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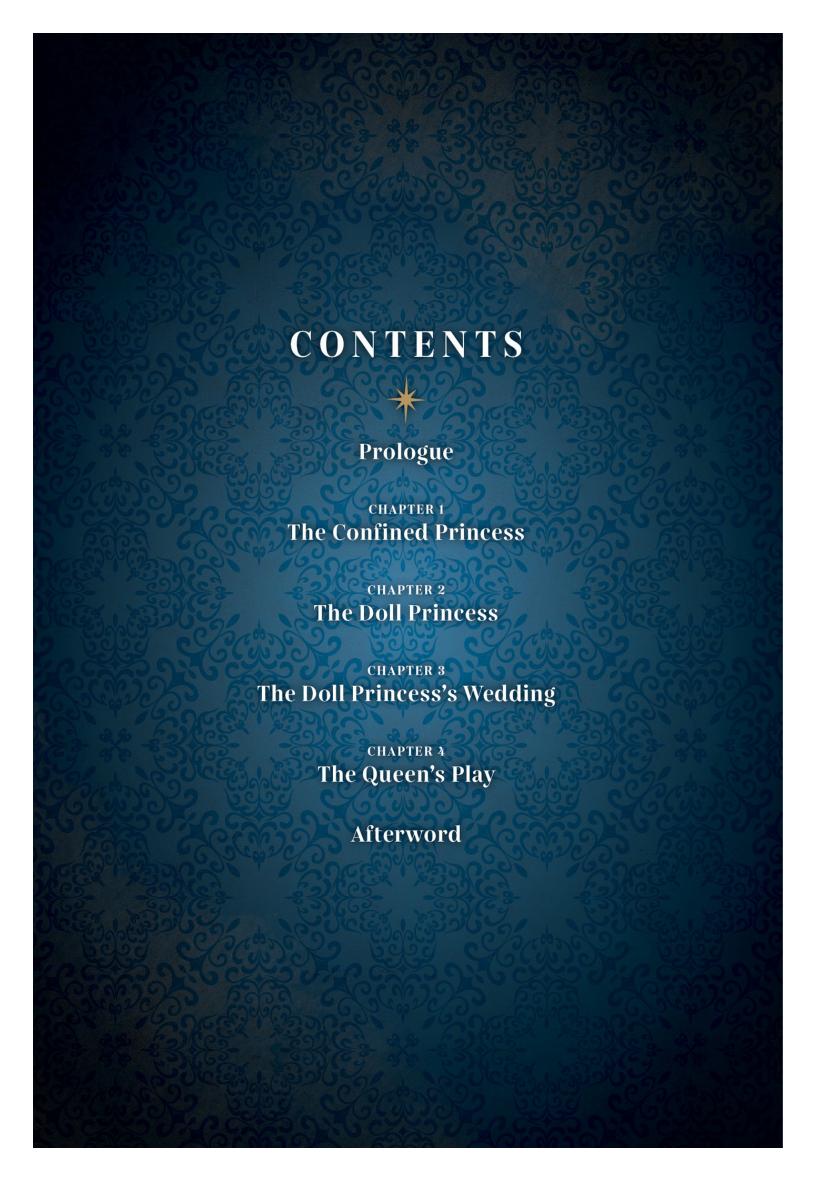
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AKUTOKU JOO NO KOKOROE Vol.1

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Prologue

WHY? Why did you accept this with a smile?

The question burned within me like a flame even though I knew the answer. I didn't dare voice it aloud, lest I ruin my carefully crafted facade.

My name was Luxeria von Ausgrid. I was a newly crowned queen, having just ascended the throne of the Federal Kingdom of Ausgrid. Standing before me was Wilhelm Radford, son of the marquess Lord Radford—and my fiancé. At this very moment, we were in the midst of our wedding ceremony...but neither vows nor rings would pass between us.

No, what linked us together now was a red sword. The blade had pierced right through him.

"Aiiieeeee!"

After a moment of silence, screams tore throughout the halls. The terrified shrieking was hardly fit for a wedding; that much was obvious. After all, the bride had just stabbed the groom. But the screams felt terribly far away, as if I were on the outside looking in.

I watched Wilhelm collapse to the floor, then turned to the chaotic hall. Caution, fear, shock, and anger rolled toward me in waves. Why, a bride should never have been the target of such emotions on her big day! A smile curved my lips ever so slightly.

"Silence," I declared. Though I did not speak loudly, my voice resonated through the chamber. A few guests stood and tried to run, so I followed up with, "To your seats, everyone."

Despite it being my first command after taking the throne, some refused to comply. Or, more specifically, they *couldn't* comply. They stood stupefied at the sight of Wilhelm and me, unable to process what had transpired.

I couldn't move on if I just let them be, so I gave the order again in a firmer tone: "What are you doing? To your seats. *Now*." They snapped out of their

stupor, realized they were the only ones standing, and rushed to sit down.

"A word, Your Majesty!" A voice other than mine reverberated through the silent hall. It belonged to Vixen Radford, Wilhelm's father and head of House Radford.

"What is it, Lord Radford?" I asked as I sat on my throne.

"Why did you kill my son?! Tell me!" he bellowed, his eyes dark with hatred. The entire crowd seemed to agree.

"Why, you ask? Of all people, you dare question me? I should be the one asking questions here, Marquess." I sucked in a breath and faced Vixen Radford head-on. "Why did you betray the royal family?"

At long last, the curtains had risen on my revenge.

Chapter 1: The Confined Princess

ONE DAY, ROUGHLY EIGHT YEARS before the marriage ceremony, Father made a sudden announcement.

"Listen up, Luxeria. From this day forward, you are to remain in this tower."

Anyone else would surely have despaired at those words...but I wasn't about to protest. Instead, I felt so happy I could have danced on the spot.

"Yes, Father!"

Oh dear. I must calm myself. I forced my lips into a frown and lowered my head.

Back then, I was still the crown princess—the only child of King Philip, the 37th ruler of Ausgrid. How did the heir to the throne wind up sentenced to confinement in a tower, you might ask? Could it be that someone wanted me out of the way to claim the throne for themselves? Surely *someone* out there felt threatened enough to craft such a sickening plot. But no, that wasn't it.

So was I on bad terms with my parents? Absolutely not; that was preposterous. My mother and father spoiled me so intensely, I was all but guaranteed to become the sort of haughty, selfish princess you read about in stories. Why, then, did I end up relegated to a tower?

It was because of my magic.

Magic was a supernatural power that defied all logic. With the mana flowing in your body, you could use magic—and make the impossible possible. For example, you might move an object without touching it or light things on fire.

There were many different types of magic, but each person could only use one. Unfortunately, of all the magic out there, mine was the most dangerous and difficult to handle. I also had ten times the power of any normal mage—I couldn't control my magic whatsoever. What was the point of having such immense power if I couldn't use it properly? It just made me more dangerous. I

assumed my father had no choice but to confine me so I wouldn't cause others harm. In fact, I was relieved that he'd made this decision.

The next day, I moved into the tower right away. That said, I had nothing to bring but myself. The tower was already furnished, and I hardly needed any clothes since I wouldn't be going outside.

Upon stepping inside for the first time, I said, "Oh..."

The whole place was dark and gloomy. Dust piled on the floor, and the furniture looked as old as the tower itself. Some of it was even broken. My heart sank at the thought of living here.

No, home is where you make it. Home can be anywhere!

I had to change my perspective. Though the tower was incredibly dusty and dingy, it was the perfect place for a fresh start. This was where it all began... My new life, here and now.

"Okay, let's get started!"

Mind made up, I got to cleaning.

A week had passed since I moved into the tower.

"Oh, no, no, no!"

I let out a shriek as the shelf attached to the wall fell, shattering the glass on top of it.

"Urgh..."

The plumes of dust sent me into a coughing fit.

I had been cleaning nonstop since I arrived at the tower. After a long, hard battle, I managed to finish tidying up the bedroom and had since moved on to the living room. It wasn't that big, so I honestly thought I'd get it done quickly, but the room was a lot filthier than I imagined. Moreover, doing all this in a child's body was difficult indeed. Here I thought things would be easy with the help of my past-life memories, but the reality was different.

Yes, I was born with memories from my past life—memories from when I

lived in a country called Japan. Finding myself in this brand-new world was bewildering, to say the least. One moment, I was a grown woman in Japan, and the next I was an infant somewhere the likes of which I'd never seen.

In my previous life, I was born into a family that prioritized education. I managed to endure the extreme pressure from my parents and graduate from college. I was hired by a famous company, so I was certain I had fulfilled my parents' expectations. Ten years passed, and all the while I assumed I'd continue living my life the way it was, working my way up the corporate ladder.

But for some reason, I turned into a baby.

I thought it was a dream at first, but I was a baby when I slept and a baby when I woke. It didn't seem like I would return to my reality at all. Why had this happened? So many times I wanted to grab someone by the collar and force them to explain why. Unfortunately, my body wouldn't listen to me, so I tried to observe my surroundings instead. I was clearly in a place filled with complete strangers, somewhere that looked like Europe in the Middle Ages.

Out of the corner of my eye, I occasionally saw the mysterious phenomenon called magic. At first I thought this confirmed that I really was in a dream, but after living in this place for several more years, I realized that this *was* my new reality. And that was how I, Luxeria von Ausgrid, found acceptance. No, I suppose it was the opposite: Luxeria von Ausgrid accepted that she had the memories of a woman from Japan.

Though my past-life memories confused me, they sometimes helped me get by alone in the tower. In fact, compared to my past life, my new life was amazing. I didn't need to pay rent, and I got to eat delicious food all the time. I just needed to do a little upkeep, like cleaning and laundry.

Aah. What a great life!

Out of the blue, a knock came at the door.

Who could that be? I never thought someone would visit a place like this. Curious, I opened the door. On the other side stood a girl about my age. She had light red hair and striking jade eyes.

Why is such a cute little girl here?

"Nice to know you. My name is Alicia. Are you Princess Luxeria?"

Nice to know me? Maybe she meant nice to meet me.

I nodded. "Y-yes, I am."

"I see. Then you're my mistress."

Startled, I stood rooted to the spot. "Your...mistress?" I couldn't quite process what she'd said.

"I have been gave—um, given—the task of serving you, Your Highness. I look forward to being your humble servant."

"Hey, wait! Come inside before you—" I stopped mid-sentence, thinking back to the horrific state of the living room. There wasn't even room to stand! I couldn't possibly let her in. That said, we couldn't just talk in the doorway.

"Wait here for a bit," I told her. Then I dashed back to the living room and frantically hid the glass shards and remains of the bookshelf. I could clean up afterward. After returning to the front door, I welcomed her in. "You can take a seat over there."

"Huh?"

Seeing her hesitate, I frantically thought to myself, *Oh no, is the chair dusty, too?!*

"I was telled—told—that it's bad manners to rest in front of one's employer..."

Phew, so it's not the dust.

"Come on, just sit. It's hard to talk if you stay standing," I said.

"Then I'm gonna sit."

That'll keep her from seeing the mess I made earlier. Good thing I got around it! Relief washed over me anew. Now that I could relax, I studied her for the first time. How strange. My magic doesn't work on her.

"So, who told you to serve me?" I asked her.

"Umm, the king did. His Majesty, I mean."

"Father did? But why?"

Judging by her speech and appearance, Alicia wasn't from a noble family. Was that why father had chosen her as my maid? Because she was lowborn and therefore expendable?

I immediately doubted myself. There's no way my kind father would give such a cruel and heartless order. More likely, he'd sent her to me because he assessed her magic and guessed mine wouldn't work on her.

"Uh... He—His Majesty said, 'Luxeria's magic might not work on you.' He also said, 'Since you have nowhere to go, you can join her.'"

"Aha. I thought that might be the case. I'm sorry, but I can't hire you here. I'd like you to go back to the palace."

"Wh-why? I need the job!"

"If you're looking for work, I'll ask Father to hire you for a better position. One inside the palace."

"Nah, I can't—I mean, no, I cannot do that."

"You can't? What do you mean, you can't...?"

"His Majesty told me you'd reject my employment. He said, 'Although she is my daughter, this is the only request of hers I will not accept—I believe my daughter needs you. If she says what I anticipate her to say, I want you to tell her this, word for word: I do not intend to let Alicia work anywhere other than the tower."

"Did you just...tell me what Father said, word for word?"

"Huh? Um, yeah."

I wondered why she was so eloquent all of a sudden; it turned out those were Father's words. If she really *did* repeat it verbatim, her memory was amazing. Alicia herself didn't seem to realize how remarkable that was. *She looks so cute with her head tilted to one side, all puzzled like that… No, now's not the time for fawning!*

"What a waste... You have such a good memory. I can't believe he wouldn't let you work in the palace. With your talent, you can definitely get by doing

something else. You should really get a job that can make the most of it."

"That would be a problem. I need money to live. When d'you think I'll—I mean, when might I be able to get a job like that, Your Highness?"

We looked at each other for a short while. Though she seemed quite troubled, her eyes glimmered with expectation. This wasn't good; she was *not* backing down.

I let out a soft sigh. "I'll tell you why I don't want to hire you. Once I do, you'll want to leave. My magic, Heart Realm...affects the hearts of others."

"It affects people's hearts?"

"Yes. I've been able to hear mysterious voices since the moment I was born. Those voices are people's innermost thoughts."

In the beginning, I had no idea it was my magic. It came so naturally to me, I thought everyone in this pseudo-European world had the same ability. Back then I was also still reeling over the fact that I'd *reincarnated*, so I couldn't dwell on the voices in my head. As it turned out, I was the only one hearing them.

"I thought it was normal to hear people's thoughts. I would reply out loud to what my mother was thinking. Not just once—I did it often."

She shrugged it off the first time, thinking I was just a perceptive child...but it clearly wasn't a coincidence after it happened again and again. Soon enough, my parents discovered the nature of my magic.

"Once my parents found out what type of magic I had, things became awkward between me and the servants. I heard everyone's thoughts, even the ones they wanted to keep secret. It's understandable that they wanted to avoid me and my...creepy powers."

"His Majesty and Her Majesty as well?"

"No. Thankfully, they both love me. Even though they, too, are afraid of my magic."

I heard my parents' inner voices along with everyone else's, and they were just as frightened by that as the servants. Despite that, their hearts emitted whispers of pure love and affection toward me; I couldn't express how happy

and grateful that made me feel.

"Then why did you move away from them?" Alicia asked.

"Imagine if you could hear everyone's thoughts—even the ones you wished you didn't. It's much less taxing to be isolated, even if it means I can't leave."

Besides, my past-life memories had made it hard for me to get used to my pampered life in the palace. Being confined into this tower was a godsend.

"So is that why you... Your Highness chose to live in this tower all alone? And why you can't hire me?"

"Yes, that's right."

"But, Your Highness, I don't think you can hear my inner voice."

I froze momentarily at her curt remark. That was an answer in itself, so I forced myself to ask, "Why do you think so?"

"Well, 'cause you were surprised when I told you what His Majesty said. You didn't know I was picturing him."

I was surprised that she managed to notice. It was clear that I couldn't lie my way out of this.

"Yes, you're right," I said. "For some reason, I can't hear your thoughts...
Actually, I'd like to ask you why."

"Why? Um..."

"The only explanation I can think of is magic. What is your magic?"

"M-magic? Um, my magic's called Dichotomy. I can make barriers that attack people or protect me. But I haven't used it in a long time."

"Barriers, huh? I doubt that's the reason. I've met plenty of people who could make barriers, but they still couldn't defend against my magic. Oh! Hmm... Alicia, can you try channeling your magic?"

"Huh?" She frowned, reluctant. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm allowing you to use your magic. Rather, I'm hoping you will."

At that moment, I sensed magic flowing out from her. Ah, so this is why.

"Alicia...your magic is very strong."

Her magical power was so concentrated, it was practically suffocating; someone without magic would probably have fainted on the spot.

"Uh, yeah. Oops, that's not right... Yes, it is."

This must be what shielded her from my magic and why she didn't want to use it. I figure it's also why she's so unsettled.

"I think this is why I can't hear your inner voice. I've never felt so much pressure from someone else's magic before," I said. Since I had vast amounts of mana myself, I had never felt the palpable *power* of someone else's magic. Yet right now, Alicia's was bearing down on me, deflecting mine.

"Um, so is it okay if I work here?"

"No."

Just because she could counter my magic didn't mean I was comfortable with the idea of her living with me.

"What?!"

"A no is a no. I will not change my mind."

"May I ask why? If I can block your magic, it should be fine, right?"

"My magic grows stronger by the day," I said, my voice rising as I went on.
"You might be able to block it now, but I don't know if that will always be the case! One day, you will—"

"Hey, Your Highness... I've been wondering. Can your magic do more than let you hear somebody's thoughts?"

So she realized it... Some things truly are better left unsaid. It was too late for me to regret my words now, though.

"When you were telling me about your magic, you said it 'affects the hearts of others.' But you coulda just—uh, you could have simply told me you can hear people's thoughts. And while I'm sure everybody hates that you can hear them, I don't think that's enough to put them in danger. But it feels like this whole time you've been worried I'll get hurt. So, um, I thought maybe you can do

more than hear thoughts..."

I heaved a sigh. *She's a very perceptive girl.* Even though she phrased it as a hypothetical, I could tell she was certain of it. I couldn't fool her with flimsy excuses anymore.

"Yes, you're right," I admitted. "When I say my magic can affect the hearts of others...I mean I can manipulate them with my magic."

I detested my awful magic. No matter how hard I wished it would disappear, it only grew stronger—and the voices filling my head compounded along with it.

"I used to be in a sour mood all the time because I had so much trouble sleeping. Even if I closed my eyes and covered my ears, I could hear someone else's inner voice. It didn't matter what time it was—morning, afternoon, or night—I could always, *always* hear them. And when I couldn't take it anymore, I pressed my hands to my ears as hard as I could and shouted, 'Shut up!'"

"That's all it took?"

"Yes, that's right. I think my voice must have accidentally sparked my magic. The maids who heard me collapsed."

When it happened, I watched them fall to the ground. I was stunned; it had happened out of nowhere, like they fell asleep in an instant.

"Luckily, they all woke up the next day. That's why I thought it would be all right to let my guard down... But I shouldn't have. They stopped responding to anyone after that. They just stared into space with vacant eyes. No one knew why it had happened. Even the doctor who examined them eventually gave up. I started to think maybe I was the one responsible, and that suspicion snowballed into fear."

Is it because of me? I thought back then. Because I screamed for them to shut up? I kept trying to persuade myself otherwise, but I gradually grew more afraid.

"I tried yelling at them to go back to normal...and they did."

I was relieved that they recovered, but it became clear that it was all caused by magic—my magic.

"What everyone initially thought was mere mind-reading magic turned out to be powerful mind manipulation. I'm capable of things like brainwashing and hypnosis. If I make even one wrong move, I can break someone's mind."

It was a terrifying ability, especially in the hands of a small child. With so much mana flowing through me, I couldn't even control it.

"My father chose to confine me after that. I'm sure you agree with his decision after hearing my story. Even I'm afraid of myself, you know. When I was still around other people, I felt like my magic might explode at any moment and break someone else. I got lucky last time, since the maids went back to normal—the idea of my next 'accident' being permanent frightened me so badly I couldn't sleep. Father saved me from that torment, so I can't thank him enough."

I watched Alicia, analyzing her reaction. Though I expected her to be fearful of me, her expression hadn't changed much.

"As I said earlier, my magic gets stronger every day. You may be able to defend yourself now, but that might change in the future. I can't let you put yourself in danger by being here."

"Can I ask a question, please?"

"What is it?"

"You'll become the queen one day, won't you?"

"Did...did Father say that?"

"Yes. He said that's the way things are. Is that why your confinement here is a secret?"

"Indeed. In this kingdom, the eldest child inherits the throne regardless of their gender. That means I'll take the throne after my father. It would be detrimental for the public to hear that the next queen is confined to a tower, so only my father, my mother, and a few trusted subordinates know about it. The rest of the kingdom was told that I'm recovering from an illness."

The true nature of my magic was also kept secret. Using Heart Realm, I'd removed the memory of it from all of our servants. I could control or break

absolutely everyone with Heart Realm—save for Alicia. If my ability was misused, the results could be catastrophic. No one could ever know the truth of my imprisonment.

"If you're going to become queen, you'll have to leave the tower eventually... right?"

"Yes, I will. I must learn to control my magic before then."

"How are you s'posed to test out your control over it?"

"l..."

"If you're gonna be all by yourself, you have no way to check. But you've gotta be able to control it someday, so you have to practice. I'll stick around so I can help...Your Highness."

She had a point. I would have to learn how to control my magic one day. Even if I did end up having a younger brother or sister, as long as I was alive, I would be the one to take the throne.

I felt grateful that Alicia was willing to help me practice. Well, polite gratitude alone was expected of me as a princess. My true feelings went beyond that—I was *moved*. This was the first time someone outside my parents had volunteered to be with me despite knowing about my magic. Here I thought no one else would ever accept me.

"...Very well. You're hired. It seems I'll be needing you."

"Thank you so mu...ah...achoo!"

Her loud sneeze came as no surprise, considering the amount of dust in here. I was surprised she managed to hold it in for so long.

Crash!

I whirled around at the loud clatter behind me. The remainder of the shelf I had haphazardly propped up fell—it was a miserable sight.

"This is rather sudden, but...could you do something for me, Alicia?"

She offered a wry smile. "Yes, I'll go clean that up."

It had been three days since Alicia's arrival. She was so quick to adapt, it was like she'd been with me from the very beginning. Although the tower wasn't very large, cleaning it by myself was a real challenge. Thanks to her, we managed to get most of the rooms clean.

During one cleaning session, I tripped and stumbled into a nearby wall—and an ominous wobble came from the shelf behind me.

Crash!

Brow furrowed, I looked back to see a broken bottle on the ground.

Alicia popped up behind me with a stern look on her face, staring at the tragic heap of glass. "May I ask what happened, Mistress?"

"I, um, didn't do it on purpose. Also, I told you to stop calling me that."

"Oh, right. Are you hurt, Your Highness?"

"I'm all right. It didn't fall on me."

"Good. Now go on, please leave this to me."

"What? It's fine! I broke it, so I'll clean it up."

"But, Your Highness, there are still a lot of rather breakable things around here."

That was true. There were a lot of bottles and other fragile things in the room. I supposed I should listen to Alicia and back off to prevent further disaster.

"Ugh...yeah. I'm sorry. Thanks, Alicia."

"No problem, Your Highness!"

After that, I dutifully headed to my bedroom and waited. I felt a little sorry for her, but I had nothing else to do, so I cracked open a book. Once enough time had passed, I returned to Alicia.

"Are you almost done?" I asked.

"Yes, I just finished cleaning it all."

"Okay, then let's take a break."

"Got it!"

Alicia brought out the tea set as I brewed us a pot. She repeatedly said she'd do it, but I insisted since I'd made a mess for her. Unfortunately, brewing tea was the *only* thing I had managed to accomplish today.

"Are you in a rush to clean the room because you want to be settled in the tower as soon as possible, Your Highness?"

"Yes. The plan was to move in after it was ready, but...I wanted to leave the palace immediately. I told them I'd clean it myself and left right away."

A lot of people lived in the palace, and hearing their inner voices around the clock was incredibly irritating. So when my father told me I'd be living in the tower, I felt like I'd struck gold and dashed off as soon as I could.

"Is that also why you don't have any servants besides me?"

"Mm-hmm."

I had my food delivered to me, so I thought I could manage everything else on my own. This tower was always meant to house royalty, so it had been built to keep out prying eyes. I could get food and daily necessities from a room in the palace by taking an underground tunnel.

The look in Alicia's eyes changed to something like bemusement. Bothered, I asked, "What is it, Alicia?"

"Nothing... I'm just amazed that you decided to move into the tower by yourself."

"Is that because I can't clean on my own?" That stunned her into silence, and I laughed. "You'd think so, wouldn't you? I really thought I could handle it, though."

"You've never had to clean before, right?"

"No, I haven't—but I've practiced in my dreams." I figured that referring to my past life as a dream wasn't really a lie.

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"I knew it."
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[&]quot;You did?"

[&]quot;You've got zero cleaning skills, Your Highness."

"What?! No way! Am I that bad?"

Alicia faltered. I understood her trepidation; it must have been a difficult question to answer, coming from her employer. Nevertheless, I needed to hear it.

"Please! Be honest!"

"You drop and break something every time you clean. The books you tried to organize never made it back to the bookshelf. And for some reason, you always lose something after tidying up."

"You're right..." I muttered, feeling embarrassed.

I'd always been bad at cleaning, even in my past life. I was able to get by at work, but that was probably because organization was part of my job.

"I'm glad you came after all, Alicia. You always help me out. And that corner there—you not only cleaned up what I broke but also dusted the shelf!"

I truly was grateful for her. If I had chased her away, who knew how long it would have taken me to get this place looking halfway decent.

A shy grin spread across her face. "Happy to help, Your Highness."

Oh, she's cute.

"Okay, let's continue!" I said. "Although, um, it's probably better if I don't help out in this room."

My eagerness to get things done did not change the fact that there were a lot of fragile items strewn about.

"Yes, Your Highness..."

As I looked at the shelf, an idea struck me. "Oh, right! It's all about DIY these days!"

Alicia tilted her head in confusion. "Dee eye why?"

"Yep. It's when amateurs like me build things instead of hiring a professional. Though it's hard work, the end result will have more sentimental value. And above all, you can customize the size and tailor it to your tastes."

"But where can we get the materials?" Alicia asked.

"There's a warehouse full of storage at the back of the tower, right? There should be wood and other tools inside."

"Huh? You can leave the tower to go around back?"

"Ahh, you must've thought that the underground tunnel was the only way outside."

"Yes, that's what I was told."

"There's actually a secret door. I found it when I was exploring the place."

Frankly, the first word that came to mind when I entered this tower was *shabby*. At the same time, I definitely found myself brimming with curiosity. The stories I read in my past life spoke of hidden doors in castles and stairs with trap doors... I always wondered if they truly existed, so I couldn't stop myself from looking for them. As a result, I managed to find a path that led outside.

"We can go outside!" I said. "Okay, I'm going to fetch the materials now."

"Your Highness, please wait!"

"Why?"

"I'll help you get the materials."

"It's fine. If I wrap myself in magic, the materials will be as light as a feather." Magic could be used to enhance someone's physical prowess, making them stronger, faster, and more resilient.

"You only have two hands. Even if you enhance your body with magic, there's only so much you can carry at once."

"Hmm, that is true. But aren't you busy with cleaning, Alicia?"

"I'm almost done."

"Very well, then. I suppose you can help."

The two of us exited the tower and retrieved some wood. Thanks to Alicia also being a mage, we managed to carry all the wood we needed in a blink of an eye.

"All right, let's start building!" I exclaimed.

"I'll cut the wood, all right? I can't possibly let you get hurt."

"Don't worry. I've done this many times in my dreams."

"In your dreams...? You've said that about cleaning, too—wait, Your Highness!"

Ignoring Alicia's protests, I started building the new shelf straight away.

Three weeks had now passed since Alicia moved in with me. The tower was sparkling thanks to her hard work, making it a lot more comfortable to live in. I'd also managed to finish building the shelf, even if it ended up a bit crooked.

"Alicia!" I called. "Brew me some tea, please."

"Right away!"

Alicia brought out the teaware shortly after, then stiffly made the brew.

"Here's some Bellean tea," she said once it was done.

"Sorry to say, but you're wrong. These are Dimble tea leaves."

"Huh? Oh no... I'm sorry."

"You have such a good memory. Why do you keep mixing up the blends?"

"To be honest, Your Highness, I can't bring myself to be interested in tea. It all tastes the same to me, and I never got the opportunity to sit and enjoy it when I was living out there."

I can see that. She did mention she needed money to live, so I'm sure she couldn't afford the luxury of choosing her preferred teas and whatnot. Still, she's serving the future queen here—she needs to learn.

Mind made up, I gave her a light jab with my elbow. "C'mon, now."

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I just need to introduce you to the wonderful world of tea! Tea can taste completely different depending on the variety. For example... Hmm. Get me all three cans on the second shelf, please."

"Y-yes, Your Highness."

I took out tea leaves from the cans she gave me and slowly brewed each one.

"For example, this is Dimble tea," I said. "Over here is the tea you mixed it up with, the Bellean tea. Try them both."

Since they were very similar in color, it was difficult to tell them apart by looks alone. However, you could really smell the difference if you brought it closer to your face.

"Hm... Now that you mention it, they *are* quite different. Bellean tea is a bit milder, maybe?"

"Yup! Okay, take a sip of this next. It's Wilson tea."

"Wow, it's completely different!" Alicia said. "How should I put this...? It has a very delicate flavor!"



"Right? See, there is a lot to learn about tea. And since tea blends are *so* different, isn't it natural that preferences can greatly vary from person to person?"

"Well...yes."

"If you're here to serve me, you'll have to learn about tea," I said with a grin.

Alicia's face stiffened. She hadn't flinched when I told her about my mind manipulation magic, yet she was afraid of *tea*.

"Your Highness, there are too many things for me to learn. I can't remember them all!"

"Oh, you'll be fine. With that impeccable memory of yours, I'm sure you'll remember everything. You've got to make good use of it! Now, shall we get started on our language studies? I'll have you accompany me."

"Eeeek!"

I grabbed her before she could run away and sat her down to study. Since we didn't have a teacher, we had no choice but to study by ourselves. Fortunately, the palace regularly sent us textbooks, worksheets, and so on. We even had a system in place where they gave me homework to assess my progress. I simply sent it back to the palace when I finished, and they would grade and return it to me.

When we first started these sessions, I thought, Wow, it's like taking an online class.

Alicia looked unsteady on her feet after we finished. "Ah, my head feels so heavy... I'm so dizzy!"

As I instructed, she'd been working on language studies. She was currently learning how to read and write. Later, she would move on to proper pronunciation—the sort we'd use around the palace.

"Are you okay? Do you feel sick?" I asked her.

"No, not at all. My head just got so heavy from all the stuff I learned."

"Oh. Um, I'm glad you're okay."

"By the way, Your Highness, could I please ask you a question?"

"Yes, go ahead."

"You mentioned that in this country, the firstborn inherits the throne, regardless of their gender. That means you're the next ruler. Why is that?"

"I understand... You're no doubt wondering how someone stuck in a tower is going to be the next queen."

"N-no, it's just that when I was reading stories, I noticed that it's usually boys who take the throne. It's like that in this book you gave me. This one, too."

On top of making her learn how to read and write, I also gave Alicia a few storybooks. Unlike Japan, this place did not have any picture books written for children, so I had to give her a dense novel. But Alicia turned out to be a fast learner, and a quick reader to boot. Her pronunciation still needed work, though. Anyway, it was just as she said: all the books I gave her had a king. Not a single one of them featured a queen.

"True, none of our neighboring countries have a ruling queen. Only here can an eldest son *or* daughter take the throne."

It was the tacit law of this kingdom. If not for that, I never would've had a chance.

"May I ask why that is?"

"Well, I don't know why other kingdoms can't have a queen regnant. As for our country, firstborns rule because they're the only ones capable of inheriting the royal family's heirloom, the Sacred Swords."

"The Sacred Swords...?"

"Yep. There are five in total, and each one holds a different meaning: love, wisdom, honor, sincerity, and eternity."

Panicking, Alicia asked, "Where are they kept?! They must be maintained! This tower is so humid, they'll rust!"

I giggled. That's what she's worried about?

"Don't worry, I didn't bring my sword to the tower. The sword is... Hmm, how

do I explain this? They dwell inside the ruler's body."

"That's terrible!" she cried. "Doesn't it hurt?!"

I tilted my head in confusion. "What? Why would it hurt?"

"I mean, to have a sword inside your body!"

Her response cracked me up. It was my fault for giving such a confusing explanation.

"Sorry, that was just a metaphor. Let me rephrase: the sword doesn't exist physically until it's called upon by the ruler."

Though the swords did not typically have physical form, they manifested when the ruling king—or queen—desired it. More accurately, it existed in a different dimension when not in use.

"I don't really get it," Alicia said.

"Mm... Yeah, it *is* hard to understand. I've never summoned a sword myself, so I'm not entirely sure how it works. But Father showed me a while back. He made two swords appear out of thin air! I was so shocked. It was like they wanted him to wield them."

"Only two? Aren't there five swords?"

"Apparently, the number of swords differs between rulers. They can usually summon two, but people with more mana can summon three. According to the records I've seen, only the first king was capable of summoning all five."

"I see..."

"We got a bit off track there, but to answer your question, I'm next in line for the throne because the power to summon the Sacred Swords is passed down to the firstborn child. After my father, I'm the only one who will be able to do so."

Because those swords held such tremendous power, they had become revered symbols both within and outside of the kingdom. Their strength unified our nation, and they served as part of our line of defense. That was why I, the sole heir who could summon them, would take the throne.

"I see. It makes sense now," she said. "I s'pose that's why it's so vital that you

learn to control your magic!"

"Right you are. That's also why we're studying together."

"Isn't this less efficient, though? We're learning completely different things."

She really is sharp. "Yes, speaking solely in terms of efficiency, it would definitely go faster if I studied alone—but there's more to it than that."

"Hm?"

"Since you're working here, I want you to learn as much as you can through experience and instruction. Knowledge is vital. Even if you don't need the information now, you might find it useful later on. For example, when you grow up and take on another job. It might seem burdensome at first, but with your memory, it won't be hard to keep the knowledge with you. If there's a chance for you to learn, I don't want you to miss out on it."

"You're very kind, Your Highness."

"What makes you say that?"

"Just...everything you've done. I'm a commoner's child. No one of noble birth would ever try to teach someone like me...and definitely not my own mistress!"

"I told you to stop calling me 'mistress.' And, well...you're the first."

"The first what?"

"The first person to stay. You didn't run away from me, not even after hearing about my magic."

"But that's because—"

"I know, you're here to make a living. Still, it's impressive that you chose to remain here despite the risks."

"It is?"

"Absolutely. That's why I wanted to give you something worthy of your bravery."

I wasn't lying, but I also wasn't telling the whole truth. Yes, our lessons would arm her with knowledge. If and when she left the tower, she would be better for it. Frankly, however, I didn't think of her as my maid. She was my first friend

in this world, and she felt a bit like my younger sister. I wanted her to gain as much from this experience as possible.

Not that I could ever tell her all that out loud. It would be far too embarrassing.

She smiled shyly. "Thank you."

"It's fine, no need to thank me," I replied. "I'm sorry to ask this of you since you're tired, but could you please fetch us some food? I'm sure our meal will taste better than usual because we've used so much brainpower."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

As I suspected, dinner that evening was delicious.

Alicia had been with me for two months now. The air gradually grew colder, harkening winter's arrival.

"My, Alicia, what's gotten you so angry?" I asked.

"Did you hear my inner voice?"

"No, but I can tell from your mannerisms that you're upset."

While two months wasn't a long time, we'd been stuck together almost all the while. I could discern her mood at a glance, whether she was happy, sad, or upset. In truth, it wasn't just our proximity—she was easy to read.

"I just went to the palace," she told me.

"Oh, for the usual report? Thank you for working so hard."

Alicia regularly went to the palace to update my parents on my progress. Normally, someone of her status would have no chance of an audience with the king and queen. But with my confinement being strictly under wraps, they opted to have her report to them directly. The fewer people who knew of the situation, the better.

"It went perfectly fine and all, really...but I saw something that made me sick."

To summarize, Alicia had encountered some palace bureaucrats who engaged in what seemed an awful lot like bullying. There hadn't been any violence

involved—they were in the palace, after all—but seeing a group of people crowding around someone just to insult them had gotten her all wound up.

