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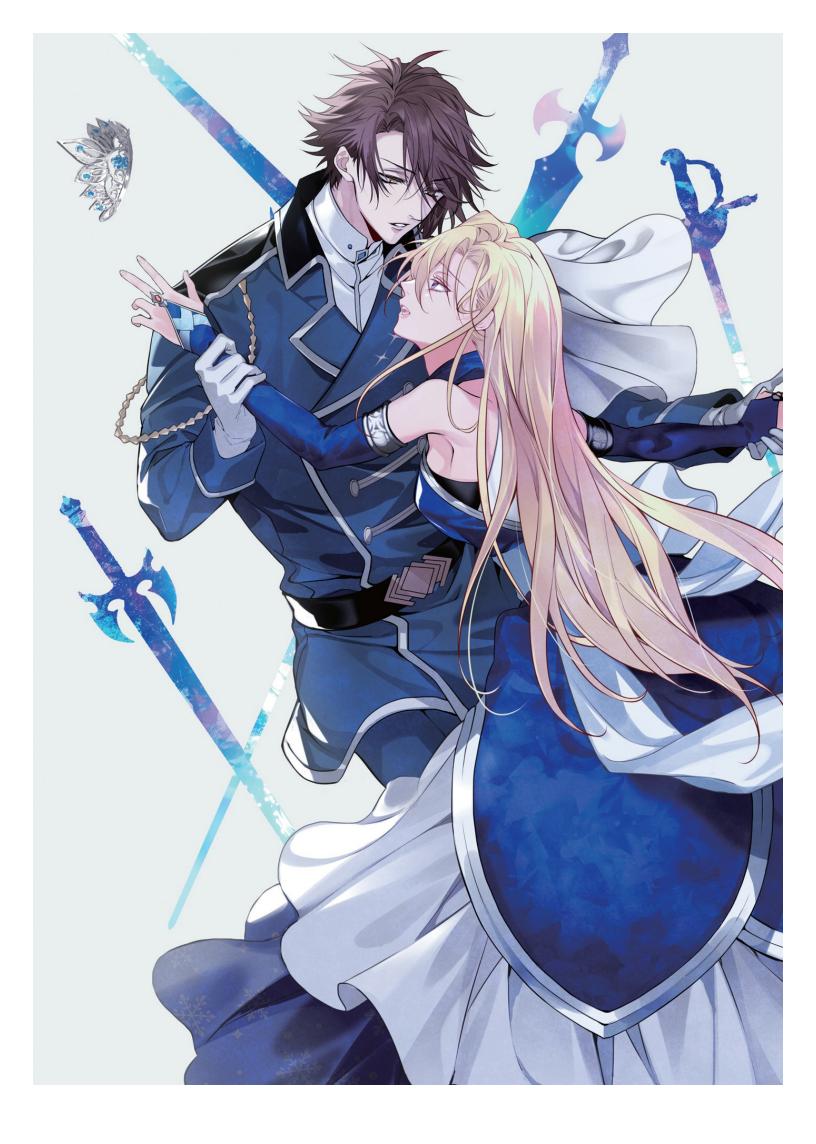
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BONUS CHAPTER
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Afterword

AKUTOKU JOO NO KOKOROE Vol.2

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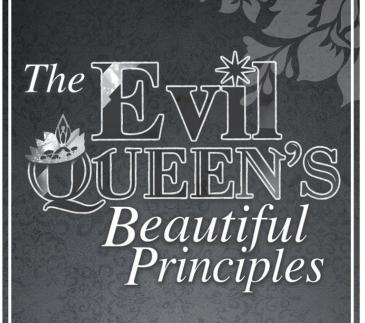
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Seven Seas Entertainment

Prologue

CLACK, CLACK.

The sound of pawns clattering across a chessboard rang through the room, soon joined by a knock at the door.

"Excuse us," came a voice from the other side.

My eyes slid over to the source, and sure enough, Gilbert and Tommy entered my quarters. However, something was amiss. Not with Gilbert—I was quite used to him bringing me stacks of paperwork while dressed in his properly worn and well-coordinated uniform. That was the same as ever. The problem was with Tommy.

Tommy was a reliable sort and, although few knew it, a close confidant of mine. Oddly enough, he looked phenomenal standing there in maid's attire. Adorable, really. He'd likely come to consult me once again on matters he wished to keep secret. Out of consideration for my reputation, were I to be seen in his company without a female attendant, he'd chosen to dress this way around me.

Since the three of us had a great many things to discuss as of late, I had unfortunately been subjected to this particular spectacle many times over. I still wasn't accustomed to it, and I had to hold back my laughter every time. Refraining from chuckling at his appearance, I excused the other servants from my presence.

"Our sincerest apologies for visiting at such a late hour," Gilbert said. "There was a sudden demand for document approvals."

"I see. It's not a problem," I replied.

I got up from my seat, walked over to the chair where I conducted official business matters, and sat back down. I listened closely to what Gilbert had to say as I signed paper after paper.

"Is that all of them?"

"Yes. Thank you for your time."

"I told you, I don't mind. My duties are of utmost importance to me," I said with a wry smile.

I was Luxeria Von Ausgrid. Though I was once born in a world called Earth amid the cosmos, my past life had been uneventful. One day, I suddenly perished—and was reborn into another world. Being reborn in such a manner was shocking enough, but this also turned out to be a world where magic was real. My rebirth and all it entailed sounded like something out of a fantasy novel. But for a number of reasons, this world was no fairy tale.

I was born into royalty. Not just any sort of noble upper class but as the sole heir to the throne. Rather than leading the spoiled life of a princess, I was held in captivity for most of my youth. I had powerful, overwhelming magic, and this magic was feared.

When a mage was born into this world, they came to possess a singular type of magic. Similar to how no two humans were exactly alike, neither were two types of magic. The one I commanded, Heart Realm, allowed me to hear others' thoughts and control them as I wished. The kingdom had judged this power to be uncontrollable and dangerous—enough to destroy myself and those around me—so I was hidden away at a young age.

Perhaps this was for the best. Had I not been given such power, I would have struggled to keep control of the throne. It was easy to imagine, given the royal family's waning influence at the time.

The royal family's title was little more than a grandiose facade. The sphere of influence my family commanded was rather limited in scope, akin to that of a feudal lord in my previous life's history. Over the years, their political power and authority was slowly stripped away. Eventually, the Great Five Marquess Houses became the ones who commanded great power in the kingdom.

Truth be told, my life in captivity wasn't a bad one. I wasn't required to

endure any menial labor, I was fed, and I had freedom in my daily activities. During that time, I also met my one and only friend. I'd have lived a happy enough life had those days continued without interruption, but everything came to a screeching halt when my parents died.

They didn't die from some normal cause like illness or old age; they were murdered in cold blood. And the ones pulling the strings in the shadows were the Great Five. The moment my parents were attacked, the Great Five attempted to kidnap me. I ended up losing my one true friend in the process. Life as I knew it shattered to pieces.

All that remained was my desire for revenge and my hatred toward those who took everything I held dear. Thus, I made a vow. A vow to make those wretched, cruel, power-hungry monsters kneel before me. I wanted to abase them, humiliate them, and see them squirm. I vowed to reform this nation, which their machinations had long distorted beyond recognition, and watch them wither away in defeat.

I took the crown, inheriting the throne that was once my father's. Now that I was reflecting upon it, I had lived quite a solemn life.

"I am honored you feel that way, my queen."

Gilbert's reply brought me back to reality. "Your bureaucrats' efforts have paid off over these past months, Gilbert," I said. "The plan is proceeding as intended, and I have you to thank. I can see the final phase taking shape as we speak."

It was on the day of my coronation that I set the ominous waves of my revenge in motion. The first to fall victim to my master plan was the house of Lord Radford, whose son was my betrothed. The Radfords' very own descendant, along with the myriad Radford loyalists who populated my kingdom, were executed on that fateful day. In the six months that had passed since then, my bureaucrats had been hard at work reclaiming the infrastructure that the marquesses had stolen from me, taking back my ability to directly

govern the land.

"But of course, my queen." Gilbert raised the hand that wasn't holding any papers and quickly pushed his glasses back up against his brow, his eyes glittering behind them.

His reaction piqued my curiosity, so I encouraged him to explain. "But *of course*, you say?"

"In my humble opinion, a plan with too many unforeseen variables is a half-baked one at best. You carefully considered every possible risk during the planning phase and prepared for the worst, making it clear that you considered it vitally important. Why else would I have been ordered to make so many preparations?"

His rhetorical question prompted me to chuckle a bit. "You are quite correct."

I'd once heard that wars were won before they were ever fought. Political matters were similar. This was exactly why I had to consider how much money we would need, how many servants I would require, and how many risks I would have to take for my plan to come to fruition. Being unprepared for what came after bringing judgment upon the Radfords would've been incredibly foolish.

"You will need some kind of reward eventually," I said. "Few are aware of how much effort you've put into our plan, even beyond overseeing the bureaucrats."

"Oh, please. Watching such intriguing circumstances unfold is its own reward," he replied.

"You truly want for nothing, don't you? Regardless, there will come a day when things change."

The kingdom's civilians had no knowledge of what their political rulers were doing, nor how much effort was needed to accomplish anything. But this was a world without television or internet. There was no helping the fact that

commoners didn't have an opportunity to learn about the inner workings of their government. All they could judge and bear witness to were the results of our actions. Taking responsibility for such results was part of my duty to the kingdom, but my efforts were as visible as the wind passing through their villages.

Though I supposed my citizens' ignorance was comparable to how people acted in my previous life. Even with greater access to information, there had been many who held no interest in politics, not to mention the ones who'd criticized political movements based on convenient assumptions. I shouldn't judge them, for I avoided political subjects in those bygone days myself.

Gilbert dipped his head at my previous statement. "Indeed. We've only told the populace a tiny fraction of the truth thus far."

"And the time will come when they must learn the whole truth. While I trust you, I also feel that we run quite the risk by focusing solely on restoring the royal family's governing rights."

"You may be right, but I think we should worry about that later."

"That is fair. We have our own sinister schemes to concoct in the meantime." A gleeful, menacing grin formed on my lips. "Let us make haste. We must purge the Great Five once and for all."

Tommy, who had been silent the entire time, smiled at that. Only four of the Great Five Marquess Houses remained: Houses Alcott, Slade, Weston, and Beckford.

"I had a feeling you'd propose that sooner rather than later," Gilbert said. "Nevertheless, we should consider what must be done after they've been eliminated. Our experience dealing with the Radfords should prove insightful. We simply must consider the characteristics of the regions each house rules as we formulate our plans." His anticipation and excitement were as plain as the sun shining on his face.

"Indeed. Thank you for being so reliable. Hee hee... Ha ha ha!" I could no

longer hold back my laughter, which burst forth from the depths of my being. "Ah, my apologies. Just the very thought of ridding the kingdom of those miserable snakes fills me with joy."

Stifling further maniacal snickering, I continued, "What sort of emotions will the Great Five reveal when they realize they've been undone? Regret? Despair? Anger? Hatred? Ha ha ha! Thinking of it has my heart racing!"

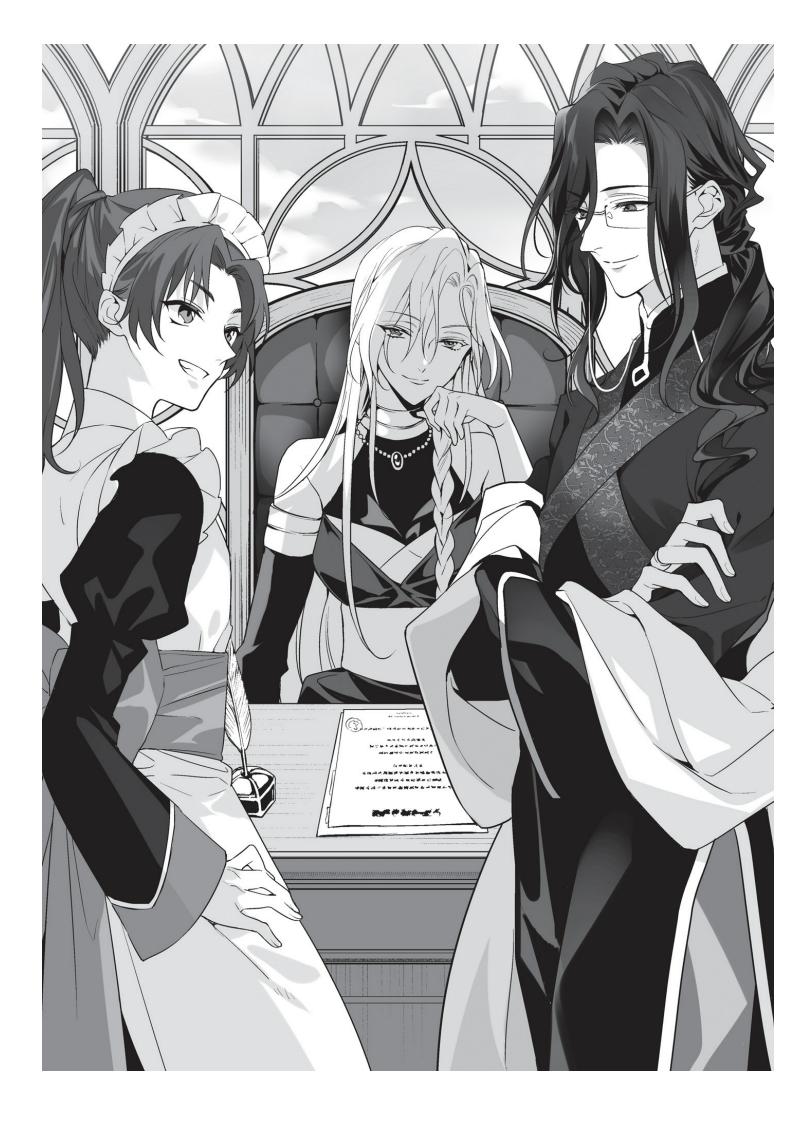
Enduring bliss washed over me as I imagined their cold, dead eyes. Gilbert, on the other hand, turned pale.

"Ah, I'm sorry. You have little free time to spare, and I shouldn't be wasting it. You're welcome to excuse yourself," I assured him.

"You are not wasting my time, Your Majesty. But I shall take you up on your offer. Pardon me."

After Gilbert left, Tommy finally spoke up, paperwork still in hand. "What a pity," he said. "Your venom struck him so deeply that he was blue in the face."

"Venom?"



"What, you aren't even aware of it? I'm just saying you shouldn't point your hunter's gaze at those who aren't your prey. Even I can't handle the sheer iciness of it."

"Oh, is that so?" I said as I stood. I restrained my overflowing magic and sat in my earlier seat in front of the game table. "Heed my words, Tommy: Vengeance is repulsive, yet it is the most delicious dish in the world. Do you not understand how impossible it is to drool before a wondrous meal?"

"I'm afraid my palate isn't as refined as yours, Your Majesty," Tommy replied.

"It is impolite to turn your nose up at something before you've tasted it yourself."

"But revenge is toxic even to oneself," he explained. "It's rather unusual for someone to willingly consume something so harmful."

"I suppose. A clergyman may accept his sins and beg for forgiveness. A corrupt soldier may lose his desire to accrue more vices. A friend may insist that his parents never intended for anything bad to happen. But despite...no, because of these things, revenge is a delicacy."

"Huh?! Y-you have friends, Your Majesty?!" Tommy exclaimed. His reaction was rather rude, but I supposed I wasn't the friend-making type.

I donned a quick little grin. "I had a friend, once. A very long time ago." The words reminded me of those days in the tower, that perfect world shared between me and my one true friend, Alicia.

"Oh, I see. My sincerest apologies." Tommy's questions ceased immediately; perhaps he understood precisely why I was speaking in the past tense.

"It's quite all right," I said, fiddling with the pieces on the chessboard. "The Great Five must fall for the sake of our kingdom. It is a grand, laudable goal. However, at the end of the day, it all boils down to my thirst for revenge. The only feeling left in my heart is hatred for marquess scum. And on occasion, I hate myself for it."

"Yet you continue down this path of revenge?"

"I have no other choice." As I said this, the pawn in my hand snapped in two, and one could practically hear it scream in pain. It would seem my magical energies were beginning to overflow.

"The delectable fruit of our labor waiting at the end of this is what keeps me going. And having gotten a proper taste of it, my desires cannot be suppressed any longer," I said, smiling coldly.

"Your Majesty, that venom of yours is starting to seep out again."

"And you expect me to be able to control it? Now that our goal is finally within reach?"

"Understandable. But I do recommend exercising greater self-control. A predator revealing that much bloodlust can scare away even the most docile of prey."

Tommy's warning was accompanied by the kind of glare a carnivorous beast would use to stare down its next meal. It was the sort of gaze that could extract any secret from its victim, should the topic of conversation continue.

"Your advice is appreciated, Tommy."

"Before I proceed, may I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"You mentioned your queenly duties are of utmost importance. Is that truly how you feel?"

"Of course."

"More important than your own feelings?"

"Absolutely. I'd rather not follow the Great Five's example." Using state power and influence for the sole purpose of enacting my revenge would make me no different than those pathetic fools. To act like them would be loathsome.

"I suppose that's all right, then. Just wanted to be sure," Tommy replied.

"I have no desire to burn this kingdom to the ground in the name of vengeance."

"Glad to hear it. Now, the main reason I'm here—I have intelligence on the movements of the Great Five."

"Good. Tell me what House Slade is up to."

"The house of the woman who challenged you at that tea party, eh? Very well."

"True. That did happen," I said.

His words brought me back to the tea party before my coronation. There were many who had derided me as the Doll Princess, and the daughter of House Slade was the worst offender of them all.

"Lord Slade truly does adore his little girl," Tommy told me. "It's not surprising that she has a rather large head on her shoulders."

"Are you implying that she's a spoiled brat? One spoiled by the abuse of power, no less. No wonder she mistakes herself to be a ruler of this land."

"It would be nice if the Slades could spare any of the love they have for their daughter for anyone else, huh?" Tommy said, amused.

To the Slade family, civilians were little more than disposable tools to bolster their wealth—a fact to which Lord Slade would probably admit without a shred of shame. It was completely understandable why Tommy would complain about Slade's over-adoration of his daughter and the man's despicable view of commoners.

"It's hard to believe the same man could be so loving toward his daughter when he so flippantly uses the less fortunate for his own ends," he added.

"He likely only sees those with a similar social status to himself as actual people. Commoners are like ants to him."

"I just can't fathom why anyone could think like that," Tommy said. "Never mind. We've got more important things to talk about. Like the things he loves

spoiling her with—you know, the rubies?"

"The jewel she had on hand, hmm? Have you discovered the hidden mine?"

Slade's daughter claimed to have found the jewel on her own, but there had never been any record of House Slade discovering a ruby vein. Thinking that might be an angle I could use to bring down their house, I ordered Tommy to investigate.

"I'm afraid not, Your Majesty. I couldn't find anything pertaining to the discovery of a ruby mine."

"Meaning they must have procured the jewels from another region or perhaps another country altogether." If there truly was no ruby mine, then those were the only two possibilities remaining. Existence was not birthed from nothingness.

"I figured you'd say that. In fact, I happened to spot something rather peculiar when investigating the borders of Slade's region," said Tommy.

"Hurry up and tell me, then."

"My apologies." He cleared his throat. "It seems that people from the Celden Republic have been moving in and out of Lord Slade's land."

"Oh? Celden, you say?"

Celden was a neighboring nation of ours, and one that had close ties to House Slade. However, the Federal Kingdom of Ausgrid did not have a positive diplomatic relationship with Celden. The country's policy was to regard magic as "the devil's work," oppressing any citizens who possessed magical powers. This view was completely incompatible with our own kingdom, one whose ruler wielded powerful magic: the Sacred Swords.

"There may be some kind of illicit business going on between them—whether it be trading goods or trading state secrets. It's something worth pondering, certainly."

"If Celden is giving rubies to House Slade, then the Slades must be providing

them with something equally valuable," Tommy replied.

"Naturally. And if they're hiding that information from the rest of the kingdom, then they are up to something nefarious."

"Agreed."

I sighed deeply as the situation began to take shape in my head. "Do we have any spies assigned to Celden?"

"Yes. It's already been arranged."

"Good. Keep me updated on any new developments. To think Lord Slade gave his daughter such a prized gem so casually..."

"She's a spoiled brat, I tell you. Rubies are so expensive that average folks could never afford them—not even if they saved every penny they made in their lifetimes."

His observation brought a slight smile to my face. "But thanks to his indiscreet doting, we were able to learn something potentially important."

"True. Next up, House Weston. They haven't made any big moves lately, but there's word that the marquess has been having a number of arguments with Oscar, his heir."

"With Oscar? Really? Hmm."

"Do you know him, Your Majesty?"

How perceptive of him to notice the subtlest change in my expression, I thought.

"No. But we have met once, on the day of my coronation."

"Makes sense. Nobles from all the Great Five were there."

"Indeed. But he was different from the others. Even as I stabbed Wilhelm, even when I pointed a Sacred Sword at the onlookers, he showed not even the slightest hint of fear."

The reason I'd been disparaged as the Doll Princess was because I was unable

to summon the Sacred Swords, the five greatest treasures of our nation. When a reigning monarch died, their ability to wield the swords passed down to their heir. However, I was unable to wield them after the death of my father—or so everyone thought. In truth, I had broken my mana veins attempting to save Alicia during the kidnapping fiasco earlier in my life. I had to cease using magic until I grew older in order to heal my veins.

Thus, I played the role of a powerless puppet. When I revealed I could summon the Sacred Swords during my coronation, it completely shocked the members of the Great Five. Terror gripped their hearts when it appeared I had murdered my betrothed, Wilhelm—but it hadn't frightened the Weston heir.

"Was the fact you were hiding your magic powers somehow discovered?" Tommy wondered aloud.

"That isn't possible. He was certainly surprised in his own way, but instead of cowering in fear...he smiled at me."

Tommy was taken aback learning of Oscar's reaction. "He did what?"

"I haven't a clue as to why, but I figured it was worth mentioning."

"Good to know," Tommy said. "So, uh, up next is House Alcott. They haven't really done much of note lately besides increasing their region's security."

"Increased their security? Is there no other motive?"

"The agents we sent to spy on them have said they're reforming local security. But regardless of whatever goal they claim to have, the fact remains that they're amassing a larger army. We'll keep an eye on them."

"Please do," I implored him.

"And finally, House Beckford. Or, rather, Étoile."

"Ah, yes, the show tent with close ties to the Beckfords."

The circus called Étoile was popular in the royal capital; Alicia had mentioned them to me before. Despite their status as a traveling circus, they settled down permanently in the capital after my coronation. We'd been keeping an eye on

them since then, sensing something was amiss with their desire to remain in one place. This led us to learn they had ties to House Beckford.

"Right. We've hit a bit of a snag in our investigation of them. Any ideas?" Tommy asked.

"You've mentioned reports of Beckford servants meeting with members of the circus, yes?"

"Yes. But we have yet to figure out the reason behind their meetings."

"Did the Beckfords' servants not leave a paper trail?"

"Not in the slightest. I doubt they'd be foolish enough to leave physical evidence of their machinations out in the capital."

"Oddly careful of Lord Beckford, for sure," I remarked.

"Indeed. Pretty unusual for that lecher to be careful about anything."

"Yes, he's always with his favorite mistress, and he spends money like water."

"Uh-huh. He even parades around in public with that woman rather than his actual wife. He's so vile that even the other nobles look at him sideways."

"And yet with Étoile, he is acting with such measured care," I mused. "Either someone else is involved, or his vile behavior is merely an act."

"He'd be quite the star if his acting was that good."

"Agreed."

"Now, Your Majesty, back to what I originally wanted to ask—should I infiltrate House Beckford?"

"Do as you wish."

"Then I'll make preparations right away."

"You wish to infiltrate them personally? Why not just send one of your servants?"

"If I want the job done right, I've got to do it myself."

"Understandable. May I borrow some of your subordinates while you're away?"

"Sure. They're wrapping up their research operation regarding the treatment of mages within the kingdom."

"Ahh, that. When will their report be ready?"

"My agents will report soon after they return. Do you have another assignment in mind for them?" Tommy asked me.

"I want them to look into the other places where Étoile has performed."

"Your Majesty, we already investigated the traces they left behind."

"Look into any incidents that occurred in locations where they've performed, no matter how minuscule or seemingly unrelated. I doubt any organization that is allied with House Beckford would travel the kingdom aimlessly."

"So, you want me to try to understand their plans for the future by tracking down their past. Guess my scope's been a bit narrow in approaching this. I'll get my men on it right away."

"Thank you, Tommy."

Our conversation concluded, he bowed and left the room. Afterward, I had my guards escort me back to my private quarters.

"Welcome back, Queen Luxeria!"

A familiar face greeted me when I returned. It was my dear friend Alicia, the very friend I spent so much time with in the tower all those years ago. Unfortunately—perhaps due to the near-death experience she once endured—her memories of that time had vanished long ago, along with her magic. Not that she needs magic to be my personal attendant, of course.

"Alicia, could you please get me something to drink?"

"Certainly. As a matter of fact, we just got in some tea that's been said to help with sleep! I'll go get some right now!"

"And I shall assist you in changing clothes while she takes care of that, Queen Luxeria," said Freesia. She'd been quiet and nearly invisible before suddenly appearing at my side.

"Thank you. Please do."

We went behind the partitioning screen and Freesia assisted me in changing my clothes. Being freed from the somewhat suffocating dress I wore today made me sigh in relief. Afterward, I relaxed into my sofa as I watched Alicia prepare the tea.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, my queen."

"Thank you, Alicia."

It was rather slovenly of me, but I slumped into the cushions and enjoyed the tea.

"I'll see myself out," Freesia said, taking her leave.

"Ahh. The tea you prepare truly is wonderful, Alicia."

"You flatter me, Your Majesty! You said as much when I first learned how to make it, so I stuck with it."

When she "first" learned of how to make it... I understood why she worded it that way, but it hurt to hear all the same. Once again, I was faced with the reality that she never remembered our days together in the tower.

"I'm pleased, Alicia. Especially since I get to enjoy your tea." I swallowed the phrase "once again" along with the tea in my cup.

"Is something wrong?" Alicia asked. She could tell something was amiss with me; it was written all over her face.

Ahh, this isn't good, I thought. Seeing her always made me sentimental. Perhaps some of the light in my heart from back then still existed.

I shook my head and hurriedly schooled my expression. "Nothing. I'm tired, that's all."

"I'm sorry. Perhaps it'd be best if you retired early tonight."

"I agree. Good night, Alicia."

After she left the room, I stood and stretched. Sitting in a chair all day long certainly made one's muscles incredibly stiff. With a deep breath, I relaxed my body. Suddenly, my vision became incredibly blurry.

"Agh!"

Using what little energy I had, I tried not to make any noise as I collapsed to the floor. *Phew.* Had I caused a ruckus, the guards would've rushed in and seen me like this. I had used magic today, and my body wasn't happy about it. Even holding back my magic until adulthood hasn't saved my feeble body. It was weak enough that it cried out in pain every time I used my magic.

Nobody could ever know of this. I had only just begun reforming the kingdom and exacting my revenge. If anyone knew of my frailty, it would all be for naught. I had to keep this to myself.

I took deep breaths in and out, trying to flush out my unease. As I repeated the cycle of breath, my vision slowly returned to normal. My body—which had been twitching and useless—regained its function, allowing me to roll onto my back. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a lantern flickering in the dark and chuckled to myself. It was funny to imagine the sight of a royal queen flopping on the ground of her own bedroom.

"Just how long will my body be able to last?"

Naturally, I was not given an answer to my impossible question. If there was anyone who could answer, they'd certainly lack the means to reply. After taking another deep breath, I dragged myself to my bed and fell into a deep slumber.

Chapter 1:

The Queen Makes Her Move

COULDN'T STOP MYSELF from sighing after the meeting ended. I'd been swept up in meetings since the crack of dawn, and it wasn't until evening that I got a chance to relax. Even with Gilbert doing all he could to cut down on pointless appointments, it was still rather dreadful. It made me wonder how much worse it'd be without him.

"Excellent work today, my queen. Might I suggest resting for now?" Brian said. The young bureaucrat now spent his days working as Gilbert's right-hand man.

His suggestion prompted me to shake my head. "That won't be necessary," I told him. "What do you have to report?"

"We just finished discharging the Radford bureaucrats."

"Oh, that was today? Were there any complications?"

"A few. There were some disputes, but it was nothing we weren't prepared for."

"I see, very good. I must say, It's quite disheartening to know that two out of every five Radford officials were caught up in some truly deplorable crimes."

"Yes, it shocks me every time I look at the numbers."

"Makes one wonder what must be happening in their region."

"Many of the bureaucrats themselves are relatives of the marquess. Ideal breeding grounds for corruption and nepotism, I'm afraid."

Brian was, unfortunately, quite correct. There were five regions surrounding the capital that belonged to the Great Five Marquess Houses. House Radford ruled the north, while House Slade was to the east. To the south stood Houses Beckford and Weston, and House Alcott sat to the west. All of these regions

were independently governed by the Great Five. Those with blood ties to the marquesses were given priority for official positions over all other candidates. This abuse of power was so rampant that rumors spread saying the Great Five didn't consider anyone outside of their bloodlines to be real people.

"Yes. It's unsurprising that they've produced so many individuals who don't know their place," I said. Brian stayed silent for a while, but his fretful expression told me what he was thinking all the same.

"Even so, I doubted my eyes a bit when I saw the report," he said at length.

"The corruption is much more widespread than I would've imagined."

"Indeed. Even the ones who haven't openly engaged in corruption are quite complicit in ill deeds. I've heard some have shirked their letter delivery duties and used their social standing to carouse with their friends day and night."

"Wage theft is what it is. I'd say three of every five bureaucrats were found guilty of it."

"Will this have any impact on the operation of our government?" I asked.

"Doubtful. We called as many officials loyal to the crown back to the capital as we could, so we should be fine for now. If anything changes, you will be the first to know," Brian told me.

"Very well. I leave it to you."

Brian became unusually shy as he requested to say one more thing. "By the way, Your Majesty..."

"Yes?"

"May I ask why you didn't punish the Radfords more severely for their little rebellion?"

I cackled. "Ahh, so you think I should have raked them over the coals?"

"I suppose so."

His aloof approval greatly reminded me of his superior, Gilbert. The man

must've been running him ragged.

"Forgiving them for that incident was my mistake. Disdain for me lingers in the capital because of it."

"Honestly, my queen, it does. Disparity in how you've chosen to punish different parties may lead to criticism over your methods in the near future."

"I considered punishing them more severely for their crime," I admitted.

"Nonetheless, the pain of the people that led to the rebellion was a reality. The independent bureaucrats would've been gravely disappointed in me had I punished an entire party over it."

Independent officials were those with no ties to the Great Five. They were not necessarily my allies, but they were not exactly friends with the Great Five either. They would become my enemies were I to turn a blind eye to their concerns, and I simply could not allow that to happen. Not a single policy I desired would be feasible if they turned against me.

"In any case, they're doomed. I let them off the hook, thinking they might prove useful in the end," I said.

Brian sat up straighter as a sinister grin crept across my face.

"Does that answer your question well enough?" I asked.

"C-certainly. My humblest thanks for your input, my queen," Brian said as he bowed before me.

He left the room, and Gilbert entered soon after.

"Ah, so it's you this time," I said. "What do you have to report?"

"Information regarding the latest harvest," Gilbert replied.

This was an issue I'd brought up in a prior meeting. Accurate reporting of the harvests was something the Ministers of Finance and Internal Affairs had both neglected for over a decade.

"Did I not order you to prepare reports from each region regarding this

matter?"

Officially, the Great Five were meant to be servants to the royal family. In reality, they were our enemies. Over the years, they'd stripped political power away from the king, acted as tyrants in their own regions, and even gone as far as assassinating the kingdom's previous ruler—my father. Such vile people could not be trusted to report their finances honestly. This was why I wanted to observe the economic numbers coming out of each region. In my previous life, such government audits were performed regularly. They were enacted to make regional expansion fair and to make the actions of local governments public information.

"Indeed, and we did exactly that. Here they are, as requested," Gilbert said, tossing a stack of paperwork onto my desk.

On perusal, I muttered, "Ridiculous."

"Isn't it?"

"The auditing structure and methods written here are fine. But what in the world is this last caveat? 'We deem the Minister of Finance to be necessary and require his approval'? It's an empty platitude at best."

Was the Minister of Finance a relative of the Great Five? Did they fear he'd be upset at being left out? They wanted no audits to begin with, meaning the status quo would not change. They'd report whatever falsified numbers they desired and continue to run unchecked.

"Likely intentional, given they went out of their way to include that clause."

"Gilbert, I refuse to accept these terms. Remove this clause. Even if we end up having someone approve an audit, it should not be the Minister of Finance. The auditors themselves should decide who gets to do so."

"You are quite right. I shall do as you ask, Your Majesty."

"I have faith in you—but be careful. They'll surely do whatever they can to offer *concessions*."

