my education.

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Cecilia Cline."

Nice to meet you?! What am I doing? I need to calm down!

Knocking on my window at this hour is too suspicious, no matter how handsome he is! Although, I want to give him a pass, considering how picturesque this scene is...

A gorgeous man wearing a shirt, trousers, and a black cloak who is obviously trying to go incognito, smiling on the balcony with the moon in the background and a rose in hand? What kind of prank is this?

If I were a dreamy young girl, I might blush. Although, he was clearly suspicious. I hope I'm not actually blushing!

I don't know what's going on, but I need to calm down and think.

He kept saying his name was Lucas, and the more he did so, the more he seemed like the real Lucas. It was both confusing and oddly convincing.

I clenched the front of my nightgown, confused, and stared fearfully and intently at the man who called himself Lucas.

He gave me a wry smile and stood at the threshold between my room and the balcony. "I'm sorry for startling you," he said. "It seems there's a barrier beyond this point. I promise I have no intention of entering your room tonight or causing you harm. I've come to see you for a reason."

Tonight. He doesn't intend to cause harm tonight.

That one word drastically reduced my sense of security. What would happen on another day, then? I swallowed nervously. "What brings you here?" I asked.

"I wanted to greet you properly, apologize, and ask you a favor."

"Apologize and ask a favor?"

What could it be? A terrifying thought flashed through my mind. Please tell me it's not calling off our engagement! The blood drained from my face.

Whether or not he was really Lucas, hearing such words from someone with

Lucas's face was unbearably frightening. I covered my ears with both hands unconsciously and shook my head. I backed away instinctively and saw him rush to speak.

"I'm truly sorry for coming so late to rescue you! You were being held down by that wretched Fenrir, and because I was delayed by that worthless dragon, I couldn't return in time. I caused you such fear and pain. I'm deeply sorry..."

He lowered his head, his beautiful eyes widening with anger.

Oh no... Is remembering it making him angry?

"That Fenrir... I should've made it suffer more before reducing it to ash. I should've made it regret being born and forced it to apologize to you before I killed it."

No thank you, that's too scary! The idea of being apologized to by that Fenrir was simply traumatizing.

This is supposed to be a romantic scene, but the balcony is starting to grow dark. No, stop! Don't release such intense anger or people will come!

"It's really okay. There's nothing to apologize for!" I answered desperately, my face twisting with effort.

Even though I knew I should call for someone from the house immediately, I couldn't bring myself to do so. Just because he had Lucas's face, I found myself trying to get him to hold back.

I felt scared despite myself. I was afraid that this person might actually be Lucas, and that fear seemed to be the strongest proof of all.

I told myself not to get my hopes up and stared at him intently as he began to speak again.

"But..." he began again. "You were crying just now, weren't you? And you were injured. I made sure to cover you with my cloak so no one would see, and I healed you as best as I could. I couldn't check your wounds in public, though."

How long was he standing there?! He saw me crying like that? It's too embarrassing! And I was cursing, wasn't I? I didn't mention any names, right?!

My pale face instantly flushed. I took a small step back, flustered. He noticed and quickly spoke, his words now making a bit more sense.

"No, I didn't see you crying! Well, I did, but it was just because your dress was torn, and... No, wait. That's not it... I just wanted to check your wounds!"

"Wounds?"

Oh, he's talking about seeing my wounds, not seeing me crying just now. That means he probably didn't hear me cursing. But that's not the point. Is he talking about the injuries the Fenrir gave me? He's embarrassed he saw my breasts when he healed me because my dress was ripped open. Wait, when he healed me...?

Only a few close people knew about my wounds from the Fenrir. Anna and the others said most of the knights present hadn't seen it. Most had already collapsed due to the Fenrir, and it was hard to see from the outside because Kate was repairing the broken defense barrier.

The healers from the castle didn't know about my injuries, either. By the time they had gotten there, Lucas had already healed me.

Yet, he just said he saw me and healed my wounds when he rescued me. So that means he must really be...

I clutched my aching chest and struggled not to cry as I stared at him.

"I-I didn't mean any harm. I just wanted to confirm the extent of your wounds... No, I mean, er... Well... I should've asked first," Lucas muttered. He told himself to get a grip, then took a deep breath and steeled his gaze. "Cecilia."

I didn't realize how happy I would be to hear my name. I took a sharp breath and tried to hold the warmth in my nose as he continued.

"Oh!" he said, realizing something. "Can I call you Cece? And you can call me

Lukie."

When I heard him say that, I couldn't hold back the tears any longer.

I'd decided to start over not a moment ago. I'd resolved to be the one to make the effort to go see him. Now it all felt so painful.

It was true that he had no memory of me. Otherwise, he wouldn't be introducing himself like this and speaking so formally.

When we grew closer, he always spoke casually and showed his inner self. So the fact that he stood here speaking so politely meant he really didn't remember me. It made my heart ache to think so, but still... I reconsidered. Even without his memory, he's still Lucas. He was still the kind man he always was, unchanged, allowing me to stand at the starting line to begin again.

He had probably learned about our engagement and de facto marriage right after his return. And even though he didn't remember me, he'd come to see me.

Listening to his request was terrifying. Losing his memory and learning he was already married must've shocked him. But the fact that he came to introduce himself to me meant he cared about me a little, right?

Even if he said he wanted to annul our marriage due to his memory loss, I would never give up.

Even if you forget me, even if you look at someone else, there's no way I could give up loving you now that you've bound me with this ring. Whether I give up my love or continue to hold on, both will be painful. Either way, I choose to suffer by your side.

"Yes. Please call me Cece, Lord Lukie." I made up my mind and quickly wiped away my tears, replying with the biggest smile I could muster. For some reason, Lucas froze.

"Sorry, could you wait a moment?" he asked in a quiet voice. He lowered his face and covered his mouth.

I said yes, tensing as I quietly waited. His shoulders rose and fell as he took deep breaths. Then I saw him gather his resolve and look straight at me.

"I have no memory of you."

Even though I knew it was coming, those words froze me to the spot. My chest ached, and I fought the urge to scream.

"It's like my memories have vanished completely. I have some memories that don't make sense, and I knew something was wrong. Even though the earring in my left ear is clearly engraved with a wedding vow, I have no memory of it. I can't believe it."

His face fell, and I found myself staring at the flames flickering in his dark eyes.

"Your ring and my earring are matching wedding rings, although you haven't changed your name yet. When I heard we were basically married, I looked into it myself. I realized I didn't have the right to stand beside you, let alone be in front of you. I realized I had lost you, and suddenly, everything went dark. No matter how hard I researched you, my memories didn't return. I couldn't find a way to recover them. I thought if it kept going like this, I'd have no right to stop anyone else from taking you. So, I decided even if it meant hurting you, I'd apologize to you until you forgave me and ask you to give me another chance, to start over... And that's...why I came here tonight."

He looked pained when he finished speaking. A familiar emotion was in his golden eyes. My eyes widened in disbelief.

## Could it be?

My heart trembled, my vision blurred, and then I took a step forward, drawn to him.

"I wondered if it was right to come see you, knowing I would only hurt you and make you sad. Apologizing without my memories was too insincere. But I couldn't stand the thought of losing you. And more than that, I missed you so

much I just couldn't take it anymore. I'm sorry for hurting you. I'm truly sorry..."
Lucas's voice was hoarse and filled with sorrow as he apologized over and over.
His words overflowed with emotion, which made me stop at the threshold between the balcony and the room.

He looked pleadingly at me when he saw me freeze, his face twisted with pain.

"I swear again to love you alone for the rest of my life. I will swear it over and over, so please..." He knelt down as if cutting through the boundary, his voice breaking with regret. "Cecilia, can you believe me if I tell you I fell in love with you the moment I saw you when I rescued you? I want you to believe me..."

He reached out with trembling hands and offered me a rose. Without a word, I immediately stepped over the threshold and leaped into his open arms.

\*\*\*

I sobbed against his chest, my nose running.

He showered the top of my head with kisses and nuzzled his cheek against mine, repeatedly murmuring apologies and words of love. I clung to him for a long time, unable to control my sobs.

After feeling his warmth, inhaling his familiar scent that I loved so much, and hearing his deep, loving voice, I was certain it was really Lucas. I realized I needed to tell him, "Welcome home." I looked up and saw his slightly teary golden eyes and his tender, smiling face. Then, I noticed something odd.

"Lord Lukie?"

"Yes, Cece?"

His smile is too beautiful...

He was as handsome as ever. A hint of guilt was still in his golden eyes, but they were overflowing with love. Everything seemed fine at first glance, but... *Is it just me, or is he being cagey?* 

"Why aren't you hugging me?" I asked, suspicious.

I was the one who had jumped into his arms, but his hands were raised awkwardly, like a businessman trying to avoid being mistaken for a groper on a train.

What? He opens his arms but doesn't hug me back. What was the point of his apologies and words of love? Can anyone blame me for being irritated about this?!

"Lukie, put your arms down."

What are you gasping for? You're making me look like some kind of pervert! No, no, calm down! There had to be some reason he didn't want to hug me. It made my heart sink just thinking about it.

My face twisted in pain at the thought.

"N-no, it's not that!" Lucas raised his voice, panicked, once he noticed. "I can't control my strength. So I can't hug you."

His frantic explanation took me by surprise. "Huh?" I replied dumbly, staring into his intense golden eyes.

He averted his gaze, embarrassed. "I just realized how pathetic that is... It's too late now, though. But," he sighed and casually grabbed the balcony railing, which cracked beneath his grip.

Um, that railing is made of stone...

"My strength has increased significantly since becoming the Hero. I've been practicing my control, and I can make it through everyday tasks. I'm so excited to see you and happy and that you accepted me, though. I'm not confident I can control it."

He looked away, his ears turning red. "So please...forgive me today."

I glared at him, blushing. This man is truly unfair! He made me practically overflow with love but tells me he can't hug me?! Even the reason he can't hug me is making my heart pound!

He really wants to start over from the beginning, but I have the advantage of having experienced this before! I'll tease him as much as I can! I was actually happy about this for some reason, and I gave into my emotions, tightening my grip around him. He immediately stiffened.

```
"C-Cecilia, could you please, um, step back a little?"
"No."
```

"No? You're too adorable! Please, really! It's, uh! It's...danger...ous!"

His broken speech was adorable. The balcony creaked and cracked. *This is so weird. It's supposed to be stone.* I ignored the noise and looked up at Lucas, whose face was flushed red and teeth clenched. Then, I gently touched his cheek.

```
"Lukie?"
"Yes?"
"I love you."
```

"Please, don't make me so happy. I love you, too, truly! I want to touch you and hold you more than anything, but... I don't want to hurt you, so please just step back a little!"

His embarrassed, pained voice made me smile.

```
"Then let's end this here. Please bend down."

"N-No, I..."
```

"Please. I want to give you a 'welcome-back' kiss," I whispered, touching his earring.

His lips trembled. The railing finally broke. High-density protective barriers suddenly surrounded his hands, binding them for some reason. Then, some kind of magic repaired the broken railing. Startled, I looked back at him.

"Oh, right. We're married, so that means I don't need to hold back or hesitate once I'm able to control my strength," he muttered ominously, making me turn

my gaze back to him in alarm. "I understand. But if you feel scared or sense danger, please run away."

"Huh?"

Danger? I didn't understand why I needed such a warning before a kiss or why he needed high-density triple-protective barriers.

Lucas gave a sidelong glance at my shocked face and took a deep breath. He looked determined for some reason.

"Phew. All right... Okay. Go ahead, Cecilia."

"O-okay."

He said, "Phew..." We're just going to kiss, so why is he acting like I'm preparing to face a high-rank monster?

All jokes aside, my heart pounded as I gently touched his earring and slowly kissed his cheek.

"Welcome back, Lukie. I've been waiting for you."

My lips trembled, and I tried to pull away in embarrassment. He lifted his dark eyelashes, and his golden eyes, now flickering with a familiar flame, stared back at me. He kissed me on the cheek in return. "I'm back, Cece. I'm really sorry..." he said, his voice strained with guilt.

Overwhelmed, I grasped his shirt tightly. We locked eyes. His golden gaze pled for forgiveness. I froze and couldn't help but kiss his cheek again.

Embarrassed and slightly anxiety-ridden when he didn't say anything, I kissed him repeatedly, gradually moving closer to his lips. When I kissed the corner of his mouth, he let out a heated breath. My heart raced, and my hands trembled.

He hesitated. "Cecilia," he whispered longingly. "Cece..."

After moistening my lips, I finally kissed him on the mouth. I kissed him softly, over and over, confirming that he was really alive. Each time I called his name, he responded, filling my heart and making my throat tighten with emotion.

```
"Mmm, Lukie... Lord Lukie... Lord Lukie!"

"Yes, Cece... Cecilia..."
```

His voice echoed in my ears. It was the same voice I'd heard just a few days ago, with the same warmth and intensity.

I thought of that strong, tender man and the way he'd whispered, "I won't ever change." Then, I opened my eyes.

His hair was dark as twilight, reflecting the moonlight. His face was as elegant as a god's. And his endlessly beautiful, golden eyes... They were all the same ones I remembered. The overwhelming love and obsession within those eyes were still there, too. He hadn't changed at all. Everything about him was exactly as I loved, and I couldn't help but let my feelings spill over as our lips met.

"Lord Lukie, you idiot!"

"I know. I'm sorry. I'll never let you go again," he replied in a firm voice to my unreasonable complaints.

He kissed away my tears, nuzzled his nose against mine, and urged me to accept a deep kiss, his eyes half-closed.

```
"Mmm, ahh, mmm..."

"Cece..."
```

As our kisses grew more intense, my moans grew more tender. I heated up. I couldn't even think about pulling away. I just clung to Lucas's neck and accepted his kisses. My lower belly began to ache, and my legs trembled.

```
"L-Lord Lukie... Mm, ahh!"
```

"Nngh, are you okay?" He sucked on my tongue and pleasure surged through me, causing my abdomen to tighten and my body to tremble. He quickly broke the protective barrier and caught me as my legs gave out.

I muttered an apology, tried to support myself on trembling legs, and looked away from his concerned gaze. My nightgown clung to my sweaty skin, and I

panted shallowly in an effort to release the trapped heat. I felt ashamed at how naughty I was being. When I felt his arm around my waist begin to pull away, I looked up at his silent face.

Lucas leaned against the railing, gazing up at the sky as he took a deep breath.

"I think I can control myself if I imagine the marquis interrupting us," he muttered cryptically. Then he wrapped his arm around my waist, his expression slightly sulky, which surprised me.

"Please don't tempt me anymore today. You're just too adorable. Damn it. I'm so mad at my past self!" he muttered, sounding tired. He sighed and exhaled loudly.

This embarrassed me so much that I felt a bit annoyed. *Sure, it was just supposed to be a welcome home kiss, but I accidentally turned it into a full-blown make-out sesh. Several times, too.* My excuses sounded lame, no matter how I tried to justify it.

"I wasn't trying to tempt you. I just wanted to kiss you."

"Maybe that's how you see it, Cece. But if you ask me for a kiss, I feel like I'm being seduced."

I vaguely recalled him saying something similar before. So basically, I wasn't the one making advances, was I? I tilted my head to the side, seeking confirmation.

"You're not even aware, huh?" Lucas muttered. "I feel like I've struggled with this before." His arms tightened around me, gentle but firm.

He lifted my hand, which trembled from the heat reflected in his golden eyes, and softly kissed my ring. "I bet I thought I'd never let you go," he whispered.

My eyes widened at his words. Lucas smiled gently at my surprise.

"Right before I rescued you, you were fiercely facing off against the Fenrir," he said, his voice warm. "Your bright green eyes sparkled with determination, and your pale pink lips spoke with such strong resolve that my heart and eyes

were captivated. I was terrified of losing you. I reached out for you, and you reached out for me, too. You called my name with those very lips. And I knew you were calling for your beloved, Lord Lukie."

His whispery voice made me blush fiercely, and tears welled up in my eyes. He chuckled softly and continued speaking.

"I was desperate to hold you, and the world turned unbelievably colorful.

Then I despaired. The person I fell in love with at first sight was wearing a wedding ring. My heart screamed that you were mine, but you were married.

Married to someone with the same name as me. How many times did those lips call my name? I wanted to kill that doppelganger. And I wanted to make you mine."

Lucas stared at me with narrowed eyes. I couldn't control my emotions; they were written all over my face. I flushed with joy and longing and smiled slightly.

"I was serious, you know. There would've been many ways to erase him without anyone finding out. Plus, I'd just become the Hero. If I really wanted you, nothing would've stopped me. So, I desperately held back because I immediately knew from the surroundings that you were the daughter of a high-ranking noble family and that Anna and the others were with you for some reason. Knights there, too, and I didn't want to make a mistake and damage your honor. So, with a heavy heart, I left you with the Imperial Knights. I thought if I wanted to have you, I had to make sure not to make even the slightest mistake."

The more he spoke, the darker his eyes became. My heart pounded louder and louder.

"Lord Lukie."

"I won't let you go. You're mine. I will never let you go. That was the only thing that ran through my mind, Cecilia."

He looked down at me and into my very heart and soul, calling my name pleadingly. I trembled and let out a shallow breath. Lucas kissed my ring.

"So please," he continued, "believe me. Lady Cecilia Cline. I, Lucas Theoderic Herbst, truly love you. I swear to love you and only you forever."

"Oh..."

His intense gaze buckled my knees, the mixture of love and obsession in his eyes making me cling to him. His eyes softened, and Lucas laughed so gently it was almost a sigh. Seeing his smile again and hearing his joy-filled laughter made me so happy. But I was a bit frustrated, too.

Even though I knew glaring at him with a flushed face was pointless, I couldn't help but complain about how unchanged he was.

"You're so unfair! I thought I'd be the one to make the first move this time."

"Oh? Well, I'll come again tomorrow. Try your best to seduce me then."

"Seduce?!"

That's not what I meant! Honestly, you haven't changed at all! It's reassuring, but your wicked persistence annoys me at the same time!

Tears of frustration and embarrassment wet my cheeks.

"Really. Even your crying face is adorable. I love you, Cecilia."

"Lord Lukie, you're such an idiot! I love you, too!"

"Ha ha. Yeah, it's my fault. Thank you, though."