"And then the guy went, 'This is no place for a baron. It's probably best for you to leave as soon as possible.' Isn't he horrible?!"

"Hmm... That definitely sounds hostile."

Since I hadn't been there, I couldn't speculate further on the situation. Though the aggressor's words certainly sounded like a threat, the person on the receiving end might've done something bad enough to warrant a reprimand.

"Yeah! But still, I can't believe he said, 'You won't go up against me if you know what's good for you. I'm a close relative of Lord Slade.' Augh, just thinking about someone abusing their power really ticks me off!"

"Lord Slade ... ? Oh."

"You know of him?"

"Um, yes, of course. Lord Slade is head of one of the great five marquess houses in this kingdom."

"The...great five marquess houses?"

"Don't you know about them?"

Alicia shook her head timidly. Right, I still haven't taught her politics or history.

"The great five marquess houses—or Great Five, for short—are the five most influential families in this kingdom. By the way, Alicia, what's the name of our kingdom?"

"Huh? It's the Federal Kingdom of Ausgrid, right?"

"Yes, we are a federal kingdom. That means our nation is made up of smaller, individual kingdoms. The king who unified the country gave five families the status of marquess and permitted them to govern the abundant land over which they had always ruled. That's how the Great Five came to be."

"So the marquesses were given the title because they agreed to serve the royal family, right?"

"Yes, but they were granted considerable authority over their regions, so we aren't *exactly* a single kingdom—it's mostly in the name. The federal kingdom is still essentially a group of six separate countries."

Calling it "considerable authority" was putting it mildly. Each region had its own legislation and administration. As long as they didn't go against the interests of the wider kingdom, they were free to do as they pleased.

"Six separate countries? Really?"

"Yes, six if we count the region centered around the capital—governed by the royal family—as one country."

"Okay, got it. So basically, um, the royal family and the Great Five..."

"Have similar amounts of power, yes."

Since Alicia seemed dismayed, I finished the sentence for her. I supposed it was bad manners to tell a royal that her family was essentially powerless against the nobility.

"If one family rebels, we can probably suppress them by joining forces with the other four. If all five families rise up...it's over. Just two or three would put us in quite a pickle, I think."

"Ahh. Is that why?" Alicia asked.

"Pardon?"

"Going back to the Sacred Swords... Is that why the firstborns with summoning power take the throne? You use the swords' power to keep the Great Five in check?"

"Correct. If someone who can't inherit the swords succeeds the throne, there's a possibility that the person who *can* use the swords will conspire with the Great Five. Ultimately, this is why the firstborn becomes ruler, regardless of gender. Since I can wield the swords, I'll be the next ruler. If I had younger siblings, my brother would become a duke, and my sister would be married off somewhere."

"Dukes have higher status than marquesses, right?"

"Yes. Dukes are attached to the royal family, so they do have higher status.

But in reality, marquesses have more political sway—they have extensive land and more authority."

That said, the royal family had produced only one child for each of the past several generations. No royal children had joined ducal households in some time, and our blood ties had become quite thin. If I were to die without siblings or successors, there would be no one left who could summon the Sacred Swords. Miraculously, the royal family's lineage had run uninterrupted thus far. I didn't actually know what would happen if our line ended, but there was no point worrying about that right now.

"Sorry," I said. "I went on a tangent there. Long story short, that's why anyone related to the Great Five can throw their weight around in the palace. Father has been trying to strengthen other families, but...I guess you could say it's still a work in progress."

"I understand now. Doesn't change the fact that bullies are bullies, though. I hope from the bottom of my heart that Your Highness and His Majesty will break those people's noses!"

That was quite violent language for Alicia. It proved just how angry she was about what she'd seen.

"Let's start by supporting my father's endeavors," I said to Alicia. On the inside, I thought, *If only Father could just hurry up already*.

Not even the royal family could stand tall in the face of the Great Five. I'd gathered that from eight years of eavesdropping on the inner voices of others in the palace. People's thoughts were so honest. Even though I was somewhat removed from the heart of politics, I grasped the gist of the situation just by listening to the thoughts of my parents and the servants. If I discovered that one of the servants was affiliated with the Great Five, I had them dismissed.

That being the case, if any servants who worked at the palace right now were affiliated with one of the Great Five, the bureaucrats should've been able to root them out. Seeing how angry Alicia was, I was even more certain of it.

Who would want to take the throne when enemies lurked everywhere? Surely I couldn't be blamed for hoping my father would take care of them during his reign.

"Oh, right! I shall make you some tea, Your Highness!" Alicia's voice had returned to normal, so her gloom must have lifted.

I suppressed a sigh as I watched her leave.

Almost three months had gone by since I started living with Alicia, and I still couldn't hear her inner voice. It grew even colder outside, and frigid gusts invaded the tower.

"It's so c-cold," I said as I shivered beside the fireplace. I was terrible with cold weather, so Alicia had started a fire for me. "I-I'm really glad you're here, Alicia. I can't even go get firewood in this cold."

"You sure seem to get cold easily, Your Highness... What did you do in the palace during wintertime?"

"I just wore a lot of layers and stayed in front of the fireplace."

I couldn't count how many layers of clothing I wore every year. I'd also been this way in my past life, so I was a cold-hater to the core.

"Oh..."

"I can't stay like this if I'm going to live here," I said. "Let's move our bodies a bit. It'll help us stay warm."

Though the palace supported us, Alicia and I lived alone. There was much to be done, so I couldn't afford to let the cold take over.

"Ooh, right! Since we're going to move our bodies anyway, there's something I'd like to try!" Alicia said, then promptly dragged me outside.

"H-hey, Alicia... I'm supposed to be confined to the tower, so I don't think I should be out here. It's *a lot* colder. I can't stand it!"

Considering how we'd regularly played outside when the weather was better, my confinement was a flimsy excuse at this point.

"You're thinking aloud, Your Highness," she said, stifling a giggle.

"I won't deny that," I grumbled, shifting from foot to foot. "So? What was it you wanted to try?"

"The Black Witch game!"

"The Black Witch game?" I tilted my head in puzzlement; I'd never heard of it before.

"Yup. One of us will be the 'Black Witch'—she runs after the others to catch them. The witch wins by catching everyone! As for the others, they win if they can outrun her."

It sounded like a game of tag. Seems like similar games exist in every world, I thought, oddly impressed.

"Wouldn't we need at least three people for this game?" I asked her. "If it's just the two of us, there'd only be one person running. The game will end once we catch each other."

"Yeah, but...I just really wanted to try it after seeing kids in the city play," said Alicia, giving me her best puppy-dog eyes.

I couldn't say no to that look. "Fine, but we're only allowed to run between the tower and the forest behind it. We can't get close to the palace. Also, we can't go indoors. Those are the rules."

"You got it, Your Highness! And now..."

Alicia took out a coin and flipped it. *Plink!* The coin spun in the air a few times before she caught it on the back of her hand.

"Heads or tails?" she asked.

"Heads," I said.

"Unfortunately, it's tails. I'd like to be the Black Witch!"

"What? You guessed it right! Are you sure you want to be the Black Witch?"

"Yep! Always have!"

"Well, okay. Come after me once you've counted to ten, all right?"

I dashed as fast as I could toward the forest. Once she reached ten, Alicia chased after me at lightning speed. Shocked at how fast she was, I ran even quicker. Now that a bigger gap stretched between us, I ducked into the forest, observing Alicia's movements as I hid behind the trees.

"Huh? Your Highness! Where are you?" Alicia called out, entering the forest. She scanned her surroundings in search of me. "Princess Luxeria?"

I used trees and bushes as cover while I ran, being careful not to make a sound. *Is hiding allowed in tag? Ah well.* I had no idea how Black Witch worked, and Alicia hadn't said anything about hiding when she explained the rules of the game.

Quietly, I watched Alicia from the shadows. Her eyes glimmered with the same joyful shine as when she first proposed we play the game. She frolicked about with the kind of childlike excitement that suited her eight-year-old self.

Yes, she was only eight, just like me. You wouldn't think her so young from how sharp and perceptive she was. I wondered if perhaps she'd reincarnated, like I did, but she never reacted when I mixed in modern terms during our conversations. Maybe she was deliberately hiding it from me.

This might be far-fetched, but what if it has something to do with her magic? People can enhance their physical prowess, so why not mental prowess as well? It would explain her amazing memory.

Whatever the case, this was only guesswork. There was no way to verify the nature of her abilities as long as we were stuck in the tower.

"Found you, Your Highness!"

Stuck in my own thoughts, I failed to notice Alicia closing in. *Crap!* I tried to run away with all my strength, but in the end, she still caught me.

"Let's take a break!" I said between heavy pants. I hadn't done sprints in quite some time, so I was completely out of breath. I sprawled out on the ground, wiping the sweat rolling off my forehead. It wasn't very ladylike, but I doubted anyone was watching.

Alicia collapsed next to me. "Do you feel warmer now?"

"Yes, I do. In fact, I feel *too* warm now, thanks to you." I inhaled deeply, then exhaled.

As I finally caught my breath, I felt a fit of laughter welling up inside me. Alicia started to laugh at the same time, clutching her stomach.

"That was fun," I said with a contented sigh.

"Very!" Alicia agreed. "You were so fast, Your Highness. I was panicking because I couldn't catch you at all!"

"Well, you're really fast, too. You were so speedy that halfway through, I found it utterly terrifying."

"What?! That was because you were hiding, Your Highness! I was worried I'd lose sight of you again!"

As we bickered, I couldn't help but play back scenes of our game in my mind. That really was a blast!

After that thought, my laughter was ready to burst free again. Maybe Alicia thought the same; she also loudly guffawed with glee.

When our cackling finally died down, Alicia whispered, "That was the first time I ever played that game." Even though she lay right beside me, she was so quiet I could barely hear her. "My magic is really strong, you know? I was born with it, so everyone was scared of me from the start. Especially since no one around me could use magic."

Only roughly one in three hundred people in this world had magic. Ausgrid was famous for having a higher percentage of mages, but even then, they were small in number. It was commonplace for people to never have met a mage in the first place. Mages were often feared and shunned by the people around them, even if their magic wasn't as strong as Alicia's.

"On top of all that, I've lost control of my magic before. Unlike you, Your Highness, I ended up hurting a lot of people. That's why I was put in the kingdom's custody."

"Ahh."

It wasn't that the thought hadn't occurred to me before. She possessed far more magic than others; it was a miracle she'd kept it under wraps for so long.

"Have you learned to control it?" I asked.

"I have. Letting it run wild once was enough." Alicia's smile was bitter, tinged with regret.

Picking up on those feelings, I decided to not ask any further. "I see."

"I went off topic, but...that's why I never got to play with anyone my age."

"Ha ha. Me either. I've never played the Black Witch game before. Actually, I've never spent time with *anyone* my age. We're the same."

"Yeah..."

"Still, it's a shame you caught me. I won't lose next time!"

Alicia laughed, probably understanding the meaning behind those words. Next time meant we were going to play again.

"I won't lose next time, either!" she exclaimed.

We looked at each other and started giggling again.

That night, Alicia and I both caught a spectacularly bad cold. Of *course* we did —we'd sweated profusely and taken our sweet time chatting outside in the chilly air! That unpleasant experience was the reason why we made it a rule to return to the tower immediately after playing outside.

Almost half a year had gone by since we started living in the tower.

"Only three more days until your birthday, Your Highness!" Alicia chirped as she prepared my tea.

"Now that you mention it, I'm almost nine years old, huh?"

I didn't feel particularly happy about it. Adding in the age from my past life, I'd be more than forty years old. Birthdays had long since become boring.

Thinking back, time really had passed by in the blink of an eye ever since I started living with Alicia. It had been so much fun that the days flew by.

"Will you be returning to the palace for your birthday?" she asked me.

"Of course not. I'll still be here the day of."

"Huh? But...I heard there'll be a party at the palace. You can't go to your own party, Your Highness?"

"I'm supposed to be sick right now—that's why I can't go and show myself in

front of everyone. I already let them know I won't be attending."

The excuse wasn't exactly a fib. Going somewhere with a large gathering of people meant I'd hear numerous inner voices. If I put myself in a situation like that, I was bound to feel ill.

"It's fine. I'm sure Mother and Father are willing to celebrate it with me later."

In all honesty, I would've been much happier celebrating my birthday with people I loved as opposed to suffering through a suffocating party full of strangers.

"His Majesty and Her Majesty, huh? You must be looking forward to that!"

"Yes, I think it's been almost three months since I saw them last. When they stop by, I have to be extra careful with my magic."

"Don't worry." Alicia offered me a gentle smile. "You won't use your magic unless you want to. You haven't used it on me at all, right? That's proof!"

"Ha ha ha. It's thanks to you that I'm able to control it, Alicia."

Even now, my magic did not affect Alicia. I relaxed, no longer afraid that I might accidentally hurt her. That peace of mind occasionally helped me stop myself from eavesdropping on my parents' inner voices.

"I'm glad to be of assistance!"

"I still need more training, though. I won't be able to succeed my father in this state."

It was already difficult just to stand in the same room as other people, let alone face a crowd. If I didn't get better, I couldn't *think* about taking the throne. Instead, I'd have no choice but to hole up in the tower my whole life. Even if I had a regular job, I'd still need to interact with people. For me, someone unable and unwilling to deal with people, staying here would make me the happiest. That said, if I just took the easy path, I would get in a lot of trouble... The world was a cruel place.

"I know! Let's throw our own birthday party!" Alicia proclaimed.

"A party? Here?"

"You heard me! On the day of your birthday, Your Highness. Would you like to invite anyone else?"

"Sadly, I don't have any friends besides you. Oh, there was that boy..." For an instant, I thought back to a boy I briefly interacted with before my confinement. "No, never mind. Having you here with me is more than enough."

"C'mon, it's a special occasion. Let's invite him! I'll reach out to him lickety-split!"

"Um, he lives far away. He can't just say yes and drop by."

"Aw, all right... Wait, then how did you meet him, Your Highness?"

"He tagged along with his father, who came to the palace for work," I explained. "This was back when I still lived in the palace. I was wandering around like usual and happened to make his acquaintance."

"Ooh... What's his name?"

"Wilhelm." When I closed my eyes, I remembered our first meeting as clear as day. "You look pretty, just like the moon."

That was weird for eight-year-old me to say, but thinking back on it, he didn't speak in a childlike manner, either. No... Maybe he was able to say such things because he had the innocence of a child.

"He might be willing to come to your birthday party, Your Highness. I'll ask!"

"That's even worse!" I groaned. "Please don't. If he's coming to the palace for the other party, we can't have him here in the tower. Won't he find out I'm skipping out on the main party?"

"Oh, that's true."

"Right? So let's just have the birthday party be you and me. Ah! Why don't we sneak outside?"

"To our usual forest? We can bring lunch along with us!"

I giggled. "I'm looking forward to it!"

Time whizzed by as we planned my birthday party. Before I knew it, the big day arrived. I was officially nine years old.

"Aren't you ready yet, Alicia?" I said, waiting for her alone in the tower. I waited and waited, but she didn't return from the palace. I knew she was getting our lunches packed and ready, but it was taking her far too long.

"Hm?"

For the briefest of moments, I sensed Alicia's magic. Did she just use magic? She hasn't used Dichotomy even once in my presence, though. Why would she use it now?

Filled with a strong sense of foreboding, I dashed out of the tower. It was like when we played together, only this time I was chasing down her magic.

"She's not here."

Alicia was nowhere to be found—instead, I discovered several men sprawled out on the ground between the tower and the palace.

"What in the world is going on?" I muttered. Channeling magic into my words, I yelled into one of the men's ears: "Wake up!"

"Urgh..."

"Stay put and answer my questions!" I ordered. "Where is Alicia, the girl who was here just now?!"

"We tried to capture her because she overheard our conversation," one man groaned. His eyes were vacant; only his mouth moved.

"Where is she?!"

"I don't know. She's probably at our base."

"And where is that?"

"In the North Ward of the royal capital, second floor of the Crimson Horse Tavern..."

"Noted. What are you after?"

"The death of Crown Princess Luxeria."

"Who is behind this?"

"It is—aaaugh!"

The man burst into flames before he could answer my question. His cohorts ignited at the same time. Sensing magic, I whipped my head back to find another man lurking behind a tree. Just as I readied my own magic, he shrouded himself in fire.

"Ugh! Come on!"

What should I do? What's the right move?

I was alone. All the palace guards were unfortunately attending my birthday party. There was no time to stand here and worry—taking time to find the guards and explain the situation would be a waste. Besides, even if I was the target, I refused to run or hide. Alicia was too important to me.

Alicia... My precious, precious friend.

I would be fine. I had powerful magic, after all—that was my key to saving her. That didn't mean I was fearless, though. Facing the culprits and wielding my magic were both terrifying prospects. But if I couldn't use my magic now, when would it ever be useful?

Shaking off my fear, I ran straight for the Crimson Horse Tavern.

The city was in a festive mood, perhaps because of the party at the nearby palace. I stumbled over cobblestones as I ran. Though I felt apprehensive about the flood of inner voices in the city, I found that they didn't bother me—my focus was strictly on saving Alicia.

"Tell me where the Crimson Horse Tavern is!" I shouted at a random group of people. The ones who knew showed me the way immediately.

When I arrived at the tavern, I hurried to the second floor.

"Everyone besides Alicia, sleep!"

Everyone in the room toppled over in slumber.

"Alicia!" I called. "Alicia, are you all right?!"

At last, I found her—she was lying on the floor. I rushed over and propped her up.

"I'm okay," she murmured. "I'm sorry for troubling you."

"You're sorry?! Those people were after me! This is all my fault... Are you hurt?"

She nodded and stood up, holding my hand for support. "It's nothing serious. I just fell and got a few scratches when I tried to fight the kidnappers."

Hearing her response, I let out a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness..."

Now that I'd found her safe and sound, my heart finally stopped threatening to explode. That said, there was no time to bask in our heartfelt reunion.

"We can't stay here. We have to run," I told her. "There could be others out to kill me." I stood up and made to go out the way I came.

Just then, men appeared from another room and spotted us trying to flee.

"Hey, the kid is running away!" said one.

"Wait, isn't that our target?!" asked another.

One of them cast a spell, shooting a stream of flames so bright it resembled a laser beam.

"Watch out, Your Highness!" Alicia cried, shoving me away. She alone stood directly in line of the spell.

"No! Alicia!"

The fiery beam pierced right through her.

"Ah... Aliciaaa!"

Time slowed down to a crawl—it was as if I watched her fall in slow motion. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the man click his tongue as he readied another fire spell.

"Everyone besides Alicia, fall asleep!" I said, running full speed toward her.

"Alicia... Alicia!"

"Are you hurt, Your Highness?" Alicia asked hoarsely.

"I'm fine, don't worry about me! You're—"

"That's great..."

Seeing her smile, I froze. "Why?"

Why are you smiling? Why didn't you protect yourself? Why are you on the floor?!

"Since it was all so sudden, I couldn't use my magic," she replied, as if she could hear my thoughts. She launched into a coughing fit, spitting up blood.

That snapped me back to my senses. "Alicia, don't speak! I'll get you to a doctor right away!"

I channeled magic through my body and picked her up.

"You're my first friend, Your Highness," Alicia went on, heedless of my warning. "I wanted to protect you, no matter what... As long as you're okay, I'm happy."

Her smile grew wider as she closed her eyes.

"Alicia...? Alicia!" No matter how many times I called her name, she didn't wake up. "Alicia, no!"

She's...not breathing.

My legs gave out, and I crumpled down on the spot. I looked at my hands, dyed red with her blood. My entire body shook.

Why? Why did this have to happen to Alicia? No... No, no! I don't want to lose her. Please... Please, wake up!

One after another, tears welled up from my eyes. They rolled down my cheeks and dripped down onto hers.

Drip. Drip.

"Alicia..."

Being with her made me so happy. For the very first time in this world, I had been at peace. Yet I was about to lose someone so precious like this?

"Nooooo!"

The moment I yelled, I felt a tremendous amount of mana flowing from my body. Five swords of just as many hues appeared around me.

"Are these...the Sacred Swords?"

The five swords spun around me in midair.

"Why are they here?"

I can only inherit the swords during the coronation or...when the king dies. Has something happened to Father?!

I wasn't sure, but I didn't have the time to think. I grabbed the amber-colored sword—the one that represented eternity—and drove it straight into Alicia's heart. The sword emitted a dazzling amber light, and I felt even more mana drain from my body. My vision blurred, and I became so dizzy that I couldn't distinguish up from down.

"Urgh..."

I vomited blood from the discomfort welling up from my stomach, but I held tight to the sword.

More... I have to channel more magic into it!

Somehow, I knew she would come back. I was absolutely certain of it.

Eventually, the light ebbed away. Once it had completely disappeared, I checked Alicia's wound.

"Thank goodness," I said.

To my surprise, her wound had sealed altogether. Most importantly, she started breathing again. Tears overflowed from my eyes once more, this time from relief. I'm so glad you're all right...

"Oh, Alicia," I murmured, gently caressing her cheek. She felt warm.

Utterly relieved, I collapsed on the spot. As I drifted off, I heard a familiar man's voice.

"Your Highness!"

When I awoke, I recognized the familiar ceiling overhead.

"I'm back..."

I managed to sit up despite my blurry vision. I wondered what had happened after I passed out. Was Alicia okay? I tried to stand up to check on her, but my body was too weak.

"I see you're awake, Your Highness," a man said. It was the same voice I heard before.

"Ah, it was you, Marquess."

Seeing his face jogged my memory. I'd met him once or twice before I was sent to the tower. He was a marquess and head of one of the Great Five—the most influential among all noble families in this country. And of the Great Five, only he had earned enough of Father's trust to learn about my magic and subsequent confinement.

"How is Alicia?!" I blurted.

"Alicia? Ah, if you're speaking of the young girl who collapsed, her life is no longer in danger."

"Good... Glad to hear it," I said, letting out a sigh of relief. "So why were you there, Marquess?"

"The Great Five originally existed to support the use of the Sacred Swords, which consume a tremendous amount of mana. Historically, our houses have dedicated our magic to those swords. The sword you used was imbued with my magic, so I immediately sensed when it was summoned."

This was the first time I'd ever heard of the Great Five playing such a role.

"Does that mean the heads of the other four houses know I've summoned the swords?" I asked.

"No, I believe I am the only one. No one else has dedicated their magic to the swords in some time. Every other family has neglected their responsibilities for the past few generations."

"I see." Silently thankful that they had slacked off, I studied the marquess anew. "Why did the Sacred Swords come to me, though? Did something happen to my father?!"

The swords could only be passed on after the previous ruler's death or upon

receiving the crown during the coronation ceremony. Obviously I hadn't received any sort of crown, so the only possibility was that my father had been hurt.

"His Majesty was still in good health when you summoned the swords, so I cannot say. I do not know why you were able to inherit the sword before your coronation. This has never happened in the entirety of this kingdom's history."

"Wait, what do you mean he was *still* in good health when I summoned the swords? Did he...?"

"I am afraid it is as you fear: His Majesty has passed away. Her Majesty died in the same instant."

"Mother, too?!"

I looked down, averting my eyes from the marquess. Even though he had earned my father's trust, I couldn't risk a stranger knowing my inner turmoil. I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists so tightly my nails nearly broke the skin.

"Who did it?" I demanded.

The marquess's brows lifted at that. Was it really that surprising? It was laughable to think my parents died of disease. Unless both my parents had simultaneously succumbed to the same grave illness, there was no way they'd die at the exact same time. I'd never come across any news about an epidemic, and besides, they would have informed me one way or another if they were ill. After all, I was their only child—and the sole heir to the throne.

It was possible an accident took their lives, but this was unlikely considering the palace's high level of security. And if an accident really *had* taken the lives of the king and queen, palace security would seem shockingly terrible.

No, the most plausible scenario was that someone had murdered my parents.

"We managed to capture the culprit, but we do not know the mastermind behind all of this. Unfortunately, the assassin committed suicide before we could interrogate him."

"Hm, seems like he was very well disciplined," I said. "Well, never mind. It doesn't matter. Find the mastermind, no matter what it takes."

"Understood." The marquess dipped his head in assent and left the room.

Once he was gone, I let out a deep sigh. I relaxed, feeling my body grow weak. At the same time, tears dripped down from my eyes, one after another.

"Father... Mother..."

I released all my pent-up emotions and allowed myself to grieve. Overwhelming despair crushed my heart. I sobbed long and hard, as though it would purge the devastation I felt. I couldn't hold back the onslaught of tears.

Those two people had loved me despite my horrible powers. I loved them, too. I *treasured* them. Their deaths cut me deeper than any blade—and they'd died because of me.

When Alicia was kidnapped, I hadn't asked for anyone's help because I was overconfident in my abilities. As a result, she nearly died trying to protect me... and the Sacred Swords wound up in my hands. The marquess had said that His Majesty was *still* in good health when I summoned the swords, which meant Father was unable to summon them when he was attacked. If only my father had the swords, he would've been able to beat back his assailant. Those weapons had extraordinary power. If I hadn't forcefully taken the swords away from him, both Father and Mother would have been spared.

Regret and guilt tormented me. My parents were so dear to me...yet I'd lost them. It was all my fault.

It hurts...!

I felt so sad and devastated. My heart ached so badly, I feared it might shatter. I was drowning in grief. The only things keeping me afloat were the tears seeping from my eyes, draining my destructive feelings one droplet at a time. Even so, the pain never lessened.

I cried all night long. Even as my voice grew hoarse and raw, my tears didn't stop. I cried on and on and on.

It had been three days since I found out my parents passed away. During that time, I'd secretly returned to the palace. I sighed deeply as I sank into the

couch. My body felt sluggish, and for some reason, I couldn't hear anyone's inner voices at all.

I was so certain I'd be overwhelmed with everyone's thoughts, so I'd mentally prepared myself before moving back in. Unlike living in the tower, I was bound to be surrounded by a lot of people in the palace. Naturally, I would hear more inner voices... At least, I was *supposed* to.

But right now, all was quiet. Why in the world can't I hear them?

I sort of had an inkling as to what was going on. I had stopped feeling mana in my body ever since I saved Alicia using the Sacred Sword of Eternity. Something unusual must've happened to my magic when I did so.

A knock came at the door, and the marquess entered with a maid. "Hello there."

"Have you discovered something?" I asked. "Or has Alicia awoken?" I did my best to change my diction, trying to replicate my father's regal accent.

Though the marquess's eyes briefly widened in surprise, he deliberately chose not to acknowledge my change in tone.

Alicia still hadn't woken up. Even though I'd managed to keep her alive with the Sacred Sword, she hovered on the verge of death. I couldn't help but worry that her condition would deteriorate any moment.

"The girl is still in a deep sleep. We have no choice but to put our faith in the power of the Sacred Sword," he told me.

"I suppose you're right. Ensure the palace physicians continue to provide her with extensive care."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"So, what brings you here then?"

"We managed to identify the mastermind behind the attack on the late king and queen."

"My, my... To identify the culprit in three days, you must have been diligent. Tell me, who was it?"

"It was the head of House Slade."

I burst out laughing. "Hah! You would have me believe a marquess from the Great Five murdered the king? What nonsense!"

The walls shook, as though the very palace was responding to my anger. The marquess kept his head down. I nevertheless caught a glimpse of his face, which had gone white as a sheet.

"One of the all-powerful Great Five has betrayed the royal family, you say... I wonder if the others will follow suit."

That was the greatest dilemma: if multiple families with great influence over the kingdom openly declared their hostility toward the royal family.

"Wh-what? My family has pledged staunch allegiance to yours!"

"Oh, right. You're a marquess, too. However...are you truly an ally?"

The marquess briefly averted his gaze, looking somewhat uncomfortable. His lips quirked up a bit before he replied, "I-It's true that I pride myself on my bloodline and the region I govern, but that is precisely why I must protect my land and its people. That is the truth of the matter."

He spoke eloquently and paused to raise his head. His face was still ghastly pale, but his gaze intensified to a frightening fervor.

"My ancestors pledged fealty to the royal family of Ausgrid, believing it the best choice for our citizens. And the royal family has continued to keep the promise they made to my ancestors. We feel nothing but gratitude toward the royal family—betrayal is inconceivable. Committing such an immoral act would bring great shame upon us. As long as you are willing to uphold the promises from your family's past...I shall be your sword and your shield, Your Highness."

"Do I have your word?" I asked curtly. I still couldn't hear his inner voice.

"I know you are capable of powerful magic, Your Highness. There is no need for equivocation. Spewing lies would be utterly foolish, would it not?"

I stared at the marquess, discerning as much as I could from his expression. "Indeed."

I'd only ever thought of my ability as annoying; I never thought its absence

would feel so inconvenient. That being the case, it was rather unlikely that he would lie to me in this situation, considering he didn't know my magic was currently useless. There was no reason to lie to someone who could see right through you. Besides, I doubted someone with such an earnest expression could lie so smoothly.

"As proof of my trust, I shall confide in you regarding one matter," I said.

"What is it?"

"Call a magic scholar. The flow of my mana has been strange ever since I used one of the Sacred Swords. I cannot wield magic as I wish."

"You cannot use your magic? I shall arrange for someone to see you at once," said the marquess. His face remained stern as he hurried out of the room.

As he departed, I heaved a sigh. My body felt *extremely* heavy. Unsteady on my feet, I wobbled back to my room. I lay down on the couch, surrendering myself to its softness. The fluffy cushions were very comfortable, and I soon fell into a deep slumber.

A rap on the door woke me up. I gave my permission to enter, and in came my assigned maid.

"The marquess and the head mage await you in the reception room," she said.

"I see."

I briskly made my way there to find the marquess standing with a man I'd never met.

"And you are...?" I asked, sitting in front of them.

"It's an honor to make your acquaintance, Your Highness. I am Godfrey, head of the palace mages."

The palace mages were exceptionally skilled. They applied their talents in service of the royal family.

"I permit you to touch me. You may conduct an exam," I told him.

"Y-yes, Your Highness. Pardon me—it'll just be a moment."

He took my hand and channeled magic into it. After doing this a few times, he backed away from me. I assumed he was finished with the exam.

"I'm afraid this may be the result of using a tremendous amount of mana at once," Godfrey said.

I laughed bitterly to myself; I knew all too well how much mana I had used. I had forcefully inherited the Sacred Swords from my father when I summoned the Sword of Eternity.

"There is undoubtedly mana in your body, Your Highness," Godfrey explained. "However, you can't use it due to abnormalities in your mana veins."

"There are abnormalities?"

The *macreas*, an organ in the abdominal area, produced mana. Mana veins then circulated that mana throughout the body, whereupon it could be used for magic. Comparing it to the circulatory system, the macreas was the heart, and the mana veins were the blood vessels.

"Because I have stronger magic than others, I presume that means my macreas is very active?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Then what's wrong with my mana veins? Aren't they strong enough to support the macreas?"

"No. Your macreas is *too* strong, Your Highness. Your mana veins are unable to keep up with the increased mana production."

"Hm... Does that mean the macreas and mana veins grow differently?" I asked.

"Yes, the amount of mana one's macreas produces is determined at birth. No amount of training can change your mana capacity. The future of a mage is, to some extent, predetermined."

I listened to his explanation with rapt attention.

"However, a mage's ability does not entirely rely on how much mana they

have. It also lies in their technique. It is vital to determine the least amount of mana required for a spell or task before it circulates throughout your body. Ultimately, it depends on how well you are able to use your mana veins.

"Mana veins become stronger as we age, and you'll naturally learn how much mana you need through experience. In Your Highness's case, your mana veins are still developing. At this stage, I believe it is possible that your mana veins can become damaged if you use the vast amounts of mana generated by your macreas."

"I have two questions," I said. "First, what are the chances I've been wasting mana?"

"I cannot say for certain. Magic varies so greatly that it can practically be considered a trait unique to each individual. Using mana is a very intuitive process. No one—myself included—can tell you how much power you'll need. Mages can fine-tune their intuition by using magic repeatedly. By training in such a manner, mages can increase the number of times they can cast spells without changing the amount of mana required."

It was clear that the reason my mana veins broke down was because too much mana had circulated through them. I could use the same amount of mana without ever damaging them again if I learned how to optimize...but that was a difficult prospect.

"Very well," I said. "Now, the second question: will my mana veins heal?"

"Yes. If you abstain from using magic for a while, they should heal naturally."

"How long will this take?"

"I don't know for certain. Judging by the extensive damage your veins have suffered, I believe it would be best if you wait until you come of age. Even if your veins heal, they may break again if your body can't keep up with your mana."

"I see."

Until I come of age... Basically, I couldn't use magic for another seven or eight years.

"Good work," I told him. Then, forcing myself to channel Heart Realm, I added, "Forget that I am unable to use magic and that my mana veins have broken, then leave the room."

Godfrey's eyes instantly darkened before he exited.

"Hrk!" Unable to hold it in, I choked out blood. The world spun around me as an intense, throbbing headache took hold.

The marquess ran toward me, immediately concerned. "Your Highness!"

"Quiet," I chided him, stopping him in his tracks with my gaze. Unable to stay sitting, I leaned back on the sofa. "So this is what happens..."

I looked down at my hand, eyeing the bright-red blood.

"How do you feel?" the marquess asked.

"Bad. I have no choice but to rest. There's no point in seeing a physician since this is caused by my mana veins." I let out a deep sigh. I would feel a bit better if I rested.

"Why did you go so far as to erase Godfrey's memories?"

"The fewer who know about my damaged veins, the better."

"While that may be true—"

"I also wanted to test it out. I wished to know if I can use my magic in an emergency."

Though there were consequences, I could still use it if need be. Confirming that was worth the pain.

"In your current state, I believe you should heed the head mage's warning and abstain from using magic as much as possible."

"Indeed."

I looked up at the ceiling and thought about what I should do next. As the marquess said, it would be prudent to avoid using my magic. I nearly fainted just from casting one spell. If I inflicted further damage on my veins, I could lose my ability to use magic completely. And if that happened, I could never summon the Sacred Swords, as they required tremendous amounts of mana.

Now that my father was dead, everyone expected me to be the swords' next summoner. Should I fail to perform, everyone would look upon me with suspicion. Worst-case scenario, the people of Ausgrid might overthrow me.

But perhaps this was the perfect opportunity for me.

"From now on, I shall be a doll," I declared.

I shifted my gaze to the side, observing the marquess in all his confusion. That was understandable; I had said it out of nowhere.

"I am unable to summon the Sacred Swords despite the late king's passing. I also can't use magic," I said. "With the heir to the throne in such a state, won't the other marquesses look down on me?"

"Yes... They may even doubt whether you're truly of royal blood."

"Despite that, I am the only successor to the throne. Even if they wish to take me down, the other marquesses won't make a move immediately—they'll have their hands full keeping each other in check. Won't it be more likely that they put me on the throne and do away with our family's pesky sovereignty altogether once they're ready?"

"Unfortunately, yes. But what is the meaning of showing your cards so openly?"

"For revenge."

My immediate reply rendered him speechless. I threw my head back and laughed, a wild sound that bounced off the walls of the quiet room.

"Revenge, you say...?" the marquess echoed once he could eke out a response.

My smile widened. It was time to stage my show: a comedy I would write in the name of revenge, where I would play the main character and direct all of the action. *They* would be the other cast members. It was the beginning of a wickedly fun and terribly hilarious play.

"That's right. We have no need for six rulers in this kingdom, do we? Especially not those who betray the royal family. I shall strip away all their power and return it to its rightful owner: me."