The art of words was a vague one. Small changes to a sentence could alter its meaning. For example, "I've seen him submit documents numerous times," and, "I've seen him submit numerous documents," had subtly different nuances. The former implied the speaker had seen the man turn in documents many times over, whereas the latter was more ambiguous. It was unclear whether the man turned in many documents all at once or if the speaker had seen the man turn in documents more than one time.

It was likely our foes twisted their words and numbers in similar ways to put themselves at an advantage.

"Dealing with crochety vermin like them is so tiresome, but we don't have a choice. We'll do our best."

"I'm counting on you," I said, then sighed. "We need to get rid of anyone supported by the Great Five as soon as possible."

There were only two men I really trusted: Gilbert and Tommy. I supposed I trusted Brian and, by extension, Gilbert's other cohorts. But Gilbert's men lacked the social status and experience needed to deal with those tied to the Great Five, leaving only Gilbert himself. As such, I could not let my guard down at any point.

"If things were as they should be, it'd be prudent to accept opposing forces in the kingdom's government," Gilbert pointed out.

"True. Those who are overly loyal to me would be afraid to point out any mistakes I make. Opposing opinions should be welcomed," I said. "But things are far from what they should be. The Great Five are only concerned with their own wealth and power—they don't care about the country itself. Their actions have no place in my kingdom."

"I agree, Your Majesty."

"This work must be very hard on you, but I'm counting on you to do what's right."

"Understood. I shall see it through."

Gilbert then left, and I sank deeper into my chair. I finally had some free time, even if it was completely dark outside. I stared at the unfinished pile of paperwork on my desk and pondered. Should I just finish it now or put it off until tomorrow? With those opposing thoughts clashing in my head, I picked up the first paper on top of the pile and glanced at it. This was not something I could delay—a habit from my previous life, no doubt. I saw that their due date was tomorrow, sighed deeply, and got to work.

I went through the papers faster than I expected, without much thought on my part. And just as I'd finished about a fifth of the pile, someone knocked on my door. Shortly after, Freesia entered the room alongside a certain man.

"Ah. It's been a while, my dear marquess," I welcomed him.

I flashed a sly grin in his direction. This man was one of the leaders of the Great Five Marquess Houses, and the only one who knew what I hid beneath my guise as the Doll Princess.

"It has been quite some time."

As he bowed in front of me, I gave an order to my servants: "None of you, aside from the marquess, are to hear us speak. You will forget all that happens here beyond the fact of the marquess visiting."

I gave that command using the magic I was born with, Heart Realm, as naturally as breathing. It allowed me to hear others' innermost thoughts and desires and manipulate them as I pleased. My servants would forget my discussion with the marquess entirely.

"So, what business do you have with me tonight?" I asked. He was a busy man, so I urged him to get to the point. He should've understood, yet he stared blankly at me.

"Oh, just some small talk," the marquess said.

"Small talk? From you? My, things must be quite amiss."

"Quite. So, how about that circus in town, eh?"

A smidgen of surprise hit me. No, no, this is bad. I shouldn't reveal my thoughts so carelessly.

"Oho. Have you an interest in clowns all of a sudden?" he prodded.

"Enough with the jokes. Tell me what you know."

"Terrible things. In every town that's hosted them, children have gone missing."

My brow furrowed. "Did you know of this the whole time?"

His response to my overly forward question was a simple smile. He knew what I was asking, and that smile alone was enough for me to understand two things: that he knew what I was aiming at and that I knew what he wanted.

"Just to be clear, do these disappearances have anything to do with you?" I pressed.

"Hardly. My main concern is that of my own house. It wouldn't have made a difference if I'd informed the former Doll Princess of these happenings. But regardless of whether the children vanished in my territory, it does weigh on my heart to think that the commoners are suffering."

Every word out of his mouth was slimy. His reactions, his words, all of it made me want to gag. Even more so because nothing he said was technically untrue.

"My, those are kindhearted words coming from you," I said. "By the way, I've noticed Lord Beckford seems to have quite a pretty lady accompanying him these days."

"That he does. It would be easy to see her as a beautiful flower had she chosen a better patch of land to bloom upon."

"Quite the scathing review. Is she not fit for high society?"

"Her very existence disrupts the order of nobility. Don't you see something wrong with those who vie for her affection?"

I giggled. "Indeed, a woman lacking the blue blood of nobility is likely to be gawked at in confusion. Lord Beckford would surely be the laughingstock among them for his poor taste, enough to damage the reputation of the Great Five."

"And yet he maintains his influence. Truly bizarre, and warranting of Your Majesty's firm hand, I'd say." He said this knowing full well the current reach of my political power—what a merciless man.

"Say, have you noticed that she seems to obtain more and more luxurious accessories lately? Does that have something to do with the disappearances of children?" I asked.

"Who can say? I'm a boor with no grasp on what kinds of baubles women like or their value. I must praise her ability to gather so many shiny things, however. I'm not resourceful enough to pull off something like that."

"Hmm. These are interesting topics you've brought to my attention," I said.

"I merely hope they're not ignored. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other business to attend to."

"Very well."

With that vague goodbye, the marquess left the room. After seeing him off, I returned to my private quarters and began playing with the chessboard.

The man was an enigma. I thought about him as I moved gray pawns around on the board, knocking others over. He may have been the most honest of the Great Five, but that didn't change the fact that he was still one of them. He probably spent more time concocting schemes than anything else.

He'd clearly known about the disappearances for some time now, meaning he had let those children be kidnapped long before he ever informed me. And if he knew that Lord Beckford was behind it, then he must have told the rest of the Great Five about Beckford's actions—likely seeking allies in his own scheme. Perhaps he thought there was nothing to fear if his cohorts were all in on it. I

saw no other reason why the marquess I met with tonight would have such knowledge of Étoile.

"What a troublesome man," I muttered.

He'd denied any ties to the circus, but he'd forced me into his debt by relaying that information. I could not let my guard down. Perhaps his social standing dictated that he had to inform me, seeing as his current position was quite complicated. A long time ago, he had sworn fealty to me, likely because he saw the hatred I held within.

My hatred was for the Great Five. I had immense magical power and all five Sacred Swords on my side. The magnitude of those truths probably scared him. In the history of our country, most rulers only had enough magic to summon one or two of the swords at most. With all five, I could easily reduce a whole region or two to dust if I put my mind to it. He likely saw me as a disaster waiting to happen.

It was understandable that he didn't want a potential explosion to be pointed in his direction, and so he'd chosen to submit to me. But he had been unable to prove his loyalty to the crown during my time as the Doll Princess. I had no political power whatsoever back then, and I had to act the part of a helpless princess who couldn't use magic at all. Part of my act was to goad the Great Five into laying their corruption out in the open, but still.

Regardless, this particular marquess couldn't provide me with public support as I acted out my play. To do so would have ended in him making an enemy out of the other four houses. And if he had been found out during that time, I wouldn't have been able to assist him either. He understood that, hence the delicate balance he'd maintained with the Great Five. It was all to protect his own family and his citizens. Thinking of him caring so much prompted a chuckle from me.

Don't stop entertaining me, Marquess.

What move would he make next? I'd already torn down my doll facade and

begun my campaign of vengeance. I was excited to see how these developments would influence his trajectory.

I let out a sigh, having finally finished reading all the documents given to me earlier. I had spent another day entirely on busywork. The documents covered two subjects: how to handle the kingdom's mages and reports from the spies sent to Celden.

The contents of both were so much worse than I anticipated. My mood was abysmal. First of all, the treatment of the country's mages. The things Alicia told me long ago were like a fairy tale compared to the reality of the situation. There wasn't much strife between those with magic and those without in the capital, but wandering even just a tiny bit past city limits painted a completely different picture. Some parents outright disowned children with magic, and there had even been instances of entire families ostracized simply for having a magic-wielding child.

The reports coming from Celden were even worse. While I knew that Celden forbade magic, I had no idea how severe the persecution of mages truly was. According to the nation's own written laws, people with magic had no human rights whatsoever. It appeared that children born with magic were executed immediately upon discovery. Celdenian society's fear of magic propagated the idea that all magic was inherently evil. Like a primitive society hunting down witches, it was a truly gruesome situation. The majority of mages within the Celden Republic were slaughtered by the state.

The only reason anyone with magic existed in Celden at all was due to the rare circumstance of a magical child being born to parents with no magic themselves. As long as Celden's attitude toward mages stayed the same, the killings would continue. I took another long breath.

No. My mood is too dour now. No amount of deep breathing would be enough to clear my thoughts.

Trying to lift my spirits, I made my way to the palace's library. Books lined

every wall, reaching all the way to the ceiling. The morning glow peeking in from the windows in the otherwise dark room gave it an alluring atmosphere. I picked out a book detailing the kingdom's history from one of the shelves.

"Ah, Queen Luxeria. I didn't expect to see you here."

The young woman's remark caught me completely off guard.

"Hello, Freesia. Sorry for moving around the palace without letting you know. Where's Alicia?"

"She was looking for you. Have you not seen her?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm sorry for causing you two any trouble."

"I see. I'll let her know, then."

"Oh, wait," I said. "Excuse me, Arthur?"

"Yes, my queen?" the man in question replied.

Arthur was one of my escorts, a knight assigned as personal guard to the crown. My guards were the bravest, most loyal, and most skilled knights in the kingdom—the best of the best. The two knights who had stayed by my side since I shed my mask at my coronation were Arthur and Howard.

"Can you let Alicia know I'm in the library and that I would like her to prepare some tea?"

"But, Your Majesty..."

"We are within palace walls, remember? One of you being briefly absent is unlikely to lead to any trouble, given the might you both wield."

Arthur and Howard were both trained directly by Commander Aaron. They could defend me from most threats, so long as the enemy wasn't exceptionally talented.

Freesia butted in, "Queen Luxeria, if it's just speaking to Alicia, I can—"

"I wish for you to stay here and speak with me."

"If that is what you wish, then I accept," Freesia acquiesced.

"Now then, Arthur—please let Alicia know and come back when you're done," I instructed.

"Understood."

Arthur departed in a hurry. Once he was gone, I faced Freesia directly.

"Have you read this book before, Freesia?" I asked, holding up a copy of *The Genesis of Ausgrid*.

"Sorry to say, but I haven't. I know that the story is quite famous among the commoners, though, and I'm at least familiar with the broad strokes."

"Hmm, I see."

It was the story of our kingdom's founder. He had immense magical power, which he used to create the five Sacred Swords. He wielded these swords to protect people from the evils of the world. More and more people vowed to serve him, and five nations joined under his banner for fear of going to war against him. And so the Federal Kingdom of Ausgrid was established. He treated his followers fairly, regardless of their ability to use magic, and he protected his populace with the same fair hand. Thus, Ausgrid prospered.

That was it—the whole story. It was supposedly a historical record of how the nation was founded, but it practically read like a fairy tale. The protagonist of the story sounded like a flawless and mythical hero. It was just a silly story with a happy ending.

"Is there something you wish to discuss about the book?" Freesia asked me.

"Oh, it just makes me wish I could see a true utopia."

The world described within its pages seemed like an ideal society for mages compared to Celden or even the Ausgrid of today.

"Huh?" Freesia tilted her head in puzzlement at my abrupt admission. It was rare for her to show such an expression around me.

"Apologies, Freesia. I was merely thinking out loud. By the way, you were born with magic—have you ever felt that it compromised your personal freedom?"

"My freedom? Not really. If anything, I feel privileged to have it."

"Were there any other mages in your family?"

"Yes, my father."

"I see." I turned to the guard beside me. "How about you, Howard?"

"I was born out in the countryside, so I didn't know any other mages back then," he told me. "It did lead to some problems growing up, but at least my powers helped me become a knight. Ultimately, I'm quite grateful that I was born with magic."

"Hmm."

"Is something the matter, Your Majesty?" Freesia asked, and I shook my head.

"I've been researching how mages are treated in our kingdom. The results have been... Well, they're far from what I consider ideal. I thought to ask those close to me about their own experiences."

"Ahh, so that's it," Freesia said.

"Unfortunately, my queen, it is as you've read," Howard said. "It's not so bad here in the capital, but growing up as a mage in the countryside was a very lonely experience."

"Even though Ausgrid's rulers have wielded the Sacred Swords, artifacts of pure magic?"

Howard nodded solemnly in response. "Feelings and reason don't always go together, I'm afraid. Those without magic see mages as people carrying swords out in public. The possibility that they could draw that sword at any point, for any reason, terrifies them."

I understood all too well. Back before she lost her memories, Alicia told me

her magical awakening had hurt the people around her, and I'd experienced similar incidents myself.

"Mm. I see."

"It is true that Ausgrid holds a more sympathetic view of mages than other places, though," Freesia offered. "My grandmother was banished from her homeland due to her magical lineage, which is how she found her way here to Ausgrid."

"Goodness, I didn't know something so painful was in your family history."

"Yes. My grandmother was quite grateful to this kingdom for letting her live like any normal person."

"Like a normal person, huh?" I pondered Freesia's words. I'd never expected to hear someone say such a thing aloud. "Your grandmother must have gone through serious hardship."

Some people called Ausgrid the "last bastion of sorcerers," given that it was founded by a king wielding swords made of pure magic. We'd seen many refugees from nations that oppressed their magical citizens, like Celden. Her grandmother's story was not uncommon.

That said, our kingdom was on the brink of losing its *pride* in its mages. As Howard pointed out, that might've been unavoidable. Without an institution dedicated to studying the proper applications of magic, it unfortunately ran amok from time to time. And since the public knew that magic was imperfect, each of those incidents caused more and more fear to spread through the populace. As that fear increased, so too did the estrangement of those with magical abilities.

Other nations were much worse off than ours, though. They might oppress mages publicly, then gather them in secret and force them into military service. This cycle of oppression worked to their governments' benefit—with the public hostile to mages, they could also get away with whatever inhumane research they wanted to conduct on those with magic. The mages forced to live in

research institutes were *never* allowed to "live like any normal person" at all. Lab rats, that's all they were. The thought of it sickened me.

"I just don't understand," I heard myself say. It was true—I didn't understand how other countries could continue to oppress so many people when they clearly saw the practical applications of magic. And certainly, many mages fled their homelands knowing their governments viewed them as little more than tools. It would serve these countries better to treat their mages with more respect, make a place for them, and foster genuine cooperation, and yet...

"Something the matter, my queen?"

"No. Forget I said anything."

I went back to quiet contemplation. As of right now, I did not have the ability to spurn other nations, nor could I change my opinions on the matter.

My own kingdom needed to come first, and I did not want the mages of Ausgrid to be oppressed in any way. I strove for the sort of utopia outlined in *The Genesis of Ausgrid*. Perhaps it would be prudent to set up a school for magic education as soon as possible. We needed to show those born with magic how to keep their powers under control from an early age and in a safe environment.

"I'm back," Arthur said as he returned, bringing me out of my thoughts.

"Thank you, Arthur. What did Alicia say?"

"She will come as soon as the tea is ready."

"Good. Freesia, thank you for your time."

No sooner had I said so than Alicia appeared. "Coming through! Here's your tea, Your Majesty!"

Her energetic voice lifted my spirits, making me crack a genuine smile.

[&]quot;I have a report, Your Majesty."

Tommy's voice softly echoed throughout my silent chamber, his silhouette appearing from nowhere.

"Is this about Étoile?" I asked.

"Sure is."

"Then I have a question for you: Have your agents provided information regarding children disappearing from the towns where the circus performs?"

"Huh. Who let you in on that juicy tidbit?"

"None of yours, don't worry. Just someone who wanted to make small talk."

Tommy laughed. "Quite the big topic for some 'small' talk, I'd say."

"That I cannot deny," I said. "So, have your men heard anything?"

"Yes. Several reports of missing children have been handed over to me."

"How many children?"

"Thirty. This hasn't been elevated to an official incident, though, so there could be more kidnappings we aren't aware of."

"Is there a common thread between those who have gone missing?"

"All the missing children are between five and ten years old, boys and girls alike."

"And where have the kidnappings taken place?"

Instead of telling me, Tommy leaned over a map and drew red circles in the southern and eastern regions, away from the capital.

"In the regions of House Beckford and House Weston," he said. "Weston's region in particular has had the most incidents."

"What about House Alcott?"

"Nothing there. Étoile hasn't performed in that region either."

I took a deep breath, absorbing all the information Tommy gave me. This was awful. They really did seem to think they had nothing to fear if they all

committed the same atrocities at once. I let out a laugh—not out of amusement but in a vain attempt to vent my frustration. I seemed to have a bad habit of doing that when enraged.

"Well, I can feel history's greatest wave of fury emanating from you, my queen. Any observations you'd like to share?"

"Yes. I've reaffirmed just how cancerous the Great Five truly are."

Tommy glanced at me, awaiting a follow-up to my statement.

"It would appear that Lord Beckford has been looking for friends willing to accept Étoile under their roofs," I continued.

"Ahh, so they wish to share the revelry with their friends? How sweet,"
Tommy said. "And by 'friends,' they're of course neither inferior nor superior to
one another, yes?"

Tommy was smart, and he clearly understood what I was getting at. Lord Beckford was looking for other members of the Great Five, his equals, to conspire with Étoile alongside him. Put simply, he very well might be cooperating with other regional lords to target and kidnap children.

"Isn't that the very definition of a friend?" I said.

Gathering that we understood each other, Tommy chuckled. "Glad you get it. Yes, the Great Five are the vilest bunch around. I can see why you had to let off some steam there just now."

"A mystery remains, however: Why are they capturing children? What do they stand to gain?"

"Not to mention we still don't know where they're being held."

"Quite."

I looked at the map once again, my mood sourer than a rotten apple. The fact that I hadn't realized the connection between these incidents sooner was a sign of my imperfection. So much for my dream of a school for mages... Wait!

My thoughts went back to the conversation I had in the library this morning.

"The children. Were they mages?" I asked.

"Were they? Hmm."

"I hate to put it like this, but some unscrupulous individuals could see children with magic as having many, shall we say, *uses*. And I've heard other nations are secretly gathering children with magical aptitude," I said.

"A likely scenario. I'll let my men know to keep an eye out," Tommy replied.

"Your magic would certainly come in handy for situations like this."

Tommy's magic was Oscillation, a very versatile power. He could project his voice over long distances like the telephones of my previous life, erase other noises entirely, and even reduce matter to dust.

"Eh. If I went far enough, I'd have to rely on someone with Transfer magic to relay information both ways."

"Didn't you have a man named Dudley working for you who had such magic?"
"Yep."

"I've heard Transfer can send small objects across long distances, but nothing larger than that. Seems like it'd pair well with your powers, Tommy."

"I guess. My magic hasn't been that handy lately. Last time it made a big difference was when Alicia's magic ran out of control. Was great for fixing up all the land that got torn up at the time. Haven't really used it much since."

Tommy had two sides. Publicly, he presented himself as a humble gardener, but privately, he worked as my assistant. It was pleasant to see him joke around with Alicia as a gardener, but he was subtly different during those interactions. That being the case, his casual demeanor didn't change too much between his professions, honestly.

"Words spoken by a man who doesn't know the force of his own power," I said. "By the way, are you still looking into House Beckford?"

"Yep. We might finally make some headway on that front soon."

"I see. I would also like you to investigate the connection between Houses Weston and Slade. So long as we lack hard evidence of any 'friendly' goings-on between the Great Five, conjecture is all we have to work with."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

Tommy left the room, making not even the tiniest noise as he did so. Whether it was a skill he picked up as part of being my personal servant or a trick performed with his magic, I did not know—but either way, he vanished like a puff of smoke.

Chapter 2:

The Queen's Plan Commences

 $\text{$^{\prime\prime}$P}_{\text{LEASE RECONSIDER!}$ Peasants aren't meant to be used as bargaining chips!"}$

The man shouting was Oscar Weston, heir of House Weston. As he stood in the room belonging to his father, Layfe Weston, his words only prompted the head of the house to furrow his brow.

"This nonsense again? I've told you before not to bother yourself with such trifling matters," Layfe scoffed.

"Trifling? You dare insist this situation is unimportant?!"

"If it is not trifling, then what is it? The peasants are our property, son. And property is to be used by the owner as he sees fit."

"They're not just toys, Father!"

"You still insist on this? Their population's the same as money. Simply leave it be and its numbers will replenish. Fret not."

Oscar clenched his jaw at his father's callousness, his eyes bloodshot with rage. "Peasants and money are the same to you? Do you consider yourself king of this land now?"

Layfe's response to his son's glare was a cold, sickening chuckle. "Yes. A country is property of its king."

"You're wrong! A king should strive to be an example for his people, a protector! You'll never be a king. And if I were a peasant, I'd never let myself live on the land you rule!"

"You wretched child!"

A sharp crunch filled the air as Layfe punched his own son in the face.

"This land belongs to me! I am its ruler!" Layfe roared. "How many times must

I tell you before you understand, you stupid boy?! Westons are descendants of the old kings of this country. We're disgraced as marquesses because of those foul Ausgrid buffoons! They stole our place on the throne, our power, our status! I am merely taking back what is rightfully ours, and we are so very close! Soon that wench on the throne will fall, and we will reclaim our birthright!"

Oscar sighed in resignation. "I'll be going now."

Having given up on convincing his father, Oscar made a swift exit. He stormed through the halls, rage burning within him and lighting his every step. Servants unfortunate enough to witness his fury rushed out of the way in terror. He continued stomping his way through the halls until he violently ripped open the door to his personal quarters.

The first to greet him was his close confidant Sam, his servant and foster brother whom he saw as his own flesh and blood. "Welcome back, milord. How did your talk with the—oh! What happened to your face?!"

"Don't worry. Father punched me, that's all," Oscar said.

"That's all? Why in the world did that happen? Oh, that doesn't even matter right now." Sam immediately began treating Oscar's wound.

"Father's gone past the point of no return, Sam. There's no reasoning with him anymore."

"Oh, milord..."

The marquess held absolute power over his house, and even his heir couldn't possibly hope to stand against him. Resistance was not tolerated. As a servant of the house, Sam should have scolded his master for arguing with the marquess, but all he felt was sympathy for Oscar. The man was just that important to him.

Oscar relaxed his muscles as Sam worked on his injury. "This isn't anything new. Wilhelm said the Great Five's corruption began a long time ago, and I think he's right."

"You're on friendly terms with Lord Wilhelm?"

"Right, I never told you about me and him, did I? Sorry, this might take a while. Have a seat," Oscar said, pointing to the chair in front of him. Finished with treating Oscar's wound, Sam sat.

"Remember back when I used to sneak away from you and the guards?" Oscar began. "I went to see Wilhelm every time that happened."

"Really? I thought you must be secretly seeing some girl," Sam replied.

"When I was ten years old? I'd have to be one hell of a rascal to pull that off...

Oh, right. I think this was before you were even officially our servant."

"Indeed. We were separated at the time, as I was in training to be your attendant."

"Yes. So when I first went to the capital, you were back home on our land."

"That I was," Sam confirmed. "So, when did you two meet? At just ten years old, you wouldn't have been attending any tea parties."

"Pure happenstance. The capital captivated my interest when I first visited, so I snuck away from the family and explored the town. You know, a little adventure of sorts. But I was a sheltered, naive little kid. It didn't take long for me to run into trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Oh, you know. Going to a restaurant and not paying for my food, that sort of thing."

Sam gasped, eyes going wide. "Lord Oscar, you're guilty of defrauding an innkeeper?!" A marquess's heir committing a crime like this was unthinkable.

"Yes. The smell of some tasty skewered meat lured me in, but I didn't know you needed money to pay for goods and services around town. I got a real scolding by the owner of that stall when I tried to walk away without paying."

Sam sat in total silence at his master's confession, which Oscar found rather

amusing.

"Just wait until you hear what happened next. I was a stupid kid, you know? So my response to getting yelled at by the man was to say 'I'm a noble!' like it would magically solve the problem. Didn't change the fact that I had no money on me. I was *trying* to say I'd pay him back later, and that I had money because of my status, but I chose my words as poorly as possible. It wasn't any different from telling him I had no intention to pay at all."

Listening intently, Sam nodded.

"Things were starting to take an unfortunate turn, but then Wilhelm showed up. He said, 'Stop messing around, all right? You have to pay for the food you eat.' Then he apologized to the man and gave him the money he was owed."

"Clever boy. He must have had a lot of experience exploring the town."

"Apparently, he slipped away from his guards even more than I did—not that I knew it at the time. It was all so he could explore the capital."

"Hmm. I see."

"We ended up wandering the city together and became fast friends. We'd meet up every time we were both in the capital. We even sent each other letters."

"If you two were that close, then the catastrophe at the queen's coronation must have really affected you."

"About that... He expected something like that to happen."

"Really! How?!"

"He knew. He knew everything—that the Great Five had Luxeria's parents killed, that his own mother plotted Luxeria's assassination for after their marriage, and that Luxeria had discovered the truth."

"S-sorry, wait a second." The truth was too shocking for Sam, his head throbbing as he pushed his face into his hands. "You mean to t-tell me that the Great Five...plotted the assassination of the former king and queen? You are

certain of this?"

"Absolutely. I saw the plan laid out in a secret message at House Radford.

Lord Slade plotted the crime itself, while Lord Radford guided the royal couple to their deaths."

"Unbelievable..."

"Our own house is guilty of diminishing security on that day as well. Meaning that we're complicit in committing treason."

That was all Oscar had to say regarding these shocking revelations.

"Are you truly okay with telling me all this?"

"You're the only real family I have, Sam."

Sam was a bit taken aback by Oscar's statement, one he gave with no hesitation whatsoever.

"I am honored," Sam said earnestly. And while he was happy to know Oscar trusted him, he was afraid of the implications of his words. Forget the headache—Sam was starting to feel queasy.

"Wilhelm did what he could to save her," Oscar said. "The first thing he did was try to call off the wedding."

"So he cultivated his philandering reputation on purpose?"

There was a time when the public held Wilhelm in ill regard, when rumors spread of him seeing another woman despite his betrothal to the future queen. Oscar was certain Wilhelm had deliberately spread those rumors to put distance between them.

"Yes. He knew convincing his mother to call it off wasn't possible, so he chose the next best thing: tarnishing his reputation. He hoped doing so would lead to the Great Five demanding the wedding be canceled."

"And by extension, he'd manage to stop the assassination plot?"

"Exactly."

"To think such wild things were going on behind his scandal with Barbara..."

"He also tried to support Luxeria from the shadows," Oscar went on. "He made subtle preparations to help expedite Luxeria's judgment of House Radford and her plans to reform the regional governments."

"He predicted she would go as far as she has? And he tried to assist her on top of everything else? How many eyes and ears did he really have?" Sam mused.

"I have no idea. It always seemed like he just knew everything."

"I still don't understand. Why did he go to such extraordinary lengths? How come he didn't directly cooperate with her? Surely he must have known that the path he chose would lead to his demise, and yet..."

"Is it so strange for a man to want to protect the woman he loves?"

"But they were betrothed for purely political reasons!" Sam exclaimed.

"Doesn't mean he couldn't fall for her," Oscar said, grinning. "I hadn't heard him speak about it—no firsthand account of falling in love, no romantic escapades, nothing. Call it a hunch on my part, but I think his feelings toward her were complex. Perhaps he sympathized with her, felt guilty for what she'd been through." A pang of grief for his lost friend lanced Oscar's heart, and his gaze darkened. "So even if all that awaited him was oblivion, he never wished for her mercy. He never even considered the *possibility* of mercy."

"Because he wasn't able to call off the marriage?" Sam asked.

"He tried so many times, but it never worked. He didn't let it sway his resolve. His feelings were too strong to ignore, so he tried to help her from the shadows, but..." Despite the light tone of his voice, Oscar balled his fists in anger. "But you know what? He was smiling when Luxeria stabbed him. He made peace with that fate, and he was satisfied in the end."

"Unreal..." That was all Sam could muster, his gaze pointed at the floor. He couldn't process everything he'd just learned, at least not in such a short period

of time.

"Say, Sam. What do you think of Queen Luxeria?"

Sam's head snapped back up. "What do I think of her? I've never met her in person, everything I know is secondhand. I don't have much of an opinion, really."

"That's fine. To be honest, I get rather nervous thinking about her. Can't stay calm. My opinion is biased and I know it," Oscar said.

Sam chose his next words carefully. "Based on what I know, she seems to be as coolheaded as they come, yet she burns with an unspeakably deep rage. She knows the circumstances of her parents' death, yes?"

"She does. I have no clue when she learned the truth, but it couldn't have been immediately prior to the wedding. In which case, she must have played a role of sorts, pretending she was much weaker than she really was until the day of her coronation. To keep her venomous indignation at bay while hiding and polishing her sword of vengeance... She must have incredible mental fortitude. Astonishing amounts of it."

"Clearly," Sam agreed. "The number of years she kept her rage concealed no doubt added to her ferocity. As a result, the wedding ended the way that it did, and House Radford was wholly subjugated. I figure she must be the type who won't stop spreading the fires of her hatred until she has burned everything to the ground."

Oscar laughed upon hearing Sam's analysis. "Ha ha ha! A fascinating theory, Sam. You see her as I do."

He stood up and walked to the window, gazing at the setting sun. Darkness had begun to stain the sky.

"Can a woman so cunning be as powerless as my father says?" Oscar wondered aloud. "Absolutely not. If anything, it's my father who is powerless before her."

"Well..."

"Taking her out of the picture, obtaining independence from the royal family? It would be nothing short of a nightmare. The notion is completely divorced from reality. It's utterly pathetic that my father even imagines it. I have no idea what the rest of the Great Five are thinking, but I have to wonder why my father's house takes the queen so lightly. It's hard for me to see it as anything other than proof that my father's contempt for the royal family, along with his greed, has left him corrupt and complacent."

"I also wonder about the queen's plans," Sam said. "She wore the guise of a doll for so many years."

"Yes. That's terrifying in its own right," Oscar said, opening the window. He closed his eyes and breathed in the evening air, letting it clear out the stuffy atmosphere that had filled his room. "Whether Luxeria is scheming against my family or not, my answer will not change. My father is evil, and he must be removed. And this house, this wretched institution that brings nothing but suffering to the citizens of its land, must cease to exist. I finally understand how Wilhelm felt leading up to his final days."

"So, you wish to aid the queen?" Sam asked.

"I do."

"But...there's no guarantee you'll come out unscathed, milord. The flames of her revenge are as likely to burn her allies as they are her enemies. And even if you manage to get out of it alive, what future will await you when House Weston falls?"

Oscar shrugged. "I don't know. I'll figure it out when I get there."

"Oh dear..."

"I'm more concerned about the protection and prosperity of my people than my own safety. What's best for the citizens of this nation comes first."

"Certainly, but—"

"Frankly, I didn't act soon enough. I knew the sins of the Great Five, and all this time has passed without change. Now our own citizens are being thrown to the wolves!" There came a loud *thud* as Oscar punched the wall beside the window in frustration. "I should've spoken up sooner. I treated what happened to Wilhelm like it had nothing to do with me. The sins of the past, the sins of his mother, and now the sins of my father... They're suffocating me like snakes coiled around my neck!"

"Calm yourself, Lord Oscar!" Sam shouted.

"Sam, please," Oscar begged. "I need your help. I'll make sure you have employment after I meet my end here."

"That will not be needed. I am your servant to the very end."

"I won't be able to support you on my own."

"Did you not say you'll figure things out when you get there? We can work it out."

"I did say that," Oscar admitted with a chuckle. "Sam, we need government officials of our own, ones not tied to my father. Ones who can be our allies."

"Understood."

"I'll learn what I can about my father's plotting. Then we need to win over some knights to our side. If you hear anything important, let me know immediately."

"It shall be done, milord."

"Thank you."

"May our lives prosper together forevermore."

Their fates decided, two men shook hands.

A man hid in the darkness of the night. It was Tommy, spying on House Beckford. Given that he was using his magic to erase all noise, no one detected his presence.

Tommy reached his destination, pausing as he heard a voice.

"Yes, Lord Bernard. I shall hand them the usual reward."

The voice belonged to a man named Karl, the closest attendant to the marquess and head of house, Bernard Beckford. Servants across the land were aware of how capable Karl was; the young man had established a name for himself on Beckford's land.

"Yes, yes, very good. So, when will Lord Slade's money arrive?" Bernard asked.

"Not soon. I'd wager about a month from now, after their next sale of goods," Karl replied.

"Damn it! I won't be able to get Cherry the ring she demanded in time!"

"Relax, milord. We can use the earnings from our last sale as a deposit."

"Is that so? You should've said so earlier! What will I do if someone else gets it before me?!"

"A ring with that price is not one that others can easily purchase," Karl said.

"And I'm sure the Cameo Corporation will give you, their most valued customer, special priority if needed."

"F-fine then," Bernard conceded. "Can you get in touch with them about the ring right away?"

"Of course," Karl replied with a seemingly benevolent smile. "By the way, Lord Beckford, we have received an emergency report from one of our officials requesting immediate funds and resources to repair a bridge in our territory."

