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**By a
Twist of
Fate,
I'm Attending
the Royal
Academy
in Disguise**

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By a Twist of Fate, I'm Attending the Royal Academy in Disguise Vol.2

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WAKEATTE, HENSOU SHITE GAKUEN NI SENNYU SHITEIMASU by Ringo

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Chapter 4, Part 2: By a Twist of Fate, I'm Working as my Rival's Maid

AFTER the chaos in the drawing room on the top floor of the royal castle, and just when Mavis had spotted a certain object, Cesia was falling—headfirst—from the balcony she had just leapt off of. The forest stretched out below her, but at her current speed, she had no hope of the trees acting as a cushion for her fall. But she didn't have any other choice. She couldn't fly, but she had to try.

As she scolded herself for the tears welling up in her eyes and her desire to shrink into herself from fear, she aimed a wind spell directly at the ground and fired it off with as much power as she could muster. Wind puffed up from below. It reversed her fall, and her body floated slightly upward. That only lasted an instant. In the blink of an eye, she resumed her descent.

She repeated that again and again, carefully adjusting the power of her spell each time. Finally, after being thrown about in the air several times, she reached a height that looked safe to fall from and adjusted her body to break her fall as she approached the ground.

"*Guh!*" she grunted when she hit the ground, momentarily stunned. Unable to contain the momentum of her fall, she tumbled over and rolled. She remained still for a while, and after the pain faded, she sat up.

"I am *never* doing that again!" she loudly proclaimed. *That was terrifying!*

With tears still in her eyes, Cesia got to her feet. She had cast strengthening magic on her body as she fell and had taken the utmost care to hit the ground properly, so while injured somewhat, she had come away from the fall with all of her limbs still attached to her torso. Next, she cast a spell to seal a wound dripping with blood on her dominant arm. However, closing the injury was the best she could do; she couldn't yet cast healing spells that were high-level magic and would have completely healed her. There were also bruises all over

her body from the gusts that had caused her midair bounces, but she could move, so for the time being, she pretended she didn't see them.

She carefully took one step, then another, making sure nothing impeded her ability to walk. Then, as quickly as possible, she put distance between herself and where she had landed. She didn't know how much time she had until her pursuers from the castle showed up. After she took off the apron of her maid uniform, she looked at first glance to be wearing a plain dress, and as she walked, she used magic to change the color of her hair and eyes, her black hair slowly transforming into a golden blonde.

"If only I knew something like this would happen. I should've practiced using magic to disguise myself as a man," she lamented.

Cesia had been prized for being a female enforcer, so she hadn't expected a time would come when it was advantageous for her to hide the fact that she was a woman. Even if she had hastily pulled a disguise together, it would have looked unnatural when she moved, so she made do with only altering her hair and eyes.

As she gathered her bearings and advanced through the forest, Cesia thought of her next moves. Her pursuers would search the castle and forest, then go to the castle town. If she had been her old self, she would've preferred to escape through the forest and head to another city, but now, she had to return to the castle, so she went toward the town. She wasn't the stray cat she had been in the past; she had things of her own now, people she knew, and a place to call home.

No one in the castle suspected Anita was the spy—not even Marcus. Cesia didn't think that any of the other members of the Second Financial Audit Division would leak the contents of their investigation to anyone, but if Anita, the second princess's head maid, asked the Security Bureau for information that she said pertained to the princess's security, they would tell her if there weren't any pressing reasons not to. When she thought of it that way, it wouldn't be easy for Cesia to tell the Second Division the spy's identity. It was highly likely that she would get caught in Anita's information network while trying to establish contact with them.

Cesia had taken as many measures as possible when she had escaped via the balcony, but if Anita or Juliette found her, it would all be for nothing. Still, the idea that had struck her back then had been her best option. The worst thing she could have done was to get caught. It would have been simple for Anita to fabricate physical evidence against her and plant it somewhere where it could be found, like in her accommodations. In that case, Cesia would probably be made out to be the spy for the criminal syndicate. *And if that happens, I don't even want to know who will be framed as the mastermind behind it all*, Cesia thought.

The person really behind everything—Juliette—was trying to flee to safety. Marcus and the rest of the Second Division wouldn't be fooled, but without 100 percent definite evidence, they couldn't do anything about Juliette, no matter how solid of a case they had against her. After all, she was the princess of a foreign country.

"Evidence. Evidence, huh...?"

With how audaciously Juliette had smeared Cesia in front of everyone, there was no way anyone would find anything implicating her while she was in Emeroade. That might change after she returned to Gwyllt, but the Second Division didn't have the authority or the means to pursue her that far. The battle would be decided now while Juliette was still in the country. Juliette had gone so far as to expose her own spy to keep Cesia away, so her plan must have been close to fruition, whatever her goal was.

That was as much as Cesia could guess at. It didn't suit her to run and hide out of fear of false accusations, and anyway, her creed was constant, determined resistance. She would fight with all her power and shake off any trouble that befell her, and no matter what, she had to get payback on anyone who tried to set her up.

The best defense is offense! she thought and said, "All right!"

Alone in the forest and brimming with fighting spirit, Cesia had forgotten one thing: why Juliette had exposed Anita and caused all that commotion in the first place. Thanks to Anita, Juliette would have known that Cesia wasn't just an ordinary maid but an enforcer working under Marcus at the Second Financial

Audit Division. It followed that she would also have guessed that Cesia had been disguised as a maid to monitor her. Juliette had disliked Cesia from the start, so Cesia had assumed that Juliette had just wanted to remove an unwelcome observer. But, with both her mind and body exhausted by the day's unexpected events, Cesia had overlooked just how sneaky and cunning Juliette Lani Gwyllt was.

A short while ago, just after Juliette had flung the teapot to the ground and shrieked as it shattered—in the middle of changing Ronald's diaper, Crown Princess Edith looked up in surprise at the partition leading to the adjacent room. The room she was in was normally used as a waiting room where servants could stand at the ready or prepare tea or anything else necessary. For that reason, there was a door that led to the hallway, but there was no door that separated it and the drawing room, only an extravagant curtain.

Edith thought it was impossible for anything dangerous to happen, but if something was going on in the drawing room by some chance, the lack of a door meant the waiting room was defenseless. With a mother's instincts, she at once stood in front of the bench her baby was lying on, covering him with her body. She couldn't begin to imagine what might have occurred in the other room, and her anxiety only grew.

Mavis, kneeling next to Ronald, couldn't keep watching her sister-in-law grow pale from fear, so she stood up and said, "Lady Edith, I'll go and see what's happening."

"But, Lady Mavis, it's dangerous..." Edith said, grabbing one of Mavis's slender arms and stopping her.

Mavis bravely shook her head and smiled at her sister. "I'll be fine. Anita and Cesia are there, too. She might not look it, but Cesia is quite strong."

"But..."

"Don't worry." Mavis grabbed Edith's hand and nodded firmly. "Please, stay here with Ronny."

"Then," Edith said, still worried, "you three, go with Lady Mavis and protect

her, no matter what happens,” she told two guards and a lady’s maid in the room, sending them with Mavis.

It was then that the commotion began.

As she looked toward the adjoining room and strained her ears to hear what was happening, after a while, Edith suddenly felt like something was off.

“Ronald?”

Her son, who had been grumbling and pouting until just before, was no longer moving. He looked as if he had stopped breathing.

MARCUS rushed to Ronald’s room upon hearing the news, engulfed in a whirlpool of emotions when he entered: sadness, rage, doubt, confusion, and regret. Edith was crying, and her husband, Crown Prince Reynold, had a frighteningly blank expression as he gently rubbed her back. The guards and lady’s maids hung their heads, gravely silent.

“Where’s Ronald?” Marcus whispered, and Reynold shifted his gaze to the canopy of the infant’s small bed. Marcus rushed over to it, almost tripping over his feet, and knelt down. Gently taking off the cover and peeking inside, he saw Ronald lying in the bed, looking just like he was sleeping. Next, Marcus put a hand next to the baby’s mouth and confirmed he wasn’t breathing. Then, as if he still couldn’t believe it, he put his hand on Ronald’s chest.

Marcus was silent. His throat trembled, and he silently screamed. *Was this what Juliette wanted?!*

He had been the first person notified that Cesia had attacked Juliette and that, just as she was about to be captured, she had escaped off the balcony. Marcus was certain of Cesia’s innocence, but uncontrollable anger quickly replaced the doubt he had felt at why Juliette had so obviously set up Cesia when he received the subsequent message informing him of Ronald’s passing.

As always, there was no evidence. Juliette had been around other people the entire time, so it was clear that she hadn’t done it herself. However, the timing was too perfect, and Marcus was sure Juliette had planned it.

There had only been a few people at the tea party. Then, there was Ronald, who had been brought there after he had suddenly grown restive. The commotion had occurred when a maid abruptly attacked a foreign guest. In the middle of the tea party, which had been scheduled for some time, two random events had coincidentally overlapped, creating a momentary gap in everyone's attention.

But what if it wasn't a coincidence? Marcus thought. What if Ronald's presence at the tea party had been arranged beforehand? Juliette must've pulled some sort of trick so that Ronald would show up. Then, while framing Cesia... No, while killing Ronald, she also took the opportunity to frame Cesia.

Marcus knew that the one outside factor in that situation had probably been himself after he had carried Ronald there. However, for the time being, the exact method Juliette had used to kill Ronald and frame Cesia was less important than finding a flaw in her plan.

Reflecting on what had happened in the drawing room, Marcus quietly muttered to himself, "Ronald was brought there because he was throwing a tantrum and wanted to see his mother..."

He touched Ronald's cold arm. The energy and warmth Ronald had had when Marcus had brought him to the drawing room was gone. Marcus rolled up Ronald's sleeve. The soft skin there was untouched, free of the blemish that had been there earlier in the day—this confirmed it. No matter how fast an infant's metabolism might have been, a bruise like that wouldn't heal in such a short time.

"Reynold," Marcus said.

"What is it?" his brother asked. The normally stern crown prince now resembled a wilted flower. Marcus was in no position to even begin to be able to understand how hard it was to lose one's child, but there did seem to be one way to ease his brother's pain.

"This isn't Ronald's body. Please allow one of my subordinates to examine it."

Reynold's eyes widened.

Luckily, someone on hand was familiar with the matter. He confirmed that the

body wasn't Ronald's.

Then, what exactly *was* the body Edith had discovered? To everyone's surprise, it was the product of black magic and human bones, a kind of magic item banned in every country. Though it was difficult to distinguish from the body it was designed to mimic, undoing the spell required little preparation, so after the necessary steps had been taken, the item returned to its original form.

"Apparently, the magic item is single-use and can't be used again after being transformed into someone else's body once," Marcus said.

Hearing Marcus's explanation, Reynold squinted, pain in his eyes. He had thought that it had been his son. He was angry at having been tricked, but after hearing how it had been made, he couldn't just content himself with venting that anger. Hesitatingly, he asked, "Do you know whose bones were used?"

Reynold's appearance, with his golden-blond hair, blue eyes, and rugged, masculine features, was in line with many other Emeroadian noblemen. He had the presence of a boulder, and his strong-willed personality resembled his father, the current king. Marcus was proud to have him as his brother. This might have been the first time Marcus had seen him so confused—the situation was just that abnormal.

"They're mixed with other materials, so I can't say whose specifically they might be..." Marcus said, casting his gaze downward. He would've preferred to return their remains to their proper resting place, if possible, but without any trace of evidence, there was no way to identify them.

"Oh... Then, is it possible that they were...killed for this?" Reynold asked, a rigid look on his face.

It's unlikely, but it's possible, Marcus thought. However, if that was the case, there wasn't anything they could do about it, so he decided to tell Reynold what the most likely option was. "According to the person who knew about this magic item, it's common for skeletal remains to be used, with some time having passed after death. The bones...were probably dug up from a grave."

"I see..."

The fact that nobody had to be killed to create the magic item did nothing to

improve the situation. Someone's bones had still been taken to make it. Still, it was some comfort, small as it was.

"So, this means it no longer has any use, right?" Reynold asked.

"Yes."

"Then, I want them buried in the national cemetery. I want them to at least have somewhere to rest peacefully after all the evil that's been done to them."

"I'll arrange it," Marcus said, and Reynold nodded.

It wasn't Ronald's body, but that was hardly something to be unreservedly glad about. The person who had used the forbidden magic remained at large, and they couldn't afford to let them escape.

"You don't have any evidence that it was Juliette, though," Reynold said.

"I don't, but I know she did it," Marcus asserted. "Please let me continue my investigation."

Reynold stared at Marcus's face, perplexed by his younger brother's unusually pushy manner of speaking. Marcus's symmetrical features resembled his mother's and were clouded by a thin layer of tension stretched over a fiery storm of anger.

Reynold was silent, then said, "I'll call an emergency session of parliament. Make it so those senile old farts have to agree with you."

"You can count on me."

Full of determination, the two princes nodded to each other.

SEVERAL hours later, at the emergency session of parliament the princes had jointly called, Marcus was making an impassioned speech. Pointing at the magic item wrapped in a silk cloth, he explained its purpose to those in attendance, all of whom occupied major positions in the government. His grave expression concealed the boiling anger beneath.

"This is not something that anyone can make easily. One of my employees happened to know what it was, so he recognized it, but if he hadn't, we

would've been holding a funeral for Ronald right about now."

Upon hearing Marcus's report, Crown Princess Edith had collapsed from the shock but quickly recovered, even insisting that she go out to look for her son herself if there was any chance it would help them find him. Seeing her strong side gave Marcus a renewed respect for her; he had thought that his sister-in-law was just a delicate, refined noblewoman. *Mothers are strong—no, she's giving herself the willpower to be strong for her child*, he thought.

If he wanted to meet her expectations, Marcus knew that he had to gain parliament's consent to investigate Juliette. Until then, he had only been monitoring foreign visitors under the pretense of investigating a criminal organization. However, now he wanted to get the government involved in directly criminally investigating her. That could turn out any number of ways, so he absolutely wanted permission from parliament.

"So, Prince Ronald is still alive? Do you have any proof of that assertion?" an elderly cabinet minister asked.

As soon as the man finished speaking, Reynold gave off an angry aura, unable to conceal his emotions any longer, and a sharp wave of tension swept over the room. Marcus knew from experience that his brother always acted in earnest, making his genuine expression of anger feel even better. The minister's internal thoughts were clear to everyone: *In the worst case, you can have more children*. More than that, it was obvious he didn't want to lose the customs deal with Gwyllt, which they had even given up their second prince for.

Marcus was more skilled at hiding his emotions and carrying out his plans in secret and with force of will than his brother. When he grew older, he might even come to think about things in the same way as the minister. However, for now, he hated that calculating attitude. *I never want to be like that*, he thought, relieved to see Reynold's unconcealed anger. *A country's future is our children's future, and a country won't have a future if it doesn't care about the children that live in it*.

"Speaking frankly, taking into account the conditions under which Ronald was abducted, it would have been simpler to kill him," Marcus explained in a clear voice. "To abduct him, then, means that keeping him alive has some value to

them. Their ultimate goal is still unclear, but them taking the time, effort, and risk involved in abducting Ronald means that they've likely kept him alive."

The ministers were flustered, and each incoherently voiced their opinions and looked around at their colleagues.

"Your Royal Highness, do you have evidence that this was instigated by Princess Juliette?" one of the ministers asked Marcus.

Marcus hesitated. *I don't. But is that so important at this late stage? You're all acting much too deferential toward Gwyllt. Is our diplomacy so weak that it would be an international issue for us just to have a talk with Juliette?* he thought. Then, with a cold fire in his eyes, he said, "The six-month-old, future crown prince is in danger. Is there anything that matters more than that?"

Someday, Marcus might eventually end up like one of those cunning ministers, valuing the nation over the individual. However, he wasn't there yet. He loved his nephew and burned with a sincere, youthful rage. As the carefree second prince, he could make bold actions and proclamations that the crown prince couldn't get away with. At the same time, he was still equipped with the power and authority of a prince. He would have things his way, even if it were based on a selfish and faulty assumption. "If I'm wrong, I'll happily give up my life for it. I need a warrant to search and investigate the visitors from Gwyllt."

If he risked his life, it would be for the greatest utility possible—that was Marcus's creed.

If Cesia knew about this, she'd get angry at me again. She might even cry, he thought. He always felt embarrassed when she scolded him for not valuing his life more. *I haven't yet seen her cry, but I know it'll be incredibly beautiful if she does.*

IN the end, Marcus wheedled permission out of the ministers, which gave him the authority to carry out an official investigation into Princess Juliette of Gwyllt.

It was some comfort that, at the very least, the ministers who had believed they should abandon Ronald were in the minority. Several had also held

noncommittal positions, but the glare on the crown prince's face had swayed most of the votes. A few had even argued that they should assertively challenge Gwyllt and recover the baby prince, even if it soured Emeroade's relations with the country.

Emeroade was poor in natural resources but had grown prosperous through international maritime trade. It was second nature for them to be sensitive to the moods of every other country.

It was the role of the second prince to act recklessly, and it was the job of the crown prince to clean up after him when everything came to light. Marcus's apologetic feelings toward his brother and his duty to rescue his brother's son blended within him, becoming a fuel that roused and propelled him forward.

The information that Cesia had tried to attack Juliette but failed and fled had spread throughout the castle with startling speed, even reaching the lowest Emeroadian servant. Ideally, the situation would be resolved before it reached the ears of the foreign visitors.

“CESIA’S the criminal organization’s spy? That’s impossible!” Felix shouted, pounding his fist on his desk.

They were in the office of the Second Division, meeting with representatives of the Security Bureau. Every one of the members of the Second Division had been taken aback when asked whether Cesia's background was perfect when she had been employed. As the rumors of what she had done flowed from one person to the next, their contents had been modified and transformed, eventually turning into the baseless idea that Cesia was a spy leaking information to a criminal organization and that when she was about to be found out, she had attacked Juliette. Everyone in the Second Division was grateful that parliament had approved their cooperation with the Security Bureau, but when the first action by their new partners was to doubt Cesia, they were irate.

“She was dragged into quite a few incidents. If she is the spy, that would explain things,” the person in charge on the Security Bureau side said calmly. Then, he asked again whether there had been anything strange about Cesia's

behavior.

“She *is* awkward,” Felix said. “She always thinks through things, but those thoughts are sometimes lacking.”

“Felix, that’s insulting,” Roy gently warned him.

Felix was momentarily silent but quickly spoke again. “Anyways, she has a strong sense of justice! She would never betray her country and leak information to another. She couldn’t,” he asserted clearly.

“But,” the man from the Security Bureau continued, “Anita has also testified that Cesia attempted to harm Princess Juliette. She may not be a spy, but is there any possibility she may have retaliated after constantly being treated poorly as a maid?”

It’s Cesia. I can’t say for sure that she didn’t, Felix thought.

When he saw Felix avert his gaze, Marcus let slip a chuckle.

“Your Royal Highness,” Layne said in a critical tone.

Marcus firmly shook his head. “Cesia was disguised as Juliette’s maid under my orders. Don’t look down on my subordinates; none of them are so foolish as to forget their duty and attack someone out of a personal disagreement.”

Marcus’s voice was calm, but Felix felt as if the temperature in the room had dropped somehow.

Beads of sweat appeared on the man’s forehead, but he managed to put up a front and reply. “Whatever the reason, so long as there’s testimony against her, I want to investigate her background!” the man spat.

Marcus nodded, unbothered. The thoroughly obstinate Security Bureau had their own way of doing things. Marcus founded the Second Division of the Financial Audit Bureau because they moved so slowly. However, once they got to work, they could produce astonishing results. Against a powerful opponent like Juliette, their solid, stubborn nature was a valuable asset.

AFTER they went over all the fine details, the meeting concluded, and the members of the Security Bureau left with a clatter of footsteps. The office then

fell silent.

Was it fine for them to allow the Security Bureau to investigate Cesia's past? Chris, Marcus's butler, wondered. He knew Cesia's past, and while he was confident that there were no records of her having illicitly attended the Royal Academy in her cousin Selene's place, there was no such thing as a safe bet. *From how they were acting, they'll frantically search for anything they can get their hands on.* Chris felt a touch of uneasiness and then got irritated at himself. He didn't have time to worry about that right now.

"Your Royal Highness, shouldn't we also search for Cesia ourselves?" Keith asked.

Before Marcus could respond, Layne said, "We can't afford to neglect to monitor Princess Juliette. The fact that she tricked Cesia, who was observing her, is itself evidence that she's linked with the criminal syndicate. The only problem is that we don't know how she did it."

Felix and Roy, both close with Cesia, frowned at Layne's severe response. Still, he wasn't entirely wrong that it would be a waste of resources to expend personnel looking for Cesia when the Security Bureau was already searching for her. Even if the Second Division found her first, they would still have to make her turn herself in so she could explain the situation.

A heavy silence fell again. Then, there was a knock on the door. Their office was a document storage room half-heartedly turned into a workspace with the placement of desks and dividing walls in one corner of the room, so visitors were rare. As a faint nervousness spread among the members present, Roy opened the door.

When everyone saw the face of a certain unexpected visitor poke their head into the room, they widened their eyes, surprised.

"May," Marcus said quietly.

She was wearing a plain dress, but her fiery red hair immediately caught their eyes. She was Second Princess Mavis, Marcus's younger sister. She stood in the doorway holding something wrapped in cloth. "Marcus, I have something to talk to you about," she said.

“Did you come all the way out here alone?” Marcus asked, prompting her to enter the office.

As a document storage room, the Second Division was in the corner of the castle. Marcus didn’t even want to consider the possibility that there might be someone in the castle who wished to harm Mavis, but many foreign visitors were staying there, to say nothing of the present state of emergency. Her coming alone was dangerous.

“Marcus. Even I know that something awful is going on in the castle right now,” Mavis said, looking straight up at her older brother. Then, she held out the bundle she was holding.

Chris took it momentarily, then unwrapped it for everyone to see, revealing an everyday, normal teapot inside. They all cocked their heads, puzzled.

Layne reached out to touch the teapot, saying, “Your Royal Highness, just what—”

“Don’t touch it!” Mavis shouted in a shrill voice, and Layne’s hand froze.

Marcus suddenly understood what it was. “Is this the teapot from when Princess Juliette was attacked?” he asked Mavis.