The marquess, who rarely wore his heart on his sleeve, looked extremely unnerved. My proposal must have come as quite a shock.

"You should also think about what to do with yourself from now on," I said.

"It's not too late. Now that you know my plans, you may choose to betray me or serve me."

I stared down the marquess. He showed no sign of wanting to speak. Perhaps he finally sensed that I wasn't joking; his dazed expression suddenly turned stern.

"Permit me to ask three things, Your Highness. First, if I were to serve you, what would happen to my family and people?"

"If you ally with me, I guarantee your safety, as well as that of your family and your people. I'm well aware that your family has been loyal to the throne for generations. I also know that you yourself served my father well. Therefore, I shall promise you a position with a certain extent of power."

"A 'certain extent'? Does that mean my current authority will be taken away?"

"It does. Even if you remain a marquess, I cannot guarantee you will have the same authority as before. I am thinking of abolishing the system the Great Five have thrived under... But if you remain loyal to me, I promise you will have some authority in your region, plus hospitable treatment at the palace."

"Understood. My second question: How does Your Highness being a 'doll' translate to revenge?"

"Wouldn't that make it easier to lure out the hidden enemies?"

I couldn't help but laugh at the image of those who might oppose me falling into hell.

In stark contrast to my amusement, the marquess was paler and stiffer than ever. Oh, no need to be so frightened, my dear. I won't eat you alive if you join me.

Not that he's made his allegiance clear just yet.

"So you seek to root out all the traitors? This is too dangerous, Your Highness.

As we discussed earlier, you cannot use magic. People will undoubtedly aim for your life!"

"I assume you've never gambled before?"

"What? You would gamble with your fate?!"

I'd never gambled in my life—or the previous one. When I lived in Japan, I only visited a few casinos during vacations overseas. Since reincarnating into this world, I had never once left the palace grounds. In short, I had no experience to back up my bravado.

"I certainly would. To gain something worthwhile, one must be prepared to abandon something of equal value, no matter the dangers."

If what you stood to gain and what you could lose were roughly equivalent, you would finally have the chance to get what you desired. That was what I believed, at least. My only bargaining chip right now was my safety, so that was all I could bet on.

"Your Highness, you..."

"I wouldn't take the risk if I had no chance of winning," I said simply.

"You believe you have a chance? You think you can protect yourself without magic?"

"Yes, I do—though my chances of success aren't particularly high. The Great Five are bound to squabble over the throne even if they do dismantle our sovereignty. And to do that, they'll need to prepare. The more useless of a queen I am, the more likely they are to assume I'm harmless and ignore me to prioritize their schemes. The former king was murdered, after all... Since I cannot use magic, I believe this deception is the only way I can protect myself."

"Right... I understand now. This *does* seem like a solid tactic to lure the enemies out of hiding, not to mention a measure for your own protection. Very well, then. My third question: I do not doubt the head mage's judgment, but what will you do if your mana veins don't recover by the time you come of age?"

"I'm sure I'll manage."

"Wha...?!" My optimism had clearly caught him off guard.

"This is not blind faith. The crown I'll receive at the coronation is not just a weighty decoration—it is a tool to support me when I summon the Sacred Swords. The same crown has been used for generations."

"I confess that I did not know this," the marquess said.

"I thought as much. It is something only disclosed to heirs."

"Why tell me?"

"I figured it'd be fine. There is no deeper meaning."

"Thank you for placing so much faith in me. In that case, wouldn't it be better if you inherited the crown now? Your damaged veins should not affect that."

"Don't you think the other marquesses would try to interrupt my coronation ceremony?"

"Well..."

"Given that no one has ascended the throne at my age, we could use that as an excuse to delay my coronation."

"Fair enough."

"Taking everything into account, I will be the doll princess. I will show them how weak I am, that they can overthrow me at any time—even after I become queen. So, Marquess...what is your answer?"

"My answer remains unchanged. As long as you continue to protect my house and my people, I shall continue to loyally serve you."

"Hm."

I discreetly activated Heart Realm. It seemed I could still listen to others' inner voices if I tried hard enough, so I managed to hear his.

"Urk!" Because I pushed myself again, I coughed up blood.

"Are you all right?!" the marquess cried out.

It probably is best to stop using Heart Realm for the time being.

"Yes, the damage I suffered must still be affecting me. This is quite difficult to

heal from."

"Please do not push yourself."

"I won't." With a dry laugh, I wiped the blood away and looked at the marquess again. "Hide the fact that you are seeing me from now on, even if that means you have to antagonize me in public."

"I... Yes, Your Highness."

I heard a knock at the door before the maid walked in. "Your Highness, the girl you instructed us to look after has awakened," she told me.

"Really?!" I tried to stand up, but I was still too dizzy.

"Are you all right?"

"Never mind me. How is she?"

"About that..."

Seeing the maid hesitate made my stomach sink. "Did something happen?"

"She's lost her memory. She can't remember anything from before she woke up."

My mind reeled at the unexpected answer. "What?! Are you certain?"

Please let it be a mistake! I silently hoped.

"Y-yes... The physician examined her, and he is certain."

Her blatant answer confirmed the truth. I'd lost Alicia as well.

I clung to my last hope: "Is it possible she'll recover?" I asked hoarsely, despite knowing the answer.

"The physician does not know. Her memories may return tomorrow, or they may never."

Holding back my tears, I forced a smile. "I see."

"Would you like to visit her?"

"No, it's fine. Instead...I'll contact Lord Nichols. Bring me some paper."

"Um, of course, Your Highness."

The maid left the room immediately; only the marquess and I remained.

"I'll put Alicia in the count's care," I told him.

"Are you sure?"

My heartbreak at having to let her go was obvious, but he neither supported nor opposed my decision. The path on which I was about to embark was wreathed in bloody thorns. He probably thought I'd fare better if I had more people on my side.

"Absolutely. She risked her life to protect a member of royalty. It only makes sense to give her a noble status."

"No, that is not what I—"

"Don't worry. This is something I must do to protect Alicia."

The marquess was not fooled by my pretty words. He probably saw through my intentions from that sentence alone, as he refrained from asking further questions.

I never wanted to experience the fear of losing someone again. If I lost Alicia as well, I would never be able to stand on my own. I had managed to save her by some miracle, and the safest thing for her was for me to let her go.

"So it is."

"Marquess, alter the records regarding Alicia. Make them say she has never worked here before."

"Yes, Your Highness." I wasn't sure if he agreed with me or not, but the marquess rose to his feet. "After you've written the letter to the count, see to it that you get some rest."

"I suppose I will."

I waved my hand in dismissal, and the marquess left the room. As soon as he left my sight, I collapsed on the couch again, my limbs terribly heavy. I felt ill, not only because of my injured mana veins but also because of Alicia. I'd lost so much in this life—it went past sorrow to the point of absurdity. And yet, the sorrow only strengthened my determination.

That day, I continued to cry until I nearly lost my voice. Something shattered within me like breaking glass, though I could not pinpoint what or where. At that same time, I made up my mind to walk down the path of thorns. Even if I wound up stained with blood... Even if I had to bear the name of evil... I could not stop. I would succeed in my revenge.

I didn't have much time; I could only move freely until I came of age. Seven short years stood between me and my coronation. Until then, I had to study, hone my body, and recruit allies.

I turned my attention to the window. Before me was a beautiful sunset. The sinking sun painted the sky a shimmering, radiant red.

As I watched it set, I thought, This is where it all begins.

Chapter 2: The Doll Princess

THOSE SEVEN SHORT YEARS came and went.

"There's only three months until your wedding!"

The familiar voice had me lost in reverie, so I couldn't bring myself to respond right away.

"Hello? Princess Luxeria?"

Once the young lady realized I'd been daydreaming, she peered into my face. I smiled to assuage her worries.

How did things come to this? I wondered.

I slid my gaze toward her and found her in high spirits. She had grown considerably from the girl in my distant memories. This was the last person who should've been standing there with me, and yet there she was.

Really, how did this happen?

Brushing aside the question in my mind, I replied, "My, Alicia, that's all you've been talking about. We still have three whole months."

"What are you talking about, Your Highness? Three months is nothing! We need to decorate, decide on the food, source the ingredients, draw up a seating chart for the guests, and plan out the ceremony—there are plenty of things to do! And the most important of all is getting you ready! We need to massage your skin to keep it perfect and sort out your cosmetics, too..."

I'd gotten used to listening to Alicia drone on and on, so I gave up responding and let her words pass in one ear and out the other.

When she woke up years ago, I called on Lord Nichols to adopt her. I knew we'd meet again one day, considering she became a count's daughter and rose to noble status, but I never imagined we'd become so close. When she was introduced to me as my lady-in-waiting, I was so shocked I briefly forgot how to

breathe. I did some digging and found out she'd started working at the palace of her own volition to learn etiquette. I suspected someone pulled some strings, but that didn't seem plausible.

Goodness... I have so many questions about how this turned out. Still, I know I won't get to the bottom of it anytime soon, even if I ask.

"Ooh, first I should have you put the wedding dress back on!" Alicia said. "Then we'll decide what kind of makeup to do..."

The day I turned sixteen would be both my coronation and wedding to my fiancé. Since it was a wedding *and* a coronation, the ceremony involved the whole country. Preparing for it would certainly take time. The arrangements were to be done by professionals in each field; thus, there actually wasn't much for *me* to do. It was no wonder I felt like three months was plenty.

"Oh! In addition to the cosmetics, I want to plan your hairstyle, too... No, no, we can't miss out on the massages that'll keep you in good form..."

She was getting so worked up that I couldn't help but grin. Since ceremonial hairstyles took a long time, I dreaded that part of the process. Massages and skincare felt nice, but I didn't have the time to indulge—and the potency of her enthusiasm sort of scared me. Nevertheless, Alicia was so honest and bright, just having her around was a balm for my heart.

"Hmm, perhaps we should test out hairstyles after all! We stopped at a good spot the other day. Allow me to do your hair, Your Highness!"

"Unfortunately, our planning time for today is over. I have class with Mr. Mahoguard after this, don't I?"

"Oh, right. Mr. Mahoguard will no doubt arrive on time, so we must get ready soon."

Alicia's mood noticeably worsened. She looked so adorable it had me chuckling.

"Yes, such a pity. I do enjoy our time together," I told her. "Hey, Alicia? Come chat with me after class, won't you?"

"Of course! I shall return as soon as your class is over!"

Just like that, the clouds above her head dissipated, and she beamed brightly. Her joy was infectious, and I found myself laughing with glee.

Once Alicia left, I immediately went to the study next door. Unlike my bedroom, which had a light-pink theme, my study had wallpaper in a calming, tealike shade of goldenrod. A writing desk stood in the center of the room, with a low table beside it.

Soon after I arrived, Mr. Mahoguard entered with a maid in tow. He probably rushed here after losing himself in his own research. His dark-blue tunic was slightly askew on his thin body, and his long black hair was loosely bound. Clearly he'd put the bare minimum amount of effort into his appearance today. Even so, the eyes that peeked through his distinctive glasses glinted with intelligence.

"I saw Miss Alicia on my way here. She was as energetic as usual," he said, chortling at the recollection.

"Yes, she really is. Being with her is a lot of fun."

"Ha ha... You seem quite taken with Alicia. You *must* know that every time I see her, she blathers on endlessly about her love for you, Your Highness."

"Goodness, Alicia! Sorry about that."

"No worries. It's fascinating."

"What does she talk about?"

"Just how wonderful you are."

I wished I could crawl into a hole. Ever since Alicia moved back to the palace from the count's estate, she had been praising me to an aggrandized extent. She wasn't like that when we lived together in the tower.

"Well...that makes me feel even more apologetic."

"No need. As I said, it was most intriguing. We spoke about what you would be learning today, and she said she'd prepare you something sweeter than usual if the lesson is too difficult."

"Oh my! Did you tell her it would be difficult? I can't resist her homemade desserts!"

"I did, considering I've always prepared lessons that meet your expectations of difficulty. Now...shall we begin?" His expression turned stern, and a tense atmosphere overtook the room.

Mr. Mahoguard was the youngest of all my teachers. That said, the knowledge engraved in his mind was so vast and deep, you would think he was much older. He had very high expectations of others, and he assigned difficult work.

Once our lesson was over, Mr. Mahoguard said, "The coronation ceremony is gradually approaching. I barely ever come into the palace, as I still don't quite think I deserve to be here, but I've heard it's bustling. Word also has it that the heads of the Great Five are filtering into the capital."

I already knew this. It was prudent to stay informed of what those powerhouses were up to. "Yes, they've begun making their way here. But we still have three months, don't we? Everyone is in such a rush. It's quite troublesome."

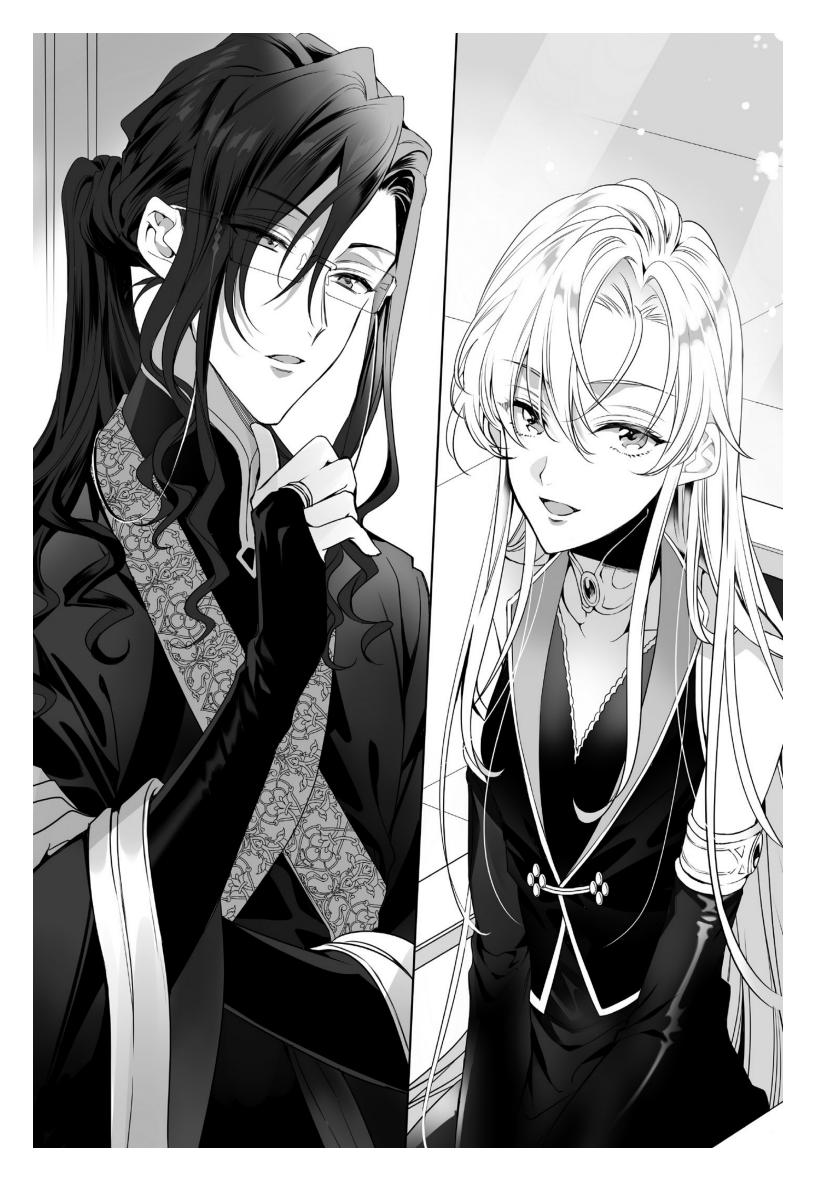
Detecting the real meaning behind my words, Mr. Mahoguard smiled. "Well, well. You must be excited."

I faltered. "Yes...of course."

Perhaps because of the awkward silence hanging in the air, Mr. Mahoguard raised his eyebrows in suspicion. "Oh? Was I wrong?"

"No. As you said, Mr. Mahoguard, I am excited...but at the same time, I'm a little afraid. It's a big event."

"I see, so that's it. You'll soon be in a position with a lot of responsibility, so it only makes sense you'd feel that way. That's why I'm overjoyed to see someone as sincere and purehearted as Alicia by your side."



"Indeed. Thank you for today's lesson, Mr. Mahoguard. I'll be looking forward to our next class the day after tomorrow."

I said those words to signify the end of our conversation. Taking that as his cue to go, he dipped into a quick bow and left. The now-empty room was far too quiet and terribly boring.

When will Alicia come back?

No sooner did I think that than I laughed at myself. Even though we were together earlier today, I already missed her. I thought I succeeded in letting her go—when I placed her in Lord Nichols's care, I thought it best we keep our distance. But the more honest I was with myself, the more I realized I hadn't really done that at all.

I was lucky to have her around; I just needed to accept the fact that she had walked right into a battlefield. The logical side of me begged me to release her —insisted that it wasn't too late—but I couldn't muster the courage to send her away again. I helplessly clung to any shred of happiness I found.

Though I constantly battled my own foolishness, the overwhelming joy eclipsed all else and enveloped me.

"My, Alicia, why are you here? I hardly see you in the servants' quarters during work hours."

Hearing her colleague call out to her, Alicia stopped. "Hi, Freesia," she said. "I just got my clothes dirty when I was helping set up the ceremony, so I came back to change them."

"You're working during your free time? You must really like your job," Freesia remarked. "We're all thrilled you're helping with the setup, though—there's not much time left."

"There's no need to thank me. If it's for Princess Luxeria, I'll gladly help. But since I can't use magic, all I can do is sweep the corners or help decorate."

To be more precise, Alicia did have magic—she just struggled to wield it.

"My, but those are exactly the tasks we need the most help with! You're very

diligent, assisting even though setting up the hall isn't really your responsibility..."

"What are you saying?! This is Her Highness's wedding ceremony! I'd do anything to make sure she's satisfied!"

"You sure do love the princess," Freesia said, rolling her eyes in annoyance.

Puffing up with pride, Alicia responded, "Yes, I do! From the moment we met, I knew I was born to serve her. She's just so kind—and beautiful, too! I'm so happy to have the opportunity to be her lady-in-waiting. Why, just the other day, when I was speaking with Her Highness in the library—"

One year ago, Alicia was selected to serve Luxeria. She couldn't forget the shock she felt when they first met. She truly felt like she'd been born to serve her.

"Okay, okay, I now know just how much you adore her," Freesia cut in, keeping Alicia from launching into a never-ending rant. "But hey, aren't you busy? Shouldn't you get going?"

"Oh no! I'm late! Sorry, I've got to run!"

"Not in the palace, you won't! There are other high-ranked nobles around, so be careful!"

"I know!"

Alicia dashed out of the servants' quarters, then speedwalked toward Luxeria's room.

The interior of the palace contained different areas. Each area had distinct rules as to who was allowed inside. The section where the royal family resided was in the deepest reaches of the palace, also known as the inner palace.

In front of the inner palace stood the middle palace, where only high-ranking nobles were allowed entry. It contained a hall mainly used for tea parties and other gatherings hosted by the royal family. Further ahead was the outer palace, where the bureaucrats worked.

Because Alicia was Luxeria's lady-in-waiting, she was allowed to move freely throughout the grounds. Using that special privilege, she wove through the

garden and proceeded directly to the inner palace.

When she reached the spot between the middle and inner palace, she overheard a discussion nearby.

"Regardless, House Radford did really well."

"Indeed, I'm jealous they managed to have a son about the same age as the Doll Princess. They can actually establish blood ties with the royal family."

Two men who appeared to be nobles stood in the hallway, speaking of the upcoming wedding. "Doll Princess" was Luxeria's nickname—a disparaging term that meant people saw her as just a pretty face, a useless ruler with no more skill than a child's plaything. Alicia wasn't sure who had coined the nickname, but it had caught on. Hearing the appalling epithet, she quickly hid behind one of the trees in the garden.

"I can also see why Lord Radford would initiate discussions with each house. I'm sure I would've done the same to make sure things run smoothly in the future, no matter how it'd make me look."

Lord Vixen Radford was the father of Luxeria's fiancé, Wilhelm, and head of one of the great five marquess houses.

Luxeria was the only remaining direct descendant of the royal family. Her ascension to the throne was inevitable, meaning her husband would be king consort. Whoever managed to wed their son to Luxeria stood to gain enormous authority and political power. House Radford had emerged the victor.

"Hah! Indeed. He'll be dealing with *the* Doll Princess—the fraud who knows nothing about being queen! She can't even summon the Sacred Swords. Well, with that pretty face...she'll be good to have by his side as a decoration."

"Not sure who started it, but that is a very fitting name."

"Quite right. The vast authority of the kingdom comes with a pretty doll... Can't blame the other houses for throwing a jealous fit."

"I went to greet the Radfords as soon as I came to the capital, seeing as they've gained a lot of power."

"You too? I did the same!"

Alicia glared at the two laughing men as she passed.

This is bad. I can't control my anger!

Once the noblemen were no longer in her sight, the ground beneath her shook. The moment the earth cracked, the gardener noticed and dashed over to Alicia.

"H-hey! What's wrong, Alicia?!" he cried.

In an instant, the magic floating around her disappeared. "I-I'm sorry, Tommy..."

When the magic dissipated, Tommy heaved a sigh of relief. "Let your magic run wild again?"

"Um, yeah... But it was because those men I just passed were saying such horrible things about Her Highness. I couldn't stand it!" Alicia's anger surged when she mentioned it, and magic seeped out of her once more.

Tommy frantically waved his hands in front of her. "Calm down," he said. "Getting angry won't change anything... You know that, right?"

"Yes, I do, but—"

"Even if we wanted to give those hoity-toity snobs a hard time, us servants can't do anything about it. Ditch the anger. There's no point holding on to it when you've got no outlet."

Alicia frowned, unable to accept his suggestion.

"Also...I know it's awful, but with all the high-ranking nobles trickling in, you're bound to hear people stay stuff like that over and over again. Are you gonna let your magic go nuts every single time?"

The royal family's power had weakened over the past few centuries. By contrast, the Great Five had only gotten stronger. Although it was once unthinkable to hear insults about royalty inside the palace, they had fallen to the point that such behavior was tolerated. In fact, it was so commonplace that even the palace staff expected it.

"Still, it's really odd that you have magic even though you can't cast any spells. People call you Powder Keg 'cause that magic runs wild when you're

ticked off. We all know you won't hurt us, since you only get mad when the princess is involved, but you should still be careful."

"Yeah, you're right. I'll be extra careful until the ceremony. Sorry for the trouble, Tommy."

"It's fine. I'm an exceptional gardener, y'know? I'll use the little bit of mana I got to fix this mess up in a jiffy."

His levity brought a smile to Alicia's face. "Thank you. I have to go now. See you later!"

"Gotcha. Make sure to keep what I said in mind, okay?"

"I will."

She thanked Tommy again and walked out of the garden.

When Alicia returned to me, my tension eased. "My, Alicia, that took you a while."

Her clothes weren't messy, but she was slightly out of breath. She must have rushed here.

"I'm sorry for being late. I made a little mistake..."

"What kind of mistake?"

"When I was cleaning up, I accidentally flipped over the bucket and soiled my clothes. I went back to my room to change, and that took some time."

"Goodness, you were cleaning the wedding hall again?"

"Ugh... Yes, I was."

"Good grief, Alicia. You must rest whenever you can. You're my lady-in-waiting! I'd be in trouble if you collapsed on the job."

"I get all my energy from serving you, Your Highness. No need to worry."

The number of hours she worked definitely would've violated labor laws in my past life. I told her to rest whenever there was a chance, but in the end, she always found more work to do. Holding her gaze, I thought how much she

resembled a puppy. If she had a tail, it would no doubt be wagging constantly. A smile rose to my face as I imagined how cute that would be.

I waved her over and had her lean forward so I could fix her hair. She politely obliged.

"Oh, sorry for my unsightly appearance," Alicia murmured. "Thank you for fixing it."

"Ha ha, no problem. Please don't work too hard, all right?"

The image of her collapsing after protecting me all those years ago still lingered in my mind. It was exactly why I wanted her to prioritize her safety and health. At the same time, I wanted her to have the freedom to do whatever she wished. Rather than dish out commands, I gently requested that she take care of herself.

"If that is what you wish, Your Highness...but please permit me to keep at it until the ceremony is over. As your lady-in-waiting, I want to do as much as possible to prepare the stage for your radiant presence."

"Alicia, your health is more important to me than anything else. I do appreciate the sentiment, though. Thank you."

Alicia tilted her head, curious. "Aren't you looking forward to the wedding ceremony?"

Even without her memories, she was still perfectly sharp. A wry smile spread across my face. *Aren't I? What a question.*

I was excited for it, in a sense, considering the coronation ceremony marked the beginning of my revenge. I had carefully planned for it all this time, and now I could finally set things in motion. But as excited as I was, I also wished the moment would never come.

It was Wilhelm who gave me second thoughts. If only I'd been betrothed to someone else, I could have done the deed without a twinge of remorse.

Since I never summoned the Sacred Swords, I expected others to call me a doll and sneer at me. I also expected the veracity of my royal lineage to come into question, and for others to want me off the throne. It had been a real

gamble aiming to become queen in such circumstances, but I'd come out on top. The marquesses were too caught up in their squabbling over who would rule that they let me succeed the throne unchallenged. Up until then, everything had gone according to plan.

I never imagined my assigned fiancé would be heir to one of the Great Five.

When I first heard the news, I was petrified. I had completely let my guard down. In a typical situation, each house would vie for the seat of king or queen consort and leave it at that. However, the Great Five wanted to do away with the royal family entirely and take the kingdom for themselves. To that end, all they had to do was oust me from the throne; marrying me off to one of their heirs seemed unnecessary. At the very least, I suspected they might choose a distant relative—a pawn who mattered little as long as they had a way in. Or perhaps they would've gotten too caught up in competing to settle on a single candidate.

But no, they arranged for me to marry a marquess's son. And it was *Wilhelm*, of all people—the boy I encountered by sheer coincidence at the palace and spent a whole day with. I didn't tell him my name back then, so he didn't know who I was...but I'd never forgotten him.

Maybe his parents realized I was the one he played with, and that's why he was betrothed to me? I fantasized for a moment, then immediately shooed that daydream away. There's no way a marquess would choose his path forward based on some anecdote from his son.

Nothing indicated that Wilhelm had made the connection, so I felt that to be proof enough of my suspicions. Frankly, it didn't matter if he remembered our time together or not—we were going to be enemies soon enough. It would be better if I didn't get attached to him.

I stamped down my affection, but I still felt unsettled. If only it were someone else, *anyone* else, I would've been more than happy to set the stage for my revenge.

"I'm sorry for saying something so ru—"

I immediately cut off Alicia's apology. "Though I do want that day to come sooner, I also wish it would never come."

"Because Master Wilhelm is your fiancé?"

How? How does she always know when and where to strike?

From her point of view, it must've been a natural thing to ask because of his reputation. Since I was already thinking about him, however, I heard her question as: "Are you sure it's okay to drag him into your revenge plot?"

Alicia was perceptive, and I'd mentioned his name once in the tower. If her memories had returned, she might've realized that I didn't want him involved because of our childhood connection. But since she *hadn't* recovered her memories, that was highly unlikely.

Despite having no recollection of our time in the tower, she's spot-on. What an astute girl.

Unable to answer, I just smiled. I wasn't sure how she interpreted that, but she didn't ask me any more questions. That was my cue to change topics.

"Oh, Alicia—could you put away the books stacked up over there?"

"I shall do it at once." Her gaze slid over to the pile on my desk, eyes resting on the book at the very top. It was the one I'd just been reading. "Do you like that book, Your Highness?"

It was a fairy tale called *The Evil Witch*. It was a story about a princess trapped inside a tall tower by a Black Witch, forced to live there all alone. One day, a fairy appeared before the princess, and the two became fast friends. Once the fairy found out the princess was being held against her will, she confronted the Black Witch without telling the princess. In the end, the fairy had to run for her life.

At the same time, a prince from the neighboring country took interest in the doorless tower and decided to scale it—thereby meeting the princess. The prince fell in love with her at first sight. When the princess broke down and cried, he asked her, "Oh, princess as beautiful as the moon, what bothers you so?"

The princess told him through her tears that her dear friend—the fairy—had disappeared, but she herself couldn't go out to find her. The prince promised he would search for the fairy in her stead, and he left the tower. He found the

fairy, who told him about the Black Witch. The two of them worked together to defeat the witch, then rescued the princess and lived happily ever after.

That was the story.

"Ha ha ha, it's quite childish, isn't it?" I said.

Everyone in the kingdom knew the children's story by heart. It had such a profound impact on our people that comparing a woman to the moon meant you were praising her beauty. Not many commoner families knew how to read, but the tale was also passed down through oral tradition and plays.

No one would expect someone about to turn sixteen would bother reading it. The only one who knew was Alicia, since we were attached at the hip.

"No, not at all! It's a wonderful story!" Alicia said. "Every girl looks up to a hero who can beat the villain and save the princess!"

"My, is he the prince of your dreams? I've heard many girls grow up admiring princesses."

"Yes, I'd love to be a princess who can catch a nice prince like him! What about you, Your Highness?"

"Hmm, I think I prefer the fairy. She's a wonderful friend for challenging the Black Witch all by herself. I like the prince just as much, though."

"So you would rather not be the princess?"

"Ha ha, I guess not. Well then, Alicia, could you please help me pack up? I'd also like some tea."

"Got it! I'll brew the tea first."

Alicia dipped out of the room, only to return shortly after, pushing a full tea cart.

"Today, we have Munrue's first flush tea, Dimble, and Sayrol," she said. "Which blend would you like?"

I was deeply moved; when we lived in the tower, she didn't seem to care about tea blends as long as the brew was drinkable. She'd grown a lot since then.

"I'll have the Munrue," I said.

"Yes, Your Highness." Just like that, she brewed the tea in front of me with smooth, fluid movements. "By the way, I saw Mr. Mahoguard earlier."

"I heard. He said he was happy to see you with your usual pep."

"Ugh... That doesn't feel like a compliment."

"Oh? I think it was. He told me you were a rare gem in this palace. I, too, find your liveliness adorable."

Bright, straightforward people like Alicia were a rarity around here. Most people were always digging around behind one another's backs, trying to suss out ulterior motives.

A bashful smile spread across her face. "Your Highness, you're embarrassing me..."

She placed a fresh cup of tea in front of me. I took the teacup and drank it. "Mm, your tea tastes the best, Alicia. Did you cast some sort of secret spell to make it taste this good?"

"Hrm... I guess the skill a maid learns for her lady is basically magic. It tastes great because it's filled with my love for you!"

"Gosh, Alicia..."

I beamed at that, then enjoyed the delicious tea with scones and mini sandwiches. Once I'd finished, Alicia brought me a pie just out of the oven. The sweet aroma was simply heavenly.

"This is the main dessert for today," she told me, setting it on the table.

"So this is what smelled so good. What type of pie is it?"

"It's polum pie. The fruits taste great if you eat them warm."

"Ooh, polums! Wow, this looks delicious. Did you come up with the recipe yourself?"

I cut the small pie into bite-sized pieces with a fork, the sweet scent wafting in the air. The inside was soft and melty, and the crust had perfect crunch. As I savored the texture, a smile rose to my face. "Yes! I wanted you to really enjoy your tea today, so I came up with this pie. I went and bought polums at the market yesterday."

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"Aren't you my lady-in-waiting?"

"Huh? Yes, I am."
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"You're with me nearly every moment of the day, right?"

"Yes, it is an honor to serve you."

"Then how did you find the time to go to the market?"

"With the power of love."

"...I see."

I laughed it off, but was Alicia's love for me so strong that she was capable of superhuman feats? I wouldn't be able to pry any further, so I focused on my dessert. With each bite, the whipped cream melted in my mouth. The tartness of the polums cut through the sweetness, elevating the taste to sheer elegance. The pie was just as tasty as it looked, and I couldn't stop eating it.

I polished it off in a flash. "Ahh, that was delicious."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it!"

"You've really outdone yourself. I wonder if the head chef will eventually invite you to work in the kitchen?"

She glanced away, suddenly stiff.

"...Or maybe he already has," I said.

"I'm sure he was just joking, but...if he was actually being serious... My apologies to the chef, but I do *not* intend on leaving your side, Your Highness!"

Seeing how eager she was to stay with me, I called her over to stroke her hair. "I'd be lost without you, Alicia," I said honestly. "By the way, how was the market?"

"It was quite crowded, probably because of how soon your wedding ceremony is. There was even a show tent! Everyone was cheery and all, but with so many people around there was definitely a fracas or two. The kingdom's army looked really busy."

The kingdom tended to see an influx of visitors before large, important ceremonies. Though we needed to improve our public security, it was adequate at the moment.

"I see... I'm glad it was fun."

"Yes, very much so! Mages were performing magic dances in the show tent. It was just so dreamy!"

Envisioning the scene, I said, "Ooh, that sounds great. I'd love to see it one day."

Unfortunately, I'd never left the palace grounds. I *couldn't* leave; I was the Doll Princess. Worthless, but still good enough to have as decoration. That was why everyone was concerned for my safety. As a result, I was trapped inside the palace like a bird in a cage.

The head of House Radford, my fiancé's father, was supposed to be the ringleader. Yet it was his family and their associates who truly thought me a nuisance, and who were waiting in the wings for a chance to kill me. This only made the marquess more protective, hence my restriction to the palace grounds.

"Let's go see it together one day, Your Highness. It looks just like you imagine."

Alicia knew how little freedom I had, so she sometimes stepped out to see them in my stead. I clearly remembered her giddy excitement when she first proposed reporting to me about all sorts of pretty sights.

"I'd like to hear more about the show tents."

"As you wish!"

I absorbed her delightful stories and animated gestures with a smile on my face.

"Hey, isn't this a bit too...extravagant?" Luxeria asked, eyeing herself in the mirror with a wrinkled brow.

"What are you saying, Your Highness? It suits you very well. Doesn't it,

Freesia?"

Seeking to encourage Luxeria, Alicia grinned and pointedly asked Freesia for backup. Though Alicia usually attended to Luxeria by herself, formalwear for a party was too great a task to handle alone. Consequently, Freesia was also there to aid Alicia in getting the princess ready.

"Yes. As Alicia said, it really suits you, Your Highness."

Luxeria looked beautiful in the glamorous party dress: a bright-red robe à l'anglaise. As if to highlight the superb quality of the fabric, the dress had very little decoration. To compensate for the lack of embellishments, the white stomacher had pearls sewn on with gold thread, forming an intricate pattern. The petticoat was made with the same material as the lace along the sleeves. Though there was little ornamentation, the dress exuded elegance.

"Really? Hm... Since both of you said so, it should be fine."

The dress complemented her wonderfully. She looked like a rose, her beauty in full bloom.

Today there was a party hosted by royalty. It signified the beginning of the social season and was held to welcome the nobles gathering for the upcoming wedding. The ones in charge of the wedding preparations were probably groaning about having to plan another party. They were already so busy, Alicia feared they might just work themselves to death.

Naturally, the lady-in-waiting was a little tired.

"Thank you for getting me ready, Alicia. You can rest until the party ends," Luxeria said.

"How could you say that? This is my chance to burn the sight of you all dolled up into my mind, Your Highness! I cannot waste a single second!"

Seeing how quickly and seriously Alicia responded, Luxeria smiled wryly. "If that's what you want to do, then go ahead."

Luxeria donned a regal expression, stood up, and walked forward. Satisfied, Alicia watched the princess take the hand of her royal guard and walk forward with careful steps.