"A *bridge*?! Just rebuild the damn thing! That sort of busywork will get in the way of my sweet time with Cherry! Fire that man immediately!"

Tommy had heard that Bernard spent entirely too much money on his favorite lady, but his sloppy behavior was even more horrid than he'd imagined.

He held back a sigh.

"Mm. Very well, as you wish. Now, excuse me while I contact the Cameo Corporation."

"You do that."

Karl left the room, soon followed by the eavesdropping Tommy. Tailing Bernard would likely only lead to witnessing scandalous scenes with his lover, Cherry, and probably no discoveries regarding Étoile. If Bernard himself were capable of hiding information about the circus this skillfully, then he'd be the greatest actor in the land—but that was simply not the case. Tommy had learned that the hard way over the last few months, his investigations turning up a whole bunch of nothing.

"That dim-witted windbag..." Karl muttered under his breath, a satisfied grin rising to his face. He proceeded to do some paperwork in his office, then retired to his private quarters. After Tommy confirmed the room was entirely empty, he made his move. He infiltrated the office and searched Karl's desk.

Aha! Keeping himself from saying that aloud, he looked through the document he'd found. He wrote down the information, put forgeries in place, and made to leave. But before he could, he sensed the presence of someone else and jumped.

A tiny blade pierced the floor next to him. It appeared that the brunt of the manor's security was focused here, not on the marquess. Assassin after assassin poured into the room, poised to strike at Tommy. He took a deep breath.

"Great. Guess I'm gonna have to charge extra for this one."

He struck them down one by one, but his vision grew dim as their number only continued to increase.

The next morning, one of Tommy's underlings sat on a bench in town. Shops opened up for business while common folk walked the streets—an exceedingly

normal sight. The only abnormal thing, as far as the man on the bench was concerned, was his superior's absence. No matter how long he waited, Tommy never arrived. The man furrowed his brow, confused as to why his boss was late. Could he have been captured?

He only mulled over it for an instant. If Tommy had been captured, then staying at this rendezvous spot was dangerous. The possibility that news of this meeting had gotten out was high. And even if that wasn't the case, the fact that Tommy hadn't shown up on time was enough proof that he'd run into some kind of trouble. What could have happened to him?

He had to figure out the reason for Tommy's absence. He left the meeting place, met up with reinforcements, and made his way to the second designated meeting spot. He split duties with the backup, one man entering the building and the other scouting their surroundings from the roof. When the backup informed him that there were no signs of unusual activity nearby, he entered the building.

He immediately caught sight of Tommy from the other door. He was in bad shape, his whole body stained red from bleeding wounds.

"Tommy?! Is that you?!"

"Keep your voice down," Tommy croaked with a pained smile, then fell over. His underling rushed over and caught him before he hit the floor.

"Are you all right?!"

"Yeah. Just had to deal with some annoying pests," Tommy said.

"I'm just glad you're here. Don't move—I'll perform first aid."

"Thanks. Sorry to bother you."

"No, no, your safety is nothing to apologize for."

"Can't believe I got out of that hellhole alive. It was way more than I signed up for," Tommy griped. "I'm never going back to a place with security like that again."

Once his wounds had been tended to, he gave orders to all of his subordinates who were present.

"I'll stay here," his underling said. "You can't move around yet, right?"

"Sure can't," Tommy replied. "Sorry, I need to take a nap."

Tommy was deeply grateful to his men as he fell into a much-needed sleep.

I was playing with chess pieces around nightfall when Tommy's voice echoed softly in my office.

"I have a report."

"I heard you were injured. Are you truly well enough to speak with me?" I asked.

"I'm all right. My wounds aren't that bad."

"I see. Rest if you need it. I won't scold you even if the report ends up delayed."

"Thanks. But really, I'll be fine. I've got some relevant information about Étoile now. As you suspected, all of the captured children were mages."

Tommy's statement prompted me to take a deep breath. "I knew it. Where were they taken?"

"To Lord Slade's territory, but I couldn't find out where they ended up after that. House Beckford is likely unaware as well."

"How deviously cautious of them. I suppose we must investigate House Slade next."

"Certainly. Here's evidence of the trafficking."

The paper Tommy handed me was a list of children's names, their individual characteristics, and where they would be delivered. It was practically an inventory sheet. *Absolutely disgusting,* I thought.

I held my rage at bay, giving him my sincere gratitude. "You did well to find this."

"But this isn't..."

"Enough of a revelation, I know," I finished for him.

Nothing in these papers bore the names or insignias of Houses Beckford or Slade. Any attempt to falsify them would likely backfire tremendously, as it wouldn't take much to prove we faked them.

"Right you are. Though I did find evidence of House Weston's involvement, at least."

He then handed me another list that looked similar to the one from before. The main difference was that it bore the insignia of House Weston.

"My, my. What an incredibly transparent friendship they have."

"Did you figure something out?"

"Slade and Beckford left no direct evidence tying them to this crime, yet you found direct proof of Weston's involvement. Easy to imagine they all have evidence implicating each other, no?"

"Ahh, I get it. You've got to keep your friends from stabbing you in the back, after all. About as transparent as a window, this friendship."

"Then we must investigate Weston and Slade. If my suspicions are correct, then we might be able to find something with which to extort Beckford."

"A good idea, Your Majesty, but I'm afraid Lord Beckford won't be of much use to us."

"Pardon?"

"From what I could tell, he doesn't care about anything other than trysting with the woman he fancies. He leaves all the actual governance up to his assistant. Lord Beckford came across as someone who just wanted money and didn't care how he got it."

The sheer audacity of that man sent me into a fit of burning rage. "Yet he dares to toy with the lives of innocents?!"

I slammed my fist on my desk, and most of the pieces on the chessboard toppled over. "If he is useless, then launch an investigation into the other houses... Wait, I have an idea."

"Hm?"

"I just remembered that I have a meeting with Lord Slade tomorrow. Perhaps I'll just drag the information out of him directly," I said.

"You have quite the handy brand of magic for that."

I did. Honestly, my magic was a better fit for a spy like Tommy. "In situations like this, it's useful. It'd be worthless if I was living a normal life."

"I'm convinced a higher power had plans for you," Tommy said. "As the ruler of this land, you were meant to have this gift."

"If only... Never mind. Forget about looking into Slade and Weston for now."

"Understood. Also, those chess pieces... Are they meant to represent you and the Great Five?"

"You noticed."

"The way the pieces are arranged is nothing like a normal game of chess, so..."

"Mm-hmm."

"So the black king piece represents you, Queen Luxeria. The pieces surrounding the king must represent us, your servants. And our enemies are three white kings with their own pawns. Wait, three? But there are four houses left to topple. Why are *two* of the houses missing?"

"Well, one of them is what I call the gray faction," I replied with a chuckle. The marquess who was the first to know of my true power came to mind.

"Gray? So neither white nor black. Does this mean they're an ally?" Tommy asked.

"I'm not sure, and I would rather not put the wrong idea in your head. Anything more than that is a secret." I rearranged the board, with four sets of white kings and their pawns along with a black king and its pawns.

"Understood. I will assume all four of the remaining houses are our enemies, then."

"Good. Though I would like to stain one of those white pawns a shade of black."

"Searching for allies, are we?"

"That we are. Speaking of potential allies, the heir to House Weston... Should we reconsider him?"

House Weston's heir was the one who smiled when I impaled Wilhelm during the coronation. Why had he reacted that way, rather than cowering in fear? Perhaps he wanted House Radford to fall, or maybe he was excited for the beginning of the end of the Great Five. Either way, he could be useful to us.

"Lord Oscar, yes," Tommy said. "I did learn something interesting about him recently."

"Oh?"

"He has a habit of taking walks through the capital whenever he's in these parts."

"Hmm. Is he the curious sort? Or is he meeting up with someone in secret?"

"The person he used to see most in the capital was Lord Wilhelm, apparently. I have no hard evidence to back this up, though, just secondhand reports."

"Is that so? Then why...?"

Why did he smile? If Tommy was telling the truth, then Oscar would have even less reason to react like that. A close friend of his had been slain before his eyes. I couldn't wrap my head around it.

"I'll find out what he's up to," Tommy said.

"Please do. But first, you should get some rest."

"A paid vacation sounds pretty nice. Don't mind if I do."

"A paid vacation?" I laughed. "Very well."

Tommy was the type to work himself to the bone, so I eventually had to ask if he'd accept payment under the condition that he obey my orders to rest. Just because I was regarded as an evil queen did not mean I had any desire to deprive my servants of rest, like some sort of soulless corporation from my past life. Of course, if any secrets got out about Tommy's role in my inner circle, circumstances would be quite different. At any rate, Tommy took to calling my orders to rest "paid vacations," and he'd parrot it to me like a drunkard whenever I demanded he take care of himself.

"Now, if you'll excuse me..."

Likely keeping things short due to his injuries, Tommy bowed and vanished into the darkness.

The following night, I was leisurely enjoying a book after finishing my daily work. With the big confrontation with Lord Slade happening so soon, I needed to do what I could to calm my nerves.

"You're really enchanted by that book, Your Majesty," said Alicia as she prepared my tea. I was once again back to reading *The Genesis of Ausgrid*. I'd been reading it in my free time ever since I talked to Freesia and Howard about it.

"I suppose I am. Have you read it before, Alicia?"

"Many times, when I was much younger!"

"Hmm. I see."

I closed the book with a thwap.

"I believe it to be a tale recording the arduous trials and tribulations of

mages."

Alicia tilted her head at my unexpected remark.

"For example, the Dark One mentioned in the story," I pointed out. "Such horrific monsters do not actually exist in this world, do they?"

"Dragons, you mean? They don't."

"Perhaps the dragon is a representation of those who oppress mages. And the original king of this kingdom founded it to protect those with magic. That's my theory," I said.

"Hmm, I see! I have heard Ausgrid treats its magical citizens more fairly than other nations. I can't use my magic properly, but I'm sure I'd have met a much worse fate if it'd gone out of control anywhere else. Not that I've been hasslefree for everyone here in Ausgrid with my mishaps..."

It's not your fault, Alicia. Before the kidnapping—before you lost your memories—you were an incredibly gifted mage. Your pained smile makes me desperately wish I could tell you.

"Incidents of magic going out of control are much like a natural disaster, Alicia. You have no need to look down on yourself like that. Without you, my life would be very different."

At that, her taut smile bloomed like a beautiful flower.

"Just let me know if anyone gives you trouble for it, all right?" I pressed.

"It's no problem! Everyone's really kind, so I doubt that'll happen."

"You think so? I suppose Freesia can ensure your safety as well. Hmm..."

"She absolutely can!" Alicia agreed. "So, about that book—wasn't the first king just so amazing? Founding a kingdom simply to protect those with magical gifts."

"It is the ideal I strive for."

What would our first king have thought if he saw the current state of our

kingdom, a country that captured magical children and sold them like cattle? Would he have felt the same sadness and rage that I did? Would he have lost all faith in the world?

"The Sacred Swords embody his hope for the future of the nation, do they not? Looking at them that way tickles the imagination, certainly," I said.

"Sure does! Me and all the other mages of this nation are blessed."

"What's gotten into you?"



"I truly believe you'll become a wise ruler like the first king. I'm happy I got to live in the same era as you."

"You hold me in too high regard, Alicia."

Her little fantasy was too much for me to bear, and all I could muster was a forced smile in response.

The next day dawned. I could sense how thoroughly ill at ease I felt, likely due to my upcoming meeting with Lord Slade.

Alicia noticed as well, showing her concern for me. "Your Majesty, are you all right? Do you feel sick?"

"I'm fine. I just have an important guest arriving today. It would appear I am not immune to a case of the nerves."

"Ahh, so that's it."

"Alicia, I want my dress and makeup to be especially perfect today. If you could do the honors, I feel that I'd be able to stand up to Lord Slade. Can you help?"

"With pleasure!"

She did precisely as I asked, with Freesia joining in to hurry things along. Their combined technique made me look about 30 percent prettier than usual—it felt that way to me, at least.

"Thank you, Alicia, Freesia. I feel more capable than ever now."

The appointed time came soon after. Lord Slade arrived in my meeting room right on schedule. He and his men bowed before me, awaiting my response.

"It is good to see you," I said. "Raise your heads and relax."

They politely did as commanded and sat in the seats in front of them. I grinned as I faced them from the other side, thinking to myself how utterly shameless this all was. The Great Five had a duty to report to the kingdom's

ruler once a year regarding the state of their region. In reality, they dropped by several times a year as a matter of business. These meetings were little more than semiformal periodic greetings.

Once they'd said their piece, I said, "I see. It is heartening to hear Lord Slade's region is as healthy as ever."

"It's all thanks to the royal family's support. May we continue to prosper in peace," Lord Slade replied.

Now was my chance. I activated my magic, but something felt wrong. Why can't I hear their thoughts? My magic was flowing as normal, so it should work!

I attempted to compel them to answer a simple question: "Might I ask what sort of magic the men accompanying you are capable of?"

"Their magic, you say?" Lord Slade remarked, a complete nonanswer.

Silence settled in. My magic wasn't working.

"Right, then. Who is this man?"

"Alvin," Lord Slade replied.

"Noted. He is not a member of House Slade, is he? Yet you brought him along to face me. He must be quite the talented guard."

"Not at all. He is a skilled assistant of mine, merely here as part of his duties."

"Very well. My apologies for jumping to conclusions."

After a bit of frivolous small talk, Lord Slade and his men left the room.

The moment they were gone, Tommy appeared. "Goodness. To think the queen's magic would fail to function."

The room was empty, save for the two of us. He hadn't entered through the door, so nobody knew he had come in at all.

"It must be due to the magic of that man he brought with him. Alvin."

"Could it be Lord Slade himself?" Tommy suggested.

"Absolutely not. I have heard his thoughts in the past."

"And I confirmed there were no other hidden men he brought with him. Meaning Alvin is the only possibility."

I gnashed my teeth. "That miserable wretch!"

"I thought it was rather odd that he had someone with him who wasn't a Slade. He absolutely lied to you about him being an assistant. He had to be some sort of guard."

"No better guard than one who can protect him from the effects of magic, certainly."

"Does that mean he knows about your magic?"

"He shouldn't, but it's not out of the question. A few people who know my secret still live."

Only a scant few people knew about my magic: Alicia before her memory loss, my late parents, and the one secretive marquess. If anyone else found out, I made sure to erase their knowledge of it with Heart Realm. And the one marquess wouldn't casually leak such information to other members of the Great Five. He was well aware I'd know it was him who let the secret slip.

"Well, regardless, it seems we must do something about Alvin if we are to solve the mystery of Lord Slade," I said.

"It seems that way," Tommy replied.

"Much as I'd like to order an investigation right away, I believe patience is required here. We should take our time and plan it out."

"Why wait?"

"You're still injured, are you not?"

Tommy let out a small sigh. "I am your pawn, Queen Luxeria. Losing a pawn will limit the moves you can make on the chessboard."

"That's beside the point. We're talking about House Slade here. I could only

ask you to take on that snake's house when you're in tip-top shape."

There was a knock at the door, and Tommy vanished.

It was Gilbert who walked in. "Excuse me... Hmm? Where did Tommy go?"

"I'm right here," came Tommy's voice. "You're sharp to figure that out, Gilbert."

"I figured you'd be the one talking with the queen after her meeting with Lord Slade."

"Oh, that's it? Gotcha."

"As it turns out, there was something I wanted to confirm with the both of you. May I borrow some of your time?" Gilbert asked.

Despite them both being my closest confidents, Gilbert and Tommy didn't meet very often. Tommy was often out of town for days or weeks at a time, while Gilbert was constantly busy. Their schedules rarely aligned, so it was uncommon to hold a meeting with both men present.

"Give your report. Tommy and I just finished our conversation."

"Very well, then."

Gilbert's report outlined the personal affairs of those living in the royal palace. There were currently two factions within the palace walls: those aligned with the Great Five and those completely unattached to them. Gilbert concluded that reforming this situation was necessary to bring about the downfall of the Great Five.

"Is this a list of palace residents we must expel?" I asked Gilbert, shaking the long list of names he'd handed me. I needed to be confident that this was a list of those with ties to the Great Five, whether by blood or otherwise. And if that was the case, I needed to know what reason he would have to show this list to me.

"To put it bluntly, it is a list of those who have committed illegal acts," Gilbert replied.

"Quite the long list, is it not?"

"It is the result of numerous incidents piling up over the years, I'm afraid. Many atrocities were committed in the name of the Great Five, and we must be thorough to eradicate the festering corruption."

I heaved a sigh. "I see."

There was little else I could say regarding the infection that had run rampant in my own palace. Gilbert checked with Tommy whether the information he presented was correct while I skimmed through the names. Tommy answered Gilbert's questions without hesitation; his memory was quite impressive. I watched them converse as if I had no knowledge on the subject.

"That is all I have to report."

"Understood. What effect will expelling these people have on our government's operation?"

"Well, it will certainly do more than nothing. However, I did find out the minimum number of people needed to maintain each ministry of our kingdom. I plan to reassign the people we have on hand after expunging the rot."

"All right, then," I said. "And this same sort of plan is in place for other regions as well?"

"Of course. The first phase of our political purge is already complete."

"As brilliant as ever, Gilbert. I see no problems, then. Please continue your report."

"Right... Actually, I think you should go see Freesia and Alicia. They've been worried sick."

"Ah, true. I did give them plenty reason to fret this morning."

"That may be unrelated, but I believe the brunt of their worry concerns the tea party in five days' time."

"Hm? A tea party?" I had completely forgotten we had one scheduled. It took

me a moment to remember anything about it. "Oh, yes. With the ladies of the Great Five."

I'd dismissed it as an utterly unimportant gathering, but perhaps I could use the situation to my advantage. The thought made me smirk.

Tommy understood what my sinister smile meant. "Queen Luxeria, don't tell me...you're going to set the Great Five's women against their own houses?"

"It is not the most desirable method, but I'd rather this than some ridiculous ordeal. Tommy, no investigations should be done until the tea party has ended. Focus on recovering."

"Message received, Your Majesty. I'll rest up as much as I can."

"Now, Gilbert—if your report is finished, I'd like to make some arrangements ahead of time."

They acknowledged my orders in tandem.

"I'm counting on you two."

"Got it!"

"Yes, my queen."

I parted ways with them, making my way to Alicia and Freesia.

The moment Freesia spotted me, she said, "Queen Luxeria, we've been expecting you. Could you please help us decide on a venue for the tea party?"

"I'm more concerned with your well-being, Your Majesty," Alicia chimed in. "Are you all right? Was it hard having to meet with men you dislike?"

"Alicia! The queen has a *very* important tea party to attend in five days to establish her authority. How dare you interrupt something so vital!" Freesia scolded her.

Their little spat made me chuckle. "Oh Alicia, thank you for worrying," I said. "You both helped me tremendously with my appearance earlier. We can speak about other subjects later, Alicia. For now, let us decide on a venue, like Freesia

suggested."

And so began our strategy meeting for my next battle.

"My lord, why is it you oppose the royal family so?"

Alvin's question elicited a chuckle from Lord Slade. Had it been any other servant who asked the question, they'd be torn to shreds immediately. That he didn't kill Alvin was proof of how much he valued him. Magic was the most powerful force in the world, and he was capable of rendering it useless. Every mage wielded only one kind of magic, and nearly infinite types existed. Alvin's magic, Nullification, was unique to him.

Even if Slade hated Alvin, he wouldn't be able to easily replace him. He also couldn't treat him as if he were any other servant. Quite the opposite—the marquess was incredibly accommodating of him, despite Alvin not being a Slade.

"Do you see my actions as deliberately aggressive?" Slade asked.

"A bit," Alvin admitted.

"I see. I do view them as an eyesore, certainly."

"Because you wish to become king?"

"No," Slade said. His denial prompted Alvin to tilt his head. "I do not wish to become king. I wish to reclaim the title that is rightly mine."

"You were a king once, milord?"

"Indeed. Do you know how this kingdom was founded?" Slade asked, and Alvin shook his head. "This country was formed by six smaller nations. Each leader of the Great Five Marquess Houses is the descendant of a king from those ancient times."

"They were all royalty at one point? My, my."

"That they were. And our five houses were invaded, conquered, and used as

the building blocks for the Federal Kingdom of Ausgrid. Naturally, our resentment toward the so-called 'royal family' has never faded. Were things as they should be, I'd have a crown of my own. That wretched girl should never have been allowed to take the throne."

Alvin looked at the floor as Slade ranted. The marquess's ramblings—basing his entire life's beliefs on historical what-ifs—came across as delusional.

"My house has fought for many years to take our country back from that wretched royal family, and soon, it shall be ours once again. I will finally exact revenge in the name of all the Slades before me."

Despite Alvin's obvious disregard for the subject, the marquess continued his diatribe.

"The time is nigh, and you will do my bidding, for my benefit. Is that clear?"

"Yes," Alvin said, deciding to simply follow orders. He would not peer further into the marquess's mind.

"Reading The Genesis of Ausgrid, are we?"

"Ah, my dear marquess. Fancy seeing you here."

I smiled at the sight of the mysterious man entering my library. Using Heart Realm, I erased all traces of his visit. "Heed my words! Everyone other than the marquess will forget he was here, and no one will remember the contents of our discussion."

After I cast my magic, I addressed the marquess. "You visit often for someone so busy."

"My apologies, Your Majesty."

"So, what do you think of the Ausgrids?" I asked, lifting up the book. "Were they a tribe who invaded five other nations and plundered them? Or do you see them as the protectors of mages everywhere?"

He smiled, looking pensive. "I'm sure I told you so many years ago, but my ancestors were members of the Ausgrids' military. They made a pact to protect both their own family and the kingdom's citizens."

"It sounds as though you're saying the Ausgrids were both of these things at the same time."

"Our land was home to many mages and even more enemies."

His answer prompted me to smile. "Sharing an enemy can be a wondrous thing, don't you think? A perfect excuse to forge the bonds of friendship."

"Indeed," the marquess agreed.

"Are similar tales passed down in the families of the other houses?"

"I don't know. It isn't likely, considering some of them see the throne as something to be returned to them—even though such theft of authority never occurred in the first place."

"Aha, so that must be it. We vanquished our common enemies, and over time, the records of the Great Five became distorted. This led to a loss of trust between the Great Five and the royal family. How truly fragile that alliance was." I studied the marquess, then went on, "This is a serious matter. The alliance the Great Five currently enjoys with one another is bound to crumble if I, their mutual enemy, am defeated."

"Most likely," he said, forcing a smile.

"Well, what brings you to me today?"

"The ongoing investigation of my bureaucrats."

"I see. You seem to have a solid grasp on your own men. I expected House Weston to show up before you did."

"Weston? Why him?"

"Not the lord himself, mind you. Someone from the same family with a keener mind."

"Hmm. Seems your revenge is coming along well," the marquess remarked.

"Quite. I assume you're here because you're feeling a bit of pressure, and you wish to clarify matters?"

"Correct. You've given me plenty of time—more than plenty. I will relinquish my status as a marquess and leave myself at your mercy."

"I see. But I need you to keep your status for just a bit longer, Lord Alcott."

"Really? But—"

"This will be my last request of you," I cut in. "Your judgment will come at a later date. I will not do ill against your family or your people, just as I promised when you pledged your loyalty to me years ago."

"Your words are a relief, Your Majesty. Very well then."

Lord Alcott bowed profusely before leaving the room.

The day of the tea party arrived. Recalling the last tea party I attended sank my mood into the ground.

"Oh, you look wonderful, Your Majesty!"

Once again, Alicia and Freesia assisted me in dressing up for the occasion. I wore a white gown that gradually transitioned into deepening shades of blue, and I paired it with a sapphire necklace and earrings.

"I'll make sure to serve you to the last moment today!"

Alicia was oddly excited about this. Perhaps she was still sour that I'd left the last tea party halfway through.

"My, how reassuring," I said. "And I must say, you two are marvelous at making a lady look her best."

"Only because you're so beautiful to begin with!" Alicia replied.

"Now if you'll excuse us, we need to make some final preparations at the

venue," Freesia said flatly. Unlike Alicia, she seemed wholly disinterested. I had to admit, the contrast between the two was rather amusing.

"Please do."

Shortly after they left, I was called to the party by the guards stationed outside my dressing room. I sighed, expelling the gloom and anxiety welling up within me as I exited the room.

It appeared the guests had already arrived, waiting in their seats. They seemed a bit cold, and perhaps nervous. The icy atmosphere was unusual. The mood didn't change even after the party began.

"S-so, Queen Luxeria...I must say, the dress you wore to your coronation was simply fabulous," one lady said. Her words confirmed my suspicion that these women had been present at my coronation. They'd seen me impale Wilhelm. Perhaps it had been too shocking a sight for these sheltered noblewomen.

"My, thank you. I am glad I could impress," I said.

The lady of House Weston cracked a twitching smile in response.

No, you fool. Don't wear your heart on your sleeve so carelessly. Smile in the face of fear. Show joy to the mirror of your sadness. Hide your emotions behind the mask of a puppet, lest the people around you pull the strings.

"By the way, Melania, do we have any surprise guests scheduled to arrive today?" I asked.

Melania's shoulders twitched in response to my question. "Any, um, surprises? Uh..."

"Yes, surprises. We had one last time, did we not? I figured something similar would be waiting for me this time."

"T-t-terribly sorry to fall short of your expectations, but we have no other guests planned for today," Melania said. Her conduct stunned me. She was a demure little maiden compared to her intimidating father, Lord Slade. She was unlikely to change the topic like he would, nor would she inquire about who

invited Barbara.

"I see. That's unfortunate. Hopefully that can be arranged next time," I said.

"Um, certainly."

I kept an eye on her from then on. She was a golden child, doted on so heavily by her father. He didn't just throw her extravagant birthday parties, but he also established many elaborate celebration days in her name: the day she took her first steps, the day she first said the word "papa," among other dates. He'd made so many holidays out of her achievements that he ended up spending most of the year celebrating her in some way.

Slade might have seemed like a doting father—perhaps to a sickening extent—but he had the greatest political power in the land. He could and would do anything for his little girl. But perhaps this was exactly why she was so easy to manipulate, unlike her father.

The tea party proceeded normally after that, ending just before sunset. As everyone began to leave the venue, I called out to Melania.

"Y-yes? Is something the matter?" she asked.

I spoke using Heart Realm: "Melania, stand in place."

The moment I used my magic, the color in her eyes faded. She was now utterly at my mercy.

I then cast my magic on the rest of the women: "All those present besides Melania, forget that I spoke to her. You will remember that she stayed behind to look for a lost item. Now, take your leave. Melania, come with me."

Everyone followed my words to the letter. I escorted Melania to a different room.

"You will answer my questions truthfully," I said, wielding my magic. Then, I spoke normally. "Why is your father gathering mages?"

"I do not know," Melania replied.

Of course. The reason she lacked any escorts capable of resisting my magic was that she knew nothing incriminating. It was disappointing, to say the least.

"Then, Melania, answer me this: Have you seen any children with magical abilities around your living quarters?"

"No."

"Do you know of any place in those quarters where children could be hidden? Someplace where people or objects could be concealed?"

"The manor has a basement," she said.

"Have you ever been inside of it?"

"No."

"Then we shall change the subject. How did you come to own that ruby necklace?" I asked.

"It was a gift from my father," she responded.

"Who does your father meet with most often, and to whom does he send the most letters?"

"For personal meetings, his bureaucrats and assistants. He also sees Count Adcock and Count Scott, as well as members of the Cameo Corporation. He primarily sends letters to the associates I previously mentioned, and to envoys from the Celden Republic."

Aha! I finally had some useful information. "Why is he in contact with Celden? Has he said anything about it?"

"Father says friendly relations with neighboring nations is a necessity for House Slade to prosper. He never tells me what is written in the letters. He has gotten quite close to the people from Celden, however. He told me this ruby was from them."

It stood to reason that she wouldn't know the contents of the letters, but learning that her ruby came from Celden was still an important discovery.

"Hmm. I see." I finished our conversation by using Heart Realm: "I am done. Hold the article you 'lost' and go home. Forget all we discussed here."

Melania did exactly as I ordered, and she left as if we'd never spoken at all.

"I assume you heard her, Tommy?" I said in the direction of a seemingly vacant corner.

Tommy emerged from thin air. "Yes, absolutely."

"There were no records of a sudden influx of children over at House Slade, correct?"

"Mm-hmm. You don't think...?"

"I do. If the children haven't been seen in his residence, it's likely he is selling them to the Celden Republic."

"And you think he might be holding them in the basement until they get passed off to Celden?"

"Yes. He is most likely trading them for money and rubies."

"What a vile man," Tommy grumbled.

"Very. Investigating Celden and Étoile is now a higher priority."

"All right. I've got several men snooping around Celden. I'll give them the update as soon as possible."

"Please do."

Tommy disappeared again, and I returned to my private quarters.

"Welcome back, Your Majesty!"

Alicia's presence alleviated my anxiety, finally allowing me to relax. With a deep breath, I eagerly sank into my sofa.

"Thank you for helping me today, Alicia."

"I'm just happy it went without incident. It seems the ladies were better behaved this time." "You noticed that as well?" I asked.

"It's heartening to see them start to understand how wonderful you are!"

Her praise brought a smile to my face. "Well, I had no intention of getting into any fights today."

Alicia tilted her head to the side, puzzled.

"Never mind. Say, could you get me something sweet? I haven't eaten since the party started."

"Yes, Your Majesty! I'll prepare something right away!"

"Thank you."

I battled the dizziness that tried to take hold of me by focusing my attention on Alicia's steadfast smile. That smile hadn't changed, not even after she lost her memories.

I was worried that my physical state was deteriorating. I'd barely used my magic today, but I could no longer stand up. My mana veins were collapsing, and my condition would only worsen the more I used my magic. There was no hope of recovery.

Even so, I could not afford to stop using my magic. I needed it to exact my revenge. *Please, dear body, hold on a while longer. Once I've finished, do as you will—just grant me a little more time.* I took a few more deep breaths, begging my body to persevere.

Some time after taking a break to regain my faculties, I descended a hidden staircase to a sealed room. On the way there, I grew lightheaded again, which forced me to steady myself against a wall. I stumbled a little, praying the pain would stop soon. When it eventually passed, I stood up and walked toward the door.

Opening it revealed a bed in the center of the room, where Wilhelm slept. After making a show of stabbing him at the coronation, I'd hidden him away here, sending him into deep slumber by the power of the Sacred Swords. All this time, Alicia had made sure this room stayed spotless.

I gazed at him from his bedside. "It appears Lord Slade is selling innocent children to other nations like livestock, and both Weston and Beckford are guilty of abetting his crime," I said. "How vile of them to treat innocent civilians so callously! I'm surprised the citizens haven't revolted. Perhaps it's due to my presence on the throne."

I recounted the recent developments to him, silent and slumbering as he was. This was a daily routine of mine.

"Tommy and Gilbert have done very well. I doubt my revenge plot would be going as smoothly as it has without their help. I'm thrilled to see the growth of the men serving under them too. Just recently, they were able to push a new reform through without difficulty. I thought it was due to Gilbert taking matters into his own hands, but it was actually his men taking the initiative in negotiations. The days when they threw their own ideas into the trash seem like a distant memory."

I wrapped my hand around his.

"Oh, Wilhelm, when can I wake you from your slumber?"

I felt neither cold nor warmth from his skin. This was proof that the Sacred Swords had stopped the flow of time in his body. With each year that passed, the difference in our ages and appearances would grow more and more apparent. I hated that more than anything, but I could not wake him. Not now. I had to destroy the Great Five first. To wake him now would render all my effort meaningless. He, as heir to House Radford, would become my political equal. As long as those who would take advantage of his bloodline remained, I could not wake him, regardless of how much I wanted it.

"I will return," I told him.

Today, like every day that came before it, I did not remove the sword that still pierced him. I wanted to so very badly. I looked out the window and saw a

stormy sky; the weather matched the mood of my soul.

"I've been waiting for you, Godfrey," I said.

The man who entered the room was the palace's head mage, Godfrey. He'd been checking up on my condition since the first time I fainted from using the Sacred Swords.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Your Majesty."

I used Heart Realm to compel Godfrey: "Examine me."

He followed my orders, taking my wrists into his hands and letting his magic flow into me.

"So, how am I?"

"You need treatment immediately," Godfrey said. His answer came with no trepidation, reverberating through the otherwise silent room. The look he gave me was deathly serious; I found it oddly amusing. I chuckled.

"That simply isn't happening," I said.

"You're near your limit. The damaged mana veins are causing your magic to run rampant through your entire body. It's tearing you to pieces."

Freesia, who had been sitting at my side, yelped as she stared at me. Surely it was her concern for me and not some fear of Godfrey that made her respond so.

"Keep your voice down," I told Freesia. "Now, Godfrey, will treatment actually improve my health?"

"Well..." He lowered his gaze. What little I could see of his face displayed a deep frustration.

"Unfortunately, there are a great many things I need to accomplish. If such treatments will not ultimately change my fate, then I'd rather not waste what time I have left."