“Yes, it is,” she said, nodding. There was a serious look on her face.

“Didn’t it break?” Keith asked, surprised.

Mavis shook her head. “Before Cesia jumped from the balcony, she cast a rewind spell,” she explained, a gloomy, princesslike expression on her face. “I know it’s high-level magic, but being able to activate it within the drawing room because it was cast from the outside is quite a hole in our security.”

“Even so, you did well in taking it away, ma’am. It must have roused suspicion when shards of the teapot went missing,” Layne said.

Mavis apologetically lowered her gaze. “I pulled off the tablecloth, letting the matching teacups fall and break on the floor... When the whole truth comes out, I’ll make sure I undergo a punishment for hindering the investigation.”

“Your Royal Highness...” Layne said.

No reproach was in anyone’s eyes, but they were all wondering why the

princess had done so much. If the guards had found the unbroken pot, they would've passed it along to the head of the investigation. There was no reason for her to have taken the teapot herself.

Mavis fixed her gaze on the still-silent Marcus. "I want to know the truth, Marcus."

"Even if it hurts you?" he replied. He spoke with suppressed anger and squinted, upset and frustrated that his sister might be hurt.

However, Mavis resolutely nodded. "I'm a princess of this country. I have a duty to know what is happening." With her small, elegant hand, Mavis grabbed Marcus's hand. This small hand—he had always thought that, as her older brother, it was his duty to protect her. Now, though, he was astonished by her strength. "I'll be fine. I'm stronger now because you've cherished and protected me all this time," she said.

Her hand was warm. Marcus gazed into her eyes and made a decision. "Roy, find me any prints."

Roy instantly stepped forward. "Yes, sir."

Roy was extraordinarily talented in magic, and Marcus had recruited him, just as he had Cesia. Roy's small build made him look unprepared for a physical fight, but his position in the Second Division showed how much stock Marcus placed in his magical aptitude.



Roy had also been the one to see through and dispel the magic item disguised as Ronald. He had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge of any and all kinds of magic, new and old, and all of his pay went to the bookstores in the capital that dealt in technical books. He was downright obsessed with magic, and because of that, it was rare for people to realize he was the son of an influential margrave.

Incidentally, he was also Cesia's magic teacher. Cesia was oddly knowledgeable about high-class magic because it was one of his interests. In teaching her how to apply her exceptional skill in finely adjusting her magic output, he had proved that it was possible for someone without particularly high amounts of magic energy to master high-class spells, and he had even written a paper on it.

Roy held his hands out over the teapot, and soon, gold particles gathered around the handle, finally coalescing into the handprint of the person who had touched it last. When he transposed it over a preprepared image of Juliette's handprint, the two prints perfectly matched.

"Roy," Layne said.

Roy nodded. "It corresponds exactly with Princess Juliette's handprint. She was the last person to hold the teapot!" he declared.

The atmosphere in the room turned tense, and Mavis covered her mouth with her hands.

Felix frowned. "But this only demonstrates that it wasn't Cesia but Princess Juliette who touched the teapot last. Isn't it a bit too flimsy to prove Cesia's innocence?"

"Idiot, think about it for a second. All we wanted to prove with this was that Cesia wasn't lying," Keith said in a serious voice. He looked frighteningly gloomy. He always maintained an aloof attitude, even in a crisis, so this was a rare sight.

"Then, this means..." Felix said, looking anxiously at Mavis.

Mavis looked pale, still covering her mouth with her hands. Still, with lips trembling in despair, she unfalteringly said, "With this, it's clear who was lying."

When Mavis had given the teapot to Marcus, she had already prepared herself for the worst. Her eyes were wet with tears, but she resisted the urge to cry.

Marcus was unable to find the right words, so Layne spoke first. "If Princess Juliette purposefully dropped the pot, then Cesia did nothing wrong. But one other person there provided testimony to back up the princess's statement..."

"Anita. My head maid..." Mavis said. Unable to bear it, a single tear fell to the floor.

Marcus wordlessly pulled Mavis close, and she quietly sobbed. She didn't know what Marcus and the Second Division were after or that Juliette was the mastermind behind the ring of kidnappers that had orchestrated her abduction, either. However, she knew enough to know that Anita had framed Cesia, and she felt incredibly sad.

After a while, Mavis stopped crying. Turning to look at everyone around her, she said, "Please, let everyone know the truth. I know it'll save Anita."

Layne frowned, but Marcus nodded. Chris led Mavis to a couch in the corner of the room and made her some hot tea. Then, sitting around a table they normally used for meetings a short distance away, the members of the Second Division again faced each other.

"If Anita... If she's the princess's head maid, then she would be privy to a decent amount of information," Roy muttered glumly. He had never had any direct interaction with Anita, but as one of Cesia's teachers, he felt a one-sided sense of closeness with her because she had given Cesia lessons on how to behave like a lady.

"But what's in it for her to leak information to a Gwylltian princess?" Felix asked. Everyone else was puzzled, too.

When searching for the spy, they had limited their possible candidates to those who would benefit from passing information to either Gwyllt or powerful figures within Emeroade. Anita's position might have made her a suitable spy, but they didn't know her motive.

"Regardless, what will we do next?" Keith asked.

Layne looked at Marcus. "Should we secretly capture Anita and hear what she

has to say?" he asked.

Felix and Roy went pale at Layne's suggestion. At a time like this, "hear what she has to say" meant submitting her to torture. Layne was unperturbed. He was an ex-mercenary who was fiercely loyal to Marcus, and he was willing to do anything for the prince.

Marcus shook his head. "If Juliette notices that we've figured out that Anita is the spy, she'll promptly return to Gwyllt. She's in Emeroade as a representative of the king, but as a member of a foreign delegation, she's brought diplomats along with her. If she says that she isn't feeling well or anything else, really, we'll have no way to keep her here."

Their only chance to capture Juliette would be while she was still in Emeroade. If she fled the country, arresting her would be nearly impossible. It would be just like it had been with the leaders of the criminal organizations that had escaped in the past, except this time, she was a princess of a foreign country.

"Then, Your Royal Highness, what should we do?" Felix asked, frustrated.

In contrast to him, Marcus looked hopeful. "Juliette is prepared for any eventuality and never lets down her guard. I can't imagine that she's brought anything on her visit to Emeroade that might connect her to a criminal organization."

The members of the Second Division nodded as understanding dawned on their faces.

"However," Marcus continued, "what about Anita? She's been in Emeroade the entire time."

With a start, everyone lifted their heads.

"Furthermore, she's been searching for and leaking information on our movements to criminal organizations. I won't let *any* of you tell me that you can't find *some* evidence on her," Marcus said clearly.

Everyone bowed their heads and, in unison, said, "Your wish is my command."

WITH knowledge of the spy's identity, the Second Division proceeded with their investigation in secret. Meanwhile, Cesia was on the run and lying low in a mansion. The property was one of several that Chris had picked out for her as potential rewards for rescuing Mavis.

Thank goodness I asked about the location and layout of this place in advance, Cesia thought. I broke the lock on the back door, but I can reimburse the owner after all this, so hopefully, they'll forgive me.

The house was unoccupied, and as temporary property of the royal family, there was no worry about anyone suddenly moving in without permission. And, the only people connected to the current case who knew the details about her reward were Marcus and Chris. Of course, being vacant, the Security Bureau would eventually search the house, but she had some leeway before then.

Initially, Cesia hadn't wanted to run anywhere. She had to return to the castle, get one over on Juliette, and expose Anita's crimes. Even if she had to let down the people close to her to do it, it was better than them not knowing the truth.

Mavis's despondent expression flashed across Cesia's mind's eye. She might not ever forgive Cesia once she discredited Anita. However, Cesia believed in her and knew that the princess had the strength to accept the truth, no matter how painful it was.

Cesia had temporarily sealed the injury on her arm with magic, but it wasn't fully healed, and she had difficulty moving it. It was warm to the touch and felt stiff. As a stopgap measure, she had taken a cloth draped over a piece of furniture and tore it into long strips, which she wrapped around her arm in place of a bandage. She had sealed the wound, so there was no need to worry whether the cloth was sterile.

Now, how do I get back to the castle?

She could, at most, change her hair and eye color with disguise magic. Under the present state of heavy guard and with foreign visitors all around, it would be nearly impossible to hide her identity and sneak into the castle. That was no reason to go in without a disguise, of course; if she did, it would be a one-way

trip to jail. It would be a different story if someone from the Second Division came to meet her, but the situation would take a turn from bad to worse if she carelessly contacted them and made them become suspected as potential accomplices.

“I might be a bit stuck,” Cesia muttered quietly. Then, she forcefully shook her head. *I can't give up. I won't just sit here and take it.*

She remembered Mavis, helpless when the two had been kidnapped, and Lady Amy, the daughter of Marquess Acton, calling for help in an exhausted, barely audible voice. Cesia still didn't know why Juliette had built up criminal organizations in Emeroade, if the princess herself had wanted to do it, or if another person was manipulating her from behind. However, there was no getting around the fact that Juliette had tried to frame her and had used Anita to do it. That meant that Cesia knew precisely the person she would just love to send flying.

Even if I'm dead, I won't give up until I've gotten one good swing in on that pretty, stuck-up face of hers, Cesia thought, encouraging herself.

“I might as well just force my way in,” she muttered aloud.

“Oh my, that's a risky idea.”

When someone replied to her monologue, Cesia almost jumped in surprise. Then, recognizing the voice, she let down her guard and turned around. One other person besides Marcus and Chris would have quickly hit upon the possibility that she was hiding in one of the empty mansions entrusted to the royal family.

“Maria!” Cesia called her name.

Maria took off the hood she was wearing, revealing long, fiery red hair. She smiled and flawlessly winked. “Cesia, are you all right?” She knelt in front of Cesia, who was sitting sloppily on the floor. She looked over Cesia, her gaze settling on her arm. “Are you hurt?”

“You have a good eye.”

“You're covering it. Show me.” Maria undid the improvised bandage, then put a finger on Cesia's arm. Her nails were unpolished, and she was only wearing

light makeup.

“You look plain today,” Cesia remarked.

“Of course I do. I’m here to meet a wanted criminal in hiding. I’m just adapting to the circumstances,” Maria replied irritably, in a tone she rarely used.

Cesia widened her eyes in surprise. Maria normally behaved somewhat mischievously like Marcus did and always seemed aloof somehow. “Are you angry?” Cesia asked.

“Not at you.”

“Then who is it? Juliette?”

Maria lifted her face, and she had an unexpectedly grim expression. “Myself.” She stroked Cesia’s arm, her pale hand barely grazing the injury. Cesia felt something soft and warm, and while nothing had visibly changed, her arm felt better. Maria had cast healing magic.

“The pain is gone,” Cesia said.

“The only time what you did is effective is when it’s a much lighter injury. Sealing your wound with a thin layer of skin stopped the blood from flowing out, but that was it,” Maria said coldly.

“I know...” Cesia said, sulking. “But I couldn’t do anything else.”

“You’re not training enough.”

“I know,” Cesia dejectedly lowered her gaze. Just then, Maria’s appearance changed, beginning at the bottom of her feet. Her form wavered as if shrouded in mist, and Marcus was standing right next to Cesia when the mist cleared. “Your Royal Highness,” Cesia said in a panic. *It’d be bad if it got out that he’s here*, she thought, then Marcus drew her closer to himself.

“You...” he said, desperation in his voice. “You *know* your training is still lacking, so why did you run away on your own?! You even got hurt. If I hadn’t healed you when I did, it could’ve turned necrotic.”

Cesia blinked at the strength and warmth of his arms. “Sir...”

“Am I that untrustworthy? Even if you’d been arrested, I would’ve done anything in my power to get you out.”

“I did the only thing I could think of. It’s not that I don’t trust you, sir, but rather than wait for someone...wait for you to help me, I thought I could be more useful to you and less of a hindrance if I ran and waited for an opportunity.”

Marcus frowned. “I don’t care if you’re *useful*. And I don’t care if you get in my way... I want to protect you.”

Cesia’s cheeks turned bright red. He sounded passionate—romantic, even. *He doesn’t mean it like that. He has a strong sense of duty, so he’s disparaging himself for being unable to help out a subordinate in a bind*, she thought.

“I’ll be fine, Your Royal Highness. You chose me to be an enforcer, after all. We’ll definitely expose Juliette—”

“That isn’t it,” Marcus interrupted, hugging her tightly, and Cesia’s breath caught in her throat. “I’m so relieved that you’re okay...” he said in a strained voice.

Cesia’s vision suddenly grew blurry. Surprised by her tears, she grew flustered. His tone told her that he was simply, and without any pretense, glad that she was okay, and the strength of his arms, as he hugged her wordlessly, conveyed just how much he had been worried about her.

She had been terrified. During the commotion that had ensued after Juliette had tried to frame her, the castle guards, who she should’ve been used to seeing by then, had all appeared as enemies. Mavis had an expression of disbelief, but equally visible was the princess’s hesitation about whether it was okay to trust Cesia. It may have been a natural reaction in that situation, but it saddened Cesia and made her afraid.

Until then, ever since she had begun working as an enforcer in the royal castle, she had believed in and acted upon her own sense of justice without any deeper introspection. It was only natural to save someone who was in trouble. It was wrong to lie. She hadn’t doubted that the right actions would bring about the right results.

Back then, however, she had been alone. Her first thought after falling into the forest was that she had to quickly return to the castle and report the identity of the spy and Juliette's plans. Then, a worry had crossed her mind: *Maybe no one will believe me.* She had become frightened, convinced that, even if she returned, she would be disregarded and thrown in jail.

She had always believed that she would never give in to anyone. After all, she had always been alone, and the only person she could count on to protect her had been herself. Then, what was the point of returning to a place where no one would believe her just to tell them who the spy was? No, she wasn't alone anymore; she had to return and carry out her duty as an enforcer. But no one had believed her before she ran.

That voice of insecurity had haunted Cesia in the back of her mind. Anxiety bred indecision, which led to fear, which sapped her will to go on. This loss of strength left her feeling disoriented as if she was lost without anyone to turn to—it made the very ground she was standing on ambiguous. She no longer knew what she was fighting for.

And what about it?

It felt warm within Marcus's embrace. When he hugged her tightly, it felt like she grew more solid, starting from where he held her. She was in his arms, and he showed her that she could stand on her own from now on, that she had been standing on her own the entire time. He believed in her and hadn't doubted her for a second. She could be fine on her own, but he was still worried about her.

Thinking back on it, he had always been her guide, showing her where to go. He had helped her whenever she was in a tight spot, and when things were difficult, he casually told her what she could do to resolve the situation. After she began working in the castle, he—and Maria—would always ask her how she was, how her job was going, and so on, making sure she wasn't pushing herself too hard. There had been times when Cesia had thought it was a bit overbearing, but it made her happy. No one had ever cared so much about her before. There was no one else like him.

When she thought of it that way, she couldn't do anything to stop herself.

"I love you," Cesia said, tears welling up in her eyes again.

Surprised, Marcus let go of her and stared at her. "What...are you..."

"I know I shouldn't have said it. And I'm not asking you to do anything about it." Cesia blinked, and her tears overflowed from the outer corners of her eyes and onto her cheeks. Marcus's jade-green eyes followed the trails those tears took.

"Cesia."

"I'm fully aware of how silly it is to convey feelings of love to a prince. But still, I wanted to say it," she said. Still shedding tears, she gazed at Marcus straight on and smiled happily. "I love you, Prince Marcus. I have for a long time now, and I'll continue to from now on." She didn't care whether anything came of this. She was standing there, alone, free to convey her feelings if she wanted to. "I'm happy I came to love you," she said. She wanted to tell him that she was glad. That she was truly happy to have met him and fallen in love with him. "That's what I wanted to say," she finished speaking. But when she tried to pull back quietly, he grabbed her arm. "Sir?" She looked up at Marcus in surprise.

Marcus lowered his gaze, and an indescribable look appeared on his face as if he were holding something back and was trying to suppress a desire to shout.

Cesia, not knowing whether she wanted to laugh or cry, softly touched Marcus's hand, which was still holding her arm. "I understand that you're angry at me for saying something so ridiculous at a time like this, and I don't mind if you fire me after all this is over," she said.

"That isn't it," Marcus said. Unusually for him, he hesitated to speak.

"What? ...Then, I'm sorry for bothering you with this so sudde—"

"My bad. That isn't it, either. Just hold on."

"It's fine. I'm not asking for anything from you."

"No, just, that isn't it. I'm asking you, just wait a second," he spoke over her and stopped her from talking.

Cesia blinked, surprised by his hurried manner of speaking. "Yes, sir...?"

It was the first time she had ever confessed her feelings to someone. Actually,

he was the first person she had ever even had feelings for. Though she had told him because it had been more painful for her to remain silent, the longer she lingered there, and the more time she had to cool her head, the more she wanted to cry out in embarrassment. The refreshing, euphoric feeling had subsided, and in its place, she felt shame gradually crawling up her spine. Aware that her face was slowly turning red, she wanted to distance herself from Marcus, but he was still grabbing her arm, and she couldn't move. If she tried to get away without thinking, he would raise his downcast eyes and look up at her, and he would notice that she was blushing.

"Could you possibly...release my arm?" Cesia asked hesitantly.

"Sorry, but I can't," Marcus instantly replied.

Cesia's lips twisted into a frown. *He says hold on, but he won't let go or say a word. I know I confessed my feelings to him, but isn't this a bit much?* She felt annoyed, but Marcus gently stopped her when she tried to pull her arm away. She didn't know what was happening, but he was resisting her efforts to pull her arm away with a perfect balance of strength so as not to hurt her. *I don't need you to exhibit a strange new skill here,* Cesia thought, peering at Marcus's downcast face. *Now that I think about it, why is he doing all this with his face hidden?* She was relieved he couldn't see her blushing, but something was off.

"Your Royal Highness?"

Marcus paused. "What?" he asked bluntly.

"Please raise your face."

"I refuse."

After another instant reply, Cesia put her hand on his jaw and forced his head upward. He could have resisted if he had wanted to, but he, too, had given up trying to hide it anymore.

To Cesia's stunned surprise, Marcus's attractive face, now visible, was a magnificent shade of crimson.

"That's why I didn't want to raise my head..." Marcus said in a sulky voice.

"Your embarrassment is sexy, sir," Cesia mumbled in a daze.

“That’s the first thing you say?!” His face broke into a broad grin, and Cesia found herself smiling, too.

In the vacant house, the two smiled and blushed at each other. It was an odd scene, but they also felt that it fit them somehow. Nothing so romantic a phenomenon as, say, their feelings wordlessly conveying themselves just by touching each other occurred, but even Cesia understood what such an obvious blush meant.

“You can’t say it, can you?” she said.

“Yeah... My bad.”

“No... I, it’s like, the second I thought, ‘it’s you,’ I’d already forgiven you.”

Marcus wouldn’t give her a reply. He couldn’t. He was a prince, and he had a fiancée. That fiancée might have been Juliette, but that didn’t change the reality of the situation. He thought it would be dishonest to convey his feelings to her in that situation.

Well, fine. At times like this, he has to be so stubborn. So hopeless, Cesia thought. If it had been anyone but him, she would’ve gotten angry and might’ve even used her free hand to smack him across the cheek. “This must be what being blinded by love is like,” she said. *Oh, well. That part of him is another reason why I love him.*

“When this is all over... I’ll tell you then, so please...wait for me.” Marcus squeezed her hand with both of his large, warm hands, and Cesia relaxed and smiled.

“Still, I know it’ll be difficult,” she said.

“I can’t say anything irresponsible. But you shouldn’t have to give up on the whole thing.”

Even if everything came to a tidy conclusion, and Juliette and Marcus’s engagement was broken off, there was an enormous gap between Cesia and Marcus’s social positions. She knew their feelings couldn’t overcome that. But her love, in its entirety, was standing before her, holding her hand. He had already answered her feelings, and that was enough. Any more, and it would harm him as a prince.

“Very well. I’ll be waiting,” Cesia said.

So, she lied. She lied to protect her kind, beloved prince, who always tried to sacrifice himself for others. To protect him, she resolved to seal away her feelings and hold on to this moment for an eternity. She knew she could do it. Marcus had his pride as a prince, and the royal family and the people of the kingdom were honored to have him as one of their leaders. She couldn’t force him to change his life for her.

“So let’s settle this thing quickly!” Cesia added. The hand Marcus held seemed warmer than just a moment before. She felt a mysterious sensation as if something warm wrapped around her, and its warmth extended all the way to her heart.

“Yeah,” Marcus said and smiled.

When everything was over, a commoner like Cesia wouldn’t be able to continue to be by Marcus’s side anymore. She etched the memory of his beautiful, smiling eyes into her mind.

CESIA’S tears subsided, and Marcus checked to see whether any redness remained around her eyes.

“Should I cool you down?” Marcus asked.

“This much is nothing.”

Feeling awkward around each other, they spoke as little as possible.

TIME passed, and it was the middle of the night before they knew it. They shared the information they had, judging it to be more prudent to take the time to rest their bodies rather than carelessly go out. So, sitting together where they could see the entrance and leaving a small space between each other, Marcus told Cesia in detail the events that had transpired after she had jumped off the balcony. When he reached the point where Ronald’s body was found, Cesia went pale. And when he explained that Ronald had been replaced by a magic item, she ground her teeth in frustration, knowing that Juliette had used

her as a distraction and that her jumping off the balcony had aided the princess in her plan.

Then, Marcus told Cesia that, sure enough, jewelry had been found in her lodgings worth more than what she could afford with her pay and that the Security Bureau reasoned someone had hired her to attack Juliette. In other words, whether Cesia had run or gotten arrested, it had played into Juliette's scheme.

"That sneaky...!" Cesia clenched her fists in frustration. Juliette would pay for abducting a baby and framing her. "Then, about the spy," she said.

"Yeah, thanks to May bringing us the teapot you rewound, we found her."

"Lady May brought it to you? That was," Cesia bit her lip, "that was incredibly brave of her."

"She admirably performed her duty as a member of the Emeroade royal family."

"You're a bit..." Cesia giggled. "You sure love your sister." If that was how Marcus put it, then she knew Mavis was all right. She was strong, had done the right thing, and lived up to her beliefs, even though it meant implicating her beloved head maid.