Once Luxeria was far away, Freesia smirked and said to Alicia, "You should've taken the chance to rest, since Her Highness went out of her way to say so. You've not only been doing your usual work but also preparing for the party, haven't you?"

"Yes, but I felt all my fatigue wash away after seeing Her Highness look gorgeous. As I said, I don't want to miss a single second of her in that wonderful dress!"

"About that... Do you always say those kinds of things to the princess?" "Huh? Yeah, why?"

"O-oh. Well, good, I suppose. Her Highness must really like you," Freesia remarked.

Freesia thought she knew all too well how much Alicia adored her mistress, but she was put off by the intensity of her praise.

You don't want to miss a single second? Burn the sight of her into your mind? Just how much do you like her?! she thought.

If Freesia were in Luxeria's position, she probably would've distanced herself immediately. Although Luxeria was known as the Doll Princess, she was still a respectable member of royalty in this kingdom. Alicia's head could roll at the first sign of disrespect. Yet in all her authority, Luxeria didn't question Alicia's devotion. In fact, she calmly accepted every word of it. She obviously had great affection for the girl.

Like servant, like mistress... There's a lid for every pot. Anyway, it should all be fine since they've built a good relationship with each other, thought Freesia. She did her best to impart these thoughts throughout the conversation.

"I can't stay here! I've got to go!"

Freesia frantically held Alicia back before she could dash off. "Stop right there. No running in the palace."

"Oh, sorry. I couldn't help it." This time, instead of running, Alicia walked after Luxeria at a brisk pace.

The radiant glow of glamorous chandeliers meticulously polished by the servants bounced off the floor, making the hall sparkle. On the wall hung five heavy banners of different colors: crimson, indigo, cerulean, jade, and amber. Each color represented one of the Sacred Swords. The Sword of Love was crimson, Wisdom was indigo, Sincerity was cerulean, Honor was jade, and Eternity was amber. The hoisted banners bore unique patterns as well.

Atop the dais on the one side of the hall lay the throne. It had been remade in a more feminine style for its soon-to-be queen, the silver cushion embroidered with a vibrant design.

The hall was already bustling. Tradition dictated that guests arrive before the royalty.

When Luxeria entered, the band stopped playing. With all eyes focused on her in the now-quiet hall, she smiled sweetly.

"Thank you for gathering here today. I am pleased to see everyone in great health and good spirits. I hereby extend my greetings and prayers for the continued prosperity of the kingdom and the well-being of you and your families."

After Luxeria's speech concluded, the music resumed. But unlike the relaxed tune playing earlier, it was a lively and upbeat song perfect for dancing. Married couples and socialites had already paired off. Luxeria watched from atop her throne as everyone danced with smooth, practiced steps. Meanwhile, Alicia kept her gaze locked on the princess from a concealed position behind the dais.

"I'm surprised you know this spot exists," whispered Freesia, whom Alicia had brought along.

"Yeah. Her Highness told me about it before. Apparently, it's a well-kept secret among the guards."

"Isn't that to protect the royalty? Servants like us shouldn't know about it."

"Huh? But I do now... Her Highness said I'd probably be bored waiting alone, so I could bring along a friend for company," Alicia explained.

"Well, I'll take this secret to my grave."

Unfortunately, Freesia's last whisper did not reach Alicia's ears; her focus shifted entirely toward Luxeria. "Ahh, she's so wonderful. I'm glad we went with that hairstyle after all. The dress suits her so well," Alicia murmured, enchanted.

Freesia let out a defeated sigh, then noticed a man out of the corner of her eye. "Oh my, isn't that Master Wilhelm dancing in the center? His partner is..."

Wilhelm Radford had brown hair and golden eyes. His physique wasn't overly muscular, but even through his clothing, one could tell he had a toned and well-proportioned body. His gorgeous face held its own beside Luxeria's renowned beauty. He was the heir to the prestigious House Radford, one of the Great Five. Blessed with these divine attributes, he was chosen to be Luxeria's fiancé.

However, he currently danced in the arms of another woman.

There was no rule preventing men and women from dancing with someone other than their betrothed. In fact, it was commonplace to dance with others to foster social connections or to maintain the *appearance* of doing so. Yet it was an unspoken rule that the first dance of the night should be with your wife or fiancée. Even if it was a strategic marriage devoid of love, a man choosing to dance with his wife or fiancée proved his respect for her. This was tacitly understood by all the attendees of the ball.

Despite this, Wilhelm's first dance was not with Luxeria but with another woman. Even worse, his dance partner was Barbara, a baron's daughter rumored to have recently caught his attention.

Freesia shot a fearful glance at Alicia, worried she would snap at this disrespect toward Luxeria. If the lady-in-waiting let her magic run out of control in this hall full of people, the princess's favoritism would mean nothing. She would face harsh consequences.

Strangely enough, Alicia showed no signs of letting her magic take over. Freesia, expecting the worst, heaved a sigh of relief—but that relief was short-lived.

"What the heck is *that*?!" Alicia growled. A second later, magic surged from her body. Her eyes were fixed on Wilhelm and Barbara.

Oh, she's definitely angry!

Freesia's despair was immeasurable. Her glimmer of hope that Alicia would keep her magic under control was immediately extinguished. She frantically searched for the right words to calm her down. Freesia considered various options in the few seconds she had, but in the end, bringing up Luxeria was the only way.

"C-calm down, Alicia... We'll just trouble the princess if we cause a scene at her party."

It seemed to work. The intense magic that hovered around her gradually began to disappear.

"That's true..." Alicia said, deflating.

Freesia exhaled, glad she had managed to mitigate disaster.

"I'm sorry... Seeing that man neglect Her Highness's feelings—and that woman disrespect her, too—just made my blood boil." As she vented her frustrations, Alicia's magic started seeping out again.

Sensing it, Freesia chimed in, "Yes, she *is* very disrespectful! She should know that Master Wilhelm is Her Highness's fiancé. Barbara is famous for licking the boots of every high-ranking noble. But there's also something wrong with Master Wilhelm for *falling* for someone like that—oops, never mind! Ignore me!" Freesia quickly fell silent after realizing she'd just added more fuel to the fire.

"That's exactly why it's so irritating! He's disregarding Her Highness's feelings. There's no way someone of *his* status wouldn't know what he's doing!"

"Her Highness's feelings? I know I shouldn't really say this, but...they're engaged for political reasons, right?"

The engagement between Luxeria and Wilhelm was nothing more than a political arrangement. The royal family wanted the influence of the Great Five, and House Radford coveted the royal family's authority. Luxeria and Wilhelm were to be wed because their parties' intentions aligned; there was no love between them. That was what all the nobles and servants in the palace assumed, at least.

Alicia firmly denied this. "Her Highness does have feelings for Master

Wilhelm." Her quiet assertion made it seem like she had solid proof.

"Huh, really? Well, if you say so. You must've heard it from Her Highness."

"No, I didn't." Alicia thought of the smile on Luxeria's face when Alicia had asked if the reason she wasn't looking forward to the wedding was that her partner was Master Wilhelm. The princess's smile was so incredibly cold and sorrowful it sent shivers down her spine. She seemed fit to cry, so Alicia attempted to ask her another question, but Luxeria steered the conversation away from the subject. Alicia hadn't gotten the chance to ask about it again, but she was certain Luxeria loved Wilhelm—and that was why she *didn't* want to marry him. It was terribly contradictory, but Alicia wholeheartedly believed that was the meaning behind her melancholy smile.

"What ...?"

"Her Highness's heart is her own, and I've never asked her...but I know she has feelings for Master Wilhelm. No, I think she *loves* him! That's why she's sad seeing Master Wilhelm like that."

"She's sad?" Freesia looked over at Luxeria.

The princess was still engaging in cheerful conversations with guests. She didn't seem sad at all. She wasn't even looking in Wilhelm's direction. As usual, a beautiful smile shone on her face.

"Yes, Her Highness is sad," Alicia said. "I'm always with her—I can tell."

Freesia studied Luxeria again, but the princess's face betrayed no sorrow. Her smile lingered as she chatted with one attendee after another, unchanging. Was Luxeria truly sad? Freesia just couldn't wrap her mind around it.

"Well, if you say she is, she probably is," said Freesia with a small laugh, acquiescing. "Anyway, I'm glad you've calmed down."

"It's all thanks to Her Highness. She must be in so much pain, but she's enduring it. I can't possibly burden her with the consequences of me lashing out with magic."

Freesia was certainly glad of that. There were no more signs of Alicia's magic running wild.

"Just because she's called the Doll Princess doesn't mean she's emotionless...

She isn't being trapped, she's *letting* herself be trapped, and she hides her thoughts and feelings. That's why there's no emotion on her face," Alicia said in a voice so low, Freesia barely heard her. Alicia's eyes seemed vacant, and her face was completely blank; it was vastly different from her usual demeanor.

Frightened, Freesia pretended she hadn't heard. "Hm? Did you say something, Alicia?"

Alicia spun toward Freesia and tilted her head in confusion. "Huh? No, I didn't say anything." Her earlier frigidity had disappeared, and she'd returned to her normal self.

"Maybe I was imagining things," Freesia said. "Anyway, the dance is about to end."



Alicia nodded. "Yeah, it is."

She and Freesia then turned their attention back to Luxeria.

"You're there, aren't you?" I murmured softly in my study.

A man soon appeared from the shadows. "Amazing as always, Your Highness. You never fail to sense someone's presence," he said in an exasperated tone, smirking.

I laughed dryly. "I thought you'd call me out for being slow."

"Of course not," he told me. "In fact, your detection is so spot-on that I'm worried my skills are lacking. That said, you *did* take longer than usual."

"I might be tired from the party."

"Ah, yes. You did quite well. Shall we speak another time?"

"No, I wish to hear your report as soon as possible."

"Thank you. How is Alicia?"

"She was just helping me pack away the ball gown. I told her I wanted something sweet, so she headed off to the kitchen. She probably won't be back for a while."

"I see. You are very prepared, Your Highness."

"Not exactly. I *did* think it was about time for you to arrive. But more than that, I really do want to have Alicia's dessert," I explained.

"You sure do love those," he mused. "The girl must be gifted to have the crown princess wrapped around her finger... I'd like to try one of her sweets myself."

"Ha ha ha. You should ask her. Everything she makes is delicious."

Just thinking about her desserts made my stomach cry out. Then again, my hunger was only natural. Although there was a banquet at the party, the number of guests to greet was endless, so I hadn't eaten a single bite. You'd get extra hungry, too, if you saw all that delicious food you couldn't eat.

It wasn't good to eat so late at night, but this was a reward for my hard work. Alicia was amazingly attuned to my needs; she could tell I was tired without me saying a word. She told me she would make me something sweeter than usual.

"I will if I have the chance," he said. "And please, have this."

He handed me a stack of papers, which I quickly skimmed through.

"Oh. This is bad. *Very* bad," I said with a laugh. "I'm surprised the regions managed to maintain governance for so long."

There was a lot of complex, strange, and needless work in this kingdom. It was commonplace for a single task to be shuffled around to different departments. Some wound up stuck in the discussion stage. Just how much precious time was spent on such things?

Moreover, the kingdom required a substantial number of staff for the system to function. It was an absolute waste of resources. Unfortunately, this applied not only to the other regions of the kingdom but also to the palace itself.

"Really, what is the government even for?" I asked. Should the government prioritize the formal processes or the citizens? It was they who had to bear the consequences of bureaucracy.

I didn't think the formalities should be ignored outright. But seeing the people's wishes disappear into thin air to satisfy the egos of officials...you'd end up lamenting about it, too.

"Your Highness..."

"Well, it's fine. Nothing will come out of whining about it."

"True," he said with a smile. He seemed to be enjoying this. "But you'll be changing it for us, no? You'll destroy all the stupid rules and burdensome bureaucrats so everyone can live peacefully in this kingdom."

I smiled. "I believe I'll start with this region first. It's amazing they managed to keep the government running."

"I assume it's because some excellent individuals handled the important tasks here and there," he said.

"Most likely. And we've managed to make some unexpected discoveries this

time, thanks to them."

"I'm glad there are some officials who meet your standards, Your Highness."

"Indeed. I suppose there are a few."

The man laughed. "You're very strict."

"If you think I'm strict now, what will you think after I take the throne? I'm planning to fire a lot of people."

"You'll be downright terrifying."

"Ha ha! Terrifying, you say?"

"Regardless of whether you're feared or hated, you have no intention of stopping, right?"

"I shall lend an ear to dissenting opinions, but no—I will not stop." I took a piece of paper, wrote some notes with a quill pen from the writing desk, and showed it to him. "We will not be taking in any of these people here. As for the rest, I'll give commands after reading through the report. Make sure to let them know. Oh, and show this to Norman as well."

Norman was a bureaucrat in the palace and another important ally of mine. I'd been discussing with him how to reform regional governance.

"Understood," the man said.

"How is the other task?"

"Still in progress."

"Too slow. I want to see it as soon as possible... I'll give them one more week. At that time, tell me the minimum amount of work required for a region to function. It's fine if the report is incomplete."

"Yes, Your Highness. I shall let them know."

"Thank you. There just isn't enough time."

"Seems like you're doing fine," he muttered.

I laughed at the words that seemed to have slipped out of his mouth. "Really? I must be quite something to hide it from someone astute as you."

"You are. You're the stunning, beautiful Doll Princess... No one would expect you to be like this behind the mask."

"Ha ha ha. It's thanks to everyone going along with it. I didn't think my nickname would already be so effective. I knew names were meaningful, but I never imagined it would make things so easy for me."

If royalty tried to change the government, the spotlight was bound to shine on them. The ruler of the kingdom making a move was a noteworthy event. However, thanks to this unfortunate epithet of mine, none of that attention ever fell on me. Everyone was fooled by the Doll Princess.

"Indeed. You didn't even need to go out of your way to build up your image. I'm sure no one would suspect the Doll Princess to be scheming and building a trap behind the scenes. If you hadn't allowed me to work with you, I wouldn't have noticed, either."

"You say that, but won't you take on another mission to assassinate me?"

"If I were dealing with the Doll Princess, I would."

"Then that means you truly have become my subordinate." Now that was a laugh.

"Really, no one could anticipate your true nature. Rather than Doll Princess, wouldn't lililaris suit you more, Your Highness?"

Lililaris was a graceful flower with a pale-yellow hue. Despite its outward appearance, the flower concealed a terrifying secret: it contained a potent poison. Consuming just a small handful of roots would kill you instantly.

"I can't believe you'd compare me to a lililaris...but it's so fitting that I cannot deny it."

He chortled. *Is it okay for a spy to be so open with his emotions?* I wondered, but I let the matter slide. I was enjoying our conversation.

"How long do you plan on hiding your poison from Alicia, Your Highness?"

Despite his somewhat teasing tone, I snickered. "I'm sure she'll find out eventually." His smile melted straight off, so it seemed I'd baffled him. That had me giggling.

"I assumed you would do your best to hide it," my spy said.

"I wasn't planning on it. In fact, I never intended to from the beginning. I simply have no need to show it. Is that really so surprising?"

"Well, yes. Are you sure you're all right with that? If Alicia learns the truth, you might not be able to taste her delicious desserts anymore," the man said. "Or do you think she'll remain by your side even after you've revealed yourself?"

"I have no idea. If she does leave, then there's nothing I can do about it."

"That's even more confounding, given how much you dote on the girl."

"Ha ha ha. I'm sure you think so." I gazed off into the distance, recalling a distant memory.

"I give up," he said. "Seems like I can't peek into your heart no matter how hard I try. I shall take my leave."

"Go ahead. Good work."

He vanished without a sound, leaving no trace he'd ever been here. It was as though I'd been alone all this time. The sudden silence of the room made it feel much more vast than earlier. Then again, this room was bigger than any I'd had in my past life.

It was then that Alicia burst in, shattering the silence. "I'm back, Your Highness! Thanks for your patience!" she cried, energetic as always.

"And patient I was," I told her. "Now let me have some of your delicious dessert."

"Gladly!"

With that, we moved to my room so I could savor every bite of Alicia's homemade sweet treats.

Chapter 3: The Doll Princess's Wedding

MY WEDDING WAS only two months away, but nothing had changed. My life, my environment... Everything stayed the same. If I didn't already know better, I wouldn't have guessed the ceremony was imminent.

Accompanied by Alicia, I leisurely enjoyed a cup of tea in the garden.

"Would you care for another?" Alicia asked me.

"Yes, please."

The commotion caused by the wedding preparations hadn't reached the inner palace. Thanks to that, I could sip my tea in peace. I reached out to grab more of Alicia's freshly baked cookies. Their crunchy texture was quite enjoyable. Topped with homemade jam, each cookie had a different flavor. They were all so delicious, you'd think they were professionally made.

"Mmm, these are just lovely! Though there isn't much sugar, the natural sweetness of the fruit makes up for it."

"Thank you. Tommy grew the fruit!"

"My... He grew these on the palace grounds?"

"Yup. He told me he's been growing all sorts of things in the greenhouse you gave him. Mainly medicinal herbs, but he grows fruit, too. Some fruits have medicinal qualities as well, you know."

"I see. I'm surprised he was willing to let go of any."

"At first, he wasn't too willing to hand them over. But I *really* wanted you to try some, so I chased him around for three days. He finally gave in!"

"O-oh..." I made a silent promise to share some of these cookies with Tommy later.

I couldn't believe Alicia had the time to pester him to the point of surrender. Does she have the ability to teleport? I wondered the same when I heard she

had time to go to the market. But from what I've seen, teleportation magic doesn't exist in this world...

"That red jam is made from kukul fruit. I heard it can help you recover from fatigue."

"Wouldn't it be better for you to eat it, then?" I asked. With the wedding day drawing near, Alicia was busier than ever before. I had to order her to take breaks because she wouldn't listen to me when I asked politely.

"I appreciate your concern, but I'm fine," Alicia said. "My sturdy disposition is my greatest talent!"

"Is that so?"

"Mm-hmm. Besides, I baked these for you, Your Highness! You shouldn't be worrying about me—your wedding is in two months. You must make sure you're rested."

"Ah... Very true."

Unfortunately, it still didn't feel real. My fiancé, Wilhelm, was also in the royal capital, but I hadn't seen him since the banquet. I was upset that he didn't visit me, but perhaps I was being selfish.

"Today, a designer will come to discuss the wedding dress," Alicia said.

"Again?"

"Yes, again. There are some details I thought needed fixing."

Though I hinted to her that it was a bother, Alicia wouldn't budge. I caved under the pressure. "Right... I mean, as long as it doesn't overlap with other things on my schedule."

"Thank you!"

Lately, Alicia's passion for my wedding burned even brighter. She wouldn't let me run away from it anymore, although I was thinking I should probably join in the preparations soon.

Right then, a man walking along the hall stopped and called out to me: "Well, if it isn't Princess Luxeria."

"Hello, Lord Alcott. It's very rare for you to come to the inner palace," I said.

The man was a marquess, Lord Douglas Alcott. One of the Great Five, House Alcott controlled the region closest to the royal palace. Douglas was its head, and as you might expect, his presence exuded grandeur.

"Yes. I simply wished to greet you, Your Highness."

"Why now?" A little late, isn't it?

"I have been quite busy. You appeared busy yourself when I first arrived at the capital."

To an outsider listening in, our conversation must've sounded like an exchange of sarcastic insults. I had essentially asked, *Isn't it too late to "greet" me?* He then retorted, *If the Doll Princess is busy, then I, as head of House Alcott, am even busier.*

Alicia watched from beside me with a scowl on her face.

"Certainly," I said. "I'm glad to see you well."

"The same to you, Your Highness." He glared down at Alicia. "As you know, I often stress that you should be selective with your company."

"Thank you so much for your concern. but I'll be fine. I daresay I keep splendid company." I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Ha ha ha! Well, as long as you are satisfied. My apologies for getting ahead of myself," Douglas said.

"No worries. Thank you for paying a visit despite being so busy. Please enjoy your time in the royal capital."

"I will. Your concern is likewise appreciated." Douglas bowed and swiftly made his exit.

Alicia hung her head once he was out of sight. "My sincerest apologies, Your Highness." She seemed upset.

"Don't take it to heart. He wasn't criticizing you."

"But—"

"Really, you don't need to worry about it," I insisted. "Could you please pour

me another cup of tea? I'm feeling a little chilly."

"Should we move indoors, then?"

"No. I would like to enjoy the scenery here for a little longer."

"Then I shall bring you a shawl along with more tea. Just a moment."

"There. See?" I prompted, and Alicia tilted her head sideways. "What you did just now—you're always so considerate of me. That's exactly why I want you by my side."

"Oh, Your Highness! I-I'll bring you the tea and shawl immediately!"

Alicia ran off with a happy smile on her face.

You can't run in the palace, I thought with a crooked grin as I watched her go. She probably doesn't realize just how much her genuine and sincere nature has saved me...

A shadow suddenly loomed over my table. I looked up and froze at the unexpected arrival.

"It's been a while, Wilhelm."

"It sure has, Princess Luxeria."

He smiled nonchalantly, unperturbed. Maybe he hadn't noticed my reaction. Or he had, and he didn't care.

"Are you also here to greet me?" I asked.

"'Also'...? Someone else was here?"

"Yes, Douglas."

"Oho, Lord Alcott himself. We did not plan this, I assure you."

"Really now? Curious, then, that I receive two rare visits right in a row. Makes me wonder if something *is* happening."

He shrugged and smirked wider. "I'm telling you, it's nothing."

"Then what brings you here?"

"Do I need a reason to see my fiancée?" he countered.

"Hrm. No, but I don't think you would come see me of your own volition."

"That's not true."

I felt like I saw him hesitate for a moment. *How shameless,* I thought to myself. At the same time, my heart suddenly felt so cold and heavy I feared it might freeze. I averted my gaze to hide my inner turmoil.

Everyone knew about him and Barbara. Although I hadn't seen him since the party, he apparently spent almost every day with her. The socialites gossiped behind our backs, wondering who *his* real fiancée was.

It's too late now. Wallowing in hurt won't change anything.

I raised my head and stared at him. His sardonic smile deepened as he stared back.

"The moon..."

"The moon?" I blurted, wanting to know what he really meant.

At that moment, I sensed another presence in the hall. I assumed it was Alicia, but I was wrong.

Wilhelm spoke up again right when I saw who it was. "It's true that Barbara is a wonderful woman. I admit I enjoy spending time with her more than you."

I laughed bitterly. "Well! I shouldn't tie you down, then. You may leave. You've already paid your respects, so go and have fun."

For some reason, he went stiff. He then dipped into a quick bow and walked off. We had spent only a few minutes together, yet I felt a profound loneliness; it was as though a gaping hole had opened up in my chest. It was an altogether unsatisfying encounter with my cold fiancé.

I felt far more emotional than I had anticipated. The wonderful scenery around me immediately lost its appeal. Shortly after, Alicia returned, bringing cheer along with her.

"Sorry I took so long, Your Highness!" she exclaimed.

I chuckled at how jolly she was. "Welcome back, Alicia."

"Here, take the shawl first! It's a new one that goes well with the dress you're

wearing. And about the tea..."

Thanks to her, my dulled surroundings regained their beauty. I put a lid on my earlier tumult and focused on the delightful conversation with Alicia.

Looking at myself all gussied up, I sighed. "How depressing."

"Come now, Your Highness!" Alicia said, all fired up with her fists raised. "I know I'm nothing special, but I'll be there for you!"

I pray she won't need to use those fists, I thought, smiling. "Are you kidding? You're a one-woman army. Now, shall we go?"

Although I said that out loud, on the inside I was thinking, Is there a way I can escape from this tea party?

Other noblewomen had been invited to this tea party. Balls were bad enough, but tea parties were just a nightmare. It would be much better for my mental health to hole up in the library and read instead. Regardless, I couldn't come up with a good excuse to run away, so I had no choice but to head to the salon where the tea party was to be held.

Just like the evening party, everyone was already there by the time I arrived. Although the dresses were not as extravagant as the evening ball gowns, everyone's attire was still elaborate and luxurious.

"Thank you all for gathering here today."

The moment I spoke, the crowd stood and dipped into curtsies. After that, I took the empty seat reserved for the host. Following my lead, the other ladies sat down again.

All the ladies were unmarried women around my age. If only this were a pleasant gathering where we could chat endlessly, it would have been all right. However, each noblewoman came bearing the honor of her family. We all had to stay sharp, carefully assessing whether each question or topic had a double meaning. Words had to be chosen wisely and with careful consideration.

In other words, it was going to be an exhausting event.

To start, I praised some jewelry that caught my eye. "Oh my, Lady Melania,

your necklace is beautiful."

"I am honored by your praise, Your Highness. This necklace was crafted with a ruby from my region."

"Speaking of rubies, your red dress from the other day was absolutely gorgeous, Your Highness. I look forward to seeing your wedding dress," another lady chimed in.

"Yes, indeed."

"What kind of dress will it be?"

I giggled politely. "I shall save it as a surprise for the special day."

Everything seemed to be going well. The conversation was calm and peaceful.

At that very moment, the voice of someone who should never have come reverberated through the salon: "Hello!"

I knew this gratingly peppy voice. "Lady Barbara?" My face twitched involuntarily at her unexpected entrance.

The noble ladies here were daughters of counts and above. Since Barbara was a daughter of a viscount, she had not received an invitation to this party.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"Um...I heard there was a tea party, and I really wanted to join," Barbara said.

Her answer lacked so much common sense that I almost ripped off my Doll Princess mask to scold her. In my stead, the attendees voiced a chorus of criticisms.

"I presume you don't have an invitation," said one. "You should go."

Barbara started trembling at that. I wondered if this display of weakness made men want to protect her.

Melania stood up to put a stop to the discord. "Isn't it all right?" she asked. "Why, Lady Barbara will be *living* in the royal palace one day, won't she? I believe it's best for her to bond with everyone from now on."

So this was your plan? I thought, suppressing a laugh.

One after another, voices defending Barbara emerged, mainly from the daughters of the Great Five Houses:

"I agree. I want to be better friends with Lady Barbara, too!"

"Quite right! And I would very much like to hear how you became acquainted with him."

This was a scheme to undermine me. When the ladies said Barbara would be living in the palace one day, they meant as Wilhelm's mistress. And by "him," they were referring to Wilhelm. Even if our marriage was a mistake, this was completely unacceptable to say two months before our wedding. They must have been the ones who informed Barbara of this tea party, inciting her reckless act.

From what I could tell, only three of the Great Five had joined in on this plan. The remaining two ladies either knew about the plan and opted to watch silently, or they were also secretly supportive. Regardless, they didn't say much about Barbara's participation.

Two had remained silent, and three had defended her. The odds were in her favor.

"Well, well. Since you came all the way here, please join us, Lady Barbara. Alicia, please prepare an additional tea set."

This was how the relationship between the Great Five and the royal family functioned. Though I could accuse them of disrespect, the country would be unmanageable if three Houses turned against me. If multiple houses agreed on the same thing, even royalty could not stop them.

Basically, this was a warning to not turn my blade against the Great Five, even after I ascended the throne. I didn't know if they did this under the command of the marquesses or of their own accord. Regardless, it was clear as day that even a crown princess was vulnerable to the Great Five's power.

Most people would think this a very humiliating situation for a crown princess. On the contrary, I was rather impressed by Barbara. She had the support of the Great Five Houses, sure, but I was surprised she dared to do something so brash. When the time came, she could very easily be cast aside

because of her family's status.

I sensed Alicia's anger flaring up behind me. This was a dangerous situation...
Though she hadn't let her magic run wild yet, there was no telling when she would. And there was no way I could tell her to calm down in front of these women. What do I do?

Eventually, I managed to get her to leave the party, but I had no clue what would happen when she returned.

"So, Lady Barbara. How *did* you two get acquainted?" I asked. I sensed a considerable amount of malice in the glance she shot my way.

"Um..."

"My, don't beat around the bush! Tell us, please. We all yearn to experience our own wonderful love stories," one lady said.

"We happened to meet at an evening party and discovered that we had a mutual acquaintance. On that day, he greeted me as I was conversing with the person in question. Then he kindly asked me for a dance. When we talked after the dance, our conversation just...flowed."

"My, it must be fate!" another lady chimed in.

Nothing would come out of accusing Barbara of lèse-majesté, and since they never referred to Wilhelm by name, they could evade any such accusations. Even if I pointed out her impertinence, it would simply provide the noblewomen an opportunity to twist my words and attack me, claiming I'd falsely accused her.

"Don't you agree, Your Highness?" Melania asked.

I smiled. "I'm not too sure, as my position does not allow me to fall in love. But it sounds wonderful! Just like a storybook."

As this conversation continued, Freesia appeared with the extra tea set. I figured Alicia had unleashed her magic, so Freesia was sent here as an emergency replacement. A half smile tugged at my lips at the thought of Alicia's current predicament.

"Lady Barbara, you must be so in love with that man," said one of the

noblewomen.

"Yes! That's why I really want it to be acknowledged!" Barbara replied.

"My goodness, what do you mean? Does your father disapprove of this relationship?" I asked, deliberately testing her.

"No, that's not it... Um..." Barbara stumbled over her words. She blushed as she snuck glances at me, trying to gauge my reaction.

She was just as I expected.

"I'm jealous."

"What?" Barbara was the only one close enough to hear me.

The others, perhaps fearing the awkward atmosphere, tried to ignore us and focus on keeping their conversation flowing.

"It's nothing," I said.

The tea party ended without any further attacks from daughters of the Great Five. It didn't exactly go well, but I'd let it be.

After the tea party, I immediately had Freesia help me change. I let out a big sigh, hoping to expel all my fatigue. I was *exhausted*. It was unladylike, but I sprawled out on the couch to rest. As I enjoyed the silence and comfort of my room, I heard a knock on the door.

"Excuse me..." It was Alicia. "I'm so sorry for not fulfilling my duties earlier."

She's unusually somber, I thought. Switching out with Freesia halfway through the tea party must have bothered her. It was true that she didn't fulfill her responsibilities—I should've been angry. Instead, I was worried about how sad she seemed. I really did have a soft spot for her.

"Don't worry about it. I misjudged how the situation would unfold. I never anticipated they would act so audaciously. Also, I'm sorry for subjecting you to such an unpleasant experience. Your magic went out of control, right? Are you feeling okay?"

The tea party didn't matter much to me. The sole reason I'd hosted it in the first place was because it was traditionally held at the beginning of the social

season each year. I couldn't break that tradition, but I had slacked on preparing for the tea party. My attention was entirely devoted to other matters. I was only reflecting on my naivety; I had no intentions of blaming Alicia for her mistakes.

"I'm fine, but those ladies are unforgivable! They're just *too* disrespectful, Your Highness!" She may have been polite toward those girls, but Alicia's eyes burned with anger. They looked extremely volatile, like she might explode at any moment. I sensed magic flowing from her.

So she still hasn't calmed down. "It's fine, Alicia. Let it be." It's not time yet.

She looked dumbfounded, probably because she had no idea I was biding my time. Her many questions were written all over her face.

I smiled to reassure her. "Anyway, Barbara was adorable. I was *very* jealous of her," I said softly, thinking back on the party.

It seemed Alicia heard that loud and clear. She furrowed her brow, perplexed. "I don't understand what part of her was 'adorable,' Your Highness." She sounded unusually cold and detached.

"No?"

Barbara was blissfully unaware of the situation she'd put herself in, and she was utterly honest about her desires. She was foolish and easy to understand. I found her endearing.

"Oh, but you're much cuter than her, Alicia."

"W-we're not talking about me right now..."

"You and Barbara are both very honest. But I'm terrible—how could I compare the two of you? You're completely different people. Your honesty is sincere and pure. You are a hundred times cuter than Barbara."

"Your Highness, you..."

"I can't be honest. No—I can't afford to be honest."

If I could do and say whatever I wanted, just how happy would I be? It wasn't worth questioning. Even though I was royalty—no, precisely *because* I was royalty—I did not have the power to do that yet.

"Please speak your mind, Your Highness. No matter what it may be, I'll help you in any way I can."

I laughed at how desperately she said that. "Watch out—if you say it like that, I'll whine and whine, even if you've had enough."

"Well, that would make me very happy."

"I'm all right...because I have you."

In response to my words—words that were meant to bind her to me—she puffed up her chest with pride. It made me giggle.

That same night, while I was reading through paperwork alone in the study, I sensed someone nearby and raised my head.

A man silently stood on the opposite side of my writing desk.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"I have something I'd like to give you."

I took the stack of papers from him and gave them a quick skim. "An interesting report."

"I thought you'd say that."

Once I'd read through it, I smiled. "Mm... Rather than enforcing stricter punishments, it is more important to focus on crime prevention, huh? It will be hard to enact what's written here, but whoever came up with it is remarkable."

It was a proposal about improving public security. The idea was that we would set up a department dedicated to the task, one independent from the military. Furthermore, the institution should not only protect the nobility but also ensure the safety of commoners. To put it in terms from my past life, this proposal suggested we put together a police force. If successful, crime rates might go way down.

Considering the circumstances, we had to discuss the state of the army if we hoped to establish an organization solely for public safety. The kingdom's army was currently assigned to the job. That was fine and all, but the military had to

prioritize defending the country from *external* threats. It was difficult to deploy them for smaller matters within the kingdom unless the incident was major.

This is fascinating. I never would've thought a bureaucrat would propose something to safeguard everyday citizens. The royal family relied on the royal guard, whereas nobles hired private guards for their security. Yet this proposal aimed to extend protections for the common people from matters of warfare to their everyday lives. It was very appealing.

"Who wrote this?"

"A man named Brian in the Military Affairs Bureau."

"What is his reputation at the bureau?"

"Excellent. However, this proposal was apparently suppressed by the bureau."

"Why is that?"

"It's quite common. Brian has absolutely no ties to the Great Five, unlike his superior... I'm guessing it was quashed for going against the norm."

There were two ways to become an official in the royal palace. The first was to pass an exam. The second was to be referred by someone of high status within the palace. Roughly speaking, the former accounted for 60 percent of the staff and the latter 40 percent.

"You shouldn't say that. There are excellent workers even among those who got in on recommendations." The referral system was originally established to assign bureaucratic positions to individuals with specialized knowledge. It allowed palace officials to bring in personnel they deemed vital to their duties.

Over time, however, there were more instances of influential nobles recommending their own kin for bureaucratic roles. This was not a major issue, as said nobles typically possessed the required education and qualifications for their positions. Indeed, when delving back into history, there were numerous examples of people who became prominent bureaucrats through these recommendations and left a lasting legacy due to their competence.

"But now that I know, I am concerned about the performance of that

superior. I have no plans to take immediate action, but keep an eye on him."

"Understood. What about Brian?"

"Hm... First, show this report to Gilbert Mahoguard. If you simply tell him to 'handle it,' he'll take care of things."

"So we're handling this as usual? Noted."

"I'm impressed you managed to find these."

"Well, I had some free time, so I just wandered around the palace."

"Of course you discovered this just by wandering around. How did things go with the issue I asked you about earlier?"

"Oh, you mean that region's governance? The local officials are currently working on it, and that's exactly why I have so much free time!"

"I see. I presume it's about time you returned and checked on their progress."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Oh, one more thing. I would like you to investigate the origin of some rubies from House Slade..."

I proceeded to tell him what had transpired at the tea party.

"First things first, Barbara and Melania are way too brazen. I can't believe they'd dare to pick a fight with you, Your Highness."

I smiled wryly. "Really? I ran away with my tail between my legs."

"But you have no intention of letting them off scot-free, do you?"

"I'm surprised you could tell."

"One can easily guess just from your expression, Your Highness."