"But...Your Majesty, with treatment, we could prolong your life span! Please reconsider!"

"No amount of consideration on my part will change my answer. That said, are there any medicines I can take?"

"Yes, this one," Godfrey said, pointing. "Please be aware that it will not cure what ails you. It merely treats the symptoms, not the cause of them."

"I understand. Thank you," I said. Then, I spoke using Heart Realm: "Godfrey and Freesia, forget what you've learned of my health. Godfrey, you will supply me with this medicine in consistent doses when called to my office."

Their eyes lost all color and substance as I wielded my magic. They returned to normal with a single clap of my hands.

"Thank you for your report regarding the training of the palace mages, Godfrey. It was quite the interesting subject. I hope to hear from you again soon," I said.

"It was my pleasure, my queen," Godfrey replied, accepting my thanks without question. "May I request another look at your Sacred Swords?"

"Again?"

"Please, I beg you."

I summoned them at his request, and his eyes glittered as the blades floated in the air.

"Ahh, they're so beautiful! Stay as you are, Your Majesty, I'm going to sketch them." Godfrey pulled out a piece of paper from his robe and began furiously scribbling. "You can practically feel the magic dripping from them when you're this close! Oh, how wondrous!"

His face showed utter rapture, yet his hands never stopped moving. That was an impressive feat. If I didn't know any better, I'd consider him a suspicious fellow.

Eventually, he put the paper away and sat back down, seemingly satisfied.

"Thank you so very much, my queen. Your magic is as brilliant as ever. Please excuse me."

He then ran off like a gust of wind.

Freesia watched him go, muttering, "Is Godfrey always like this?"

"Yes. Have you not seen him get like that before?"

"No. I only know you talk with him about the goings-on of the palace mages."

That was, of course, a false memory I'd planted with Heart Realm. I always called Freesia here to assist Godfrey with examining my mana veins. I couldn't have asked Alicia to help, as my magic did not work on her. She had been unable to properly use her magic since the day she nearly died from it, but she still retained enough magic to counteract mine. Also, I wouldn't be able to hide the dire state of my body from her if she was involved. I could not have her present when Godfrey examined me.

"I see. It's always quite the show when he and Alicia go at it," I said. "Alicia will grab hold of him and say, 'Her Majesty is tired from her duties, so come back another time!' and he will respond, 'Nothing will stop my passion for brilliant magic!' as he attempts to break free and run to me. A comedic scene every time."

Freesia sucked in a breath. "I apologize for Godfrey's misbehavior."

"It's fine. He and Alicia make an amusing duo. I've had fun watching them."

"Really? Hmm." Freesia paused, then said, "Godfrey is the head mage, isn't he?"

"Not as majestic a man as his title would entail, is he?" I joked.

Freesia waved her hands a bit, clearly flustered. "I wouldn't go that far..."

"Relax. You and I are the only people in this room, Freesia. I think his crazed love for magic is precisely why he became head mage at such a young age."

"Ah, that makes sense. It may be rude of me to point this out, but Master

Godfrey tends to quiver where he stands whenever someone mentions your coronation."

"He nearly screamed when he saw the five Sacred Swords shining in unison," I said, remembering. At the time, I thought it was out of fear. I was shocked when he begged me to show him the swords again—so much so that I was momentarily rooted to the spot in stunned silence. He never got tired of seeing the Sacred Swords, even finding time to request their presence on days when, by all accounts, he should have been quite busy.

"So he did..." Freesia bobbed her head, but her eyes indicated her mind was elsewhere. She probably had other thoughts regarding Godfrey, but they weren't easily discernible from her expression. She was far better at hiding her true thoughts than the ladies of the Great Five.

"Is something the matter?" she asked, noticing my gaze on her.

"Apologies, I'm a bit tired. Mind if I have some time to myself?"

"Of course, Your Majesty."

After Freesia left, I made my way back to the hidden room.

I had a wicked, terrible nightmare.

"She's disgusting."

"Oh, I feel sorry for the king."

"Don't mind me, I've got to run!"

"Why was she even born?"

"The sooner she's gone, the better."

The horrific thoughts of others flooded into me, thoughts I'd heard many, many times. Relentless, horrifying thoughts. I figured I'd be accustomed to hearing them by now.

I always told myself this was inevitable. I was just happy that I never heard

such thoughts from my parents—but that was small comfort. Just because I was used to hearing them didn't mean the cruel thoughts of others weren't hurtful. I never wanted this kind of magic.

I wish I didn't have to hurt anyone.

Deep within the darkness of my nightmare, a younger version of me cried and cried. She was covered in wounds, in blood, in sorrow.

Suddenly, the scene changed. It was a scene I'd never witnessed before: a young Alicia staring blankly ahead as she stood in a pool of blood. Several corpses lay around her within the crimson lake. *Ahh, I get it now*. This was an image of the time her magic ran rampant. It must have been so difficult for her, so painful. She dropped her face into her bloody hands and sobbed.

The imagery shifted once again, showing another unfamiliar scene. A young man, persecuted by his family for wielding magic. A young girl, bullied for her magical aptitude. All of them crying, all of them cursed. Mages cursed themselves while people without magic condemned them. All the magical children hoped from the bottom of their hearts that they would never have to hurt anyone.

What a dreadful nightmare. This was a cold, heartless world, far from the ideal kingdom I desperately wanted to provide for my people. It made my heart ache terribly.

I was embroiled in troubling nightmares until sleep eventually faded to reality. I rose from my bed, poured a glass of water, and took the medicine Godfrey had prescribed. My body felt a bit better after that.

Tommy appeared from seemingly nowhere. "Queen Luxeria?"

"Yes, Tommy?"

"We've finished our reconnaissance regarding the whereabouts of the missing children, and I've come to give my report."

"That didn't take long."

"All due to your foresight in sending so many agents to Celden," Tommy said. "We gave you a report regarding their research facility before, remember?"

"Ah, yes, a particularly unpleasant one to hear. A kind of research that strips mages of all rights and respect. Revolting."

I stopped there, but Tommy was sharp and knew what I was getting at. With a dark expression on his face, he picked up where I left off. "Indeed. And the subjects of their experiments are none other than the kidnapped children of Ausgrid."

Crash! The glass I'd been holding fell to the floor.

Alerted by the sound, the guards stationed outside my room rushed in. "What's going on?!"

The moment they saw me, their worries eased. My anger had grown so explosive, I'd summoned the Sacred Swords without realizing.

Seeing them brought me back down to reality a bit. "It's nothing. Please leave," I said. "Howard and Arthur, forget what you saw here. You did not hear the glass break. You will forget everything once you leave this room."

Their eyes turned vacant from my magic before they left the room.

"Sorry. I couldn't contain my anger." I took a deep breath and sat back down onto my sofa. "They're directly conspiring with enemy nations. Houses Slade and Beckford are finished."

"Those countries aren't officially Ausgrid's enemies," Tommy said.

"That means nothing. The fact remains that Beckford and Slade are selling their own citizens into slavery—to a nation with a sickening ideology toward magic."

"Lord Slade isn't selling civilians from his own region. He's the middleman. Beckford procures the children, Weston sends them off, and Slade receives them and brings them to an agreed-upon location for sale."

"Regardless, it appears the culmination of my revenge will arrive sooner than anticipated."

"Right you are. We won't need brute force or devilish trickery. We've simply got to wait it out—they're up to stuff so nasty that we'll have just cause to wipe them out."

"Agreed, Tommy. This will work. I had intended to squeeze them dry over time, but now we can catch them all at once. And when we do, they're done for."

Tommy hummed his agreement.

"I'm sure you already figured this out," I said, "but to be clear, you need to call off all of your agents currently in covert operations and get them working on this case right away."

"I'm on it, Your Majesty."

"Also, I wish to see Commander Aaron. Privately."

"I'll see to it."

Rain began to fall outside once again, the patter of droplets echoing through the otherwise silent room for hours on end.

Clack, clack.

Alicia descended to the hidden room. Once inside, she immediately began to tidy up—an important task handed to her directly by the queen. As she cleaned, she paused and looked at Wilhelm.

"Just how long do you intend to keep sleeping?"

She did not have a high opinion of the man; in her mind, all he did was haunt her queen. Wilhelm's marriage to Luxeria was a purely political arrangement. Even if Luxeria had feelings for him, it was not a marriage of love. They would never truly be together, and Alicia understood that.

She also knew Wilhelm had been unfaithful and sought out other women. The queen may have laughed it off, but he must have hurt her deeply. Even if there was an ulterior motive to his public philandering, Alicia's loyalty to the queen left her incapable of sympathizing with him.

"The longer he sleeps here, the more he burdens her," Alicia murmured. "And yet..."

Alicia coughed. The Sacred Swords consumed vast amounts of magic when in use, and the one that pierced him right now was the Sacred Sword of Love. It held the power to protect those who loved its wielder or whom the wielder loved. That was why Wilhelm merely slept even while impaled on the blade. Luxeria must have been exerting tremendous amounts of magical energy at all times to keep the sword in use. It had to be an immense drain on her.

"Huh? Wait, why do I know this?" Alicia said. Her vision grew hazy, and she pressed her hands against her brow. Right, she had heard this before. Luxeria had once explained the power of the Sacred Sword of Love.

But why did she know that continuing to use the sword required so much magic? She could tell just by looking at Wilhelm—a threadlike conduit connected him and Luxeria, channeling magic from her body into his.

Something akin to what's inside me, Alicia thought. Wait, what's inside of me?

Those five beautiful, horrifying blades must be eating away at Luxeria.

A strange image flashed through Alicia's mind. Luxeria had fallen over, a maelstrom of power whirling above her. Luxeria toiled away, blood pouring everywhere as she kept exerting more and more effort. That horrifying *thing* was hurting her, killing her.

Wh-what is this?

More and more images that Alicia shouldn't be able to see flashed in her mind. Racked with pain, she tumbled to the floor. Even as the agony rattled Alicia's mind, the Luxeria she saw in her head whispered, "Don't cry."

Luxeria tried to comfort her even when *she* was tearful and in pain. *Forget* about me! Alicia thought, I want to protect you. I don't want you to be sad. Why can't I help you? What am I forgetting?

These thoughts gripped Alicia as the scenes flashed through her head. Overwhelmed, she lost consciousness.

I was able to meet with Commander Aaron on short notice.

"It's been a while since we last met outside of official business, Aaron."

Unlike yesterday, today's skies were crystal clear. I sat on the terrace, enjoying Alicia's tea and cake. Apparently, she had fainted in the secret room yesterday. I'd told her to rest, but she continued to serve me.

Aaron hovered behind me like one of my guards. "Indeed," he said. "I am glad to hear you haven't forgotten about me."

I didn't look back at him, but I could hear the smile in his voice. I followed suit with my own grin. "Don't be silly. One would never forget someone as hardworking as you. And it is this hardworking man whose help I seek."

The air around us changed in an instant, as if Aaron had drawn a sword and was ready to strike. My grin only grew wider.

"Anything you wish, Your Majesty."

"Give me ten of your best men. I'd like them to escort me out of the capital a week from now."

"Where to, exactly?"

"Oh, just to appreciate a show being put on by some people we need to find."

"Pardon?"

I laughed at his befuddled response. "To be more precise, we will be sneaking around a bit. Once we've enjoyed the show, we'll be capturing a few people. We will go for a nice little stroll, but one where we remain inconspicuous. Our

targets are rather belligerent, which is why I'd like ten of your most skilled fighters. Can you provide them?"

"Certainly, but I must ask why you are putting yourself in harm's way, Your Majesty."

"I desire a bit of sightseeing. The reviews of this show have been quite favorable, you see."

"I-I'm afraid I don't follow," Aaron spluttered.

His confused gaze bore into me from behind, and I squared my shoulders. "I'm joking...sort of. This show has piqued my curiosity, you see. How many attendees will show up? How many have become pawns of the Great Five? I may even wish to say a few words at the venue. Is that not reason enough?"

"Then why not see the show after we've captured the people you're targeting?"

"I wish to have this situation dealt with as discreetly and quickly as possible. Having me on the prospective battlefield to give orders in person would be prudent."

"Very well," Aaron acquiesced. "I will send ten of my finest warriors to your aid."

"Thank you. If possible, I'd like you to pick them from the team that marched on House Radford."

"Yes, I planned to do that from the start. If discretion is crucial in this situation, then those men would be best suited for such work."

"Excellent." I held back a sinister smile as I savored my tea. "You have my gratitude for sparing the time to see me. It would be lovely if you'd join me for a training session sometime."

"Of course. But may I make a request, Your Majesty?"

I nodded for him to continue.

"We, the Kingdom's Army, are the sword and shield of the queen. Should you require protection... No, should you require *any* service of us, we will do what we can to fulfill it. What I mean to say is..."

He paused for a moment. Wondering what he meant to say, I turned around and made to rise from my seat.

"You need not *ask* things of us, my queen. We are here to receive your orders. From the beginning, and until the very end, we will serve you. Never forget that."

He punctuated this declaration with a warm smile. As smiles went, his was stunning.

"Sorry, Your Majesty, I may have said too much. You seemed like you were about to rush into the unknown—I felt I had to tell you."

"No need to apologize. And I value you, Aaron. If I hadn't made that clear to you before, then that is my mistake. I shall take your words to heart."

He had given me his selfless, honest advice. And because of his honesty, I could trust him.

Once our conversation was complete, the commander and I parted ways.

I walked through the bustling streets of the capital. All manner of services, goods, and people ended up here in Ausgrid's central city. Business had died down for a bit after the coronation, but as time passed, the capital slowly regained its former glory; now its streets buzzed with activity once more.

"Ahh, how wonderful," I said as I took in the view. This was only the second time I'd walked the city. The last was when I went to save Alicia. Having visited on so few occasions, I didn't know the capital's layout all too well.

"Is something the matter, Queen Luxeria?" Tommy asked me.

"A town with nobody walking through it is a bad omen," I said. "To see so many people out and about in my city fills me with joy. It's magnificent."

Tommy grinned. "Gotcha."

"Oh! What sort of shop is this?!" I exclaimed. "Or that?!"

The reality of how sheltered my life had been dawned on me. Until now, the world outside the palace was only something I'd read about. Those stories told tales of people living life to the fullest. However, the people who lived here were no work of fiction. A nostalgic warmth filled my heart. It felt as if I was peering into the world I'd left behind on the day I lost everything.

"It's time, Your Majesty," Tommy said, his smile now forced.

It seemed I'd spent more time gawking at the outside world than I'd realized. I apologized to Tommy for my overexcitement as we made our way to the show. My mood tempered the closer we got to the tent. It was big and loud and vibrant, exactly as you'd expect from a circus.

"Tommy, station two men at each exit. Do not allow any guilty party to escape. The rest of the men will join me inside."

Tommy confirmed my orders before we made our move. Even if our ten soldiers were in plain clothes, I couldn't walk around with them and escape everyone's notice. I had them stand in wait in a few nearby locations, and Tommy relayed my orders to them using Oscillation. His magic could practically send his voice from one end of the nation to the other. After his men set about their tasks, we entered the enormous tent.

A large stage stood in the center of the tent, circular in design and surrounded by wooden benches. We picked ordinary seats in the audience, sat down, and waited. Eventually, a bell rang, signaling the start of the show.

As I'd anticipated, the show was wondrous. One act that particularly caught my eye was a girl walking a tightrope. The sight of her walking among the stars was marvelous, even if it was bolstered by magic. The other acts—such as the sword dance performed by a beautiful young woman or the comedic skit put on by a troupe of clowns—employed a perfect blend of practical techniques and

magical illusions. The tent began to empty out as the show ended, the customers satisfied with their time spent at the circus. The soldiers accompanying me blended in with the crowds excusing themselves from the tent, locking down the exits.

A man who looked to be part of Étoile approached me. "Excuse me, dear customer. I'm sorry, but today's show is over."

"Ahh, sorry. The show was so wonderful, and I was so moved."

"An honor to hear," the man said.

"Might I request an audience with the cast? I'd love to communicate my appreciation directly."

"Unfortunately, everyone's busy wrapping things up in the back."

"Oh, what a shame. But I'm not going to give in, so listen carefully," I told him. "Bring all members of Étoile to the stage."

The man's eyes went hollow at my magic command, but only for an instant. His friendly smile sprang back immediately after.

"Right, you want to see everyone?" he asked.

"Yes, please." I smiled at him as he turned to bring out the cast of the circus.

As he left, a voice rang in my ears: "Quite the handy power you've got, my queen." It was Tommy, who stood some distance away. He had used his Oscillation magic to project his voice to me.

"As is yours, Tommy," I murmured under my breath. "Is the whole tent under your spell?"

"Yeah. Nobody outside will hear a thing," he promised. He could hear me just fine, given his prompt response.

"Good work. Stay where you are," I instructed.

"Yes, my queen."

As my conversation with Tommy ended, the members of Étoile gathered

onstage. The man I'd compelled to drag them out here was rather forceful, and the performers were very unhappy about it.

"Mind telling me what the hell we're doing out here? What do you need everyone in one spot for, anyway?" one performer asked.

The man in charge did not answer. He was wholly focused on the command I'd given him with Heart Realm.

"Queen Luxeria, that's all of them," I heard Tommy say.

"Right."

Using Tommy's words as a signal, I clapped. It was a shocking display, given their confusion. One by one, they turned toward me.

"I'm sorry, miss, but our show is over for the day."

"Oh, I'm aware. It was a grand performance, and I wished to convey my admiration."

Most of them were perturbed, but there was one who thought I was genuine, at least. "Why, thank you."

"Please, I want to know—what kind of training do you usually do?" I asked.

Panic began to show on the faces of the circus troupe.

"What must one practice to skillfully kidnap innocent children?" I demanded.

Those words were the last straw. They held their breath and stepped into formation. The first to make a move was the sword dancer, who swung her hand over her head and sent several blades flying at me. She must have been a mage.

"Anita!" someone yelled.

"Get out of here, now!" the sword dancer screamed. She sounded so serious, so desperate.

I couldn't help but laugh. "Ahh, what a pity."

The girl named Anita stared directly at me, shock plain on her face.

Understandable, considering I hadn't received a single scratch from her onslaught. The soldiers accompanying me had deflected every last blade.

"Everyone onstage, stay still. You will remain cognizant as I speak."

"Wh-what the hell?! Why can't I move?!"

I made sure they kept their awareness so they could further suffer the effects of my magic. The light in their eyes never vanished, but they were frozen all the same.

"Now, tell me: What are talented performers like you doing abducting children?" Step by step, I approached the stage. "Without my mercy, there is no escape for any of you. So tell me the truth, or suffer the consequences."

They all remained silent. Some sort of immense willpower allayed their fear. I summoned one of the Sacred Swords, grabbed a nearby man, and held the blade to his neck.

"You, girl. Answer me, or I will kill this man."

"Ignore her, Eumith! Don't worry about me!" the man yelled, attempting to choose valor over his own life. The girl he'd called Eumith looked at us both, torn between her fury and fear. I tightened my grip on the hilt to dispel her doubts.

"Eek!"

Many of them screamed, but none of them would speak. *Quite the determination they have,* I thought with a sigh. I withdrew my blade and gave up on scaring them into divulging the truth.

"Did you all truly need the money that badly?" I asked. They glared at me as I coldly accused them of having been bested by their greed. "Is it not money? I see no other reason a successful entertainment venture such as this would feel the need to kidnap innocents."

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Anita snapped.

"Of course I don't. Why else would I be asking?" I said. "Honestly, the reasoning behind your crimes is not that important to me. No amount of strikes from my sword would calm the rage I feel when I think of those suffering children."

I glowered at them as I vented my anger. The venomous lashings made them flinch.

"Despite that, I still wish to know: Why have you captured children born with magic? What reason could you possibly have to sell them as lab rats to the Celden Republic? Are you not a band of mages yourselves?"

"Th-the Celden Republic?" one man echoed, visibly confused.

His response surprised me. This was a possibility that I had considered but desperately wished wasn't the case. *Don't tell me...*

"You can't seriously claim you didn't know. The children you captured have all been sent to the Celden Republic, stripped of their rights, and tortured in cruel experiments!"

"You're lying!"

My response was as frigid as ever: "I have not told a single lie."

"You're lying! You *have* to be lying! Master Karl said we were saving those kids!"

Karl was the right-hand man of Lord Beckford. Tommy's reports painted him as the de facto leader of the house. I licked my lips upon hearing such an important name connected with the crime. He must have deceived these people as part of his scheme. What a horrible man!

"I do not know what Karl is thinking, but surely he understands how vile this trade is."

"Don't let her fool you, Ben! She's probably lying!"

"Do not make me repeat myself. I do not speak falsehoods."

All five Sacred Swords materialized around me, floating in midair. Time seemed to stop for a moment as their eyes went wide in disbelief. The sight of them trembling made me pause, and their thoughts crept into my mind:

"No way!"

"Just how much magic is in those swords?!"

"Could those five swords be...?"

I mustered a dry laugh. It was time to push them even further.

"I am Luxeria von Ausgrid, queen of the Federal Kingdom of Ausgrid. As proof, I present the Sacred Swords."

They gaped in awe, quaking in fear.

"Were I to use the Sacred Swords, I could compel you *all* to answer me whether you want to or not. The reason I haven't forced you is that I wish to hear it in your own words. I swear upon the Sacred Swords that I have not told a single lie to any of you." I held the Sacred Sword of Sincerity in hand and kissed the hilt. "Now, tell me, please: Why do you support the harming of my citizens?"

Still, none of them answered me. The horrible reality I'd thrust upon them caused them to despair and avert their eyes.



"No... What have we done? Why...?" Eumith muttered, her words echoing in the now-gloomy atmosphere of the tent. Tears poured down her face.

"Let me ask you once again," I insisted. "Why did you do this?"

Through her tears, Eumith was the one to answer me. "T-to save the children! That's what he told us we were doing. He said we were saving the children!"

"Saving them, you say?"

Eumith sobbed so forcefully that she could no longer speak coherently. The young man they called Ben spoke in her stead: "Queen Luxeria, surely you've noticed that all of us are mages. We didn't come to perform in this tent for the fun of it. Some of us were disowned by our families. Eumith was abused for her gift, and Anita—"

"My magic ran rampant, which made villagers cast out my entire family," Anita said. "Ultimately, this led to the death of my parents."

"Everyone here has a similar story to tell," Ben told me. "We founded Étoile so we could exist in peace, even though we all have magic. *Especially* because we have magic." His words were sincere and true. "Once we got our business set up, we traveled from town to town, prioritizing the ones that lacked entertainment facilities. It led us to a lot of places out in the countryside."

As though in answer, the other troupe members' hearts cried out in agony. Their lamentations seeped into my mind.

"We saw the same old story in every one of those towns. Kids who were mistreated like we were," Ben went on. "At first, we just recruited them into the troupe, but we hit capacity fast. We couldn't just ignore their plight..."

"Which is when Karl came into play, I assume," I said.

"He told us he'd save them! He said he'd teach them how to control their magic, how to live a normal life! He promised it all!"

The researchers in Celden probably *did* teach these children how to control their magic. *Though not in any humane fashion, certainly...*

"Why did you trust him with the children?" I asked.

"Because he said he was a servant of House Beckford..."

I did not blame them for trusting a nobleman. After all, it was the royal family that appointed the Great Five to their positions. Nevertheless, the performers deserved scorn for trusting him so blindly and for putting themselves and all those children in danger.

"To clarify...you knew nothing, and you merely wanted to help the children?"

They all nodded tentatively in unison.

I sighed. "You've caused quite a mess."

"What?!"

"Is this not the case? At the end of the day, it is your fault that these children are suffering."

"Well, we didn't-"

"You didn't know? Do you think that's a good enough excuse? If you wanted to save those children, you should've looked after them from the beginning. This half-baked approach you've chosen—shuffling them off to some stranger—has only hurt them in the end."

"So should we have just ignored them?!"

"Given the result of your actions, that may have been the better choice."

"No!"

"Are you listening to me? You should've taken care of them yourselves. Why did you hand them over? Why were you so careless? I will admit that your resolve is impressive, but your decisions have consequences. No children were saved. Not a single one."

Anita shot to her feet, thoroughly startling me. *How is she moving? Heart Realm is still active!* Yet even as my magic flowed, she took tiny, shaky steps toward me.

"I-I know asking this is unbelievably selfish, but can you save the children, Queen Luxeria?" Tears pouring down her face, she kneeled before me and shouted, "Please! Those children deserve safety! They deserve love!"

"Do you intend to have another party take them in the end?" I asked.

"No! I will join your mission, Queen Luxeria, even if you deny me. And if you desire my assistance, I will do anything! Until those children are safe again, I won't take my eyes off you—not for a second!"

Her eyes were filled with tears of sorrow and frustration; her voice echoed through the tent. Desperation fueled her spirit—so much so that it overwhelmed me.

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"I see. Then by all means, join me," I said.
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"Wait! I'll come with her!"

"Me too!"

One by one, more members of the troupe spoke up. In the end, they all offered to help me.

"I'm afraid I cannot have such a large group of people with me at all times," I said. "Anita will act as your representative. In exchange, I'd like the rest of you to be my eyes and ears."

"And what is it you want us to do?" Eumith asked cautiously.

"If the request seems unreasonable, you may reject it. I mostly wish to hear detailed accounts of your previous meetings with Karl and for you to follow my orders when you see him next. There may also be requests to send me reports regarding the state of the towns your troupe visits."

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"Okay."
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"Understood."

That settled, I called out, "Tommy?"

Tommy appeared at my side not a second later. "Right here, Your Majesty."

"I leave these people to you. Make sure they say nothing regarding Karl to anyone else."

"Will do," he replied.

"I will be leaving now. Anita, gather your belongings if you wish to accompany me. I will wait for you outside."

"Okay. I'll get ready right away."

Tommy and I left the tent along with our soldiers. As we walked, I gave Tommy additional orders. "Tell your men stationed at the exits that our mission was a success thanks to their help. I will be sure to convey my thanks directly later. Unfortunately, I must ask that they keep their posts. We cannot trust the troupe just yet."

"They can handle it. I figured a few extra might come in handy, so I have them standing by a little ways from here."

"Excellent. We shall wait here until Anita and your replacements arrive."

"Got it." Tommy paused, then asked a brazen question: "I assume you didn't use your magic to make them confess because you wanted to get them on our side, right?"

I looked around to see if anyone was listening.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm using my magic to ensure only the two of us can hear each other right now."

It was safe to speak, then. "To be honest, I hadn't expected things to go so smoothly."

"Really? I figured you would've at least considered it as a possibility."

"I did want their help in pinning down Karl, since it's the least they can do to make up for their transgressions. But while my magic can compel people to perform actions, it's difficult to ensure full and unconditional cooperation. Hence why I avoided using it during the questioning phase."

"How kind of you," Tommy said dryly. "As for their atonement, wouldn't that be saving the children?"

"It would. But I doubt they could pull that off, so I don't expect too much from them. I thought perhaps I could win over their cooperation. I never dreamed they'd prostrate themselves before me as they have."

"They've got their own pride, that's for sure."

"Perhaps."

"At any rate, how are we going to punish Étoile? I sympathize with them, sure, but they've gone too far. While most of the children they captured were in dire straits, as they described, there were still a few who could have lived a normal life."

"It is regrettable that the magical children of our kingdom have lived such dreadfully unfortunate lives," I admitted. "Though I will say, it seemed a few of those troupe members were overreacting a bit."

"Definitely," Tommy agreed. "Hmm. Maybe I'm overthinking their punishment. Getting run ragged by you will probably be punishment enough."

"How rude," I chided him.

Tommy shrugged. He probably knew too many examples of my harsh deeds to name.

"You have the right idea, though. I will make them work for me," I said.

"Human labor is always a valuable resource, and I will not allow them to escape their duty through death. And once we've saved those young mages, I will ensure that Étoile never puts another child in danger again."

"I suppose that works. I'm sure you'll get good use out of them."

"Hopefully."

Just as we wrapped up our talk, Anita and a soldier I'd stationed within the tent emerged.

"Let us return to the palace."

Thus ended my first casual stroll around the capital.

I was buried in paperwork the next day, having shirked those duties the day before. Mountains of reports and documents awaited my approval.

"How is the transfer of some of my authority to the ministries coming along?" I asked Gilbert.

"We've just received a report from the Ministry of Justice," he replied.

"They've set things up on their end. You will have to relinquish decision-making to the various ministries, but you'll have the final say in their approval. The finer details will be sent in another report to you tomorrow, my queen."

I chatted with Gilbert as I signed document after document. Eventually, I finished signing them all.

"I hear Lord Slade has already run back to his region," Gilbert said. "Awfully quick of him, for once."

Memories of the meeting I had with him came back to me. It was tradition among the Great Five to return to their own lands after greeting the royal family.

"Indeed. Perhaps he was homesick? Or does he simply wish to scurry back to his territory to keep his wrongdoings under wraps? It must be the latter." I pulled out one specific document from the stack in front of me. "The Radfords' region yielded more crops this year, yet Beckford's region has produced less. Should we be investigating the difference?"

"We should. The problem seems to stem from the Beckfords' tax rate. It's high enough that some farmers were probably forced to sell their land just to survive."

"Right, the regions all have different tax rates set by the Great Five..."

"Correct. As it stands, the marquesses hold absolute authority over their

regions. The royal palace currently lacks the means to override decisions regarding the governance of their lands."

"We'll need to fix that."

"It will be easily resolved once we have direct control over the other regions like we do with House Radford."

"All the more reason to finalize this situation as soon as possible."

"I do have something to report regarding regional governance," Gilbert told me, changing tack. "It would appear that most of the farmers who sold their land have left the Beckford region for Radford's. The more modest taxation rate must have played a part in their decision."

"The greater culprit is still the negligence of the Great Five," I said. "House Beckford will likely feel the need to increase taxes further if enough people leave their region."

"But were the Beckfords to do so, then more citizens would flee his region, and he'd have to increase the taxes again. It would spiral out of control."

"If Tommy's report on him is accurate, Lord Beckford couldn't possibly care about the citizens of his land less than he currently does."

"I've heard he has quite the talented assistant in Karl," Gilbert noted.

The mention of Karl's name caused Anita, who was stationed at my side, to flinch.

"Surely he'd leave a sinking ship at a moment's notice," he continued.

"Someone as crafty as him likely has money set aside for that very purpose.

Your Majesty's concern is quite justified."

"We can't let him get away! He needs to be behind bars, now!" Anita shouted, no longer able to hold herself back.

"Anita, your anger is completely understandable," I said, "but I need you to calm down." She could not hide her frustration even after I told her to steel herself. "Answer me this, then: What is most important to you right now?"

"Rescuing the children," Anita replied.

"Precisely. And we must eliminate the cause of this evil so that it may never repeat."

"And that's why we need to catch Karl!"

"Karl is merely a pawn in a greater scheme. Behind him are the shadows of Houses Beckford, Slade, and Weston. We'll put ourselves in a dangerous position if we focus too much on Karl. While we are distracted dealing with him, the marquesses could strike all at once."

"Oh..."

"Trust me, I want nothing more than to save the children right away," I said. "The ones responsible for this must pay. But the method we choose is of the utmost importance. We need a plan that ensures the culprits won't escape—one that incurs as few casualties as possible, especially among the children. In order to do that, I need everyone to do what they can to gather proof of their sins."

"I-I see," Anita relented. "I get it now."

Anita's assignment was a rather complicated one. Officially, she served under Gilbert. In reality, she was meant to be Tommy's assistant. I'd intended for her to focus entirely on the serial kidnappings with Tommy, but his duties often sent him outside the kingdom's borders. Were Anita to accompany him, she would no longer be able to assist me directly.

To compromise, Anita stayed with me to act as Gilbert's messenger and aide during the day, then helped me sort reports from Tommy at night. I had no ulterior motive for assigning so much work to her—it simply worked out that way.

"I shall take my leave, Your Majesty," Gilbert said.

Once he was gone, I went back to my own work.

Anita spoke up shortly after. "Um, Queen Luxeria?" she ventured, arranging

documents in the corner of the room.

"Yes?"

"How long will I be working for?"

"For today? That will be all. But if there's more you'd like to accomplish, you may stay here."

"So, uh, I can stay if there are other things I want to do?"

"Correct. Right now, I'm writing instruction manuals for everyone."

"What's an instruction manual?" she asked.

Pen in hand, I kept writing as I spoke. "They are books detailing tasks that can be done when I am absent."

Anita sighed. "Do you need to finish those today? Shouldn't you get some rest?"

"Oh, I suppose this is the only part of the day when you'd have free time. You may sleep if you wish."

"But then I won't be able to keep watch over you..."

"You say that, but didn't you take a nap yesterday?" I remarked.

"Well...yes, but..."

"Then don't worry. I won't force you to watch me every waking moment."

"Are you always like this, Queen Luxeria?"

"Always like what?"

"You just work, work, work. Every day, you toil into the late hours of the night. Just how hard are you pushing yourself?"

"I don't have time."

"You don't have what?"

Oh. I said something I shouldn't have.