"Still, to return that teapot to normal..." Marcus said. "That was an audacious plan. I wonder what would've happened if Juliette or Anita had found it first."

"I didn't know how many people were connected to Juliette, but I couldn't think of anything else. I relied on the possibility that, as a piece of evidence, it would find its way into the hands of whoever was investigating it. Luckily, Lady May found it before anyone else did," Cesia said, relieved.

Marcus nodded. "Actually, one of Ronald's wet nurses had been employed on Anita's recommendation, and after some questioning, she admitted to purposefully upsetting Ronald to create an excuse to bring him to the tea party. But, she says that Anita told her to do it, and she didn't know she was helping Juliette," Marcus said. He took a breath and lowered his eyes. His long eyelashes cast shadows on his cheeks in the faint light from outside. "Nevertheless, she won't be able to avoid a severe punishment for what she

did.”

“Oh...yeah...” Cesia said. “Everyone in the castle must’ve really trusted Anita for her to have been able to insert someone as Prince Ronald’s wet nurse...”

The Second Division only knew Anita was the spy because Mavis brought them the teapot. If the people investigating the alleged attempted assault had seen the teapot, it was questionable whether they would’ve thought to suspect Anita, even if they had figured out that Juliette had been the one who had held it last.

“You’re right... Apparently, Anita showed up five years ago with an impressive resume and letter of recommendation. After being employed as a lady’s maid, she demonstrated her talent and diligence and was continually promoted,” Marcus said.

“But normally, daughters of nobles serve as lady’s maids,” Cesia said. *Five years. Anita spent that time attaining her position and building trust. What made her do it?* she wondered.

“She was the daughter of a count, and her background was reliable,” Marcus said. “She had spent her life abroad, in another country, so she wasn’t known in Emeroadian noble social circles.”

“And that country was...”

“Gwyllt.”

Cesia blinked. Finally, a connection.

“I investigated her family, trying to get more information,” Marcus said, “but her father had already passed away from disease, and her half-brother inherited his title.”

“No way...”

“According to the current count, Anita was the daughter of the previous count, but she was an illegitimate child. He—her brother—said that after her mother passed away, she relied on their father for passage to Emeroade and that he hadn’t met her since she asked him to serve as a reference.”

Cesia was impressed by how much the investigation had uncovered in such a

short time. They had only figured out that Anita was the spy that evening after Cesia had run from the castle and Mavis brought the teapot to the Second Division. “So Anita...lost both of her parents,” she said.

“That isn’t an excuse to do wrong,” Marcus said in a princely, impartial tone.

Cesia fixed her gaze on him. “But, there are times when children without any adults to protect them have to do wrong to survive,” she said argumentatively. “Like when I pretended to be Selene.”

Seeing her serious expression, Marcus nodded. “You aren’t wrong, but it’s still a crime. Depending on what she did, she’ll have to be punished.”

Cesia hesitated, then said, “Yeah.”

“Of course, I don’t think that every person who does wrong loses their right to walk free again. The duty of those in power is to show the way to reform... or at least, I think so...” Marcus’s voice trailed off.

He had said those words to her once before. She had gone astray, and Marcus had extended a helping hand to her. *Had Juliette done the same for Anita?* Cesia wondered. With those thoughts in her head, she frowned and closed her eyes. *I can’t help but feel frustrated. We both grew up in similar circumstances, but the wrong person saved her.* Then, she said, “I respected her.”

“I know. I don’t think anyone in the castle disliked her...” Marcus said. His voice was calm but heavy, and he spoke quietly.

Perhaps because she had cried earlier, Cesia started to get a headache, and she put a hand to her head and quietly groaned. “The issue now is how we get back to the castle...” she said. “If only I could transform into a barrel or something.” She was already at her wit’s end after spending all her time alone, racking her brains for a solution.

Of course, Marcus hadn’t come empty-handed.

“By the way, Cesia.”

“Yes?”

“I think red hair would suit you. What do you think?”

Cesia hesitated and tilted her head in confusion, she said, “Pardon me?” with

a puzzled look on her face.

Like a young boy who had just thought of a new prank to pull, Marcus grinned mischievously.

EARLY the next morning, the guard at the small servants' entrance at the rear of the castle gave Maria a lovestruck grin when he saw her walking toward him. "Hey, Maria. You're here early today."

"Good morning. I'm showing a new dishwashing girl around."

"Yeah, the kitchen sure is busy. Is she a temporary hire?"

"Yes," Maria said, smiling. She showed the guard her ID and the temporary pass of the girl with her. He took both, then used a special magic item to check whether they were forgeries.

"All right, looks good. Good luck, new girl."

Cesia, her hair light blonde, silently nodded, then quickly followed Maria through the gate. Even though Cesia was wanted, the guard didn't seem to have memorized her facial features. As long as she changed her hair color and had the proper pass, she could confidently enter without anyone suspecting she was the same person as that wanted black-haired maid.

They entered a small equipment room, and Maria undid her disguise. Then, appearing where Maria had stood, Marcus promptly gave Maria's ID to Cesia to hold. "If you have this on you, you can travel most servants' passageways. Don't go to the corridors above," he said.

"Understood."

"What's with that face?" Marcus asked, raising an eyebrow.

Cesia looked up at Marcus with an unreadable expression. "So, Maria *does* have an ID."

"Yeah."

"That's an abuse of authority..."

"Of course it is. Who do you think I am? I'm a prince, you know."

“Aah... So now I’m an accomplice...”

“What are you saying? That ID is completely legitimate.”

“How can a person who doesn’t exist have an ID...” Cesia said, exhausted, and Marcus pouted. Of course, on the job, Cesia herself constantly deceived people.

“You aren’t using it for anything bad, so isn’t it fine?”

Cesia pursed her lips. *“This is an emergency, after all,”* she said, making up her mind.

Marcus nodded. He gently touched Cesia’s hair, and it morphed from blonde to a bright, fiery red. *“Yep, this looks good on you.”*

“I-Is that so...” Cesia blushed, remembering their conversation in the vacant house.

“The Security Bureau has some people assigned as guards to watch Juliette closely. Anita is restrained and locked up at the Second Division, and May and the others are there, so go there.”

Cesia was surprised. *“Even Lady May? Why?”*

“Juliette might raise her guard if she can’t establish contact with Anita after enough time. But there’s nothing for her to be suspicious about if Anita is doing something for her mistress.”

It pained Cesia to think about how closely Mavis was involved in the case. She hadn’t wanted to drag the simple, innocent, diligent princess into everything.

“She’s still a princess. If it involves the future of Emeroade, she has the resolve to carry out her duty, even if it means she gets hurt doing it,” Marcus said, voicing his opinion, not as her brother but as a prince.

Cesia knew beneath that he was worried about Mavis’s gentle heart more than anyone, but she said, *“Yeah, you’re right.”* Juliette’s goal was still unclear, but it was hard to imagine that, with all of her audacious actions up to that point, her objective had simply been to make money. At the very least, it was certain she was trying to weaken Emeroade as a country. Judging from the rapid, ongoing developments since the day before, it wasn’t hard to see that her plans were coming to some sort of grand conclusion.

“Ronald’s abduction hasn’t been made public, which means she doesn’t know that we saw through the fake dead body,” Marcus said.

“Does that mean Juliette still believes we think Prince Ronald has passed away?”

“Probably. That fake was quite a feat. She had to have carefully prepared it before coming to Emeroade.”

“That means that she intended to,” Cesia paused, “abduct Prince Ronald from the start.”

“Yeah.”

Ronald was only an infant, but if everything went as expected, he was next in line to be king, after his grandfather and his father. The plan to harm him felt less like something from Juliette and more like a plan by Gwyllt itself.

“She’ll pay for this,” Cesia said.

“No doubt about it. She won’t get away this time. We’ll crush her.” Marcus clenched his fist, and Cesia nodded forcefully.

DISGUISED to look like Maria, Cesia quickly walked away down a servants’ corridor carrying a large, wrapped box, acting as if she was on an errand. Marcus watched her thin figure disappear down the corridor, then turned around on the spot and headed to make his report to the king, crown prince, and other important leaders.

It had been risky for him to meet Cesia in the vacant house. Maria was an extra, irregular piece in a fight, but while she was active, Marcus was necessarily absent. It was more of a risk for someone to catch on that the second prince was gone from the castle than it was for anyone to see Maria visiting Cesia. In the Second Division, some thought it was an unnecessary danger to bring Cesia back and that it would be better to let her stay in hiding until she could proudly return to the castle with all suspicion around her cleared.

However, Marcus had wanted to see her, no matter what it took. He had

convinced the others by bringing up how important she was to their fighting strength, but after seeing her helplessly crying as he hugged her, he was deeply relieved that he had gone. Still, if the Security Bureau found out that the Second Division had contacted Cesia, they might all fall under suspicion of having been involved in some way with Juliette's assault. His one and only excuse was that he had gotten permission from the stubborn crown prince to do so.

Just as Marcus was about to begin walking, he felt he should visit Juliette and greet her. After Cesia had supposedly been on the verge of harming her the day before, Juliette had shut herself up in her quarters and hadn't come out since. There were guards stationed outside her door, so if she left, he would know instantly, and he hadn't gotten any messages of note—but did that really mean she was in her room?

When she kidnapped Ronald, Juliette swapped out the infant for a double without anyone noticing. She'd had the advantage of surprise on her side. There had—unbelievably—been only a single guard and lady's maid, and everyone's attention had been focused on the other room. Even so, it couldn't have been easy. Cesia's jump from the balcony probably hadn't been part of Juliette's calculations, and without it, the room would've been an even more confused mess of guards trying to arrest Cesia.

What was secretly slipping out of her quarters alone to a woman like Juliette? Even Marcus had been able to get Cesia back into the castle, so with Juliette's thoroughness, it was likely that the princess already had a way to escape the castle. And Cesia finding out that Anita was the spy meant that Juliette had a deadline. Even if the princess didn't know that people besides Cesia knew about Anita, Marcus couldn't afford to be sloppy. His worries might be unfounded, but it was safest to check, just in case. She had been refusing visitors, saying that she felt sick, but she was in no position to refuse to grant her fiancé an audience.

With those thoughts in his mind, Marcus went to where Juliette was staying. When they saw him approaching, the lady's maids out front visibly panicked. After the incident with Cesia, the Emerodian maids and lady's maids assigned to the princess had all been dismissed, having been told they could no longer be trusted. The ones left had all been brought from Gwyllt.

“Prince Marcus, Lady Juliette has stated that she won’t be meeting with anyone today,” one of the lady’s maids said.

“You said that yesterday, too. Being attacked by her maid must’ve been terrible. This time, I won’t leave until I can check on my fiancée’s condition,” Marcus said definitively.

The lady’s maids quickly lost their resolve and looked at each other as if to say, “What do we do?” Cesia hadn’t called them incompetent slackers for nothing, after all.

With that, Marcus was certain that Juliette was gone, but he couldn’t leave until he confirmed it with his own eyes.

“Come in,” one of the lady’s maids said in a quivering voice, leading Marcus inside. In the living room of the lodging for noble visitors, a woman was sitting on a sumptuous couch. She was wearing one of Juliette’s dresses, but she didn’t resemble the princess in the slightest.

“Ee—” The woman suppressed a shriek, and her face went pale. Her hair and build closely matched Juliette’s, so she had fooled the guards from far away. Someone coming this close to her, however, must not have been part of the plan.

“So? Where’s Princess Juliette?” Marcus asked, questioning the woman frozen in place on the couch.

“I-I...” she began.

Suddenly, Marcus felt something coming up behind him and nimbly dodged it. He backed up quickly, moving almost as if he had slid across the fluffy carpet, and stared directly at the person who had tried to hit him. He hadn’t even considered that the Gwylltian lady’s maids might do something so stupid.

“Hey! What are you thinking?!” the woman disguised as Juliette yelled.

Holding a vase, the lady’s maid who had attacked Marcus yelled back. “But it’ll be bad if he finds out!”

“So you attack a prince?! That’s even worse!”

With this loud of a shouting match, it’s odd that the guards outside haven’t

come in to investigate, Marcus thought. Someone in Juliette's camp must've cast soundproofing magic. Come to think of it, they might've been the same person who kidnapped Ronald. Why didn't I think of this before? With what she's planned, of course, Juliette would bring a couple of people who can use magic.

But Emeroade was confident in its excellent magic defense, thanks in part to its proactive pursuit of cooperative magical research with other countries. A defense spell was always active in the drawing room where Ronald had been kidnapped, for example.

Did they find some sort of gap as Cesia did? Or are they just that skilled?

Ignoring the arguing lady's maids, Marcus rushed to exit the room when another person landed a strong blow on him from behind. His knees gave way, and he crumpled to the floor. The lady's maids had diverted his attention, and he hadn't noticed anyone there. His vision wavered. The person who had hit him, whoever they were, had swung with enough power to make him think that they had been trying to kill him. His field of vision began to turn red.

"Are you stupid?! What would you do if he died?!" one of the lady's maids shouted.

Another one replied in a weak voice. "But, if Lady Juliette found out—"

"That's why you're stupid! You won't make it out alive if you've killed a prince!"

"For now, let's just let Lady Ju—"

"Gah...! That's...I'm...!"

Besides the two lady's maids, Marcus felt the presence of someone else standing right above him. He struggled to look up, and through his hazy vision, he saw someone he recognized. It was a diplomat from Gwyllt who had come along with Juliette.

The last thing Marcus remembered before he passed out was the sound of the lady's maids' shouting, but unable to understand what they were saying, he lost consciousness.

MEANWHILE, without any inkling of Marcus's predicament, Cesia finally reached the document storage room that housed the Second Division. She had been asked for her identity multiple times along the way, but Maria's ID had stood up to scrutiny each time, and she had been allowed to pass.

Even if it's legitimate, they think I'm Maria, and I only have different-colored hair, Cesia thought. Anyone could steal an ID and pass themselves off as another person. The trick probably has something to do with this red hair, which Marcus colored. I can feel a trace of some sort of magic energy.

In this world, everyone could cast magic at some level or another. Nobles tended to be more magically powerful, and because of that, there were even times in the distant past when marriage between family members had been promoted. However, the continued existence of commoners born with high amounts of magical power meant that, at present, there was considered to be no link between lineage and ability. Additionally, in Emeroade, a country with prosperous international commerce, one's magical power was not seen as all that important.

Cesia didn't know how the IDs were made, but she assumed they corresponded to the unique hue of each individual's magic, and it was with that that a person could be identified. However, it'd be suspicious if Marcus and Maria had the same magic color, so Maria's ID had probably been modified somehow. It might be said to be a type of mimicry. If Maria's artificial color covered Cesia, she could mimic Maria.

She didn't think she was far from the truth, but just thinking that a prince of her own country could make a fake identity made Cesia anxious.

"This is *definitely* not allowed..." she said to herself, shivering. Marcus was no less cunning and methodical than Juliette was. Cesia was thankful that he chose to use his wits for good.

Cesia placed the empty box she was carrying in a corner where it wouldn't get in the way, then knocked on the door of the Second Division's headquarters. She worked there, so she normally wouldn't knock, but seeing as she didn't know who was inside the room, she moved carefully, just as Marcus always

cautioned her.

Keith opened the door, and he widened his eyes in surprise upon seeing Cesia. Then, he smoothly invited her in as if she were an ordinary servant. He closed the door, said, “Cesia, you’re okay!” and gave her a big hug.

This time, it was Cesia’s turn to widen her eyes in surprise. “S-Sorry, Keith, for causing so much worry!” she hurriedly apologized.

Keith let go of Cesia and patted her on the head. “I’m glad you made it. I was waiting,” he said, smiling happily.

Cesia felt her chest tighten as if someone had squeezed her heart in a rigid grip. She had been afraid of returning. It would cause the Second Division trouble and hinder their investigation. She had worried that if they had treated her even a bit coldly, or if anyone had said to her that she was in the way, the strength she had wrung out of herself and used to force herself to keep moving forward would have evaporated away, leaving her unable to even stand on the two feet that had taken her so far. But the members of the Second Division, heedless of her anxiety, warmly welcomed her back into the fold.

“Cesia, you’re okay! I’m so happy!” Roy said, on the verge of tears as he held both of her hands.

Felix pursed his lips and poked her forehead. “Don’t worry me so much, you idiot.”

“I don’t want an idiot like you calling me that,” Cesia instantly, unconsciously, replied. Roy and Keith sighed in annoyance, but just when the bell that always signaled the start of their frequent verbal bouts was about to ring, they were interrupted.

“Cesia!” Mavis shouted. She rushed to Cesia and hugged her.

“Lady May!”

“What were you thinking? It was so high up! How could you j-jum— Just don’t do it again!”

Tears spilled from Mavis’s large, jade-green eyes, and Cesia keenly felt how much she had worried her. She felt ashamed that she had doubted her for even

a second, and the corners of her eyes started to feel hot. *So many people care about me here*, she thought.

“My apologies, Lady May.”

“Promise me you’ll never be so careless with your life again! If you don’t, our friendship is over!” Mavis threatened, sobbing.

A certain word made Cesia pause. “We’re...*friends*?”

Mavis’s face turned bright red. Then, still blushing, she defiantly crossed her arms. “Y-Yeah, we are! We’re already friends! Right?!”

Cesia tearily smiled and said, “Yes, we are.”

Mavis smiled, relaxing, then hurriedly made herself look annoyed. “We’re friends, so if you break your promise, I won’t talk to you anymore! If you don’t like it, then value yourself more highly!”

What an incredible, cute friend, Cesia thought. She gently took Mavis’s hand, and making sure not to hurt her, she grasped the princess’s hand tightly. “I promise. I don’t want us to not be friends, after all.”

“That’s right! Take care of yourself... Don’t forget it!”

These small, elegant hands have never washed dishes or held a sword, but we’re still friends, Cesia thought. She wanted to keep her promise, not as an order from a princess, but as a vow with a dear and beloved friend.

As the two held each other’s hands and smiled awkwardly, a hard-to-describe, peaceful air settled in the room. However, the atmosphere was shattered when Layne came out from the division chief’s office.

“Oh, you’re back, Cesia.”

“Layne!” She turned her head to look at him. Mavis squeezed her hands once as a show of support, then let go, nodding at Cesia and going back to the couch she had been sitting on. Grateful for Mavis’s gesture, Cesia stood before Layne. “My deepest apologies.”

“You did what you could back then. I’m glad you’re back in one piece,” Layne said. His expression had softened when he saw that Cesia was safe, a marked difference from the stern look he had often worn recently.

Seeing that even Layne had been worried about her, Cesia felt like she was about to cry again. “Thank you!”

“Also, sorry, I know you just got back, but I have a job for you,” he said, looking into the division chief’s office.

Following his gaze, Cesia gulped when she saw Anita tied up in a chair. “Why is she—”

“It might’ve been her only option, but when Her Royal Highness took the teapot you rewound away from the crime scene, it made it something that could have possibly been fabricated, and it lost its evidentiary value. The Security Bureau had no reason to arrest Anita, so we had to do it instead.”

Still, if the teapot had fallen into someone else’s possession, it was doubtful whether they would’ve understood from it that Anita was the spy. It would’ve been the same even if Cesia had returned to the castle to testify afterward. At the very least, the current state of affairs where Marcus, the Second Division, and Mavis knew the identity of the spy was the best she could’ve hoped for.

They were unraveling the mystery step by step and driving Juliette into a corner, but Juliette seemed only ever to draw the cards she needed. They weren’t taking any losses, but Juliette was always one step ahead of them.

When that thought crossed her mind, Cesia felt uneasy. Juliette had so blatantly revealed the existence of her spy to Cesia; would she really sit by quietly and let them catch up to her?

“Layne, what is Juliette doing right now?” Cesia asked.

“She shut herself up in her room from the terror of being attacked by you, or so she says,” Layne replied. Then, he raised his face with a start. “You don’t suppose...”

“She’s known our next move the entire time. I don’t think she hasn’t accounted for this,” Cesia said definitively.

Layne turned to face the rest of the Second Division. “Keith, check to see if Princess Juliette is still in her quarters! Make sure you have someone who knows her face!”

“Understood,” Keith replied, then swiftly exited the office.

Layne continued, not missing a beat. “Roy! Send a message to Prince Marcus. Tell him to come back here as soon as he can.”

“Yes, sir!” Roy replied. He dashed over to the window and used magic to deliver a message. His magical ability made his messages much more precise than Cesia’s, but even then, sending a message was faster and more reliable when next to the outside air.

Cesia entered the division chief’s office and faced Anita. “Anita...”

Anita paused, then said, “So you made it out okay.” She smiled. Her smile was the same as it had always been.

Enduring the difficulty of the situation, Cesia sat in a chair in front of her. “Where’s Juliette?”

“Is she not in her quarters? They’re for noble guests, and she is a princess, after all,” Anita replied calmly. She spoke as if she hadn’t understood what Cesia meant.

Cesia shook her head. Juliette had been a step ahead of them the entire time; they would lose if they didn’t start with the assumption that they were missing something. “No. The fact that you’re so calm is evidence of that. You’re trying to make us think that she’s still in her room, unaware we captured you... You’re a decoy, and you’re going to sacrifice yourself for her,” she said firmly. Anita’s smile grew wider. Taking that as confirmation, she continued. “Why are you so devoted to her? She is, objectively speaking, not worthy of someone like you serving her. Either as a leader of a criminal syndicate or as a mistress.”

Anita cast her gaze outside, looking through the window, then shrugged her shoulders. The gesture was somewhat affected, so Cesia redoubled her vigilance, making sure it didn’t appear on her face.

Outside, the sun was beginning to climb in the sky—Anita was worried about the time.

“This country is so free,” Anita remarked.

“Huh?”

“You’re an orphan, but you’re beautiful, and you can use magic. All your life, you haven’t had to work all that hard, have you?”

Cesia was unsure what to think. Her family had been poor when her parents had been alive, but they had been happy. Even after she had lost her parents and entered the custody of the Diances, there were times when she had nothing to eat, but she always had a roof over her head and somewhere to sleep. She didn’t know whether that upbringing was supposed to be a lucky one or not. However, Anita only knew Cesia’s public records, which led her to assume that Cesia had been treated as a normal servant in the Diane household. There was an inconsistency between each of their understandings, and while it was unquestionable that Cesia had struggled quite hard while growing up, there was no third party to point that out.