I laughed. "Is that so? Well, today's tea party made it quite clear: Barbara aside, I must cast the young ladies of the Great Five Houses—Melania in particular—in my revenge play."

"You seem angrier than I expected."

"Angry? Ha ha ha, I suppose I am."

"Am I wrong?"

"Compared to all the foxes and weasels in the palace, these ladies are too cute—they're willing to display their disdain for me outright."

"Then why ...?"

"They act as such because they believe that the Great Five have more power than the royal family. In fact, they even take it for granted. So how are they any different from the marquesses who seek to overthrow me? If I leave them be, I'll allow them to fester. Thus, they must disappear along with the heads of the Five. And it will all happen on the stage I am preparing."

"I see... So that's it."

"That said, I cannot allow them to sense my true intentions. I must be careful with my words and actions." There were no mirrors available, which was a shame—I would've loved to see the expression I wore as I said that.

"Yes, please do. Now, those rubies... You said that the daughter of House Slade herself mentioned that the region produces rubies, correct? That is very interesting. Thinking back on the reports I've read..." He trailed off.

"Precisely. There haven't been any reports about that," I said. "They've either kept it a secret to evade taxes or they've been obtaining rubies from elsewhere. It is one of the two."

The man laughed. "Regardless, this investigation will be quite the challenge."

"I'm sure it'll be a piece of cake for you, no?" When I posed this question, he smiled—a confident, arrogant smile.

"All right, all right," he said. "Since you're so encouraging, I guess I have to do it."

"By the way, the polums you grew were delicious, Tommy."

"Oh, you mean the ones Alicia ran off with? I was terrified—she chased after me like a monster!"



"She really did it, then!" I laughed. "Sorry about that."

"No apology necessary, Your Highness," Tommy said. "I'll be taking my leave."

He bowed his head and slipped silently away. As usual, he was exceptionally skilled at erasing his presence. I smiled as I looked upon the spot where he once stood.

"Brian? Where are you going at this hour?"

Hearing his colleague's voice, Brian stopped in his tracks. "O-oh, I was just going to look up something."

"Wow, you're a hard worker."

Tap, tap.

As his colleague came closer, Brian's reluctant smile deepened. *Please just leave. Don't bother with me,* he thought.

"I must say, your effort is meaningless. Unlike me, you have no connections, right? To work at the palace, you really need someone on the inside."

Brian laughed nervously. "Yes, I truly am jealous of you. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

Unable to bear the conversation any longer, Brian quickly fled the scene. He didn't want to be late to his meeting. Once he was certain he'd escaped, he stopped to catch his breath. Putting his judgmental colleague out of mind, he focused on the task at hand. He was about to confer with Gilbert Mahoguard—someone he'd heard much about but never met.

Gilbert had penned many notable papers in various fields, after all. His achievements garnered so much recognition that he received an honorary medal from the kingdom. At the same time, he was shrouded in mystery. Aside from his writings and his name, no information about him was publicly available.

For some reason, Brian had received a letter from the mysterious Gilbert expressing his desire to meet. It was confounding. When Brian first saw it, he

couldn't help but think, Why? Had it not been for the wax seal famously bestowed to Gilbert along with his medal, Brian would have dismissed it as an elaborate prank and torn it apart.

Following the instructions in the letter, Brian found himself in a moderately sized reception room in the outer palace. He knocked on the door, announced himself, and stepped inside. Right away, he had to squint against the bright light shining in from the windows. Once his eyes adjusted, he took in the man seated inside.

The man before him appeared far younger than he had imagined. His body was thin as a needle, and his long black hair was loosely tied. The eyes peeking through his glasses shimmered with intellect.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Gilbert Mahoguard," the man said.

"I-It is a pleasure to meet you! M-my name is—ouch!" Brian was so nervous he accidentally bit his tongue.

Gilbert refrained from pointing it out, but he let out a chuckle. "I know who you are, Brian Wilgred." As he spoke, Gilbert gestured for Brian to take a seat. "Apologies for summoning you out of the blue. I hope it wasn't too much trouble?"

"N-no trouble. Um, I was actually pretty free today."

"Oh, really? Someone who's capable of writing a proposal like this is free?" Gilbert casually placed a stack of paper onto the desk; it was the report Brian wrote.

"Why do you have this? I threw it away!"

"Don't you mean it was *thrown* away?" Gilbert's lips curved into a thin grin, but the smile did not reach his eyes. He seemed to be testing Brian.

Feeling the tension in the air, Brian found his throat dry. He swallowed. "What about it?"

"One man's trash is another man's treasure. My superior thought your idea was wonderful. And I agree."

He read it! thought Brian, his shoulders relaxing upon the realization.

Countless proposals he had written went unnoticed. Despite that, he never gave up, continuing to write. He hoped that one day, his ideas would be acknowledged by his superiors—and that those ideas would be implemented into government.

Since he managed to become a bureaucrat, Brian wanted to contribute to the kingdom's affairs, even if it was only in a small way. He wanted the citizens to live in a safer, more comfortable environment. Although he had big dreams, he was just a cog completing mundane tasks every day. And while he understood the importance of fulfilling those responsibilities, he couldn't discard the ideas that sprouted from his everyday life, imagining how nice it would be to have all those things. That tenacity fueled his every document. However, those proposals were continuously thrown away by his superior. The man told Brian to do as he was told without stepping out of line.

Now, finally, someone had read one of his papers. Brian has no idea how it happened, but it didn't matter. His proposal had somehow found its way into the hands of *the* Gilbert Mahoguard.

"Unfortunately, this idea cannot be realized in its current state. I assume you're aware of that?"

"I am."

Gilbert was right. The proposal was only collection of ideas strung together. It had a general structure but was lacking in detail.

"Nevertheless, your idea is absolutely fascinating. How would you like to study under me? There will be time constraints. It would have to be after your work hours."

"May I?!" Brian blurted, awed.

"Of course. My superior also holds you in high regard and would love to see you grow. In fact, my superior has seen potential in a number of individuals and placed them under my tutelage. I believe you will be able to exchange valuable information across departments as well."

"Who is your superior, if I may ask, Lord Gilbert?"

Gilbert smiled wide in lieu of an answer. Overwhelmed, Brian gulped again.

"What would you like to do? If you're afraid of power struggles, it may be best to pretend this conversation never happened," Gilbert said.

"No! Please take me in!" Brian yelped, banishing the very suggestion.

"Good to hear. Very well, Brian. Now that you're my student, do refer to me as Mr. Mahoguard."

"Y-yes, sir!" Shedding a few tears, Brian grasped Gilbert's outstretched hand.

I was in the study alone late at night. I sat on the window seat, peering outside, though the landscape was shrouded in darkness. All I saw was my own reflection, unadorned.

"Hello there."

"My, is it appropriate for a gentleman to visit a young lady's room so late at night, Mr. Mahoguard?" I teased, prompting a sardonic smile from him.

"I simply wanted to inform you that I was able to get Brian on board," he said. "Besides, I knew you probably wouldn't be asleep at this hour."

"I offered to report for him, but he wanted to tell you himself," came another voice. A man appeared from behind Gilbert. It was Tommy, disguised as a maid.

I chuckled at his appearance. "That outfit of yours—are you trying to be considerate of the rumors about me?" Since my only company already knew my true nature, I dropped the demure princess act. "Good work, Gilbert. How did it go?"

"He's working hard, just as you surmised. I had him join the study group immediately, and he's been bombarding me with questions all day."

"So that's why you're visiting me at this hour. Ha ha ha! I'm looking forward to the future." I shifted my gaze from the window to the two of them. "We've got several exceptional bureaucrats working with you now. Through group study and conversation, they're coming up with all sorts of new proposals. It's marvelous. Wouldn't you agree, Gilbert?"

"Quite. These study groups are very intellectually stimulating."

"I see," I said. "You have a keen look in your eyes. It's so different from when we first met. You're no longer bored, are you?"

"Please, Your Highness. Kindly forget my former self."

I met Gilbert right after I acquired Tommy. The marquess introduced him to me after I whined about wanting a capable right-hand man. When we met, Gilbert had already garnered attention for his exceptional essays in a number of fields. No one had been able to contact him, as he refused to disclose any personal information. I was only able to locate him thanks to my exceptional spy and the marquess, who had been tracking and gathering information about him since before his rise to fame.

And so, with the help of others around me, I was able to meet Gilbert. He was in a terrible state back then. Everything bored him—he laughed while looking at me with listless eyes. It was to the point where he'd rather die than live in this boring world. Recruiting him in such a state was honestly a miracle.

"I'm very fulfilled now," Gilbert told me. "I don't even have the time to think about dying."

"Really now? That's wonderful to hear. By the way, Tommy, are the preparations for the 'workplace experience' going smoothly?"

"Yes, of course. He and I put our noses to the grindstone on this one. Everything is ready. We've managed to slip it into the publicly available schedule, so you'll be able to meet all of his students in one place. But why do you want to meet them right now, Your Highness?"

"To be honest, I think meeting them now might be too late. Considering what will happen later, I'd like to chat with Gilbert's students without the Doll Princess guise as soon as possible."

"So that's why. Well, this definitely is a rather lax schedule, given that you're hosting the workplace experience two months before your coronation," Tommy remarked.

"It's part of the tradition—that's just how it is. And it's probably because they did not expect for the throne to be vacant for so long. But as the Doll Princess, I cannot suddenly break from tradition."

"Indeed, it would be quite unnatural for the Doll Princess to display sudden interest in politics," Gilbert said. "Incidentally...you look rather pale, Your Highness."

"I thought the same," Tommy chimed in.

I chuckled. For a moment, I thought they wouldn't notice. Both men were quite perceptive.

My hand flew to my mouth, and I doubled over. "Agh!"

"Your Highness, what's wrong?!"

I held up a hand to stop Gilbert's approach. "Don't make a fuss. I'm fine."

"You are unwell. You remained seated by the windowsill even after we arrived. Considering how mindful you are about your reputation, you wouldn't dare do something so impolite unless you were ill."

As Gilbert spoke, Tommy brought over a jug of water, a cup, and a napkin. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes, I am. I just need some time to recover."

"You seem strangely used to it. How long have you been dealing with this?" Tommy asked.

"Who knows? I can't even remember anymore." I let out a weak laugh and gathered my breath. I had no strength to drink water, so I only took the handkerchief and pressed it against my mouth. I coughed into it with all my might.

"Does anyone else know about this?"

"No."

"Please take care of your health, Your Highness," Gilbert pleaded. "What would happen to the kingdom without you?"

"I'm so touched that you're thinking of the kingdom."

"This isn't the time for jests." Tommy's expression was clouded; he seemed genuinely worried about me. Gilbert had the same look.

"I'm fine, really, just a little tired. Ha ha... I am merely someone who fears

great responsibility."

It wasn't exactly a lie. Considering the weight of each citizen's life in this kingdom, and the weight of the lives I would soon be forced to take, my heart felt so very heavy.

"Leave, both of you. I'm all right. I'll recover after I get some rest."

That wasn't the true reason behind my symptoms. My mana veins had never fully recovered after I saved Alicia. I was still capable of using magic, but this was the consequence. They would have healed naturally if I'd refrained from using magic until I reached adulthood, but I ended up needing to use it multiple times. For example, when Tommy and his assassins first came for my life, and when I had to recruit new talent with Gilbert.

I never summoned the Sacred Swords—I wasn't that reckless—but multiple uses of Heart Realm had undoubtedly harmed my body.

"But-"

"I'm *fine*. I'm probably just nervous about the wedding. If this continues afterward, I'll be sure to see a doctor."

I could not tell them the truth. The next stage of my plan required the Sacred Swords. If these kind souls knew, they would object. I couldn't let them; I had no intention of stopping. It was best to keep quiet about my condition so they would support me without question.

"I understand, but if we see this happen again before then, we will bring a doctor over."

"Very well."

Gilbert cast a disapproving glance at Tommy, who stepped back. "It'd be worse if we insisted and she refused to see the doctor altogether, even if things got dire. I'm sure you know how stubborn the princess can be."

"Very well," Gilbert said. "Again—take care of yourself, Your Highness."

I bid the two farewell as they reluctantly left. Once their figures were completely out of sight, I turned back to the window.

Thank goodness they found out today. If my magic throttles me again in the

future, they'll just think it's a nonmagical chronic condition.

Ruminating on the matter, I gazed into the abyss beyond the panes.

Inspection Day had arrived. It was tradition for the next monarch to visit and observe the outer palace. In other words, it was time for me to see what type of work went on around here with my own eyes.

Tommy and Gilbert briefed me on the situation; it felt oddly like a job fair. *I* attended events like this when I was a student in my past life, I thought, lost in my old memories.

"Since you're out on official business today, I prepared a stylish dress!" Alicia said.

In the mirror, I studied the outfit Alicia had chosen for me. The navy dress had minimal embellishments, and it gave me a composed, refined aura. Alicia's taste was impeccable as ever.

She gazed at me with sparkling eyes. "You look great in any dress, Your Highness!"

"It's because you have good taste, Alicia. Shall we?"

Accompanied by my royal guard, I made my way to the outer palace. As the workplace experience was a formal event, it was widely known that I would be inspecting and touring the premises. High-ranking officials warmly welcomed me one after another, as if they had eagerly awaited my arrival.

However, I could tell that no one was particularly excited about the Doll Princess dropping by. I didn't even need to use Heart Realm; I could just tell that they thought dealing with me was a waste of time. I felt alienated. There was no place I belonged, no matter which department I visited. Rumors of my uselessness must have been very effective—which meant I'd been deceiving everyone well.

After spending the entire day exploring, I finally reached the last location.

"Thank you for showing me around. This is enough," I told my guide once we arrived.

Despite that, he seemed quite troubled by my request. "But—"

"What is the last item on my schedule?"

"It is a social gathering with a group of bureaucrats. They are... Ah, we have people you don't usually interact with, Your Highness."

"My, a social gathering? I'm not sure who scheduled it, but it seems like an interesting opportunity to converse with people I don't usually see."

I spoke as if I had just learned about the gathering, but I'd known about it far in advance—I'd instructed Tommy and Gilbert to squeeze it in. That being the case, I couldn't let the guide catch on.

"It would be an even greater waste of time for someone of your status to attend," I said. "I have my guard here with me, so I can return without any issues." I pretended to be considerate as I shooed them away.

"R-really? Then I shall take my leave." He readily accepted my suggestion and departed.

I'm glad he wasn't stubborn about it. Well done, Doll Princess. After seeing him off, I removed the doll mask.

"First a maid, and now a royal guard? You really can sneak in anywhere undetected."

The royal guard, who up until now had been silent with his gaze downcast, raised his head and grinned in satisfaction. It was Tommy, with his typical gleeful smirk.

He snickered. "As long as I've got my hands on the right intelligence, I can infiltrate any place you can dream of. Royal guards aren't usually stationed in the outer palace, since their main role is to protect the royalty. Though they *are* stationed out here today because of your inspections. I figured I would be fine as long as I memorized the guard placements, their routes, and your schedule. But I do still feel somewhat anxious about running into a *real* royal guard."

"What a talent."

With that, I slipped my Doll Princess mask back on and opened the door.

Inside the room, the bureaucrats milled about restlessly and engaged in sparse chitchat. Their nerves were understandable. They were about to meet the princess up close—someone they rarely had the opportunity to speak with. Of course they couldn't hide their apprehension.

"Mr. Mahoguard, I hear Princess Luxeria will be joining us later?" one of the attendees said to Gilbert on behalf of the group.

"Yes, indeed. Her Highness wished to meet the palace's bureaucrats, so I took it upon myself to coordinate everyone's schedules."

"Oh, I figured something was happening, since we're all gathered here... I trust whoever you've chosen, Mr. Mahoguard. There's no way the Doll Princess would've known about our study group. Right, Brian?"

Hearing his name, Brian gave a vague nod and smiled knowingly. Brian also had his doubts and questions about the attendees. After all, everyone present was a student studying under *the* "Mr. Mahoguard." Although he had just heard the reason directly from Gilbert, Brian still felt something was amiss in how Gilbert had assembled his students. If it was just to see the princess, surely there was no need for him to bring together all of his pupils at once.

"Thank you for your hard work, everyone," Luxeria said, warming the atmosphere with her gentle smile and elegant demeanor.

As the bureaucrats marveled at her beauty, she took the open seat prepared for her, positioned right in front of them. Then, in the blink of an eye, she changed completely. Luxeria transformed from the gentle spring sunlight into an icy winter breeze that chilled the air.



"Thank you all for coming here despite how busy you are. As I've wanted to personally speak to you talented individuals at least once, I've imposed this meeting onto your schedules."

Her voice was deep, her tone authoritative. All the bureaucrats sensed the shift, and they quivered in response.

"...Brian."

"Ack! Um, yes?"

Brian's questions were plain on his face: Who in the world is this? What the hell is happening?

"I hear you've been studying diligently under Gilbert's guidance. I'm sure you still feel quite nervous being in the company of other talented individuals... But please, continue your efforts."

Brian quickly grasped the implication. His eyes widened to the point that they could stretch no further. "Th-then...Mr. Mahoguard's superior was really..."

"You're a keen observer," she said. "The work you've all been doing has been reported to me. I have sent those I deem worthy to Gilbert. Brian, your proposal was particularly intriguing."

"Th-thank you!" Brian cried, tears welling up as he bowed his head.

"Are you sure you should be thanking me? Think carefully... You will soon be thrust into a power struggle. Moreover, you will be fighting for the unpopular side."

"If things continued as they were, I would've given up on everything," Brian replied. "Both my dreams as a bureaucrat and my hopes for my work."

His voice was so soft that it almost dissolved into the quiet room.

"I realized just how difficult it is to uphold my ideals when faced with the harsh reality. I would've simply accepted the situation and convinced myself that it'd be easier to do nothing and rot away." He lifted his gaze once again. "But then I remembered why I wanted to become a bureaucrat in the first place, why I even had ideals to begin with. It's all because there was someone who believed in me and supported my dreams, no matter how unrealistic they

seemed."

"You prioritize your ideals over your safety... Fascinating. What about the rest of you? This is your chance to escape. I'll forgive anyone who wishes to leave this room right now." Luxeria said, scanning the room with watchful eyes. Nobody, not even Brian, made a move to leave.

"You have wonderful students, Gilbert. No, allies."

"Right you are. I feel I'm the one learning here," Gilbert replied, smiling gently as he looked at his students.

"Now, let us move on to the main topic. I have a question for all of you: When I ascend the throne, what do you think will be the first thing I do? Take a guess."

One after another, the bureaucrats shared their opinions:

"Will you focus on training mages? It is crucial to strengthen the kingdom by ensuring our mages are well prepared."

"Might you reform the tax system? Despite its many flaws, the system has remained unchanged for several decades."

"Or perhaps the medical system! The rural areas still lack sufficient healthcare, leading to countless scammers who resort to dubious healing practices that can hardly be called magic."

"The legal system also demands change. Like the tax system, it hasn't seen significant improvements in decades. The kingdom is incapable of handling new customs and crimes."

Luxeria smirked, clearly intrigued by their responses. "All interesting perspectives. Unfortunately, what I have in mind is quite different. What I desire to reform is our *kingdom*."

The group collectively tilted their heads, finding her statement puzzling. One person stepped forward and said, "How do you mean, Your Highness?"

"Mage training, tax reform, healthcare improvements, and legal changes will indeed be necessary," Luxeria acknowledged. "But these changes can only happen once we have a proper system in place—one that can propose, approve, and manage them. Under our kingdom's current organizational

structure, any brilliant ideas will remain on the page."

She rested her chin on her palm as she observed the bureaucrats' every move. "All of this is due to the complicated structure we're dealing with. One of the causes of this disorganization is that certain regions hold excessive authority. Without going into specifics, I assume you understand that I'm referring to regional governments... Is it not inefficient to have duplicates of the same power structure within a single kingdom?"

"But as long as each region's leader holds power, there is little we can do, right? Or are you..." Brian trailed off, afraid to voice his thoughts further.

Luxeria laughed. "I will not ask you to finish that sentence, but I will say your hunch is correct." She didn't explicitly state it, but she'd clearly implied that she wanted to get rid of the great five marquess houses. "I will not hesitate. If necessary, I will sully my hands."

The princess's smile widened. The terrifying grin truly suited her face. Perhaps she had been this cruel all along.

"I suppose I should explain further. Continuous 'improvements' throughout history have made our palace overly complicated. It's as if everything has just been loosely stitched together," she said with a sigh. "As a result, the command structure and the responsibilities of certain roles have become ambiguous. The extent of one's duty and authority is all muddled. A government can only function if the ones in charge and their subordinates have well-defined responsibilities. If we are unsure of who must attend to what, can we truly claim that all necessary duties are being fulfilled? In this state, we won't be able to reform anything, will we? Therefore, our first step is to thoroughly examine all current roles, streamline the necessary departments and personnel, and clarify our command structure."

She glanced at Gilbert, seeking his input. Gilbert nodded in support.

"I've had Gilbert assign you work based on your skills as they'd apply to government. We will continue to hold meetings and discuss it from now on."

"So our discussions and assignments weren't merely theoretical exercises?"

"I wouldn't waste your valuable time." Luxeria smiled again. "Make sure to

remember everything is interconnected in government. There will be someone or something else involved in everything that you do. Question everything—understand not just the surface but the underlying intentions as well."

"Your Highness, do you have a specific reason for clarifying your goals now?" asked Brian.

Luxeria's eyes widened slightly in surprise. Immediately after, her smile turned downright bewitching.

"Ha ha ha... Yes, I do indeed." She raised her index finger. "Firstly, I wanted to demonstrate my trust in all of you. Know that I'll be relying on you in times to come."

Then she raised another finger and said, "Secondly, I wished to make you aware of my ambitions. Gathering talented individuals is one thing, but we'd never make progress without being on the same page. Sharing a goal means we'll all move forward together, no?"

She lowered her hand, and her expression softened. "Now, moving on. What do I desire by getting rid of those who obstruct us and reforming the kingdom? I want our country to prosper. I wish for all the people in this kingdom, not just the nobles, to benefit from our resources."

Every bureaucrat in the room gasped. Aside from Gilbert and the "royal guard," they were all stunned.

I see... What a wonderful goal, Brian thought. It'll be very difficult to achieve, though. If we prioritize the people and neglect the nobles, the nobles are bound to resist. With how powerful the Great Five are, anyone could foresee how hard it'll be to push through the reforms.

That was when it clicked for him: *Oh, that's it. Her Highness wants to get rid of the Great Five.*

Luxeria was not a medicine that would cure what ailed their kingdom. She was poison—a drug so toxic and powerful it could destroy everything.

"I am fully aware of the dangers on the path ahead, but I must do this to ensure the kingdom's survival for centuries to come. If you are willing to join me on this journey, I am confident we can achieve our goals." Poison though she was...what were the effects?

Every bureaucrat present knew full well what the limits of the current system were. Some people were given too much power, and they sank their claws into the government. Ultimately, the bureaucrats desired the same outcomes as Luxeria.

"We must centralize the regional governments and decentralize the national government. The first step is to rebuild our foundation. We need to reallocate tasks and authority from the regions back to the central government. Then I will distribute the necessary authority to each region. It's crucial to simultaneously allocate funds and personnel according to the needs of the kingdom.

"After that, we can start implementing the reforms we all dream of. If we continue to strengthen our foundation, our country will thrive, and so will our people. The citizens will experience the benefits of it all. *That* is my vision. However, as you all know, this goal is very, very far away—the path to it will be long and arduous. Time is of the essence."

Glory to the kingdom. Peace for the people. If Luxeria was willing to be the poison seeping into their kingdom's weaknesses for the sake of its citizens, the bureaucrats would support her.

"First, you should all further your discussions and clearly define what this government will look like. I shall also participate in your discussions from now on. Let us talk about the future of this kingdom together." Luxeria smiled. "There are only two months left. We will finalize the idea before I ascend the throne."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Everyone stood up and bowed their heads in tandem, the timing almost rehearsed.

Luxeria stood up. "It's time... I shall take my leave. You all should promptly continue your studies."

And just like that, she made her exit.

"Did you gain anything from that workplace inspection thing?" Tommy asked me as we left the room.

"Why are you asking? You already know the answer."

"Well, well! My apologies. You see, I've learned the hard way that I've no idea what goes on in your head, Your Highness."

I chuckled. "Still holding a grudge?"

"Has no one told you it's rude to laugh at other people?"

"I'm simply being honest," I told him. "Anyway, I've officially acquired the few bureaucrats our country needs."

"That so? For how much you 'need' them, you spewed some serious venom," Tommy said, clearly done with this conversation.

I couldn't help but laugh again at Tommy's remark. "Ha ha ha. Fear is another great method to make others obey."

Tommy sighed. "Yes... It was terrifying indeed. I suppose it must be true since you're oozing with confidence."

It wasn't confidence—I just knew. I was listening to the bureaucrats' inner voices with Heart Realm the entire meeting. I had expected more resistance, but to my surprise, there was none. In fact, they were very supportive. I had no idea why, but I was glad I didn't need to spend time convincing everyone. I would have, if necessary, but I was able to wrap up much earlier than anticipated.

"Now, what of the other request I made?"

"You've asked for a lot, Your Highness. Are you talking about the rubies? If I've found allies in other regions? The poison? Or the military?"

"We're already on the topic of government, so obviously I'm asking about the military."

"Ah, I knew it. Just so you know, I'd *never* ask you to increase my pay for giving me *so* much work."

"You just did. If you manage to complete it all in time, I'll consider giving you a

raise. So...what about your work?"

"It's going perfectly fine, of course. Anyone would be able to do it, don't you think? I mean, you've already got a pretty good grasp of the military and the palace mages."

"I cannot make any moves in public, and it's too difficult to meet them in secret. I have no choice but to rely on your talents." I shifted my gaze to Tommy, who wore a proud smile on his face.

"Relying on my talents, eh? Guess I've got to keep it up. I've already scheduled a meeting for you before your coronation."

"Good work. Oh, also, I'll need you to cross-dress tomorrow. It's your forte."

"Ugh, it's not my forte. I only did it last time because I had to. Well, I'm pretty free tomorrow, so I will."

We reached my bedroom.

"Your Highness," Tommy called out as I entered the room. "How's your condition been?"

"The same as your work: perfectly fine. No need to worry. And since I didn't collapse, there's no need to call a physician, right?" I said with a chuckle.

Immediately after the door closed behind me, I crumpled to the floor. I'd made it in the nick of time. Using Heart Realm left me feeling incredibly dizzy. *Thank goodness I was able to end the meeting early.* Although it took a toll on my health, I gained a lot from it.

I couldn't rest yet. There was still much to be done. I'd only just assembled the staff to assist with my play.

Only after some time had passed did I feel well enough to get back on my feet.

The day after the inspections, I happened to have scheduled a class with Gilbert—or rather, Mr. Mahoguard. When Tommy entered the room, I burst out laughing.

"You look very natural, even under the bright sun," I remarked.

"Thanks for the compliment," Tommy said dryly. His words were grateful, but his body language said otherwise.

Seeing his reaction, my smile grew wider.

"Since you've assigned *her* as the maid to escort you, I suppose that means we won't be having class today," Gilbert said.

"Apologies. I just wanted to organize the topics I'd like to discuss with your students in the future."

"What a coincidence. I thought the same."

"That's great. And...I apologize, Tommy, for making you go through so much trouble."

"I'm managing. Since you can't be here alone with this shabby man, I had no choice but to come here as a woman."

Whenever Gilbert came to tutor—or rather, when *any* guest visited my office—I would have a maid with me. I couldn't allow the real servants to see me without my Doll Princess persona, so I'd asked Tommy to come in his maid guise.

"Shabby? How rude... Though you aren't entirely wrong," Gilbert said. "Very well, Your Highness. We don't have much time, so let us begin posthaste."

"Indeed. Let's start off with what I asked your students yesterday regarding their thoughts on an ideal government."

"Certainly. As you instructed, we're conducting an analysis of the current situation. We confirmed the responsibilities of each ministry. It should be completed in a few days at most," Gilbert reported.

"Good. Those findings will serve as the foundation for future discussions. Make sure to scour them for any imperfections."

"Understood."

"I would like to conduct an inspection based on the analysis to root out any redundant roles. That way, there will be no repeated tasks across ministries. I want this done before my coronation."

"Is this what you meant by wanting to remove anything that's a 'waste,' Your Highness?" Tommy asked.

"Yes, that's right. I've reviewed past reports, and it seems this country's government has all sorts of complex and unnecessary aspects. We should simplify everything we can, no?"

It wasn't just this country. In my past life, Japan had the same problems. There was an abundance of complicated procedures that took loads of time and effort to navigate. I imagined it was the same everywhere: the larger an organization grew, the messier it became.

"Good point."

"Also, by identifying the redundancies, we'll be able to pinpoint what we truly need. When problems arise, we'll sustain the country with minimal governance as long as we know what's essential."

"I assume this is similar to the inspection process in regional governments?" Tommy said.

"Precisely."

"Your Highness," Gilbert said, "I believe we should involve the heads of each ministry to confirm which tasks are duplicated elsewhere."

"What do you mean?"

"To streamline any repeated tasks, we'll have to eliminate extra instances, which means we must determine the ministry responsible for each of those tasks."

"I see, you're absolutely right."

"That being the case, we should notify the ministers. If we continue to investigate without their involvement, they might doubt our findings, which could result in us having to repeat the investigation. Even if it's superficial, we should guide the process so it appears as if they made the changes themselves," Gilbert explained.

"Hmm, I see your point. So, should we develop a preliminary plan that assigns

specific tasks to each ministry and discuss it with the respective ministry heads after my coronation?"

"Yes, I believe that would be the best approach."

"We can evaluate the authority of the person in charge afterward."

"Actually, I think we can determine it while identifying the tasks that overlap."

"Then I suppose I shall give them the order after my coronation as well."

"Yes, I think that will work."

"All right. Also, while each ministry head confirms their responsibilities, have your students confirm if there are any additional tasks that need to be addressed."

"Is this in preparation for introducing a new system?"

"No, we cannot create tasks in advance for something that hasn't been finalized. It is simply to verify if there is anything the current government lacks."

"Noted, Your Highness. To achieve this, we will have to secretly collaborate with allies in other regions. If our goal is to centralize regional governance, we will eventually need to transfer tasks from other regions to the royal palace. The exchange of information will be essential when facilitating the process," Gilbert said.

"That's true." I turned to Tommy. "My apologies, but—"

"I know, I know," Tommy interjected. "We have enough personnel right now, so they can handle the communications, but things might get a bit tight after the coronation, so we should recruit more people now—while we still have the time."

"Information is vital," I said. "Spare no expense in recruiting individuals you deem capable."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Tommy said sincerely. "I'm honored by your trust in my judgment."

"This is not flattery. I'm simply stating facts. Gilbert, is there anything else we need to confirm?"

"No. Everything is set."

"I see... I'll leave the planning in your hands. Keep me updated and consult with me as necessary."

"Of course, Your Highness."

"Tommy, Gilbert—I will likely burden the both of you with a lot of work from now on. There may be times when I ask too much of you. However, I only have one pair of eyes, ears, and hands, plus a single mind. I can only navigate this thorny path with your steadfast support. I will continue to rely on you in the future."

"Yes, Your Highness," they replied.

After that, Gilbert left my office, and only Tommy remained.

"Do you not need to escort him out?" I asked.

"I've told the maid outside to take care of it," Tommy replied. "And since you happen to have a moment to spare, I was thinking of having you meet the commander of the kingdom's army." He extended a hand to me.

"Efficient as ever. All right, let's head over now." I took Tommy's hand and stood up.

Tommy chatted on our way there. Despite it being daytime, the inner palace was less busy compared to other areas.

"Look here, Your Highness—I was so intimidated by you earlier, I got goosebumps."

"You don't have to show me. Were you really that scared?"

"Hrm... It wasn't fear, per se. More like awe. Did you use magic?"

"Of course not. If I had, you two wouldn't have been able to stand. Besides, I prefer to use my magic sparingly, and doubly so for my closest confidents."

"Yeah. If you had used magic, we would've been crushed by the pressure of it."

"Unfortunately, I can't tell—I've never used my magic on myself."

"Well, duh!"

Tommy and I laughed.

"Hush, quickly," Tommy said. "Someone's here."

My laughter died in my throat as two men appeared before us. Noticing my presence, they frantically lowered their heads and moved to the side for me. Passing the two men, we entered the garden that separated the inner palace from the middle palace.

We continued on, cutting through a maze of a thicket, eventually reaching a serene gazebo. I took a seat on the long bench inside. Gazing at the garden, I murmured, "The palace sure is huge."

"Yeah. Security's a pain because of it."

"You might be the first person to criticize the palace in such a manner," I said.

"Maybe in front of royalty, but anybody who handles palace security would agree. No matter how detailed our plans are, there's bound to be a blind spot in such a vast space."

"True enough."

While we conversed, a man with rugged features approached us. His muscular physique was noticeable even beneath his clothing.

"Don't you agree, Commander Aaron?" I called out.

"Hrm. Honestly? Yes."

I chuckled. "I see."

Once Aaron walked over to me, he took my hand and kissed it. "Good day to you, Your Highness."

"It's been a while, Aaron."

"It seems you've continued to wield your sword," he noted. "You have wonderful hands."

Realizing he probably held my hand just to inspect it, I smiled. "I'm honored by your praise... I'll have you be my opponent next time."

"Please do," Aaron replied. He let go of my hand, took a step back, and knelt reverently before me.

"Let's proceed to the matter at hand. How is the festival progressing?" I asked.

"The royal palace Security Unit and the other unit have been prepared. They've undergone the appropriate training and are ready for deployment at any moment. All we are waiting for is your word, Your Highness."

"Have you controlled the flow of information within the troops?"

"My vice commander and I are the only ones who know the details," Aaron promised. "The other officers are not fully informed."

"Good. If any information were to leak to the enemy, it would complicate our mission further. Please ensure you keep a tight lid on it."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Who will command the second unit, the one being dispatched elsewhere?"

"I will. My vice commander will oversee the royal palace Security Unit while I'm gone."

"Very good. While I will be the star of the coronation, you will play the main role in the hunt elsewhere. It is clear which task holds greater importance. If necessary, I will protect myself with my own hands."

"With your skills, you may indeed be capable of that—but we won't let you take center stage."

"That's reassuring. Have you coordinated with Tommy to arrange the positioning of the royal palace Security Unit?"

"Yes. I've already informed Tommy of the guard posts inside and outside the chapel, as well as the main path leading to it."

"Excellent. Tommy, have you informed Aaron where his hunt will take place?"

"Of course. I've told Commander Aaron all the places our targets frequent."

"This part of our play must be kept secret, so we've narrowed down our forces to one hundred people," Aaron said. "If we attacked at the same time— or if our first strike was delayed—it would increase the chances of our targets' escape. We plan to send the troops in groups of ten to the targets' mansions, as

that's where they're most likely to be. If we are still unable to capture them, we will search every corner of the region."

"Only a hundred people?" I replied. "You're sure to make it in undetected."

"Yes, I should think so. We will discreetly make our way to the region's capital before the festival begins. And until we capture our targets, we will ensure that we do not draw attention."

"Thank you for that. How about the military logistics? Any other issues of concern?"

"Thanks to Mr. Mahoguard's support, things have been progressing smoothly."

"I see. Official orders will be given on the day of the festival. Our primary objective is to capture them, but should they resist—invoke my name and eliminate them without mercy."

"Understood, Your Highness."

"I will pray for your triumph in battle from the royal capital."