I stumbled for an explanation. "I have to worry about the kidnapped children on top of all my other duties, yes? So I have no time."

"O-oh. All right."

My words came across harsher than intended, but all was well if I was able to fool her.

Anita yawned. "I'm sorry, I can't stay awake any longer. I'm going to bed."

"Very well. See you tomorrow."

"Mm-hmm."

I took Godfrey's medicine after she left.

"Just a little more time..."

And so, alone in the quiet of my office, I went back to work.

"Today's tea is a Bellean blend," Alicia announced.

The tea she'd prepared was quite lovely. Its fresh aroma did wonders for my mood.

"And here are today's desserts," she added. "Chocolate cake and cucur mousse."

I sampled both dishes between sips. "My, how delicious," I said. "The sweetness pairs so well with the tea."

"Would you like some as well, Miss Anita?" Alicia asked, and Anita poked her head out from a pile of paperwork.

"Um, I'm okay. I've got all this work to do, you see..."

"All the more reason to take a break! Especially given your vitally important role in helping the queen. It's important to know when to focus on work and when to relax!" Alicia's smile was simply sublime. I couldn't resist smiling with her.

"Alicia's right. Have some tea and rest," I said.

"W-well, if you insist..."

Anita wasn't used to seeing me with my guard down around Alicia. Confusion was written all over her face.

When she tried the tea, however, her reaction was emphatic. "Oh, this is tasty!"

"It is, isn't it?" I purred. An almost motherly pride came over me as Alicia's efforts were praised.

While we enjoyed our tea, Head Mage Godfrey entered the room. "Greetings, Your Majesty."

"Good day, Master Godfrey! The queen is taking an important break right now, so please don't cause her any trouble. And *definitely* don't ask her to summon any Sacred Swords!" Alicia warned him with a sunny smile on her face, ready to take him down at a moment's notice.

"Are breaks not the best time to indulge in magic for one's own enjoyment?" Godfrey shot back.

Godfrey and Alicia would go at it for ages if I let them, so I said, "Sorry, Alicia, but I did call for him today."

"Oh, really? Then don't mind me," she replied. With that simple statement, she and Godfrey established a truce.

"By the way, I'd like to have a conversation with Anita and Godfrey alone. Is that all right with you?" I asked her.

"Of course. I'll go ahead and step out."

Godfrey seemed disappointed by her departure. "Aww, I wanted to speak with her a little longer."

"Because you see her as a research subject?"

"Absolutely! Her case is a truly fascinating one! She has magic, yet she cannot

use it. I've never heard of anyone suffering from such a condition. And you tell me she also suffers from amnesia? There may be a correlation between her memories and her magic... Or perhaps her magic was sealed in some manner during the period she cannot recall. Ahh! The possibilities are just so exciting!"

His eyes were full of wonder as he babbled. His theorizing brought me back to the memory of the day Alicia lost her memory—the day I saved her life. She had taken an attack meant for me. Mere moments before her death, I summoned the Sword of Eternity to tie her to this world.

Her amnesia and inability to use magic were most likely consequences of my using the Sacred Sword of Eternity, but I could not tell Godfrey that. If I did, he'd haul her off to his laboratory in an instant.

"She will not be a creature for your experiments," I told him. "Ever."

"I know, but I feel like I could glean something of her condition just by speaking with her!" he lamented. "Unfortunately, those opportunities are quite rare, and I'd rather not risk incurring your wrath, my queen."

He seemed a bit disappointed. I supposed it wouldn't do Alicia any harm to simply have a conversation with him.

"Now, on to the main order of business," I declared, snapping him out of his trance. "Godfrey, what do you think of the Celden Republic?"

"I'd rather not go near it, though I'm sure they'd deny me entry even if I wanted to go."

"We may end up going to war with them."

I informed Godfrey of the recent developments: Étoile's activities, the Great Five gathering magical children, Karl selling those children to Celden, and so forth. Even as I told him of the horrors, his expression did not change.

"As a fellow mage, it is only natural to feel animosity toward them. Whether the enemy is the Great Five or the Celden Republic, I will fight for you," Godfrey proclaimed.

"That is a relief to hear."

"I must admit that learning our own kingdom was directly harming its magical citizens has me rattled. And..." Godfrey paused for a moment, and I waited patiently for him to finish. "It fills me with profound sadness."

"Truly?"

"Yes. Perhaps it is too simple a word, but it was the first emotion I felt upon hearing your explanation," Godfrey said, forcing a smile.

"I see."

Godfrey tilted his head in response to my unclear expression. "What is it, my queen?"

"Nothing to worry about. Gather your most trusted men and prepare for the day we move."

"Understood."

After a bit of small talk, Godfrey left. Alicia returned soon after, collecting the teacups and dishes before exiting the room once again. I stayed behind, devoting myself to my work as Anita watched over me. It all went quite smoothly. Before I knew it, night had fallen. Somewhere in between, Alicia had come back.

While I rested, I called out, "Alicia?"

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"When is one most likely to become preoccupied with another person's words?"

"Preoccupied, you say? Hrm... I'd say it's when you sense something out of place in that person's statements."

"Out of place?"

"Yep! When someone tells a lie, or you tell *yourself* one, it's natural to notice words that don't seem like they fit."

"An interesting observation, Alicia. It is one thing to notice it in others, but noticing it when telling yourself a falsehood? Hm."

"Yeah. Humans are the kind of creatures that constantly lie to themselves."

Is that so? What have I been lying to myself about, then?

"I heard a man mention his *sadness* earlier today, and something about that just didn't feel right. I don't think he was lying, so why did it seem strange to me?" I mused.

"Your Majesty, I—"

Before Alicia could say more, a knock on the door interrupted her.

"Pardon me. I'm here to give a report."

With Alicia's statement put on hold, I welcomed my next visitor and returned to business.

Later on, Tommy appeared while I was up to my ears in paperwork.

"Queen Luxeria, might I have a moment?"

"Certainly. What is it?"

"Through a contact of ours at House Weston, we established a connection with Oscar Weston," Tommy told me.

"The heir spoke to you? For what purpose?" I asked.

"He apparently wishes to see you in an unofficial capacity."

"Curious timing. Could it be regarding Étoile? Or perhaps the Great Five?"

"You said you wanted to bring him over to our side, didn't you? Seems like it's already working out that way."

"We cannot be certain yet," I said. "But if he has taken our bait, then we have a duty to reel him in."

The day of our meeting had arrived. Gilbert, Anita, and a dozen armed escorts joined me. Oscar, meanwhile, was accompanied by only two servants.

"You have my sincerest gratitude for granting me an audience on such short notice, Your Majesty," Oscar said.

Gilbert was taken aback by the man's politeness—and so was I. The Ausgrids were enemies of the Great Five, or a nuisance to them, at least. They'd never been this straightforward with me, not even when feigning fealty to the crown.

"My, what proper manners you have," I said. "Now, then, let's get right to the point."

"Layfe Weston is involved with human trafficking," Oscar said.

"Telling on your father, are we? What proof do you have?"

"Letters from House Beckford with instructions on sending children to House Weston to be sold at a later time. Unfortunately, the only letters with proper insignias are House Beckford's."

Oscar handed a stack of documents to Gilbert, who quickly rifled through them before passing them off to me. I confirmed their contents myself. These were lists similar to the ones found at House Beckford. It was a good thing for Oscar that the documents we'd recovered had House Weston's seal on them—he no longer needed to feel guilty about lacking the proof himself. If anything, this proved the theory that members of the Great Five were poised to stab each other in the back.

But still...

"Were there no documents bearing the insignia of House Slade?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not, Your Majesty. I looked everywhere for them, but I couldn't find any."

I'd imagined the houses would have evidence against each other, but it appeared the situation was more complex. Houses Beckford and Weston had nothing to tie House Slade to these crimes. This would imply that House Slade

held additional authority over the other two houses, though I'd originally envisioned the three as equals.

"Very well. I appreciate your honesty, but why did you do this?" I asked. "You know that passing these documents off to me will not end well for House Weston. Were you not aware of what happened at my coronation?"

"It does not matter. House Weston will meet its end by your hand," Oscar said.

"Oh?"

"Nearly half of our bureaucrats have come under your control, and they are among our most talented staff. House Weston would be nothing without them. Even if the others completely abandoned their tasks, the local government could still operate. The situation is similar to the Radfords' just prior to your coronation."

"You're well informed. Have I been a bit too bold with my actions?" I said, grinning. I had to admit that his attentiveness delighted me.

"No. I only know about this because of my familiarity with what happened to House Radford and the horrible incident from eleven years ago."

His words gave me pause. *Eleven years ago? He must be talking about my parents' murder!*

"You... How do *you* know about the incident that occurred eleven years ago?" I asked him, pushing past my hesitation.

"I first learned of it from Wilhelm Radford," Oscar replied. "Then I discovered my family's involvement in the incident on my own."

"Wilhelm knew? You're certain?"

"Yes. I swear upon my family's name."

"How long ago was this?"

"Over five years ago now. When Wilhelm learned of the horrible truth behind

—which he did. Evidence of your attempted poisoning was exposed to your servants, and he ensured that the other members of his family had no hope of escape on the day of your coronation. He was one step ahead of those who would interfere with your rule, and he dealt with them accordingly."

I wanted to scream that this must be a lie. But what if Oscar spoke the truth? Just how much misery did I put Wilhelm through?

"Here is the evidence of my family's involvement with the king and queen's assassination," Oscar said.

Gilbert took the proffered letter from him. The look on his face once he'd skimmed the contents was an unusual sight. Rarely did I ever see him so surprised.

"You do understand what it means for you to entrust me with these documents, don't you?" I said.

"Yes. My family has committed acts of treason against the royal family. You may execute me, along with the rest of my house."

"Tell me, why are you not begging for your life in exchange for this information?"

"I believe that House Weston must fall. Selling off our own citizens, opposing the royal family—it's entirely unacceptable. Only the dissolution of House Weston can lead to a better future. I have provided evidence to expedite its destruction."

I felt the immense weight behind his words. None of it felt insincere in the slightest. His manner of speaking was of someone who had experienced much discord and despair. But even then, I didn't fully understand his motive.

"What is it you truly want?" I asked him.

Perhaps I simply lacked the ability to fully trust him because of his familial ties, but his expression told me there was something more to this. I needed that

clarity.

Oscar looked confused for a moment, then smiled. "My best friend did everything he could for this kingdom. It wouldn't be right for me to avoid punishment. Also, I felt you should know what Wilhelm did for you."

"Is that why you smiled at me during the coronation?"

"Yes. I opposed his decision, but seeing him look so thoroughly satisfied...I couldn't help myself." Oscar bowed his head, as if to apologize for troubling me.

"Who is this servant you've brought with you?"

"Sam. He has nothing to do with this," Oscar said firmly.

"Everyone besides Oscar, Sam, and Tommy—you will forget what you've heard about my parents' assassination and leave this room. Guards, stand by outside. Gilbert and Anita, wait in my office."

Everyone did as I commanded with my magic. I looked at Oscar and Sam. "Now the only ones who know the truth are the four of us. You've been listening, right, Tommy?"

He appeared without a sound.

"Tell Tommy everything you know," I instructed Oscar. "No lies. And your punishment will be to cooperate with me until your house breathes its last."

"I beg your pardon, Your Majesty?" Oscar replied.

"House Weston will fall, as with House Radford before it. That will come to pass. However, you and Sam are now my accomplices. You will not be seen as members of that house."

"Someone as lowly as me doesn't deserve such kindness, Your Majesty,"
Oscar said. "Please give me the same punishment that awaits the rest of my family."

"Lowly,' hmm? You are risking your very life to right the wrongs committed by your bloodline. Someone willing to take that risk is deserving of considerable respect, in my view."

"But we need to establish a precedent for—"

"I never once said one was needed."

"You can't!" Sam blurted out.

"Calm yourself, Sam," Oscar said. He tried to get Sam to back off, but the man did not heed his words.

"Your Majesty, with all due respect, Lord Oscar has stated plainly that he is ready to give up his life," Sam went on. "But I cannot sit idly by and watch that happen. I don't care what happens to me, but could you please spare my master from a horrid end?"

"You wish to imply your life holds the same weight as his?" I asked.

"N-no, I just, uh..."

"I was merely joking. In fact, life has its way of balancing the scale. The universal truth is that no matter how different we are from each other, we all eventually grow old and die. The arrogance required to decide how much worth one life has over another is no different than what corrupted the Great Five."

Sam gaped at me, speechless.

"You're blessed to have such a devoted servant," I told Oscar.

"You flatter me," Oscar said.

"Regardless, the man known as Oscar Weston cannot be allowed to live," I declared. "You will have to discard your past, your name, your very face."

"Huh?"

"You will need a new identity," I clarified.

"S-so does that mean you will spare Lord Oscar?" Sam asked.

"The man named Oscar Weston dies tonight. Going forward, he will live as someone else."

"Th-thank you so much!" Sam cried.

Oscar seemed dissatisfied. "But, Your Majesty..."

I sighed. "It is a harsher punishment than you think. If anyone discovers your true identity, your life will be forfeit. The reality of being the sole survivor of your house will haunt you forever. This is a cruel punishment indeed. Can you handle it?"

"I don't have a choice," Oscar replied.

"Oh?"

"If you're willing to spare me, then I will live. And I will do everything I can for the kingdom."

"Relax. I will have you work for me, for the sake of everyone living in Ausgrid."

"Is that truly all there is?"

"I need more trustworthy pawns."

"I'm grateful for your mercy and kindness, my queen."

"Ha! So you accept my terms. Very well," I said. "Arthur!"

Arthur entered the room at my summons. "Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Take these two to the next room and have them wait there for a while. I will send Tommy their way."

"Of course," Arthur said, then escorted Oscar and Sam out of the room.

"Some rather shocking revelations tonight," Tommy remarked.

"To think that Wilhelm knew all along..."

"Sorry I didn't notice his support earlier."

"I do not blame you—I didn't notice either. I did think that assuming control of House Radford went a bit too smoothly, but I was more concerned with the results than anything else at the time." I took a long, deep breath. "The rest of the evidence confirming my parents' assassination lies with Houses Slade and

Beckford."

"Should they still have evidence of the crime, it's bound to be their most closely guarded secret," Tommy said. "Obtaining it could be even more challenging than proving their ties to human trafficking."

"Very likely. We must find proof of the kidnappings and perform searches on any property that facilitates them. Thanks to Oscar, we've obtained proof of Beckford's involvement in the scheme, so now we just need to find evidence incriminating Slade."

Tommy had spent years making a detailed search of the Great Five's territory possible—to find evidence of the assassination plot and tear their reputations to shreds. However, the Étoile incident changed everything. He no longer needed to forge an official government document to take out the houses; the fact that they were trafficking innocent children was a far more heinous crime than anything we could have imagined.

"Those conniving bastards," Tommy grumbled.

"Will it be possible to pry any evidence from them?"

"Karl has probably already informed the other houses of the infiltration attempt on Beckford's land. Gathering further evidence is going to be a real challenge, but I'll do as you command."

Tommy's response prompted me to think it through a little more.

"No," I said at length. "The reward is not worth the risk. I have no desire to send you to an early grave."

"In that case, I do have a suggestion."

"Hm?"

"If we're unsure the evidence exists, then why don't we just forge some? Étoile is on our side now, after all."

"Are you asking me to further endanger those children?"

"I've got over a dozen people who look young enough to play the part—we can trust them. And everything will be fine if we strike *after* the children are handed off from Beckford to Slade but *before* they're shipped to Celden, right?" "Hmm."

"Please, Your Majesty. This is the fastest, most assured way to corner them. At least consider it."

I put a great deal of thought into Tommy's proposal. He wasn't wrong; as far as I was aware, it was the most practical and efficient play we could make. After thinking it through, I came to an answer.

"No. This method will lead us nowhere. And tell your men to keep their guard up."

Having said that, I told Tommy of an alternate plan I had in mind.

I once again found myself in the hidden room where Wilhelm slept.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

No matter what I asked, he never answered. And yet, I asked him all the same.

"I never thought you knew the depths of my anger, nor that you were prepared to lose your life for me."

How difficult had it been for him? He knew his death was coming, and he faced it head-on. He said nothing, knowing his death would signal the end of House Radford. He never complained or lamented his fate. He merely wanted to do what he could to save me, seeking nothing in return.

How much did it hurt, knowing he would lose everything?

Tears trickled down my cheeks. No, no, don't, I thought. It's unfair to him if I cry now.

"It's almost over," I promised him. "You'll be free again soon."

His life was all I could give back to him. I was incapable of providing a more fitting reward for his efforts.

"Aaron told me before, you know. That I shouldn't take everything on by myself. And look what I've done since this began—walked in circles all on my own. I'll be sure to work with Godfrey and Aaron from now on. The members of Étoile are on our side now too. We've amassed an impressive number of allies. I've even made preparations for the kingdom to function when I am no longer here. A proper end to this struggle is nigh."



All I could do now was exact my revenge. I had come this far already, and it was my duty to ensure justice was served. Only with this could I express my gratitude to Wilhelm. I simply didn't know any other way.

The next day, I called a select few individuals to my side: Gilbert, Commander Aaron, Head Mage Godfrey, and Anita. Tommy, as usual, was secretly stationed nearby.

"The reason I've called you all here today is precisely what you suspect: to discuss arresting the criminals of Houses Beckford, Weston, and Slade."

They stood up straight, clearly understanding the weight of my statement.

"Anita," I began. "You will hand off the children to Karl."

She exploded at my command. "Never! I'm cooperating with you to *save* these kids! What are you thinking, deliberately putting them in more danger?!"

"I understand your concern, but these are no normal children. They're Tommy's underlings."

"Oh. Well, fine, but isn't that a risky move? Yeah, Tommy's men should know how dangerous this is gonna be, but...we'd be marching them straight into enemy hands. We'd be responsible for anything that happens to them."

"We still lack the evidence to force an arrest upon House Slade," I replied. "That means we can't even legally perform an inspection on their land. If we learn where the children are being held, we can use that as evidence. As much as I wish to save the children trapped in the Celden Republic, we need to resolve the situation within our kingdom first before we can get into that mess."

"I have an idea!" Anita exclaimed. "We can capture Karl right away and compel him to, uh...I think the word is 'testify'? Yeah, make him testify, and we're good!"

"If we act against House Beckford too soon, House Slade will most likely purge

all traces of evidence they have lying around—if any still remain. Or they may simply go into hiding and attack us when we least expect it. Regardless, doing so would only serve to benefit them. We need to take down Beckford and Slade at the same time."

"What about House Weston? Don't we need to get the Westons at the same time too?" Aaron asked, finally speaking up.

"No. We need to move as quickly as possible with a small amount of trusted people. Even with the head mage on our side, taking on two houses at once will be troublesome. Oscar can hold House Weston at bay—we have a strong connection there. So the other two houses need to be prioritized."

"Understood."

"Anita, I promise Tommy's agents will be protected by the power of the Sacred Swords. Do not fear for them," I assured her.

"She's right," Godfrey chimed in. "The Sacred Swords all have names derived from their abilities. One of them, the Sword of Honor, is said to be powerful enough to destroy all enemies of the kingdom while protecting innocent civilians. The children will be blessed by its power, most certainly."

"All right, then. Let's do this," Anita said.

"Yes, let's," I agreed. "We'll be splitting our army into two groups: one with a fifth of our troops, and the other with all the rest. Aaron, Godfrey—you two will lead the larger group to march on House Beckford."

"That's a hell of a difference between the two, Your Majesty. Who's commanding the small team, then?"

"I am, of course."

"Wha—Your Majesty! You're headed to battle yourself?!"

"Absolutely."

"It's too dangerous, please reconsider!"

"It's too late to reconsider."

"Then at least bring more troops with you for your own safety!"

"That will not be necessary. Your concern is touching, but please remember that I command the Sacred Swords. I will be safe, even with a smaller squadron. Ensuring the defeat of House Beckford is of utmost importance."

"U-understood!"

Aaron and Godfrey were clearly reluctant about this plan.

From there, we spent much time discussing our strategy: how to topple both houses at once, military formations, and so on.

Chapter 3:

The Queen Goes to Battle

The day of reckoning arrived. Aaron and Godfrey stationed themselves in front of Lord Beckford's manor.

"Magic sure is handy, huh?" Aaron muttered as he looked at the residence.

"Hm? Don't you also wield magic, Aaron?" Godfrey said.

"Eh, I guess. It's nothing special, though," Aaron answered with a forced smile. "Transfer magic is one thing, but I just can't compare to the queen's ability to *enhance* magic."

"You shouldn't compare yourself to her. Not only is the sheer force of her magic unparalleled, but she also has the Sacred Swords at her disposal. Frankly, if the goal of our operation was 'eliminate' rather than 'apprehend,' she could've done it all on her own with no problem."

"She's that strong?"

"You're not familiar with how potent the queen's magic is?"

"I didn't attend the coronation. And magic isn't something I know a whole lot about in general," Aaron admitted.

"Ahh, I see," Godfrey said. "Her power is overwhelming. It's simply divine, I must say."

The two men went quiet for a time.

"Now then, I believe we should get started," Godfrey said eventually, placing his hand on the ground. He summoned walls from the earth, surrounding every corner of the mansion.

"Your magic is Alteration, right, Godfrey?" Aaron said.

"Yes. I can reshape materials, turn water into steam, things of that nature."

"Like I said, it's handy. Going to be a real big help with the operation," Aaron told Godfrey, then turned to address his men. "All troops, charge!"

At his order, the soldiers and mages ran in and began arresting House Beckford's private army. All the while, Aaron shouted commands from the back lines.

"Remember your mission! Don't let him escape! Hurry!"

"Pardon, Commander Aaron, but does the enemy's resistance seem oddly weak to you?"

"One must never underestimate an opponent, but this *is* strange. Perhaps their main forces are with the marquess and Karl, or—" Aaron cut himself off, fixing his gaze ahead. "Now's not the time to speculate. We must move quickly."

"Indeed. I'll be on my way."

"Good luck, head mage."

"You too, Commander."

The two split up as the rest of the squadron performed their duties as planned.

Aaron urged his troops along, sending them deeper into the manor. "Onward!"

"Commander Aaron! Look!" one of his men shouted, pointing out a door more lavishly constructed than the rest.

Aaron nodded. Right away, the soldiers rammed the door open and rushed in.

"Hurry up, you bumbling buffoons!" someone was yelling inside.

It was none other than the lord of the manor himself, Bernard Beckford. The servants accompanying him were shocked at the sight of Aaron and his soldiers. They froze up on the spot, but Bernard was so absorbed in his own affairs that he hadn't even noticed the intrusion.

"What the hell are you all doing?!" he barked.

Deeper within the room, a woman dressed in luxurious garments quaked with fear. "W-we need to get out of here, now! Why does this have to happen to me...?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Cherry!" Bernard cooed, then turned back to his servants. "C'mon, you lousy bastards! Pack my things, now! Careful, that necklace is worth three entire years of your salary!"

It was an utterly absurd, comedic scene. Lord Beckford had yet to realize he was completely cornered while panicking and preparing to escape. Some of the servants seemed more exhausted than afraid.

"Forget that thing! You can just buy another! We need to get out of here right this minute, Bernard!"

"Sure thing, my dear!" the marquess replied. "Hey, you! Hold this!"

Having seen enough, Aaron cut in, "Cease this at once, Lord Beckford."

"What are you blathering on about...now...?" It was then that the marquess finally noticed Aaron and the other soldiers. He screamed. "H-hey! You idiots, stop this man!"

His servants showed no sign of listening to him.

"By order of Her Majesty the Queen Luxeria, you are all under arrest!" Aaron announced.

At the same time, one of the mages cast a spell. His shadow extended toward Bernard and Cherry, binding them.

"Wh-what are you doing?!" Bernard roared, his face turning red with fury. "I'm the marquess of House Beckford!"

"I know," Aaron said. "But I am acting on orders from the queen."

Bernard was frightened, both by Aaron's calm delivery and the ice in his glare.

"W-wait a moment," Bernard stuttered, "I-I-I'll owe you a favor if you let me

go. What do you say, huh?"

Aaron's expression remained unchanged.

"Money! You can have everything in that box over there! It contains more money than you'll ever make in your life!"

"You would try to buy my mercy with your profits from selling the kingdom's own citizens?" Aaron retorted.

"Wh-what in the world?! I would never..."

Step by step, little by little, Aaron approached him. Bernard desperately wanted to run away, but the towering man had him pinned in place.

Aaron seethed. "You dare insinuate you knew nothing of this crime?"

A glimmer of hope shone in Bernard's eyes, like a spider grasping for a thread. "Y-yes! I know nothing about selling peasants! Someone must've been taking advantage of me!"

The commander unsheathed the sword on his back and raised it above his head, snapping the thread Bernard clung to so desperately.

"Eeeeeek!"

Aaron lowered the blade, holding it a hair's breadth from Bernard's face. "This little farce of yours is over. We already possess documents with your insignia that detail human trafficking done under your name."

He crouched down, staring Bernard directly in the eye.

"If you still insist you know nothing despite the evidence, then what good is your status? If being a marquess does not require any thought, if you never ask any questions and always do what you're told, then perhaps a dog would be better suited for the role. Someone who desires only to indulge in worldly pleasures, no matter what kind of illegal acts must take place to fund those vices, is worse than a parasite. The least you can do now is lie still and make your final moments painless," Aaron said with a smirk.

"Noooo! I have nothing to do with this at all! Please, spare me!" Bernard wailed.

"Sorry, but I'm not here to make judgments. If you maintain your innocence, then that is further reason to come with us quietly. A warning, though..." Aaron put his sword back in its sheath. "The taxpayer money embezzled to support your lifestyle is roughly equal to the total earnings obtained by the entire region. Some of that money is from peasant children being sold into slavery. From the people's point of view, you will likely come across as an obvious coconspirator in their suffering."

Aaron left the room, letting his troops take care of the rest. After retracing his steps, he pivoted down one of the hallways and entered the room at the end. Inside stood a group of confused troops surrounding a noblewoman.

"What's going on here?" Aaron asked one of the men.

"Are you the commander of these troops?" the noblewoman asked.

"I am," Aaron replied.

"I see. My name is Enola. Through an unfortunate string of events, I wound up married to that vile man, Bernard Beckford."

"Thank you for your cooperation. I am Aaron, commander of the Kingdom's Army."

"Ah, so you're the celebrated commander," she said. "If you would, good sir, please take a look at this." She stood up, picked several papers off of her desk, and handed them over to Aaron.

"This is...!"

"Hard evidence of our bureaucrats' involvement in financial corruption, as well as proof of involvement in the assassination of the king and queen eleven years ago. Be sure Her Majesty receives these, would you?"

"Why would you...?" Aaron trailed off.

"It would do my heart well to know that my husband will meet a miserable

end." Her soft smile was terrifying when juxtaposed with such venomous words.

"Perhaps it is strange of me to ask, but why do you want House Beckford to fall?"

"Sorry for responding to your question with another, but why would I wish for that vile man to continue living?" Enola's smile was sly and almost sickening. "I've been little more than window dressing in this house. I was never granted the status or the prestige of being the marquess's wife. He has been slowly and silently killing me for years."

"Ah. It must be awful to have that other woman around."

"Oh, that Cherry girl or whatever her name is?" Enola scoffed, then burst into laughter. "Ha ha ha! Ahhh, how funny!"

Her laughter died as quickly as it came. Azure flames of hatred burned in her eyes.

"Our marriage was political," she said. "I did not care if he had any affection for me. What I *couldn't* accept was being denied the privileges that come with marriage. Did you know that he bends over backward to over-tax the peasants, yet he never allowed me to use even the tiniest bit of his money? I've been surviving off my dowry for ages now."

Her words blended into one another, sounding almost melodic.

"The servants over there? They listen to Cherry, not me. To them, I may as well not exist. How pathetic a wife I must be for even the servants to ignore me at every step. My children passed away from neglect one after another, yet that woman's children are doted on. Was that his idea? The servants'? Perhaps it came from the woman herself? Regardless, I've been treated as less than human in this house."

Enola stood completely still, changing the subject in a heartbeat.

"The heir and the girls escaped, along with Karl," she said. "You will catch

them, won't you?"

"We will," Aaron promised her. "We have many allies working to ensure that."

"Good. And worry not, the other children are in the next room. They're sound asleep."

Some of the soldiers were shocked to hear this, immediately scrambling to search the next room over. The soldiers who stayed put were a bit sickened by Enola's toxic aura.

"Oh, I do apologize for wasting so much of your precious time," Enola said. "I'll see myself out."

In a flash, she picked up a full glass she'd been staring at. The men watched her, unsure of her intentions. Aaron was the only one to move; he flew over and tried to wrest the glass from her hand. But he was too late. She gulped down the contents and collapsed to the floor.

"Lady Enola!" Aaron cried. He picked her up from the floor and turned to shout an order at his troops. "Call a medic! Now!"

"Lady Enola. Ha ha. That's the first time anyone has called me that," she whispered, already in a great deal of pain. "I refuse to be executed alongside that man and his mistress. Please, don't try to save me." She smiled gently, as though the poison wasn't hurting her in the slightest. "It's too late to ask for help now. Oh, don't frown like that. I'm finally free..."

With those words, she breathed her last.

A soldier approached Aaron, his expression solemn. "Commander, the children in the other room... They're dead, sir."

"Is that so?" Aaron mumbled. "A truly regrettable end, but our mission is complete. Collect Enola and the children, and please be respectful about it."

"Yes, sir."

"I will check on the team currently watching over the servants," Aaron said.

"Wait, Commander!"

"What is it?"

"Forgive me for asking, but should we gather evidence from the servants to corroborate the lady's testimony? As it stands, she's destined to be remembered as the same kind of scum as her husband."

"True. And even if she were lying, she would still end up posthumously associated with him and his crimes," Aaron mused.

"It breaks my heart, Commander. Shouldn't we honor her desire to be free? Lord Beckford never once acknowledged her as his wife, anyway."

"We should. At the very least, she should be buried in the same grave as her children."

With that statement hanging in the air, Aaron left the room.

Since parting ways with Aaron, Godfrey had been focused on tracking down Karl.

"Ahh, how incredible."

Before him were Karl and the heir to House Beckford, Russel. A large retinue of guards surrounded them. They were on high alert at Godfrey's sudden appearance.

"Truly wondrous," Godfrey said.

"Stop your babbling and get out of our way!" Russel shouted.

Godfrey ignored him, placing his hand on the ground. Just as he had earlier, he formed walls from the nearby dirt and rocks. "Do you not see the wonder yourself?" he asked.

They were all baffled by the sudden appearance of the walls, their minds struggling to keep up. With everyone at a standstill, Karl was the first to break the silence.

"Right, yes. Your magic *is* quite impressive." Despite the smile on his face, the bafflement was plain in his eyes.

Godfrey seemed to not notice, laughing with glee. "My magic? Oh, don't be silly. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about Her Majesty and her associates. To think they'd so perfectly predict the route you'd use to escape! Thanks to them, I get to have so much fun."

Karl froze at the mention of the queen. "Who the hell are you?"

"Right, introductions. Apologies. My name is Godfrey, head mage to the royal palace."

Upon hearing the title, Karl looked as if he'd aged several years. "So you are the famed head mage..."

"You know of me? You're well informed." Godfrey beamed, delighted.

Karl, on the other hand, was clearly wondering how anyone could say such things with a straight face.

"Oh, this is no good. With your expression, you're bound to make your men nervous," Godfrey chided.

Karl said nothing in return, only forcing a smile.

"Now then. Lord Russel, Mr. Karl—will you turn yourselves in?"

"Turn ourselves in? Why would we do that?"

"If you truly don't know what I'm talking about, why were you running away?"

"You dare say we were *running away*?" Karl said. "Master Godfrey, I don't understand what you're implying. Lord Russel and I are simply taking a stroll around the countryside."

"Is that so?" Godfrey replied. "What fortunate timing! How about I join you for a sojourn to the capital?"

"Ah, I couldn't possibly take up your valuable time."

"Oh, no need to be so reserved. It's an invitation!" Godfrey said. "Just come along quietly, and we'll have a grand old time."

Godfrey then took a deep breath and narrowed his eyes. Karl quickly understood what Godfrey really meant by *invitation*, and he braced himself.

"Guards! Protect Master Russel!" Karl shouted. He planned to abandon Russel and the other guards, ensuring only his own escape. The guards were fooled, rushing toward Godfrey at his command.

"Aha! Ha ha ha!" Godfrey laughed aloud in the face of his enemies. He crouched on the ground, his hand pressed against the dirt. In an instant, the walls surrounding them vanished. The soldiers he had hidden behind the barriers leapt out from their hiding places and clashed with Russel's guards.

Having magicked his walls away, Godfrey willed the ground to swell.

Countless pillars shot up from the bloated patches of dirt, battering any guards above them. Each man they hit was instantly knocked unconscious.

One guard managed to make his way past the assault of pillars, raising his sword to strike at Godfrey. "Aaaaugh!"

Even when facing mortal peril, Godfrey continued to laugh. "Ha ha ha! Ah ha ha ha!"