Not only did he accept my feelings, but he also returned my words of heartfelt gratitude, making me cry even harder.

"Can you stand on your own now?" he asked after I'd had a good cry, his voice teasing. His unchanged, slightly mischievous nature made my heart race, and I felt flustered.

I can stand on my own without your teasing, thank you very much! I glared at him.



"Even that face is cute. I want to make you unable to stand again," he replied sweetly, which caused me to stop glaring.

I'm completely helpless. Being deprived of Lucas for so long means I'm utterly captivated by everything about him. I guess I just have to give in today. I made excuses for my weaknesses as I felt his arms loosen around me.

"I'm at my limit now, so please step back a little. My body is burning."

I reluctantly stepped away from Lucas, who leaned on the railing and looked up at the moon. Something felt odd.

"Cecilia, please. You're so cute I want to kidnap you. So please, step back."

"But..."

I can't let go of him! It was embarrassing, but I clung to his clothes, unable to release my grip.

"What was I even thinking before? What kind of patience did I have?"

"Excuse me! You didn't have to be that patient, Lucas! You used to do whatever you wanted!" I snapped back.

"Oh, that's good to know," he replied ominously.

The railing creaked and cracked. I gasped. My survival instincts screamed at me to immediately let go and step back. The moment I obeyed that instinct, he pulled me into a tight embrace for the first time today.

In his strong yet gentle arms, I could hear his heart beating slightly faster than usual. Crazed love flickered in his golden eyes, which were close to mine.

He whispered a soft "I love you" and kissed me, causing me to collapse from the overwhelming happiness.

The overwhelming happiness caused me to collapse. As I sat there, my entire body flushed, he watched me with a tender gaze. He stood on the railing, his cloak billowing, and smiled gently.

"Good night, Cecilia. See you tomorrow. Oh, by the way... There are people

worried about you, so please make sure they're by your side. They'll make sure your eyes won't get swollen from all those tears."

Then, Lucas vanished, leaving roses on the balcony as he disappeared into the beautiful moonlit night.

\*\*\*

"It wasn't all a dream, was it?"

Even though I had sobbed heavily, I should've been visibly swollen. Yet, no one would've been able to tell that I had cried at all when I looked into the mirror as I was expertly attended to by a maid.

Somehow, I'd slept deeply without any dreams. I felt light as a feather. My state had improved so much overnight that I felt skeptical before escaping into reality.

Following Lucas's advice, I called the three who quietly appeared afterward with teary eyes, their usual smiles strained. I couldn't imagine how much worry I'd put them through or how to convey my gratitude, so I decided to speak from the heart.

"Thank you so much for protecting me. I'm sorry I've been a burden. I might still trouble you a lot in the future...but will you still support me anyway? I'm sorry for being unreliable, but I'll do my best to stand firm as your mistress," I said.

They cried as they took care of my tear-stained face with various items they brought.

By the way, when Elsa asked if I was okay, I told her how much I loved fluffy things. If my memory serves me right, you turned into a huge cat. Please let me pet your belly...

"Sorry, I understand what you're trying. I just can't believe Lord Lucas will kill me."

"But it'll be ready in no time if it's a Fenrir box and not a Cath Palug box."

"I'm sorry, but please spare me that..." she said.

Elsa was so pale she was practically transparent. She trembled violently, implying something terrible had happened. *I definitely won't ask about it.* I nodded in silence.

Even if it was because of Lucas that my body felt light, the ducal house's maids' skills were amazing. I wondered if they were using secret techniques.

As I drank my tea and thought about the night before, my parents called out to me.

"Cecilia, you're looking better today. Are you sure you want to be out of bed?"

"Yes, it seems like you've already eaten. Please don't overdo it."

Their tender words of concern warmed my heart, and I smiled shyly in response.

"Father, Mother, I apologize for causing such a commotion. As you can see, I'm perfectly fine now."

"I see..."

Mother sighed. "Please stop being so nonchalant," she said, reprimanding Father.

"What was wrong with what I just said...?" Father muttered.

"Exactly that!" Mother said with a soft smile, putting a finger to Father's mouth. Seeing them getting along so well warmed me, and I smiled.

Come to think of it, Father's image as the stern marquis was so strong that I'd forgotten he was the one who'd snagged Mother, who was very popular in her day, with just a single proposal. I almost choked on my tea when I remembered the story.

"He said he didn't want any woman but me for the rest of his life and that if I said no, he'd be a bachelor forever."

It was so romantic. He was definitely handsome and had a good job, and he was utterly devoted to Mother. *Come to think of it, he reminds me of Lucas...* 

Hmm, they say daughters often marry men similar to their fathers. Could this be a perfect match?

I hastily took a sip of tea in an attempt not to tremble.

I glanced at my parents again and couldn't help but feel a bit touched by their affectionate banter.

Last night truly felt like a dream.

Lucas didn't have any memories of me, yet he had appeared and said he loved me. He wanted me, wanted to start over again. It was like a miracle. Could I have just created that miracle in my head because I missed him so much? I couldn't help but feel uneasy that I'd just had a very convenient dream.

I sighed softly as I dwelled on the turbulent emotions inside of me and lowered my gaze.

"Cecilia," Father said, "you're still not quite yourself, are you? We'll have to cut back on your social activities for now. You shouldn't do anything for a while. Just rest."

"That's right, Cecilia. You've been pushing yourself too much. Your father has already decided on the date for the engagement ceremony, so you'll be busy again before you know it. Just take it easy for now, okay?"

"But, um..."

When I heard that the date for my engagement ceremony had been set, I couldn't help but ask when I would be able to see Lucas again. Father looked displeased for some reason and explained the upcoming schedule.

"Prince Lucas is currently very busy with his duties. He's making frustratingly good progress with his work, which is causing us a bit of trouble. We're also planning a smaller-scale celebration for his triumphant return, so he's quite busy with that as well. Very busy indeed. But you'll have a chance to meet with

him before all that, so just settle down until then."

"Okay," I said quietly, staring at my tea.

My mother squinted at my father. "You didn't schedule that meeting on short notice on purpose, did you?"

What really caught my attention was how Father had emphasized how busy Lucas was. He said it several times, so he must be really busy.

Since my social engagements had been canceled, Lucas had to bear that burden. He'd only just returned home after defeating and taming the ancient dragon and then immediately resumed his duties as the second prince, which was already an intense workload. On top of that, he had to take care of his bedridden fiancée's duties, too! And despite being so busy, he'd come to see me. That made me happy but also incredibly guilty. My failure disheartened me.

"That brat..." I heard Father mutter darkly. "His very existence is annoying." Mother jabbed him with her elbow.

They're so in love. I'm jealous.

My parents told me to go rest, so I returned to my room, feeling a bit down. A longtime maid of my family's waited for me in front of my door, a small bouquet of colorful flowers in her hands.

"Please take these, Lady Cecilia," she said, handing them to me. "Do they look familiar?"

"That looks like the kind of bouquet I've been receiving for years."

"That's right. There's still no name on it, but they began arriving again right after you returned home."

After my engagement to Felix, bouquets with no cards on them began arriving at my house. They were small and modest, but strangely, they were only filled with flowers I loved. Those bouquets had stopped coming once I'd become engaged to Lucas, but until then, they'd been a daily comfort. I stared at the bouquet in surprise when I remembered that as my maid's voice grew distant.

My eyes were glued to the ribbon tied around the bouquet. I lifted it carefully. It was the same kind of ribbon that was wrapped around the first rose Lucas gave me—navy blue with intricate gold embroidery. Why is it tied around this bouquet?

The timeline of my meeting "Lukie" and my engagement to Lucas connected suddenly, and I instinctively covered my trembling lips with my hand.

"Oh, today's ribbon is a rare color, isn't it?"

"Y-yes. Um, excuse me, but I need to rest for a bit."

The maid's words snapped me back to reality. I smiled and closed the door just slowly enough to not be rude. I leaned against the door and shut my eyes tightly.

"He's so unfair!" I muttered curses to distract myself from my pounding heart, which screamed, "I love him! I love him!" But it was no use. My mind kept wandering to the thought of seeing him tonight, and I found myself exhaling hot breaths over the bouquet.

As I tried to calm myself, I spotted a small yellow flower and poked at it in frustration. The way the petals gently swayed softened my expression.

I remembered the first time we met. His steady gaze made me look down shyly, and then he'd saved me. What could I possibly have given him in return when he'd loved me with such dedication?

I recalled what he'd said about how I'd given him a chance to start over, something we could only do because he'd made a life-or-death decision for me. And because of that, we had this moment. His strong will had brought about this future. Now it was my turn to repay him with love and gratitude.

"I love you, my dear husband." I gently kissed the flower, which reminded me of Lucas's eyes, with determined resolve.

I fanned my hot face with my hands. I'll love him just as much as he loves me!

I was filled with a strange determination.

As the day ended, I readied myself for bed. This is so odd, I thought.

I dressed in an elegant lavender nightgown with cream-colored lace trim. I didn't recognize it from my wardrobe. The maids applied a fragrant oil to my hair that I fell in love with during my time at the ducal estate and expertly styled it with delicate, adorable braids. I had to admire their efficiency.

"Beautiful!" one of them whispered as they twirled around me. I couldn't help but glance at the maid. She smiled at me through the mirror. "The moon is lovely tonight. I've left the window open, so you should have wonderful dreams," she said. I admired my own restraint for not screaming, I knew iiiit!

I realized something was off. During the day, a maid had been humming while meticulously cleaning the balcony. The curtains had been replaced with ones featuring a delicate lace pattern. Blankets and cushions had been strategically placed near the entrance.

Thank you. How thoughtful! But how did you infiltrate my family's household disguised as their maids? Did you use transformation magic?

Even though Father had agreed to the additional protection, I doubted he knew about *this* level of infiltration. Despite my growing concern, I was happy to look lovely for Lucas.

Trying to hide my nervousness, I whispered softly to the maids. "Thank you. How do I look?"

"Like a goddess!"

"Amazing!"

"Beautiful!"

Ah, all three of them are here... My eyes misted over.

The maids left the room, looking satisfied. I sat on my bed, fidgeted with the lace on my neckline, and twisted a strand of hair around my finger.

I was growing anxious. I loved looking pretty, and I wanted Lucas to think I looked pretty, too. Putting so much effort into this nightgown seemed

excessive, however. Won't he think I'm trying to seduce him? Well, he did tell me to seduce him yesterday... I blushed furiously and stood up in a panic, my thoughts spinning wildly. I wanted him to think I was cute, but the idea of seducing him was just too mortifying.

Lucas didn't remember me. Accepting his words at face value and making the first move felt wrong. Where has my modesty gone?

I had something to ask Lucas tonight. It was a request that I'd found difficult to make, but it was to prove my modesty. If he thinks I'm seducing him, then he won't think I'm modest at all, though. What on earth is modesty, anyway?! I'm getting confused. I think I'll change after all!

I reached for the bell.

"Where are you going, my love?" I heard Lucas say.

I whirled around to face him, momentarily stunned.

The breeze from the window caressed my face. Just like yesterday, he sat on the railing with his long legs crossed, framed by moonlight. Lucas looked as beautiful as a god descending from the moon. He twirled a flower in his fingers, his eyes glowing darkly as he gave me a fierce smile.

"Lord Lukie..." As I called his name, I heard the warmth in my own voice and blushed involuntarily.

Wait. Are his pupils dilated? He just got here, though, right?

His eyes widened slightly, his dark gaze softening. He reached out his hand to me.

"Come, Cecilia."

I stepped onto the balcony and was quickly enveloped in his arms. A shiver ran down my spine. He lifted my chin and met my gaze, his golden eyes narrowing slowly. I was bound by my intensity. Then, he softened.

"Did you get scared of me and try to run away, Cece?" he whispered.

"N-no, I would never do that!" I denied vehemently.

Look, Lucas is laughing at me! When he smiles so happily like that my heart aches, and it makes me want to blurt out the favor I want him to do for me... Calm down, Cecilia! Just because I'm happy to see him doesn't mean I should lose my composure! I promised I wouldn't lose!

Lucas doesn't remember anything, so I have the upper hand when it comes to experience. Hang in there!

I tried to encourage myself with that nonsensical determination and smiled at Lucas, trying to ignore the heat in my cheeks. He suddenly pulled me close and held me tight.

"I'm relieved, then. I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions. I felt like yesterday was just a dream, and I was anxious all day. I couldn't wait to see you to make sure it wasn't a dream."

Make sure...? His sexy whisper made me clench my jaw.

Wait, you don't remember anything, right? You were so flustered yesterday.

Just hugging me made you stammer. But now you're acting all seductive like you've done this a million times before! And the anxious look in your eyes is such a jarring contrast!

Why am I always the one at Lucas's mercy? What else am I lacking besides sex appeal? I wish someone would tell me. Even though I felt defeated, I was also overwhelmingly happy to know that he was just as anxious and wanted to hold me tight, never letting go.

My heart had been crying out for him all day and finally voiced its desire.

"Make sure, then."

"Cece..."

The sound of my name whispered with such joy, and the forwardness of my own words made me lower my gaze shyly. The moment I closed my eyes, he kissed me deeply. I clung to his neck.

"Nngh!"

"Cece..." He murmured my name against my mouth, then pushed his tongue inside, exploring every inch of it. He nipped sweetly against my tongue. It was so intense I became dizzy.

"Mmn, ahh..."

He kissed up all the drops of saliva that escaped my lips. His eyes were dark with passion as they gazed at me, and the love in them overflowed, making me unable to hold back.

"I have a favor to ask you," we both said in unison. We stared at each other in surprise.

A strange happiness filled me up, urging my body to move. I touched his earring with my fingertips as he touched my ring and kissed my fingertips gently. Then, he gave me another light peck on the lips.

Lucas was slightly flushed; he looked truly happy. "Anything you wish," he said. His gaze was full of emotion, and it gave me the courage to speak.

"I want you...to c-carve a P-Promise Mark on me, Lord Lukie."

"Of course, a Promise Mark..."

Hmm? He agreed, but then he fell silent. Did he think that my request was too presumptuous? Too strange for a woman to ask for? I believed in the man who said he'd return to me unchanged. But I also knew that love never completely erased anxiety. His reaction scared me, making me want to take back what I said. I struggled to keep my mouth shut.

I waited and waited, but he just kept staring at me, motionless and silent. My throat tightened. *Maybe I really screwed up*. Then I heard his cryptic mumble.

"Am I dreaming? Is this a dream?"

"You're awake."

His dazed look made me feel a bit insecure, but I nodded slowly, reassuring

him that he was most likely awake. He seemed so flustered that his polite speech faltered. "Wait, but... No way! Are you, um, sure that I can make sure?"

"U-um, y-yes... Oh!"

Now the situation was totally awkward, and both of us were stammering. My heart raced. Then the mood shifted as he suddenly lifted me in his arms, where he kissed and embraced me tightly. For some reason, he blushed and sank to the floor with me in his arms. What is happening?!

"You're so much softer than you were in my dreams, and you smell so good...
I guess I am awake," he mumbled into my shoulder.

I sweat nervously. Stop smelling me! This isn't how you make sure I'm real!

"L-Lord Lukie..."

"I can't believe it. I wished again and again that we could share our memories..." he said in a trembling voice.

Ah, I knew it.

He needed to hear our past to fill in the gaps, but he feared hurting me again by asking me to share those memories with him.

You think that you hurt me yesterday when you begged for love without remembering our past. You were afraid to hurt me again and probably thought you couldn't just ask to carve a Promise Mark on me.

"Lord Lukie..."

"W-wait! I won't let you take that back!"

The way he hastily interrupted me was so cute that it made my heart race. Stop! Your desperation is turning me on! And he's staring at my mouth like he has zero intention of letting me take it back. He's usually so calm and cool. Seeing this adorable side of him really drives me wild!

"No. I don't really want you to take it back, but... Are you sure?" His eyes wavered anxiously. I reached out, cupped his cheeks, and gave him a gentle

kiss. His eyes widened with surprise, and I couldn't help but giggle.

When I heard that Lucas had forgotten everything about me, I'd been truly shocked. The fact that only I remembered the memories we'd shared together was deeply painful. But we'd made a vow and exchanged rings, pledging to share both our joy and suffering.

I know you'll share everything with me. It doesn't matter what happens in our lives as long as we're together. I know we can be happy. Even though you're incredibly handsome, the second prince, and a real Hero who's adored by all, I'll probably always feel jealous standing next to you...

So please, let me bind you to me, too.

"I, Cecilia, Cline, love you, Lucas Theoderic Herbst with all my heart. I swear to love you and only you for the rest of my life. Please be mine, Lucas."

Please don't suffer alone. Don't apologize anymore. Just give me your words of love, like you always do.

"I...love you, Cecilia..." he said after a moment of silent shock.

Oh, there are those tears in your eyes again, like pearls. I love you too, my dear husband.

Even though I knew he didn't remember it, Lucas pulled me into his lap and kissed me exactly as he did when he first proposed. He whispered my name against my lips, then softly replied, "I promise." Warm magic enveloped me. The ring on my finger began to glow, startling me. "There, all set."

Huh? He's acting like he just did something. Once again, my emotions have been overwritten by shock! There's a content smile on his face and he's blushing, like he's satisfied. Explain yourself, Lucas! You did something, I just know it!

```
"Lord Lukie?"
```

"What is it?"

Don't give me that! You can't fool me with that pretty smile!

"The ring glowed."

He paused. "Yes," he said.

"What did you do?"

"I cast a subtle illusion spell, linking the ring to hide the Promise Mark and some other things..." he muttered.

My eyes widened.

"There's a ball coming up, and if someone sees the Promise Mark too soon, I won't be able to visit you anymore. I added some protective spells to enchant the ring. Honestly, I'd prefer to just make you invisible to everyone but me, but I figured that might be a bit inconvenient for you."

The incredibly unreasonable Hero tilted his head with a troubled smile. My mouth hung open. How could he maintain those spells without being physically present? Just what kind of precision machine-like magic control and endless mana does he possess? He's beyond overpowered. I'm not even sure what to comment on at this point. Plus, what he said was a little unnerving... We'll just ignore that.