"From the bottom of my heart, thank you. I shall also be praying for your success in your own battle," Aaron said.

"Mm-hmm."

"Now then, I've got some training to attend to, so I must take my leave. Please excuse me." Aaron stood up, bowed, and left the gazebo.

After seeing him off, I returned my gaze to the garden. "It would be nice to take a leisurely break to drink tea. If only Alicia were here..."

"Speaking of Alicia, have you had anyone test her desserts for poison?" Tommy asked.

I shook my head. "No, never."

"What?! Never?"

"Not even once. That way, I can eat her baked goods while they're still nice and warm."

"That sounds wonder—wait, no! That's terrible! At least let me appoint

someone to test for poison from now on."

"No need. Alicia would never poison me."

"I'm sure you know this, but...human beings are prone to betrayal."

"I know that all too well. But isn't everyone in my circle capable of betraying me?" I laughed. "That was a mean-spirited question, to be sure. I'm not saying I don't trust you—I simply mean that anyone can turn on me, no matter how loyal they claim to be. In fact, excessive loyalty and devotion can be toxic."

"True, I suppose. You and I see things differently, so I can never really know what you're thinking. In that sense, anyone could betray another."

"That's right. And since anyone can do so, the ones who'd make me pause and say, 'Nothing I can do about that,' are the most important. Alicia is one of them."

"Even if she betrayed you with ill intentions?"

"I would assume that the fault lay with me for pushing her to that point. That's probably why I'd come to accept it."

Tommy chuckled. "You're so kind. What about someone other than Alicia?"

"I wouldn't hold back in that case, of course."

"You really do cherish her. What makes her so special to you?"

"You didn't investigate that?"

"I did, but I couldn't find anything."

"If even you couldn't find anything, perhaps there's nothing to find?"

"You think quite highly of me," Tommy said. "Honestly, I feel defeated. My gut is telling me—shouting at me—that there's something more going on between the two of you."

It only made sense that Tommy didn't find any dirt to dig up no matter how hard he tried. One of the Great Five—my ally—had covered up the evidence of Alicia working in the tower when we were young. On top of that, I used my magic to erase the memories of everyone involved. Of course Tommy's investigation was fruitless.

"You also managed to conceal your relationship with Commander Aaron quite well. If I had looked into that first, I would *never* have taken up the hit on your life, Your Highness."

"Well, there's a pervasive rumor that the Doll Princess never leaves her room, so it takes a lot to keep things quiet. There were plenty of times I snuck out...

That being said, I could only participate in the kingdom's army training thanks to your help in concealing our relationship. I'm truly grateful."

"Then may I please ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Why did you ask Commander Aaron of the kingdom's army to train you?"

"Because it was necessary. That's all."

"As the next monarch, you'll constantly have a guard with you, no?"

"Are you seriously saying that? I'm sure you know full well, particularly after you came to assassinate me, that no one is *truly* protecting me."

"My apologies."

"It's fine," I said. "That's why I felt the need to learn to protect myself as the next queen. I also wanted to personally interact with Aaron, as he was very famous at the time." A smile curled my lips as I reminisced.

"What are you smiling about?"

"I just remembered what things were like back then. When I first asked Aaron to train me, he flatly refused."

"Well, if a princess hidden from the public eye made such a request, of course he'd think it was some sort of trick."

"Indeed. In his position, I would probably have thought the same."

"How did you persuade him to train you?"

"I forced him."

"Um... Does that mean you used magic?"

"You're partly right. I enhanced my physical prowess with magic."

Tommy smirked at my answer. "Oh, right. You have a lot of mana, Your Highness. And the stronger your magic, the stronger and hardier you can make yourself. Although strength and speed aren't everything, they definitely are powerful assets."

"I never thought there'd be a day when I would be grateful for my magic," I remarked.

"Well, since magic users are in the minority, you do endure discrimination. But thanks to the Sacred Swords, there are fewer people prejudiced against mages in our kingdom compared to other countries."

"Yes, but..." I trailed off, looking out at the garden.

Compared to other countries, ours did have less outward prejudice against mages. But Alicia's past and my own experience proved that even here, excessively strong magic was still feared.

"No, forget about it. We should get back." I shifted my gaze back to Tommy and extended my hand.

He helped me to my feet. "Yes, Your Highness."

Hand in hand, the two of us left the beautiful garden and its gazebo behind.

Only a month remained until the wedding. My days were filled with savoring Alicia's delicious desserts and conversing with Gilbert's students. It was all very gratifying.

"You'll be having a facial massage today, Your Highness! We don't have long until the wedding, after all!"

As the ceremony drew near, I could no longer avoid the arrangements; it was rather taxing. There was no way around it.

"If you don't mind, I'll get right to it," said Alicia.

I lay on a long bench, facing upward. Alicia's hands caressed my cheeks, nose, and neck. Her gentle touch loosened my tense muscles.

"...All finished, Your Highness."

I opened my eyes to see Alicia holding a mirror. Ah, I must've fallen asleep.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to doze off."

"It's okay! You have to relax. In all honesty, I'd love to have let you rest a bit longer, but you have something scheduled after this."

"Then I suppose I'll have to wake up," I said. "Show me."

As requested, Alicia raised the mirror so I could see. My skin tone had brightened, and my facial features appeared sharper and more distinct.

"Amazing as usual, Alicia."

"It's because you have such good looks to begin with."

"Oh, you flatter me! What is next on my schedule?"

"Mrs. Mulberry would like to see you."

"Ah, right."

"I shall help you get changed."

Alicia swiftly brought over my clothes and helped me change into them. Once she was done, we left my bedroom and went to the reception room.

Soon enough, we heard a voice from the other side of the door: "Coming in."

In walked Freesia—and Wilhelm. Alicia looked bewildered at the sight of him. I could almost hear her say, Why are you here?

"Why are you here?"

Oh, there it is. The words written on her face flew right out of her mouth. Wilhelm fixed her with a glare.

"I heard I was meeting Mrs. Mulberry," I hurried to explain. "As did Alicia, which is why she's so surprised you're here. Isn't that right, Alicia?"

Alicia nodded, reluctantly going along with my attempt to smooth things over.

"Well, my apologies," Wilhelm said. "It would've been quite the ordeal if I tried to meet you directly. I had Mrs. Mulberry lend me her spot."

"I see. So, what brings you here today?"

"I wanted to hear your answer before it all ends."

"...My answer?"

Did he ever ask me a question? I wondered. I couldn't seem to come up with anything, no matter how much I pored over my memories.

His next words plunged me deeper into confusion: "My question is whether the moon still wishes to spin around the world."

My mind went blank. What did he just ask me?

I jolted to my feet without thinking. Though Alicia visibly startled, I was too overwhelmed to soothe her.

Wilhelm smiled at my reaction. It wasn't a smile of contempt like the other nobles directed toward the Doll Princess. It was a sad smile—one that said he had accepted some unhappy truth.

"I hear your answer loud and clear. I look forward to your coronation, Your Highness." With that, Wilhelm bowed and made to leave.

"W-wait!" I cried out.

He stopped and glanced back for a moment. In that instant, I activated my magic. I desperately wanted to hear his inner voice. I knew full well that it wasn't fair, that I shouldn't force my way into someone else's mind, but I just had to.

I made a vow after I learned how to control my magic that I would only use it for my royal duties and never for personal gain. With Wilhelm...I was always afraid of his true thoughts, so I didn't want to use my magic. I couldn't. This marked the first time I'd ever listened to his inner voice—the part of him he usually kept hidden.

Regret crashed over me in waves. I bit my quivering lips to hold back the sob that threatened to escape. Instead of speaking, I simply stared at him.

It was quiet. His eyes were like the depths of the sea: calming, but with a hint of sadness lurking within. My body trembled as I gazed into those eyes.

"No... Never mind," I said.

Wilhelm bowed once again before exiting the room. Now it was just Alicia and myself. She didn't say a word in the face of my strange behavior. Normally, she would've at least said something like, *Can you believe he just asked that weird question and left?* But in that moment, I was grateful for her silence.

That night, I stayed in the office until late. Though I knew it wasn't something the Doll Princess was known for, I really wanted to focus on my thoughts. I couldn't get Wilhelm's words from this afternoon out of my head. I couldn't believe he still remembered our promise from back then.

A knock resounded in the quiet room.

"Come in." I welcomed them into the room, wondering, Who would visit at this hour?

It was the usual suspects: Tommy and Gilbert. I smiled despite myself—it was good to see some familiar faces.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Why have you come at this hour?"

"I've brought a report regarding our government reform. I was wondering if you could review it before noon tomorrow," said Gilbert.

"Mm-hmm. Leave it on the desk there and I'll read it later."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"I hear you saw your fiancé today," Tommy said.

I schooled my face into perfect calm so I wouldn't give away just how shaken I felt. "Of course you have. Word reached you that fast?"

"Were you trying to hide it? I made sure no one else would know, just in case."

"I see. Thank you."

"Personally, I'm more concerned about your dramatic reaction. We've come such a long way—you're not going to let your feelings for him interfere with our plans, are you?"

I went still. "There will be no changes to the plan."

Though I meant it, I was hesitant. On the day I lost my parents, I decided I would go through with my revenge no matter what I had to sacrifice. If I strained my ears, I could still faintly hear the sound of something breaking, like glass shattering in the distance...

Looking back on it now, I realized something had indeed broken that day: my compassion, nurtured by the tranquility of my past life, and my warmth, which I'd obtained in this one. The joy and nostalgia that once bloomed in my heart had been stamped down by a never-ending blizzard. Now only a frigid, snowy landscape remained.

I would regret nothing. I would *not* run away. I was going to move forward, even if it would bury me in ice and snow.

Despite this, a single sentence from him had softened my resolve.

Was there another way? Is there one yet? I thought, ruminating on all the futile possibilities.

"I admit I wavered when I heard his words."

I would regret nothing. I would *not* run away. I had already chosen my path. No matter how difficult it was, how painful it became, how many things I had to leave behind, or how much I would be hated—I would have my revenge.

I couldn't afford to pivot now. If I were to go easy on myself, even a little, I would have to abandon my plans altogether.

"But...I will not betray the vow I made to myself. I cannot." I pursed my lips to stop their quivering, then smiled. "Tommy, there's only one month until the grand opening. How goes the investigation into the poisoning incident?"

"I've already gathered the evidence, and I'm almost done setting up the bait."

"I see... Great work, Tommy. That's reassuring to hear."

"I can't believe they chose *this* time to poison you. This may sound morbid, but I believe if they waited to poison you after giving birth to a male heir, they'd have guaranteed power over the entire kingdom," Gilbert said, somewhat reluctantly.

"Guaranteed power?" I echoed. "How is that any different from what they

have now?"

"Yeah, the great five marquess houses already have more influence than the royal family," Tommy chimed in.

Wow, he managed to say that with a smile, even.

"I'm sure to them, the royal family is just an annoyance," I said. "While the citizens view the Sacred Swords as objects of faith, the Great Five see them as obstacles to their control over the kingdom. If I were to die 'accidentally' with no heirs, it would be a perfect opportunity for them to acquire royal power... You don't need the Sacred Swords to rule a country. There are plenty of other methods."

I was more inclined to use my Sacred Swords because for me, resources like money, people, and time were limited... But as long as the Great Five had enough resources, they'd manage.

"So they think it's all right for the Sacred Swords to vanish from this country forever?" Gilbert mused. "Sure, the government doesn't need them to function, and the kingdom's security can be maintained by placing more personnel at the borders, but I think they severely underestimate the power of human emotion. People can become strongly attached to their faith."

"I don't know that they thought that far. They likely proceeded with their plans thinking there would be no resistance. But I don't intend on letting them kill me so easily," I said.

"That's a relief. Forgive my earlier impertinence," Tommy said, dipping his head.

"It's fine. Your concerns are valid. Please continue to support me."

Gilbert and Tommy both knelt down and bowed their heads in reverence.

After they left, I looked at the night sky through the window. It was a beautiful sight. Countless stars twinkled in the dark, and a crescent moon hung at the center of it all. The scenery was downright breathtaking.

"I love you."

Just one little phrase. How lovely would it be if I could tell him that? How

lovely would it be if I could hold his hand and walk a different path with him? But it was too late... Much too late. Instead of telling him, I whispered the phrase under my breath in the empty room.

No one responded. The words simply melted away and disappeared into the dark, quiet night.

The entire country buzzed with excitement over the crowning of a new queen—and her impending marriage. Alicia was undoubtedly the most thrilled of them all.

"You look wonderful, Your Highness!" she exclaimed, tears welling in her eyes.

"Oh, Alicia," Luxeria said with a self-deprecating smile. "You're exaggerating."

Alicia meant every word, however. She thought Luxeria looked gorgeous in her wedding dress. The dress exposed her shoulders, and its revealing neckline accentuated her graceful figure. It was pure white, with delicate lace adorning the décolletage; matching white pearls were carefully sewn onto the lace. In the dress, Luxeria exuded an air of untouchable purity.

"Gosh, it's *such* a shame that only so many people will see you in all your splendor. Why is the coronation ceremony limited to the Great Five and their relatives?"

"Well, the coronation is a sacred ceremony. Restrictions on the attendees are apparently a lot more lenient than they used to be."

"But because of that, even the wedding has restrictions! Since the coronation and wedding are happening at the same time, it's very difficult to let more people enter just for the wedding... Even though it's supposed to be the most important event in a woman's life!"

"It's all right, Alicia. I've come to accept it. Besides, this is actually better for me."

"Better?"

"See, I'd get nervous if too many people attended. It's better like this."

"As long as it pleases you, Your Highness..."

"It's almost time," Freesia calmly interjected, completely accustomed to Luxeria and Alicia's back-and-forths. Luxeria thanked Freesia, took her royal guard's hand, and proceeded to the chapel. Alicia and Freesia followed closely behind. Unlike the banquet months ago, the two maids were allowed into the venue as Luxeria's attendants.

Generations of monarchs had been crowned in the palace chapel. Five colorful banners hung from the walls. An altar stood at the far end of the room, and behind it were replicas of the five Sacred Swords.

Godfrey Saxon, the head mage and the man who would conduct the ceremony, stood before the replicas. As formidable magic weapons, the Sacred Swords fell under the palace mages' jurisdiction. Furthermore, the swords were objects of faith for the citizens of the Federal Kingdom of Ausgrid. That was one more reason the palace mages were entrusted with overseeing various royal affairs.

Few attendees sat in the hall despite the ceremony being of national importance. Their eyes were fixed on Luxeria as she slowly walked toward the altar. Her dress shimmered in the sunlight streaming into the chapel, making Luxeria herself appear to sparkle. Everyone present gasped in awe of her beauty.

Wilhelm stood before the altar, where the two would exchange vows once her coronation was officially done. Luxeria joined him, and Godfrey began to speak in a melodic tone. He recited the words spoken by the first king of Ausgrid when he passed the throne to his heir: "Are you prepared to inherit the throne?"

"I swear to take the throne and ensure the brilliant flame of our nation never dies. I swear that flame will illuminate this land far and wide." Luxeria uttered the oath with no hesitation, then got down on one knee.

"Rule the kingdom well," Godfrey said, placing a crown upon Luxeria's head.

Applause erupted from the audience. Luxeria waved her hand, acknowledging their response. Once the applause subsided, Godfrey launched into a new speech, one commonly given at weddings. He asked about their commitment to

building a family and growing old together.

Luxeria and Wilhelm turned to face each other. The wedding ceremony would end once they both said "I do." Luxeria was supposed to go first, but she remained quiet.

As Luxeria's silence persisted, murmurs of confusion swept through the attendees.

Freesia shot a questioning glance at Alicia. The lady-in-waiting, however, was completely absorbed in watching Luxeria.

Suddenly, the newly crowned queen whirled toward the audience as powerful magic rippled out through the venue. It emanated from Luxeria where she stood at the altar. The magic was so intense that even the air felt heavy, causing another round of gasps in the crowd.

Luxeria spread both of her arms wide open. A warm breeze swept through the chapel as five swords appeared around her, hovering in the air. Each sword possessed a unique color—crimson, amber, cerulean, jade, and indigo. They were, without a doubt, the Sacred Swords.

The onlookers held their breath, stunned speechless. After all, it was widely believed that Luxeria was unable to summon the Sacred Swords. That was precisely why she was called the Doll Princess. And yet, she had just accomplished what no previous ruler—except the first—had been able to achieve: summoning all five Sacred Swords simultaneously. By all accounts, it should've been impossible.

Alicia, too, struggled to hide her surprise at Luxeria's feat. She waited on tenterhooks, watching the queen's every move. Her eyes stung, and she swiped away the teardrops rolling down her cheeks. "Huh?"

Why am I crying? she thought. Am I scared? Or sad?

None of it seemed quite right. She couldn't put it into words, but it was some potent blend of nostalgia and amazement that overwhelmed her as she witnessed Luxeria at the center of the Sacred Swords.

While Alicia openly cried, the scene took a dramatic turn. Luxeria reached out and grasped one of the swords around her. It was the one with a vibrant

crimson glow. In one swift motion, she pointed the Sacred Sword at Wilhelm and thrust it straight through him.

It was a shocking sight—so much so that the audience must have wondered if it was staged. Time slowed to a crawl. After a long moment of silence, someone screamed.

"Aiiieeeee!"

One after another, similar screams followed, echoing throughout the chapel.

"Wh-why...?" Alicia whispered to no one in particular, but her words were drowned out by the screams. Her gaze was locked on Wilhelm's collapsed body.

Why was he smiling?

The image was seared into her mind.

Right before Luxeria stabbed Wilhelm, he smiled. That smile had contained all his sorrow, all his joy. In that same moment, Luxeria's face tightened, as though she were on the verge of tears.



What does all this mean? Alicia had never seen Luxeria make such an expression. Luxeria's smile was always warm and gentle, like a ray of sunshine. Whenever Alicia noticed the occasional loneliness brewing behind Luxeria's eyes, she'd think, What's wrong? What happened? Is she okay?

Each time Alicia tried to ask about it, Luxeria concealed it immediately, pasting on her usual smile. However kind she looked, that smile warned Alicia to not delve any deeper. That was why Alicia never pushed the issue...and now she regretted it. Even if this unfathomable sorrow had been lurking beneath that smile, she should have asked.

Had Luxeria ever found someone to confide in? Or had she carried this pain alone all along? What had filled her heart with such terrible misery?

Amid the fear and astonishment consuming the chapel, Alicia was rooted to the spot, thinking of nothing but her concern for Luxeria.

"Silence," said Luxeria. Her voice was sharp as it sliced through the venue. "To your seats, everyone."

"Yes..." Alicia mumbled.

Unable to process Luxeria's command, everyone just stared at her, dazed. Some had even fainted.

"What are you doing? To your seats. *Now*." Unable to wait a moment more, Luxeria repeated her command. Everyone immediately sat down.

One voice rose up from the silent, suffocating atmosphere. "A word, Your Majesty!"

"What is it, Lord Radford?" Luxeria asked as she sat down.

The man in question was Vixen Radford, head of House Radford and father of Wilhelm Radford—the one who'd just been stabbed.

"Why did you kill my son?! Tell me!" he shouted, eyes flaring with hatred. Everyone present seemed to support him.

"Why, you ask? Of all people, you dare question me?" Despite being bombarded with glares of suspicion, hostility, loathing, and fear, Luxeria remained composed. With a twisted smile, she called a servant over. The two

engaged in a quiet conversation—the audience, unable to pick up a word of it, grew even more suspicious.

With a nod, the servant left.

"I should be the one asking questions here, Marquess. Why did you betray the royal family?"

"Betray, you say?! What are you talking about? House Radford has always been loyal to the royal family!"

Queen Luxeria burst out laughing, finding something about his comment highly amusing. "Loyal, really? Is your idea of 'loyalty' assassinating me?"

"What?!"

Just then, the servant Luxeria talked to returned, handing her a stack of documents.

"Did you think royal power would be transferred to House Radford if you took my life?"

"Th-this is a misunderstanding! How can you throw out such bold accusations?!"

"Oh, a misunderstanding? I've uncovered the means you used to source the poison intended for me. Not only that, but I've seized the actual substance, captured witnesses who can testify against you, and even apprehended the assassin you hired as a contingency plan in case your initial attempt failed. Even with all this evidence against you, do you still dare to call this a mere misunderstanding?"

She tossed the papers into the air, and they scattered with a loud rustling sound. As they fell, Luxeria stood among them with a vial in her hand.

"Urk! I-I... Ngh!"

Perhaps Vixen also saw the bottle; he began to panic. Seeing him in such a state, everyone turned their mistrustful gazes on him. But for better or worse, Vixen regained his composure.

As if he had never been in distress, he began to shout. "Your Majesty, I'm being framed!"

Clearly amused, Luxeria narrowed her eyes. "Framed, you say?"

"Yes. Someone has set a trap to bring down House Radford!"

The queen chuckled. "I see, I see. You would accuse me of lying?"

"No, not at all, Your Majesty. Rather, I believe you are being deceived by someone."

"Ah, right. You know nothing of Heart Realm." Luxeria's words seemed oddly abstract, confusing the audience. "It's fine. Let us determine the truth with the power of the Sacred Swords."

Luxeria raised one hand high. A Sacred Sword enveloped in blue light appeared. The very manifestation of a Sacred Sword now frightened the attendees, and several of them screeched in terror.

"Are you behind the attempt on my life? Answer me."

"No, of course not! House Radford is perfectly loyal, I tell you! I vow that no one in my House participated in such a—"

Vixen stopped speaking halfway through. Noticing that the blue light had enveloped him, he let out a shriek. The next instant, he collapsed.

Screams echoed through the hall once again.

"Silence!"

Fearing her wrath, everyone went quiet.

"Godfrey," Luxeria said.

"Y-yes, Your Majesty?"

"Since you're the head mage, I presume you know about this sword?"

"O-of course. That is the Sword of Sincerity. That blade will punish whoever dares to proclaim falsehoods before it."

"Indeed, no form of deceit will slip past this sword. That is where its power lies. However..."

Luxeria extended her hand, palm facing up. In an instant, all five of the Sacred Swords appeared and spun around her.

"This isn't the only sword that contains extraordinary power. They all do. If one fails to overcome the trials given by these swords, he will perish. And if he survives, no matter what accusations are leveled against him, he will be granted forgiveness as a beneficiary of the monarch's favor. Am I correct, Godfrey?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Luxeria smiled and raised her hand. The Sacred Swords vanished without a sound.

"As Vixen has been punished by the Sword of Sincerity, this proves that House Radford conspired to kill me. Committing treason against the royal family is an offense of the highest order. For their crimes, House Radford shall be abolished."

It was then that Lord Slade spoke up. "A moment, please."

"Yes, Lord Slade?"

"Treason against the royal family entails collective punishment. I believe we should apprehend the members of House Radford immediately."

Luxeria's smile widened. "Rest assured that they will be punished shortly. I've already commanded the kingdom's army to apprehend every single member of their house—except for Vixen and Wilhelm on the floor there, of course."

The marquess laughed. "They certainly do not need to be captured. Apologies for getting ahead of myself."

"No matter. Does anyone else wish to speak their mind? If there are no takers, then this concludes the ceremony."

When her declaration received no reply, Queen Luxeria took her leave. The tension among the attendees disappeared along with her, but a heavy atmosphere remained. One woman stayed firmly in her seat, while one particular man anxiously looked around, unsure what to do next.

With one sideways glance at the lingering attendees, Alicia dashed out of the venue to chase after Luxeria. The palace was dead quiet, as though the commotion from before was but a dream.

Before Alicia could get far, Freesia called out to her. "Alicia!"

"Freesia? What's wrong? It's unusual for you to shout."

"R-really? Anyway, where are you planning to go?"

"Where? To Her Majesty, of course. I must hurry over to help her change clothes."

"I knew it," Freesia muttered.

"Seriously, is something up? Oh! Was I in charge of something else?"

"No, that's not it! Listen, Alicia..." Freesia firmly gripped the other girl's shoulders. "Are you all right?"

Alicia's eyes widened at Freesia's surprising strength. "Um, yeah. As you can see, I'm doing great."

"That's not what I'm asking! Alicia, are you not frightened by Her Majesty?!"

She tilted her head sideways, puzzled by the question. "Frightened by her?"

"Yes! She has such strong magic and wields the Sacred Swords... I got goosebumps during all that chaos. You don't know if and when she'll use that power on you—doesn't that scare you?"

"Hmm. I've never thought about that. Why are you fretting about it, Freesia?" "What do you mean?"

"If Her Majesty does use her magic on me, I'm sure there's a reason for it. She used it just now because Marquess Radford tried to kill her. In fact, I think what she did was reasonable as the ruler of the kingdom."

"Sure, I guess, but—"

"Her Majesty is a kind person. Her magic's just stronger than other people's. If she wasn't so kind, I'd have been punished a long time ago, don't you think?"

Luxeria's sunny smile rose to Alicia's mind. No matter how much she thought about it, Alicia didn't feel a lick of fear toward Luxeria. The queen's eyes shone with resolve in her every move. The only thing plaguing Alicia right now was concern.

"True, Luxeria always accepted your impolite behavior with a smile," said Freesia.

"Huh? Have I really been so disrespectful?"

"Wha...?" Freesia's jaw dropped in disbelief. Shaking it off, she changed the topic. "Okay, then. You've got to see Her Majesty as soon as you can, right? I'll give you a hand."

"Right! I'm sure she's waiting for us."

With that, the two ran off to Luxeria's room.

Chapter 4: The Queen's Play

ARRIVED AT THE OUTER PALACE very early the following morning to review paperwork in my royal office.

"I heard about your wonderful 'battle' yesterday," Gilbert said.

"You're the first to joke about yesterday's commotion, Gilbert."

"Ha ha ha! Well, I wasn't there to witness it myself. Besides, knowing it was going to happen, I wouldn't have been afraid."

"Ah, makes sense. So, how is the palace faring?"

"There is a lot less chaos than expected. I thought the bureaucrats would be in disarray and that most of them would take a day off, but that hasn't been the case at all. In fact, it appears the news didn't reach them."

"Oh? I thought the nobles in the palace loved spreading rumors... When did they become so cautious?"

"I believe every noble who witnessed the event decided to keep quiet. Something clearly happened, but no one dares to speak about it. Even if the bureaucrats want to ask, they can't casually approach powerful nobles. They've also refrained from speculating and speaking out without solid evidence... It would be quite impressive if anyone dared to gossip about it."

"I see. I wonder why everyone chose to stay silent about it? Wouldn't it be better to openly discuss what they saw?"

"I think it's because they fear you, Your Majesty. Several families have packed up and rushed back to their regions."

"They fear me? I find that hard to believe. Considering everything that happened at the banquet and the tea party, I can't imagine their attitudes would change so drastically just because I summoned the Sacred Swords once."

"Well, not everyone shares the sentiment. Some of them couldn't bring

themselves to believe what they saw and opted to turn a blind eye."

"Hm."

"At any rate, it might be a good thing that the story didn't spread far. If others remain in the dark about your transformation, they will continue to look down on you as they always have. There might be an opportunity to round up and apprehend such individuals all at once."

"A fair point. It would be much easier if they brought about their own demise, though."

"I doubt they'll be such easy prey—the Great Five in particular. Oh, apologies, there are only *four* of them now." Gilbert laughed with mirth—and he seemed to be testing me.

"True enough. Gilbert, continue to closely monitor the bureaucrats' movements. Make sure they aren't up to anything."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

At that moment, there was a knock on the door. The man who entered was dressed head to toe in military garb, and he snapped off a perfect salute.

"Excuse me. We have received a postrider's report from the Radford Region Expeditionary Unit!"

"Tell me, have they successfully apprehended everyone related to House Radford?" I asked.

"Yes, all targets have been detained. No sign of rebellion or unrest in the region."

"I see. Since there is still a possibility of revolt, stay on your guard. And about Norman, the bureaucrat who was dispatched from the palace... Have you heard anything from him?"

It was part of the original plan to have Norman sent to House Radford, so I'd discussed regional governance with him on many occasions. With House Radford abolished, no one was leading the regional government. To fill that gap, I'd dispatched him from the palace, granting him the authority to rule.

"He has arrived safely and will be working alongside local officials, as

planned."

"Good. So many people went to work in House Radford's region because they believed in me... I must pivot my efforts as well."

"Yes, we should prepare for the second phase to increase the chances of success."

"Mm, we should," I remarked. "Messenger, is there anything else to report?"

"No, that concludes the report. Though I have received documents from Norman to deliver to you."

"Ah, good work. You may leave."

"Yes, Your Majesty! Excuse me."

After the messenger left, I turned back to Gilbert. "First, we should instruct the heads of each ministry to identify the redundant tasks covered in others... Is everything ready for the meeting?"

"Of course. Could I borrow some of your time tomorrow to sign off on a few things?"

"Absolutely."

"Thank you. I have more things to attend to, so I'll be off, then."

"Yes, you're free to go."

Once Gilbert was gone, I returned my attention to the paperwork on my desk. Some things were beyond my understanding, so I'd asked those relevant to each subject for clarification.

I heard a knock, and in waltzed Alicia. "Hello, Your Majesty!"

"My, Alicia, what bring you here?"

"I figured it was about time for you to take a break, so I brought you a treat."

"Wow, your homemade dessert! Thank you. I was just feeling tired and craving some sugar!"

"I'm glad to hear that. Today's dessert is...cheesecake!"

"Oh my! You're just the best. You really know my tastes."

I set the documents aside and let myself indulge in Alicia's cheesecake. At the first bite, its rich sweetness spread through my mouth. The tart berries she'd paired with it brought the whole thing together.

"Mmm, delicious!" I couldn't help but exclaim in delight before I devoured the rest of the cake.

I knew this was a little—no, *quite* unladylike—but I couldn't help it. Sweet things tasted the best when you were tired, after all. And they were even better when made by Alicia. She knew my preferences through and through. The cake disappeared in an instant.

"There's plenty more," Alicia said. "Would you like seconds?"

"You know it."

For a moment, I thought, I didn't move at all today, so I'll probably gain weight if I eat all that. Still, I didn't doubt my decision.

I finished every last bite of Alicia's cake before returning to work.

"Welcome, Master Ted. Master Nate is awaiting you in the reception room."

Immediately after the new queen's coronation, the various ministers of government received word of a mandatory meeting. The night before, Minister Nate—head of the Ministry of General Affairs—had invited Vice Minister Ted to his home.

Upon stepping into the reception room, Ted saw his superior unusually agitated.

"Damn it! How dare she underestimate me?!"

The butler who had guided Ted into the room seemed taken aback by his employer's outburst.

"Oh, how unsightly of me. Thank you, you may leave."

Relieved, the butler fled the room, leaving the two colleagues alone.

"Isn't this just ridiculous?!" Master Nate slammed his fist on the table with a loud bang. A glass of water toppled over and spilled its contents on the desk.

"I agree," Ted said. "The doll who was handed the throne on a silver platter dared to summon you despite all the work on your plate... Good grief, she is terribly disrespectful. Is the purpose of the meeting still a secret?"

"Yes... How unpleasant."

"But if that's the case, won't other ministers be inclined to skip the meeting?"

"They should! But the Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs unfortunately rejected my proposal to skip the meeting. Not only that, but they *insisted* I participate."

"What? The Minister of Defense *and* the Minister of Foreign Affairs?! Why in the world...?"

"I do not know, either. They don't do anything without a damn good reason, though. There must be some logical explanation behind their choice."

"Yes, they're both very sharp. Perhaps it would be best if you joined."

"I know. But to think I'd be summoned by a brat like her... It makes my blood boil!"

"On the other hand, this might be a good opportunity."

"What?" Nate's eyes snapped over to Ted.

"She is little more than a brat who knows nothing about politics, right? You should mentor her, Nate."

Nate, who had been ranting and raving all this time, finally smiled. "Aha, I see. I suppose you're right. I should just embarrass that clueless girl during the meeting."

Ted poured some liquor into the now-empty glass on his desk and handed it to Nate. Nate happily accepted the cup, downing it in one gulp.

Two days after my conversation with Gilbert in the office, I found myself surrounded by high-ranking officials. We were in a conference room in the outer palace. Every single aspect of this room—which was specifically designed for high-ranking officials—was luxurious.

The one who held most authority in this kingdom was me, of course: the queen. Next in line were the five ministries: Foreign Affairs, Finance, Justice, Defense, and General Affairs.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs dealt with diplomatic relations with other nations. The Ministry of Finance was responsible for budgeting, financial reports, accounting, and taxation. The Ministry of Justice oversaw the establishment and maintenance of the kingdom's legal system. The Ministry of Defense managed the kingdom's army and the palace mages. Lastly, the Ministry of General Affairs handled tasks unrelated to the other four ministries.

The high-ranking officials consisted of all the ministers and vice ministers. With so many seasoned veterans in one place, there was a certain gravitas to the occasion.

"Well... Now that it's time, we shall begin. Today, we will be discussing reforms to the organizational structure of the government."

"Government reform, you say? Is that truly necessary? I believe the current system is functioning adequately," the Minister of Finance said.

"If it is functioning adequately, does that mean we should stop striving for improvement?" I countered, meeting each person's gaze in turn. "To not even consider improving is negligence. Is there truly nothing in our kingdom we can make better? Is our government truly working as needed? I don't believe so. Therefore, I have decided to restructure our kingdom in this first phase of my plan. In the second phase, we will be discussing new policies. A simple explanation, but that's the gist of it. Does anyone have questions so far?"

"It's clear that you want some achievements to your name now that you've claimed the throne, but aren't you being too hasty? As the Minister of Finance pointed out earlier, our country is functioning adequately. Please be aware of the risks involved in unnecessarily disrupting the government." These blunt words from Minister of General Affairs elicited mumblings from a few in the room. If I recalled correctly, his name was Nate Velnatti.

The two men from the Ministry of Defense—who knew what happened during the coronation—watched me warily. I let them know they had nothing to worry about. The others in the room tilted their heads in unison, confused by

their seemingly excessive reactions.

"You also believe it's functioning adequately?" I asked.

"Indeed," said Nate. "This country has been operating under this system long before you rose to power, Your Majesty."

"Hmm... Very well. Then do explain why we haven't received the report on our crop harvest for the past decade. If I remember correctly, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of General Affairs are responsible for it."

Nate's face twitched in discomfort. "I won't know for sure until I confirm, but the Ministry of Finance used the data in its annual financial report, so—"

"What?!" the Minister of Finance cut in, seeing the comment as an accusation. "The financial reports reflect the crop yields, yes, but we merely require the quantity."

"Oh... In that case, is it entirely the Ministry of General Affairs' responsibility to compile crop reports from each region, assess trends in crop yields, appraise the national reserves, and take appropriate measures in the event of a poor harvest?"

Neither Nate nor the Minister of Finance replied.

"Am I mistaken? I suppose I won't know if you're doing your job unless I have the report. In my opinion, there is no need to continue allocating personnel and budget to something we can't see. What are your thoughts?"

"I cannot say anything further until we conduct proper investigations..."

I held back from sighing at Nate's response. I never had any expectations for him. Before the meeting, I investigated the progress of the report from all avenues. I gave them the benefit of the doubt—maybe it was only the final report that hadn't been handed in, and they were halfway through the work—but it turned out they hadn't worked on it at all. Even if the Minister of Finance had been aware of this situation, it was unlikely that he'd be able to provide such an answer in this setting.

"If you cannot provide an explanation right now, it suggests that you have no understanding of this matter whatsoever. In short, you have failed to fulfill your

duties," I said. "Now...Minister of Finance, you mentioned that you only required the quantity of crops, but have you ever verified the accuracy of those numbers? Surely you didn't blindly accept the data provided by the Ministry General Affairs."