A steel ball in his hand took the shape of a shield, blocking the attack. Thorns burst forth from the shield, piercing the guard and bringing him to his knees. Godfrey then touched the steel thorns and morphed them into discs, tossing them with the greatest of ease and taking down the rest of the guards in one throw.

"Ahhh, this is so much fun!" he shouted toward the heavens with a crazed smile on his face.

The sight disturbed Russel so much that he tripped over backward. He desperately tried to run, horrified beyond belief. Godfrey noticed this, turning to look at the young lord.

"Oops, sorry. You've granted me the opportunity to enjoy such fantastic entertainment, yet I've been so rude! How could I ignore the guest of honor?" Godfrey smiled, his voice soft and kind. No reaction could have been less appropriate.

"You're...you're a monster!" Russel cried.

"A monster? No, I'm just a simple man. I don't deserve such a prestigious title."

Godfrey walked ever so slowly toward the terrified Russel, but he did not stop there. Instead, he walked past him to stand in front of Karl. The man was trapped between Godfrey's earthen walls, unable to break free.

"How did you summon these walls from all the way over there?"

The head mage chuckled. "Looking to abandon your master and run away, are you?"

"Answer me! You took down the walls when the guards went after you!"

"I did. They would've only gotten in the way of dealing with your guards, after all," Godfrey said. "But that didn't mean I had to remove *all* of the walls. See?"

Karl looked left and right as more and more walls sprouted around him.

"Impossible! You made these in the midst of battle?!"

"That's right. I did it while I summoned the pillars. I wanted to see if you'd abandon Russel like you did Bernard."

"Y-you used magic over such a vast distance just for that? You...monster!"

"Russel called me the same, but I must reiterate that it is too grandiose a title for me. After all, I am but Her Majesty's servant." Step by step, Godfrey drew closer to Karl. "I do find you quite incredible, Mr. Karl. To think you'd be so bold as to challenge Her Majesty, someone whose power even I cannot possibly equal!"

He paused right in front of Karl, a smug grin on his face.

"Her Majesty has handled this whole situation flawlessly, I must say. Now, Mr. Karl, are you ready to receive your punishment?"

And so, Godfrey succeeded in capturing both Karl and Russel.

I stood before the manor of House Slade alongside several guards. Transfer magic had allowed me to reach this abode in a matter of seconds.

"Break through their security."

At my command, my guards eliminated the defense stationed in front of us. Our sudden arrival left them without time to react, so they went down easily.

"Your group will keep watch out here. Keep doing as we planned even after we've stormed the gates."

A few of my escorts stood back while the rest of us ran through the center of the estate. I would've preferred to go straight to Lord Slade himself, but Transfer had its limits. If the casting mage was not familiar with the location in mind, then moving to a precise spot wouldn't be possible.

A whisper reverberated in my ear: "I'm reminded why the Sacred Swords are so special. Their ability to strengthen magic is just totally unfair."

It was Tommy, who was taking a different route.

"I won't deny that. And while I know you can erase sound with your magic, that doesn't mean we have time for small talk," I said.

"Ha ha, right. Things are going well on my end. We should be able to find the imprisoned children soon."

"Excellent. Keep it up."

We came across a door leading into the manor. My guards broke it down in short order. Naturally, Lord Slade's servants weren't expecting us.

"Eeep!"

"Wh-who are you people?!"

Some were terrified, others looked baffled, and a few were still absorbed in their cleaning duties.

"Servants of House Slade: Remain conscious, but do not move from where you stand."

My command forced them to do as I said.

"Apologies for the intrusion. I am Luxeria von Ausgrid, and I have business with your master." I used Heart Realm again. "Servants of House Slade. Tell me where the marquess is."

"He's in his office," answered one of the maids.

"Very well," I replied. "Take me to him—and be quick about it."

We followed our unwitting guides through the halls. I silenced each servant we saw along the way with my magic. When we finally reached the office, my soldiers broke down the door. Lord Slade sat inside with the man who had accompanied him the last time we met.

"Well, well, what a surprise," Slade said coolly. "Did we have a meeting scheduled today?"

While clearly a little startled by our sudden arrival, he was the ever-unruffled Lord Slade. The man had nerves of steel.

"I'm afraid not," I said. "Apologies for coming on such short notice, but I needed to speak with you as soon as possible."

"As soon as possible, eh? Much as I would love to grant you an audience here and now, I'm afraid you'll need an appointment. I'd appreciate it if you would send a letter and arrange a meeting in advance."

"Sorry, but the situation is of grave importance to the kingdom as a whole, and its resolution is of the highest priority."

"Does that not make following the proper procedures all the more vital?"

I chuckled darkly, the echo producing an unsettling atmosphere in the room.

"Oh, I shall ensure the proper procedures take place. For the arrest of a treasonous criminal, that is."

"A criminal, you say?"

"Just how full have you stuffed your pockets by trafficking the kingdom's citizens?"

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty, I'm afraid I don't understand your question," Slade said.

My attempt to put pressure on him did not make him flinch—as I expected from this snake.

"Really? We recently performed a search of House Beckford," I told him. "Among the documents we seized, we found a record of House Slade's involvement with the capture and sale of children."

I had these documents on hand, of course, and I showed him the exact one that implicated House Slade.

"My, my! How bizarre," Slade remarked, playing the victim. "My house would never be involved in such barbaric practices. Surely it was forged by someone from another house." He sported a sickeningly false frown. I'd never seen an actor get so involved in a role.

"Oh? You claim to know nothing of this?"

"Nothing at all, I assure you. You see, the evidence you've presented lacks the Slade insignia, and it does not bear my signature."

What a pity. He may have been a talented actor, but he was no director—and I was running the show.

"Ha ha ha ha!"

Slade had made a critical mistake. Things were going precisely as I planned.

"Goodness, what's so funny, Your Majesty?" Slade asked.

"Ahh, this whole situation!" I said. "You claim to know nothing about children

being bought and sold. If that is the case, then why are there mages locked up inside this very manor?"

At that moment, Tommy sprang into the room. "Your Majesty! The children have successfully been rescued!"

He had hilariously good timing.

"Have you detained the jailers?" I asked.

"Yes. We've already gotten their testimony as well," Tommy replied.

"There you have it, Lord Slade," I said. "Will you continue to deny your involvement even now?"

Slade growled, then rang a bell on his desk. By the time I realized it was an alarm, his guards were already swarming into the room. The small office became very cramped very quickly.

"Seize them!"

"Soldiers of House Slade, kneel before me."

Slade and I spoke at the same time, but it was my magical order that everyone heeded. They all kneeled.

"What?! Impossible! Magic is supposed to be unusable in this room!" Slade said.

His shock disappointed me, and I sighed. "Why are you so surprised? I know full well that your assistant can nullify magic. Did you think I wouldn't find a way around that?"

"But how can one use magic to counter magic nullification...?"

"You really don't know? Now that's a surprise."

One of the Great Five's official duties was to supply the Sacred Swords—which required vast amounts of magic to operate—with their own magic. They should all know exactly what the Sacred Swords could do, but it appeared they'd forgotten it in their endless pursuit of wealth.

I waved my hand, summoning forth a weighty blade bathed in indigo light.

"Behold, the Sacred Sword of Wisdom," I said. "It can nullify enemy magic and enhance the magic of the wielder and her allies. So long as I wield this blade, your little tricks will have no effect."

For the first time, I saw Lord Slade grow visibly worried. It filled me with joy and made my heart flutter.

"Lord Slade and his assistants, kneel before me."

Slade fell to his knees just as his soldiers had. The humiliation and frustration they felt was clear on all their faces.

Enjoying their misery, I gave a sweeping order to my men: "Arrest the lot of them."

They acted immediately, placing them all under arrest.

"Now then, let us return home," I said.

Before certain troublesome figures meddle in our affairs, that is.

I was unsure if anyone heard my command, but the troops moved as I had asked.

"This is Tommy," came a voice in my ears.

"Tommy? Where are you?"

"I left the situation at Slade's place up to my men. I'm at Weston's manor now."

"While I know this was part of my plan, I admire your diligence."

"Eh, I suppose. While I'd love more of your praise, this went without a hitch. The people in charge of the house were taken out by those loyal to Oscar. I guess some kind of a resistance group? They had help from House Alcott's soldiers."

House Alcott had cooperated with us. I'd asked for their help when I first planned our strategy with Aaron and Godfrey.

"It seems Oscar and the Alcotts did what they were meant to."

"Yep. Shockingly well, I might add."

"Very good."

"Anyway, we're gonna take everyone we arrested at House Weston back to the capital."

"Understood."

Tommy spoke no more after that, and we each made our way back to the capital.

Gilbert was the first to greet me upon my return.

"Ahh, it's a relief to see you looking well, Your Majesty."

"Where are the others?" I asked him.

"They haven't made it back yet, but I received word that they successfully completed their missions and are on their way."

"I see. Very well."

"Did you run into anyone from the Celden Republic?"

"No. Thankfully, they kept their heads out of tonight's proceedings."

"Good. It seems there was merit in getting this done so quickly after all."

"Indeed. I am especially glad we pinned down House Slade before Celden became involved."

"I agree, that would've been a terrible scenario. Even the illustrious Queen Luxeria would struggle to face down an entire nation."

"That, and it would've been quite the pain if Slade had slithered his way into their borders."

Gilbert chuckled. "How true. I'm sure Lord Slade wasn't expecting to be captured so quickly that he wouldn't even have time to call for backup."

"Possibly."

"Your plan to capture them all before Celden could make any moves was a major success. I'm very relieved."

"It only worked out because everyone did their best."

As we continued to banter, we eventually arrived at my private quarters.

"Gilbert, I need to rest."

"Understood. Sorry for getting in the way of that. I'll see myself out."

Once he'd left, I entered the room to find Alicia waiting for me.

"Thank goodness you're safe!" She was smiling in relief as tears flowed down her face. Seeing her truly made me feel like I'd returned home.

"That I am," I said.

"I'm..." Alicia sniffled. "I'm so happy you're all right..."

"Thank you, Alicia." I embraced her tightly for a moment as she cried. "Are you okay?"

"S-sorry, I didn't mean to..."

Alicia blushed bright red. Ahh, how adorable she is.

I giggled. "It's quite all right. It's a sign of how much you wished for my safety, no?"

"Y-yes. I'm so glad you're safe."

"I'm glad to be home, and to be able to see you once more."

After she had calmed down, I stripped away my dirty clothes and took a nice, warm bath. Then I put on some comfortable clothing and sank into the cushions of my sofa.

"Alicia," I said.

"Yes, Queen Luxeria?"

"May I have some time to myself?" I asked.

"Of course."

Once I was alone in the room, I could no longer keep myself upright. Darkness warped my vision, and immense pain shot through my nerves. I gasped and clenched my teeth, desperately trying to stay quiet. I bit down so harshly that the taste of iron filled my mouth. Given that I had used two of the Sacred Swords today, the agony was to be expected. I should have been glad the symptoms weren't worse.

I coughed twice. Blood sprayed from my mouth—not just from the bite wound but from deeper within me as well. Another cough, and my consciousness faded. The damaged vessel that was my body had finally shattered. Reality melted as all light ebbed away.

Only an endless expanse remained, shrouding me in boundless darkness. It seeped into me, infecting every aspect of my being, threatening to erase me completely. All I felt was fear. I wanted to escape. The moment I wished for it, I felt someone grab hold of me. The hand was shaking, but it woke me.

When I came to, my body felt incredibly dull and heavy. Better than it was before I fainted, at least. Having confirmed my physical state, I wiped my bloodstained hand with a wet cloth.

"Is anyone there...?" I murmured.

"You called, Queen Luxeria?" Freesia replied.

"Ah, Freesia. Where is Alicia?" I asked.

"She anticipated you would wake up soon and is currently preparing tea."

"Ah, good, good. How long have I been asleep?"

"Not very long," she said, and I nodded.

"Freesia, wash this cloth and ensure nobody sees it," I ordered. "Call Alicia for me, would you?"

"As you wish."

Freesia stashed away the cloth and carried it out of the room. I waited on the sofa for Alicia to arrive.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Queen Luxeria!" Alicia said, bounding inside.

"Oh, what a sweet and lovely aroma. You included dessert with the teatonight?"

"That's right! You worked very hard today, so I made both a light and a heavy dessert. Which would you like?"

"Hmm... I'll have both."

"Both it is, then—wait, both? Really?"

"Of course. I wouldn't dare let your efforts go to waste. What are they, exactly?"

"The light dessert is a Bellean mousse, and the heavy one is a Tutton tart."

"My, how wonderful! Thank you, Alicia."

I indulged in her delightfully tasty desserts. They were the perfect ending to a long day. After I finished the treats, I had her brew me more tea.

Accompanied by my personal guards, I stepped into my office. Aaron, Godfrey, Tommy, and Gilbert were all sitting there waiting for me.

"Apologies for the delay," I told them. "I needed to rest."

"That's all right, Your Majesty," Tommy said. "Did you get some good shuteye?"

"Yes. Sorry again."

Godfrey squinted a bit, then said, "No need to apologize. It's only natural you would need rest after using so much magic."

"Godfrey is right," Aaron chimed in. "It's a bit shameful to admit, but things

likely would've played out very differently today without your magic. We have no room to criticize you for needing to rest after that."

"You flatter me. Our victory was a team effort, made possible by everyone here."

"I'm not deserving of such praise, Your Majesty," Aaron said with a dip of his head.

"Chin up, Aaron," I said. "Now then, let us hear everyone's reports."

Aaron went first. "Forgive me, Your Majesty. My men and I deeply regret our failure to save Lady Enola."

"I do not blame you for her death. She never desired salvation to begin with."

"But—"

"We cannot turn back time. There is no point in dwelling on past mistakes," I said. "You have permission to bury Enola alongside her children."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Tommy, were there any other children at House Slade besides your own agents?"

"I'm afraid not. The rest had already been shipped off to Celden."

"Gilbert?"

"We have already voiced our objections to Celden through diplomatic channels," Gilbert said. "Unfortunately, the trafficking was done independently of Celden's government, and that complicates things. We cannot claim they were 'taken' so easily. Currently, we're stating that we 'oppose Celden's mistreatment of mages' and are requesting custody of the children."

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"And their response?"

"Nothing yet."
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"I see. Tommy?"

"As a result of all this, Celden's authorities are split into two factions," Tommy said. "First there's the warmongers, who are incensed by our objections. Some of them want to invade Ausgrid with the help of their magical test subjects. The second faction consists of the more moderate folks, who deny mistreatment of any sort happening in their nation."

"Hah! Looks like they fell for your scheme, Gilbert. Well done."

Gilbert nodded. Aaron tilted his head, puzzled.

"It's a good tactic, splitting Celden's diplomats into two," I said. "Gilbert's actions have also shown the other nations that the people of Celden—vermin who claim that magic is disgusting, fearful devilry—are hypocrites. They publicly oppress mages yet secretly gather them for experimentation. Celden's denial of such wrongdoing means nothing. The very fact that any nation has publicly announced a protest of such actions will raise suspicions. They'll be forced to wonder what Celden is up to."

"And it's likely everyone will see their actions as military expansion," Gilbert added.

"Not only has friction begun within Celden as a result of just one diplomatic protest, but other nations will now view their actions with greater suspicion. Celden's authorities are likely shaking in their boots. Time will tell if they decide to lash out in rage or enact mass censorship, but the fact remains that we have sown the seeds of discord."

Tommy grinned. "Pfft. The whole nation of Celden sounds like a bratty kid when you put it like that."

"You could say that. All right, Tommy—continue keeping a close eye on Celden. Take advantage of the ongoing situation."

"I will. We'll do our best to get those kids back as soon as possible. Right, Gilbert?"

"Of course."

Hearing their resolve, I stood up from my seat. "Will you all be coming with me?"

"I'm afraid I cannot," Gilbert replied. "There is much work to be done regarding the change of governance in the regions the Great Five ruled over, and I must oversee it."

"Sorry to say, but I can't come either," Tommy said. "I have to focus on monitoring Celden for now. And I can freely investigate the Slade manor now too—may as well see if there's anything there we haven't found yet."

"I see. Aaron, Godfrey?"

"If you insist, Your Majesty, I shall accompany you."

"I will too."

Once the commander and the head mage had joined me, we made our way down to the prison cells. We'd apprehended an incredible number of people from Houses Slade, Beckford, and Weston. The cells were all packed.

We were headed for Karl in particular, so my preferred "pleasantries" for our prisoners would have to wait for another day. With each step down the stairs, the prison became darker and darker. Finally, we came upon Karl's cell. He sat behind the iron bars.

I approached him. "So you are the one they call Karl."

Karl ran up to the front of the cell with desperation in his eyes, searching for mercy. Do I look like a goddess of salvation to him? I chuckled a bit at the absurdity of the image.

"Your Majesty, I am so very sorry for what has happened! Please understand, I had no choice but to help House Slade to meet Lord Beckford's ridiculous demands!"

Perhaps that was why he ran his mouth so fervently—to say things he normally never would. To think he had a connection to House Slade... Even if Karl lacked hard proof, we would likely find corroborating evidence among Lord

Slade's belongings. His words still irritated me greatly; I couldn't stand how drastically they differed from his actions.

"It's amusing how simple it can be just to talk," I said. "Wouldn't you say so, Godfrey?"

"I agree wholeheartedly. Can't say I expected him to open up so easily."

Godfrey approached the cell himself, prompting Karl's eyes to bug out as though he'd seen some nightmarish beast. He scurried to the corner of the cell.

"Dear me, Godfrey, what did you do to scare him so?"

"Nothing special, Your Majesty. I arrested him, that's all." Godfrey shrugged, implying he truly wasn't aware he'd done anything out of the ordinary. Even the mention of his name was enough to make Karl quake with fear, so it must have been something dramatic.

I sighed. "So Lord Beckford was manipulated by a rat like this..."

I clenched my teeth. What a frustrating, awful man. To think one of my sworn enemies—a member of the Great Five—was pathetic enough to be swindled by this bastard.

"Your Majesty, I advise you to remain calm," Godfrey said.

His words brought me back to reality. "Right, I seem to have forgotten myself."

"No, no, it's fine. Your magic is always a pleasure to behold, but it may be a bit too stimulating right now."

I followed Godfrey's gaze and saw Karl cowering in fear in the corner. His face had gone deathly pale; he looked like a cadaver.

"Answer me, Karl. Why should I believe you? You, who left your masters behind one after the other in an attempt to save your own skin?" My gaze slid over to Godfrey. "You made it clear that I have an infinite well of rage toward all involved in this case, right, Godfrey?"

"That I did."

"And yet this is all we get? Clearly I'm not being taken seriously enough." I glared down at the cowering Karl. "You will receive no mercy for the evils you have inflicted upon the civilians of our kingdom. Reflect on your sins in the time you have left."

With that, I turned to leave the prison.

Aaron, who had been quiet the whole time, spoke up on our way back. "You're heading home already?"

"Yes. I'll have my fun with him later."

He nodded in response.

"The marquesses' questioning will begin in two days," I said. "All will be revealed then. Pestering them now will only lead to them blathering on aimlessly, much like Karl just did. I don't have the time to waste on listening to such drivel."

"Ah, is that so?"

"Besides, it's more fun this way. Just imagining them kneeling before me, thoroughly humiliated... It makes me feel so..."

I cackled, unable to contain myself. What a beautiful fantasy. Aaron and Godfrey were silent, and my laughter echoed ominously throughout the prison halls.

We then returned to my office.

"Good work, both of you," I said.

I parted ways with them, sat down at my desk, and got to work on the duties that awaited me.

Chapter 4:

The Queen's Revenge Reaches Its Climax

 $T_{\text{HE SKY WAS A GRAND}}$, gorgeous blue. Yet on such a wonderful day, the dark atmosphere in the throne room was heavy enough to suffocate.

Brian awaited the start of questioning, increasingly nervous about what was to come. Luxeria sat atop her throne, stoic and emotionless. Brian could tell that the queen's current mood was merely the calm before a great and terrible storm. In no world would this trial go smoothly.

Many nobles had gathered in the throne room, here to witness an event that would change the fate of the entire kingdom. This decisive moment had been years in the making. Brian, along with the other nobles, were symbols of the Great Five's influence. They were dressed in lavish garments, arrogantly certain that nothing would stand in their way. But would that still be the case after today?

The marquesses themselves were escorted into the throne room by Aaron and his men, draped in plain garb and drooping at the shoulders. They were all clearly exhausted—haggard, even. They sat in front of the throne, as if supplicating before their queen.

A bell rang.

"Marquess of House Beckford, Bernard Beckford. Marquess of House Weston, Layfe Weston. And Marquess of House Slade, Cyrus Slade. Your questioning begins now!" one of the assistants next to the throne announced, his declaration reverberating through the room.

"Bernard Beckford and Layfe Weston are charged with abduction and human trafficking. They kidnapped peasant children from their own lands and handed them to Cyrus Slade as slaves for trade. Cyrus Slade is charged with human trafficking and treason. He abetted an enemy of the kingdom, selling citizens to

the Celden Republic."

Loud chatter rippled through the nobles as the marquesses' sins were announced.

"As evidence, we have documents listing the trafficked children. These documents bear Bernard Beckford's and Layfe Weston's signatures. Regarding Cyrus Slade, Her Majesty and the royal soldiers accompanying her personally discovered him harboring missing children on his property."

As the assistant finished stating the facts of the case, Luxeria raised her hand. The chatter that had filled the room ceased in short order.

"What justification do you have for these heinous acts?"

Layfe Weston was the first to speak. "Your Majesty, I-I was deceived! By a despicable circus troupe called Étoile!"

"M-me too! I was betrayed by my own assistants! I swear, I would never willingly commit acts of treason against the crown!" Bernard Beckford followed up with his own excuse. The men's desperation hardly suited these supposed "nobles."

"I see. Then nothing can be done," Luxeria said, testing them.

A glimmer of hope shone in their eyes. Brian sighed, wondering how they could possibly think any mercy awaited them when she looked at them the way she did.

"That is what you would like me to say, isn't it? You truly see me as incompetent, don't you?"

The queen's eyes blazed bright with fury.

"Excuse me?!"

"What?!"

"Silence," Luxeria commanded. "While that excuse may work regarding the abductions, it has nothing to do with the sale of the children. Documents with

your insignias detail the delivery of citizens for monetary compensation. This is an immutable fact. With such evidence on our side, you dare to claim ignorance?"

"Well, um..."

"I've heard enough of your trite excuses," the queen said. "Now then, Cyrus Slade. What justification do you have to offer?"

In stark contrast to Beckford and Weston, Slade was relatively calm. "I have none to give," he said.

"Oh? Are you truly all right with that?"

"Does it matter? Being brought before you means we've already lost," Slade said. "And you two—quit the ridiculous display. As long as she wields the Sacred Sword of Sincerity, the blade she judged Lord Radford with, further lies will only harm us."

His warning sent the other two marquesses into a rage.

"How dare you! This is all your fault to begin with!"

"Yeah! You made us do it! All because eleven years ago—"

"Enough, Lord Beckford!" Slade shouted.

"True. I have already decided the outcome of today's questioning," Luxeria said.

The room fell silent, the nobility staring daggers at Slade. Just as he said, their mere presence in this questioning had ensured their sins would never be forgiven. Yet even though they were beyond saving, Bernard Beckford had admitted to something critical. The nobles studied the man who willingly tightened the noose around his own neck.

"Y-yeah! Slade is to blame for everything!"

"That's right, Your Majesty! He's responsible for it all!"

Perhaps the other marquesses saw a way out in pinning it all on him.

"Yes! I'll admit it! My sins are the heaviest of us all!" Slade exclaimed. "And so I demand you two to shut your mouths!"

Layfe and Bernard piled more sins upon Slade's feet. His enraged, indignant reaction ironically made the first two seem even more foolish—and Slade himself somehow the most honest of the three. It was a darkly comedic moment.

"Ha ha ha. Ha ha ha ha! Ah ha ha!"

Mocking laughter rang through the hall, turning the entire room ice-cold. The laughter didn't cause the chill—well, in a way it did. But the nobles heard something horrifying within that laugh. The frigidity sent a chill down their spines, like Death was right there lurking among them. At the same time, an overwhelming force emanated from the throne, threatening to tear the skin off everyone in attendance. No one wished to admit what it was that disturbed them.

Luxeria averted her gaze. "How admirable, Cyrus Slade," she said with a sickening grin. No, not a grin—it was a twisted shape contorting her lips. "How surprising to think even you can feel familial love."

She understood that no one seemed to get what had amused her—except Slade, that is. He knew exactly what she was getting at, and the color in his face drained in an instant.

"Of course you want those two to stay quiet. They're your accomplices. You cannot stand hearing them say things that might inconvenience you...whether it's about this crime or crimes of the past."

Slade shivered at her words, but she did not stop. She continued to back him further and further into a corner.

"Did you really believe me ignorant of your sins? Of what the men standing beside you have done?"

Her statement avoided getting to the heart of the matter. Every noble

present, Slade included, wanted to hear more—but they couldn't possibly urge her to continue. The staggering power she exuded stunned everyone into silence.

"F-forgive me, Your Majesty!" Slade pleaded. "My family has nothing to do with this! Every ill act done under my name is my crime, and mine alone—"

"Hah, I know. But surely you know that nothing you say will cease my inquiry."

"Your Majesty!" he cried, seeking mercy at any cost.

Despite his desire for compassion, the queen coldly delivered her verdict. "The crimes on display here were born from the privileges granted to the Great Five. As such, the families of Weston, Beckford, and Slade will relinquish their titles, and their houses will be no more," she said, singing the song of their demise. "Furthermore, Bernard Beckford, Layfe Weston, and Cyrus Slade are hereby sentenced to death. Their kin will meet the same fate, and all their allies' houses will be destroyed."

The queen's words were heavy, but her delivery was as light as a feather. The dissonance further chilled the room, and nobody dared to speak.

Amid that silence, a singular question was put forth: "Your Majesty, isn't that punishment a bit too severe? Even for human trafficking?"

"Human trafficking?" The queen laughed, then grew icy once again. "Bernard Beckford. You claim that the true perpetrator of your crime was Cyrus Slade, yes?"

"Y-yes! That's right!" Bernard exclaimed.

"And was this the case eleven years ago as well?"

"Yes, I...uh..." Bernard trailed off. The blood drained from his face, leaving him pale and lifeless.

"Hmm? Perhaps we should clarify which incident we're discussing. Does anyone else here know what happened eleven years ago?"

The queen's words reflected the very question stirring in the minds of the attending nobles. They'd all been wondering what she meant, but they were afraid to broach the subject. However, there was one thing they all understood: the sight of Bernard quaking with fear was enough to prove something was deeply wrong.

"Layfe? Would you mind telling the audience?" Luxeria prompted.

Layfe's lips remained sealed.

"What's wrong? Are your mouths sewn shut? Then I suppose I will be the one to say that it was the three of you who murdered the previous king and queen."

Time seemed to stop as everyone in the room took in this reveal. Some doubtful murmurs broke out in the crowd, signaling the amount of sway the Great Five held over the kingdom. At the same time, there were cries of shock and disbelief, a sign of how much respect for the royal family still remained.

Luxeria laughed again, quelling the noise once more. The nobles looked upon her in fear and awe, wondering what she would say next.

"You have no energy left to deny it, I see."

She told nothing but the truth. Layfe Weston's gaze dropped to the floor as he muttered to himself. Bernard Beckford sullenly stared at the ceiling. Cyrus Slade shrank in on himself like a turtle receding into its shell.

"Gilbert?" Luxeria called, and he stepped forward.

"We have procured evidence detailing an assassination plot hatched by these three men, alongside Vixen Radford. We were able to search their homes in the human trafficking case and found evidence of this heinous act of treason among their belongings. Hence, we were able to arrest them all."

"And there you have it," the queen said. "So, Cyrus Slade... Tell me, who is culpable for the crime of treason?"

The marquess didn't answer. He simply twitched in fear.

By contrast, the queen smiled as if she was greatly entertained. "Accomplices!

Is that not what you claimed when I delivered judgment upon the Radfords? With my mother and father dead, there would be no one left to claim the throne. Then the Great Five could become kings. Or would you see it as having your royal status restored? A short-lived dream, in any case."

For some reason, the more she smiled, the more miserable Luxeria seemed.

"No forgiveness. No mercy. You cannot stop me. I deliver judgment under the authority of the crown." Her pained smile was difficult to look at. It was like an invisible wound of hers had reopened and begun to bleed.

"Your sentencing has been decided. The inquiry is now over," Gilbert announced. His cold proclamation put an end to the proceedings.

Afterward, Slade, Beckford, and Weston were executed, as decreed by the queen. Thus, judgment was carried out upon those involved with the assassination of eleven years prior, as well as everyone tied to their families. Endless blood flowed in the name of revenge.

Queen Luxeria's swift and cruel punishment spread fear across the kingdom. However, this cemented the queen's capability as a ruler. In an age of chaos not seen since the founding of Ausgrid, Queen Luxeria went above and beyond. Not content with simply weathering the storm, she put her skills to the test and regained control of the government, establishing an enduring political foundation.



Historians would dub this event the Sanguine Purge, an instance so infamous that word of it spread far beyond Ausgrid's borders.

Chapter 5:

The Queen Despairs

CLACK, CLACK.

The sound of pawns shuffling around the chessboard echoed through the room.

"You seem to be having fun," Tommy said as he entered.

"Do I look like I'm having fun?"

"Are you not? I mean, your wish was finally granted."

"I did enjoy myself when we caught them. Seeing them squirm in agony was delightful," I admitted. "But it wasn't the feast I'd hoped for. I'm not sure why, but my chest feels so very hollow."

"Because you don't have any goals to strive for now?"

"Hmm. Possibly."

A single white king remained on the board, its pawns all knocked aside.

"So, what's Celden up to?" Tommy asked.

"They're doing exactly what we anticipated, to a laughable degree. They've made numerous appeals to other nations as a result of the purge. 'Ausgrid is the land of devils, ruled by a demon lord who slaughters her own people,' and so on."

Tommy laughed. "A bloodthirsty demon lord? They love their fairy tales, don't they?"

"You find it amusing?"

Tommy had tilted his head, confused. It dawned upon me that even in this fantasy world, a demon lord was an entirely fantastical concept. Demons were nothing more than nuisances in children's fables, like eerie dark witches and

their ilk. Personally, I had to laugh at the idea of being lumped in with them.

"It is an honor," I said. "A title like that will inspire greater fear in our enemies."

"Well, I guess congratulations are in order."

"Thank you. Just a little longer, you think?"

"Just a little longer," Tommy said.

"Very well. Then all I can do is wait patiently."

"Indeed, Your Majesty. I'll set up the joint operation with Aaron and Godfrey."

"Good. I'm counting on you."

"Roger that. Now, if you'll excuse me, my queen."

Tommy left, and the marquess entered the room soon after.

"You've done well, Douglas Alcott," I said. "You are the only remaining marquess in the kingdom. The only one of the Great Five to remain loyal to the crown. Quite the grand honor, no?"

"Going with sarcasm today, Your Majesty?" Alcott quipped.

I chuckled. "I'm being completely sincere. Now then, there's something we must discuss."

Alcott's jaw tightened, but then he smiled and nodded.

"Lord Alcott, you knew about the assassination plot, yet you did nothing to stop it. You may not have aided them in the crime, but you let it happen."

I'd seen all that House Slade had left behind. Not a single document showed any involvement from House Alcott in that incident. However, there was a record of Alcott having turned down an invitation of Slade's. Considering the houses that *did* accept his invitation went on to be involved with the death of the king and queen, it was not hard to imagine what the invitation entailed. Still, his rejection lacked anything pointing to the assassination, so this was mere conjecture on my part.

"Honestly, I should be careful not to rely on Heart Realm so much. Your thoughts were, in fact, sincere," I said. "But they also didn't tell me everything. Consider yourself lucky that I didn't use my magic further to drag out more information."

"I'm sorry if this comes across as a poor excuse, Your Majesty, but while I did think something was amiss, I never imagined the other houses would commit outright treason..."

"Never mind that. You came to my aid when it mattered most. Whether that stemmed from guilt or the fact that I was able to summon the Sacred Swords means nothing. I understand that your assistance was largely indirect, but it allowed me to simply ignore your house's presence. Do you have any misgivings about that?"

"None at all," Alcott said.

"Good. As I decreed earlier, your authority in regional governance has largely been stripped. Does this bother you?"



"No. The other regions are now operating under royal governance. Attempting to delay the inevitable would only lead to my family being ostracized further. It would be no different from exile."

"True. Instead, your house will see greater tax revenue than ever before. Enjoy the privilege of being the last of the Great Five. If this is somehow not enough for you, then I haven't a clue what you really want." With a smile creeping across my face, I placed my hand on the last white king piece.

"To atone for the sin of allowing the assassination of the previous king and queen, I will relinquish my title as marquess and confine myself to my home," Alcott said. "My son was most grateful for your kindness when I admitted my faults to him. He will serve you well, Your Majesty."