As a noblewoman, I couldn't avoid having my maids dress me. They would catch on right away. And once one of my family's maids saw my Promise Mark, she would report it to my father immediately. Then, I wouldn't be able to meet Lucas like this. I didn't want that. I had to see Lucas again. I wasn't staying in the ducal estate anymore. If Lucas stopped coming here, I wouldn't have any other way of seeing him. With that in mind, I grasped Lucas's shirt tightly and voiced my concerns for him.

"Will it put any strain on your body or anything like that?"

"No, not at all. In fact, it'll be more difficult to contain it without using up mana, so I secretly cast defensive spells all over the marquis's mansion. They can easily deflect Fenrir-level threats, so you can spend your time here peacefully and rest without worry."

What in the world is he planning? No, worrying about it is a waste of time.

I knew Lucas was unconventional. He was someone who nonchalantly did things that ordinary people couldn't even understand. Perhaps that was why a giggle escaped my lips.

"He he. Thanks. So, we'll see each other tomorrow, then?"

"I have one more request, Cece. Will you hear me out?"

I was so happy I didn't notice the intensity in his eyes or the unusual gentleness in his tone of voice. "Yes, of course," I immediately said, and soon tearfully regretted it. "W-wait, maybe..."

"What do you mean, 'maybe'? You said you'd listen, Cece."

Can anyone blame me for glaring at him in anger after this otherworldly beauty draped his cloak over my shoulders with a beautiful smile?! I nodded.

"Then can you go get me a blanket from inside the room?" Lucas asked.

What's going on? I had a bad feeling about this. I felt compelled to obey, though, and handed him the blanket. He smiled as he prepared something, apparently in high spirits.

He gestured for me to sit on the cushion between his knees. As soon as I did so, he surrounded us with a high-density protective barrier and wrapped me in his arms as if to say I couldn't escape. Then, he smiled warmly.

"I wanted to check if there were any scars left by that mutt's attack. Will you show me what's underneath that cute nightgown?"

I shook my head, of course. I was so shocked into silence and just kept shaking my head.

The Hero of our kingdom surely already knows no scars were left behind. And he still has the audacity to say, "If you have any scars, I'd want to cut off my own arm!" That just makes my blood run cold!

"No, there aren't any marks at all!" I desperately assured him.

Lucas shifted his gaze and looked at his own arm. "If you're that desperate, then maybe..." in a tone of voice that was clearly fake.

You conniving pervert! Return my sweet feelings from earlier! I thought angrily.

But then, I realized he might *actually* cut his own arm off. He was serious when he made threats, after all. Considering that we were married and had already made love many times, I supposed showing him my arm or my chest to avoid a bloody mess on the balcony was only rational and a small price to pay. With a heavy heart, I agreed.

He slowly released his grip on me, staring at my arm all the while. Then I panicked. *Oh, no! Crap! This is very, very bad!* 

"A-all right, I'll do it," I stammered, tongue-tied. The wicked, perverted prince immediately flashed me a dazzling smile and thanked me, launching his next dirty assault.

"Thanks. Sorry, but can you lift it yourself, Cece?"

"What?"

Myself? I looked at him, frozen.

"I might tear that adorable nightgown if I'm not careful," the pervert continued, not looking the least bit guilty.

What is his obsession with tearing my clothes, anyway? Wait, that's not the point...

So he wanted me to lift up my nightgown and expose myself to him?

Isn't this really weird? Yesterday you were so shy and blushing. And you were adorably flustered a few moments ago. Where did that cute version of Lucas go?

And haven't you already mastered controlling your strength? I know how diligent you are. Your hard work is clearly heading in a very weird direction! Isn't this the time to show off those efforts? Why...? Why do I have to act so slutty?!

I trembled with shame and frustration as I glared at Lucas. "N-no, I won't!"

He looked troubled. "Is it okay if your nightgown gets torn, then?"

I was about to retort that he was already holding me tightly. What he said next froze me on the spot.

"If it rips, it'll be obvious I was here. Then we won't be able to see each other again..."

He's infuriating! Absolutely infuriating!

But the thought of not being able to see him made my heart scream in protest.

Begrudgingly, I reached up to my nightgown, mentally cursing my love-struck brain. His intense gaze made my temperature rise and my breathing become shallow. My nightgown was tied at my collarbones. If I loosened the ribbons, it would fall down my shoulders, exposing my chest.

Who picked this nightgown again?! I vowed to interrogate my maids the next day.

I turned my face away and slowly untied the ribbon. But I was so embarrassed that my hands stilled. I hoped he'd say that was enough, but when I peeked at him, I saw a side of him only I knew; his beautiful face was twisted with desire, and his golden eyes narrowed as he called my name. Overwhelmed by the joy of being desired, I found the courage to pull the dress off my shoulders.

"There...aren't any scars," I whispered haltingly, my throat parched from my nerves.

I unconsciously called Lucas's name, seeking help. He pulled me in close with a growl, capturing my lips in a deep kiss. His endless kisses and the words he murmured between breaths sucked the strength out of me.

"Mm, mmph, ahh..."

"Cece... Cecilia... You're mine. All mine." He traced my throat and licked my

collarbone, letting out hot breaths as he gave me lovebites. I couldn't help but moan sweetly, feeling like I wanted to cry.

"Ahhh!"

"I love you, Cece. Your voice, your breath, each strand of your hair... No one else can have them."

He slid his tongue deep into the valley between my breasts, sending sweet shivers down my spine. He exhaled a hot breath against me, then kissed the spot where my wounds had been.

"I'm so glad you're not scarred. Your skin is still pure and beautiful. You look like a fairy in the moonlight. So beautiful. I want to capture you, lock you away, and spoil you endlessly." He murmured in a pleading voice before sucking a little harder.

At the same time, he teased my hardened nipples with his fingernails, making me cry out. "Mm, ahh!"

"So pure, and yet your body is so honest and naughty. It's irresistible," he whispered sweetly to me, like he couldn't take it anymore.

Now he's making me angry. Calling me naughty is not a compliment! I grabbed his cheeks in frustration.

"What are you doing, Cece?"

What am I doing? You're the perverted prince! I might've gotten carried away, but you're the one who said you just wanted to check for scars, right?! What do you mean, "What are you doing"?! That's my line!

He still looked handsome and cute when he pouted, but I wouldn't allow this to go any further!

"That's enough!"

Even if you give me that adorable pout, the answer is still no! I can't give in! I must resist!

"There aren't any scars, and you promised not to leave any marks in visible areas..." I said, my voice trailing off with embarrassment.

He tilted his head to the side. "Did I?"

I let go of his cheeks and nodded. He seemed lost in thought for a moment. "Did I make any other promises?"

My eyes widened in surprise at the question.

\*\*\*

Each night when Lucas came to see me, I'd tell him about the past promises we made to each other. I looked forward to it every night. At first, I thought it would hurt that he didn't remember, but he *was* still the same person. He guessed his past actions and responses accurately, surprising me.

Being able to see his loving gaze and feel his caring touch every night was truly blissful. And the more we talked, the more his composed demeanor crumbled, making me even happier. *I might be developing a strange fetish!* 

So, I told him all about when I first met him as "Lukie," the promises we made as children, the flowers he sent me, and how he had been my bodyguard. He listened to all my stories quietly. Very quietly. And then he'd tremble with embarrassment.

Seeing the extremely handsome Lucas turn bright red and shrink away, saying, "This is really tough. I'm so embarrassed I could die... Cece, I'm really sorry, but can we stop here?!" made my heart flutter.

Mini-Cece would squeal, "He's so cuuuuuute!"

"Lord Lukie, how did you choose that ribbon for my bouquet if you didn't remember anything?"

"It's so hard on me when you ask questions with those sparkling eyes, but it's also so cute... I chose it because I thought, 'She's mine.' Sorry for being possessive! Is there anything else?" he asked, blushing.

Ahhh, my husband answers so adorably!

"And why did you keep training with the knights while using transformation magic?"

"Knowing I was weak back then was mortifying. I didn't want people to go easy on me just because I was from a ducal family. Plus, I did it to practice controlling my magic. Please, just forget about it..."

"But the way you fought was so dashing. You were the best."

"Thanks..."

Even the way he says thanks when he's embarrassed is still so cool! And so unfair!

By now, I'd explained all the major promises we'd made to each other:

- 1. No marks on visible areas.
- Do not make love to me to death.
- 3. Allow me to chat with other men at social events.
- 4. Never, ever, under any circumstances, do it in public!

When I told him the last three were especially important, he fell silent for a moment, then smiled brightly. "Can we talk about this some other time?" he asked as he tried to cuddle with me. I sternly told him to sit and listen to me.

"The promise about, um, intimate matters is especially important, Lord Lukie. So please keep it."

He was silent for a moment.

"Lord Lukie?"

"But, for the first time..."

"Lord Lukie?"

"Maybe we can make a little exception..."

"You'll keep those promises, won't you, Lord Lukie?"

"Yes..."

I was relieved at his answer and watched him bow his head, then clench his fist in frustration. He's even handsome when he looks dejected and rakes a hand through his hair, I thought.

"No way..." he muttered.

"What's wrong?" I asked, tilting my head.

"Nothing. It's just that, sadly, those promises make perfect sense to me now. It's really unfair. I must've really struggled to control myself before. I can't do anything now. Ugh..." He covered his face and sighed deeply. I couldn't understand what he meant halfway through, but I was glad that he understood.

I was proud that I was able to keep Lucas in check for once, but in my excitement at being able to tease Lucas when I was usually on the receiving end, I had completely forgotten about my father's words that Lucas was busy.

That evening, Mother mentioned Father's involvement with the victory celebration, which made me realize my grave mistake. I paled at my oversight.

"Isn't it about time you get back to a full schedule, too?" she asked.

I could only nod weakly, spending the rest of the day ridden with anxiety, waiting for my usual knock on the window.

Lucas arrived a little later than usual, and I hurried to him, my heart heavy with guilt. Even though his face showed no signs of fatigue, I felt too guilty to jump into his arms. But once I heard him call my name in his deep voice filled with longing, it made me happy despite myself.

Feeling selfish, I asked in a quiet voice, "Are you tired, Lord Lukie?"

"Cece? What's the matter?" He gently embraced me and looked at me with concern. My heart ached.

"I was worried that my lack of keeping up a social calendar is putting too much of a burden on you. I've been taking advantage of your nightly visits, despite knowing how busy you are. I'm so sorry. If it's too much, you don't have

to...come..." My voice trailed off, and my throat tightened. Being so honest with my feelings made me feel foolish.

I tried to keep my head up, fighting the urge to look down. Before I could speak again, Lucas gently kissed me.

"Mm, Lord Lukie?"

"I come here because I want to see you, Cecilia. Or...am I merely being a burden?"

"That's not it at all! It's just... Well..."

"Then don't worry about it. I should be doing this work anyway. I won't slack off just because our official meeting was postponed or because some of the tasks are tedious and my subordinates are troublesome. I'm not particularly busy, anyway. Plus, thanks to reinforcing the city's barrier recently, I feel quite refreshed."

Was our meeting postponed? I'm not sure that's an appropriate thing to do to a royal...

Wait, did he reinforce the barrier around the entire capital by himself?! That's incredible! Wait, that's not the point!

"Really? You're not tired?"

"Is it bothering you?"

I nodded. "Of course it bothers me." I didn't notice the glint in his eyes until it was too late.

"Then how about you help me relax?"

"Of course! I'll do anything I can!"

Lucas gave me a sweet smile, lifted me from his lap, and cradled me in his arms. He showered me with gentle kisses, making me feel I was the one who was being pampered. I was so lost in his warmth that I forgot Lucas was still Lucas deep down; I'd completely let down my guard.

"You're really adorable, you know that? Hey, Cece?"

"Yes? What is it?"

"You've stayed overnight at the second prince's quarters in the castle before, right?"

"Yes, before you went on your campai—Ahh!"

Suddenly, he teased my ear with his tongue and exhaled hotly into it, sending a shiver down my spine. I hastily looked up at him in surprise. His golden eyes narrowed, filled with a mischievous gleam as he licked his lips. He looked like a beautiful beast as he grinned happily at me. I froze.

"I knew it," he said, voice dripping with sex appeal. "So as long as we're not outside, that means it's okay to do it here."

"Outside...?"

His voice dropped to a murmur, and before I knew it, he was caressing my thigh over my nightgown. He whispered, "The bath."

I let out a gasp. "H-how did you remember that?!" I replied. His golden eyes were filled with amusement. I quickly covered my mouth, but it was already too late.

"You said you'd help me relax, didn't you, Cecilia?"

He gestured toward the ribbons on my nightgown, his smile sweet but intense. I shook my head emphatically.

"Just caresses," he whispered softly before kissing my ring. "Only touching. I promise I'll be careful. I wouldn't want you to get dirty, even if it's not outside."

How much does he remember? Does he really have amnesia?

I stared at him, flustered and in shock. My heart pounded as Lucas pulled at the top of my nightgown, slightly exposing my breasts.

"I'm keeping my promises, so you will, too, won't you?"

His sweet but slightly teasing smile made my heart race. He really hasn't

changed! You beautiful, perverted demon! Fine. If that's how you want it! I can take you on! I glared at him, completely forgetting about my chances of winning when I was angry. Then I turned away, my voice rising in defiance.

"Unfortunately, this nightgown has to be taken off from the top. And I refuse to take it off! Plus, this balcony is visible from outside! If you're not going to...do it, then there's no need to take it off! So, let's just call it a—"

Before I could finish, I found myself surrounded by a high-density barrier. It was transparent and impenetrable, like polished glass. Lucas kissed my cheek as I sat there, stunned.

"You really know how to please me, Cecilia," he whispered. "It makes me burn with desire, so you should be careful. Well, that'll have to wait until next time."

He lifted my leg and kissed it tenderly.

"You don't need to undress. This barrier is invisible from the outside and soundproof," he said, tapping on the barrier lightly. "So there's no problem, right?"

As he smirked, I could almost *hear* my inner self screaming, "He's so coooool!" It was actually so frustrating that I began to tremble.

"Saying you'll only touch isn't accurate, then!"

Where's your common sense when I need it?! I glared at Lucas, trying to escape his looming figure.

He sighed. "Fine. If you want to go all the way, I won't stop you. In fact, I'd prefer it."

"I didn't mean that! Ah!"

He pulled us back onto the large cushion and pressed his hips against me. I felt something hard press against my rear end. I panicked and arched my back, only to have my breasts groped through my nightgown. My voice trembled as I tried to stop him.

"W-wait, Lucas! Ahhh!"

"Such sweet moans. Your nipples are getting harder."

"No, that's not... Mmph!"

Why do you always have to talk like this, you filthy prince?!

Both furious and embarrassed, I turned to face him, only to have our lips meet and our tongues entwine. His hand slipped into my panties, his long fingers moving deliberately. The sensation made me gasp sweetly into his mouth, my face flushing a bright red.

Things sounded wet down below, and I called Lucas's name, unable to hold back. I desperately tried to push his arms away with my weak hands, whispering, "No, we can't..."

"We can't? Are you sure?" he asked. My lips trembled.

My body had been well-trained by him. It was already reacting honestly to Lucas. I looked at him with a mixture of pleading and defiance. He spoke in a tone that made me feel as if he were trying to convince himself.

"You said to do it properly, didn't you? So here I am, holding you for the first time without any restraint or hesitation. Now...will you let me make a complete mess of you?"

"A...mess?"

"Yes. A soaking. Wet. Mess. I'm not used to your seductive behavior, Cecilia."

"S-seductive?!"

"I love you, Cece. There's no one more important to me. The thought of holding you excites me. I just wanted to touch you and stop there, but I'm so glad you encouraged me..."

He spoke with such passion that it left me a bit stunned.

Wait... Did I provoke this somehow? I didn't mean to at all. I'd better apologize. Oh, no! When did he take off my panties?

"Wait, Lord Lukie! Please, not here! Ahhh!"

He spread my legs without a word, and I instinctively covered myself with my hands. The cold air brushed against my most sensitive spots.

"I warned you. Now, move your hand. I need to get you ready. You don't want me to just touch you, do you?"

Although I knew it might be a trap, I gave in. The thought of stopping halfway felt better than going all the way.

"I-I'm sorry. I do want you to touch me, Lord Lukie..." I pleaded, looking up at him.

He closed his eyes for a moment, let out a breath, and tilted my chin up so I was looking up at him.

"Honestly, you're too aware of your own actions," he murmured, then pushed his tongue against mine.

He pressed me against the cushion, his passionate kiss leaving me breathless. Lucas wiped my wet lips with his thumb. "Well," he said. "Do you want me to touch you a lot when we're here together?"

I swear, this man is completely driven by his desires! He didn't say anything about "a lot" before! His mischievous expression infuriated me, but I had no choice.

"Cecilia? Is that not what you want?"

"Y-yes, that's what I want..."

I'm pretty sure he just mouthed, "And make a mess out of you?" You naughty demon prince!

"You'll keep your word, won't you?"

"Yes! I will!" I snapped back, annoyed by his persistence. I didn't realize that was the final trap.

"Good. I'm so happy I get to touch you every night," he said gleefully,

shocking me yet again.

"E-every night?"

"Of course. Didn't we just confirm that you want me to touch you a lot when we're together?"

He hasn't changed at all! His heart is pure black!

"I'll do my best to get used to your seductive behavior," he said. His face was so gorgeous it made me want to hit him with the cushion. All I could do was stifle my voice into it, though, unable to resist his outrageous demands. Now that I made such a horrible promise and accepted this pervert's request, he'll torture me and make me cry every night!

"Cecilia, you can make noise. It's okay."

"N-no, hahh!"

It's not okay at all!

The sound of my moans—even the embarrassing, wet noises my body made—was amplified, echoing within the barrier. Yet he told me to make more noise. You twisted, perverted prince!

When his tongue flicked against my swollen bud, I felt my arousal trickle down between my ass cheeks, making me want to cry.

His thick tongue pushed inside me, making obscene slurping sounds as he lapped at my nectar. My moans echoed around us. I covered my ears, trying to block out the sound that bounced off the barrier he made.

"Please, no more, Lord Lukie! Ahhh!"

"I love you, Cecilia. Your body is so sweet and soft, and it smells so good everywhere. Your reactions are so filthy when you buck your hips, yet you look so shy. It drives me wild. You're such a bad girl."

His tongue lapped at my wet pussy lips skillfully. The naughty sounds made me squirm as I tried to escape the stimulation. Lucas let out a breathy laugh,

then nipped at my clit before sucking it hard.