“Don’t try to delay this. Where is Juliette?” Cesia asked.

“You’re also smart and brave. I can understand why His Royal Highness likes you and why Lady Juliette is wary of you.”

“Don’t change the subject. And stop stalling for time.”

“This country really is free. It’s a wonderful place,” Anita repeated, and Cesia frowned. “I was born to a prostitute, and my father was an Emerodian count who hired her during a stay in Gwyllt.”

She’s stalling; don’t listen to her, Cesia warned herself, but when she thought she might get an answer to the mystery of why Anita was helping Juliette, she was reluctant to stop her.

“My mother was a prostitute...and she was incredibly beautiful. The count became obsessed with her, and he promised to look after her even after he returned to Emerode,” Anita continued, narrating her memories in fragmentary bursts. Hers was a common experience for many. “The only Emerodian man my mother had been with was that count, so when I was born with exceedingly Emerodian features, there was no doubt that he was my father. He continued supporting us after I was born, and when he came to Gwyllt for his job, we peacefully spent our time together, the three of us as parents and child. Thinking back, those are my only happy memories.”

Anita looked at Cesia and smiled again. “The count, worried for his wife,

couldn't be with my mother publicly. Still, when I saw my parents getting along, I assumed I was happy... But when my mother passed away from a plague, the situation turned on its head." Anita's voice became grim. "After my mother passed away, I was abused because I was an illegitimate child. Did you know? In Gwyllt, exclusively male inheritance is common, and anyone with a foreign parent is seen as an outsider, a non-citizen. When my mother was alive, she ran herself ragged, protecting me from harm."

"I..." Cesia's voice trailed off. It was a world she couldn't even imagine, having been born and raised in Emeroade. In recent years, it had become common for women to inherit titles and estates, and the nationality of one's parents was seen as holding no special meaning; she couldn't understand why someone would be concerned about it. Cesia supposed that that was the big difference between Emeroade, which had frequent cultural exchanges with other countries, and the insular Gwyllt.

"I tried asking my father for help, but at the same time, he, too, was being ravaged by disease, and his support for us came to an end," Anita continued.

The room outside the door was becoming noisy. *Something's happening. Should I cut this short? I still can't decide. But I want to know what's next.*

"Those were hellish days. Then Lady Juliette found me. She said that it wasn't my fault that I was dirty, and she selected me to be one of her servants." Anita absentmindedly chuckled. Her smile was completely different. She looked as if she had been possessed.

Cesia knew—Juliette's sweet words had come from the mouth of a devil, but because Anita had been in hell, they had sounded like the words of an angel. *Besides, Juliette said that Anita was dirty. She's dirty just because of her birth or how she grew up? As if!*

"Do you know just how happy I was then?" Anita asked.

Cesia, with a start, had a sudden realization. "I do," she said, staring directly at Anita. Fiery red and sparkling jade green flashed through her mind. "More than anyone, I do." Anita smiled kindly at Cesia's sincere response. It was a smile Cesia knew well, and she looked like the woman she had once admired. "I get why you serve Juliette. I know that I'd do anything for Prince Marcus. If he

asked me to, I'd give up anything and everything for him... But, Anita, this is different. This is wrong," she said. Her words were awkward, and she knew that whatever she said couldn't compare to the significance of Anita's time with Juliette. Her only option was to appeal to Anita's wisdom, kindness, and love.

Just then, the door made a small rattling sound. Turning around to look, Cesia saw Mavis standing in the doorway. Behind the princess, the members of the Second Division were busily moving around, and no one spared a second thought to her actions.

"Lady May," Anita said.

"Your Royal Highness," Cesia said.

Mavis raised her face. Her eyes were wet with tears, but she wasn't yet crying. "Anita. My head maid... It made me sad to hear that you handed over the information you said you gathered for my sake to a foreign country in an effort to harm this one." Mavis clenched her fist. Anita squinted slightly. "Even so, I...when I was afraid at night, and I couldn't sleep, you were there the entire time, gently stroking my back... I don't think that was a lie." Mavis breathed in, and the tears she had held back poured from her jade-green eyes. Her lips trembling, she stared fervently at Anita. Quietly, she shed tears for Anita. "I know how kind you are... Weren't you torn between your obligations to Lady Juliette and your duty to Emeroade? Maybe if I had noticed sooner, none of this would have happened," Mavis said, frustrated. Tears stained her cheeks, and her eyes were turning red. "I'm sorry, Anita. I couldn't protect you. I'm sorry."

Cesia bit her lip. Mavis was too sincere. Cesia remembered when Mavis had insisted on apologizing when she knew she was in the wrong. However, she hadn't been wrong here. No one had noticed Anita's true intentions or distress.

Still, the princess's words appeared to have reached Anita, and she, too, was quietly crying. If anything could compete with the time she had spent in Gwyllt after Juliette had saved her, it was the time she had spent with Mavis. Cesia could see how much Anita cared for Mavis. *What was she thinking when she learned that Mavis would be kidnapped and used as a decoy? How did it feel to stroke her back when she was afraid and couldn't sleep when it was because of that kidnapping?* Mavis had said that the truth would save Anita—this was what

she must have meant.

“I’m sorry, Lady Mavis... I was betraying you the entire time,” Anita confessed.

Still crying, Mavis shook her head. “I... I won’t forgive myself for still loving you.”

“Please...don’t forgive me.”

That, too, was another bond between them.

“Cesia,” Anita quietly addressed Cesia, and Cesia looked at her. “Lady Juliette is on a Gwylltian ship in the port. Probably along with Prince Ronald and Prince Marcus.”

“Prince Marcus?” Cesia felt cold sweat run down her back.

Just then, Felix burst into the room. “Cesia! We can’t establish contact with His Royal Highness!”

Normally, Marcus never replied late. *He used himself as a decoy again*, Cesia thought. “That...brat!” she said, rudely clicking her tongue in frustration. She rushed out, leaving Felix to deal with the division chief’s office, and, seeing Layne and Keith discussing something, she shouted, “Layne! Juliette is on a boat in the port! His Royal Highness is probably there too!”

“Got it. I’ll send soldiers there right away. And Cesia, don’t go off alone!” he warned.

Cesia nodded. “I won’t. But please, let me go too!”

Layne yelled back, “What did I—”

Keith smiled and patted Layne’s shoulder, consoling him. “There, there, Layne. We’ll be going anyway, so all that means is we’ll be getting there a bit earlier.”

Cesia’s gaze grew more intense.

Layne sighed deeply. “I’ll take this as a sign that you’ve improved, Cesia. It’s better than running off alone.”

After that, everyone quickly carried out their duties. They escorted Mavis back to her quarters and sent Anita to jail. The head maid meekly obeyed, and

there, in a reversal from her earlier silence, she unhesitatingly answered all of the questions someone from the Security Bureau asked her.

The members of the Second Division headed to the port, and with the approval of parliament that Marcus had gotten, they were easily able to take some knights and soldiers with them.

“Now, let’s go meet His Royal Highness,” Layne ordered.

Cesia silently nodded.

MARCUS awoke to the faint creaking of floorboards, and the scent of ocean water filled his nostrils. Slowly opening his eyes, he looked around to confirm his surroundings without moving his head. He was lying in a room with a wooden floor and walls, a window somewhat high up on one of those walls, and a single door. Finally, he felt a slow, regular swaying. He silently, carefully got up.

Juliette was leisurely sitting in a chair and watching him. “It’s unfortunate that my invitation to you had to be like this, Prince Marcus,” she said, her voice filled with regret.

Marcus couldn’t help but laugh scornfully at her theatrics.

She continued, unbothered by his reaction. “My lady’s maids have done you a great disservice.”

“The greatest disservice here is you,” Marcus said. He shook his arms, rattling the chains of the magic cuffs around his wrists. His ankles were also bound, oh so thoroughly. With his high birth, being treated as if he were a common criminal was more humiliating than he had imagined.

“Oh, but if you weren’t in those cuffs, you’d go on a rampage.”

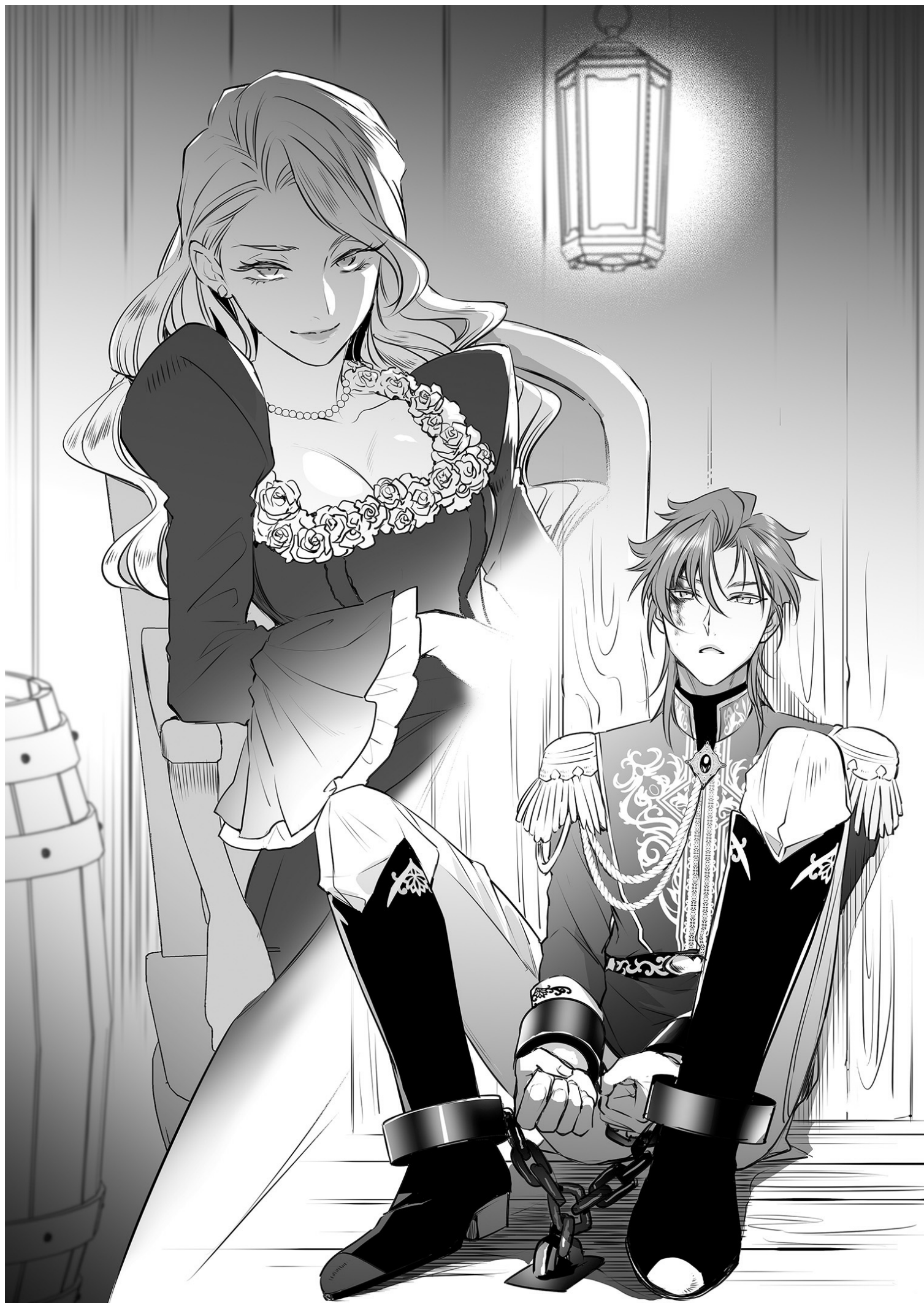
“Don’t assume that others have as little regard for those around them as you do. Though, you’re right; I don’t think I’d sit still after being taken onto a ship without any memory of being invited.” The regular swaying was a result of the waves, and from how the ship rocked, Marcus could tell that they hadn’t yet left port and could even estimate the ship’s size. He angrily glared at Juliette,

and she furrowed her eyebrows.

“Please don’t assume that I planned this unseemly situation.”

Marcus raised an eyebrow. “You mean to tell me it was all your lady’s maids’ fault?”

“Yes. I had no idea that every one of them was so useless as to be unable to house-sit for a little while,” Juliette said, grumpily turning her face away. Her anger told Marcus that this situation hadn’t been part of her plan.



She had predicted everything until this point. The fact that she had escaped from her quarters in the castle meant that she had already accounted for her spy's identity becoming known. However, she hadn't thought that Marcus would come barging into her room, and her lady's maids getting spooked and trying to kill him had been unexpected. If Marcus hadn't been where he was just then, he would've even felt a degree of sympathy for her for how foolishly her lady's maids had acted.

Still, no matter how resourceful Juliette was, her plans would always come apart at the seams, and her subordinates would remain foolish as long as she treated them like pawns to be sacrificed. There was no better demonstration of this than how Marcus and the subordinates he was so proud of had worked together to take down the criminal organizations Juliette had entrusted to others.

All of that brought Cesia to Marcus's mind. Over the past year, she had given it her all, and her efforts had borne incredible results. He loved her as a woman, but he was also proud of her growth as his student.

She used to have trouble with drying magic, but now, she could probably hold her own in a bout against one of the castle's casters. I have to make sure to tell her to turn down any recruiters from the knights. The corners of Marcus's mouth ticked up slightly.

"What are you smiling about, Prince Marcus? Do you not know the situation you're in?" Juliette said irritably. She seemed annoyed. Then again, her annoyance was only natural, considering the time and money spent preparing her plans and how Marcus's meddling forced her to change them.

"You know, I think this is very unfortunate, too. And here I was, thinking that our marriage was a good deal for both of our countries, only to have something like this done to me," he said.

"Oh? You were wrong," Juliette said. "There was never anything in the marriage that would have benefitted Emeroade. I was going to turn this country into a vassal of my own, with you, my husband, as its king." She smiled.

Her girlish, light pink lipstick didn't suit her. Marcus thought a sinister, darker color would be much more fitting for a woman like her. "How stupid," Marcus

said. “Even if you did control the king, we’re a constitutional monarchy. You can’t just do whatever you want.”

The royal succession was as if carved in stone. The crown prince enjoyed universal support. A supporting role suited the second prince, and the third prince was still young. And, after each of the beautiful princesses of the country got married—probably for some political reason or another—none of the citizens doubted that Emeroade had a bright future ahead of it. Even so, there had been times when some foolish people had tried to dangle the throne in front of Marcus. Just like Juliette, they had the shallow dream of taking control of the country through him.

However, the monarchy existed for the people’s sake; it wasn’t something a single person could exploit for their own self-interest. The person on the throne wasn’t the one with the most power; they were the one with the most responsibility. Even if Marcus were to replace his older brother, he couldn’t simply do whatever he wished.

Juliette looked into Marcus’s reproachful eyes, then chuckled. “Then, when the country is mine, I can just change it.”

In their two countries, being king meant different things. In Gwyllt, the king was an existence second only to God and held the most power in the country. That was why Juliette could come to Emeroade to try to establish her own country and why, to her, the beliefs of people like Marcus sounded like nothing but the opinions of weaklings.

“Oh, well. My plan has been moved up a bit, but I was going to bring you here anyway. Enjoy your heartfelt reunion,” Juliette said. She snapped her fingers, and a man opened the door and entered the room. Judging from his build and the way his movements left no trace of his presence, Marcus intuited that he was the man who had hit him from behind in Juliette’s quarters.

“Count Dawson Peck, right? So it was him. That’s the name of Gwyllt’s diplomat,” Marcus said.

“What about Count Peck?” Juliette asked, playing dumb.

The man, who appeared to be a diplomat, wore a flamboyant mask as if he was about to attend a masquerade ball. Marcus had thought it was odd that

Juliette had just been complaining about her lady's maids' failures but hadn't mentioned the man who had hit him, but it appeared that this man wasn't a sacrificial pawn like Anita and the lady's maids were. Marcus had seen the count's face once before but had no way to prove it was him, so Juliette seemed committed to concealing the count's involvement. At the same time, that could also be taken as evidence for how far Juliette had been backed into a corner—she'd probably never intended to use the count.

Marcus's internal deliberation stopped when he noticed what Count Peck held in his arms, and his eyes widened in surprise. "Ronald!" he shouted. Judging from the count's smooth movements, he seemed closer to an assassin or a secret agent than a diplomat. He was probably the one who'd pulled off the impressive stunt of swapping out the baby Ronald right from under his mother's nose.

"Yes, it's the cute baby prince. And look, he's still alive. Isn't this wonderful? Aren't you overjoyed to see him?" Juliette finally smiled cheerfully.

Marcus moved, and the heavy magic cuffs rattled.

"Oh, please don't think about doing anything stupid. You don't want your cute nephew to be killed, do you?" Juliette said, laughing and showing off the sleeping Ronald. He looked as if he had been put to sleep with magic.

"You'll kill him even if I don't do anything," Marcus said. Ronald was farther ahead than he was in the line of succession and would be an obstacle in making Marcus the king. Marcus didn't know why Juliette had kept Ronald alive, but ultimately, Ronald and Reynold would have to die for her plan to succeed.

"You aren't so cruel as to quicken the death of an infant who isn't even a year old, are you?" Juliette cooed. "Lord Marcus, do you know what puppetry magic is?"

Ronald's double had been a magic item, crafted using forbidden black magic, undoubtedly by someone in Juliette's camp who was well-versed in the practice. Earlier, Marcus had only been able to guess what she was after, but now that he knew that she wanted to make him king, the details of her plan became more apparent.

"I see. To protect Ronald's life, you want me to agree to puppetry magic,"

Marcus said.

As royalty, he had been taught to a certain degree about black magic. Puppetry was a twisted form of magic that let a person manipulate someone after destroying their spirit, with the added perversion that the target had to agree to the magic themselves for it to work. That meant that Juliette wanted to install Marcus as a literal puppet on the throne of Emeroade, and she was using the chaos of the ongoing celebrations to get rid of one of the barriers to that plan, Ronald.

No matter what he did, she would kill Ronald. His brother and nephew were both higher in the line of succession than he was. However, that didn't mean that he could just sit by and let his nephew be killed right in front of him. So, while Juliette planned to have Ronald killed eventually, he was still a hostage that she could use to force Marcus to do what she wanted.

"Oh, how scary. I've heard that, besides magic, you're also quite a skilled swordsman and martial artist. If you do anything unwise, I've ordered him to cut this baby's throat without hesitation," Juliette said, smiling.

Marcus laughed derisively and made a wicked grin. "Princess, order your subordinate to be very careful with Ronald. If he so much as scratches him, I don't know what I'll do."

"Hee hee, you're so charming when you pretend to be brave. It'll almost be a waste to break your spirit."

"I'd much rather not be broken, thank you very much."

"We're already far past that stage, thanks to no one else except you."

Marcus felt goosebumps on his skin.

Originally, Juliette had planned to murder Reynold and Ronald without Marcus knowing about it. She would kill the physically weak Ronald; then, after she and Marcus had married, she would wait for a chance to kill Reynold. Of course, if two people ahead in line for the throne died in quick succession, suspicion would fall on the person next in line, Marcus. Because she wanted him to be king, the deaths were a required part of her scheme, but that was where problems would arise and why she had wanted to do everything over a

long period without raising suspicion.

Juliette brought the components necessary for puppetry magic and the item she had used to mimic Ronald's corpse to Emeroade, but she hadn't planned to use either. The latter, in particular, was rare and expensive, and she had only brought it as a last resort. After all, she wouldn't have gone to all the trouble if everything had been going smoothly and Marcus hadn't wrecked everything. She knew how important taking her time was. She had planned to use the fertile soil of Emeroade as a breeding ground to expand her kidnapping rings, drug smuggling operations, and other criminal organizations that would bring in even more money for Gwyllt and weaken Emeroade, all while winning over Marcus. She was proud of her skill at making money, even more than her political ability, and she had sent all the money she had remorselessly made using her talent back to her native country. Here, too, she had been confident she could continue her work while keeping Marcus from noticing or doing anything she didn't want him to.

That is, until that scrawny maid—what was her name? Cesia, that's right—had barged in and forced her to change plans. Quick-witted as she was, Juliette had managed it on the fly, all while pulling things in the direction she wanted them to go. Bit by bit, however, cracks showed, and as she was compelled to ignore multiple low-priority objectives, her perfect plan slowly crumbled. The first was that she had lost the ability to make Ronald's death look like an accident, and the second was that her only option now was to break Marcus's spirit and turn him into a puppet when before he was going to be her close, loving husband and future crown prince. She had wanted to make Ronald's murder look like the work of that annoying maid, but it had become impossible. Cesia had made Juliette go through all sorts of extra work, and she was fed up with it.

The true beginning of the end for Juliette was when she mistakenly judged Marcus by his appearance to be an easygoing, carefree prince, but she hadn't noticed that yet.

"Puppetry magic is a forbidden art, and it even requires the consent of its target. How silly. Of course, it would go out of fashion," Juliette said. Count Peck handed Ronald to her, and she made an unpleasant grimace. She hated soft babies and children because they never listened to reason.

Meanwhile, the count, his hands now free, approached Marcus and cut the prince's arm, spilling his blood onto the implement necessary to activate the puppetry magic.

"Now, Lord Marcus, if you don't want to see your baby nephew killed in front of you, consent to the puppetry magic," Juliette said. "Don't worry, I'll make you a wonderful king."

Juliette pointed a knife at Ronald. If Marcus refused, she would thrust its sharp blade into the infant's soft skin.

But, even with magic cuffs binding his limbs, the air around Marcus's skin tingled, and he felt magic enveloping him. He could tell that the mark he had laid out before his abduction was getting closer. "My eye for people is many times better than yours," Marcus said, "and I never miss a good opportunity."

"Huh?" Juliette raised an eyebrow.

"I have excellent subordinates, you see," Marcus said confidently.

As soon as he finished speaking, there was a tremendous noise. The door and window were flung open, and Keith and Felix leaped in like bullets through both. Keith hit the count and knocked him off his feet, and he was taking Marcus away in the space of a breath. At the same time, Juliette noticed Felix advancing on her and moved to bring down the knife.

"Wait!" Felix yelled, but naturally, it had no effect.

Cesia appeared in the doorway and fired a spell at Juliette. "I don't think so!" she shouted.