"Fine. Tell him that he better not disappoint me."

"I will."

Our exchange finished, the marquess took his leave.

Alicia entered shortly thereafter. "Your Majesty, your tea's ready!"

"Thank you, Alicia."

I enjoyed a cup of Alicia's delicious tea, its floral notes dancing on my tongue.

"Is anything unusual going on?" I asked.

Alicia looked upward, collecting her thoughts. "I suppose so," she said, her tone demure. "The capital is abuzz with gossip right now."

"How so?"

"Well, I mean...we might be invaded by another nation."

"Ah. So the citizens are anxious."

"They are. Everything's going to be fine, right?"

"I see anxiety has gripped you too, Alicia. Fear not—I will protect you."

"No, no. I meant to ask if everything with you will be fine, Your Majesty! You

always push yourself too hard!"

Her reaction surprised me; I wasn't sure what to say.

"Perhaps I ask for too much," Alicia continued. "But you mean more to me than anyone else! So please keep yourself safe!"

Her concern brought a smile to my face. "Thank you, Alicia." Warmth spread through the void within me. "A frown like that doesn't suit you. Keep your spirits up, for doing so will lift mine as well."

"Oh, Your Majesty..."

"Wipe your tears. Show me that lovely smile of yours the next time we meet."

"A-all right. Sorry..."

Once she left the room, I finished my tea and continued to look through documents, reflecting on what I had done. Many people had died in this purge, and it was only thanks to my allies that we were able to keep greater chaos at bay.

"Coming in, Your Majesty," came a voice at the door.

A man with gray hair and an unusually plain face entered the room, joined by Godfrey.

"It's unusual for you both to appear at once," I said. "Have you grown accustomed to your new face yet, Morgan?"

The man now known as Morgan smiled, his cheeks flushing. "A little. Mirrors aren't surprising me anymore, at least."

This man had once been Oscar Weston. He'd changed his name and appearance in exchange for being excluded from the purge.

"Excellent. Impressive work, Godfrey."

"Heavens, I should be the one thanking you," Godfrey replied. "You've inspired me to use my magic in ways I never would've dreamed of on my own."

Morgan's face had been altered through Godfrey's magic. The head mage had

never used his magic on other people before, but the need for changing Oscar's appearance caused him to realize it might be possible. No doubt he'd thought something along the lines of, *I can modify matter—aren't humans also made up of matter?* The results were quite impressive. Morgan looked nothing like Oscar, and he could now enjoy working as Gilbert's assistant.

Anita also worked for Gilbert now, still as determined as ever to save the captured children. Our working relationship with Étoile had continued, and they sent any struggling magical children to us to keep in government custody.

"So, what brings you to me today?"

"Paperwork. I've got a bunch to hand off," Morgan said.

"Ah, I see. I'll be sure to read through it."

"Thank you."

He put the papers on my desk, where a mountain of documents awaited me.

"Goodness, there's a lot," Godfrey remarked.

"You should see his desk, or even Gilbert's," I replied. "My stack of documents is a cute little pile in comparison."

Morgan sulked a bit in response. "It's what I deserve. As the only survivor of my house, I must give my all for the sake of the kingdom."

"Is it hard for you?" I asked him.

"I wouldn't dare say that. This is my punishment—that is all."

"Mm."

"And frankly, I'm just not that great at going through documents very quickly. My apologies for not being good enough."

"No need to apologize. Just do your best—that's all that can be done. Gilbert's had so many papers to sift through that he's barely had the time to give me a basic report today."

"The purge of the three houses affected many lives," Morgan said. "That Your

Majesty and Gilbert were able to reduce the ensuing chaos to such a degree is truly remarkable."

"It was only possible through extensive preparation. The aftermath of having purged three political powerhouses is quite severe, but we will get through this if we keep putting in the effort."

I then gave Morgan various orders related to regional governance. My experience with the aftermath of House Radford made this part go rather smoothly.

"I understand you must feel intimidated, but we have to finalize this as quickly as possible. Our government needs to be optimized, connected, and properly situated. If not, then we won't be able to wage war or rescue the children."

Morgan nodded. "Understandable, Your Majesty. Having a nation fully prepared and perfectly organized is ideal when threatened by an enemy nation."

"Yes, but we barely have any time. As we speak, Tommy's espionage is accelerating the mayhem unfolding in Celden."

"The sooner Celden makes its move, the sooner we can save the children," Godfrey said, staring up at the ceiling. "Still, it would be great if Ausgrid could breathe for a moment. Oh, what a contradictory pair of desires. I knew it'd be like this when we first formulated our plan, but it bothers me all the same."

"We've gone off topic," I said. "Godfrey, what is it you wanted to ask of me?"

"I will be away for some time during my next mission," he replied. "I'm just here to say goodbye."

"Ah. I doubt anything bad will happen to someone as skilled as yourself, but you have my blessing."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Morgan, Godfrey—if you were to learn of a method to erase magic from this

world, would you do it?"

They picked up on my intentions right away.

"I see no reason to give up my magic," Morgan said. "It is a useful tool. It is not inherently good or evil. Some may misuse the gift of magic, but it would be tragic to suppress *all* magic because of a few malefactors."

His words rang true. Whether magic was used for good or evil was up to the wielder. Those who abused it were the problem, not the magic itself. Placing the weight of all that magic represented solely upon magic itself was misguided. Doing so allowed people to blame magic for their own wrongdoings.

"Personally, I think we could do without magic," Godfrey said.

Godfrey's stance was the opposite of Morgan's. It was surprising to hear this from the head mage, to say the least.

"Academically, I find it fascinating, and a part of me does wish for it to exist. But magic has made society stagnant. I don't believe we need it. All hell would break loose for a while if it vanished all at once, but things would balance out eventually. People would survive."

Perhaps his title as head mage was precisely why his argument held so much weight. He got to the heart of the matter more sincerely than Celden ever could.

"I see. Thank you both. I greatly value your input."

"It was no trouble, Your Majesty. Anyway, we need to get going."

And so they left.

I found myself in the hidden room once again.

Muttering to myself, I looked upon Wilhelm's sleeping form. "I have no right to be here, and yet... Just a little longer. Just a little longer, and you'll be awake again."

All who opposed me had perished, but the kingdom's political situation had yet to stabilize. More than anything, I did not wish for Wilhelm to see me caked in blood while there was still more to shed.

"I had the help of so many people..."

Originally, I'd intended to settle the score all on my own, even if it cost me my life. I had made arrangements for the government to run regardless of whether I died, and those plans helped reduce the impact of the mass political purge. Thanks to my foresight, we were able to avoid the most critical problems.

For example, we didn't have to expel or execute any bureaucrats this time around. House Radford's officials had rebelled against us once before, refusing to work and withholding the necessary manpower for the government to function. We'd made preparations to ensure something like that could never happen again, and those loyal to me understood what to do in the unlikely event that it did.

The Radford situation had also taught me how to handle regional governance. Setting up their region to be managed directly by the crown gave us the tools and knowledge to apply the same method to other regions. The most important part was assigning the right people to the right positions. I granted Gilbert all the authority he needed, and in turn, he made sure everyone he hired was the best of the best. That convinced me that everything would be fine, no matter what happened.

Even so, the moment I learned of Celden's involvement, I realized I couldn't see my plans through on my own—and that was a bitter pill to swallow. It was simply irresponsible to insist I could handle problems abroad on top of everything happening domestically. Furthermore, I could not overlook the persecution of my fellow mages.

I was haunted by memories of a horrible dream. The mages of this world were much like Alicia and me in our youth. Those overwhelmed by their own magic, like me. Those whose magic ran amok after the abuse of others, like Alicia—an

innocent girl who'd suffered so much heartbreak.

What difference was there between mages and non-mages? We were one and the same. And yet, our lives were dictated by the magic we wielded. We were hated by those around us. We were hurt. But magic itself was not to blame for this. Magic was merely its own unique power, neither good nor evil.

Humans themselves were too naive, too ignorant; that was all. Learning of this prejudice did not fill me with sadness like Godfrey thought. It exhausted me, made me give up on humanity. I could not handle a world that tolerated violent oppression. The first king of Ausgrid must have believed in magic's potential, with mages living peacefully with non-magical people, hence the founding of this kingdom. He believed that things would change one day, and he'd tried to buy time till that day came.

But nothing had changed, so I decided to put this miserable reality to an end. I could do it with the power of the Sacred Swords. To that end, I had refrained from using magic too much when dealing with the houses, instead relying on the people around me. It was for the best.

"I've been guided by so many people," I said. "How shameful of me to realize that this late..."

I only arrived here by working together with countless people. Not as pawns but as equals. The realization shook me to my core.

"But, you see...the more I feel the warmth of those around me, the less I can find forgiveness in my heart for the treasonous cruelty of the human mind. How can one allow it to exist?"

I truly did wish to become a kind person, surrounded by the smiles of a peaceful world—but I couldn't. The more I saw how kind people could be, the more I questioned everything. Why did I have to part ways with the kindness of the world? Why did I lose those dear to me? Why were there people who wouldn't allow kindness to thrive? Why were those born with magic hated simply for existing?

The more I questioned the world, the more tainted my heart became. The more I experienced kindness, the more familiar I became with the darkness inside me.

I no longer saw the Great Five at the end of my path—the very world that allowed these injustices to thrive became the target of my hatred. A part of me wished for everyone's happiness, but my exasperation at the state of humanity was far more pronounced.

"I need you to sleep a little longer. My face must look hideous right now."

Such dark thoughts surely showed in my expression. I never wanted him to see me like this. No, he needed to picture me in my wedding dress, the one lovingly crafted by Alicia. I would rather he remember me that way forever than see how far I'd fallen.

"Your Majesty, the designer has arrived," I heard Alicia say, prompting me to close my book.

"Oh, really?" I replied. "You did well to find me, Alicia."

"You do love the library."

"I suppose I do. It is relaxing to spend time here."

For a shut-in like me, this was one of the few places I could enjoy myself.

"So, what sort of designer is this?" I asked.

"The one who will make your Genesis Festival dress. You've been too busy for a standard appointment, but we're running out of time! Production needs to start soon!"

"A dress? Hmm..." I put the book away and approached Alicia. "I'll entrust the entire task to the designer, then. My measurements haven't changed in the slightest, so they shouldn't have any trouble crafting something without my input."

Alicia was rather disappointed to hear this. She always did love to sew dresses.

"In exchange, might I ask if you have made any arrangements for the rest of the day, Alicia?"

"Any plans? Just work..."

"Then it's decided!" I said. "We're taking a walk."

"A w-walk?! You're going outside, Your Majesty?"

"I am. Now's as good a time as any. Can you help me get changed?"

"Um, shouldn't we bring some guards with us?"

"It will be fine," I said, pushing her along. "Now, let's get going."

We got our things together and left the palace. As soon as we were outside the walls, I had a good stretch.

"Thanks for your help, Alicia. It's fortunate that you are friends with the gate guardian."

Alicia was unusually nervous, looking left and right.

"Relax," I said. "We'll be fine."

"But, Your Majesty, we have no guards with us. If anything were to happen to you, I—"

"Your concern is appreciated, but don't worry. Your deft hands dressed me up quite well."

"Still..."

"More importantly, we *finally* get to have our stroll around town! I've been looking forward to this for so long."

Alicia was confused. "What do you mean, 'our stroll'?"

I gasped. I'd been referring to the promise we made on my birthday eleven years ago. Because of her amnesia, she wouldn't know what I meant. It was

only natural she would be puzzled by it.

"I mean, you've talked so much about what goes on outside the palace, right?" I said. "I've been curious about exploring the capital with you for some time now."

"It's an honor, Your Majesty."

"So how about we enjoy ourselves? Don't be so formal with me. Call me 'Lux' while we are out."

We departed after I gave my order. I was in such a good mood that I ended up walking at a rather brisk pace. Alicia looked like she wanted to say more, but she followed my lead. We ended up crossing quite the distance. The central streets of the capital bustled with activity.

"There's an awful lot of people around so late in the evening," I said.

"We should be safe as long as we avoid the alleyways."

"Good to know."

Brian's ideas to enhance security around town seemed to be paying off. I made a note to commend him for it later. We looked around some more, and one storefront in particular caught my eye.

"The prices seem a tad higher than I remember."

"They sure are," Alicia said. "Prices have been rising lately, especially the price of food."

It was likely due to rumors about the oncoming war. To manipulate prices so brazenly was despicable. But I was here to enjoy leisure time with Alicia—my duties could come later.

Once we'd had our fill, I turned to Alicia with a smile. "I had so much fun today."

"Me too, Your Majesty!"

"Now, now, dear. Don't say it so loudly, lest you—"

In that moment, a strong gust of wind blew past us, catching my shawl and sending it flying. Alicia took off after it.

"Oh..."

The memory of how I almost lost her eleven years ago burst into my mind, sending shivers down my spine. Perhaps seeing her run so fast for the first time in ages reminded me of that fateful day.

No! Alicia, don't go!

My throat locked up; I couldn't form words. I stood as still as a statue, the sharp gusts of wind piercing through me. Urgency rattled through my mind. *I can't leave her alone*. I thought back on our conversation, deciding she must have entered a nearby alleyway. I dashed after her.

Alicia was in the alley, and a little boy stood behind her. Three brusque men surrounded her, fixing her with sinister glares.

"What is going on here?" I demanded.

"Oh! S-sorry, I ran into this boy after I grabbed your shawl..." Alicia's worried response was adorable.

I approached her, ignoring the boy and the three men. "Are you all right? No injuries?"

"Y-yes, I'm fine. You can leave me here and go back..."

"You know I would never leave you." I stepped in front of her, glaring at the boorish men. "Now then, would you gentlemen tell me what business you have with her?"

"We have no business with this woman! We just want the brat!"

I ventured a glance behind me, making sure to keep my guard up. The little boy quaked with fear, poking his head out around her legs.

I sighed, then captured the ruffians' gazes once more. "I'm sorry, but this boy is under my care now. So, again, what business do you have here?"

"This ain't about business. That little rat stole our money!"

The child averted his eyes when the men glared at him. I sighed a second time and pulled coins out of my purse. "Sorry about that."

The pocket money was enough for them to leave peacefully and quietly.

Honestly, I'd expected them to make more demands after I presented the cash.

Maybe they weren't terrible people after all.

"The bad men are gone now," I told the little boy. "You should go on home now. Learn from this and do better, all right?"

The child became flustered and muttered something under his breath.

"What was that?"

"I said, I don't have a home to go back to!" he shouted. Tears welled in his eyes as he stared up at me.

Alicia crouched down to his level. "Goodness. Did you have a fight with your parents?"

"No! I'm... I have magic!"

"Ahh, do you now?" I heaved yet another sigh, startling him. "Relax. Alicia and I are mages too."

"You're lying!"

"I am not. See?"

I let out a little bit of my magic, which he quickly recognized. His tears flowed freely.

"Judging by your appearance, I take it it's been some time since you were disowned. How have you made it this far?"

"I came to the capital after my village banished me," the boy explained. "I thought maybe there'd be some way a kid like me could make it, but nobody would hire me. Stealing is how I survive."

"Is that so?" I picked the child up, walking off with him in my arms.

Alicia's eyes nearly popped out of her head. "Wh-what are you doing, Your Majesty?!"

"You will come with me," I told the boy. "I will feed you and teach you. As your patron, I will provide you shelter, education, and magic practice. You will hone your skills and grow into a man who can care for himself. Fret not, for I will never abandon you. I will look after you until you no longer need my assistance. And if I ever lose the ability to care for you, I will ensure my associates will."

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"Wh-why...?"
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"Because I can't stand this," I muttered.

The boy didn't understand, flailing in my arms.

"If my kindness doesn't feel real to you, then pay me back later. I will wait as long as I must."

The boy calmed down, and we returned the way we came.

At the sight of the palace gates, he panicked again. "Wait, huh?! Wh-where are we going?!"

"Where? Why, right there," I said, pointing directly at the palace.

"Huh?"

"That's my house."

"Wha ...?"

We entered the palace, with the boy stunned into silence. Unfortunately, I had to reveal my identity to the guards in order to let the boy in. The guards were quite unhappy that I'd snuck off without protection. *Oh well.* Their nagging honestly amused me.

I leaned close to Alicia and whispered in her ear, "That was so much fun. How strange..."

"I feel the same. I loved our time together," Alicia whispered back.

A genuine smile spread on my face as I remembered her old self, along with our time together today.

"Is it time?"

Tommy smiled wryly at my question. "Time for what? Is this about the Celden Republic?"

"Yes."

"Then yeah, it's time. They'll make their move today or tomorrow. The flames of the public's frustrations can't be tamped down any longer."

"Ah yes, I believe their motto is 'The Demon Lord must fall,' correct?" I couldn't help but laugh at the ridiculous title.

"It is kind of absurd," Tommy said, stifling a chuckle himself. "Celden has deemed Ausgrid to be a country of devils ruled by an evil demon lord, and everyone's raring for war. The results of Celden's magic research will probably manifest in the upcoming battles."

"Ahh, yes, that's true. But the fact that they so brazenly refer to me as a demon lord just cracks me up!" I giggled.

"You like your new nickname, huh?"

"Maybe a little."

Right then, Gilbert burst into the room. "The Celden Republic has declared war!"

"Finally. What is their statement?"

"'We shall save the citizens of the Federal Kingdom of Ausgrid from the heartless Demon Lord."

"Just as we predicted, Tommy."

"Everyone is in position."

"Good. Let us begin."

I summoned the Sacred Sword of Wisdom. Tommy and his subordinate Dudley watched me intently. They nodded as I looked at them.

"Citizens of Ausgrid. This is Luxeria von Ausgrid, the thirty-eighth ruler of the kingdom."

With the Sword of Wisdom amplifying Tommy and Dudley's combined magic, I was able to project my voice across the entire kingdom.

"Our kingdom was founded and forged by magic. The ruler wields the Sacred Swords to protect Ausgrid's beloved citizens with sincerity and wisdom. We have become a nation of great honor, which we pray will last through eternity. The swords shall thus be handed down to each new ruler."

This was a direct quote from the opening of *The Genesis of Ausgrid*, the very book I jokingly referred to as my ideal utopia.

"You've all done well to answer the call. The ruler of each generation has supported those born with or without magic, and the bond between the two has protected our nation's honor. Our kingdom has survived alongside magic itself. It is a country where those with magic can live in peace among those without it. I hold the history we share with great pride, and I hope that you do as well."

Nobody could respond to me; I was essentially thinking out loud. I paused, took in a deep breath, and resumed my speech.

"Today, the Celden Republic has declared war on the Federal Kingdom of Ausgrid. They claim they want to free Ausgrid from an unjust ruler, but the true reason for invading our land is their fear of the Sacred Swords and their fear of magic itself."

As I spoke, I wondered how the public was reacting to this news.

"You may know someone who is afraid of magic, much like the people of Celden. That is a natural fear to have, but I ask all of those listening to remember that our nation was founded on magic."

I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply.

"Soldiers of the Kingdom's Army! Mages loyal to the palace! I grant you all permission to destroy our enemy, the Celden Republic!"

After my speech ended, I had Dudley send me and Tommy to the border of our nation using Transfer. Our destination was atop a hill, giving us a good vantage point to observe the battlefield. As I had ordered, the mages began intercepting the would-be invaders from Celden's army. Magic flew across the field as our soldiers encroached on theirs.

"Ha ha ha!"

Godfrey's laughter was loud enough to be heard above the commotion. He had fewer troops than Celden—by all means, he should've been struggling. Perhaps the challenge was what gave him so much pleasure.

I couldn't afford to rest on my laurels, so I gave my next orders. "Tommy, Dudley, go on."

Once they did as I said, I summoned the Sacred Swords. Five brilliant colors floated in the sky.

"It's the Demon Lord!" a soldier cried.

I couldn't help but crack a sinister grin, acting the part of a great villain in a fairy tale. Frankly, I wished I'd taken the time to dress the part as well.

Of the five blades, I grasped the Sword of Honor.

"To the ruler, the honor of victory. To those opposing the ruler, decay."

The power of the Sacred Sword of Honor was the strongest spear and the sturdiest shield. With a gentle flick of my wrist, a jade-colored wave flew from the blade and tore through a number of Celdenian soldiers. All my allies stood awestruck at the carnage—except for Godfrey.

"H-how incredible!"

Godfrey was more fascinated with the Sacred Sword itself rather than what I

did with it. Holding back a chuckle, I reached upward with my free hand and grasped a blade of radiant amber. With both swords in hand, I pointed them toward the ground.

I grunted with the effort. Using two swords at once took more magic than I anticipated, nearly sending me to my knees. I pushed past it and continued to channel my power. Eventually, I managed to conjure a transparent shield that surrounded all of Ausgrid, bathing it in a jade and amber glow. Such luminescence was proof of the Sacred Swords' might. Tommy's group and Godfrey must have seen the magical barrier; they took it as a signal to begin their operations.

"Ugh!"

Fatigue and dizziness assailed me in tandem. Even with the Sacred Swords supporting my weight, a great unease welled up inside me and forced me to double over. I held my hand up to my mouth, trying to hold back the blood that threatened to gush forth—but I couldn't. Scarlet spilled from my lips, staining my hand. It seemed my life might end sooner than I'd anticipated, but I could not die here. After wiping the blood on my dress, I looked up to see a scene playing out in the sky. Looks like Tommy's team was successful.

In a world where televisions did not exist, the very idea of a recorded moving image would be shocking for anyone to witness. People across the nation would no doubt gawk at the projected images in the sky with mouths agape.

The moving picture was produced by a trio of Light mages who had teamed up with Tommy and Dudley. It showed a research institute where children were being held against their will. Our own agents stood by outside before rushing in. Scenes across the lab were shown: a room for practicing magic, a room to study mages, a room where the children slept. My agents swept each and every one, taking down the adults and rescuing the children one by one.

The children had wasted away to the point that their despair no longer reached their vacant eyes. The sight was horrific, one the average person

couldn't bear to watch. But until every child was saved, the scene would continue to play in the sky.

Once the images faded, Tommy and Dudley appeared by my side.

"As you saw, the children have been secured," Dudley reported.

"Where are they now?" I asked.

"In the royal palace's infirmary."

"Excellent," I said. "Tommy?"

Tommy nodded in response, anticipating my request. I began to speak once I confirmed that his magic was up and running again.

"Attention, Citizens of Celden, as well as other neighboring nations: I am the thirty-eighth ruler of the Federal Kingdom of Ausgrid, Luxeria von Ausgrid. You have all now borne witness to Celden's heinous secret. Despite their claims that magic is the power of the devil, they forcefully captured child mages from other nations and performed brutal, inhumane experiments on them. Everything you saw was true."

The Celdenian soldiers became absorbed in my speech, with some reeling in disbelief.

"Your leader claims he wishes to dethrone a vicious tyrant. Oh, dear ruler of Celden, you simply weren't satisfied with abducting our children, were you? You wanted to take my entire kingdom, one where so many mages live."

Their ruler was likely furious and denying my words even now. But he could not be heard, and he never would be. My words would become the truth—not just to the people of Celden but to other nations as well.

"I have activated magic that will repel all attacks. You are no longer able to invade Ausgrid. You are free to confirm if I am lying or not, if you so dare."

My breathing became heavier and heavier as I strained to speak.

"This battle is over. To the troops of Celden, I demand that you leave. Failure

to do so will result in your annihilation."

"Y-you monster!" an enemy soldier screamed.

I laughed. "You think I am the monster? You insist your nation, which engaged in child trafficking, is the innocent one? How dare you say that when we were the ones who rescued the children from a wicked fate!"

The soldiers fell silent.

"Submit to me. Admit my power is the greatest of all, for I have ended Celden's attempt at war. Even if you have mages on your side, my victory is assured. Ruler of Celden, this battle no longer means anything. Withdraw your troops immediately!"

Despite my speech, some Celdenian soldiers ran in my direction. Facing them, I swung the Sacred Sword of Honor. A jade-colored wave ripped through one soldier, killing him instantly. The remaining Celdenian soldiers went pale in the face.

"Leave this place! Now!" I yelled.

They heeded my command and fled, screaming.

"Are you sure this is all right, Your Majesty?" Tommy asked, concerned.

"I fail to see a problem."

"The way you confronted them just... I don't know. Those who hate mages are no doubt going to direct their hatred toward you now."

"True, but I will accept that."

A coughing fit overtook me. *Not now. I need to last a little longer. Please,* I begged. But my plea went unheard. My vision went dark, and I shivered uncontrollably.

"Wha—?! Are you all right?!" Tommy cried.

The last of my strength gave out, and I fell to the ground.

I was so close.

Tommy ran over and gathered me into his arms. "We need to get back to the palace, now! Oh, hell, the Sword of Wisdom's power is fading too! Dudley, get a medic! We have one at the garrison, right?! Get Godfrey too!"

"Yes, sir!" Dudley replied, acting immediately.

My coughing would not cease, and my consciousness began to fade. The last thing I saw was my own blood flying out of my mouth.

Alicia tidied the hidden room as she usually did, trying to calm herself. No amount of effort could keep her from worrying about the queen. She desperately wished to rush to her side.

"Will Her Majesty be okay?" she wondered aloud as she worked.

Last time they spoke, she almost felt like the queen was about to go somewhere far, far away. Perhaps she was just anxious. No matter how much Alicia was told everything would be all right, she couldn't bring herself to believe it.

Suddenly, a pain erupted in her chest.

Alicia gasped. A terrifying power welled up within her, running rampant through her body. It was as though her blood had all turned to scalding-hot water, and the pain made her seize up on the spot.

This is magic, but it isn't my magic. Whose is it?! Alicia thought. Oh, right, it's that magic. The same magic I felt in the town. The beautiful, magnificent, and terrifying magic that saved my life.

"Ghk, aaah!"

The magic is fading. Why? Did something happen to her?! No, no. I can't lose her. I can't! Back then, I—

"Augh... Aaaahhh!"

Pain laced Alicia's mind as scenes she'd never seen before flashed before her

eyes. She fell to her knees, grasping her head in confusion as she tried to escape the agony.

"These...these are my memories!"

Something snapped inside Alicia. The memories of those days she spent in the tower with Luxeria returned, as well memories predating even that.

The pain finally stopped. She raised her head, noticing movement in the corner of her eye.

"Master Wilhelm... You're awake."

Wilhelm, still a bit groggy, stood in front of her. "You are...?"

"Apologies, milord. I am Alicia, lady-in-waiting to Queen Luxeria."

"Oh, so you must be..."

Seemingly understanding what he was getting at, she nodded. "The Sword of Eternity's power within me has vanished," Alicia said. "And you waking up can only mean that the Sword of Love has also stopped working..."

"Something must have happened to Luxeria to sever our ties to the swords," Wilhelm replied.

"I knew it! We can't stay here. She needs our help, now!"

"That she does. Is she currently at the Celdenian border?"

"How do you know about Celden?" Alicia asked.

"I was aware the whole time I slept," Wilhelm explained. "What's more important is finding her! Do you know where she is?"

"N-no, not particularly," Alicia admitted.

"Damn."

"I can sense the general area, though. It's faint, but I do feel her magic still!"

"Great! Then let's get moving."

"How?"

"I don't have the time to explain, just follow me."

"O-okay. Please, take me to her!"

They rushed out of the room as fast as they could.

I didn't know how much time had passed. At some point, Godfrey and some medics had rushed to my side. I rose, trembling all over as I tried to focus my magic on summoning the swords. I could no longer feel their presence; it seemed I had finally reached my limit. But there was still one task left, so I couldn't give up now. Using the last of my strength, I forced the magic from my feeble body.

"Queen Luxeria! Please, stop this!"

A great mass of magic swelled around me, causing Tommy and the others to retreat. It was potent enough that they instinctively knew to keep their distance. All Tommy could do was yell at me in protest. I tilted my head to the side to face him. The Sacred Swords appeared before me, and I poured my magic into them to draw out their full power. More blood dripped from my mouth as I screamed with the effort of summoning the swords.

"Why are you doing this?! Why push yourself to this extent?" Tommy cried.

"I will seal all magic. Forever."

"How could you possibly—"

"I can. The power of all five swords together can make it a reality."

"The power of a dream," Godfrey explained as I coughed. "Love, wisdom, honor, sincerity, and eternity are themselves a fleeting dream. May the ruler dream with them,' as the saying goes. It is the power to bend our very reality."

"Precisely," I croaked. "Changing the past is too much, even for the swords, but I can change the present."

"Please reconsider, Your Majesty!" Godfrey implored me. "The cost of using

that power will be your own life!"

Tommy and Dudley approached me upon hearing Godfrey's declaration.

"Even so, I will not stop until all magic is sealed away."

"Why?!"

The light of the Sacred Swords began to converge.

"All the fear of magic in this world is now directed solely at me. This is my chance. As the most feared mage in the world, I will take the world's magic to the grave with me."

"That's not what I'm asking! Why do you feel you have to do this at all?!"

"I no longer have any faith left in me," I said.

"What?"

My consciousness began to drift away. The only words I had left came from a place deep in my heart.

"Faith in my fellow humans. You all saw Celden's laboratory, yes? The hatred toward mages. Magic itself is neither good nor evil, but the imperfect nature of humanity means it is used to breed tragedy. This world is unjust, broken. I will not allow it to continue this way."

Ever since I put up the barrier around my kingdom, the only sensations I felt were dizziness and nausea. I was on death's door. But if I was going to die, then I would take this broken world with me. It was my final act of vengeance, all born from my selfishness.

I could not resist a final smile. "Fear not. Even with magic sealed away, the barrier will stay. The Sword of Eternity has ensured that."

"Your Majesty, please stop!"

Just as I was about to pour my last into the Sacred Swords, a voice that didn't belong on the battlefield reached my ears. It was Alicia, joined by a man who should have been in a deep slumber. Shocked, I stopped at once. Glancing

around, I could see the others were more surprised than I was. The world went deathly silent, and everyone stood still. I could hardly blame them. To the rest of the world, Wilhelm was a dead man. Strangely enough, seeing so many people at a loss for words helped me regain my composure.

"Why are you...?"

"I've brought Master Wilhelm with me," Alicia declared.

"What?"

"You lost control of the Sacred Swords for a moment, and they ceased to affect us," Wilhelm said. "That's why I'm awake now."

"But even so, how?" I asked. "Why are you here?"

"I was aware of my surroundings during my long slumber," he told me. "Once we sensed that you were using the Sacred Swords, we discovered where you were and flew here at once. You know about my Gale magic, don't you? Manipulating the winds got us here in an instant."

"That's not what I'm asking," I replied, shaken.

"I asked him to bring me here," Alicia chimed in. "Your Majesty, I was afraid you were pushing yourself too hard. And I don't want to lose you, just as I wished to save you all those years ago."

She slowly approached me, begging me to save myself. Her words floored me more than Wilhelm's unexpected appearance. "You... Your memories have returned?"

"Yes. They returned when I wished for your safety above all else," she said.

"This can't be..."

"It's the truth, Your Majesty. It feels like the time we spent together in the tower was only yesterday. I remember how you were always so clumsy when you tried to clean, and you'd break things by accident. You taught me to study, and we went outside and played around the tower. I remember it all now."

"Oh, Alicia..."

"And that's why I can say this clearly: You're not responsible for the safety of every mage in the world. Yes, I know—my magic made people fear me. It isolated me. But without it, I never would have met you. And because of that, I'm so grateful I was born with magic."

Tears tracked down her cheeks. I could do nothing but watch as she cried.

Wilhelm came to my side. "She's right, you know," he said. "Even if you seal all magic away, people will find other things to hate about each other. Skin color, hair color, other characteristics... They'll use any excuse to be prejudiced. I don't believe that taking magic away from the world will truly help anyone. Humanity is cruel, and I don't see why you should throw your life away to save what can't be redeemed."

His words were cynical and harsh, but he wasn't wrong. The world of my previous life was much the same as this one. Human beings always found a way to discriminate, whether against people of other nations or their own countrymen.

"But if I don't do this, nothing will change!" I shouted. My body shook all over, refusing the balm of Wilhelm and Alicia's logic.

"Your right, it won't," Wilhelm said mercilessly. He stared straight into me, making it clear he didn't want me to throw my life away. "But nothing will change if you go through with this either. Just as it is wrong to blame all the world's evil solely on magic, it is also wrong to try and solve every issue in the world by taking it away. Magic cannot change the fundamental nature of humanity."

For an instant, my magic weakened. My resolve must have been wavering, even just a little.