"Ah, nooo!"

The intense sound and sensation sent pleasure shooting through me. I spasmed involuntarily, and my hips bucked against his face, begging for more. Each time my hips convulsed when I climaxed, Lucas pressed his mouth against my pussy.

"No, no! Don't look at me!"

I cried from my body's uncontrollable reactions, and he kissed the Promise Mark left on my skin.

"So cute... Teasing me like this is too much," he murmured happily, almost like he was praising me. My heart swelled with excitement at his softened tone. I nearly reached out, desperately wanting more, but I managed to restrain myself.

He reassured my trembling hips with kisses and words of affection over and over again. Unable to bear the pleasure and overwhelming embarrassment, I pressed my hand against his head, which was nestled between my legs. He lifted his face, licking his wet lips.

"What is it, Cecilia? Do you want me to go further now?"

"I-I didn't say that, Lord Lukie!"

"It's okay. As I told you many times, I won't put it inside until you say it's okay. I promised."

He let out a disappointed sigh, and I glared at him with irritation. I tried to push his muscular body away with trembling hands, and he not only remained unmoved, but grabbed my hand and directed it between my legs. I could feel the heat and tears welling up inside of me.

"Ah, I can't. I'm done..."

Despite my pleas that I'd already come several times and couldn't go on anymore—and that it was truly embarrassing—he blushed and sighed heavily.

"Don't be unreasonable, Cecilia. I'm keeping my promises, aren't I? I haven't left any marks where they can be seen, and I haven't made love to you until you died. And I've used illusion magic to hide you and make sure no sound escapes, since you're embarrassed."

"B-but ...!"

This impenetrable defense barrier is suspiciously engineered. Why is everything echoing so much? It's not just my shameful sounds, either. Even Lucas's voice is echoing everywhere. Put yourself in my position for a minute, having all these dirty things done to me!

"We've done this many times before, so why do you keep resisting so adorably? I want to kill my old self for making those promises, but I now understand why I made those promises in the first place," he muttered to himself cryptically as he continued to check how wet I was. When he pressed his swollen shaft against my sensitive bud, I felt my hips jerk.

"N-no, wait! That's not allowed!"

"Why not?"

He pressed his hips against mine again, and I could feel my juices seep out from the hot, stiff sensation pressed against my pussy.

He narrowed his eyes and lovingly stroked the spot below my belly button, just above my womb. "I've come over many times now, haven't I? And I'm not penetrating you. You shouldn't be scared."

No, don't look. If you say it, it'll be all over...

I covered my mouth and closed my eyes tightly so I wouldn't see his golden gaze. "What's wrong, Cecilia?" Lucas murmured softly. "Are you afraid?"

It was like he could read my mind. I tensed. He stroked my cheek soothingly and gently called my name. Hesitantly, I looked up at him, and I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Why are you smiling so happily, Lord Lukie?"

His mouth might have been covered, but his smile was obvious through the gap in his fingers. Plus, his eyes were smiling.

"Heh... No reason. I was just wondering how much my adorable wife plans on making me crazy for her."

H-his wife?! Why is he using that word now?! To tease me?! He really pisses me off! I love him too much, and it pisses me off, and that's not an experience I ever thought I'd have, so thank you very much! Hmph!

I turned my face away in a huff, and he burst out laughing. "Ah, I'm so happy," he muttered.

Seeing him laugh like that made my chest tighten. Stop smiling so sweetly! And stop calling my name in such a tender voice. I'm doing my best not to want you so badly when you're gently lacing your fingers through mine. Honestly, my heart feels like it's going to explode!

"What's wrong, Cece?" he asked as he gently stroked my trembling lips with his fingers. Unable to hold back any longer, my emotions overflowed. I blushed and stared at him.

```
"P-please kiss me..."
```

"I'd love to," he said, blushing.

Seeing his reddened cheeks relieved me. I felt like crying at the tender kiss, and I squeezed our interlocked fingers tightly. He gently pulled his mouth away. The moment I saw the flames flickering in his golden eyes, I said, "That's enough."

```
He stared at me with wide eyes. "After just a kiss?" "Y-ves."
```

He had a look on his face that said, "You've gotta be kidding me." I had been saying it was over for a while now, though.

"Even though you've been seducing me like this?"

"I haven't been seducing you! How rude!" I retorted.

Lucas slumped over, his face buried in my shoulder. "You're just too oblivious, Cecilia," he muttered.

So he was just being rude gain.

Lucas then kissed my neck lightly, then abruptly raised his large body and looked at me with narrowed eyes. But I had a feeling it would never end, so I backed away.

"This is the first time I've ever felt mad that I love you so much."

I'd thought that, too, but I shook my head and told him we were done now.

"But didn't you want me to touch you a lot while we were together, Cecilia?" He threatened me with that beautiful face of his gorgeous smile.

His heart really is pure black! I thought exasperatedly, unable to say anything in return.

Lucas gave me a sidelong glance. Suddenly, he lifted up one of my legs and rubbed my honey on it with his fingers, then slowly slipped them inside.

He cautiously moved his hand, then rubbed my most sensitive spot knowingly with the pad of his fingers in circles. I couldn't brace myself against the intense stimulation, and my hips bucked as I let out a scream.

"Noo! What? Why are you inside? No, not there!"

"You're so little and tight here. Do you ever pleasure yourself, Cece?"

"Nngh, haah, p-pleasure myself? Eek, n-no, I can't, no!"

He relentlessly teased me with my own arousal as he questioned me. My head felt like it was boiling as pleasure built up inside of me. I couldn't even process his question. All I could do was reach out to Lucas and ask him to stop or else I would come.

His fingers were already slippery with my juices. He slowly caressed my wet opening before inserting more fingers, making my back arch with pain and

pleasure. He lapped at my nipples with his tongue. For some reason, I let out a sigh of relief, allowing him to do so.

"You're so sensitive everywhere, and you're reacting to me so much... It's so dirty, I can't stand it."

"No, no! No, noooo! Please, stop! I said no!"

He said I was naughty again! Of course, there's a part of me that can't deny that, but can you blame me?! I won't forgive him!

I tried to speak with the same forcefulness I had internally, but then he interrupted my thoughts by bending a finger inside of me. My inner walls being scraped by his knuckle made my stomach clench in delight. I arched my back and spasmed.

"Ahhh! L-Lord Lukie, I'm coming!"

"You're so dirty and adorable, Cecilia. Just seeing you be such a mess for me is enough to make me come."

As he said that, he rubbed my juices that had dripped down his wrist on his cock. Blood rushed to my head. I impulsively cursed him. "L-Lord Lukie, you're an idiot! A pervert!"

He seemed shocked by what I said, and his eyes widened, frozen.

Oh, right. He doesn't remember any of that! I guess it would be pretty shocking if your wife called you a pervert just a few days after you met her. But the things he does are the same as before! Maybe he'll learn his lesson and change this nasty side of himself. Just as I was about to flinch, he grabbed both of my hands. My shoulders jumped.

Wh-what? I looked at Lucas and suddenly felt a pang of regret. The way his expression slowly changed sent chills down my spine. The terrifying smile on his beautiful face was so intensely sexy that I got goosebumps and shivered.

This otherworldly beauty approached me, and I was transfixed in fear by his dark eyes and crazed face. He let go of my wrist, and I flinched as his rough

palm caressed the soft flesh of my arm. Yet, I couldn't move him, so I just looked at him in surprise. Suddenly, a translucent chain came into my field of vision.

What's that? A nearly transparent chain? But I don't feel like I'm bound at all, and I can't move it. There's no sign of it coming loose. I don't even know how to remove it.

I knew who was responsible for it, so I turned to Lucas with a confused, pleading look. He grinned at me greedily and gave me an ominous explanation.

"I attempted to apply a little bit of triple defense magic. I tried to think of a magic spell that could restrain me so I could practice control, but no matter how strong I made it, it wouldn't work against me. But it did work against Barn. I thought it was useless, but I *did* find a use for it."

I lost the energy to resist after hearing those words. I guess you could call me a coward.

By Barn, he means Barnabash, right? It's a bit strange, but isn't that the name of the strongest dragon? Why would he be using a version of the spell used to restrain the black dragon on me?

No way could I remove the chains. In fact, there was no need—*Oh, maybe he remembers how he wanted to chain me up. Was it so deep-rooted that it's still inside of him?* 

The chains felt solid. But that was impossible since they were magical in nature. Maybe I was so nervous I'd come full circle and felt calm instead. I stared at the chains resignedly. Then Lucas started to stimulate me with his lips and called out to me, and I returned my gaze to him.

He smiled dreamily. "Nice view," he whispered.

With a faintly sinister and erotic aura, my husband opened my nightgown, leaving me nearly naked. He looked down at me, and I shivered, unsure whether it was due to fear or anticipation.

"L-Lord Lukie... Nngh, ahh..."

He licked my trembling lips slowly before biting my lower lip, making me instinctively jerk away.

Slowly he pulled back, his mouth curled into a sly grin. My face flushed, then the blood drained from it. I watched in shock as Lucas murmured, "I really love that frightened, embarrassed look on your face."

A terrifying person has appeared! I tried to shake my head to convey that I'd had enough, but the next moment, I was frozen in shock.

"A pervert, huh? I like it. Being called that by you is the best," he said.

"Anything else you want to call me?" he asked while smiling, dangerously close to my face.

I'm not a coward for tearing up! What is with this man? This is progressing in a strange way I wasn't expecting! I insulted him! I definitely insulted him! Pervert isn't a compliment, is it?! But if you call a pervert a pervert, then does it become a compliment? Am I really the one who messed up? And why is my face turning red? It's supposed to be pale! Where is my sense of normalcy?! As I trembled, the pervert cutely tilted his head to one side.

"What's wrong, Cecilia? Nothing to say?"

Even though I was clumsy, I had the ability to learn and to predict danger, so I absolutely wouldn't say anything. I shook my head very slightly, and Lucas's expression instantly darkened.

"Hmm? You always seem to enjoy talking to me so much. This is a memory of me, too, right? Don't tell me it's...it's not?"

As he spoke, he put his hand on the defensive wall that not even a black dragon could break; it cracked at his touching. Since I was a coward, I teared up and spoke.

"L-Lord Lukie, please..."

"I thought so," he murmured, thinking. "But you won't say it." He glanced at

me again. "Do you not want to?"

When I gave him a vague response, he laughed with a mixture of joy and anger.

"Ha ha. You should know how jealous I am even now," he whispered in a husky voice. "Yet you're still keeping secrets. You're a bad girl, Cecilia. And since you've been provoking me all day, you'll stay with me until I'm satisfied. Isn't that right, my lovely wife?"

His terrifying words echoed within the defensive barrier. Then he suddenly inserted his long fingers into me again, making obscene noises as he thrust them in and out.

"Ah! No, no! I don't like that sound! Stop! Nngh! Not there! Not harder! Lord Lukie, Lord Lukie! Ohhh!"

The naughty, wet noises violated my ears, and I tried to move my arms to block the sound. When I found out I couldn't move, my eyes widened, and I listened helplessly to the sweet moans escaping my mouth.

His firm thumb caressed my nipples, gentle and slow, causing painful pleasure. I thrust my breasts against his mouth, and he pulled them into his hot mouth, suckling me. The stimulation made my pussy tighten around his fingers.

"Ahh... Hot! It's so hot!"

"Yes, feel it, Cecilia. Only I get to see you like this."

"Ah, not there again! No, I can't take it! Ahhh!"

I arched my back as he repeatedly stimulated the same sensitive spot inside of me. I tried to endure it but ultimately gave in. He did it over and over again.

"I don't want to come anymore. I don't want to!"

"Oh?" Lucas replied. "Then you can rest until I finish." He moved his hips, positioning his hot, throbbing length between my thighs.

The lewd sight and my own shameful body reacting to it made me want to

close my eyes. But his low voice forbade me, binding me.

"Don't close your eyes, Cece. Look at me. You're all mine, aren't you?" "Lord Lukie..."

And with that, he kissed me deeply, intertwining our tongues. He kept repeating, "I love you, Cecilia. You are mine and mine alone," in between kisses until I couldn't hold back my tears anymore.

The nightly caresses only made my desire stronger. He was the only one who could give me this, and I was the only one who knew that.

I didn't realize how painful it would be to experience this secret happiness that even Lucas wasn't aware he gave me. The more I endured his increasing intensity, the more I longed for him since he loved me just the same as he did before he'd left. He kept his promise and wouldn't go all the way, and I desperately tried to stop the urge to ask why he wouldn't do more.

He panted, his face contorting with pain as he craved my body. The knot deep in my belly grew even hotter. If I said it, these trysts would end. If anyone found out, we wouldn't be able to see each other again. And not being able to see each other frightened me. I was shocked that the very thought terrified me.

But it was really painful. He'd taught me how good it was to become one with him. And it was even more painful because I realized it was the loss of something joyous that brought me to tears. It was painful not to be able to experience the miraculous sensation of touching each other, conveying our love for one another, our two bodies deeply becoming one.

Finally, the words I'd tried not to say slipped out of my mouth.

"No more! It's cruel, Lord Lukie!"

My words were shattered by his reply.

"Then say it."

I remained silent.

"Say it, Cece. I'll never let you go. So..."

His lips moved silently, and I widened my eyes, tears streaming down my face. He smiled ruefully at me and kissed away my tears.

"I love you, so please, will you say it?"

"I want you, Lord Lukie! Please!" I cried out, unable to bear the swell of emotion. Immediately I felt a deep, ramming impact, and my vision went white. All thoughts slipped away, and I struggled to breathe.

"Ahh, haah... Nngh!"

"Cecilia, Cecilia, I love you. I love you, Cecilia!"

He held me tightly and kissed me deeply, whispering his love. It felt like my brain was burning. My body started convulsing as he mercilessly stimulated deep inside me, his thrusts soothing me. My stomach, hips, and limbs went numb as he held me down. I couldn't even clench my teeth against the overwhelming happiness that filled my entire body. With heavy eyelids, I inwardly lamented as I whispered faintly, "Bully..."

My consciousness finally slipped away as I was enveloped in bliss from the words whispered against my lips as he held me tightly.

## **Chapter Five**

THREE DAYS HAD PASSED since Lucas stopped coming to see me.

During that time, I really appreciated the education I'd received as a future princess. The ability to maintain a normal façade even when I wasn't calm was an amazing skill. *Thank you, teachers!* 

In retrospect, my behavior had been highly inappropriate, no matter how happy I'd been to see Lucas. Why hadn't I thought about my parents being nearby? I'd gladly have dug a hole and buried myself in it.

I'm sorry for being such an immodest daughter! But I'm also relieved you didn't catch me! I'm so, so sorry!

Well, actually, my mother seemed to have figured it out.

The morning after Lucas and I made love, I nervously joined my parents for breakfast. My father didn't say anything about it. I'd expected a commotion, but the breakfast table was calm, as usual. I was a bit confused but relieved. That afternoon during teatime, Mother shared some gossip with me. Just as I was thanking her for her company and getting up to leave, she called out to me.

"Cecilia. You need to be more reserved."

"Reserved?" I asked, confused.

"Prince Lucas may never get bored, but if you don't learn some restraint, you'll always be at his mercy. You've become quite alluring overnight. Your father is just too oblivious to notice."

I blushed furiously and froze.

"Don't worry," she reassured me. "I won't tell him. Consider yourself lucky," she said in an amused, happy voice.

I guess it was obvious...

Lucas's illusion magic had hidden any hickeys on my neck and chest, so it was

most likely my behavior that had given me away. *Mothers are both amazing and terrifying.* 

True to her word, Mother didn't tell Father, leaving me to battle my embarrassment alone.

That night, I was determined to tell Lucas there was to be no more touching, and that even though he'd used the barrier to hide me, he'd still broken his promise. But then a shadow landed on my balcony, startling me.

It was a handsome man with wings who spoke in a flamboyant voice. "Hello, it's the Black Dragon Express! I have a letter from the Demonic Prince."

"Something incredible just showed up..." I muttered. It felt like lightning had struck me. Using a black dragon as one's courier was quite impressive. I curtseyed, greeting him politely despite my surprise.

"Thanks for the polite greeting," the black dragon said, looking surprised himself. "You're a natural around dragons. No wonder you're his mate. He's really into looks, isn't he? Even though he said he wasn't interested in my face or even his own. Plus, what is he hiding with that illusion magic? Seems naughty. Even though he has such a pretty face, he's still a man, huh? Arg, damn it, I wish I could've eaten him at least once!"

Wait, I thought this dragon just spoke flamboyantly, but is he really into BL or whatever? I can't believe it. It's fantastic having a beautiful dragon as a messenger, but the thought of him being interested in my husband is just too much. Please keep your hands off Lucas!

"Aw, look at you, making that jealous face. My black-hearted master really does love you, huh? Don't worry. I'm only interested in Elsa now. Besides, I can't touch you without him crushing my core. It's quite a painful ordeal. Normally, having a guy with a pretty face like that corner me against a wall would be thrilling, but he said, 'If you touch her, I'll beat you close to death and then heal you just to do it all over again' with a totally expressionless face. Then he put a ton of pressure on my body with his mana. It was so scary, I peed

myself a little. Your husband is way too much of a sadist! It's frightening! So, I don't ever wanna touch you! Don't you dare come near me! Ooh, but I'd love it if Elsa looked at me like that! Elsa, darliiiing!"

This dragon sure is a free spirit. One moment he's chatting away. The next, he disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Free-spirited Lucas and a free-spirited dragon make for an anxiety-inducing combination. Will this kingdom be okay? And what did Lucas do to that black dragon? Did he really say he peed himself?! No, that can't be right. He's a dragon, after all. Lucas can be harsh, but he's not that terrifying, is he?

Uh-oh, I heard a scream from the roof. What on earth is going on up there? I hope it doesn't start any strange rumors.

At any rate, the letter the dragon delivered began with an apology. It said Lucas couldn't come see me for a while because he didn't intend to let me go. I didn't quite understand, but after that, daily bouquets and cards were delivered by the Black Dragon Express, just as they were before the campaign. I was a little lonely, but I wasn't worried. Lucas had said he'd be back in a few days after arrangements were made. My father's mood seemed to worsen by the day, too. I wondered if the two were related.