The bolt of wind Cesia fired with peerless accuracy pierced Juliette's arm, blasting away the knife.

"Ow!" Juliette exclaimed.

"Nice!" Felix said. He speedily retrieved Ronald.

When she understood what was happening, Juliette yelled at Count Peck, "Take me and escape!"

He prepared to run. "Yes—"

“Where do you think you’re going?” Cesia interrupted the count with a loud laugh and, whipping up a strong wind, blew open the side of the ship’s hull. Following a deafening boom and a rush of sand, the room was opened to the outside. Beneath the blue sky, an Emeroadian fleet neatly encircled Juliette’s ship.

“When did this happen?!” Juliette cried.

“My magic teacher is a genius,” Cesia said, proudly smiling as her long black hair fluttered in the wind. “His Royal Highness left magic energy in my hair that told me his exact position, which at the same time worked as soundproofing magic in reverse that prevented either of you from detecting the fleet surrounding you.”

Seeing a bleeding Marcus in magic cuffs and Ronald in Felix’s arms, the knights and soldiers on the decks of the Emeroadian ships yelled. With the bloody magic item right there, there was no way that Juliette could talk her way out of it.

“Why, you...!” Juliette shouted, glaring at Cesia. She grabbed the knife on the floor with surprising speed and charged at Cesia.

To Cesia, that move was “by the book” for a villainess.

“Cesia,” Marcus called.

Cesia’s mouth curved upwards, and she unhurriedly began casting a spell. Her exhilaration transformed into visibly popping magical particles. “Don’t worry, I’ll go easy on her,” she said. No sooner had she finished speaking than she dodged the knife and, with her excess momentum, slammed a magically charged fist into Juliette. Her blow landed with a dull thump, and Juliette slammed against the wall.

“What a hit...” Keith mumbled.

Though it was hardly the time or place for it, Marcus smiled proudly.

It went without saying that the others weren’t simply watching this scene unfold. Keith threw down the count and restrained him as he tried to run and abandon Juliette. Juliette was unconscious, but she was bound, and some Emeroadian knights who had boarded the ship took both away. All in all,

compared to the lengthy conversation between Juliette and Marcus that Marcus had engaged in to buy time, their arrests were over in an instant.

Afterward, Layne appeared in the now well-ventilated cabin and irritably destroyed the magic cuffs binding Marcus. He kneeled and said, “I have come to pick up Your Royal Highness.”

“Good work,” Marcus said with a princely, magnanimous nod. Then, he healed his wounds. *I’ll be scolded for this later*, he thought as Cesia glared angrily at him. He pretended not to notice her and went to check on his nephew in Felix’s arms. “How is he?” he asked.

“His breathing is stable. He seems to be only sleeping,” Felix said carefully.

Roy rushed over, and Marcus told him, “Roy, examine Ronald.”

“I’m glad that Your Royal Highness is all right! I’m on it,” Roy said. He held his hands out over Ronald. “The small prince is fine; he’s only in a magical sleep.”

Juliette had planned to kill him, so he had been put to sleep with a simple, everyday spell. As soon as Roy undid the spell, Ronald woke up, and beneath the clear sky, his energetic crying echoed through the dry air.

AFTERWARD, thanks to the large volumes of evidence discovered in Anita’s quarters, the crimes Juliette had committed—at least in Emeroade—were exposed one by one. Before that, the only evidence against her had been circumstantial. The Second Division also contributed documents and reports they had compiled as a result of their investigations. However, just as Juliette was about to be sentenced to the maximum possible punishment, the “real” Count Peck arrived from Gwyllt with impeccable timing to negotiate.

The diplomat brazenly declared, “The man arrested with Lady Juliette was an impostor going by the name of Count Peck. In actuality, he’s also wanted in Gwyllt as a professional assassin and expert in black magic.”

“Do you truly believe that we’ll accept that claim?” Emeroade’s foreign minister, Lord Myron, said harshly. He was the negotiator for Emeroade.

The self-proclaimed real Count Peck regretfully shook his head. “Whether you

accept it or not, I can only say it is the truth.” Then, sensing Lord Myron’s anger, the count briskly continued. “It is regrettable that Princess Juliette used her position to commit such deplorable crimes. However, Gwyllt knew about none of it. If we did, we would, of course, have stopped her,” he said. His incessant speech sounded as if he was making fun of Lord Myron.

“Count Peck,” Lord Myron said, furrowing his eyebrows and forming deep creases in his forehead, “I imagine you are aware this situation is not one that you can smooth over with such nonsense.”

Gwyllt’s persistent assertion was that Juliette had acted on her own. That included everything from her placing a spy like Anita in the castle to her sources of funding and her having run a large criminal organization on an international scale. There was no way that Emeroade would accept an excuse like that.

“Her plans to abduct three members of our royal family and even attempt to kill a prince are tantamount to a declaration of war against us. Gwyllt may not have had anything to do with it, but a princess of your country used her authority to do it. Don’t think you’ll be able to assert a complete lack of involvement here!” Lord Myron accused, raising his voice and trying to pressure the count.

Count Peck smoothly pulled out some documents. “Though Princess Juliette acted alone, she is royalty from our country and acted as the king’s representative on her visit. It greatly pained His Majesty to learn of all this.”

Lord Myron was there to stubbornly fight until he won compensation and an official apology from Gwyllt. Condolences from that scheming old fox that ruled Gwyllt meant nothing to Emeroade.

Prince Marcus’s recklessness was famous. He was incredibly resourceful but believed he shouldn’t involve himself in government, leaving everything in that department up to his older brother. Because of that, he tended to solve things without resorting to politics. Politics was not something with a clear line between right and wrong, like breaking up a fight, but Lord Myron wanted to teach that prince that, just as he behaved recklessly for the country and its citizens, he could also care for his beloved country through politics. He could still be a shield that protected the country.

“Very well,” Lord Myron said. “Then, let us move on to discuss compensation for the cancellation of the engagement between Princess Juliette and Prince Marcus.” He sat up straight, determined to squeeze out all that he could get.

DAYS later, when Marcus heard the contents and the sum of the compensation due from Gwyllt, he doubled over laughing, clutching his stomach.

Picking up the documents the prince had dropped, Chris went pale when he saw the sum. “What an amount!” he exclaimed.

“It’s brutal!” Marcus said. “I knew Lord Myron would get it done. He’s always done a wonderful job.”

“Well, still, considering the danger Your Royal Highness and others were exposed to, it’s hardly something that can be made up for with money.”

They had also received an official apology from Gwyllt, but the gist of it was that they were sorry for letting Juliette act as freely as she had. By sacrificing her, they had maintained their dignity. Like Lord Myron, Chris stubbornly refused to accept Gwyllt’s claim that Juliette had acted of her own accord.

“Still, neither of us wants a war,” Marcus said. “Apologies to May and Ronald, but I have to consider my duty as royalty accomplished now that we’ve gotten rid of the diplomatic rot and put a stop to the crimes in the country.”

The citizens would suffer the most harm if they started a war. They had to avoid it as much as possible. On Gwyllt’s end, letting a single princess take the fall was the easiest option for them, too.

Chris was irritated by Marcus always putting his duty as royalty first above absolutely everything else. His master, who he loved and respected, had some problems with his conduct, but he only ever prioritized the public and had hardly any desires of his own. He had said that he was behaving as he liked, and that was correct, but his goals were all for the sake of the country. Chris wanted Marcus to put himself first, even just a little, but he couldn’t say anything because he knew it would be like denying Marcus’s entire existence if he did.

Marcus laughed for some time. Then, he stamped a document and pushed it

into Chris's hands. "Now, will I be free soon? Do I have any other plans?" he asked. Marcus had made all sorts of rash decisions this time, so there were nearly twice as many documents he had to deal with compared to normal. He'd had no time to frequent the Second Division. However, his main position at the Financial Audit Bureau was also going to get busy, considering the sum of the reparations from Gwyllt, so even if he could go, they wouldn't have time to entertain him.

"Cesia requested an audience, so I approved it," Chris said nonchalantly.

"Why did you approve it?!" Marcus exclaimed, surprised. "She'll be angry at me; I just know it!"

"Your Royal Highness appeared to be avoiding her. Don't you feel bad for her, sir?" Chris said. *Go ahead, get angry at him*, the butler thought, hiding his true intentions beneath his smile.

JULIETTE was swiftly deported when the reparations and official written apology were delivered from Gwyllt. The real Count Peck went to the port to see her off, remaining in Emeroade to dispose of some miscellaneous duties.

It was perfect weather for ocean travel. The sky was clear, and there was a gentle breeze, just as it had been when Juliette had been arrested. Sailors were everywhere busy at work, and besides the Emeroadian soldiers who were there to escort the princess, nobody was there to pay her any mind.

"Good work, Viscount Garlan," Juliette said, her words dripping with sarcasm.

The real Count Peck—the man whom Juliette had called Viscount Garlan—put a finger to his lips and smiled. "Your Royal Highness, you'll be paying quite a high price for what you've done this time."

"You must've moved up in the world to be able to take such a tone with me," Juliette said, twisting her mouth into an irritated frown. She wasn't bound, but as a criminal being extradited to Gwyllt, she wore a plain dress, and the ship she was to board was hardly fit for a princess.

The man who had called himself Count Peck was determined to have been just a criminal who had impersonated a diplomat, so rather than being returned

to Gwyllt, he had been sent to Emeroade's dungeon. He would stay there, at least until they could get the necessary information out of him and sentence him, but the Emeroadian justice system wasn't so easygoing as to let someone who had kidnapped two princes live a long life.

When the real Count Peck silently smiled at Juliette's biting remarks, she furrowed her eyebrows, somewhat embarrassed. Then, she sniffed. "But you're right. First, I'll have to report to His Majesty the problems I faced, and I'll have to devise some plans to improve."

"If only Your Royal Highness *did* have a chance to explain everything," Count Peck finally said.

"Why, you!" Juliette lost her cool and sharply scolded him. "You'll wish you had time to regret speaking like that to me, you lowly viscount!"

Count Peck was completely unbothered. On the contrary, he smirked and leered at her. "I believe Your Royal Highness is the one who should watch her tone. After all, I've formally received the genuine title of Count Peck and been appointed as a diplomat from Gwyllt by His Majesty."

Juliette was shocked. "Then, in the dungeon, what about—"

"He's a mere criminal who assumed the count's name."

Understanding the implication of his words, Juliette went pale. She had brought this criminal with her, which meant she, too, was a criminal. And the fact that this man had received the title of Count Peck before he had left Gwyllt meant that the king had abandoned the former Count Peck. Juliette was the king's daughter, but she had done great harm to Gwyllt, and it didn't seem like the cruel king would forgive her.

"Ee—"

Realizing all of this, Juliette tried to shout to the soldiers who had escorted her, but before she could, Gwylltian soldiers politely yet forcefully put her on the ship. Her composure had shattered, and she was shaking from fear.

If she had been her normal self, she would have noticed that the ship had an unusually small crew and that her jewelry and other valuable luggage weren't on the ship with her. She was a criminal, but even so, the ship itself was quite

plain.

“Goodbye, Your Royal Highness. Have a nice trip,” Count Peck said, smiling. He watched the ship as it left port.

DAYS later, news reached Emeroade that, sometime after the ship had entered Gwyllt’s territorial waters, a storm had hit it, and Juliette, with several of her attendants, had disappeared. Despite the fact that she had departed on a clear, calm day.

MARCUS went to the training ground at the appointed time. Cesia was alone, sitting in a chair and repairing some equipment while waiting for her audience with him. Lately, she had been using the space more than Marcus, so the training clubs and the blades of the training swords were much more worn down than he remembered.

Noticing Marcus, Cesia stood up and greeted him. “Thank you for sparing the time to meet with me, Your Royal Highness.”

“Yeah.”

“I...” Cesia hesitated. “I wanted to ask about Juliette...and Anita.”

The news that Juliette had perished after trouble at sea had given rise to various theories within Emeroade, but as it had occurred within Gwyllt’s territorial waters, it was impossible to know the truth. Everyone had their own opinions on the incident, but the chance to ask Juliette what had happened had been lost forever.

Anita was currently still under questioning by the Security Bureau. The bureau had cooperated with the Second Division for a short while, but they never readily gave up all the details of their operations if they didn’t have to. They had let the Second Division know that Anita was testifying willingly, but beyond that, Cesia had no way to know how she was.

“Apparently, Anita’s very cooperative in questioning, and she’s also testifying in detail about the evidence found in her quarters,” Marcus said.

Juliette hadn't had definitive evidence with her when she had come to Emeroade, but Anita had carefully preserved and hidden everything as if she had known something like this would happen. Marcus had so easily been able to gain the cooperation of the Security Bureau and bring that many people to the port to surround the Gwylltian ship because of that evidence. In contrast with Juliette, who had remained silent until the envoy had arrived from Gwyllt, Anita answered everything she was asked. Thanks to her, the full picture of Juliette's plot was coming to light.

"I still don't understand why," Cesia said.

Marcus nodded. The evidence Anita had gathered had been so well-organized that it had required hardly any scrutiny to understand. At the same time, it was also a record of her five years in Emeroade. To Marcus, it felt as if various emotions, too complicated to be put into words, were contained within it: the debt of gratitude she owed to Juliette, the free life she had led in Emeroade, the trusting relationship between her and Mavis, and the joy and satisfaction she got from faithfully performing her job. Juliette had saved her back in Gwyllt, but the days she spent in Emeroade had been happy ones. There was an unexplainable longing within that evidence; she had made sure to preserve all of it while at the same time dutifully following Juliette's order to remain to the end as a decoy.

"The night we found the daughter of Marquess Acton, I had gotten the invitations to that party from May. Thinking back on it now, I wonder if Anita played a part in all of that," Marcus said.

Cesia bit her lip. "The last time I spoke with Anita... She called Juliette 'Lady Juliette.'" Anita had been the underling of someone who had kidnapped Mavis, poisoned Lady Amy with drugs, and tried to kill Prince Ronald. She had been lying the entire time. "But another time," Cesia said, sighing in between words. Tears began to fall from her eyes. "She spoke to Lady May the same way..."

Marcus silently embraced her.

Juliette was gone, and Gwyllt had officially answered that the former Count Peck, who was maintaining his silence, was someone they had no relation with. The evidence Anita had provided was enough to prove her criminal

involvement, so once her questioning was over, she would serve her sentence. Considering Anita's willingness to respond to questioning and the fact that her testimony had allowed them to determine Juliette's location so quickly, she hadn't been sentenced to death by execution. Instead, she had been granted the kindness of being allowed to drink a cup of poison.

Cesia quietly continued to cry. She couldn't change the past to make it so nothing had happened, and she knew it was far too late to help Anita. Unable to do anything else, Marcus held Cesia close as she cried from the sorrow of losing her friend.

After a while, he gently let go, and perhaps because she was embarrassed from having cried, Cesia purposefully pouted. "Still, that diplomat! He was so cruel, casually pinning all the blame onto Juliette."

"I thought you wouldn't forgive Juliette."

"I haven't! But... I think she should have lived to pay for her crimes. If she dies, nothing comes of it at all..." Cesia said, lost for words. Marcus hugged her again.

She was right—death didn't make a difference. However, there were crimes that could only be atoned for in death. Many of the women who had been kidnapped and taken to other countries had had no relatives, and efforts to return them had stalled because it was difficult to even determine who had been taken. Amy, the daughter of Marquess Acton, along with many others, were still suffering from the effects of the drugs they had taken.

It had been the opinion of the Emeroade side that Juliette should be kept alive in Emeroade because the information that she knew and hadn't yet divulged might be vital to those follow-up efforts, but the death penalty would have awaited her anyway after she had testified to everything she knew. However, Emeroade hadn't been able to get any information out of her, and her deportation to Gwyllt, away from the eyes of the law, had basically been an assassination.

Gwyllt might have actually gotten the better end of the deal in terms of outward appearance once their criminal princess had perished in an unlucky accident, but the fact that the accident had been a cover for an assassination meant that any room for doubt that Gwyllt had been ordering Juliette behind

the scenes was gone. The only remaining source of possible evidence was the still reticent former Count Peck, though it didn't seem likely he would speak. Anita couldn't testify about any possible backers because she knew very little about them, having been in Emeroade for five years.

It was frustrating, but the case was over. All the crimes had been determined to have been committed by Princess Juliette alone, on her authority, without any other outside actors. Juliette herself was probably frustrated the most by such an unsatisfactory conclusion.

"It's definitely a conspiracy by the entire Gwyllt royal family. But, we can't expose it?" Cesia asked.

"There's no evidence. Juliette left nothing in Emeroade. Even at the end, she couldn't talk her way out of it only because she had been caught red-handed."

Cesia fell silent and looked at Marcus imploringly. *It's frustrating. It's all so frustrating.*

"However, this was our victory," Marcus said.

"Huh?"

"We lost Anita, let Juliette get away, and lost any way to pursue Gwyllt for their crimes, but the negotiations for access to their canal are proceeding in Emeroade's favor."

"Well, yes. But it's still dissatisfying."

"Between countries, it's uncommon for anyone to be satisfied. In the worst case, trying too hard to get what you want leads to war."

Cesia was taken aback.

"Well, that's an extreme example," Marcus said. "We have parliament and laws, so that doesn't happen. Even if war does occur, and we settle everything in our favor, the citizens are the ones who suffer the most."

Cesia paused. "You're right." The way countries were had distorted the innocent Anita to such an extent. It was probably the same for Juliette, too.

"War must be avoided, most of all. This time, things ended favorably for us, and the people will be better off. We aren't acting to satisfy our personal

grudges; we're acting in the national interest...to protect the people of the country."

"I see. Putting it that way, it is Emeroade's victory." Cesia still wasn't satisfied, but they had accomplished what they had set out to do. Today, tomorrow, and the day after that, they could do nothing except continue living in this unequal world of theirs.

"Is this what you wanted to talk about?" Marcus asked. "I was prepared for you to scold me for getting captured by Juliette." He lightheartedly laughed.

Cesia blushed, glaring sharply at him. His comment hadn't been wise. "I *am* angry! You got captured on purpose, didn't you?"

He had probably expected it to happen when he went to Juliette's quarters. He had seemingly taken all of his actions, including casting a spell on Cesia's hair that had let her track him, with the probability of him being captured and unable to send a message or use magic in mind. The magic energy in Cesia's hair automatically returned to its owner, Marcus, when the proper steps were taken, and naturally, Marcus knew that Roy knew how to do that.

"Not at all," Marcus said.

"Please don't avert your eyes. You have a bad habit of using yourself as bait." Cesia lowered her gaze. "Everyone cares about you, and it worries them."

Carefully choosing his words, Marcus replied, "At the time, there hadn't been any evidence, and I had no idea what Ronald was going through or how long he would be able to withstand it with only the strength of a baby."

He implied there had been no other way, but Cesia wouldn't accept that so simply. She silently glared at Marcus, and he raised both hands in surrender.

"But I'm sorry for making you worry."

"Still, if you were in the same position, you'd do the same thing again, wouldn't you?"

"Of course," Marcus readily replied.

Cesia bit her lip. "I want to hit that calm face of yours."

Marcus smiled again. "I don't mind. I know how much I made you worry."

“I don’t have the right. It would be disrespecting royalty,” she said, looking away in frustration.

Marcus grabbed her loosely hanging hand and squeezed it to draw her attention. “You do have that right, Cesia.”

Then, he kneeled. As he held her hand with both of his, Cesia widened her eyes in surprise. People rarely came to the training ground, but there was still a chance that someone might see them. What would they think if they saw the prince kneeling?

“Your Royal Highness, there’s no need to kneel!”

“I can’t even put into words how angry I was when Juliette put those cuffs on me, but this is a nice feeling. This is how you do it, right?” He grinned and audibly kissed Cesia’s hand.

“Uh.” She went pale.

“Marry me, Cesia.”

It felt as if time had stopped. After a brief silence, Cesia understood the meaning of his words and abruptly shouted, “I-I can’t!”

“It’s not that you don’t want to; it’s that you can’t, huh?” Marcus said. He smiled, not bothered by what she had said. He knew he had already hurt Cesia plenty and thought he ought to contentedly accept whatever she had to say, even if it hurt him.

“I’m a commoner, and you’re a prince, and...I...I...” Ultimately, that was the reason Cesia hadn’t expected her love for Marcus to come to fruition.

“If it’s an issue of status, then I’ll solve it.”

“You can’t! If you treat me so favorably, it’ll hurt you later. And I don’t want you to suffer because of me!”

She knew Marcus, and she knew that he might, for example, actually be able to get a high-ranking noble to adopt her. But he couldn’t do that. The only reason he was free to do as he wished, and why he was so trusted, was because he was honest and impartial. He was a prince, but if he used his position and his power for his own selfish desires, the citizens wouldn’t accept it.

Cesia thought the way Gwyllt had punished Juliette had been excessive, but it was still obvious that some sort of penalty would be enacted when she thought of the national scale of it all. She wouldn't be able to stand it if, because of her, the man who had exerted himself to protect the country and its people and had put his life on the line to carry out his duties was harmed. More than anything, she wanted him to remain free. Rather than him losing that freedom, it would be better for her to leave him.

Marcus couldn't sense a drop of sweet, heart-pounding love in Cesia's stubborn proclamation. He smiled, embarrassed.

"This isn't a joke!" she said.

He smoothed things over after she scolded him with an apology. "Sorry. I was just happy that you're so faithfully trying to protect my creed."

"Your Royal Highness, if they spent a bit of time with you, just about anyone would be able to tell that you're suppressing your desires for the sake of your duties," Cesia said. She tried to pull her hand away, but Marcus didn't let go. He never wanted to let go of her again.

"Is that why, after confessing your feelings to me and getting that weight off your shoulders, you're trying to leave me?" Marcus asked.

"What?! How could you tell?"

"Of course I can tell. Don't sell short the five years we've known each other."

It really had been five years since they had met.

"I've only known *Your Royal Highness* for three years," Cesia said. She was competitive, and if she had the room to, she argued with what he said.

Marcus laughed, delighted. When he was with her, he felt incredible. He wanted to protect her and hold her close to him. He wanted her to be free and keep her by his side. He didn't want her feelings to be hurt, either, but he also thought that if she had to go through some sort of pain, he wanted it to be his fault.