"W-well, I cannot comment unless I confirm it... Besides, even though we are different ministries, we should trust information from others who share responsibility for running the kingdom."

"Hah! How can you still say that after listening to this entire conversation? General Affairs has probably never inspected the accuracy of those numbers. Besides, if you need the quantity for your duties, shouldn't you be confirming the accuracy of the numbers in your *own* ministry?"

Unfortunately, reports from each region—that is, from the Great Five—could not be trusted. There was a possibility that the numbers were manipulated or underreported.

"Now then, Minister of General Affairs," I said, turning to Nate. "If I recall correctly, you were confident that our organization was functioning adequately?"

"N-no! That was, um, a mere guess..."

"I see. In that case, I believe it is necessary to clarify each ministry's responsibilities and the scope of authority of each person in charge. What do you think?"

"I-I think that is a wonderful idea," Nate said.

"Is this what you referred to as the 'first phase,' Your Majesty?" asked the Minister of Justice.

"Indeed. In front of you are documents outlining the responsibilities of each ministry. First, I'd like you to confirm if anything is missing, and then clearly state who would be responsible for any overlapping tasks. For example, regarding the crop yield report mentioned earlier, Finance can be in charge of compiling and verifying the accuracy of the reports from each region, and General Affairs can assess the reserves and implement measures in the event of poor harvests. I believe we should subdivide each task and clearly identify the

one in charge."

"In addition to subdividing tasks, it may be best to assign leaders," said the Minister of Justice. "And about the authority of the people in charge... Could you please temporarily entrust it to our ministry? We have already begun to discuss the issue of power imbalance."

In a government as large as this one, it was a struggle to identify who made decisions and how they were made. Moreover, it was difficult for high-ranking individuals to effectively communicate with all their subordinates. Therefore, it was crucial to establish clear guidelines on decision-making authority and to develop a chain of command.

"Ensure that your responsibilities are clarified by next week and report back to me. Understood?"

Everyone nodded in acknowledgment.

Having gotten their assent, I returned to the office, then read through some additional documentation.

"Mm..."

There was a veritable mountain of paperwork on my desk. Since computers did not exist in this world, all documents were on paper. That said, I had always preferred reading on paper—even in my past life. I found it easier to absorb the material that way. The medium wasn't the issue; it was the sheer amount of work.

Once I finished reading, I leaned back into my chair and looked up. I organized my thoughts while following the patterns up the wallpaper and onto the ceiling.

A knock came at the door, and Gilbert stepped into the room.

"Pardon my intrusion," he said. "How was the meeting?"

"It went very smoothly," I replied.

"Oho. I thought you-know-who might give you a headache."

"Indeed he did...but I managed to convince him in the end."

I already knew the Minister of General Affairs would protest. That was why I

had Gilbert's students gather information in advance to counter all of his arguments.

"That's great to hear. We also need to switch up the power structure inside the palace sooner than later so we can support Norman. He is fighting alone in the Radfords' region."

I nodded in agreement. "Once we sort out the redundant tasks, we'll have completed the second phase. Your students will be all finished with their investigations, so we can assign some of them to assist the ministers. And with the remaining students, we will discuss whether we need additional duties and departments."

"Understood."

"That said, we're quite pressed for time. I wish things could progress faster for Norman as well, but..."

"Haste makes waste," Gilbert said. "Establishing a solid foundation for our government is crucial for future reforms as well. It is also essential for the centralization of regional governance and decentralization of the national government you desire."

Centralizing regional governance and decentralizing national governance... That was the final form of the political institution I envisioned.

"I've found your vision intriguing from the very first time I heard about it. The idea of decentralizing national governance in particular."

"Regrettably, I'm just one person, so I can only dedicate so much time for each task. Wouldn't it be more efficient to delegate additional authority to the ministers and have them make the necessary decisions? My role would be to maintain the overall balance," I said.

Currently, regional lords were responsible for making decisions in their own regions. My goal was to shift that authority to the ministries of the national government. Each ministry's tasks would be reported to the minister, and decisions made in the ministries would be implemented across regions. The ministers would keep each other in check, while the queen and regional lords would be responsible for monitoring their work and maintaining the general

balance of power.

That was the basic picture.

"I hope we can make it a reality soon. I don't ever want to deal with this much paperwork again." I chuckled dryly at my heap of work.

I'd been reading papers on issues and discussing them with the relevant people to further my understanding of our country's situation. I'd learned a lot of basics from Gilbert, but it was still *far* from enough.

Information was key—accurate information in particular. I couldn't make any decisions without the knowledge to back it up. Making a decision knowing nothing or with inaccurate information was no different than gambling.

No, there are smart gamblers who play out strategies based on the available information, so that comparison's not quite fair to them.

Anyway, I needed to build a solid foundation of *accurate* information. I did not want to become that one superior who signed documents and pretended to know things. An incompetent queen could kill both her subordinates and her country as a whole.

"There is still much to be done—reorganizing the education system, implementing welfare programs, advancing medical care, protecting and nurturing mages, promoting domestic development, and fostering economic growth... The list goes on. While it may be difficult to work on all of them right now, we must at least sow the seeds for them. And at the moment, creating the fertile environment for it is our top priority."

"There's something bothering me, Your Majesty. May I?"

"What is it?"

"You speak as if you've seen those policies established in real life."

I couldn't help but laugh at Gilbert's astute observation. "What makes you think that?"

"I've had my doubts ever since we began discussing the reforms. I know this sounds absurd, but it feels as if you already know what the end result looks like, and you're trying to align it with our kingdom's customs."

"Unfortunately, I have no idea how the finished product looks."

In my past life, I lived in a country with a high standard of education, but I wasn't able to use that to my advantage. I only knew surface-level information. I wished I had studied more rather than sitting idly by and accepting everything that was handed to me. I should have asked more questions, taken an interest in my surroundings.

It was too late to regret it now, though. Even if I knew all about it, not everything that worked in Japan would work in this kingdom, especially since Japanese law and administration was far from perfect. It was incomplete, so it was constantly tweaked to reflect the changing times. If I implemented that system in a country from a different time period and culture, it wouldn't work well.

That country—no, that world—was most certainly more developed than this one. I had a duty to incorporate all that I could and contribute to the kingdom's development. That was the purpose of my life after the death of my parents. That was why I needed to learn more about this country and delve into even the tiniest details.

My thirst for knowledge had resulted in this mountain of papers I wanted to read.

"I need all the assistance I can get from you and your students. I have high expectations for you," I told him.

"It seems you have skillfully diverted the conversation. But since you've offered such praise, I have no choice but to give my utmost."

Hearing Gilbert's response, my smile widened.

After discussing matters further with Gilbert in the office, I walked down the hallway, intending to return to my room. Despite it being only a very short distance, I was flanked by royal guards. Considering my position, it was understandable, but being "on" even when I had no more to give was incredibly draining.

"Ahh... I'm exhausted."

Once I entered my room, all my tension seeped away, like someone had

unbound me. Alicia was the only one around. Thanks to that, I could fully unwind, no longer worrying about proper etiquette.

"The bath is ready for you," Alicia said. "Would you like to hop in?"

"You know me so well, Alicia. Yes, right away."

Alicia swiftly helped me out of my dress and put me in a thin bathrobe.

Fortunately, a bathroom was attached to my bedchamber. With how close it was, I could take a bath whenever I felt tired. And thanks to the servants' magic, the large tub was already filled with warm water. It would've been a big hassle to do it manually—they would've needed to carry the water to a cauldron, boil it, and then carry it back to the bathtub. Though I didn't boil water when I lived in the tower, I knew how difficult it was from watching Alicia haul the water in for me.

I eased myself into the bath and stretched out. Baths were such a balm for exhaustion.

"Allow me," Alicia said. She undid my loosely tied hair, then washed it with the feather-light touch of someone handling a fragile artifact. "How does it feel?"

"Fantastic."

"You've been returning quite late recently. Please take care of yourself."

"Ha ha, thank you. My work's been taking up a lot more time since there's so much I don't know. Eventually, I'll start coming back earlier."

"May I take your word for it?"

"Of course."

Though "eventually" was still a long ways away, I meant it. I smiled at her to assuage her worries. Once I got out of the bath, I changed into my nightgown and gulped down an iced tea from Alicia.

"Ahh, that hits the spot."

I sure do sound like an old man, I thought. I probably looked like I was drinking an ice-cold beer. I returned the empty glass to Alicia as those thoughts lingered

in my mind.

"By the way, Your Majesty, Tommy started growing pelches."

"He did? I don't recall seeing any pelche trees in the garden, though..."

"Oh, not in the garden. Just on his own land."

"First polums, now pelches? Huh, he must have a sweet tooth."

Though Tommy claimed that being a gardener was just a cover for gathering information, he appeared to genuinely enjoy the job.

"Seems like it. Tommy can be surprisingly meticulous. I'm glad for that—it means I can make fruit tarts that are just right! I'll be sure to acquire some pelches for you once they ripen, Your Majesty."

"I'm looking forward to it. Oh, right, if you do get some pelches from Tommy, make sure to share some of the desserts you make with him. I'd like to express my gratitude, and your delicious cake would be a great gift."

Since he had mentioned wanting to try her dessert many times, this would be a great chance.

"Understood, Your Majesty! By the way, remember the show tent I mentioned before? At first, they were only supposed to be here until the coronation, but now they're going to stay permanently in the capital!"

"Wow, that's great news. It sounded so fun from the way you described it. It must've had rave reviews."

"Yes! The lines were apparently *very* long—some people couldn't even get in. Ah, and another thing! A new café opened as well. Rumor has it that they built it near the show tent because of its popularity. I don't know how true that is, but I'll be investigating what types of dessert they have! If they're tasty, I'll recreate them when I bake for you, Your Majesty."

I returned Alicia's cheerful smile with my own. The world she described was so gentle. It always warmed my heart.

"I'm looking forward to it, Alicia. Also, what is the show tent called?"

"Um, I think it's called Étoile."

"Étoile, huh? Thank you."

We continued chatting away, with no particular topic in mind. As we did, memories of living in the tower flooded back—it was terribly nostalgic. I treasured the memories during my confinement. I'm sure a normal person would consider their life over if they were confined... It proved that good and bad were highly subjective concepts that depended on the individual.

Alicia and I chatted late into the night, and then she left so I could rest. With her gone, the room felt so much bigger. It made sense; this was the monarch's bedchamber. I had moved into the room after my coronation. All the previous monarchs had occupied this room, including my father. Yet none of the furnishings from his time still lingered—save for the fireplace built into the wall. Everything else had been replaced during renovations before I ascended the throne.

Initially, I thought, It's such a pain to replace all the furniture, so wouldn't it better if I don't move in? But after assuming the throne, I understood just how important this room was for the kingdom's ruler. There were three secret passages, all locked by magic, making them impenetrable. Only the Sacred Swords could open them. One tunnel served as an escape route, while the other two led to hidden rooms.

When I first learned about the passages, I felt only scorn: *Really, what is the point of these things?* These days, however, I was using them myself. I couldn't speak badly of the previous rulers for doing the same.

Incidentally, the hidden room—the one I didn't use—was a treasury. Inside were confidential documents and hidden assets reserved for emergencies. If I ever encountered financial hardship that I couldn't overcome during reform, I'd help myself to that secret stash.

The secret doors would be exposed if anyone were to enter my bedchamber. To prevent this, I instructed the nearby royal guard using Heart Realm: "Don't let anyone enter this room."

I then proceeded down a dark tunnel and arrived at the other hidden room. Summoning the Sacred Swords, I opened the door. The room inside was rather ordinary. It was fully furnished—I was certain one could live a normal, everyday

life here. I walked over to the bed in the center of the room. As I sat down on the chair beside it, I caressed the hand of the sleeping man in the bed. When I felt his faint warmth, tears pricked at the corners of my eyes.

"I hope you're having a nice dream," I said. Curling up, I buried my face into an empty spot on the bed. I closed my eyes, and memories of the day I first met him came flooding back.

We met shortly before the incident that led to my confinement in the tower. My relationship with the servants was already terrible. I hated being around them, so I snuck out of the palace for a walk. That was when I met him: Wilhelm Radford.

"What are you doing here?"

I immediately knew he was a son of some noble family. After all, he was dressed in fine clothes inside the palace. Who else other than a nobleman's son would wear such attire?

I chose my words carefully: "I had some free time, so I came for a walk."

"Ooh, what a coincidence. I'm free, too! What's your name?"

"Ria. And you?"

"My name's Wilhelm. Why are you in the palace, Ria?"

"I'm here to accompany my father at work. What about you, Lord Wilhelm? Why are you here?"

I wasn't exactly lying. My dad did work at the palace.

"I also tagged along with my father to greet the king. But I got bored, so I snuck out," he said with a chuckle.

"Do you come here often, milord?"

He shook his head. "No, this is my first time."

"Wh-whatever's the matter?" I asked.

"You're very formal. Are you scared of me?"

"No, I certainly am not."

"Then speak to me as you normally would."

"Y-yes, milord. Oops! I mean, okay."

"Great! Then let's go explore together!"

He grabbed my hand, and we ran off.

I have to go back, I thought. Nobody can know I'm here!

Even so, I couldn't resist. It had been way too long since I spent time with someone. Since everyone in the palace knew about Heart Realm, no one besides my parents would talk to me.

Wilhelm and I ran around the forest on palace grounds. Since I hadn't been outside all that much before, everything was new to me. A nearby stream caught my attention.

Our estate has a stream of its own... I can't even begin to imagine how big this place is, I thought, comparing it to experiences from my past life.

The crystal-clear stream was visible even from a distance. It flowed smoothly, and cute little fish swam in the water. I rarely had the chance to see pure, natural waters in my former life.

Wilhelm and I hopped across the stones rising from the water's surface. "Be careful," he said.

Despite his warning, I was too captivated by the river's beauty. I stumbled and nearly fell.

"Watch out!"

His hand shot out to pull me up, but he wasn't strong enough, so we both tumbled headfirst into the stream. I landed right on top of him.

The first thing out of his mouth was, "You okay?!"

It was my fault he ended up in the river, yet he was immediately worried about me. His concern warmed my heart.

"I-I'm okay," I said. "Thank you for taking the fall."

We were both drenched, our pretty clothes ruined. The situation was so ridiculous that I burst out laughing. Wilhelm began to laugh, too.

The sun sparkled above us, shining brightly.

"That was an amazing fall!"

"Ha ha, yeah. We're both soaked! But the water's cold, so it feels nice."

After a while, we got up on the sunny riverbank to wring out our clothes.

"I'm sorry I dragged you along and put you through all this," Wilhelm said.

"Oh, no! You did tell me to be careful. It's my fault for not paying attention. Besides, it was really fun! Especially since I rarely get to come outside."

"Really?" Wilhelm looked confused for a moment, then nodded in understanding. "Oh, I get it. Your parents must be very strict, Ria. I hear some families don't let their children outside at all."

Ah, those noble children are like me—they aren't allowed outside.

"No, I'm not allowed outside because my magic is too strong," I explained. "So today is special."

"Your magic is too strong? I'm jealous! Better to have powerful magic than none at all."

"Not really... Magic can hurt people sometimes. That's why I'm not supposed to be out here playing with you. I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing? I'm the one who asked you to play. I've been fine this whole time, see? Nothing to worry about. If I get hurt, that's on me. I don't regret spending time with you, Ria."

"But I..."

"Hmm. What do I have to say to get you to believe me?"

I didn't need to *believe* him; I knew. Every word he spoke was genuine, reflected in his thoughts. The real problem was that I didn't *like* hearing his thoughts. Not because they were bad—in fact, his heart was so pure it was almost pleasant. But the more we bonded and I came to trust him, the more it hurt to hide the fact that I could hear his inner voice. Even just telling him I had

strong magic was pushing it.

Just how would he react if I told him I knew what he was thinking? Would he find me creepy and avoid me like the servants do? Fearing the worst, I couldn't help but brood over these thoughts.

"People tend to lose heart if they keep hitting a wall over and over. But someone once told me that God only gives trials to people he knows can overcome them. I have no doubt you'll master your powerful magic one day, Ria!"

"You think so?" Though I didn't feel any more confident in myself, I appreciated the sentiment.

Sensing eyes on me, I looked up. Wilhelm was staring straight at me.

"Um, Wilhelm, is there something on my face?"

"Nope, I just realized something."

"What's that?"

"You have such fair skin, Ria. I've been curious about it ever since we met. It complements your blonde hair really well. You look pretty, just like the moon."

Pretty? Me?! His words made my face flush with heat. C-calm down... It's not like he really means I'm pretty. He's saying the same thing a makeup salesperson does when they're like, "Your skin is so nice! Do you use any special serums? Our foundation would look great on you!" I rattled off excuses to stave off the embarrassment.

"D-do you go outside often, Wilhelm?" I blurted, desperate to change the subject.

"Nah. Though I guess I do accompany my father and my older brother a lot."

His response calmed me down a bit. "I see... That sounds nice. I'd love to explore different places, too."

I wanted to spread my wings in the outside world at least once. I was lucky enough to have been born into a different world. I wanted to see all sorts of things. But if I went to a city, I could already foresee myself getting overwhelmed by all the voices I'd hear because of Heart Realm.

"I'll take you out one day, Ria. Anywhere you'd like!"

Once again, his words had my face red-hot. Still, I was overjoyed to hear those heartfelt words. "Okay... I can't wait."

And so, our brief encounter came to an end.

A smile rose to my lips as I remembered the time I spent with him. It was just one day, a few hours at most. But in the course of those few hours, he stole my heart. I wasn't someone who fell in love at first sight; he had just made a deep impression on me.

Our day together remained vividly etched in my memory. He never lied, and he was always sincere. Knowing full well the disconnect between people's inner thoughts and their spoken words because of Heart Realm, I found his sincerity incredibly comforting.

I'm sorry.

How much easier would things have been if I apologized to him? No, I had no right. And now I'd probably never get the chance.

Thank you.

I wanted to express my gratitude, but even that would never happen.

I love you.

Just how happy would I have been if I could be straightforward with my feelings? For me, that joy was so far out of reach. Being honest with my feelings was a luxury I could never afford. That was why I'd been so jealous of Barbara—she could wear her heart on her sleeve and proclaim her love far and wide.

"Please wait until everything is over," I murmured under my breath, "I can free you then."

Upon returning to my chambers, I returned the hidden door to its normal state.

I suppose I should sleep soon.

It was then that a voice called out to me.

"Pardon my entry!"

"... I thought I told the royal guard outside to not let anyone in."

"Well, I didn't enter through the front door, so..."

Tommy's lack of remorse was amusing.

"I see," I said. "Answer me this: Did you tell anyone about the hidden door?"

"No, I didn't," he replied, eyes vacant.

So he was watching me.

"Then forget about it. If you ever see the hidden doors again, forget about them immediately and tell no one."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

I clapped my hands, and the light returned to his eyes. "What brings you here?"

He tilted his head in confusion. "Huh? Was I daydreaming just now?"

Of course he's confused. I just erased his memory.

"You were. Was there something bothering you?"

"N-no. Sorry about that. I'm here to report on House Radford."

"So you are. How goes it?"

"The region's very peaceful. I doubt there'll be anyone rebelling anytime soon—though there's concern spreading among the citizens that they will be forced to bear House Radford's sins."

"How far has this fear spread? Has it reached the entire region or just certain towns? Does it seem to be a significant problem, or is it just a rumor?"

"It's spread throughout the entire region, but it's mostly regarded as a rumor."

"I see. Continue to closely monitor their reactions, especially for any gatherings that were not present before. People loyal to the Radfords may incite a riot."

"Ah, that's true. I'll tighten up surveillance just in case. To put it bluntly, the

general public still doesn't know you've acquired the Radford region. They know nothing of your actions or future plans. So if they come to feel as if things were better before, they might lean toward supporting House Radford... We should stay wary on behalf of Norman and the other officials fighting for our cause out there."

"Indeed. But the greater threat here would be someone spreading fear intentionally."

"What do you mean, Your Majesty?"

"Isn't it possible that someone from House Radford is behind the rumors?"

We'd already identified all individuals connected to the house. If needed, we could investigate their activities and movements again.

"Please reassess the matter," I told him. "I dread the idea that someone connected to the Radfords is stirring the pot in the hopes of reinstating their family."

The citizens seeking to put the Radfords back in power would be bad enough, let alone if some schemer was backing them all the way. Things could escalate quickly. If the Radfords were outwardly involved, they'd have to consider everyone's opinions, and the process could take longer. But if someone was working behind the scenes, fanning the flames of public outrage against me, things would move fast—and that sort of fire would be hard to put out. I would have only two choices then: surrender or quell the situation by eliminating the leader of the revolt.

"Yes, Your Majesty. Will do."

"How is the regional government?"

"The officials who support House Radford have been shirking their duties. But since we did all that work singling out the essential tasks, the government is still functioning normally. We've got Norman and the other loyal officials to thank for that."

"In your opinion, do you think they will be able to maintain the status quo for now?"

"I don't know much about governance, but they didn't seem too stressed, so I think it'll be fine. I've brought over Norman's report in case you want to review it."

"Got it. I'll read it later."

"Very well. I apologize for disturbing you so late." Having finished his report, Tommy made his retreat.

"Tommy, do you know about Étoile?" I asked, stopping him.

"If I'm not mistaken, it's the new show tent that opened in the capital."

I knew he'd have heard about it. "Keep an eye on it... Let me know if you notice any suspicious movements or activities."

"I will. It's quite suspicious for them to establish themselves in the royal capital at a time like this."

"Quite right. We've been controlling the flow of information, but the public must know *something* happened, seeing as I did not marry. It's odd that they've put down roots during the unrest."

As I spoke, I thought back to the conversation I had with Alicia earlier. Although we discussed the same tent, Alicia and I saw it very differently. Alicia's world was a gentle one. That was probably why I wanted to experience the world through her eyes. Like her, I wanted to see it as a gentle and beautiful place.

"I agree. I'll be monitoring them right away."

"Thanks."

"Damn it... Damn it!"

Unable to hide his frustration, Nate slammed his fists on the table. Ted flinched at the loud sound.

"That brat... It's only been a few days since she took the throne, and she's already acting so high and mighty! Don't you agree, Ted?!"

"Right you are, Nate. Good grief, it's outrageous that an impostor sees herself

as the real ruler."

Ted nodded solemnly. It was only three days ago that they had spent the night drinking together. The situation had drastically changed within those few days.

I don't want to admit it, but she got the better of us, Ted thought.

They assumed they could belittle and dismiss her, but the result was disastrous, and now she was giving them orders. It had been a humiliating meeting for Nate and Ted, and now the two were burning with determination. They wanted to insult Luxeria and drive her from the throne.

"Hmph. The Doll Princess should act like a doll and keep quiet," muttered Nate, a sinister gleam in his eyes. "Is there a way we can silence her—have her endure her own disgrace?" His tone was terribly foreboding.

"What if we seek aid from the Great Five? I imagine they'd be equally pleased to see the brat gone."

"The Great Five, eh? Seeking their assistance won't be easy... No, wait." Nate contemplated for a moment. "I have an idea! Thank you, Ted. You can return now—I would like to get started immediately."

Nate had a complacent, cheerful smile on his face, as he usually did when dreaming up some devious plan. Ted had seen that expression enough to know that, just as he said, he truly did have a cunning plan in mind.

"Yes, sir." Ted obediently left the mansion.

A few days later, he was once again summoned to Nate's residence.

"I managed to get them in safely... Now we can bring down that doll!" Nate exclaimed.

"Who have you brought?" asked Ted.

"The Radfords."

Ted frowned. Why House Radford? Moreover, how did Nate reach them when they've supposedly gone missing?

"Master Nate... Word has it that Lord Radford committed treason."

"That is precisely why I've invited them. The bureaucrats associated with House Radford have harbored suspicions toward the royal family due to the marguess's sudden punishment. It was rather easy to rope them in."

Ted understood immediately. Nate hadn't reached the Radfords themselves but the bureaucrats associated with them. In that case, it would be a lot easier to recruit them without the Radford family present.

"Remarkable as usual, Nate, but may I ask why you chose to involve the bureaucrats?"

"That doll is making grandiose claims about reforming the government... But what if the bureaucrats she needs weren't there?"

"The government wouldn't be able to function."

"Precisely. And by exploiting that weakness to incite her, I intend to seize her power."

"I see. What exactly do you plan to do with the Radford-aligned bureaucrats?"

"Once I have secured control of the kingdom, I will grant them suitable status. I'll be able to lord over them that way."

Do you really intend to grant them status? Ted swallowed the words on the tip of his tongue. He realized that whether or not Nate kept his promise wouldn't affect him personally.

"How wonderful! I cannot wait to see her in a panic!" Nate cried.

"Ha ha ha, me too," Ted said.

The two of them looked at each other and laughed.

"Oh... Barbara wants to meet with me?"

The lady formerly rumored to be Wilhelm's paramour had requested an audience. *I can't believe she'd ask to speak with me personally*, I thought.

"Yes. She says it's just to pay her respects, but I wonder what she's truly after," said Gilbert.

"Hm... Even you don't know?"

"Well, people driven by their emotions can be quite unpredictable."

I laughed. "That's true. Now, what to do?"

"There's no need to meet her, is there? Seeing as there's no benefit, I think it would be a waste of time."

"Why don't you give it a shot, Your Majesty?" Tommy chimed in. "You want to, right?"

I looked him up and down. "You must have a lot of free time."

Tommy stood before us disguised as a footman. With his makeup and hairstyle, it was nearly impossible to recognize him at first glance. I was strangely impressed but not surprised—his disguises were always spectacular.

"Not at all!" he protested. "Lately, I've been super busy running everywhere to fulfill your orders. I was just about to head to another location, but I can stay and talk if you wish. I'll just sprint there once we're done. I figure it's better to prioritize your wishes, Your Majesty."

"My wishes?"

"You want to see—no, you want to talk to her, don't you?"

"Oh, you win. Yes, I've been wanting to talk to her. In fact, I'm sick of waiting."

"Could it be you know what Barbara is planning?" Gilbert asked.

"Ha ha ha. No, I don't."

I'd only met her twice. Once at the banquet and once at the tea party. Both times were before my coronation, when I refrained from using Heart Realm, so I hadn't been able to hear inner thoughts. Thus, I didn't have a clear understanding of why she came to the palace.

I just wanted to know whether my judgment of her was correct. That was all there was to it—not that anything would change if I got my answer now.

"Hm? If that's your reaction, were you able to discern her true intentions? I'd love to hear what she's after before it happens."

"Why? Are you implying you don't know, either, Tommy?"

"Huh? Uh, well..."

"We can ask her directly when we meet, so you don't need to hear my speculations."

"This won't put you in any danger, will it?" Tommy asked me.

"I assume not. Even if I was wrong, she probably won't be able to harm me. I've got excellent guards by my side, and I won't go down without a fight."

"That's good to hear. But, Your Majesty, how did you know she would come? You didn't ask me to keep an eye on her."

"It was just a hunch. Call it a woman's intuition, if you will."

"A woman's intuition! Your answers... How should I put it? They boggle the mind..."

"What are you implying? I am a woman."

"No, that's not what I meant."

"Anyway, it doesn't matter. Tommy—is Lord Dornetti, Barbara's father, currently in the royal capital?"

"Um, I think so. There have been no reports of him leaving the capital, so he should still be here."

"Then summon him to the palace at once. I shall meet with him after I see Barbara."

"Okay, sure... Why, though?"

"A father is unlikely to acknowledge his mistakes as a parent unless he witnesses them firsthand."

"Can't say I get it, but I'll do it, Your Majesty." Despite his lack of understanding, Tommy accepted my command.

"Now, who do you think would be a suitable messenger to send to Barbara?" I asked.

"Freesia, probably."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Though Alicia is your lady-in-waiting, she's bound to lose control of her magic around Barbara. So I think Freesia, the maid you value the most after Alicia, would be a good choice."

Alicia had never lost control of her magic in front of me. On the contrary—she'd always manipulated it skillfully. When we played the Black Witch game, I had a hard time against her magic, Dichotomy—she created barriers that blocked my path.

After losing her memories, she also lost the ability to properly use her magic. She could no longer control it, either. Despite that, she still produced the same amount of mana she always had.

Basically, Alicia's vast swathes of mana were perpetually in a frenzied state. I was amazed she'd managed to go this long without causing substantial harm.

"You make an excellent point. In that case, let's ask for Freesia."

I called upon a nearby maid, who immediately went to fetch Freesia. When the girl arrived, she looked openly bewildered; perhaps it was because she'd been rushed here.

"Hello, Freesia. Sorry for summoning you here out of the blue."

"N-no, it's no problem at all."

"I have a request I'd like your help with."

"A request for me?"

"Indeed. It seems Barbara has come to visit me. I'm occupied, but I hear she insists on meeting with me, insisting she won't leave until I receive her."

"How terribly rude."

I glanced off to the side for a moment, thinking, My sentiments exactly.

"Leave it. I am curious to know why she would go to such lengths to meet me, and I'd genuinely like to get acquainted with her. I'm planning to put on a little show, and I wish for you to play a supporting role."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Anything for my queen."

"My! I appreciate it. Please inform Barbara that I am unable to meet with her.

I believe she will protest, and when she does, guide her to me."

"Which room shall I guide her to? If you are granting her an audience as the queen, the reception room closer to the outer palace would be appropriate. If you want to chat with her as one noblewoman to another, I believe your own reception room in the inner palace would be more suitable."

"Take her to the audience chamber."

"Huh? The audience chamber?"

"Yes. I want to have a long conversation with her, and I'm sure there are others who would like to listen, so the audience chamber would be more fitting."

"Oh... Understood. I shall escort her there."

"Please do. Right, it'll take a while to gather the others, so please keep her company in the waiting room for the time being. I'll have someone knock on the door once I'm ready."

"Yes, Your Majesty. That said...wouldn't Alicia be more suitable for delivering this message? She's much closer to you, so her presence would give it more credibility."

"Alicia wouldn't be able to control herself if Barbara was disrespectful, no?"

Freesia's eyes widened in surprise as it dawned on her. "I apologize for my presumptuous suggestion. As you said, Your Majesty, she wouldn't be able to control herself. I will see the job done."

"Mm, I leave it to you."

Freesia proceeded to the waiting room where Barbara sat, and I went to the monitoring room beside it. While the waiting room primarily served as a space for guests to wait, there was a monitoring room where we could verify the guests' identities if necessary. In essence, the room was built with eavesdropping in mind. I immediately took advantage of it to listen in on Freesia and Barbara's conversation.

"What do you mean I can't meet her?" Barbara said.

It seemed Freesia had just told Barbara that I wasn't available.

"My apologies, but Her Majesty is currently occupied with work, so it'll be difficult to see her right now."

"What is going on?! House Radford was suddenly abolished, and I can't even ask Wilhelm about it because I can't see him! I want to stand before the queen so she can explain herself!"

"Forgive me for asking, but...why must Her Majesty explain herself to you?"

"Because I'm Lord Wilhelm's lover! I finally managed to reel in a good man, too... And now, since I have connections with House Radford, everyone looks at me with distaste! Even if Her Majesty's jealous of me, she has gone too far, don't you think?!"

Hearing her rant and rave, I sighed and put my head in my hands. Though my guess was spot-on, it was still shocking to hear. Gilbert cradled his own head beside me, and Tommy roared with laughter.

"Now I know what you meant by fatherly mistakes, Your Majesty!" Tommy said.

"I bet. Gosh, I didn't even have to chat with her myself—I was right on the money!" I quickly realized I'd spoken too casually, the way I would in private, as opposed the formal accent I'd adopted from my father.

"That's just splendid."

"Ahem! Yes, indeed. But how is she able to ignore noble etiquette so blatantly?"

"Maybe it's because she wasn't raised among other nobles," Tommy ventured. "She was adopted by Lord Dornetti at fifteen, so it's only been a year. I figure it'd be hard to educate her properly in such a short time."

"Oh, so she isn't Dornetti's child?"

"She is—she's related to Lord Dornetti by blood. Her mother's a maid, though. The viscount didn't formally acknowledge her as his legitimate child at first."

"Ah, I see. Still, I'm surprised she was allowed to participate in official functions with the way she acts."

"I wholeheartedly agree. Well, she *did* manage to win over a young man from a respectable family, so it turned out pretty okay, didn't it?"

"That's true. And not only him. She's apparently been...captivating young men one after another."

"Oho, impressive. Not sure if I should praise her skills or worry about our country's future."

"Both," Gilbert and I said simultaneously. We burst into laughter at our synchronized response.

In the waiting room, an exasperated Freesia escorted Barbara toward the audience chamber. As I watched them, I murmured, "You're right. Well...in *his* case, he was captured rather than caught."

"Did you say something, Your Majesty?"

"No, not at all."

"So? Now that you've managed to hear what you wanted, what will you do?"

"I've no need to see her anymore, but...since she insists, I shall."

"You're very kind," Tommy said.

"Hardly! Isn't that rather cruel?" Gilbert interjected.

I made my way to the audience chamber while they squabbled behind me.

Let the show begin.

I could already see the path ahead. I just had to follow the script to ensure we stayed on course. In my mind, politics and theater were the same at their core. They were all about how to captivate people, suspending their disbelief and pulling them into your story.

And to do that, meticulous preparation had to be done before the opening night.

Unfortunately, this is anything but a dazzling stage. We're in a comedy, yet it's not funny in the least—there's an uncomfortable gravity to it. But, well, we have quite an audience. I should do my best so they can enjoy the performance.

When I arrived at the audience chamber, the royal guards on either side

opened the imposing doors. I then proceeded toward the throne.

Spotting me the moment I entered, Barbara stood up and curtsied on the spot. "Greetings, Your Majesty."

She had interrupted the queen's entrance *and* spoken without my permission. Our hastily assembled noble audience was already chuckling.

I ignored her greeting and sat on the throne. "It has been a while, Barbara. Speak—what brings you here?"

"Uh..." Her eyes widened as she grappled with my change in tone.

I scrutinized her face so I wouldn't miss a single change in her expression. "I said, what brings you here?"

"Um, I wanted to pay my respects to the queen..."

"Your respects? A viscount's daughter summoned *me* just to pay her respects?" I studied her, and her eyes flitted around the room.

"My sincere apologies. To be honest, I just really wanted to know how Wilhelm is doing. Just where is he? I'm just so, so worried... I can't even sleep at night," said Barbara, tears already streaking down her face.

Her act was so convincing, I would've almost believed her if I hadn't heard the conversation in the waiting room. It truly was a shame.

Shall I take her in now and make use of her talents? No, she's already infamous.

Pushing the thought to the back of my mind, I kept my calm and said, "I've given Wilhelm strict punishment."

"No way!" Barbara gasped, pretending to be surprised. "Just because you were in love with him? That's too far! Don't you want your beloved to be happy, Your Majesty?" Leaning into her tragic damsel act, she wavered on the spot as though she might faint.

I couldn't help but snicker. "You speak as if I punished Wilhelm out of jealousy. Do not underestimate me. The good of the kingdom takes priority over my feelings. I punished Wilhelm because he was a direct descendant of Lord Radford, a traitor... Initially, you were also due for interrogation."

"Wh-why me?! I knew it! You just think I'm an eyesore because Wilhelm is in love with me, don't you?!" Jabbing her finger at me, Barbara stomped my way.

In my past life, there was a saying about how pointing a finger at someone meant you had three fingers pointing back at you. While I'd never heard that in this world, I knew this behavior was unacceptable toward the queen.