Even though I knew the marks on my neck weren't visible, I found myself running my fingers over them, deep in thought.

One day, Father had a gloomy aura around him. "Cecilia," he said reluctantly. "I know it's sudden, but tomorrow you have a scheduled meeting with Prince Lucas at the second prince's quarters in the palace. Several things will arrive addressed to you today, so make sure to check them."

"Y-yes, Father," I stammered in surprise.

I'm going to see Lucas tomorrow! Just the thought made me happy, but I was also nervous. I placed a hand over my pounding heart, which Father noticed.

"You should cancel if you feel unwell," he suggested excitedly.

I panicked, but thankfully, Mother intervened with an elegant smile. "Don't be ridiculous, darling," she said.

I sighed with relief, but my cheek also twitched a little. *Mother, your eyes aren't smiling. It seems you can do the same thing the members of the ducal house can do.* Possessing such a powerful weapon for social interactions would be quite useful for my position at the center of society. I should learn it someday.

Still, I was relieved my mother supported me. Canceling would have been too disappointing. I felt a bit sorry for my father, but I cheered my mother on silently and watched as he delivered the final blow with a smile.

"If Cecilia falls ill because you canceled, I won't forgive you. And I won't speak to you for a while, either. So be prepared."

"But, dear! I never said I'd cancel!"

Father's face paled at the threat of silence, making me feel a little guilty. "That brat," he muttered. "I knew he was plotting these past few days. He's so competent it's infuriating!"

I spent the day checking the deliveries and preparing for the next day.

My maids left for the night with grins on their faces. I sighed and sat at my vanity after they were gone, staring at the dress Lucas had sent for me to wear. It was deep blue, intricately embroidered with gold thread, and simply exquisite. The necklace and earrings were citrine and pearl; they matched the purple accessories, which had had my maids in a frenzy.

"Prince Lucas's colors!" they'd said.

"Good for you, Lady Cecilia!" another had said.

It was then that I realized Lucas's amnesia was an open secret.

The gifts in Lucas's colors. The sudden meeting at the second prince's quarters. It was all to show that our engagement was secure, which meant such a necessity had arisen.

I slumped over onto my vanity, overwhelmed. As someone who was supposedly recuperating, I couldn't participate in social events and had become out of touch with current affairs. Although Mother provided me with secondhand information, some things I could only learn by being present. Letters from close friends helped, but I realized that I was unable to effectively deal with anyone in my current state.

Then it hit me—I had allies, incredibly reliable ones who could gather useful information. I'd told them I wanted to work hard together, and they'd enthusiastically agreed. They'd followed me when I left the ducal estate and supported me in many ways, even beyond their duties as my guards. In *many* ways, to the point where I was worried they'd be found out.

I felt ashamed when I realized I'd been hesitant to rely on them because I feared it would be a burden. Their hearts had broken for me, yet I'd built walls up and doubted their trust.

Don't worry. If I push them too far, they'll tell me. First, thank them. Then you can ask if you can rely on them. I have to make an effort to get closer to them, too, I thought, clenching my fist with resolve.

I took a deep breath. "Anna? Kate? Elsa?" I called out softly.

I wasn't sure if it would work, but the three girls suddenly appeared before me. Despite being mentally prepared, I couldn't help but jump.

I blinked in surprise as the three of them stared back at me, their eyes intense, fists raised high. Their cute maid uniforms fluttered as they surrounded me.

"Summoned and ready! Number one! Your Anna is here!"

"Thanks for calling me second! Your Kate is on the scene!"

"Damn it, I'm so frustrated at being called last, but I'm still happy to be here. Your Elsa is here!"

Are all maids these days supposed to be secret agents?

Their unusually high spirits left me confused. Ignoring my confusion, Anna spun around and kneeled before me with a flourish.

"I am number one! The first to be called! Woo-hoo! O, my goddess! What can I do for you?!"

"You're only first because of alphabetical order! If the alphabet started with a K, it would've been me!"

"Meoooow! Lady Cecilia! I'm like a cat! I have a great sense of smell, so call on me anytime!"

"I hate cats. They always break the rules. Kate, throw her out the window."

"You don't need to tell me twice. Lady Cecilia, please wait a moment."

"Um, well..." I said.

She said "Meow!" how cute! No, wait, that's not the point!

"Up you go! Cooperate, damn it!"

No! Just because I said "well" doesn't mean you should actually throw her off the balcony!

"K-Kate!"

"Yes! It's me, Kate! At your service!"

"Yes, I know! Put Elsa down! Anna, stop Kate!" I turned to seek help from Anna. I felt a surge of fear when I saw the huge grin on Anna's face. What a waste for such beauty! "Um, Anna?"

"He he he. Mwa ha ha! It makes me so happy and bashful that Lady Cecilia called upon us!"

"It's just unbearable! Hearing her flustered voice stirs my passions within me!"

"Help me! I'm falling, Lady Cecilia!"

Maybe I shouldn't have called them... Anna and Kate are acting a bit strange.

Elsa, on the other hand, is just asking for help. Wait, help?!

"E-Elsa!"

"Whoops, my hand slipped."

"Don't worry, Kate. It's understandable. Lady Cecilia called us for help."

"Right. Who wouldn't lose their grip in that situation?"

"Exactly!" they said simultaneously, agreeing with each other.

I managed to rescue Elsa, grabbing her before she could fall. Meanwhile, Anna and Kate smiled brightly at each other. Elsa, on the other hand, was sniffling and crying.

"You... You called my name with concern twice! Almost falling was worth it!" She showed a level of optimism that was almost disturbing. *Is she so happy she's crying? Surely not,* I hoped. A chill ran down my spine.

\*\*\*

"Lady Viviana from the queen's kingdom?"

"Yes, we've known she planned on attending the engagement ceremony for a while. Our kingdom couldn't refuse."

"She's here as a guest. It's clear she's here to curry favor with the Hero, considering how soon she arrived after the date was announced."

"She's also meeting with the queen, who's under confinement, as well as that piece of trash—er, I mean, Lord Felix. Lord Dirk is monitoring the situation."

She's meeting not only with the queen but with Felix, too?

"Isn't Lady Viviana Lord Felix's second cousin? I never heard they were close."

"Yes, she and the queen share a grandmother. Although she's occasionally corresponded with the queen, she's never interacted with that bastard Felix."

"That's very suspicious." I sighed. The three maids nodded in agreement.

It's just one problem after another. Will I ever find peace? Also, I've completely

ignored how bizarrely they refer to Felix. Oh well. I'm sure it's fine. I probably shouldn't bother with titles for him, either, considering he's probably—no, definitely—summoning beasts. Honestly, he's insane. I really don't want to see him.

"Felix has already been pardoned, hasn't he?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Since Prince Lucas has no memories, the other noble houses found it hard to oppose."

"And the incident with the magical beast hasn't been publicized due to lack of evidence."

"Well, I suppose that can't be helped," I said.

The fact that Lucas had no memory of the event worked out in Felix's favor, which was disappointing. The noble families were eager to introduce their daughters to Lucas and didn't want him to remember that I was once engaged to Felix. They didn't want to risk any information that might jog his memory. That was probably why they didn't oppose Felix being pardoned.

Even with the loss of his succession rights, Felix was still royalty. The kingdom couldn't afford to accuse him of summoning a Fenrir using forbidden magic without sufficient evidence. And since this was highly classified information, most nobles were unaware of the event.

Felix was supposed to be lying low, too. It was unfortunate but also inevitable that he had received a pardon for summoning a magical beast. But issuing his pardon at our engagement ceremony was just too much. I know it's to show that there's no lingering resentment, but still.

I sighed resignedly and glanced at the three maids, who were grinning at me.

"So, what exactly is Lord Lukie up to?"

"Mwah ha ha."

"Eh he he he."

"Myah ha ha... Gah!"

Kate's timing was impeccable. She knew exactly when to stop Elsa from talking. And that "Myah ha ha" was so cute. *Really cute. I wanna pet her so bad...* Lost in thought, I felt a bit left out and frowned a little.

"Won't you tell me?"

"Argh, she's asking so cutely!"

"She's so skillful! Oh no, I might start talking!" Elsa said. "Argh, not my head..."

Uh-oh. Elsa went flying through the air again. Luckily, Kate caught her. Impressive teamwork.

I was about to beg them again when Anna desperately shouted, "No, Kate! Elsa! Remember Prince Lucas's blood-soaked box!"

Kate and Elsa paled. Well, Elsa was already kind of pale since she was being flung around by Anna.

What on earth did Lucas do? And what's this blood-soaked box? It seems like he's up to something again. Well, I'll see him tomorrow anyway. Worrying about it now won't change anything.

I hugged the shirt of his that they gave me and drifted off to sleep.

\*\*\*

My carriage stopped in front of the second prince's wing of the palace. As I went to get out, Lucas grabbed my hand. Startled, I looked up to see him standing tall and perfectly dressed as a prince, looking dazzlingly handsome with a sparkling smile.

"Welcome, my goddess," he said, kissing my fingertips.

"Th-thank you, Prince Lucas," I stammered, unable to help myself. But my father's stern face quickly spooked me back to my senses.

"How dare you sneak in unnoticed! It's too much for His Highness to

personally escort her, I'll—" he started.

"We've finally reunited, so please don't be so uncouth, Marquis. It's an honor for me to escort my beloved. Oh, and welcome to you, too." Lucas smoothly handled my father, whose veins were bulging, with a beautiful smile.

The tension between them was palpable. I anxiously looked at one, then the other. Lucas smiled sweetly at me and hurriedly escorted me away, leaving me flustered.

You really can't read the room, can you? It's almost admirable.

I was surprised when he led us to the second prince's study near his private chambers. Father called me over, and I took a step back and kneeled down.

"Your Highness, Second Prince Lucas Theoderic, it is an honor to see you. Lady Cecilia Cline has come at your summons."

I thought that was a bit formal, but I supposed showing respect was important.

Since I was Lucas's fiancée, I had to give a proper greeting. I did so with the highest level of courtesy.

"Well, you've seen him, and we've paid our respects. We shall take our leave now, Cecilia," my father said.

"What?!"

Already? We just greeted him a second ago! I just got up from kneeling, and now we're leaving? I know he's busy, but this is too brief!

Father's intimidating voice left me stunned, and I unintentionally voiced my confusion. Filled with questions, I was shaken by the fact that I would only be able to see him for a short time. When I looked up at Lucas, I saw he was still smiling sweetly and clung to his gaze.

Lucas reached out, and I instinctively placed my hand in his.

"Cecilia!"

Father's anxious voice made me try to pull back, but Lucas drew me closer, taking me in his arms right in front of my father and leaving me frozen.

"My fiancée came all the way to see me, and of course we have a lot to talk about. If you're busy, you may leave first, Marquis. Right, Cecilia?"

"Um, well..."

"Boy... Prince Lucas, even as her fiancé, you should respect boundaries. Release my daughter at once! Besides, you—"

"Not to worry, Marquis. I've already completed my schedule for the day. It's important to make time for the ones you love."

*Smile.* Lucas spoke to my father with an intimidating smile on his face. Meanwhile, a vein popped on Father's forehead.

"That's odd, Your Highness. I heard you had a meeting with the envoy from the east?"

"Yes, I did. It was deemed unnecessary for me to attend, though, as long as you and the other officials were present, so I informed them of my absence in advance. I apologize that the message didn't reach you." Lucas smiled again.

"You little brat," my father muttered angrily, his face twisted in fury.

Facing Father is getting exhausting, I thought, tightening my grip on our clasped hands. Lucas shifted, holding me closer. I appreciate the affection, but now we're practically hugging, which is even more awkward! I felt cold sweat run down my back.

"And you agreed to this arrangement, didn't you?" Lucas continued.

"Yes, I did agree, but only for a greeting!"

"A simple greeting isn't enough. If our relationship is questioned, we'll have to waste time on unnecessary meetings, which would interfere with my duties. Besides, we have preparations for the soiree and the engagement ceremony we must attend to. Everyone has been saying we're already short on time. It's best if we handle things ourselves."

Preparations for the soiree and engagement party? Handle it ourselves? I thought I just came for a short tea party and a greeting. Was I mistaken?

Feeling completely out of the loop, I watched as the confrontation between Father and Lucas escalated.

"You! I thought you'd been unusually quiet lately! According to what I heard, Your Highness, you haven't been having many meetings!"

"The second prince and his fiancée must maintain a stable position.

Therefore, as the second prince, I deemed unnecessary interactions avoidable. Furthermore, I've been inundated with an unusual amount of work from other departments, thus reducing my available meeting time. I wonder why such a surplus of administrative tasks has been added to my schedule. You're the advisor to the prime minister, Marquis. Do you happen to know why?" Lucas asked pointedly.

Father's veins stood out so prominently that I thought they might burst. What is happening here? The tension in the room was palpable, more like a battlefield than a simple meeting. And not a battlefield in a cool way, like a dragon fighting a tiger or something! I'm scared! Someone help!

"We're wearing our rings, and all the formal procedures have been followed, so there shouldn't be any issues. Oh, Cecilia. I haven't asked you yet. Do you have any plans after this?"

Caught off guard, I quickly looked up at Lucas. "No, I don't," I replied.

Lucas smiled, clearly pleased, and then turned his gaze back to my father.

"As you can see, there's no problem. I'll be borrowing your daughter, Marquis. Don't worry. I'll take great care of her until the engagement ceremony."

I stared at Lucas in shock, trying to comprehend his words as he narrowed his golden eyes at my father. What does he mean, "Until the engagement ceremony?" Borrow who? Me? I struggled to process what was happening; it

was too much for me to keep up with.

Father glared at Lucas as if he wanted to strike him down. "You've got some nerve, boy! What if her reputation is damaged?"

"I'll handle things before any damage is done. And if anything does happen, we'll proceed with the marriage immediately."

Lucas's nonchalant declaration made my entire body flush red with embarrassment. *Oh, no... No, no, no!* This situation was unbearable. *The mood in this room is too scary! I'm really embarrassed. It's far too much!* 

Uncomfortable, I looked down in an attempt to hide my burning face. Father glanced at me and sighed deeply. "Do you really think it will be that easy?" he said exasperatedly.

Lucas shrugged. "Marquis, I am the Hero," he replied, with chilling calmness. "I will use any means at my disposal. Plus, I'm an expert at *dealing* with things."

The room fell silent at Lucas's ominous words. What does he mean by "dealing with things"? Am I the only one who finds his phrasing deeply concerning? The Hero has a lot of authority and power, almost too much. His authority is practically on par with the king's! He can't use that power just to protect my reputation, can he?

Father sighed. "Fine then!"

That's not a good answer, Father! I promise he means what he says!

This frightening exchange finally ended our nerve-wracking meeting. *Wait, how did that end things?* I wondered with amazement as I watched Father return to work, gritting his teeth.

"We have a lot to talk about. Would you like to join me for some tea?" Lucas asked, still speaking in his princely tone of voice as he led me to his private quarters.

"Nnghh, haah, mm! L-Lord Lukie! Mm!"

"Haah, I'm sorry. Just stay still so I can kiss you."

W-wait, why is this happening?! We were going to talk and have tea! Not kiss!

He pushed me down onto a large sofa and slipped his hand up my dress. My brain immediately told my body to give in to him. I showed no resistance at all. In fact, I clutched his clothes as if to beg him not to let go. He grabbed my fingers and held me steady. I realized that, deep down, I was pleased that he prevented me from resisting. I was so embarrassed I wanted to cry.

"Nn, mm, ahh, mmm, haah!"

When he finally pulled away, I breathlessly stared at his lips and wondered what had gotten into him. His glowing golden eyes filled with pain, and he let out a deep sigh.

How can you be in full-passion mode when you were just fighting with Father a moment ago?! Isn't flipping your switch like that a bit quick?!

I was so confused that I stared at him, frozen.

"I'm sorry," he said when I looked away, sounding regretful. "I can't control myself. I need to calm down. I'm really sorry, Cece, but when I let go of you, please move slowly away from me. Damn. I'm so pathetic," he muttered.

You're the one who pushed me down in the first place! I thought when he let me go. I don't get it, but I can tell you're serious. And I also kind of feel like I'm in danger...

I followed his instructions, a bit panicked, and tried to crawl out from under him. However, he grabbed me again, pulling me back into his arms.

"L-Lord Lukie, what are you doing?!"

You're the one who told me to get away! And did you just unhook the back of my dress?!

"Eek! Lord Lukie! No, you can't take off my dress! Noo!"

"Sorry, but when you try to escape, it just makes me want to chase you even more. I can't stop."

Ah, when you talk like that, it sets my heart racing, you idiot! Waaaah, he's kissing the back of my neck and trying to grope me under my dress! Stop, stop!

"Cecilia..."

"Lord Lukie, stop! If you go any further, I won't speak to you ever again!"

At my desperate plea, he abruptly stopped, his shoulders shaking with effort.

Oh, he stopped. He really hasn't changed. It's amazing how well my threats of the silent treatment work on him. It makes me a bit happy, to be honest.

"I-I'm really sorry." He looked so adorably sheepish that I couldn't help but find it endearing.

Seriously, what was all that about? Even though he was looking at me all flustered and worried, I wouldn't let him off the hook without an explanation. Lucas hung his head in embarrassment. What kind of move was that? No, Cecilia! You have to stay strong, no matter how cute he looks!

"Wh-what's wrong?" I asked.

That's odd. What happened to me being strong?

He didn't respond.

Um, could you please stop hanging your head, looking all embarrassed, and explain?

"Lord Lukie?"

"Cece..."

"Yes?"

"I just... I can't help but want to make love to you."

"What?"

What did he just say? I tried to understand what he was saying, but he continued with an even more bewildering explanation, making my body start to tremble.

"Remember the other day when you showed me how you wanted me?" His words made me flush red with embarrassment, and I didn't respond. He gave me a meaningful look. "You do remember, don't you?"

I trembled with shame. "I-I remember," I managed to whisper.

"It's because of that," he said with a heavy sigh. "I worked hard because you were scared. I didn't want you to find out and get embarrassed."

I stared at him, wide-eyed and frozen.

"And you didn't figure it out, did you?" he whispered.

Finally, it dawned on me what he was trying to say. My entire body felt like it was boiling. I could barely breathe from the shock.

"Wh-what?" I stammered.