He could be patient as long as necessary if it were for the sake of the country, the people, or his family. If he knew it was for the best and they would be

happy, he could leave someone and never see them again. But he couldn't let go of Cesia. He wanted to be the one to make her happy or unhappy. He dearly wished that they could be happy together.

"All right," Marcus said. "If that's your wish, then I'll get rid of any obstacles so perfectly that no one will have room to complain. And I'll do it without changing what I believe in."

Cesia began to argue. "That isn't what I mean—"

"I love you," Marcus interrupted her. "I truly love you. I'll make you happy, so make me happy, too."

Cesia's face turned bright red. That was much more direct than when he had proposed to her, and it looked like it had worked. "Don't say that. It isn't fair..."

"I don't want to hear that coming from you. Remember, you said everything you wanted back then." Marcus grinned mischievously, bringing up her confession at the vacant house.

Cesia hesitated. "Do you really have a way to prevent anyone from complaining, no matter what?" she asked. She was realistic and still cautious.

Marcus calmly reassured her. "I already have an idea."

"You can't use your princely authority."

"So persistent. This is supposed to be a romantic scene, you know; I won't tolerate anything except an affirmative response," Marcus said. Her tenacity made even him pout. *Was courting the woman I love supposed to be this difficult?* he thought. He gained a new, unnecessary respect for everyone in a relationship. "Hey, just give in already," he said, and Cesia began to cry again. "You sure are crying a lot today."

"And whose fault do you think that is?!"

She was strong-willed and stubborn; she was a young woman but held as her creed something as unconventional as determined resistance. She was honest and a hard worker and got lonely easily; she was his cute, lovely stray cat.

"I love you. Marry me," Marcus said.

At his second request, Cesia didn't resist it anymore. "I will... I love you, too."

Marcus grabbed her by the waist and lifted her.

Surprised by the sudden change in perspective, she screamed. “Aah! Your Royal Highness?!”

“You said it, so there are no takebacks!” Marcus exclaimed childishly, with a bright, childish smile to match.

At last, Cesia smiled, too.

He knew that she would sacrifice anything for him. He wrapped his arms around her as if to say she wouldn’t have to give up anything while he was there.

“I won’t,” Cesia said. “You found me, and I’m not going anywhere.”

“Yeah. I’m not ever letting go,” Marcus said. He hugged her tight, breathing a sigh of happiness.

There was one more thing.

“If we get married, I’ll be a princess consort,” Cesia mumbled. Marcus had let her down on the ground but was still hugging her closely.

“Yeah. Why do you mention it? Did you suddenly sprout a lust for power?” Marcus asked, tilting his head in puzzlement. At the same time, he was fiddling with Cesia’s untied black hair.

“No, I don’t understand all that. But this means that you and I are equals now, right?”

“That’s what being married means,” Marcus said, looking even more confused about what she was getting at.

Cesia nodded. The queen consort and Marcus and Mavis’s mother voiced their opinions to the king if the situation demanded it. Their positions were nearly equal to his.

Though Marcus still didn’t know what Cesia was trying to say, he heard alarm bells go off inside his head. “Cesia...” he said.

“Informal it may have been, our engagement is now confirmed, and we’re on equal footing. As such, Your Royal Highness,” Cesia said, smiling broadly.

Her smile was incredibly cute. Marcus had never seen her smile like that in the five years he had known her. He had a bad feeling about what was going to happen next. “Calm down, Cesia.”

“Please clench your teeth,” she said.

His fiancée was making a fist with one of her hands.

Her greatest wish had been fulfilled at last—she had the right to hit him.

IT was another day, and, standing at the door to the king’s audience hall and waiting to escort Cesia, Marcus’s eyes widened when he saw her approaching. She was wearing a flame-red dress with jade green ornamentation—the same one she had worn the night they had danced together.

The first time he saw her wear that dress, she had tried to hide why she was wearing it. But now, fully understanding the meaning of the colors, she wore it proudly.

“Sorry for the delay,” she said.

“Not at all,” Marcus said.

She grabbed the dress to show him and smiled. “Is this weird? I think I gained some weight. A certain someone keeps trying to make me eat a bunch of food,” she said. That someone was Maria. Every time Cesia saw her, she tried to make her eat as many nutritious things as possible.

“No, it looks wonderful, as always.”

Cesia paused. “I like it. It’s my only good dress, and I got it from Lady May.”

Marcus held out his hand to Cesia, and she put her hand on top of his. When their eyes met, Marcus squinted as if staring at something bright. “You’re gorgeous.”

“Thank you.” Cesia smiled happily.

The two guards, one on each side of the door, loudly announced their entrance.

“Then, let’s go, my fiancée.”

“I’ll be counting on you, my future husband.”

They looked at each other and smiled playfully.

The double doors were wide open. A carpeted path led straight to the throne within the audience hall ahead of them. Escorted by Marcus, Cesia confidently walked forward. It was clear to anyone there who Cesia was as she walked side by side with Marcus, wearing his colors. Someone let out an audible sigh.

The two arrived at the designated point for them to stand and stopped.

Marcus looked at Cesia. “Will you be fine by yourself?” he whispered.

She was nervous but firmly nodded, and said, “Yes.” Marcus rubbed her shoulder to give her courage, then went to sit with the rest of the royal family. His face had a hint of worry, but it was Cesia’s time to perform.

Her name was called. “Cesia Kathrin.”

“Yes,” she responded. She straightened her back, then curtsied elegantly, keeping her back straight and remaining firmly aware of her foot planted on the floor. That was one of the series of movements that Anita had drummed into her. The person Cesia was now was made up of what she had learned from many different people, including much of what Marcus had taught her.

Alongside the deep gratitude she felt toward him, she also loved him. She didn’t want to make him change himself, and she didn’t want to be a weakness of his. No longer like a stray cat, she proudly advanced, head held high, to win her love herself.

Raising her face, she saw the king of Emeroade. He was a stern-looking man, slightly older than her father would have been, and he didn’t resemble Marcus at all. Then, making sure not to move her head, Cesia used her eyes only and saw two beautiful women sitting on either side of the king—the queen consort and the king’s concubine.

The king’s concubine was Marcus and Mavis’s mother, Princess Muriel. Their appearances were identical to hers, whether it was their bright, fiery red hair, jade green eyes, or the same amused expressions as they watched the proceedings.

“I hear that you greatly contributed to resolving the most recent incident. My thanks,” the king said.

His deep voice was unexpectedly similar to Marcus’s. Cesia was surprised. She had heard somewhere that the sound of a person’s voice was related to their bone structure, and Marcus and his father weren’t alike in that respect. Then she realized that Marcus might model himself after his father when he conducted himself as a prince. That idea of Marcus imitating his father was sweet. He was adaptable and light on his feet, but the image that came to his head when he imagined someone dignified was of his father, and it was clear that he had great respect for his father. With that, Cesia’s nervousness abated somewhat, and she smiled slightly.

“Thank you for rescuing my son and grandson,” the king said, continuing in his deep, calm voice.

He specifically said those words as a father and grandfather, Cesia thought. The king’s intense eyes had softened ever so slightly, conveying a feeling of pure gratitude, and Cesia felt a warm twinge in her chest.

“I am unworthy of those kind words,” Cesia said. Everyone there knew she was a commoner, so she spoke carefully and concisely to avoid being disrespectful. The king nodded magnanimously, impressed, perhaps, by her efforts.

An elderly man standing one step below the king read aloud from a document. Cesia didn’t know who he was, but he was of some high rank or another and seemed to be in charge of directing the proceedings. The man read off a list of names of those who had contributed to resolving the recent crisis and the rewards to be parceled out. He explained that the knights were to be honored and that any who had desired something else had already received it. Cesia had distinguished herself in various situations and had performed well when closing in on Juliette, so she had been granted a direct audience with the king.

In other words, at present, all the ministers and members of the royal family had gathered there for her. Beads of sweat rolled down her back, but she maintained her plastered-on smile. The setting was just right for her and

Marcus's plan, but that didn't mean she wasn't nervous.

Cesia glanced around at the royal family before her. Mavis watched her nervously, and Crown Princess Edith looked at her gratefully as she lovingly held Ronald. Marcus, meanwhile, was unsuccessfully trying to hide a smirk. *I'll hit him again after this. As hard as I can. I don't need to hold back anymore.*

"So, Cesia Kathrin, name your reward," the king said.

It had been a year since she had begun working at the Second Division of the Financial Audit Bureau. In that time, she had saved a princess, a marquess's daughter, a prince, and the future crown prince. In all, it was more than enough to say that she had saved the kingdom. The script was incredibly simple, and Prince Marcus himself had said the words she had to say once before. Saving the kingdom meant that she could take a princess's hand in marriage. Cesia was a woman, so a lovely, red-haired prince would surely be just right.

"Then, with all due respect, I would like to take Prince Marcus Emeroade as my partner in marriage," Cesia said.

For a moment, no one understood what she had said, and the audience hall fell silent. Cesia looked at the expressions on everyone's faces carefully as she waited for a response.

The man reading off the list, Count Ford, the speaker of parliament, finally broke the silence. "You wish to become princess consort?"

"No, I only want Prince Marcus."

These were quite passionate words of confession. Mavis blushed and elegantly put a hand to her mouth, but she would have shouted with joy if she had been in her room and not in the audience hall.

"His Royal Highness is the treasure of Emeroade, not someone we can readily bestow to a commoner."

At his clear words, Cesia internally chuckled. It had to come to this, or her preparation would have been for nothing. They would neatly make their case against her, only for her to defeat it. That was how she would perfectly get Marcus.

“Speaker, I have someone who would like to offer their input on that matter. Do you mind if he enters?” Marcus asked.

Count Ford’s eyes widened in disbelief that the prince had spoken, but after guards at the door informed him that the man’s identity had already been verified, he reluctantly allowed him in. The space, intended to gather together the royal family and other important individuals of high office, had heavy security, and he judged that one unexpected person would not be an issue.

With permission, Marcus signaled with his eyes to the guards. The doors opened, and everyone looked in wonder at the man who appeared there.

“Please excuse my sudden interruption, Your Majesty. My name is Ben Langton, the Marquess Acton,” said the man. With skilled movements, he greeted the king as a retainer, bowing deeply.

The king nodded once, accepting his greeting. With that, Count Ford spoke to the marquess. “Marquess Acton, what do you have to say?” he asked.

Being in the king’s presence and not wanting to waste time with any ceremonial exchanges, he got straight to the point. “I would like to transfer the barony in my possession to Lady Cesia Kathrin.”

Beginning with Count Ford, everyone in the hall looked surprised. Many high-ranking noble houses held multiple titles concurrently, and it was common in Emeroade for the eldest son to be referred to by his father’s title before he officially took over and for second sons to inherit one of the other titles. However, it was exceedingly rare for nobles to grant their titles to strangers.

“What is your reason for such a request, Marquess Acton?” Count Ford asked.

The marquess nodded slightly. “My daughter, Amy, is the most important person in the world to me, and Lady Cesia’s actions saved her life. I’ve wanted to thank her for some time now, and I won’t be satisfied by repaying that debt of gratitude with any ordinary reward.”

Cesia felt Marcus’s influence in the touch of drama in the marquess’s speech, and she had to prevent herself from smiling. While it was true the marquess had requested to be able to reward Cesia, she hadn’t accepted it. That wasn’t because the reward hadn’t been enough, but because she had never gotten

around to replying to him.

“So,” Marquess Acton continued, “I have decided to give one of my titles to Lady Cesia.” He explained that he had two sons in addition to his daughter and had already decided what assets he would give to each of them.

Under Emeroadian law, it was possible to give others noble titles, but this required the national government’s permission if this was not done through inheritance so that titles couldn’t be given to just anyone. His request was to grant Cesia one of his next valuable possessions: his lowest-ranking title, the barony of Wallen. Here, he was asking for that request—an unprecedented one—to be granted. Still, there wouldn’t be an issue if they followed the proper procedure. Also, women could inherit or receive titles and estates in Emeroade.

“I wanted to do it sooner, but with the recent national disorder, I thought it would have been a bother to suddenly make such a request, so I delayed it until today,” the marquess said.

He presented this decision as if it had been admirably selfless, but it was clear to anyone that he had preserved it for this moment. If his request had been granted beforehand and Cesia had been a baroness, there would undoubtedly have been a different argument against Cesia’s wish to marry Marcus. However, if the speaker declined Cesia’s request now, just as she was about to accept a barony for her heroic deeds, he would have seemed overly stubborn in refusing her achievements. Marcus knew well that, even if the cards in his hand were the same, it was important to play them when they would be the most effective.

The truth was that while almost everyone there was surprised, they could predict, based on common practice, that Marquess Acton’s request would be granted without an issue. They also knew that once granted, the reasoning Count Ford and others had given for being unable to accept Cesia and Marcus’s marriage—namely, that she was a commoner—would be invalid. Being a baroness didn’t quite cut it for marriage to a prince, but it was difficult to say that Cesia lacked merit. Naturally, there were no previous examples of this happening, so with no clear rules, it would be up to the judgment of the people there—the most powerful people in the kingdom.

“Pff.”

In the middle of the deathly silent hall, someone quietly giggled. It grew louder but remained elegant, and the culprit, Princess Muriel, sitting to the left of the king, eventually burst into laughter. The speaker was surprised, and both he and Cesia, who had been nervously watching over the proceedings, looked at the princess with astonishment. She laughed joyfully for another moment, then hid her mouth beneath her fan, still chuckling.

“Princess Muriel,” Count Ford said, admonishing her.

The princess suppressed her laughter. With traces of a smile still on her face, she seemed overjoyed as she looked at Cesia. “You said your name was Cesia Kathrin, right?”

Cesia looked at the speaker, checking whether it was all right for her to speak, then returned her gaze to the princess and bowed formally. “Yes?”

“You want my prince?”

Cesia hesitated. “Yes.”

“Why?”

At that, Cesia slightly frowned. She hadn’t thought that she would be questioned in that way. The answer was obvious, so she was straightforward. “Because I love him,” Cesia replied. She had maintained a neutral expression until then, but saying it again made her blush.

Muriel took in Cesia’s youthful, innocent expression, then nodded, satisfied. “You too, Marcus?”

“Yes,” Marcus instantly replied. He understood his mother and knew he should tell the truth without any embellishments or tricks. “I love Cesia. She stubbornly wished for a peaceable engagement, so I took the liberty of setting this up.”

“You’ve always loved playing pranks.”

“I must have gotten it from you, mother.”

Muriel smiled, pleased. “I approve of this marriage, Your Majesty. Saving the future king was a wonderful deed, and with the difference in status resolved, I

see no reason to oppose it,” she said confidently.

The king’s first wife, Queen Claudia, was silent, but she nodded firmly. Crown Prince Reynold and his wife, Princess Edith, had already been ready to grant Cesia land or a title for saving their son, and it went without saying what Mavis thought. The first princess and the third prince were absent due to other duties and had said they would abide by whatever the rest of their family agreed upon. The other assembled leaders found it difficult to object, having been the ones who had decided on the notorious Juliette as Marcus’s fiancée in the first place.

In a certain way, Marcus had contributed more to Emeroade’s interests in this case than marrying a Gwylltian princess would have. So, there was no issue with his next fiancée being the hero who saved the kingdom.

Count Ford looked up at the king, who had been silently watching the entire time, for his final verdict. The king deliberately looked at Marcus, then the rest of the audience, before fixing his gaze on Cesia. “Cesia Kathrin,” he said.

“Your Majesty,” she said, bowing deeply.

“In acknowledgment of your great achievements, I approve of your engagement with Second Prince Marcus Emeroade.”

“Thank you!” Cesia barely managed to speak before she heard sudden, cheerful clapping. She raised her face to see that Mavis was so overjoyed that she had spontaneously begun clapping. The princess hurriedly lowered her hands and bowed. Cesia was thankful, however, as she had lightened the mood in the hall.

“Then, I’ll inform you of the process of the title transfer at a later date. With this, today’s audience is over!” Count Ford proclaimed.

Beginning with the king, the rest of the attendees left the hall. Until the final person exited, Cesia kept her head bowed in appreciation.

Cesia heard footsteps in the now-empty audience hall and raised her head to see Marcus standing unexpectedly close to her. The morning sunlight came in from a large window high up on the wall, shining on his fiery red hair.

“Good work,” Marcus said.

“I feel like, in the end, it all went just as Your Royal Highness guided it. Like I was just watching the whole thing happen,” Cesia said, pouting.

Marcus smiled and drew her close to him. “What are you saying? Your efforts were what created the situation in the first place.”

Cesia had a troubled expression as Marcus toyed with a strand of her hair. “I guess so,” she said, still not confident.

“I only set it up. I’m more used to fighting here than you are, that’s all.”

Cesia nodded. She didn’t think things would have gone as well, even if she had had the same idea as him. *I’ll never be a match with him*, she keenly felt. “I’m still far from being able to compete with you.”

Marcus smirked. “I think you’re on the right track, though.”

Cesia frowned, annoyed. “Just you watch. One day, I’ll beat you!” she declared. Love wasn’t a matter of victory or defeat, but she was getting fired up with competitive spirit for some reason.

“Yeah, I’ll be expecting great things from you.” Marcus laughed and put his hand on her cheek, drawing her face close to his.

With his long eyelashes close enough to touch her, she cast her purple eyes downward. She felt Marcus’s soft lips on hers, and he pecked her before separating. Cesia quietly watched him, then smiled widely.

He was the person she loved and respected the most. She wanted him to protect her but also wanted to be able to help him whenever he was in trouble. More than anything, she wanted to be on equal terms with him. Her goal and her rival was her husband—that didn’t have a bad ring to it.

“I’ll beat you, no matter what,” she declared.

Marcus smiled mischievously, then quickly kissed Cesia’s smiling, pink lips again.

No matter who she was up against, Cesia’s creed was determined resistance.

And so, the mischievous prince and the stray cat had a long, happy life together. Everyone lived happily ever after—this, however, is an ending that Cesia Kathrin doesn’t get to enjoy because she was born under the unlucky star

that doomed her to a life of constant trouble.

Chapter 5: By a Twist of Fate, I'm Preparing for Married Life

THE gentle light of the early afternoon sun filtered through the leaves of the trees. It was a peaceful day, and the faint scent of flowers filled the air. This pleasant scene was abruptly shattered by a piercing voice.

“You’re so shameless!!”

When she heard the same tired phrase, Cesia readied herself with a start. The next moment, there was a loud splash, but nothing hit her. She looked around curiously and saw a girl wearing a plain-looking dress with black tea dripping off her. She looked like she was about to cry. The girl stood under one of the trees in the garden party’s venue, and several young noble ladies encircled her.

Cesia was seated at a table with all high-ranking noblewomen, and it didn’t seem anyone else had noticed what was happening in the corner. She wanted to rush over and help the girl, but as a newcomer to the table, she didn’t know whether getting up and leaving might lead to someone complaining later. She thought about it for a moment, making sure her thoughts didn’t show on her face, then beckoned her lady’s maid—Rosary Hilton, the daughter of a count—over to her.

“Is something the matter, mistress?” Rosary asked Cesia when she arrived. Rosary was a gorgeous young woman with slightly upturned eyes. As a graduate of the Royal Academy, she was intelligent and in the position to be able to live leisurely for the rest of her life without serving someone else, as she did Cesia. She had initially worked for a few years as the first princess’s lady’s maid to enhance her status, having decided she would resign after she married her fiancé. However, when the princess decided to study abroad before Rosary’s marriage, Rosary was selected as the foreign Princess Juliette’s temporary lady’s maid.

Now, Rosary was available once again. Her wedding was just around the

corner, so she was due to resign very soon, but she was working for Cesia for a limited time because there was no other noblewoman or lady's maid who was quite as worthy as her to serve the woman who was due to become the second prince's princess consort.

"Give this to the lady over there," Cesia said, handing a handkerchief to Rosary. It might not mean much to the girl, but it should deter any further would-be bullies.

Rosary looked at the handkerchief, then in the direction Cesia had gestured before looking into Cesia's eyes. "I believe it would be wiser to leave her alone. Whatever the reason, some of the blame lies on the one being bullied. She still has to live her life from now on, and surely you won't always be there to help her out, yes?"

Cesia hesitated. "That might be true," she said. Rosary was right. Cesia wasn't anything to that girl, much less her guardian. It would be an issue if the girl expected help from her next time, too. Ultimately, Cesia was only doing this for herself. Still unable to ignore it, she was at a loss for words.

Rosary sighed softly. "I disapprove of it, but I'll do it, this time only," she said, then briskly headed to the girl.

"You're quite kind, Lady Cesia," someone said to her.

Hearing her name, Cesia hurriedly turned to face forward. As the fiancée of the second prince and a newly ennobled baroness, Cesia had been seated at the table for wives of high-ranking nobles. Many noblewomen were at the party in the castle garden.

"I couldn't pretend I didn't see it," Cesia said.

"Oh my, I would expect nothing less from the fiancée of His Royal Highness, who has such a strong sense of justice."

"Indeed. She truly is suited for him."

Both of the noblewomen laughed elegantly.

Cesia felt cold sweat trickle down her back. Their words had been flattering, but she knew they were laughing at her, that upstart commoner who didn't

know the first thing about high society customs. The reason was simple—they were angry. After Juliette’s downfall had left the position conveniently open, they planned to install their own daughters as the second prince’s princess consort, only for Cesia to swoop in and nab it for herself. And just as they were wondering what sort of dignified, noble lady she was, they learned that she was an orphaned former commoner. There was no way that their pride would allow them to accept it lying down.

“It isn’t smart to feed stray dogs on a whim, after all,” another noblewoman said flatly. She was the apparent center of the circle of noblewomen, the wife of Marquess Daphne. The other wives nodded emphatically while the few unmarried noble ladies at the same table lowered their gazes.

Cesia was undoubtedly the cause of the awkward atmosphere at the table. Normally, she would never sit back idly and watch—she wanted to stand up and shout, “Constant, determined resistance!”

Instead, she snuffed out her anger. “I’m inexperienced in these manners, so thank you for the insightful advice. I’ll be more careful next time,” she said, smiling sweetly.

WHEN the garden party was finally over, Cesia returned to the guest quarters in the castle she had been assigned, with Rosary accompanying her. As soon as she changed into a more comfortable dress, she plopped down on the couch and sprawled out as if melting into it.