"How insolent! Who do you think you are?!" A royal guard yelled as he blocked her path. "I've stood by and let you say your piece long enough—how dare you speak with such disrespect toward Her Majesty?!"

I'd never seen him show so much emotion before; it proved just how angry he was.

"What? I-I..." Barbara shriveled beneath the royal guard's glare, intimidated by his rage.

"Leave it," I ordered.

"Your Majesty, I insist—"

"I appreciate your anger on my behalf, but it's fine for now."

The royal guard hesitated, then dipped his head. "Yes, Your Majesty." He then returned to his original position.

I slid my gaze over to Barbara, who defiantly glared back at me.

"Barbara Dornetti, do you really not know that you are under suspicion of treason as well?"

"Huh?!"

"It's natural to suspect someone who had a 'deep' relationship with Wilhelm, whose father was charged with treason. People will wonder if you conspired with Wilhelm or if he shared any information with you."

Realizing the gravity of her situation, she grew flustered. "I-I don't know anything! I swear I don't!"

"Oh, you don't? Weren't you implying earlier that you had a 'deep' connection with Wilhelm? Despite that, you're still certain you know nothing?"

"It's true... Please believe me!"





I observed Barbara, contemplating whether I could trust her. There was no reason to, but listening to her thoughts with Heart Realm proved her innocence: She's really not joking! He committed treason?! And here I thought I finally caught a good man... How did things turn out like this?!

I decided to let her go.

"Very well. Don't take this as a show of trust—I merely doubt Wilhelm would've shared such vital information with you."

She let out a sigh of relief, but the implication behind my words had her mouth twisting shortly after. Though I'd left it up to interpretation, she knew I didn't think Wilhelm trusted her enough to confide in her—meaning I doubted the two of them were as close as she claimed. Glad as she was to be off the hook, Barbara had been publicly belittled by the queen. Just deserts for underestimating me, in my view.

I called out to the knight who had been standing by. "Guard, take her away."

He gave a small nod of assent, then escorted Barbara out of the chamber.

"Are you sure about this?" Tommy whispered in my ear after she left the room.

"Yes. She's innocent."

"If you say so, it must be true."

"But if you let Lady Barbara go with no repercussions, won't others look down on you?" Gilbert asked.

"If I punished her, people would called me a 'jealous harpy' or some such. Either way, I'd still be criticized."

"Ah. That's probably true."

"I suppose all of this is because I haven't gained full control over the palace... Well, there's no point in talking about it now. Tommy?"

"What is it?"

"Who said I won't be punishing her?"

Tommy winced, clearly disturbed. "Oh, no, I..."

I laughed. "You don't need to be so scared, do you?"

He breathed a sigh of relief when he realized I was joking. "Please spare me from jests like that. The real you is terrifying, Your Majesty."

"You're scared of a lady?"

"Excuse me? A *lady* doesn't emit such an oppressive aura. Though I don't deny that women are scary."

"Are you speaking from experience?" I teased.

"Honestly, I think Barbara belongs in that category."

"Ha ha! I suppose so. Now, Gilbert?"

"Yes?"

"Bring Lord Dornetti here."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Lord Dornetti had been waiting in the room right next door, so he entered promptly after I summoned him. It was evident from his complexion that he had been drinking. Although he managed to mask the stench of alcohol, his eyes were glazed over. His clothes couldn't quite conceal his belly, and they seemed to be on the verge of tearing if he bent forward any further.

Though he was called to the queen's audience chamber on short notice, it was remarkable that he had the audacity to come in such a state. Many of the audience members wore looks of disapproval, much like their reactions to Barbara's rudeness.

"Now then, Lord Dornetti. From this day forward, you will be demoted to the rank of a baron."

"Wh-why?!"

"Everyone here—including you—witnessed the scene, right? Barbara's disrespectful behavior was an insult to the royal family. Naturally, I'd hold her guardian responsible. Isn't it fortunate that you got out of this with just a demotion?"

"I've severed all ties with that girl! She's not a true noble—she has

commoner's blood! I merely took her in out of pity." The ex-viscount was desperate, but it only irritated me further.

"Your response displeases me, *Baron*. Leave immediately, before I consider harsher punishments."

"H-how can you—"

"First and foremost, you made the decision to take her in and raise her. It was also *you* who introduced her to noble society. Of course you shall take the blame. Even if you sever ties with her now, that accomplishes nothing."

Reeling, he made to object. "But—"

"Oh, are you interrupting me as well?" I asked with a smile.

"What?"

"Interrupting me without permission... What are you thinking? Just like Barbara, you seem to lack a fundamental understanding of the rules governing the royalty and nobility. It appears that the problem lies not in her blood but in your influence."

"No, Your Majesty, please listen to me!"

"No further explanation is necessary. Now, guards, remove this fool from the chamber."

I heard Baron Dornetti shouting my name over and over, but I ignored him.

"Your punishment is just too cruel, Your Majesty," Gilbert said.

"Cruel? I think demotion as a punishment for insulting the royal family is too kind," Tommy countered.

Gilbert laughed dryly. "Look, everyone here knows about Barbara's attitude toward Her Majesty."

"Well, of course. We were all watching," Tommy said.

"Her Majesty didn't issue an order to be silent. News of his demotion for today's gaffe will spread among the nobility. Once it becomes common knowledge, nobles overly concerned about their reputations may feel too embarrassed to participate in social gatherings. Furthermore, as Queen

Luxeria's influence grows, fewer people will be keen on being associated with such a family."

"Oof. Sounds rough."

I couldn't help but smile—Tommy likewise seemed to believe it would increase my influence. "Your praise humbles me," I said.

"I wasn't praising you," Gilbert replied.

"Ha ha, really? All right. I think we've fooled around long enough. Tommy, shouldn't you be leaving soon?"

"You're right... I'll head out."

I stood up after seeing him off. "I should return as well. Gilbert, there are a few matters I'd like to confirm with you."

"Understood. I shall accompany you to the office."

"Sounds good."

With Gilbert in tow, I made my way back to my office.

Facing my office desk, I found myself completely lost in thought. This was the place I could concentrate best, after all. The reports detailing specific duties from almost all the ministries had been handed in. Regrettably, the Ministry of General Affairs had yet to submit one. I knew it would come in late, since the minster wasn't cooperative.

I got busy comparing the ministries' reports to the one from Gilbert and his students. It was pretty much as I expected. As for any discrepancies, I'd have the students of each ministry reassess the necessary tasks and personnel. And once *that* was ready, I'd begin negotiations with the ministries to reduce the excess staff.

A knock at the door snapped me back to the present. I granted permission to enter, and the marquess walked inside.

I immediately used Heart Realm on the maid beside me: "Don't listen to our conversation."

Her face slackened, and she stood in a daze. Satisfied, I turned back to my guest.

The marquess's gaze rested on the maid, and he smiled. "As always, your magic is versatile."

"Did you come here just to flatter me?"

"No. I will be returning to my region, so I'm here to bid you farewell."

"Knowing you, I'm sure you heard about Lord Slade's arrival and thought this was a good opportunity to visit."

If this marquess was the only one to visit me, suspicions might arise that we were conspiring together. However, now that another marquess was in the capital, it wouldn't seem unnatural for him to come.

"You guessed correctly, Your Majesty."

"So, what's the real reason for your visit?"

"I'm simply here to inquire about your well-being. Especially your condition."

"Ha ha ha! My condition, really?"

"No one said you collapsed, but you *did* summon the Sacred Swords. Given your history, of course I'd be concerned about your health."

"True enough. Anyone who knew about my mana veins might worry. But there's no need for that. As you just saw, I can use my magic without issue."

"It certainly seems so... It was worth waiting until you acquired the crown."

My mana veins were fragile, though I wasn't sure whether it was due to my previous injury or because I used Heart Realm too often.

I had lied to the marquess in the past, but even now I sometimes experienced pain similar to what I felt in my childhood. Had I summoned the Sacred Swords before I took the crown during my coronation, I probably would've collapsed afterward. Few people knew this, but the crown was an artifact that lessened the burden of summoning the swords.

My body, with its delicate mana veins, could not handle the full power of all the Sacred Swords without the crown, even though I possessed enough magic to summon them. That was why I'd hidden my abilities beneath my Doll Princess persona, patiently waiting for the coronation.

"Even though you've acquired the crown, please do not heavily rely on the swords. They consume a significant amount of mana. I doubt your body can handle it for too long."

"What are you implying, Marquess?"

"Wouldn't it be wise for you to undo the magic on Wilhelm Radford?"

I sucked in a breath. "I don't understand."

"You stabbed him with the Sacred Sword of Love to save him, didn't you?" I stared at the marquess, silently urging him to continue.

"All the swords are double-edged—capable of both good and evil. That is the nature of the sword passed down in my family. The Sacred Sword of Love adores the monarch. If its target feels the same way, the sword will protect them even as they're run through. But if both parties hate each other, the Sacred Sword will bring forth destruction."

I laughed. "You speak as if he and I are in love. You were there, too—Wilhelm loves another woman. And I've seen him with her constantly, so how could I possibly love him? How would the Sacred Swords help him when our relationship was over before it began?"

"There is no other explanation for why you sacrificed your health to wield the Sword of Love."

"[..."

"You would have had enough evidence to prove House Radford's treason using only the Sword of Sincerity. We would have been able to punish Wilhelm Radford by association. Yet you went out of your way to summon another sword... The bride stabs her own groom at her wedding, and now she's feared by the nobility and considered evil. I can't think of any other reason you'd do this apart from wanting to help Wilhelm."

"What about wanting to be feared?"

"A flimsy excuse. As I said, the Sword of Sincerity alone would have been

plenty. But if you intended to save Wilhelm, everything falls into place. 'If one fails to overcome the trials given by these swords, he will perish. And if he survives, no matter what accusations are leveled against him, he will be granted forgiveness as a beneficiary of the monarch's favor.' In short, Wilhelm would've been exempt from punishment."

"Knowing all that, you still want me to undo the magic?"

"I believe you will encounter situations where you must wield the Sacred Swords, Your Majesty. Continuously using your magic on Wilhelm will take an irreparable toll on you."

"And just what do you think will happen after I release him?!"

"I'm not sure. He would be a free man, so he should be able to live as he pleases, no?"

"That's not what I'm asking! I'm sure you know this, but I haven't gained full control over the palace yet. If I let him go, people will flock to him, wanting to exploit his name. There's no way I can set him free!"

"Are you afraid you might not be able to protect him anymore?"

I couldn't answer his question. It wasn't about protecting him; that would be too noble. I simply didn't want to fight him. And yet, whether I wanted to or not mattered little. Everyone around us would drag us into the conflict and force us to oppose each other.

Unable to reply, I fired off a question of my own. "Are you aware that Nate has already made his own move with the Radfords' bureaucrats?"

"Yes, I am."

"What a headache... I've no intention of releasing my magic until I eradicate the opposition."

"But—"

"Enough." I glared at the marquess. I would not back down.

He held my gaze for a few seconds, then looked away. "Please, take care of yourself."

"I will."

"Now then, if you'll excuse me."

With that, the marquess left the room. As soon as he was gone, I slumped over with a sigh.

I thought no one would notice he was still alive... Well, it matters not. The marquess is on my side. As long as he doesn't know where Wilhelm is, he can't do a thing about it. Everything will be fine.

I convinced myself that it was true.

A week had passed since Lord Radford's demise. There was a frantic knocking at my door, and a bureaucrat burst into the room.

"Report! Every official from House Radford has refused to work."

"I see."

The man seemed perplexed by my nonchalance, but my only thought was, Sure took them a while.

I could only remain so calm thanks to Tommy. He'd postponed his visit to the Radfords' region for more than Barbara's comedic affair—though he had certainly wanted to enjoy the show. By staying in the royal capital a bit longer, he'd been able to track our enemy's movements. The region was functioning well enough on what we'd identified to be the minimum work required, so there was no need to panic.

"I have already been informed," I told him. "Tell the other ministers we will hold an emergency meeting in thirty minutes."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

After he left, I looked at Gilbert beside me.

"You seem to be having fun despite the crisis," he said.

"Really?"

"Absolutely. I imagine you're brimming with excitement, knowing you have the opportunity to strike at the rebels in the palace."

"So that's how it looks. You're right, in a way," I said, chuckling. "Listen, Gilbert. I'm actually fuming."

Gilbert's face twitched. He didn't need to be so afraid—I wasn't going to gobble him up.

"Who can forgive those who confuse responsibility with power and act so foolishly?!"

"Calm down, Your Majesty... They are essential personnel."

"I know. Besides, they might have been ensnared by someone's silver tongue."

"Yes, I think so, too."

"I won't pardon Nate or his accomplices, of course. They will receive the appropriate punishment. Manipulation aside, though, shouldn't *everyone* involved with the Radford family be held accountable?"

"Well..."

"No need to fret, Gilbert. I don't wish to trouble you—I merely took the joke too far. I'll make sure to lecture them thoroughly so they never do something so imprudent ever again."

"Try not to overdo it."

"Then stop me if I do."

"Can I stop you, though, Your Majesty?" he said. "No, if it really comes down to it, I shall do my best."

"I'm counting on you. Now, shall we get ready for our meeting and head over?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Once I'd discussed a few plans with Gilbert, we headed to the conference room. Every minster was already seated when I entered.

"Seems like I've kept you all waiting," I said.

They all stood up and bowed their heads.

"At ease."

Tension zipped through the room like lightning. I supposed it was difficult for anyone to be optimistic about this situation...except for Nate, the Minister of General Affairs, that is.

"There is only one reason why I've summoned you all here. Are we on the same page?"

Everyone nodded silently.

"When you submitted the reports, we discussed the minimum tasks required to maintain governance, didn't we?"

Another round of nods.

"All right. It's time to fulfill your duties. To start, assess the number of remaining staff and allocate them to tasks of utmost priority. We will make this room the headquarters for our countermeasures. Immediately report any shortages or excess of personnel. Additionally, by the end of today, provide a report on the status of all tasks and an estimated workload for the near future."

"Yes, Your Majesty," replied every minister in the room.

"We shall operate under these conditions for the next two weeks."

"A-a moment, please!"

It was Nate who'd interrupted my instructions.

"What is it?"

"Well, my ministry has a wide range of tasks, not to mention a heavy workload. Maintaining operations under these circumstances would be quite difficult."

"Difficult, you say?"

"Um, well..."

"Oh, right. You haven't submitted your report yet, have you? Which means you haven't discussed it with me." I snickered, staring him down. "I daresay that's your own fault for failing to submit. You should endure the consequences of your actions, no?"

"You...! As I said, my ministry has too much work, and it takes time to write a report."

"Too much work? I asked you to submit a report *because* I don't know your workload... There is no way for me to know."

"But—"

"Moreover, even if you had difficulty making the time, you could've at least communicated that. Yet you didn't, and now you tell me it's impossible." I watched him carefully. "What should we do to make it possible? What do you need?"

Nate did not reply.

"If you can't answer, fine. I'll relieve you of your duties as Minister of General Affairs. Minister of Defense, detain this man."

"No! Over something so trivial?!"

"Trivial? You consider this *trivial*?!" My rage-filled voice reverberated through the room along with my magic. When it hit him, Nate collapsed on the spot. "Those who govern the country, especially the ministers, bear heavy responsibility. My father lived by one principle: 'Be bold as a soldier but cautious as a coward.' Prepare thoroughly enough to be considered a coward, and be cautious with your duties. Should abnormalities occur, do not overlook them—solve them, because the lives and livelihoods of the people in this kingdom rest on our shoulders! There is nothing 'trivial' about this situation. Why do you not understand this?!"

I caught my breath and shifted my gaze to the Minister of Defense.

"Detain him. Now."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"And the vice minister, Ted, as well."

"Understood!"

"Sorry for wasting your time, everyone. Hurry off and get back to your work."

Everyone bowed in response to my instructions and left the room.

After skimming the reports from each ministry, I sighed. "Seems like there's no problem with the number of staff."

"Indeed," Gilbert replied. "Though many officials involved with House Radford were in Finance and General Affairs, we can relax since we were able to allocate staff from Defense and Justice."

"I don't wish to drag this out. Gilbert, let it be known that Nate and Ted have been relieved of their duties. That is bound to rattle anyone still associated with House Radford."

"Yes, especially now that their supporters have been captured."

"Exactly."

"I shall see to it immediately."

Gilbert turned to leave, so I called out, "Oh, wait."

"What's the matter?"

"Deliver this command letter to the Minister of Defense. It's a list of those who conspired with Nate."

"Ah, to apprehend them? I do think it's best to act quickly. Once they know of Minister Nate's capture, they're sure to flee."

"Precisely. Please deliver this as soon as you can."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

With Gilbert gone, I sank into my chair and let out a long breath. This incident had granted me the opportunity to eliminate my opposition in the palace. Though there were still some suspicious individuals, we'd get to them eventually. They were also outsiders, somewhat removed from any of the Great Five.

I was sitting on a castle built from sand.

Another sigh escaped my lips, and then I smiled despite myself. I knew this would happen. I knew, yet I chose this path. I could've easily gone on pretending to be a doll, but I didn't. After all, when I decided I wouldn't stay a

doll, I anticipated obstacles such as these. A gradual decline or a dramatic transformation... Prolong the battle or confront my opposition head-on... It was one or the other.

I made my choice. I decided for myself, and that led me to where I was now. I refused to be shaken up by something so minor.

"...All right, time to work."

With one final sigh, I returned my attention to the documents.

Things were relatively quiet as the days passed, and soon a week had gone by.

"Some bureaucrats wish to see you," Gilbert told me. "They're distant relatives of the Radfords."

"I'll see them. Direct them to the audience chamber."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

With a royal guard accompanying us and Gilbert leading the way, I proceeded to the audience chamber. The officials were already seated inside, waiting.

"Her Majesty arrives!"

Everyone kneeled in an instant. I walked to the throne and took my seat, facing the assembled officials.

"Raise your heads." I scanned the room, my eyes landing on the oldest among them. "Ben Radford, if there is any matter you wish to address on behalf of everyone, please speak."

"As bureaucrats hailing from House Radford, we take issue with your handling of the region. Why have you been mistreating the Radfords, Your Majesty?"

"Mistreating...? I have no recollection of mistreating any of you."

"You've executed the head of House Radford—with no explanation, at that. Is it all that unreasonable for other members of the house to see your royal governance as suspect?"

"How can you say there was no explanation? I executed him and his son for treason. And I've not punished anyone beyond them."

"Be that as it may..."

I understood why they were upset; no doubt they'd suffered in the aftermath of the execution.

"Hm. I see your point," I said. "Perhaps I was careless in some respects. Allow me to make things clear: I will not punish you for treason. If people are cruel to you because of your association with the marquess, they are going against my decision."

A member of the audience spoke up. "We cannot ignore the possibility that the palace was involved."

"Do you have evidence to support your claim?"

"|..."

"If you accuse someone of a crime, you must present solid evidence. Even a child would understand that. An investigation has already confirmed that they had no involvement in the rebellion of House Radford. If you have evidence that contradicts this, show it to me."

I had already used Heart Realm on the officials, and none of them had conspired with the marquess. Moreover, Tommy had investigated this matter very thoroughly; I took action precisely because I believed in his findings.

"There are no criminals among them, so I will not allow them to be punished. Understood?"

Without voicing their agreement, everyone bowed their heads once more.

"Now that I have heard your statements and opinions, shall we proceed to discuss the pressing matter?"

"Pardon?" said Ben.

"I said I wouldn't punish you for treason, but you will still be held accountable for this incident. Your actions have harmed every citizen in the Radford region. Do I make myself clear?"

"No, I... What do you mean?"

"You still don't understand? The impact on regional governance was kept to a

minimum thanks to everyone's cooperation and your prompt arrival to the palace. That is the only reason I felt like listening to you. If the government had been significantly compromised, severe punishments would have been necessary. What would everyone think in that situation? It would have reinforced the perception that everyone in House Radford was dangerous."

One by one, they grew agitated, realizing the underlying intentions behind my words.

"Listen. You acted because you couldn't bear the suspicions and ridicule directed at you because you belong to House Radford. So why do something that tarnished the Radford name with your own hands?! Because of your actions, hundreds of people from the Radford region nearly had to face the same ridicule as you."

"Pardon me, Your Majesty... Are you suggesting we should've just endured it all?"

"No! I'm saying you should choose another way! Why did you choose a way that would harm the innocent? Why did you not stand proudly and speak up? Is this all that remains of your pride?!"

"Well, we..."

"You are bureaucrats. The gears of this country. An action from one of you moves another—we are all connected, and that is how we keep the country running. The livelihoods of the people of this country rest on your shoulders. Never forget that. Hear this: there will be no second chances. From now on, no matter who it is, anyone who deliberately obstructs official duties will face severe punishment. Is that clear?"

All of the bureaucrats kneeled and bowed their heads in unison, offering a chorus of apologies.

"I shall address you later. For now, apologize to those you have inconvenienced and immediately return to your duties."

Leaving those words hanging in the air, I exited the audience chamber.

"Seems like there was no need to stop you, Your Majesty," Gilbert said as we walked.

"Was I too lenient?"

"No, no. That's not what I'm saying. It was just the right amount."

"To be honest, I'm still burning up inside. But I'm keeping it in, since I can't put all the blame on them. Well, demoting some of them and reducing their pay should be enough. Now, are you planning to follow me all the way?"

"Sorry?"

"Oh, I don't mean anything by it. I'm heading off to see Nate. I may wind up unleashing my magic, so it would be best for you to stay behind."

"No, please allow me to accompany you."

"Whatever pleases you."

And so, accompanied by Gilbert and the royal guards, I made my way to the jail where the ministers were. This tower was specifically meant to confine nobles. Some of those captured were not of noble status, but I chose to keep them in this tower because I hadn't publicly announced the charges of inciting the bureaucrats. They couldn't go in the commoners' prison in the palace's basement.

As you'd expect of a confinement facility for high-ranking individuals, it was clean and well maintained—far superior to a normal prison cell.

"Nate, do you know why you're confined in here?" I asked him.

"It's because of that meeting, isn't it? I swear, everything I said then was true."

"I am not referring to the meeting. Maybe you do know, but you're playing dumb."

"I don't understand."

"Really? Even though you're trapped here with all the rest?"

His expression did not change. I wasn't sure whether he was slow-witted or just thick-skinned. Not that it mattered, since this was the last time we'd ever speak to each other.

"You seemed to have enjoyed your scheme quite a bit. I already know you all

were orchestrating the rebellion of the Radfords' bureaucratic kin. And for that, you shall receive the worst punishment there is."

Nate snorted. "What evidence do you have?"

"Ah, you at least understand the importance of evidence."

Really, what were these bureaucrats thinking when they blamed everyone connected to the Radfords? They all held positions of responsibility. They should have given more thought to the influence of their words.

"What?"

"No, it's nothing. Of course I have evidence—you were a little too careless. I possess the letters you sent to the Radfords' kin, as well as the communications exchanged between all of you here. Ah, I also have a witness. I've acquired all this evidence and submitted it to the judiciary. The specifics of your case will be addressed in due time, but the most likely outcome is that your title will be revoked and your assets confiscated."

As Nate scrounged up a response, one of his nearby allies muttered, "Don't mess with us."

"Don't mess with you?" I echoed.

Another man shot to his feet. "How dare you act all high and mighty! You're a fraud! You're not royalty!"

"Ha ha... Ha ha ha! Ah ha ha ha!"

My stomach cramped from laughing so much. They all looked at me, baffled, until my laughter finally ceased. Beside me, Gilbert grimaced.

"Don't mess with you, you say? You are the ones doing the meddling, no?"

Poor Nate was still trying to deceive me, but his allies had basically just acknowledged their crimes. As long as I had the evidence, there was no way for Nate to weasel out of the allegations.

"Does authority mean power? No, it does not. Authority comes with responsibilities, bestowed upon those who prove themselves worthy. All of you have foolishly misunderstood the true nature of authority. As a consequence, the very citizens we are meant to protect have suffered. Scoundrels like you cannot be forgiven."

I channeled magic throughout my body. In an instant, a Sacred Sword materialized in the air.

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"Th-th-that's...!"
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"It's true that I haven't been on the throne for long, but I don't think I deserve to be called a fraud."

One by one, they fell to their hands and knees. *The kingdom's people really do see the Sacred Swords as exalted*. Seeing their defiance fade away, I dismissed the blade.

"Stay put until further notice."

Having said that, I left their prison behind. I then looked at Gilbert, who had left the tower with me.

"Gilbert."

"Yes?"

"With the return of the Radfords' kin, the government should be able to resume its operations as usual, correct?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"For the next three days, have them get back to their regular duties. After that, we will resume our reforms."

"Understood."

I parted ways with Gilbert and headed to my room. After taking a moment to rest, I opened the hidden passage. Right, I have to use Heart Realm on the royal guards so they don't enter the room.

Just then, a dizzy spell took hold of me. I crouched down, enduring the familiar sensation. Although I'd summoned a Sacred Sword, I hadn't used any other magic. That was the only thing that lessened the episode.

"Coming in... Huh?! Your Majesty?!"

Alicia had just entered the room. What terrible timing.

Hearing Alicia's shout, the royal guards posted outside stormed in. I immediately used Heart Realm to erase their memories.

"Forget everything you saw and leave the room. Do not let anyone in until I say so."

Alicia watched, perplexed, as the guard's eyes went vacant and they went right back the way they'd come. Although she couldn't use her own magic anymore, mine still never worked on her.

Her eyes flicked back to me, and she dashed over to my side in a fluster. "A-are you okay, Your Majesty?!"

"I'm okay, Alicia. I just feel a little dizzy."

"We can't take any chances. I'll call for a doctor right awa—"

"No, don't. I just took the throne—if I show even the slightest sign of illness, everyone will worry." She was reluctant to obey, so I kept my tone firm. Otherwise, she wouldn't have let me be. Seeing how upset she was, I hurried to assure her. "I'm fine, really. I'm just tired."

Eventually, she gave in. "Okay."

"Anyway, what brings you here at this late hour?"

"Sorry about that. It's quite dry, so I wanted to hang up a damp cloth to increase the humidity."

Right, I asked her to do that once. It was a habit I brought with me from my past life—I had no tolerance for aridness. However, I couldn't buy a humidifier in this world even if I wanted one, so I'd asked Alicia to hang up a damp cloth instead. I noticed that dryness didn't really bother me these days, but I never imagined she would continue to do something I'd only requested once before.

"Oh, I see. Thank you."

My dizziness ebbed as I talked with Alicia, so I stood up. Right then, I remembered something important: I'd left the secret door out in the open. Even though Alicia must've seen it, she didn't ask about it. No doubt she was being considerate of me so I wouldn't have to answer. It was remarkable that she didn't even bat an eye in the face of something so unusual.

I supposed I could trust Alicia with the secret of the hidden door. In fact, she was the *only* one I could show it to. She was the one person I could trust, a maid who wore her heart on her sleeve with no need for my magic.

"Alicia. I know it's late, but if you don't mind, could you keep me company for a bit?"

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

Thus, we stood before the door.

"This is a hidden door made just for the monarch of this kingdom. It can only be opened with the power of the Sacred Swords."

I took her down the dark and narrow path.

"Here we are."

When we arrived at the door to the secret chamber, I got to summoning again. We entered the ordinary room, the one with all the furnishings necessary for everyday life.

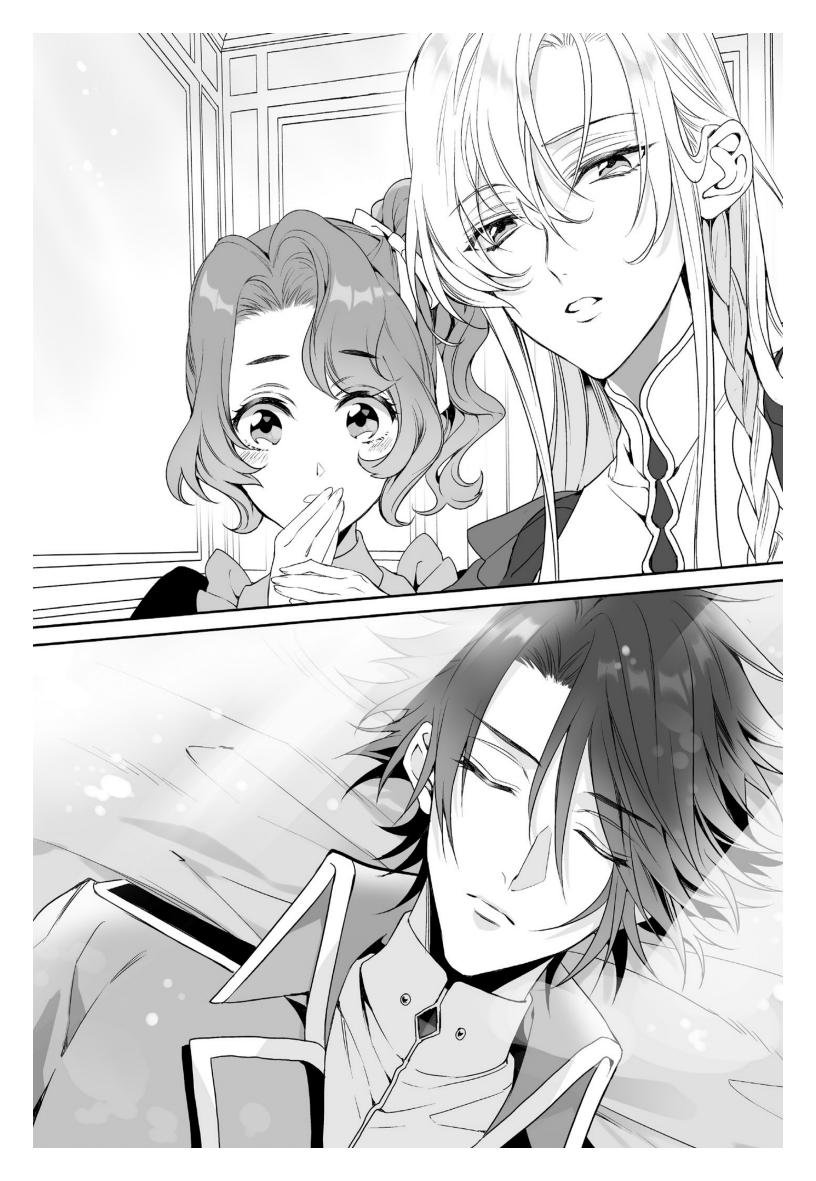
"That's...!"

Alicia's voice hitched as her eyes fell upon the person lying in bed. Though she hadn't been alarmed by the hidden doors, *he* had her reeling.

"Why is Master Wilhelm here?!"

"He's alive. I can't let the public know about it, though. That's why I keep him protected here."

I gently touched his hand, feeling the warmth of his skin.



"I knew it!" Alicia said, relieved.

I tilted my head in confusion. "You knew?"

"Well, um... I knew you wouldn't harm anyone you held dear, so this makes sense."

Hearing her tentative answer, I couldn't help but laugh. I'm amazed she still trusts me even after witnessing my coronation, I thought.

"I see..."

I carefully took out a Sacred Sword—the one I'd stabbed him with. It emitted a crimson glow.

"I love him. And he loves me. That's why he didn't die by this sword."

"In that case, why?!" she blurted, her words tumbling out. "Why did you...?"

A valid question. If I were in her shoes, I would struggle to comprehend it as well.

"By that, do you mean 'Why did you stab him if you love him?"

I chose to respond to her question with another question. She awkwardly averted her gaze.

"There was nothing I could do," I said. "It was all too late the moment I realized it."

Never before had I hated my own powerlessness since being born as Luxeria. Together with the marquess, I did everything in my power to hinder House Radford from the shadows...but it wasn't enough. They still managed to secure the position of king consort.

"Lord Radford put up his son as future king consort in the hopes of getting rid of me. Even though I knew that, the Doll Princess had no power to challenge the decision. I lacked power—magical *and* political. I had no recourse but to bide my time."

I'd been forced to wait until I acquired the crown and officially ascended the throne. Until then, no matter what happened, I couldn't make a move. The Great Five were just too powerful.

"By the time House Radford sank its claws into my betrothal, it was far too late. The result was what happened at the wedding ceremony."

I made up my mind the moment my marriage was arranged. Yet I never expected that the person I was engaged to was my first love—it exceeded even my wildest expectations.

"I'd like you to take care of him until he wakes up. Please keep the room tidy and attend to his needs. I can only place this responsibility in the hands of someone I trust. Please, Alicia."

"You got it, Your Majesty! Leave it to me!"

"I'll be counting on you."

I held his hand once more, then left the room with Alicia.

"I'll start tomorrow now that I know what to do. I assume it would be best to visit the room only when you're present?"

"Yes, that's right. I don't open the secret door until I know the royal guard won't enter."

"Understood. In that case, I'll go ahead and get going. Apologies again for the late visit."

"It's all right. Thank you, Alicia."

Alone again, I let out a huge sigh. Unable to hold myself together a second more, I collapsed on the floor. Overwhelmed by intense dizziness, I couldn't bring myself to stand up. I mustered my strength to move only my face. *Thank goodness Alicia didn't notice*.

I hadn't told anyone about my condition. Not Gilbert, not Tommy, and not even Alicia. I couldn't let them know that the more I used magic, the more it broke me. Right now, I could only wield the Sacred Swords with the crown supporting me, and my body was already in shambles. I could almost hear the sands of my life falling through the hourglass.

How many more times could I summon the Sacred Swords? How much more magic could I use?

Despite the pain, I couldn't stop. My revenge had only just begun. We were

barely past the opening act.

"There are...three houses left..." I rasped as blood gushed from my lips.

Which would come first? Would I reach the end of the play...or would the sand run out? Scoffing at myself for being so volatile, I closed my eyes.

Afterword

HELLO, EVERYONE. Lovely to meet you. For some, it's been a while since we last met. Thank you all so much for picking up this book.

Now, the idea for this story actually came to me while I was writing my previous work, *Accomplishments of the Duke's Daughter*. In that book, there was no magic—it was all about how to govern a region. But as I was writing it, I occasionally thought, *What if there* was *magic?!*

That's right, magic: the core of fantasy stories. I wondered what kind of story would unfold if my main character could use magic—something everyone's dreamed of at least once in their life.

Though I started writing with that in mind, I kept pushing the main character into more corners, thinking, *Magic is such a convenient tool. She'll be fine no matter what I throw at her!*

As the author, I love all the characters who appear in this book...but that didn't stop me from making them suffer. Yet they overcame my challenges and became even stronger. The main character in particular started out with a more "doll princess" kind of personality. As I witnessed her grow and develop, I found myself relieved and ended up thoroughly enjoying her journey.

Moving on... *Evil Queen* likewise features beautiful illustrations by the talented Futaba-sensei. They were so breathtaking that I froze up the moment I saw them. Futaba-sensei, thank you so much for the gorgeous art!

To my editor: I apologize for being so selfish sometimes. Thank you immensely for being so considerate of my schedule; it helped me a lot.

And lastly, to the readers: truly, thank you for reading this book. The thought of my book occupying your bookshelves fills me with joy. I'll continue working hard so you can enjoy my series—even if just a little.

I hope we have the opportunity to meet again in the future.



About the Author

Born in 1990 and living in Saitama. Blood type: A.

Once web novels gained popularity in her area, Reia devoured them over the last few years of her school commute. Though she temporarily distanced herself from them after graduating, she eventually returned to the world of web novels and debuted with *Accomplishments of the Duke's Daughter*.

Her hobbies include listening to music and reading. Whenever she gets engrossed in a book, she forgets to eat and sleep. During her student days, she was guaranteed to ruin her sleep schedule over long vacations.



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