He gently touched my lips with his thumb, his golden eyes filled with love.

"You were so scared that we wouldn't be able to see each other like that again, and you wanted me so much. You even let me watch you come... And I still held back. Don't you think I deserve some praise for that, Cecilia? I've been so sexually frustrated."

He sighed and ran his fingers over my lips again. All I could do was tremble as I looked at him.

When I'd woken up that day, I'd been in bed. It was like nothing had happened. I'd even wondered if it had all been a dream. None of my family's maids asked any questions. Everything had seemed normal. Lucas hadn't come by the next day, so I hadn't been able to ask anyone about it. I had been relieved no one had found out, so I'd pretended to have forgotten his inexplicable actions.

But now, my body trembled, and my cheeks burned red. Tears blurred my vision as his golden eyes wavered. My throat tightened, and my breathing became difficult. The unsettling feeling that had been simmering inside me took shape, and I could no longer ignore it. I forced my trembling tongue to move.

```
"Wh-when?"
```

"When what?"

I glared at him through my tears. My heart shouted at the wrongness of it.

"Y-you're so mean! So cruel!"

Lucas's lips curled slightly in response to my insult, and tears spilled from my eyes.

"Wanting you? You pervert!"

He laughed softly, looking happy, and his face twisted in a strange, painful way.

"When did it happen? You idiot!"

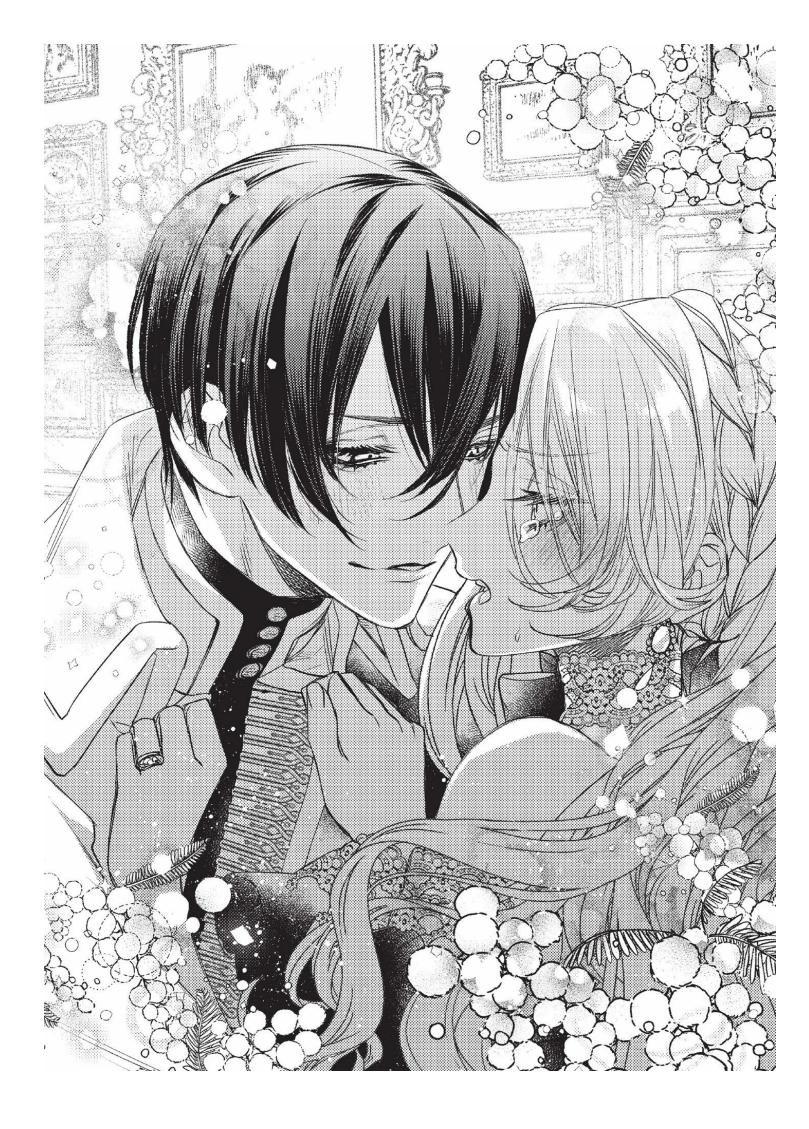
"I'm sorry. Don't cry, Cecilia."

"You're the one making me cry!" I shouted.

He hugged me tightly and apologized again. "I'm still piecing things together. I'm really sorry," he murmured softly, sounding pained. "I meant to tell you everything once I got more memories back. I didn't expect that you would figure it out so soon. How did you know?" he asked with a sheepish smile.

"You idiot!" I screamed again, unable to take it anymore. I couldn't hold back shouting any longer. "Lord Lukie, you idiot! I knew there was no way Lord Lukie could hold back!"

"What?"



Don't 'what' me! Do you have any idea how much you've messed with me?! Fine, I'm angry, so I'll say it all!

"You said it was the first time! And that we could just touch?!"

"Yeah," he said after a moment.

"And just gentle biting? No way! You would definitely bite for real!"

Again, he was silent for a moment. "Yes."

"For the first time, you were way too gentle!"

"I'm sorry."

Is he looking away? If he's apologizing, then he must remember his first time clearly. He should apologize properly!

"You knew exactly how to...make love to me!"

"Oh, well. That might've been my body somehow remembering."

"Idiot! Seriously, you're such a pervert!"

"I'm sorry! I'm really sorry! Weawy sowwy!"

Stupid perverted prince! What do you mean by "Weawy sowwy?"! If I could pinch those cute cheeks off right now, I would!

"So, for your first time, you shouldn't have been able to hold back!"

"Oh, well... That's true."

See? I knew it! I wanted to shout, but the topic was so embarrassing.

I was dying of embarrassment; my face was bright red. And he was looking at me with those slightly sad eyes. But I wouldn't let him off the hook.

"When did you start?"

"When did I start remembering?"

"Yes. When did you first remember?"

"Um, while we were kissing, and you called me an idiot. Sorry, sorry!"

You! That was right after you came to see me! No wonder your kisses were so skillful!

"Still, it's just fragments, really..." he said anxiously.

A tear slipped from the corner of my eye. "I've been waiting for you to tell me!"

"I'm really sorry, Cecilia. I love you. Please forgive me. I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

I let go of his cheeks and laughed. "Ha ha! Lucas, you're just ridiculous!"

He hung his head. "Here we go again. You're so cute it's cruel..." he muttered.

That sulky face is no fair! It's frustrating how my love for him just keeps growing deeper. He always says what I need to hear. He always keeps his promises, and he's so strong and kind.

I'd been prepared to wait forever for him to return; I never expected him to come back to me so soon. He'd taken on the power of the Hero at the cost of his memories. I believed that he wouldn't disappear or give up, but I thought it would take longer for his memories of us to return.

His slightly sullen face and those eyes glowing with love were so incredibly endearing. I gently cupped his flushed cheeks.

He froze. "Wait! Just wait!" He said, flustered.

"No. Work harder," I replied.

Lucas blushed even deeper. "You can be so mean, Cecilia! You know how weak I am against your requests, even when you say you want me!" he muttered under his breath in frustration.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and gave him a triumphant smile. How do you like that?

He blushed, frustrated. "You're so cute it drives me crazy."

"Welcome back, my dear husband."

"I'm sorry I took so long. I'm home, my sweet wife." Then, in a pained voice,

he said, "Can I kiss you?"

"Just a kiss," I whispered back with a smile.

We kissed softly, and I tightened my arms around him. He held me close, filling me with happiness. We both laughed softly, nuzzling our noses against each other.

"Cecilia, you're so mean."

"Not as mean as you, Lord Lukie."

"I was just responding to your reque—" I pinched his cheek again, glaring at him. "Ow, I'm sorry!"

"You always do that!" But his golden eyes softened sweetly, making my heart swell. I shed another tear.

"Lord Lukie is a meanie."

"Yes?"

"Lord Lukie is a pervert."

"Yeah."

"Lord Lukie is devious and black-hearted!"

I missed you. I missed you so much... Lucas let out a painful sigh as I conveyed my feelings.

"I should live up to your expectations. You're too cute when you're begging for it, Cecilia," he whispered passionately. His watery golden eyes drew closer. We shared a deep kiss.

"Ah, damn it," he said breathily. "I surrender. I'm so happy!"

The sofa creaked beneath us, making us laugh.

\*\*\*

Lucas helped me fix my disheveled dress.

I could've called Anna and the others, but I wanted to stay with Lucas a bit

longer. He quickly helped tidy me up, saying, "It's my fault, after all."

Once he was done, he sat me down on the sofa. I looked up at him, surprised. "Hmm? Won't you sit down?"

"I'm sorry, but I really can't handle this right now. I can't be so close to you," he said, moving to sit on the edge of his desk by the balcony.

That's really far away.

A coffee table and another sofa lay between us. Beyond that was the desk. The room was spacious, making the distance feel even greater. Despite his casual posture—legs crossed and an elbow propped up on his knee—he still looked effortlessly cool. It was the magic of his good looks.

I quietly waited for him to speak.

"Cecilia," he began.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Let me make love to you tonight."

Wait, what? Is that what you wanted to talk about? I struggled to control the heat which spread through my body and glared at him.

He sighed heavily. "Starting tonight, you'll be staying in the second prince's quarters. Anna and the others have probably already told you, but a marquis's daughter from a neighboring kingdom is here to attend the engagement ceremony."

"Lady Viviana, right?"

"Yes. That woman claims she doesn't have anyone to escort her, so she wants me to take her to the victory ball."

Calling her "that woman" is a little... No, I can't forgive her for trying to get close to Lucas.

"You won't do that, will you?"

"No."

"I didn't think so."

I was shocked that I asked such a silly question. Lucas looked exasperated and sighed. "Are you out of your mind?" he muttered, which wasn't very polite of him.

I reassured myself that I wasn't misunderstanding the situation, and he continued.

"Not escorting my fiancée to the victory ball would suggest a broken relationship, considering my amnesia and with you not coming to the castle due to your recuperation. From Bern's perspective, there's no way I could say yes to her request. It's out of the question for anyone to agree to it. But since she's the queen's relative and has royal blood from a neighboring kingdom, we can't outright dismiss her, either. We have to show her that our relationship hasn't changed. That's why I called you to the second prince's quarters, where only the second prince's wife or fiancée is allowed."

"I understand."

Given that our kingdom had already experienced a scandal caused by Felix, we had to avoid such incidents at all costs, especially since I was the one who had been involved in that scandal. I understood that, but still...

"What about the preparations for the ball and the engagement ceremony?"

"We didn't expect guests to arrive so soon, so preparing the guesthouse took a lot of time. Because of that, the preparations for the ball and engagement ceremony have been delayed. Normally, the queen or crown princess would handle such preparations."

"Oh, I see."

The queen wasn't good at handling these things.

"There are too many idiots in the neighboring kingdoms," Lucas muttered, looking tired. I felt genuinely sorry for him.

"And me?"

"Well, you've been handling such things in place of the queen for a while now, right? We've been delaying things, using your recuperation as an excuse. But everyone is desperate. They've all been asking for you."

I stared off into the distance. Is it that bad? Couldn't the queen have tried a bit harder? I suppose not, given that she was under confinement and probably using that as an excuse not to work. I can easily imagine that.

"I don't want you to push yourself too much," Lucas said, "but I would like your help."

Warmth spread through my chest at Lucas's slightly troubled expression. Finally, I could be useful to him and stand beside him. Happy tears welled in my eyes, but I blinked them away and smiled.

"Well, I'll do my best to help," I said.

He sighed deeply. "I'm sorry for being so incompetent."

Even someone as capable as Lucas had his limits. He was managing both his duties as the second prince and a knight, supporting his fiancée, and overseeing preparations for the ball and the engagement ceremony on top of that. Also, there were some things that only a woman could handle.

I'm really sorry for being bedridden! I'll do my best!

\*\*\*

I called in Anna and the others, who all had smirks on their faces, to quickly fix my hair and makeup. We made adjustments to my dresses for the ball and engagement ceremony, had meetings with the key personnel, and coordinated preparations for the ball. By the end of the day, everything was finally settled.

Later, after I'd relaxed and taken a warm bath, I suddenly realized something. I looked around at the various doors in the room, and my heart began to race.

This... Is this what I think it is? No, surely that's too much... This is different from the night before he went on the campaign. We might be wearing rings, but publicly, we're still only engaged.

I couldn't yet sleep in the bedroom for the second prince's wife in his official quarters. And I certainly couldn't sleep in his bedroom. That would be just about the *worst* thing I could do. It would damage my reputation, just as Father said.

But I had already used the second prince's bathtub. Come to think of it, I hadn't thought to question Anna and others when they said they should set up a decoy in the second prince's wife's quarters when my belongings had been brought in. I was too excited about Lucas wanting my help.

How foolish of me!

Cursing my romantic mind, I looked back and forth between the two doors.

This is too much. It's improper to sleep in the second prince's private quarters as a noblewoman. So, naturally, I should choose the other door...

Praying, I reached for the doorknob that led to the second prince's consort's chambers, but when I tried the doorknob, it was locked.

"I knew it..." I moaned. I heard a chuckle behind me, and I jumped in surprise.

"L-Lord Lukie!" I said, whirling around.

"What are you doing, my beautiful lady?"

Despite the fact that he was hiding his mouth, it was clear that he was trying to hold back his joy. The expression on his face made me feel shy, and I ended up raising my voice.

"Wh-what do you mean by locking the door?"

"You don't need that room," he replied smoothly, leaving me speechless.

"That's not the right door, anyway. You know that, don't you?" he said.

Oh no, he's in bully mode again! His hair was still damp from the bath, making him look stunning as he leaned against the wall with his arms crossed, gazing at me. Ahh, my heart is racing!

"I-I don't think that room is the right one, either!" I frantically retorted.

He tilted his head to the side, thinking for a moment. "Oh, so you're saying it's okay to do it on the sofa or on the desk?" His ominous words froze me in place. "Come on, let's go."

Lucas gestured toward the desk. *No, that is* not *an option!* It felt like every fragment of his memory involved some perverted fantasy.

"I-I will do no such thing!"

"But I said I wanted to make love to you tonight, remember?"

"You did, but I never agreed to it!"

"Then agree now," he said, almost pleadingly.

Is he begging? The way he's tilting his head to the side and smiling sweetly at me is incredibly cute. My heart's fluttering! No, don't let yourself be deceived, Cecilia! He's acting strangely, and I have a feeling he'll say something even more frightening.

I was right because what he said next made the blood drain from my face.

"I can't resist making love to you when you're so close. How can I resist holding you in my arms when you're right in front of me? I want to make love to you so much I can hardly stand it. After everything we've been through, I just can't hold back anymore. I want to hear you cry out in pleasure, so the bed would be ideal. But honestly, anywhere is fine as long as I can make love to you," he said with a soft smile.

Wait, a soft smile? I've never seen him smile so tenderly before. His gentle smile is so adorable! I wanna see it up close. Wait, what am I thinking?!

I almost moved toward him involuntarily. Lucas had been deploying these strange tactics recently, evolving in unsettling ways. His soft smile was the most frightening I'd seen lately. It drew me in so skillfully. It's the most terrifying, gentle thing I've seen lately!

The things he said also seemed quite scary. Why does he seem even more dangerous tonight? Plus, his pupils are dilated.

```
"L-Lord Lukie? I, um..."

"What is it, Cecilia?"
```

His gentle reply was terrifying, too! He moved closer, and I knew things would go terribly wrong if he reached me.

I decided I'd work hard as his fiancée again from here on, so I don't want to end up bedridden! I need to make a strategic retreat.

I forced a smile, feeling my cheeks twitch.

"I-I'm sorry, but I'm tired today."

"Tired?"

"That's right, so..."

"I see. Then let me take care of you."

"Wait, what?"

"Where should we do it? The bed? The sofa? The bath?"

"I-I'm not tired anymore."

Suddenly, I heard a crackling sound. His fingers sparked with electricity!

Does he remember that, too?! Does he really only remember bits and pieces?

I wanted to ask, but I knew it would only lead to more trouble. His abilities would make resistance impossible, and all escape routes were blocked.

"Wait, but..."

"I can wait. Just to be clear, though, I will make love to you tonight, and I will not take no for an answer."

He's sure emphatic! That cute head tilt and sweet words are in stark contrast to the terrifying things he's saying! I haven't agreed to anything!

Before I could retort, his low, sweet whisper stopped me.

"When you tease me, it makes me want to be rougher with you. Do you want

me to be mean to you, my beloved Cecilia?"

"What?"

"You called me a pervert before. Heh heh. So, do you want me to be mean to you?"

I hadn't said anything yet. Well, I was thinking about it, and I did say "What?" But I didn't say I wanted that! This is just a misunderstanding, Lucas! And you're smiling so happily about it, too... I have a bad feeling about this.

His beautiful, delighted face smiled softly again, and a line of light shot from the floor to the ceiling. Startled, I watched the glittering light disappear as Lucas, now close to me, casually sat on the sofa's armrest.

"No," he said, casually. The aura of fear spread throughout the room. "Whoops. I accidentally turned off the soundproofing barrier, Cecilia."

"What?"

"So," he continued, but I turned in the direction of a noise I heard. All the windows that should have been closed were open. A chill ran down my spine as goosebumps formed all over. I desperately moved my stiffened body to look at him. He moved the towel he'd been using to dry his hair toward the windows, and my blood ran cold.

"If you don't control your voice, everyone in the second prince's wing will hear your naughty moans tonight."

He opened the windows deliberately! Plus, what he just said is absolutely out of the question! He acted like it was an accident, but it wasn't at all! He's really lost it! If anyone hears me making those sounds, my reputation as a noblewoman will be ruined! I'll be too embarrassed to ever leave these rooms again. That must be what he wants!

What should I do? All my options are terrifying. Oh, no! He has chains in his hand!

"Isn't that enough? Or should I tease you more?"

I never asked for this! He looks really enthusiastic, but is he holding a grudge from earlier today?

```
"No, no. Please, Lord Lukie..."

"What is it?"

"Please wait..."
```

"You want me to wait again? How about I give you a choice?" He smiled wryly in response to my tearful plea.

Yes! More options! Once again, I was naïve...