“So slovenly,” Rosary said, annoyed.

“I’ll recover; just give me a minute,” Cesia said, hanging her head.

Rosary had promptly tidied up what was necessary and had already dismissed the other maids. There was no way to know whether any of the maids that frequented Cesia’s quarters were under the influence of the noble wives from the garden party. Until Cesia married Marcus, her title of fiancée was a trivial thing that could be revoked at any time. That was particularly true for a special case like hers.

Those noblewomen weren’t the only people digging around for dirt on her.

Ministers interested in using Marcus for political gain also had their attention firmly locked on her. They wouldn't have been so ready to spark a conflict with a foreign princess like Juliette, but Cesia, who couldn't really even be called a noble lady, was a soft target. They all saw her as easily replaceable. Cesia thought it was questionable to assume that because Marcus's fiancée had already been swapped out once, they might do it again, but she knew they didn't care for her opinion on the matter.

Looking at Cesia, whose nerves had become so frayed from a single tea party, Rosary stopped herself from sighing. "This isn't like you."

"Huh?"

"Normally, you'd have lashed out at those women for treating you like that."

"Don't make it sound like I have a short temper..." Cesia said. From Rosary's perspective, Cesia was the type of person to take on anyone picking a fight with her instantly. Perhaps because she had understood what Rosary was trying to say, she frowned. "When I was all alone, in the absolute worst case, I could've always taken responsibility and hanged myself, but things are different now... I don't want to burden His Royal Highness," she mumbled, pursing her lips. Women in love might be more beautiful, but anyone with someone to protect also became weaker.

Rosary stopped working and stared at Cesia.

"What?" Cesia asked.

"It's nothing. You've become much more respectable, somehow. It's hard to imagine that you're the same person as the one who splashed water all over me."

"I think you've gotten nastier, Rosary."

"Hmm, it must be your bad influence."

"Well, you always were nasty." Cesia frowned. Rosary just chuckled.

It was rare for her to see Cesia so exhausted. Until now, Cesia had always obstinately acted as if everything was normal, even if she had to push herself to do it. *I wonder if she's letting her guard down around me*, Rosary thought. She

could tell that Cesia made every single movement and gesture with the utmost care around the other lady's maids and maids. Cesia wasn't experienced enough yet to be able to hide her effort, but she was still easily deserving of a passing grade.

As Rosary was thinking, Cesia stretched, arcing her supple back. Her black hair was tied up, but some loose strands were around the nape of her neck. "All right, break's over!" Cesia said. "Hey, can you tell me something? Countess Ellabelle offered me sweets, right? What's the correct way to respond to that?" she asked, quickly moving to review everything that had happened earlier.

She had already learned everything in the guidebooks, but in noble high society, everything was done by unspoken agreement, and the best response changed depending on the context. Most high-ranking nobles' improprieties were tolerated, but Cesia was the center of attention of the entire country. She had to be able to do anything and everything as if it were only natural, and it was best to keep any slip-ups to a minimum. That was why Rosary had been chosen as Cesia's lady's maid; with her experience, she could cover for Cesia's mistakes.

"The way you did it was correct. But this way conveys more respect to the other person," Rosary explained, using empty tea utensils to demonstrate. The way Cesia earnestly listened to her was like a child trying to imitate her mother.

In the past, Rosary had bullied Cesia. Actually, it was more precise to say that she had bullied "Selene Diane," not Cesia Kathrin. As long as Cesia insisted as such, Rosary couldn't apologize to her for having bullied her. By making every effort to help Cesia train to be a lady, Rosary intended to make up for what she had done. She was a proud noblewoman and Cesia's lady's maid, after all.

"Ugh, isn't it weird that you have to subtly change the way you move depending on the season? It's only tea," Cesia whined.

"Tea leaves and utensils change depending on the season, so how they must be offered changes too. Altering the way you drink to match is a sign of respect for the other person's hospitality," Rosary said unsympathetically. Actually, now that she was explaining it to another person, she was struck by how troublesome it was. Anyone born into a noble family adhered to these

complicated social norms from an early age; they didn't have any trouble with them after they became adults. But Cesia had never lived as a noble, so it was difficult for her. Still, there wasn't anything else she could say to her besides, "Get used to it." From a logical perspective, many aspects were strange or pointless, but that was the nature of everything that could be called a custom.

On the other hand, Emeroade was a free country compared to its neighbors, and people were more flexible about those customs than most places. Even a small effort to anticipate the season could be seen as sophisticated. However, Cesia wasn't a normal noble—she was going to become a princess consort. She might have to entertain foreign guests, and it went without saying that she should firmly grasp the fundamentals in preparation for that occasion.

"But customs passed down through the generations all have their reasons for lasting so long. Before stubbornly refusing, you first must be able to practice them," Rosary said.

"Okay," Cesia said, nodding. She picked up the tea utensils and attempted the proper movements again. She was awkward, but she did everything correctly.

Rosary watched her neatly return the utensils to the table and nodded. "Okay, you had no issues there."

"Great!" Cesia exclaimed, smiling brightly. "Then, next—"

"Baroness." Rosary stopped her. "Let us end here for today. If you cram too much, you won't retain anything."

"You're right," Cesia said, nodding. She didn't want to force herself to learn as much as possible just to forget everything. She picked up the cup of tea Rosary had made for her break and took a sip. "Hah...delicious. At that garden party, I had no clue what the tea was supposed to taste like."

"Oh, what a waste. Those were leaves from the eastern provinces, the first picked of the season."

"Umm...those are the highest-grade leaves, right? They *did* smell like fresh leaves..."

Rosary was annoyed by Cesia's unpolished, almost wild-animal-like appraisal of the tea. Then again, Cesia hadn't been wrong, so her opinion might just be

reliable. As Rosary hid those rude thoughts, there was a knock on the door.

Rosary stood up to respond, and the maid in the antechamber between Cesia's chambers and the corridor answered the door.

"Baroness, His Royal Highness, Prince Marcus will arrive shortly."

"Oh, all right. Very well," Cesia said. She still wasn't used to people answering the door for her. Marcus always popped into the Second Division and the training ground without warning, so he had always come to see her before she had ever thought about wanting to see him.

Her maids quickly made new tea and fixed her appearance. She felt like she looked like she was waiting with bated breath to see him, which was a bit embarrassing.

After a short while, Marcus entered. He cut a perfect, princely figure with his semiformal attire and smoothed-down hair, having just come from participating in a meeting of parliament. His appearance was somewhat more formal than Cesia was used to; as he passed some treats he had brought to the maid, Cesia felt a bit of distance between herself and him.

Cesia had stood up to greet him, but she was frozen still, and the words wouldn't come out. Marcus smiled and began a standard greeting.

"Hello, my fiancée."

"How do you do, my future husband?" Cesia responded, then curtsied. Marcus had entered the room only after being ushered in, but he had been quick, and Cesia still had on the dress she wore for relaxing in her private quarters. It was different from the civil servant's uniform that Marcus was familiar with; it felt vulnerable, somehow, and suddenly, she felt embarrassed, like a young girl.

Marcus took her hand and led her to the balcony. Opening the glass door and going outside with her, he lifted a single eyebrow and spoke. "The scenery here isn't very good."

"Really? It's out of the way and seems like it'd be easy to escape from," Cesia

said.

Marcus burst into laughter. “Don’t go falling again.”

“Please don’t say it like it’s a hobby of mine, Your Royal Highness,” Cesia said in a huff.

Amused, Marcus drew nearer to her, bringing his face close to hers. Their noses touched, then he kissed her cheek. He kissed her again on her forehead to prompt her to close her eyes, then gently brushed his lips against hers before slowly separating. As he peered at her from close up with his beautiful, jade green eyes, Cesia blushed, still not used to the sight. “What did you do today?” he asked.

“I had etiquette lessons in the morning, then I attended a garden party in the afternoon.” Cesia’s studying to become a princess consort was going smoothly. She had spent more time on her studies than most, so she was already equipped with much knowledge in areas as diverse as culture, history, and even languages, which were all required to be a cultivated noble. Thanks to that, she had been able to spare time for training to become a lady.

“Oh, that’s right...” Marcus said. “You must’ve been bored. You don’t have to go if you’d be pushing yourself. My mother hardly ever attends those lessons.” He smiled.

“A lady like Princess Muriel might be able to get away with that, but I’m still new to all of this. I have to get everyone to remember my face first,” Cesia said with a troubled smile. Marcus had made it out to be so simple, but it wasn’t as easy as he had suggested.

Marcus frowned. “I’m sorry. You’re doing your best, and I didn’t take that seriously.”

“It’s fine. I chose this path because I wanted to be by your side.”

“But don’t push yourself too hard. I didn’t choose you as my fiancée to make you miserable,” Marcus said. Cesia tried to force herself to smile, and he gently caressed her cheek. “You seem a bit tired after all.”

“Not at all, I’m not—”

Marcus hugged her tightly, slowly stroking her hair. Cesia hadn't had anyone do that to her since her parents, who had died when she was young, so she initially went stiff. However, she slowly relaxed at the feeling of his solid, warm hand.

"Ah... did you cast magic on your hand? I'm feeling sleepy..."

"That means that you're tired. You must've been nervous, and your body was agitated," Marcus said. He gently patted her back. Soothed, drowsiness rapidly overcame her.

"Mhmm... No, I can't. Didn't you have some business with me? Any more of this, and I'll fall asleep."

"I don't mind," Marcus said. "I just came to arrange the next evening party."

"That's definitely important..."

Marcus partially carried Cesia as she drifted to sleep. He thought how she looked as she tried to fight against it was cute, like a child dozing off during dinner. After he cast a spell on her that made her slightly warmer, she completely nodded off, swallowed up by sleep.

"I didn't think you'd actually..." Marcus said. *I'll be scolded again later*, he thought. He cradled her in his arms and took her back inside, where Rosary was already waiting next to a fluffy couch holding a blanket.

"The baroness has been straining herself lately somewhat..." Rosary said.

"Isn't it the job of a lady's maid to help with that?" Marcus said, smiling slightly. He lovingly laid Cesia on the couch, got the blanket from Rosary, and gently pulled it over her.

"The baroness feels insecure if she doesn't at least somewhat overwork herself..." Rosary said. "Everything she's learned until now isn't enough for her to stand on her own. She's been plunged into an entirely different world, after all."

"I see."

As Maria, Marcus knew that Rosary had bullied "Selene." Cesia hadn't ever

given in, but it was true that Rosary had ganged up on her with multiple others to bother her. Marcus knew that the lady's maid had received high praise when he had assigned her to Cesia for a limited time, but he also worried. Now, however, watching Rosary take care of Cesia reminded him of how a big sister or a senior at work took care of a younger counterpart, and he was forced to admit to himself that he had been worried over nothing. He had no way to find out what exactly had happened when they had worked for Juliette together, but whatever the case may be, at some point, a link resembling friendship had been forged between the two of them.

"Then look after her so she doesn't wear herself out completely," Marcus said.

"Your wish is my command," Rosary replied, bowing elegantly.

Marcus nodded contentedly.

DAYS later, Marcus and Cesia were attending an evening party at Marquess Daphne's residence. Cesia had received an invitation from one of the noblewomen she had sat with at a tea party several days before.

Cesia wore a deep blue dress embroidered with silver thread and a pearl hair ornament, which both went well with her black hair. Marcus wore a matching tie made of the same material as her dress.

The two greeted the host, the marquess, then Marcus accompanied Cesia to the floor to dance a song together. They weren't dancing alone, as they had once before; a great number of people were watching them. Cesia seemed incredibly nervous but managed, thanks to Marcus's lead.

"I was so anxious..." Cesia mumbled as they leisurely separated from the rest of the people dancing.

Marcus quietly chuckled. Cesia was the type of person who performed better when it really mattered, and she had danced confidently, but internally, she had been afraid. "I think you did really well," he said.

"Thank you..." Cesia looked embarrassed. "But when I look at everyone else, I always get the painful realization that I still have a long way to go."

Marcus raised an eyebrow. Cesia was being awfully pessimistic. Lately, she had been working hard to embody the role of princess consort perfectly, but he felt that she had suppressed her true charm. Still, she was doing it for his sake, so he hesitated to say that what she was doing was unnecessary.

Cesia had lived as a commoner for most of her life until recently. There was no way that she would catch up to born-and-raised nobles in such a short time. Taking that into account, she definitely deserved a passing grade. He believed, at least, that he had said as much to her.

“You must be tired from the stress. Do you want to take a breather?” Marcus asked.

Cesia frowned. “But we have to go greet...no, you’re the prince, so they come to greet you, right? Anyway, there’s that and all sorts of other things we need to do. Aren’t we too busy to be taking a break?”

Marcus led her by the hand to the wall and tried to persuade her. “I can accept greetings alone. I’ve done it that way until now. Besides, tonight is to help you get used to this, so I don’t mind if you take it slow.”

No matter the training, going all out from the start always led to overexertion. With good reason, Marcus thought that, with Cesia’s ability and work ethic, she would easily adapt as long as she took the time to get used to things.

“I see,” Cesia replied dejectedly. Whatever Marcus’s intentions were, she couldn’t help but feel down. *It couldn’t happen now, but if Juliette or some other noblewoman were here with Marcus instead of me, wouldn’t they be accepting greetings with him?* she thought. Because she was her, and because she had been a commoner, he was trying to leave her behind. It was frustrating. Still, she wasn’t confident that she could behave affably while greeting everyone in her current state. She bit her lip but tried as hard as possible to nod as if it were nothing. “Then, I’ll take advantage of your kind offer to take a short break.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back.”

Cesia forced herself to smile, and Marcus stroked her cheek before leaving.

She watched him until he disappeared into the crowd, then straightened her back.

Naturally, she had no friends among the nobility. Everyone had their attention turned toward her, but she knew it largely wasn't positive attention. Without Marcus to rely on, she steeled herself, ready to fight alone in enemy territory. However, everyone watched her from afar, and no one came to speak to her. *They must not be thinking of bothering me so long as Marcus is here*, she thought.

Cesia left anyway, aware of the awkward mood that came from people being conscious of her presence. She didn't want to infringe on their nice evening.

After she left the hall, she felt a collective sigh of relief behind her. She was confused about how best to conduct herself around everyone there, and it seemed they felt much the same about her. *They must still be unable to decide how to approach me*, she thought.

She found it a bit easier to breathe once she had escaped from the stuffy air in the hall and went onto the porch that led into the garden. It was nighttime, so she couldn't look out over the entire garden, but the fragrant scent of flowers soothed her.

"I have to get it together," she muttered to herself.

Marcus had told her she was doing her duty sufficiently, but that wasn't good enough. To be with him, she had to be the princess consort. And to be the princess consort, a passing grade wouldn't cut it. She had to be a model example for noblewomen the world over. She didn't want to give up Marcus to anyone else, and she would hate it if people criticized him because of her.

Cesia stepped off the porch into the garden and sat on a bench. The inside of the hall was visible from where she was, so it wouldn't be a problem as long as she returned at the right time.

As she sat there, why, if it wasn't a repeat of what had happened beneath the trees at the garden party a few days before. Several ladies were surrounding another one and harassing her.

I can't get involved. Marcus is waiting for me, Cesia mentally chanted. But it

bothered her, and she found herself watching anyway. When one of the bullies yanked on the girl's hair and tore the lace on her dress, Cesia spoke up, startled. "Hey! That's just too cruel!"

They always escalated to tearing people's dresses.

Cesia was sitting on a bench in the shadows to avoid standing out, so all of the ladies were surprised when she suddenly shouted. But when they realized who she was, they whispered among themselves.

"Oh, isn't that Prince Marcus's...?"

"But she's just a baroness."

As was often the case with this kind of talk, Cesia could still hear them even though they were whispering. "It doesn't matter who I am. No matter the reason, it's assault to rip someone's clothes apart," she said clearly.

The ladies looked embarrassed. "Let's go," the leader of the group of bullies said to the others, and they quickly left.

Cesia considered rebuking them further but couldn't ignore the remaining girl and approached her. The lace of her dress around her chest had been ripped, and she was hanging her head. "Are you okay?" Cesia asked. "I'll fix that." She gently brushed the lace with the tip of her finger, and it magically returned to normal.

"Please stay out of this," the girl abruptly said in a wooden voice.

Cesia widened her eyes in surprise. She wasn't looking for thanks, but it was still unexpected. "Would it have been better if I left the lace still ripped?" she said. *Maybe she needed it as evidence of them assaulting her*, she thought, momentarily uneasy, but the lady shook her head.

"That isn't it. Whether here or at the garden party a few days ago, your temporary help does nothing to improve the situation. If anything, it makes things worse. You can't help me all the time, so please, mind your business!"

Cesia was shocked to hear what Rosary had warned her about directly from the girl herself. Cesia had served her time as a victim of bullying, but she had never considered that. Of course, Maria and Marcus were the only people who

had ever helped her, so she might have just never thought of it that way. “So, you’d rather be left like that?” Cesia asked.

“Or Prince Marcus or his princess consort could do something about it for me. You can do that, right?”

Cesia purposely laughed scornfully, feeling terribly sadistic. She had always lived without relying on anyone else and believed in making the utmost effort on her own to change things she was dissatisfied with. “I refuse. Haven’t you considered fighting back?” she said flatly.

The girl grimaced. “I can’t change the way I was born. I’m the daughter of a viscount, and the other girl is the daughter of a count. I have no choice but to endure it!”

“You haven’t made any effort to make them respect you?”

“What do you want me to do? It’s not my fault! What do you want me to do about my birth?! You must be happy, scoring a prince!” she shouted, then left then and there.

Left alone in the garden, Cesia stood there, dumbfounded, as anger slowly welled inside her. *You can’t change the way you’re born? I’m secure now that I’m marrying a prince? That’s ridiculous. I’m constantly subject to the curious, critical gazes of the people around me,* she thought. She was no saint. She might have been meddling by helping that girl out only halfway, but that was no reason for her to take that sort of attitude with her. “If only I could stamp out their terrible natures all at once,” she mumbled ominously. She just felt empty. After saving the country, suddenly becoming a noble, and getting engaged to a prince, those ladies only looked at her as an unknown, suspicious woman who didn’t know the first thing about how they did things. For the girl who had just run away, being helped by Cesia might itself have been a disgrace.

The activities of the Second Division had become well-known thanks to them stopping Juliette’s plans. This also resulted in it becoming known that they had greatly contributed to resolving multiple cases other departments had gotten credit for. Cesia had heard several people were hoping to enter the division this season. However, now that she was the second prince’s fiancée and couldn’t show up at the second division anymore, she had little to do with that.

“I want to go back to see everyone,” she unconsciously whispered, then instantly regretted it. She wished to stand by Marcus’s side and say she wanted to go back to when she had only been a stray cat was rude to both herself and him.

Psyching herself up, she patted her cheeks. It was no time to be whining. Time had passed without her being aware of it. She had only wanted to take a short breather, but it had become a long absence. *I have to get back to the soiree*, she thought.

She hurriedly returned to the hall, and Marcus quickly found her. “Cesia,” he said.

“My apologies, Your Royal Highness.”

“It’s fine. I take it that there were no issues because the garden hasn’t been blown away?” he joked.

Cesia smiled slightly. “Please don’t make it sound like I’m some sort of tropical storm.”

“I think there are a few similarities.”

Cesia was relieved. Their exchange felt the same as their usual conversations. However, just past Marcus, the atmosphere in the hall had room for improvement. It didn’t seem anyone thought she had been alone, and it felt like they all suspected her of having just come from a secret tryst in the garden. She could see people glancing at her and whispering and reflexively furrowed her eyebrows.

Sensing her apprehension, Marcus drew her waist closer to his and tenderly rubbed her back. “I’m done with my greetings, so why don’t we leave soon?”

“Okay,” Cesia said after a pause. *Tonight was a failure. I knew I should’ve been confident and put myself out there, even in the middle of all those people and that awkward atmosphere*, she thought. Realizing her mistake, she hung her head.

AFTER returning to the castle, Marcus escorted Cesia back to her quarters,

and the two walked the silent corridors free of the afternoon hustle and bustle.

“Cesia,” he said hesitantly. Seeing that she was frowning, upset over her failure, he tried to comfort her and brought up his hand to gently stroke her cheek, but she hurriedly separated from him. Then, realizing that she had rejected him, she was flustered.

“Ah, I meant to...umm...”

“I get it. I’m not angry, and I don’t think you’ve been unfaithful either, of course. Tell me, is there something you don’t like?”

“It isn’t that...there isn’t anything I don’t like, it’s just, whenever you touch me, I feel like I’m relying on you too much... And it...” *It’s scary.*

Marcus picked up on what she didn’t say and smiled as if to say, “What’s so scary about that?”

She had made it this far on her own. Plenty of people had helped her, and many kind people were around her. But even more people were cruel to her, and if she ever relaxed or let her guard down, they would jump at the opportunity to steal everything from her. She didn’t think that of Marcus, of course, but after feeling herself relax and melt away at his affectionate touch, she was afraid that she might become unable to stand by herself. His hands were comforting. He made her want to rely on him and yield everything to him.

“Is that a bad thing?” Marcus asked. He unassumingly held out his hand and took hers, which was hanging loosely by her side.

“I don’t know... I might...maybe I’m just afraid of getting weaker,” Cesia said, speaking in stops and starts. She was confused, and her eyes were flitting around, making it impossible for her to meet Marcus’s gaze.

He squeezed her hand and stared straight into her eyes. “Cesia.”

“Yeah...?”

“I love you. If there’s one thing I never want you to forget, it’s that.” There was a greater depth to his voice. He was being patient for Cesia’s sake, but he wanted to say plenty of other things.

She loved how he always gave her space to do as she wished. It made her

incredibly happy. At the same time, she also had the selfish thought that if he were a bit pushier, she could vent all of her chaotic feelings. Unable to say anything else, she stared back up at him and said, “I love you too.”

AFTER that, she took a bath, and when she finally entered her bedroom, Rosary was there waiting for her.

“You’re still here?” Cesia asked.