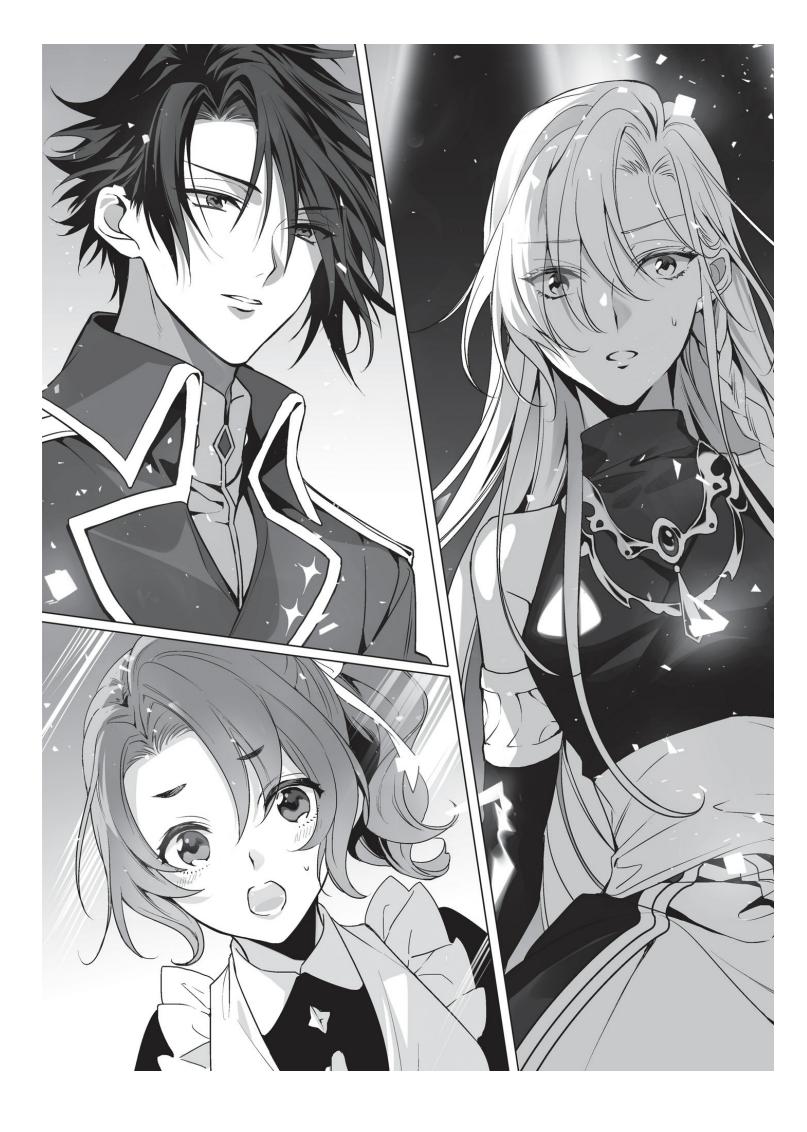
"Besides, you're not seeing the other paths available to you," Wilhelm continued. "Magic is far from the only power you command."

"What other powers are there? What am I without my magic?"

"Far more than you think. The Sacred Swords aren't your only weapons. You have an amazing ability to influence people, for example. It's a skill more valuable than even our national treasures."

"Influence, you say..."

"There's a limit to how much a single person can accomplish, no matter how much power they command. You needed the help of others to carry out your revenge, right? And help you they did," Wilhelm said with a gentle smile. "Education, diplomacy, justice—you excel in all these areas. Despite the despair this world has inflicted upon you, you've done your best to improve it, to build a foundation for the future. As long as you have your allies at your side, they will help. Myself included."



It was a childish dream, naive nonsense. If I'd had any time left, I might have gone down that path. I did not know. Pondering what-if scenarios was pointless. That notion of a future was pure fantasy to me, far from the misery and hatred festering within my soul. But a small part of me was willing to hear Wilhelm out. Perhaps that part of me still believed in the possibility of a better future, could see a ray of hope that had been blocked from my view by sheer despair.

He was correct—I did the right thing by seeking help from others. Without them, I would never have gotten this far. Every day, Gilbert worked until the late hours of the evening. He'd debate me on the correct methods of governing the kingdom, and he was my envoy across the land as needed. Tommy acted as my eyes and ears, sending me vital information. I'd even witnessed his two apprentices flourish under his mentorship. Godfrey did what he could to keep my broken body from falling apart. Aaron's skills helped me to wage war. All of them aided in carrying out my vision.

Perhaps if Wilhelm and I had forged these bonds together, we'd both be in a different place now. The thought made my heart ache, and I could no longer maintain my magic. All the strength in my body left me as I finally reached my limit.

My dizziness grew worse by the second. "Ah, this is no good."

Lacking the strength to stand, I tumbled to the ground.

"Your Majesty!"

Everyone ran to my side.

"Queen Luxeria!" Godfrey grabbed my hand. "You're in grave danger! We need to treat you now!" He ordered the medics to channel their magic into me and bring me medicine. But it was all for naught.

"Why?! You've stopped using your magic, so why is this still happening?!" Alicia screamed, her voice reverberating through my weary body.

"The moment Wil spoke, I was done for," I said. "Godfrey, it's all right..."

"What?!"

"My mana veins have b-been broken for a long time now. I'm...at my limit..."

Everyone was shocked. I was quite the actress to fool them for this long. The thought made me chuckle to myself.

"Being so absorbed in hatred was incredibly painful. Even with my revenge fulfilled, the flames of rage s-simply kept toiling away inside me, w-with nothing else to burn..."

My rampaging magic had torn me apart from the inside, making it harder and harder to speak.

"And yet...such a lovely dream ch-charmed my heart," I said, laughing humorlessly. "I was...unable to fulfill my wish in the end, but I feel so much lighter now. I am...satisfied. The hatred is st-still there...but I'm relieved I got the chance to see you all again. Even when I am gone, perhaps someone w-will destroy this unjust world. I leave it all in your capable hands..."

"No, no! Not now! I just remembered everything! Those wonderful days we spent together! This isn't fair!" Tears poured down Alicia's face. As much as I tried, I couldn't lift my hand to wipe them away. *How infuriating,* I thought. In these last moments, the only thing I wanted to see was her smile.

"I'm...so sorry. Thank you."

Then everything went dark.

"No! Your Majesty!" Alicia's voice echoed for miles.

Just as everyone began to sink into despair, Wilhelm's stern command broke the silence: "Give me your hand, Alicia!"

"Huh?"

"Hurry up and give it already!"

Baffled at his sudden outburst, Alicia let him grab hold of her hand. He guided

it just above Luxeria's body, then did the same with his other hand.

"You can feel it too, can't you?" he said. "The last remnants of magic that isn't your own."

"Magic that isn't mine...?" Alicia echoed.

"I can feel it. Most likely from having the Sacred Sword of Love inside me for so long. It's still in there." His fist glowed with a crimson light. "The power of Eternity still lies within you, doesn't it? That means the Sacred Sword's blessing is still there! It's how you've come this far!"

Alicia blinked back her tears as she renewed her resolve. "Let's do this!" she yelled, a beautiful amber light shining from her hand.

The magical light emanating from their hands melted into Luxeria.

"Will this save her?" Tommy asked Godfrey in a hushed voice, not wanting to interrupt Alicia or Wilhelm.

Godfrey's eyes were filled with unease and uncertainty. "I have no idea. But if the powers of Love and Eternity are still within them, then it may be possible. The Sacred Sword of Love protects those close to the wielder. The Sacred Sword of Eternity, as its name implies, can thwart even a fated demise."

"Then ...!"

"I've never once heard of someone outside the royal family using the power of the Sacred Swords," Godfrey went on. "I do not know how this will end. All we can do is pray that they succeed."

"Mm. Right."

Alicia and Wilhelm continued pouring magic into Luxeria, sweating and clenching their teeth in exertion. As the color drained from their faces, so too did the hopes of everyone present.

"Wake up, Luxeria! Don't leave us! You're the one that can save this twisted world! You may think your death will bring about my freedom, but I don't want that! How could I possibly be happy without you here?!" Wilhelm begged,

rallying against the futility of it all.

"Please, Your Majesty! Wake up! I didn't protect you all those years ago just so our lives would end like this! Even without my memories, I still loved you! I was so grateful that royalty like you considered a commoner like me to be her friend. Who could I possibly serve tea, if not you?! Who will be there to enjoy my sweets?! Please, I need you! I want to keep serving you!"

"My queen, please. You must wake up," Tommy said, adding to Alicia's plea. "I always thought it strange how you set up the government to function without you. Staying up late at night, writing instruction manuals and whatnot... You knew this day would come, didn't you?"

Tommy laughed dryly, as if he were mocking his own inability to realize Luxeria's intentions in time.

"But it's too soon for you to leave us just yet. You really think you can abandon us and leave your work behind?! The foundation you've made is still too brittle! Without you, we can't possibly build up the nation! Aren't you the prideful Demon Lord?! If you claim that title, then you must have the strength to live up to it!"

Godfrey followed with his own words. "Tommy is right. You are a fearsome woman. The merciless judgment you delivered upon our enemies was enough to make even our allies' blood run cold. But you were also incredibly kind. The warmth you showed, especially to Alicia, and the words of wisdom you gave us... It was difficult to understand you sometimes, but there is undeniable humanity within you. Our kingdom would not have pulled itself back together without someone like you. You ordered me before not to try to handle everything on my own. I understood that order quite well. So why are you doing the opposite?!"

"Come back, Luxeria!" Wilhelm yelled as loudly as he could.

As the last of the swords' magic seeped into Luxeria, something amazing happened: her eyes opened. Her vacant gaze regained its light bit by bit.

"Why am I still...?" Luxeria's question was barely even a whisper, yet it delighted everyone around her.

Godfrey and the military doctors rushed to her side immediately. "Pardon us, my queen."

"Hmm. We'll need to do a more thorough examination back at the capital, but her condition isn't critical."

"Your mana veins have been restored. They will surely break apart with misuse, but nonetheless, it's a miracle."

Upon the pronouncement of good health from the doctors, Alicia shoved everyone aside and hugged Luxeria. "Oh, Your Majesty!"

"So warm," Luxeria murmured. With her face squished and her hands trembling, she hugged Alicia back. "I'm alive...?"

"Yes, you are! I'll keep reading books with you and serving you tea forever!" Alicia said as her tears flowed freely.

"My dear Alicia..." Luxeria then looked at Wilhelm, her lady-in-waiting still in her arms.

"Welcome back, Ria," Wilhelm whispered into her ear. "Even bathed in the flames of hatred, your beauty shines like the full moon."

It was an echo of his confession from their youth, and his answer to all the times she'd mentioned not wanting to show her anger to him while he slept. His smile was that of a teasing little boy, unbefitting of his status and his age. She didn't want anyone else to see the gorgeous, sincere smile she gave back to him.

"We should return now. She needs rest."

"Dudley, can you send us back to the capital with Transfer? If we can't all go, can you at least ensure the queen makes it back?"

"Apologies, but that's not possible," Dudley said. "Without the Sacred Sword of Wisdom's blessing, I can't move even one person that far."

"And we certainly cannot allow her to use the swords right now," Tommy said.

"Agreed."

Wilhelm raised his hand. "In that case, I'll bring us back."

"You can handle this many people?"

"Not the whole army by any means, but just us? Yes, I should be able to handle it."

"Then I will stay behind. Someone needs to order the troops to regroup," said Godfrey. "Pardon me, Your Majesty, but we must part ways for now. I'll come to see you the moment I return to the capital." Godfrey left the scene in a hurry.

"Let's go," Wilhelm said, and they all floated into the air. Riding on the wind, they all returned to the capital.

The capital was even busier than usual. The brief wartime emergency combined with the queen collapsing on the battlefield had stirred considerable panic. Aside from the now-slumbering Luxeria, everyone focused solely on the tasks at hand. It wasn't entirely clear whether it was a stroke of fortune that the government was as capable of operating without the queen.

Then, the following night...

"Just where do you think you're going?" Alicia asked, her voice sharp.

Wilhelm stood in front of her. "Huh. I'm surprised you noticed I was here."

"My ability to use magic was restored along with my memories. Dichotomy can expand my vision to cover the whole palace. I'm aware of anyone who enters or leaves."

Her response took him aback. "You're pushing yourself a little too hard, aren't you?"

"Her Majesty is fast asleep," Alicia reminded him. "Staying on high alert for her sake is natural, don't you think?"

"Sure, but how many people go in and out of the palace every day? Wouldn't that overload your senses?"

"Not if I stay focused."

"You're tough as nails. I'm glad you're her lady-in-waiting."

"Don't change the subject. Where do you think you're going?" Alicia demanded.

Wilhelm's brow furrowed. "My presence will only complicate things for Luxeria. This is about the only chance I have to sneak out, given the ongoing conflict."

"Don't do that. It'll make her sad."

He forced a smile in response. "I'm a sinner, Alicia. Nothing can change that fact."

"But the sins of your house lay at your parents' feet, do they not?"

"That may be so, but the sins of one's house are a shared burden. I should be dead right now."

"The queen didn't want that, or else she wouldn't have kept you alive with the Sacred Sword of Love," said a voice not belonging to either Wilhelm or Alicia. "If the sword didn't kill you, then it means you've got the grace and mercy of the ruler."

"Tommy!"

Once Alicia said his name, Tommy appeared from the shadows.

"Ah. Right, Lord Alcott mentioned that at some point," Wilhelm said. "I never knew that being struck by a Sacred Sword held that sort of meaning."

"Hm? You really never knew?" Tommy asked.

"I didn't. My family never educated me on the history of the swords."

"Yet you let one pierce you with a smile? Either you've got some real guts, or you're a twisted guy."

"I didn't put any thought into it. It was the only option left to me. I guess I was calm because I knew I had done everything I could."

"Still, losing you made the queen so sad and hurt. Don't ever sadden her again, especially over any self-perceived sins."

"Whether I truly committed any sins doesn't matter. I have no place here in the palace," Wilhelm said. "The sins of my family will follow me wherever I go. 'Oh, look, it's the son of House Radford, a family of treasonous vermin.' That's what anyone who sees me will think."

"Well..."

"Also, the royal family has eliminated the Great Five's political power. Someone like me, a symbol of the old order, has no business being here."

Once more, he turned to leave.

"Don't you love her?!" cried Alicia as she watched Wilhelm walk away. "I'm not good enough for her! I can't stay in her heart like you have!"

"Don't be so harsh on yourself. The warmth in her face when she spends time with you is as plain as day."

"But—"

"I love her," Wilhelm murmured. Though quiet, his admission echoed through the darkness. "But there are some things that love cannot overcome."

With those last words, he vanished from the room. Alicia could only wail in sadness, tears flowing all the while.

"Guess there wasn't any stopping him," said Tommy, trying to comfort her.

"I'm just...thinking about how sad this will make her..."

"You did everything you could. But Wilhelm wasn't wrong."

"Why? Why must she continue to suffer?"

"That's what it means to rule a nation, and I'm sure the queen knows that. She'll probably go back to work once she's feeling better."

Tommy's cold words only made Alicia cry harder. "That's... No. It's too much! Sacrificing your own happiness for the sake of other people, never allowing yourself to cry or grieve... That's misery! I don't want her to lose anything else in her life. She shouldn't have to be sad. Something this unfair shouldn't be happening to her."

Tommy then looked over his shoulder. "And there you have it, Your Majesty."

"Huh?! Your Majesty?" Alicia stepped forward and saw Luxeria sitting down, hidden in the shadows. "Why are you here?"

Luxeria offered no answer. Alicia sobbed, tears trickling down her cheeks.

"She wished to accompany you, and I followed along to watch over her," Tommy said.

"I-I see..." Alicia sat down, locking eyes with Luxeria. The queen beckoned her to come closer, so Alicia bent down to embrace her.

"Thank you, Alicia."

Alicia continued to cry, spurred on by the queen's gratitude. "B-but I wasn't able to do anything. I don't deserve your thanks..."

"Not true. Seeing how passionate you are made me very, very happy."

"Oh, Your Majesty..."

Luxeria wrapped her arms around Alicia. "I love him too, and I wanted to stop him from leaving. But he's right. There simply are some things love cannot overcome." Tears welled up in her big, beautiful eyes, making them shine like jewels.

Alicia could do little but softly call out for her again through the tears.

"Now that I've survived, my duty is to the crown. That wonderful dream Wil spoke of is something I want to make a reality. I will make it real. I must, or else

I will fall into despair once again—I know it. I must do what is needed of me as queen. And because of that, Wil and I cannot be together. His situation is as complicated as he said." Luxeria raised her head. Despite her somber words, the shadow of despair hadn't reached her eyes. "But I will not give up. Even in the face of this harsh reality, I agree with you, Alicia. I will not lose anything else!"

As the two held each other, Tommy approached. "Well, there you have it. I, for one, plan to do what the queen asks of me," he said, understanding their wishes.

"I will too. I will follow you wherever you go, Your Majesty." Alicia finally smiled, fully agreeing with Tommy.

"Will you two lend me your strength going forward?" Luxeria asked.

"Of course."

"Yes!"

The queen smiled, relieved to hear their replies.

Several months passed. Mountains upon mountains of work awaited me at the royal palace.

The war ended in Celden's capitulation, as expected. They simply lacked the means to keep fighting. Many of their soldiers were killed, and they wasted much of their national resources on the effort. Discontent bubbled up from Celdenian civilians, and the political situation threatened to boil over. The friction between the citizens and the state was about to ignite.

Reactions from other nations were also difficult for Ausgrid to deal with, particularly ones who shared friendly relations with the Celden Republic. Celden's own actions put these countries in a tough position; even their staunchest allies were unsure of how to respond. This led to Celden being unable to sustain the war for long, and they essentially had to offer their

unconditional surrender to end the fighting.

After the war was over, the royal palace went back to cleaning up after the Great Five.

"A pleasure to see you safe and sound, Queen Luxeria," Gilbert said with an uncharacteristic smile, passing several documents to me. The image of his grin was burned into my mind, even as I devoted myself to more work.

"Gilbert, are you tired? Normally you would never show your feelings so plainly," I said.

"I suppose I must be."

He seemed aware, at least, given the bitter smile he sported. He looked better off than Morgan and Brian, who stood at his side.

"I know it's not my place to say this, but the three of you really should get some rest. It'll help your efficiency."

"Well... Yes, that's true."

I shuffled through the documents they'd handed me as we talked. "The framework of our postwar negotiations has further solidified. All we need to do now is refine some points and open diplomatic channels. As far as domestic matters go... Regarding phase one of our reforms, we have expelled the rest of the bureaucrats who benefited from the Great Five's corruption. We are also mostly finished converting their regional governances into ones controlled by the crown. That should finish up in about a month or two. A single day of relaxation shouldn't affect operations much at all."

"I suppose you're right, Your Majesty."

"I know I am. And once phase one has finished, we will truly be rid of the rats that infested this kingdom. You should be able to relax a bit more then. Your team should take turns with who goes on breaks once things have been settled."

"No buts," I insisted. "Keep yourself in peak condition so you may continue to serve me."

"A-all right, Your Majesty. Thank you!"

"Now then. I plan to present new policies at the next meeting," I said.

"For what?"

"First off, establishing a school. This is nonnegotiable."

They were initially confused to hear this, but Gilbert seemed to understand my idea quickly enough. "What's the plan?"

"I would like a school where children can learn about magic from a young age."

"Ooh. So you wish to create a proper place of learning, rather than a research institute?"

"Correct. I want to establish a school to educate children on the proper handling of magic to reduce the incidents of magic running rampant."

"A school made just for mages could feed prejudice among the public."

"I agree," I replied. "Therefore, I propose the school should accept children without magic as well."

"Hmm. But wouldn't that clash with the stated goal of your school?"

"That's easy enough to solve," Brian interjected. "Perhaps we should let the students choose which courses they wish to take? Mages can take classes related to magic, and those without magic can focus more on general academics. Would that be sufficient?"

"A good idea. A compromise should be possible as long as we determine which courses should be required of both parties. That way we can have them study together while having some freedom in what other courses to take."

"The ultimate goal of this school project is to reduce prejudice toward mages, right?" Morgan piped up.

I tilted my head. "No. My ultimate goal is for people to feel free to use magic in their daily lives as if it were completely normal, to the benefit of our nation."

"I see," Morgan replied. "Then it would be wise to include courses designed to train students in practical labor."

"Another sound proposal," I told him. "But we could also just make an institution specifically designed for that."

"We must decide on what courses will be covered, as well as the scale of the institution. Research must be done on how many schools we can open across the nation, as well as how much it would cost to run them."

"Yes, I know."

Morgan nodded. "Good. Then I will write down what we discussed into a formal proposal and hand it off to you for confirmation."

"Understood. Thank you."

"Mm-hmm."

After the three of them left, Alicia entered the room, all smiles.

"You'll be taking a break too, right, Your Majesty?"

"Um, ahh..." I averted my gaze.

"You will, riiight? It'd be a real problem for everyone if you overworked yourself again, you know."

The pressure was enough to make me sigh. "Fine. I just can't say no to you, Alicia."

My lady-in-waiting was delighted to hear it.

Epilogue

THREE YEARS LATER...

"Finally."

I had found my way to him.

Wil gaped at me in surprise, eyes wide. "Why are you here?"

"Did you forget who I am?" I shot back. "I have many friends who helped me find you."

"Right. I shouldn't have asked."

"Domestic affairs have finally stabilized," I told him.

"So I've heard. Your reputation precedes you, even this far away from the capital."

"Hopefully for the right reasons."

He laughed at that.

"I refuse to give up anything more," I said, reaching for him. "And I will not let go of you."

"That's nice, but—"

"Don't say you can't because you were the heir to House Radford. I've made sure your accomplishments are well known. You're the queen's savior, the one who prevented her assassination at the hand of Lord Radford."

"You flatter me."

"And you don't value yourself enough," I chided him. "By the way, you seem to have been quite busy around here."

Wil had moved to a fairly run-down countryside village far away from the capital. Ever since his arrival, it flourished to the point of becoming unrecognizable. His guidance led to the construction of roads and enhanced

public safety. He was able to transform this town from a sleepy hamlet into an important regional trading hub. He even spent time ensuring operations would remain stable without his presence. The more the town prospered, the more renowned his name became.

"Perhaps it would be best if you stayed here, but I refuse to give up. With you by my side, I'd be able to try harder than ever before." Even as I said this, he didn't take my hand. I was wholly confident I could convince him at first, but now the anxiety started to creep in.

Had he found a new love since we last met? Our marriage was political, so perhaps he realized he felt nothing for me during our time apart. The longer I held out my hand, the more nervous I became.

"I love you. And I want to know more about you," I said. "So please, let us walk together in life."

What would I do if he rejected me now? After everything I just said, if he admitted to not loving me, I would have to give up.

"Luxeria..." He said my name with a stern look on his face. I braced myself for the worst possible answer.

Instead, he gently grasped my hand.



"I love you too. Please, stay by my side."

I no longer had any idea what to say. Even though it was precisely what I wanted to hear, I was not prepared to answer. But where my words failed me, my instincts guided me. Without hesitation, I embraced him.

"Of course!" I cried.

Wil was taken aback, but he accepted my embrace. "How incredible that you managed to take full control of the kingdom in just three short years," he said.

Caught in his arms, I laughed aloud with pure joy. "Did you not know? I am an evil queen. If I desire something, I obtain it. No matter what."

"You've got me there."

And so our paths converged once again.

Bonus Chapter:

The Queen's Outcome

After MY Duties had been taken care of for the day, I returned to my room, where Wilhelm awaited me.

"Good work today, Luxeria."

"You as well, Wil. Thank you."

He spread his arms wide and smiled at me. I knew what he wanted, but I bashfully side-eyed him all the same. His smile didn't waver, so I gave up and dashed toward his chest. His arms wrapped around me, and his scent filled my nose. Oh, it made me so happy. Being with him was a true miracle. I never thought the day would come when we could be together again. I closed my eyes and savored the moment.

After dinner and a warm bath, I went to our bedroom. Wilhelm sat in his pajamas, staring out the window.

"What are you looking at?" I asked.

He beckoned to me to come closer. There were still times I had to remind myself of how intimate we were now. After I nodded, he embraced me from behind.

"The moon is beautiful tonight," he said.

A full, circular moon hung in the sky, not a cloud in sight. It was breathtaking.

"You sure do love the moon, Wil."

"Enough to start flirting with it, at any rate."

Heat welled up within me, reminding me of when we first met. "Say, Wil...why do you love me so?" I asked, leaning into him.

"Hm? Is something the matter?"

"No, but I just realized I've never asked you about it. I've been wondering about it for a while. We barely saw each other in our youth, after all," I said. "And aside from our first conversation, we'd only talked politics. What was it that made you abandon everything you had just to support me? I simply cannot wrap my head around it."

"Would you believe me if I said it was love at first sight?"

In lieu of an answer, I buried my face in his chest.

"I'm serious," he insisted. "I'd never met someone as beautiful as you in my life. From the first time I laid eyes on you, I wanted to spend more time with you. Just the thought of your face had my heart racing."

"I never realized, given how seriously you presented yourself."

"Really? I'm glad I managed to not spoil the surprise," he joked.

I peered up at his face, my body pressing against his.

"I always saw a shadow in your eyes when we played together," Wilhelm said. "Even when you seemed to be enjoying yourself, there was a sadness I couldn't quite place—it was as if you'd given up on everything. I so desperately wanted to make that smile of yours a genuine one."

"R-really? I didn't even notice."

"That's how closely I paid attention to you," he told me, smiling his sunny smile. "I searched for you afterward, but I could never find you."

"Of course you couldn't. I was away from the capital for a long time."

"But I never gave up. I kept looking. Eventually, I found out the princess was a girl named Ria," he said. "I then realized my magic was simply too powerful. Fear of my own power overwhelmed me."

"Why?"

"My magic is Gale, if you recall—manipulation of the winds. Voices can be carried across the wind, so I was able to spy on the royal palace using my

magic."

"Unbelievable. You'd have been in deep trouble if anyone had learned what you did!"

He clenched his jaw and muttered something about being a mere child at the time. Then he went on, "I looked into why you were confined to the tower, but the unthinkable happened while I was in the middle of my research."

He was referring to the assassination of my parents, surely.

"My wish for your freedom from the tower was granted but at a horrible cost. I couldn't see you in the immediate aftermath of your parents' death, and I wasn't sure what I could do to help you in your lowest moments," he said. "And while I was busy thinking of what to do, the political marriage had already been decided. The next time I saw you, a deep darkness had taken hold of you."

His voice had grown cold. As handsome as he was, his expression was rather unsettling.

"At first, I thought that darkness was just from the loss of your parents, but a part of me suspected there was more to it than that. Despite your 'doll' act, I could see the anger and hatred burning in your eyes. So I looked into the circumstances of your parents' deaths, and I was astonished to learn that the Great Five planned the assassination."

I placed a hand on his chest.

"The darkness within you would never fade, so long as the Great Five continued to exist. They had become a cancer upon the nation. They needed to be destroyed," he said. "Now I must ask, why did *you* fall in love with me? I was the heir to one of the Great Five, your sworn enemies."

"You aren't the only one incapable of forgetting our first meeting," I said with a chuckle. "I was struck by how words that came from your mouth and your mind were one and the same. Being near someone as honest as you made me feel at ease. To this day, I've never met another man like that. It hurt me when I

learned we were to be wed. I didn't want our reunion to be under such circumstances."

Our hands joined together, fingers entwined.

"You could say it was love at first sight for me too," I said.

We leaned into each other.

"I'd love to tell the little kid back then that there's a future waiting for him at the end of it all," Wilhelm said.

"Me too."

"I love you, Luxeria."

"I love you too, Wilhelm."

Wilhelm was already awake by the time my eyes fluttered open.

"Good morning, Luxeria."

I grinned upon seeing him so happy. Rolling over to his side of the bed, I snuggled into his embrace.

"Today's my day off," I said.

"It is. We should probably eat some breakfast."

He got up first, and I followed him. The room we were staying in was much smaller than that of my bedroom back at the capital, and it was furnished very plainly. This was our villa, which we had constructed after our wedding—our *real* wedding. We called it a villa, but it was really more of a cottage. There were no servants, so we had to do everything ourselves. When we both had free time, we spent it here.

"I was surprised to learn you can cook," I told him.

"Well, I did purchase a house that I used as a base of operations for a while."

"I never knew. Why did you need your own house?"

"I couldn't plan my family's downfall under their roof, you know?"

"Hmm. I suppose."

"Don't make that face. The circumstances were, well, what they were. But it was fun spending time there. I got a good feeling for how things were on the outside. There sure wasn't a lot to do otherwise, though, which was unfortunate. And honestly, I think it's more surprising that *you* can cook as well as you do."

"My word, Wil! I lived in a tower for most of my childhood, remember?"
We continued our small talk for a while, enjoying his homemade breakfast.

"So, what's the plan today? Reading? A picnic?" Wilhelm suggested.

"Hey, Wil... Can I be a little selfish today?"

"As selfish as you like."

"I want to go out on the town. You used to walk around town a lot, right? Oscar told me that once."

"Oh, Oscar and his big mouth." He gritted his teeth, cursing his old friend.

"It's quite all right. Shall we get ready?"

We dressed in simple clothes and left the villa behind. The sky was a clear, crystal blue, and the weather was warm. It was the perfect day for a stroll. The capital was bursting with energy, which was a delightful sight to behold.

"I used to buy stuff from here all the time," Wilhelm said, showing me around the marketplace. "This was where I first met Oscar."

The stalls here sold everything from hot meals to pantry ingredients to clothes and beyond. I got too caught up in browsing and eventually lost sight of Wilhelm, which was careless of me. The most prudent thing to do if you got lost was to stay where you were—I knew that. But with this large a crowd, that wouldn't work.

I found a place that was less crowded and waited for Wilhelm. Three men

approached me, all so drunk they were red in the face.

"Hey there, sweetie! You're lookin' awfully lonely. Wanna grab a drink with us?"

"Sorry, I'm waiting for someone," I said.

"Aww, c'mon. Any guy makin' a girl wait for him ain't worth dirt."

"Ooh, baby, you're one pretty little thing!"

Ugh. This was the worst flirting I'd ever witnessed. My brow wrinkled.

"C'mon, girlie, forget about that guy and come with me."

"What the hell you mean, with you?"

The three began arguing with each other even without my input. I thought now would be a good chance to leave, but then one man reached his hand out to me. I could have easily taken him out with one of the self-defense techniques Aaron had taught me, but a part of me wanted Wilhelm to show up and save me simply for the romance of it. I stared at the man's hand, and suddenly, another snapped out and grabbed it.

"Sorry, she's with me. Go find someone else."

Wilhelm had come to rescue me. It was a silly romantic fantasy, but one that I liked.

"Huh? How dare you say that to someone after sneakin' up like that!"

The man raised his hands to Wilhelm, but there was nothing to fear. The air whirled into a vortex, blowing the three men off their feet and putting an end to the incident.

"Thank you, Wil."

"Sorry for losing track of you," he said. "I'm glad you're all right."

We hugged each other, and I closed my eyes.

Wilhelm suddenly raised his head and spoke to the air. "Oh, take care of the

cleanup, would you?"

"Hm? Who were you talking to?" I asked.

"Your guards."

"My guards? What?"

"Well, yeah. Given your status, of course there's people looking out for you."

Tommy appeared out of nowhere, as he loved to do. "He's right. Wilhelm let us know before you two took a stroll."

"Tommy? You're with the royal guard? I was certain you were too busy for that."

"You think I could pass up a fun little job like this?" Tommy said. "Just kidding. I just happened to have a hole in my schedule today."

The thought that the royal guard had spied on my date with Wilhelm had me mortified. I glared daggers at Tommy.

"Why'd you just sit there and take it, though?" he asked. "You could've ruined their whole day with no problem."

I couldn't possibly admit that I was waiting for my Prince Charming to come rescue me, and that I'd been slow to react on purpose.

"Sorry for the shameless display, but I couldn't possibly react that quickly to a group of thugs," I said. "Anyway, we should head back now."

Wilhelm's excellent timing had kept me from making a real fool of myself.

"This was a fun date, Wil. We should do it again."

"Anytime you want. We have the freedom now to do it."

And so ended my first stroll around town in quite some time.

Afterword

T'S BEEN A WHILE. This is Reia. Thank you for reading this book. A lot has changed in the world since the release of the first volume. The days that I took for granted all seem like priceless treasures to me now.

Many people are out there trying their hardest to avoid a worst-case scenario, to bring a sense of normalcy back into their lives. I bow my head to everyone fighting for what they believe in.

My life update is that I haven't been exercising enough lately. I'm trying out strength training, and I lasted more than three days straight this time. The old me from many years ago would never believe I pulled that off.

As an adult, I see people in person less and less. More of my life has moved online lately. As a bookworm for most of my life, I don't terribly mind being stuck inside all day, but even I get lonely and crave contact with other people now and then. That may be part of the reason why I get so invested in reading.

I truly believe that what you love can save your soul. But I can only say this because I've indulged in what I love at home for so long. I hope the day when everyone can do the same, freely and peacefully, will come soon.

My sincerest thanks to everyone who helped me out. Futaba-sama, thank you for the lovely illustrations. They were even more delightful in this volume. Special thanks to my managers and the people who supported the production of this book. All the people in my life have done so much to help me, and I am deeply grateful to everyone.

But more than anyone, thank you to all the readers who chose to read this book. Thank you all so very much. I hope to see you all again someday soon.

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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