"I'm weak when it comes to you. If you take off your nightgown, kiss me, and tell me you want me, I'll close the windows and put the soundproof barrier back up. And you can choose the place for us to do it within this room."

How could he think that was a reasonable choice? Plus, why am I the one who has to ask? And why does it sound like I'm the one who's asking for it? This is scary and infuriating! Why should I have to give in to this shameless pervert?! I have to stay strong!

```
"N-no, I won't!"
"Hmm?"
```

His terrifying "Hmm?" made my blood run cold. This was the second time, and I hoped my previous experience would help now.

"Wh-why can't we use the second prince's wife's bedroom?"

"Because the castle maids manage that room, too. If you're okay with them seeing the messed-up bed and your soaking wet, disheveled appearance, I don't mind. It would mean we'll be officially married sooner."

```
"Argh!"
```

Seeing me in such a state before our official wedding would be mortifying. I'd die of embarrassment! That's why the maids set up the decoy in the chambers for the second prince's fiancée! We're supposed to be staying in separate

quarters until the engagement ceremony.

Wait, did Father mean my reputation hinged on using the fiancée's quarters?!

No, I'm about to be dragged to the second prince's bedroom! This is bad! Like,

really bad!

I was trapped, my back against the door. A cold sweat ran down my neck as my mind raced for a solution. I couldn't come up with a good idea, though, and silently cursed Lucas as I grit my teeth.

Determined not to lose to this black-hearted prince, I glared at him and was about to use my trump card. However, he closed the distance between us in an instant. My hands were pinned to the wall, then he pressed his fingers to my tongue. Dark flames flickered in his golden eyes, piercing through me, making my body tremble.

```
"If you say it..."
```

His eyes darkened. The wicked grin and the words he said instantly crushed my spirit. I nodded frantically to show I wouldn't speak.

"You won't say anything?" he asked.

I nodded again. Call me a coward, but I can't handle him being any less gentle.

He let go of me, but now he's touching my butt! His f-fingers are touching there! Ahh, I can't! I'm scared!

He was about to pull his fingers from my mouth, but I pushed aside my embarrassment and sucked on them. Lucas seemed pleased as he pulled out his fingers and kissed me on the cheek. Then, he put them back inside my mouth.

"Mmph, L-Lord Lukie!"

He wiped his wet fingers on my cheek, then suddenly slipped his hand down my panties. A shriek escaped my throat.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Mmph!"

<sup>&</sup>quot;... I might not be able to be gentle anymore."

"You're sweating. You smell good. It's so enticing. Your tear-filled eyes are so adorable. It makes me want to ruin you in all the ways I've never taken you, Cecilia."

Noooo, he's getting more and more sadistic! N-no, not there! That is not what that hole's for!

"No, no! Please not there, Lord Lukie! please, wait!"

As he rubbed my asshole, I began to beg out of fear. He grabbed my chin and forced me to look into his eyes, which sparkled with mischievous flames. My lips trembled.

As I let out shallow, nervous breaths, he kissed me gently.

"I've waited so long, haven't I?" he whispered in a soft, sweet voice. "You haven't said you don't want to. So give in, my Cecilia."

His tender voice made my heart ache, even though I was embarrassed and frustrated.

"Don't be mean, you idiot!" I couldn't help but complain, blushing deeply.

Lucas erupted into laughter and kissed my cheek.

"I'm sorry, Cece. But I really can't wait anymore. I want you so much; it's driving me crazy. Only you can calm me down. You know that, right? So please, grant my wish."

"Lord Lukie, you're so unfair."

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry."

Yes, you know?! You're saying you're sorry, but you don't look sorry at all!

He knows I'm weak against his smile! It's terrifying yet endearing. I feel powerless against that sweet, playful look.

With a sigh, I grabbed his shirt and pulled him closer. "I can't reach. Please bend down."

"I love you, Cecilia. Let me love all of you."

I pressed my lips against his. "I want you, Lord Lukie..." I whispered.

He blushed slightly, looking genuinely happy as he smiled and picked me up. But his mischievous streak showed again. Why is he like this?!

"What about your nightgown?" he asked with a sly grin. I blushed harder, frustrated that my heart was racing, and muttered, "I'm not taking it off, you mean pervert!" as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

He tipped his head to the side.

"So, Cecilia? Bed? Sofa? Desk?"

He really needs to learn how to read the room! My girlish heart is practically overwhelmed! Out of those options, there's only one acceptable place. Why even consider the other two? Absolutely not!

"The bed, please. And Lord Lukie?"

"Hmm?"

"The soundproofing."

"Oh, I'll put it back up. There's no way I'd let anyone else hear you. Why are you panting like that, Cece?"

"You're such a mean-spirited jerk!" I smacked his shoulder in frustration.

Don't say it hurts! My hand hurts more than your shoulder!

"Just for tonight!" I said defiantly, annoyed as he lay me down on the bed.

He looked exasperated. "I told you, you'll be staying here from now on..."

"There's no need for me to stay overnight!"

If I stay over, it'll be obvious that he'll have his way with me every night! I glared at Lucas, who only sighed and gave me a piercing look as he pinned me to the bed.

"Oh! Lord Lukie..."

"I thought you already knew how crazy I am about you."

He touched the ring on my finger and loosened the ribbons on my nightgown. His golden eyes were dark and terrifyingly beautiful, holding me captive.

"We're married. We've exchanged vows. I begged for your love, and you gave it to me. You're mine, Cecilia. There's no doubt about it. So why should I send you back to your family's house?" His deep, raspy whisper sent chills down my spine, and I instinctively grabbed his hand. "I said I wouldn't let go of you, but you still don't understand. I said I'd take care of you for the marquis's sake, but I only meant that I was getting you back. I'm so glad I put that ring on you. And even though it's the second time, I used my influence to get the paperwork through quickly. From now on, I'll never let you leave my side. This is where you'll live, starting today," he said with a bright smile.

Despite his piercing gaze, I shivered. The madness in his golden eyes made my heart race and brought tears to my eyes. All kinds of emotions I couldn't understand swirled inside of me. I didn't know what to say or do. I didn't know how to answer. Just as I was about to shake my head, Lucas interrupted me.

"I never want to feel that way again. Being separated, not knowing if I might lose you... I was more frightened of that than dying. I don't want to leave you and die. I don't want you to die without me, either. If we must die, I want it to be together!" he said.

Sorrow, longing, despair... Those words couldn't describe Lucas's anguished cry. It cut straight through me, almost taking my breath away.

I stared at him with teary eyes, and he gave me a bitter smile.

"I know I'm crazy, but you swore to be with me for life..."

"Lord Lukie..."

"So just give up and accept it. Right here, right beside me, is where you'll spend the rest of your life, Cecilia."

His golden eyes were filled with dark, captivating emotions that didn't allow me to move or speak, only to accept. For the first time, he gave me a direct, commanding order without hiding his desire. But his hands trembled slightly, which made me smile.

"Why are you smiling?"

"Because you're like a child, Lord Lukie. It's so cute."

He looked sullen and gently stroked my cheek with his large hand, which I cradled in my own.

"I can stay here for good?"

"Yes. We've gone through all the proper procedures. There's no problem with you living here."

"What if you have to leave for a campaign as the Hero and go far away from here?"

"I'll take you with me if I have to. But now that I have Barn, I can return quickly, so it won't be a problem."

"That's not what the Hero's power is for."

"How else should I use it?" he sulked. Despite his harsh words, he gently kissed my hand and looked at me tentatively. When I told him to let go, he froze and looked pained.

"I know I'm a crazy man, but do you still want me?"

"I love you."

He stared silently, shocked.

He he, I said it right away! The surprised look on his face is too cute! You're the strongest man in the whole world, but you get frightened when it comes to me. That's why you didn't lead from the front or watch from the back. You made me a place beside you, where we could look at each other. I love you so much for that.

I realized the emotions swirling inside of me were actually joy. *Because I'll never have to leave your side again for the rest of my life.* 

Seeing his blushing face gave me courage. "I can't take this off unless you let go," I said softly.

He looked down at my body as I loosened my nightgown, and his throat trembled. I placed my hand on his cheek. "I can't reach," I whispered.

```
"Cece..."
```

"I'll listen to your requests, just for tonight."

This is so embarrassing! Hurry up and lean down already! I touched his left earring, blushing furiously, and glared at him. Lucas chuckled softly and frowned, a sad look on his face.

```
"What about tomorrow?"
```

"No."

"What about the day after?"

"I said no!"

Why are you smiling like that? I've never seen such a sweet smile. Stop it! You're making me swoon! And stop being so persistent!

He leaned in as I grew flustered and whispered into my ear. "Then, how about on the night of our engagement ceremony? Just that night, as my official fiancée?"

"No!"

"You hesitated."

"I did not! If you don't lean down, I'm done!"

"Well, I don't want that."

Stop saying that, seriously!

"I'm so happy I could die. I love you, Cecilia. I need only you. You're the only one who can save this crazed man."

Your fingers are so intense.

"I love you, my Lord Lukie," I whispered as I kissed him. "I only want you, so keep being crazy about me."

My love is just as intense, so I think we're a perfect match.

\*\*\*

"Nngh, mm! Haah, mmph? Mm!"

"Stop trying to get away, Cece. Put out your tongue more."

You said you're crazy, but I don't want you to be crazy like this! I will not stick my tongue out more! It's physically impossible! Plus, I can't breathe! Or at least, I shouldn't be able to, but... Oh no, it feels so good!

My sensitive body was about to unleash its full potential, which I wanted to avoid at all costs. We'd only just kissed so far!

When I tried to shake my head, begging for relief, his tongue clung to mine so tightly it hurt. He pressed his hips against my spread legs, urging me to keep still, and the sensation of the rough fabric made me flinch.

"Nngh, mmph! Ahh, No, Lord Lukie!"

"Haah, damn it. I love you so much, Cece... Cecilia, get my pajamas even dirtier!"

"Nngh, pajamas? What?"

Huh? What does he mean? Oh, god, Stop! No! He's so meeaaan! Eek, I got the front of his pajamas all wet! No, there's no way! Stop, I'm so embarrassed I could die! Stop showing it to me with that gleeful look on your face! No, don't say "See?"! You pervert!

I couldn't believe what was happening. Tears welled in my eyes as I tried to glare at him. He suddenly spread my legs wider, and I screamed in protest.

"No, no, no! Let go! Stop!!" I cried out.

"Look at you, Cece. Your white slit is turning pink and twitching inside. Were you about to come just from a kiss?" Lucas asked.

No, I can't take it anymore! I wanna faint right now! But my nerves are stronger than I thought, damn it!

He kept taunting me, clearly not listening to anything I said.

"I told you not to be mean!" I protested.

"What? I'm not," he replied.

"Y-you...you are so!" I was so shocked I couldn't find the right words. Was this his default mode tonight? *This has to be a joke, right?* His barrage of obscene words left me paralyzed with shame. Did he forget I was a noblewoman?

As I stared at his handsome face in stunned silence, he smiled sweetly and restrained my hands.

"My dear wife wants more teasing?" he asked.

"Wha? Lord Lukie, wait! No, that's not it! Stop! Wait, you've got it all wrong!"

"I'm only teasing. I'll be gentle until you can't take it anymore. Don't move. Your nipples are hard and look so pink and delicious. You're so sensitive, Cece."

"No, please..."

Why does he have to say things like this? The mind of a sadistic pervert like him is unknowable. I want to have a serious talk, but when he looks up at me with those eyes while sucking on my breast, I can't speak!

He licked and sucked my breasts, deliberately turning my protests into uncontrollable moans of pleasure. I looked away in embarrassment.

"No, ahh, mm! Nngh!"

I squeezed the sheets with one hand and covered my mouth with the other, closing my eyes tightly. With my eyes shut, my body reacted with even more sensitivity. I arched my back, seeking the cool part of the sheets as heat and sweat pooled around my neck.

Enjoying my reactions, Lucas exhaled onto my breasts and touched me. He gently kneaded my breasts, slowly licking circles around my areolas. My hips

jerked off the bed when he lightly scratched my swollen nipples with his fingernails. Then he grabbed my breasts firmly. A jolt of pain shot through me, but he quickly soothed it with gentle strokes.

He sucked and licked and whispered quiet words of love. A warm rush of pleasure spread through my body. "Your muffled voice is so cute," he murmured as I struggled to catch my breath. "If I do it harder, will you let it out?"

The shiver his words sent through me was immediately followed by a sharp bite, causing a burst of pleasure deep within me.

"Ahh! Nngh!"

"Such a good sound, Cece," Lucas said.

I was more shocked by the obscene sound I made than by the pain and pleasure I felt from him biting me. Blushing furiously, I looked up at his beautiful yet mischievous face. He kissed me softly, smiling.

"The room is soundproof, so you don't have to hold back. Let me hear more of those cute, naughty sounds."

"No, please..."

I couldn't help but refuse. Whose fault is that I keep making such sounds?

Being complimented for it isn't comforting at all! I can't believe I came just from being bitten! I don't want to admit it, but my body's potential for pleasure is incredible. If this is all part of being trained to handle his teasing, I want to cry!

Lucas narrowed his eyes when I shook my head. My shoulders tensed.

"Hmm. You don't want to?" His overly sweet tone made a chill run down my spine. I instinctively shrank back to protect myself.

"U-um..."

"My shy little wife is so adorable," he said softly with a sweet expression.

Lucas kissed my cheek, and I let my guard down. Then, he suddenly pulled his

nightshirt over his head, messing up his hair. He ranked a hand through it; the gesture was so handsome that I found myself staring like an idiot.

The romantic part of my brain, which was overly sensitive to anything involving Lucas, made me drop all my defenses. I was completely under his spell before I realized it, shocked at his change in demeanor.

"My beloved, Cece. I've been holding back a lot tonight. I'm trying to be a gentleman, even though my desire for you is driving me crazy. What do you think about that?"

```
"L-Lord Lukie..."
```

"What do you think?" he repeated.

"That y-you're being, um, gentlemanly."

What does gentlemanly even mean in this context? A true gentleman wouldn't force his wife to answer with that intense smile! Is there a scale of gentlemanliness in the S&M world? If so, I suppose he was being somewhat gentle. After all, he's only bitten me once so far. But his pupils are dilating. That's terrifying!

"Right?" he said.

Why are you smiling so softly?! That soft smile might be cute, but your eyes are lying. Can you please stop?!

Lucas stroked my cheek, ignoring my trembling body. "Your embarrassed, defiant expressions are so cute I can't stand it. But tonight, they're too effective. You're making it hard for me to be gentle. How about we ban the words 'no,' 'stop,' and 'wait' for tonight, Cece?"

```
"What? But..."
```

"If we don't, it'll be dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

He nodded sweetly.

I had no idea what he meant. Dangerous in what way? His sadistic tendencies already have him in dangerous waters! Is he worried about my well-being? How considerate of him to be so gentlemanly today. But if he takes those words away, how am I supposed to stop him? He already has no intention of stopping. And now he won't even pretend to? What does he mean by, "All right, let's do that!" I never agreed to this!

I knew this was a terrible turn of events, but before I could voice my protests, Lucas covered my mouth with his hand. "No, you can't," he said softly but firmly.

I inhaled sharply as his demeanor changed.

"My dear Cecilia, if you want to be able to walk tomorrow, you should listen to me. Or do you still want me to be mean to you?"

I remained silent.

This is bad. His eyes are terrifying! The gold looks like it's dripping. They're practically gleaming! I-I'm scared! This is bad, really bad! He's really unhinged tonight! And why is he treating me like I'm a pervert, just like him? Being mean to me is the last thing I want! I'm not okay with this misunderstanding!

I wanted to protest, but my self-preservation kicked in, and I stayed silent.

I considered my options. Either choice would leave me in a precarious state. Which was the safer bet? I had no idea.

"No, that's too much," Lucas muttered.

I was relieved. Yay! You really are a gentleman tonight! Lovely! I nodded, hopeful. But then he suggested something even more terrifying.

"All right, then. I'll just make sure you can't speak."

"Huh? Wh-mmph!"

Before I could react, he kissed me deeply, simultaneously stimulating me inside and out. He held my head and tangled his tongue with mine, pressing on my sensitive spots with his rough, long fingers. My screams were swallowed by

his mouth. My body arched in response to the intense sensations, and I couldn't escape the pleasure building up inside of me.

"Mm, ahh!"

I convulsed, hips lifting slightly off the bed. Normally, he'd wait. Today, though, he continued kissing me until my tongue went numb, teasing me relentlessly so that I came over and over again. I spasmed. I felt as if I were suffocating from the lack of air and the constant waves of climaxes. When he finally released my lips, I turned away, trying to beg him to stop, but I froze when I heard how nonsensical my words sounded.

"Nnph, nmm! Mmn, haah! Ahhngh!"

Huh? What was that? Was that me? Did I say that?

I was so shocked that I covered my mouth with a trembling hand. My gaze involuntarily shifted to Lucas's serene face as he gently fixed my disheveled hair.

Slowly, he lifted his long lashes, golden eyes glinting as he smiled. "What?" he asked softly, his voice barely a whisper.

Fear, shame, and anger welled up within me, making my shoulders shake. I realized my tongue was numb.

Lucas smirked. "What's wrong, Cecilia?" he asked. "Did something happen?"

His air, like he'd done me a favor, left me speechless. He untied the string of his pajama pants and revealed himself. You wouldn't think it from his pretty face, but his large cock was proportional to his huge, muscular frame. He took it out of his pants and positioned it over my hole, which was dripping with honey. My eyes teared up.

"No, wah! Roah Rookee..."

I still can't talk properly!

Was he always like this? I swear, he can't be a real human being! I won't forgive you, Lucas Theoderic Herbst!!

In my panic, all I could do was gasp because my tongue wouldn't work right. I thought a little patience might help as I trembled. But Lucas's relentless pursuit left me with no choice. This cruel scenario was more than I could handle!

"Sorry, what did you just say, Cece?" Lucas asked, his head tilted. "Hmm?"

I pressed my hands against his chest when he approached, trying to push him away. He effortlessly captured my wrists, though, pinning them above my head. He traced the folds of my pussy, coating his fingers with my wetness before tasting it with a flick of his tongue. Then he entered my tight, spasming hole, slowly thrusting before stopping halfway.

You burning hot devil!

"So cute... You like it deeper, don't you, Cecilia?"

"No, no, no! No, I can't!"

He teased the sensitive spot on my stomach. As my breasts jiggled, he stimulated my tender nipples, pinching and twisting them. My legs tightened, lifting my hips off the sheets. Even as my vision blurred and my back arched in release, Lucas didn't stop. He held my waist firmly as I moaned, tongue still numb, preventing me from escaping as he continued his relentless assault.

"You're moving your hips, Cecilia. You like it when I hit that deep spot, don't you? Sorry, but...I'm gonna...have to go...a little harder."

His thrusts quickened. The intense sensations inside my tight pussy made me scream, shaking my head in a futile attempt to resist.

"Lucas, please, stop! I can't... Ah!"

"Oh, you're incredible... Your pussy's gripping me so tightly, Cecilia... Did you come?"

```
"Y-ye...yes... I..."
```

"Or have you not come yet?" His words, dripping with amusement, made me open my tear-filled eyes wide, my body still trembling and vision flickering.

What are you talking about? Are you really pretending not to understand? You're so cruel and calculating! You know I've been coming repeatedly! You just wanted me to say it! You're truly heartless!

And this is really bad. I think I've gone past my limit.

His eyes were a fiery gold that dripped with sadistic glee, and his smile was ferociously predatory. I panted heavily, unconsciously trying to slide away on the sheets. His eyes narrowed with delight.

"Didn't I say that trying to escape only makes me want to be rougher?" he said.

I shook my head vigorously, trying to signal that I wasn't escaping. I didn't remember him saying that. But of course, he pretended not to understand. My husband is incredibly handsome but also terribly manipulative and mean!

"Trying to run away from your husband in bed, Cecilia? That's naughty. Time for a little punishment."

"No! Stop it! I can't! No!"

He reached the deepest parts of me, teasing my most sensitive spot with the tip of his cock. My mind felt like it was on fire. I clenched my teeth, trying to endure the overwhelming pleasure. He gazed at me dreamily.

"You're trying to hold on with that sweaty body of yours, but you know I won't stop after just once, right, Cecilia?"

His terrifying words pulled me into despair. "I-I can't..."

I came again and again without a moment's rest, my voice reduced to helpless cries. Finally, Lucas eased up, gently laying me back on the bed. I lay there limply, drooling onto the sheets and panting heavily. Lucas licked my mouth and then spoke in a deep, sweet voice. Was he trying to make me cry?

"Are you okay? You haven't really come yet, have you? Because you haven't told me, after all."

This man is really terrifying tonight! And why am I blushing?! This is no good. I

can't handle a husband at his level! Where is my sense of reason? It's been missing for days!

His merciless, teasing hands knew my body all too well. I felt humiliated but somehow happy.

I don't think his smile is attractive! Not at all! So then, why is my heart racing?! Maybe I'm blushing because I'm afraid. That's gotta be it, right? I looked at him with pleading eyes as I made all kinds of nonsensical comments to myself. It seemed my tearful face only excited him more, though.

"Ah, that expression is irresistible. So cute... Cry more, Cecilia."

"Huh?"

Cry? Did he just tell me to cry? I'm already crying, and he wants more? I don't know how to deal with this increasingly sadistic husband! My only option is to flee!

I tried to twist my weak body to escape.

"Cece."

Just one sweet, low word from him made me freeze. He intertwined his fingers with mine, whispering into my ear.

"I love you so much. I want to keep you all to myself. Your beautiful bright green eyes, your warm breath. Your pale pink... You're all mine, Cecilia. Mine alone, right?"

My chest ached with delight at his words, and I accidentally replied.

"Yes..."

When he gave me an irresistible smile, I couldn't help but smile back. And it wasn't my fault that my heart skipped a beat. I wanted to close my eyes at how useless I was.

Today is hopeless! Not just him, but me, too! Why did I say yes?! I hate it! How can his possessiveness completely disarm me like this?! There are things I can't

compromise on, but now, they've all been shattered! This is so frustrating! I love him so much it's maddening! It makes no sense, but... If I just let him have his way, I'll be bedridden tomorrow, unable to leave the second prince's quarters. I'd be too embarrassed to show my face!

I have to abandon my shame and take back control. I can speak now, after all. Women need courage, Cecilia!



I couldn't shake off my anger, so I cleared my throat and raised my trembling arms, running my hands over his muscular body.

```
"What is it, Cece?"

"L-Lord Lukie..."

"Hmm?"

"Lukie, I..."
```

He looked at me in shocked silence.

Ugh, how embarrassing! Why is the first time I called him by his first name when we're in bed together?! You idiot! But I succeeded in freezing him on the spot, so I'll call it a successful mission!

His pupils shrank to their normal size, and his golden eyes were sparkling and moist. The lewd sexiness he had before that was so intense it could take over the world was now gone. I couldn't believe he was blushing like a child.

Hehe, take that, Lucas Theoderic Herbst! I'm a noblewoman, too! I'll get my revenge! How about that?!

```
"Ah, what?"
"Can I call you Lukie?"
"U-um, y-yes. I-I belong to you, C-Cece."
```

Ahh, he's so cute. What should I do? I didn't think he'd be this adorable. And if he gets this embarrassed, I'll get embarrassed, too. Please stop!

What should I do, what should I do? I have no choice but to go for it! But he's like a completely different person. It's such a jarring contrast! So adorable... I already love him. I'm an idiot. I'm really, truly an idiot! I scolded myself.

I opened my trembling lips and told myself to do my best.

```
"U-um, Lukie? Will you give me a tight hug and kiss me gently?"

"U-um, y-yes. I-I'd I-love to."
```

My heart feels like it might jump right out of my chest! Lucas's nervousness and embarrassment make me so happy! And it's so cute! It's the most awkward kiss I've ever had. I can't believe it! He didn't even push his tongue in! He just kissed me! Is he really the same person as before? He's changed so much that it makes me doubt him. But it feels so good I'm not going to point it out.

His gentle kiss and the strong arms that supported and embraced me filled me with happiness. He slowly pulled me up without stimulating me and gently caressed my body, kissing me even softer.

"Mmm, Lukie. Lukie, I love you!" I said, feelings overflowing.

"Cece..." Lucas said in response, his voice a low growl.

"Ahh? Mnngh!"

He suddenly thrust into a part of me that shouldn't have been penetrated into any further. I endured the pain in the depths of my stomach and felt myself getting hot. I instantly exploded in pleasure; there wasn't even time to resist.

My convulsing inner pussy walls squeezed Lucas. I desperately clung to his neck with weak arms, scolding him and calling him terrible names as he violently thrust inside of me.

"You idiot, Lukie! I'm coming! You're so bad! Nngh, Lukie, Lukie... No, I'm coming again, Lukie!" I cried with pleasure.

"Cecilia..." he replied in a panicked, desperate voice.

He grabbed my waist and pounded his cock in me. My vision flickered white.

"Ah, I'm coming, I'm coming! No, no, no wait! I don't wanna come again. I'm coming, Lukie!"

"Nngh, damn it! Cecilia, Cece... I'm sorry, but I can't stop now. Please, I need more!"

My lips trembled with joy when he called for me, his face distorted with effort and golden eyes filled with longing. He held me so tightly that it hurt if I clung to him, and

"Lukie, Lukie, n-nngh, ahh! You idiot! Stupid Lukie!" I said as I drowned my happiness.

"Cece... Wait, that's not what I thought you'd say..."

"You idiot, you mean Lukie! You're a bully! I love you, Lukie! I love you, Lucas!"

"Damn it!"

The sound of his skin slapping against mine rang in my ears, making it hard to hear the sound of my own moans.

He declared his love with a pained look on his face and kissed me deeply. He held me tightly, like he wanted to become one with me. He devoured me countless times like that, finally letting up when the early morning sunshine began to lighten the room.

I thought I was gonna die. I guess calling him by his first name wasn't very smart, I thought as my consciousness slowly faded away.

"This is bad," I heard him mutter. "If I don't do something, the marquis will find out..."

I smiled. Hmph, it's okay for you to struggle a little. I knew this would happen anyway. After all, I love you too much, so I've given up on that sort of thing! Do your best to stop Father from taking me back.

Oh, and if you do what you did to me tonight again, he'll be really mad.

As my consciousness slowly drifted away, Lucas pulled me into an embrace. "I love you, Cecilia. Goodnight."

I realized that I was finally back in his arms, tears falling from my eyes, and I departed into the world of dreams, filled with bliss.

## **Special Short Story**

WANTED TO DISCOVER the weakness of the perfect superhuman, Lucas.

Surely everyone's thought about it at least once, right? I know I have.

He's perfect in every way: impeccable manners, a well-rounded education, exceptional in both academics and martial arts, and highly competent in his work. He's calm and composed with everyone. His good looks only add to his charm, making him incredibly popular with both men and women. The only person who openly disliked him was my father, and even he would begrudgingly admit Lucas's actions were so flawless they were infuriating.

I wondered if there might be some flaw outside of his actions, but I never found any. So, I decided to take it as a compliment and move on. I observed him closely as I tried to discover his weakness, but I found nothing. Finally, I decided to ask him directly.

"Is there any animal or magical beast you're afraid of?" I asked.

But he said no.

"Is there any food you dislike?"

He said no.

"Any academic subjects or sports you struggle with?"

The answer was, of course, no.

I started to doubt he was even human. Just as I was about to ask him another question about what he liked, he interrupted me. "Cecilia," he said, kissing the back of my hand.

I turned bright red, unable to continue the conversation. That's not what I wanted to ask, and he's too quick! He's just too charming!

Finding no weaknesses, I decided to ask Finn and Anna. After all, I saw them

leaving a room together. I wouldn't ask them why they were together because I was a kind mistress. It definitely wasn't because Anna's gaze was terrifying.

"Lucas's weakness?" Finn asked.

"He has only one," Anna added.

"What is it?" I asked eagerly.

"You, Lady Cecilia," they replied in unison.

That wasn't the answer I had been looking for.

"Honestly, I've been with him for a long time, and he has no apparent weaknesses. He's generally disinterested in most things, which means he doesn't develop any aversions. He's a jack-of-all-trades. If anyone tried to find a weakness, they'd likely be dealt with severely. Besides, you're probably the only person who can get close to him," Finn said.

"Yes, even Lord Barnabash wouldn't succeed. Only you can manage him," Anna agreed.

"It's not like I want to manage him," I muttered.

Why did the servants of the ducal household always jump to such bloody conclusions? All I wanted was to find a small weakness of his. Seeing my frustration, Anna grinned.

"In other words, you can do anything to Prince Lucas."

"Anything?"

The shock almost made me forget my manners!

That night when we got into bed and Lucas approached for a goodnight kiss, I spread my arms wide. He blushed and happily spread his arms out in response. Seizing the opportunity, I slipped my hands under his arms and tickled him.

"Waahh?!"

Could it be? Could it really be?

```
"Ce-Cecilia?"
```

"He he he."

Oh no, I felt a little like a villainess. And I might have just switched on a strange part of my brain. But I decided to embrace my inner villainess when I saw Lucas blushing all the way to his ears.

"Lord Lukie, let me hug you," I said.

"Who told you to do this, Cecilia?"

"What? Can't I hug my husband? Is that a problem?"

He's so cute, blushing all the way to his neck and looking frustrated!

"That's dirty! Damn, you're too tempting!" he grumbled.

That's insulting, Lucas. Still, he tilted his head and spread his arms. Even though he was glaring at me, trying to look intimidating, he blushed. It was adorable. I decided to inch closer.

"Hey, Lord Lukie? Lukie?"

"Wait, wait..."

"Lukie, please let me hug you?"

"Grr, I know it's a trick, but you're too cute! Who told you to do this?"

"Lukie, please?" I whispered.

"Damn it, I'm so weak for you, Cecilia!"

Despite his grumbling and blushing, my husband didn't run away. Instead, he opened his arms wide, inviting me in. Slowly, I hugged him and... *Take that!* I started tickling him!

"Ah ha ha! Stop, Cece! Ha ha ha! Wait, wait... Ha ha ha!"

Eeeeeek! Sooooo cuuuuuute! He's laughing! This super handsome man is laughing like a child!

I was so giddy. I had planned to stop quickly, but his laughter and the way his

eyes teared up were so adorable that I couldn't help myself.

"Cece, ha ha ha, please, stop! Hahaha! I'm serious, ah ha ha, stop!"

Seeing Lucas, usually so composed, so weak to tickling and laughing until he had tears in his eyes, would make any girl's heart flutter. My eyes turned into hearts at the sight.

This was too cute. I loved seeing him laugh. However, he was hitting the bed so hard it was bouncing, so I thought I should stop before the bed broke. When I stopped, he grabbed my wrists and pinned them above my head, his tear-streaked, flushed face looking down at me. *Oh no!* 

```
"L-Lukie, um..."

"I've never laughed this much in my life."
```

"R-really?"

It's your first time, huh? Well, well... Since it was such a good experience, you'll stop pinning me down now, right? I looked at him anxiously. Lucas smiled. Eep, forgive me!

"Enjoying yourself, Cecilia?"

"Well, yes, I... Um..."

I couldn't tell him how cute he looked while laughing. I averted my eyes. *Oh no, he's untying my nightgown!* 

"L-Lukie, wait!"

"No way. I'm getting you back."

"Huh? Ha ha ha! Ah ha ha, stop! No, Lukie, stop! Ha ha ha! Oh!"

He tickled me back, touching my bare skin. Suddenly, my laughter turned into something else entirely. Surprised, I looked down at myself.

You've got to be kidding me! My overly sensitive body is just way too much!

Lucas leaned over me as I lay there in shock. The bed creaked.

"You're really sensitive, aren't you, Cecilia?"

"Th-that's not true! I'm just ticklish..."

Trying to cover up my rising blush, I glared at him. He laughed softly, kissed me, and gently tapped my side, making me flinch.

"You're mean," I muttered, blushing with embarrassment.

He just laughed and kissed my neck. "I may be weak to you," he said happily, "but you're just as responsive to me. Why is that?"

"Wh-who's fault do you think—mm!"

As soon as I retorted, he slid his hand up my side. His rough palm made me gasp. I could feel the heat spreading to my shoulders. Seeing me like this, Lucas gazed at me with melting eyes, then kissed me deeply.

"I love you, my Cecilia," he whispered, his breath warm.

"L-Lukie..."

"You're the only one who could ever kill me so easily."

Hey, wait a minute! I wasn't trying to kill you! And whispering such unsettling words while touching my breasts is confusing. In fact, it's more like you're trying to kill me with embarrassment! His rough, sword-calloused hands made me blush, only it looked like I was blushing at his words.

I wrapped my arms around Lucas's neck and pulled him closer. "So, it's the same for both of us, then."

"Huh?"

"I'm only willing to be completely vulnerable with you."

Take that!

"W-well, that, um...really makes me happy..."

He turned bright red. For someone so smooth when he's seducing me, he sure is flustered when the tables are turned. What a mysterious boy.

"Oh, I can't win against her," he mumbled, covering his mouth. "Damn, I'm so happy..."

"Hey, Lukie, let me do it one more time."

"No."

I looked up at him silently.

"No. Don't make that cute face at me. And don't tell anyone about this!"

He seemed to consider it for a moment, but... Oh well, at least I got to see him being adorable.

I gently traced my finger around his reddened eyes, then moved to his golden earring. Lucas pressed his cheek into my hand, a plea in his furrowed brow. My eyes softened, a laugh spilling from my throat.

"He he, fine. I'll keep it a secret. But in return, you have to take me on another incognito date."

"An incognito date? Sure. Do you have anything specific in mind?"

"No, I just want to spend some time alone with you."

You always bear so many responsibilities, and while that's wonderful, I also love seeing you laugh like a child. Unfortunately, that side of you is confined to our private chambers in the castle.

Sneaking out might not be ideal, but with the strongest Hero, bodyguard maids, and a dragon escort, safety isn't a concern. It might be a bit overkill. We could probably conquer an entire country with that group. Let's make sure we don't go abroad.

"As Lukie and Lia?" he asked.

"Yes. Is that a problem?" I replied.

"My love, I could never refuse such a cute request from you. We'll definitely go."

Lucas's golden eyes melted into a gentle smile, and he placed a soft kiss on

the back of my hand. The tender touch sent a shiver through me. I ran my fingers through his dark blue hair, implying what I wanted, and he smiled warmly.

"Any other requests? That face tells me there might be."

It was sweet of him to ask, but he clearly enjoyed making me say it.

"I want you to kiss me."

"Where?"

He really enjoys this, doesn't he? But I gathered the courage to say it, so now it's his turn.

"Well, it's a goodnight kiss, so on the cheek, of course, Lukie."

I tapped his lips with my finger as I spoke. He looked surprised for a moment before breaking into a grin.

"Pfft, ha ha. The cheek, huh? Will you grant me a request, too, Cecilia?" He kissed my cheek and traced his finger over my lips. Understanding his intent, I smirked.

"Sure, what is it?"

"Thank you. Then, may I tease these pink lips of yours?"

"T-tease? That's a bit..."

Wait, that's more than I expected. What should I do?

"You don't have to open your mouth. Just let me know if it gets too much," he said, tilting his head cutely as he leaned in closer. The blood rose to my cheeks. His tongue licked the edge of my mouth, then my bottom lip. I gave in, my lips trembling.

"L-Lukie, please, just kiss me properly."

My heart pounded so hard I thought it might break as I gazed at him. For some reason, he looked frustrated, and his cheeks were flushed.

"I really can't win against you," he muttered.

Grumbling about how it was his own fault, he gently kissed me, closing the space between us. He hugged me tightly until my strength left me.

"Cecilia," Lucas whispered in between kisses, tongues intertwining. "Don't tell anyone about this."

"He he, I won't. It would be a disaster if people knew the Hero's weakness. Besides..."

I want to keep you all to myself. I'll never reveal the perfect Hero's secret to anyone.



## Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

Sign up for our newsletter!

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter

## **Table of Contents**

**Table of Contents** 

**Color Gallery** 

Title Page

**Copyrights and Credits** 

**Table of Contents Page** 

**Chapter One** 

**Interlude: Dirk** 

**Chapter Two** 

**Chapter Three** 

**Interlude: Andreas** 

**Chapter Four** 

**Chapter Five** 

**Special Short Story** 

**Newsletter**