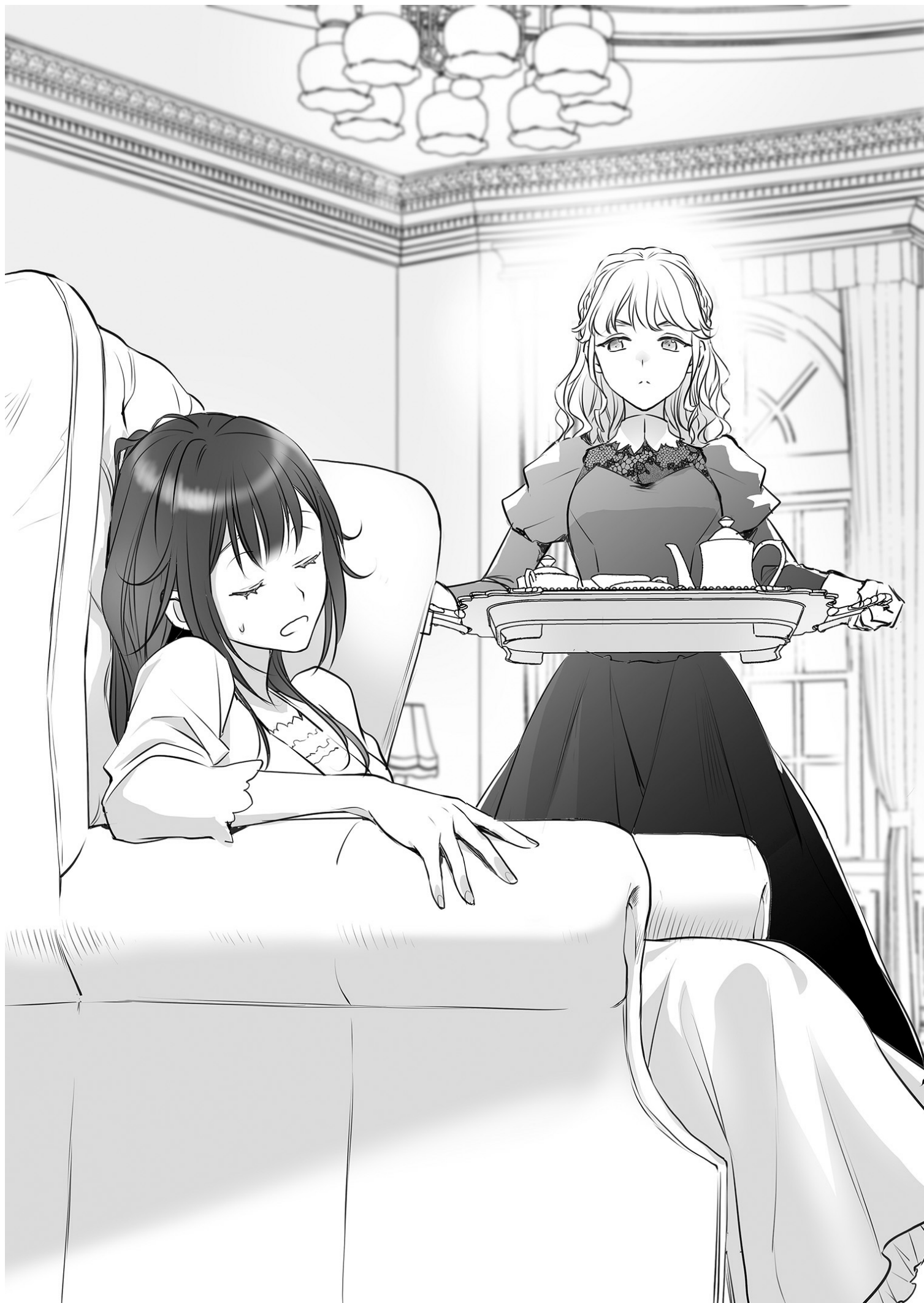
“Thank you for the kind greeting.”

“I mean... Aren’t you busy? You have your wedding and stuff. I said you could go home before I left for the party.” Cesia listlessly shook her head and sank into the couch. She was exhausted.

To help her relax, Rosary made her some herbal tea. “Unlike a certain someone, I have everything planned out, so it’s not an issue if preparations are delayed for a day,” she said standoffishly.

So she did delay her preparations, Cesia thought.

The day of Rosary’s wedding, after which she would resign, drew ever closer. Her fiancé was a knight and the eldest son of a viscount. Rosary had made his acquaintance after she had begun working in the castle. When Cesia had heard about it, she’d thought, *that shrewd choice is very much like her*, and had smiled despite herself.



Cesia had to compliment Rosary on her splendid achievement. While simultaneously working as a lady's maid to gain prestige, Rosary had scored the eldest son of a distinguished family. He was part of a lower-ranking house than her own—a count's—but his family had turned out many knights over the generations. Rosary's unfortunate stint as Juliette's lady's maid had happened because of her engagement; her marriage and resignation had been close at hand, so she had decided not to accompany the first princess when she went to study abroad, which meant she had been available.

Cesia felt guilty for being a troublesome mistress—albeit in a different way from Juliette—but she was also incredibly thankful for Rosary, with her wealth of experience and her ability to freely speak her opinion. They were the same age, and Rosary knew her past, so after they had dropped their reserve around each other, Cesia had found her easy to talk to. As an enforcer in the Second Division, Cesia probably would have hardly ever had any contact with Rosary, but she was now the prince's fiancée. Rosary was a wonderful example of a lady, and Cesia had much to learn from her.

Additionally, from the time they spent together, Cesia also learned why Rosary had had it in for her when they were both in school. From the start, Cesia had categorically rejected noble dignity and customs as pointless, which had rubbed all the ladies at the academy the wrong way. The importance they placed on protecting custom and tradition had been incompatible with Cesia's commoner way of thinking, which favored efficiency, moderation, and progress. Cesia's fundamental beliefs were still the same, even now, but after working in the castle for a year and spending more time around nobility, she could finally see why they thought the way they did. Efficiency was important, but everything that she might have preferred to omit was borne out of consideration and respect for others. There were all sorts of invisible, unwritten reasons for all of it. Cesia had said they were pointless out of ignorance, and she had learned that she had been presumptuously trampling all over what they valued. That wasn't to say that there weren't some truly pointless things among them, of course.

"You're surprisingly meek," Rosary said.

"I'm just tired," Cesia said. She thanked Rosary and took the cup of herbal tea

she was holding out for her. She knew Rosary had waited for her to return even though she was busy with her job and preparing for her wedding because she had been worried about her. *Even though she used to bully me, she's so kind I could cry.*

Rosary sat on the couch across from her and sipped her own tea. The only sound in the quiet room was the faint noise of teacups scraping against saucers. Still unable to collect her thoughts, Cesia had nothing to say, but she was incredibly grateful for Rosary's silence and herbal tea.

BECAUSE of the soiree that evening, Cesia's lessons the following morning were called off. So, for a change of pace, she visited the Second Financial Audit Division for the first time in a while to bring them some goodies. She knocked on the door and entered. It looked hectic inside, with piles of documents on every desk, but no one was there.

"Who is it?" Keith asked, coming in through the large sliding glass doors that led out to the garden. When he saw Cesia, he smiled broadly and welcomed her. "Hey, Cesia! Long time no see!"

"It's been a while, Keith."

"Wow, you've become quite a beauty since I saw you last. His Royal Highness must be treating you well."

Cesia felt the tension in her shoulders seep away upon seeing the smiling Keith.

He affectionately tousled her hair, then hurriedly removed his hand. "Oh, crap, will His Royal Highness get angry at me?" he asked.

"What are you saying? He won't get angry over something so trivial. If anything, please apologize to me for messing up my hair."

She didn't think Marcus would actually get angry, but Keith said, "A man in love is delicate," quickly fixed Cesia's hair, and took a step back.

Cesia pouted, then, remembering why she had come, held out the basket she was carrying. "I have some goodies. Sorry I haven't been able to come here in a

while.”

“Oh, thanks. Don’t worry about it. We got some new employees in the spring, and besides, we don’t do those undercover investigations and mass arrests every day,” Keith said. He quickly stuffed his cheeks full of sweets from the basket. He loved to drink and had a big sweet tooth.

“That’s right, new employees! Are there any girls?” Cesia asked.

“Yeah, one. She’s super strong-willed. You two might get along.”

At that, Cesia felt her mood brighten. As the princess consort, she might have had to quit the Second Division, but she was glad to hear that there was a younger girl to take her place. “I’d love to meet her!”

“Hmm, today might not work. We dispatched her to help the First Division. Spring is a season with a bunch of financial transactions.”

“Oh...that’s right.” When Cesia joined the previous year, this period had been busy. She felt nostalgic, remembering when she had thought that that was everything there was to the job. She never would’ve imagined what the job of enforcer really entailed. “I guess I won’t be able to meet her today, then.”

Keith finished off his first cupcake. “She should be here tomorrow.”

Cesia smiled awkwardly. “Today is my only day off.”

“Ahh... I see. That’s—”

Suddenly, the door flung open loudly, interrupting whatever Keith had been about to say, and Layne entered. Seeing Cesia, he squinted harshly at her. “What are you doing, Cesia?”

“Layne. It’s been a while.”

“We can skip the greetings. What are you thinking, being alone with a man like this? Assume someone is always watching you,” he scolded her. He headed to his desk, looking irritated.

Cesia paled. Layne was strict, but he was always gentle, and she had hardly ever seen him act that way before. Still, he might’ve been right, especially considering her failure the day before. She felt ashamed of her carelessness. She had thought of it as just returning to an old haunt, and she had assumed

that there would be others besides Keith.

“What did you come here for?” Layne asked.

“My apologies... It’s been a while, and I wanted to see everyone. I also brought some goodies...”

Layne looked at the basket Keith was holding, then shook his head. “Then your business is done here. You don’t belong here anymore, so go.”

Cesia slightly trembled, affected by his harsh words. Just over a year’s worth of time might not have been much, but in that period, she had come to think of the other employees in the Second Division as friends with whom she had made it through various troubles. To be told so clearly that this wasn’t her place made her feel a tight squeezing in her chest.

“Hey, don’t say it like that. Cesia’s still one of us,” Keith said.

“‘Still’ is the important word there. When she marries His Royal Highness, she’ll be the princess consort. There’s no way we can let her work as a civil servant anymore, let alone in the dangerous job of an enforcer,” Layne said.

He was right. Cesia had chosen to be Marcus’s wife. She had only now realized that that meant giving up the part of her that was an enforcer in the Second Division. She hadn’t ever considered the possibility that there might be something she would lose by marrying Marcus. The ground under her feet felt like it was collapsing, and she felt dizzy. She had been a nobody and thought of the Second Division as the foundation she had finally found for herself. By obtaining one thing, did she really have to let go of another?

“There are other ways to say it, Layne,” Keith said, a vein visibly bulging on his forehead.

Cesia hurriedly stopped him. “It’s fine, Keith,” she said. She didn’t want the two seniors she trusted to fight because of her. “Layne is quite right. I... I was acting spoiled.”

“Cesia... Don’t worry so much about it.”

“No. I’m going to be the princess consort. I should have known the price I would pay,” she said, biting her lip and holding back tears. “My apol—”

That instant, the door once again swung open with a bang, and another person entered the room. She had soft, fiery red hair and was wearing a plain dress—it was Maria.

“Cesia.”

Cesia widened her eyes in surprise. “Maria!”

Maria smiled. She grabbed Cesia’s hand and pulled. “C’mon and hurry, we’re going out!”

“Huh? Huh?” Cesia exclaimed as she was pulled to the door. “Um, Keith, Layne, sorry for the interruption!” she managed to say before Maria pushed her out of the office.

Maria grabbed the doorknob, too, but spun around as if she had remembered something. She smiled at the shocked Keith and the stern-looking Layne. “Don’t pick on Cesia too much, okay Layne?”

“I didn’t say anything wrong,” Layne said.

Maria tilted her head slightly, puzzled. “I wonder if it might be a mistake to judge her based on just one side of her.”

“I’m aware that Cesia has good sides to her, too. However, it’s a vital time right now, and those around her will only look at that side of her when they make their conclusions about her, so she ought to make sure every aspect of her is flawless.”

Keith paled. Layne was completely and utterly right. However, the graceful lady named Maria was only a disguise for their boss: the one and only Prince Marcus. Keith and Layne knew that Marcus had a side of him that fiercely protected those important to him.

Indifferent to Keith’s worries, Maria just cutely worked herself into a huff. Keith felt like he was having a nightmare—to think that she was actually that good-looking prince.

“Gosh! What an obstinate man... I chose her, and I’m certain she’ll be a wonderful princess consort. It’ll be too late to apologize after that happens,” Maria said, sticking out a finger at Layne.

Layne nodded. "I also hope that it ends up that way."

Maria seemed fed up with Layne's stubbornness, but further argument was pointless. She gracefully bowed in a ladylike fashion, then left as she came, jauntily exiting the room.

Cesia was awkwardly standing on one side of the corridor. "Maria," she said, looking like a lost kitten.

Maria smiled at her, trying to reassure her. "All right, let's head out, Cesia!"

"You were serious about that."

"Of course I was."

Cesia couldn't do anything except smile, looking embarrassed and confused. Maria gently held her hand.

AFTER that, for some reason, Cesia got on a shaky, horse-drawn cart with Maria. She wore a simple dress and a pair of sturdy-looking boots and had braided her black hair. After having been made to wear a bunch of pretty but heavy dresses lately, she felt comfortable and in her element and unconsciously began breathing deeply. The person who drove the cart as it rattled over the cobblestones was a familiar, red-haired woman—Maria. Maria wore an outfit similar to Cesia's, and her red hair was also braided. *Does she know that we're matching?* Cesia wondered.

"Where are we going?" Cesia asked Maria, who was sitting next to her and gripping the reins.

Maria replied in a merry voice. "We're almost there. If you're tired, feel free to sleep."

At that, Cesia rested her head on Maria's shoulder and closed her eyes. The steady, monotonous jolting of the cart made her drowsy.



As she drifted off into a light sleep, she heard a slightly lonely voice.

“So you’ll cling to me if I’m Maria.”

At that moment, she had no way to tell whose lips were the ones that brushed against her forehead...

AFTER the cart had traveled for some time through tranquil farmland, they finally arrived at an orphanage on the capital’s outskirts. The stone building, which looked like it had originally been a church, was in the middle of a large plot of land. Sheets and laundry were hung up outside, fluttering in the breeze as they bathed in the sunlight.

“Is this it?” Cesia asked.

“Yeah. I sometimes come to drop off goods or check in on them. Carry some, too, Cesia!” Maria said, plopping a box full of secondhand clothes in Cesia’s arms. It was lighter than it appeared. As for Maria, she was carrying a basket of vegetables in both hands.

“I can hold more,” Cesia said, pouting, but Maria just laughed cheerfully.

Opening the orphanage door, children suddenly rushed out and clung to Maria.

“Miss Maria!”

“It’s been a while, everyone. I brought vegetables and clothes.”

“Thanks!”

All the children energetically thanked Maria, then took the packages from Maria and Cesia. Some began to take things off the cart and carry them inside.

An elderly woman, who had come out of the building after the children, beamed at Maria when she saw her. “Thanks for everything, Maria,” she said.

“You’re welcome. I’m sorry I can only come every so often.”

“Not at all. You cannot even begin to imagine how much you’ve helped the children with your coming here.” Next, the woman greeted Cesia and headed to where the children were.

“So you were doing this kind of stuff too, huh,” Cesia said.

“Occasionally. This place is far from the capital, so it gets few donations. I only wish the country could aid them more...” Maria said, shaking her head.

That must be a worry of hers as a prince, Cesia thought. Maria said nothing and took hold of Cesia’s hand.

“Miss Maria, who’s she?”

A small girl was standing right next to them before they realized it. Cesia frowned.

“She’s Cesia. She’s important to me, and I love her very much,” Maria said without a shred of embarrassment. The girl stared unblinkingly at Cesia.

Cesia couldn’t help but feel awkward. “You sure said that confidently.”

“Of course.”

As Cesia blushed, the girl pulled her hand.

“Play with us, Miss Cesia!”

“This way, this way!”

Another girl had come, and they both pulled her arms. Cesia felt flustered. She had hardly ever had any contact with small children and had no idea how to entertain them. Hoping for some help, she looked over her shoulder, but Maria was just smiling and waving her hand.

“Do you know how to make flower crowns, Miss Cesia?”

“Uh, no, I don’t,” Cesia answered. She had hardly any memory of ever playing games as a child.

The two girls smiled. “We’ll teach you!” one said.

In the garden full of small, blooming white flowers, each child spent their time as they saw fit; some ran around, and others stretched out on the ground. Cesia sat down in a corner with the girls, and they taught her how to make flower crowns. She found it easy to weave the stems around each other, but adding more tasks, like arranging the flowers by size and making sure the best-looking ones were in the center, made it so there were an unexpectedly high number of

things she had to pay attention to. The girls gave her advice as she went, and before long, she was absorbed in making flower crowns. In the end, she had progressed enough to make prettier flower crowns than anyone else, and she gave them to the girls as presents.

“You’re really good, Miss Cesia!”

“Hey, am I like a princess?”

To be fair, she had made two crowns, one for each girl, and when she placed them on each of their heads, the girls smiled cheerfully.

Cesia felt the tension from her shoulders disappear and finally smiled. “Yeah. They look really pretty.”

The innocent girls said, “We’ll go show them off to everybody else!” and rushed away, almost tripping over themselves as they did. Cesia felt her heart grow warmer, watching their small figures as they ran away. Then, after some begging from the other children, she was conscripted to make even more flower crowns for everyone else.

TIME passed quickly, and eventually, the sun began to sink, and Cesia and Maria set off back to the castle. This time, their cart was light, as they had unloaded all the goods they had brought to the orphanage.

“My break was supposed to be only in the morning, but I ended up taking the whole day off,” Cesia said.

“It’ll be fine. I changed your afternoon plans to volunteer work before we left.”

Cesia looked troubled, but Maria laughed cheerfully. One of a noblewoman’s important jobs was to donate to orphanages and engage in other forms of social work. That was something Cesia had to get around to experiencing, but she also worried that the change of plans had inconvenienced her instructors. As she wondered whether she should bring that up, Maria smiled sarcastically, something rare for her.

“There isn’t anything wrong with using your authority, Cesia,” Maria said.

“I know,” Cesia replied after a pause. “But I know that, while His Royal Highness has a right to use it to carry out his duty, I sometimes feel like I’m not in a position where I’m allowed to do that.”

In addition to everything else that had happened recently, what Layne had said to her at the Second Division had caused her to lose her usual determination. She hung her head, and when Maria saw that, she drew her close to her with one arm. As her friend held her, she let slip a complaint that she would have never let herself say around Marcus. “All of my efforts up until now have paid off, and I’ve used them as stepping stones to advance forward.”

“Yeah.”

“But noble society is full of things I don’t get. I know that I can’t just put up a good-looking front, that I actually have to understand the meaning of everything and respond correctly on the spot; otherwise, I’ll fail... But I still don’t have the knowledge I need to understand it all and make the wrong choices,” Cesia said. She bit her lip, frustrated by her worthlessness. Learning martial arts and magic hadn’t been easy either, but she had built up confidence that told her that with concerted effort, she could improve herself and conquer her weaknesses. However, that confidence was meaningless in high society. Raised as a commoner, she found herself alone and was constantly worried that no matter what she did, she would fail.

“I don’t know anyone who hasn’t failed at least once,” Maria said quietly. “It’s fine to make a few mistakes, Cesia.”

Cesia shook her head. “If I have a poor reputation, it’ll cause trouble for him.”

“Marcus doesn’t care about something like that,” Maria said confidently. She was Marcus, after all, which meant that was what he really thought, but Cesia couldn’t just nod along and agree. Noticing Cesia’s hesitation, Maria continued. “Is there anything else you’re worried about?”

Maria’s kind voice intermingled with the sound of the rattling cart. Cesia had expended all her energy playing with the children the entire day, and the voice of a person she cared about, combined with their body’s warmth, relaxed her, and she expressed the dejected feelings she held in her heart.

“I don’t want His Royal Highness to hate me.”

“Hm?” Maria tilted her head in confusion. Marcus had just said that Cesia’s mistakes didn’t matter to him. It felt like she was missing something. “Where did you get that conclusion from?” she asked, smiling awkwardly and patting Cesia on the head.

The cart slowly advanced along the well-maintained road between the fields. A few far-away houses were visible here and there, but they couldn’t yet see the city, and no other people were on the road. That peaceful scenery clashed with Cesia’s serious tone.

“Because I...” Cesia began. “If I don’t win, if I’m not useful, one day, he might grow to dislike me and say, ‘I don’t need you anymore.’ It’s always been like that for me.”

Maria finally recalled how Cesia had lived until then. Until Marcus had found her, Cesia had been working without pay as a maid in the Diane residence and had been treated as such. Her uncle had been taking care of her—albeit in name only—and she hadn’t been able to turn to anyone for help. She had tried to get compensation by attending the Royal Academy in place of her cousin.

Cesia was more skilled in delicate magic than she would have learned at the academy because she needed to be to survive. Her creed was constant, determined resistance because it would have been over if she lost. She couldn’t ignore a girl who looked unhappy because no one had helped her when she was alone.

Marcus and Maria had always wanted to help Cesia. Both wanted to hug her tightly and tell her it would be okay. They wanted to hug Cesia when she was still a small child and tell her that they loved her.

The cart slowed and finally came to a leisurely stop. Maria looked around. No one else was coming, so it wouldn’t be an issue if they occupied the road for a while. She turned to Cesia and said, “Cesia.”

“Hm?”

Maria took Cesia’s hand and stared into her eyes. “I love you, Cesia.”

Unable to poke fun at Maria’s serious tone but also unable to

straightforwardly accept her words, Cesia looked perplexed and didn't reply for some time. "What's with this all of a sudden?" she asked.

I don't know how much my words will resonate with her, but as long as something sticks, I don't care, Maria thought. *If I can be a small candle that brings her warmth and lights her way when she feels alone, then that's all that matters.* She noticed Cesia's confusion, but she continued. "I don't love you because you're smart, or talented, or whatever. Even if you were a child who couldn't do anything, I'd still love you."

Cesia was silent.

"If you were a bad kid, I'd scold you if you did something wrong, but you'd still be important to me, and I'd never hate or abandon you. Never."

Cesia was still confused, and her gaze was wandering—like a child who knew she had just done something wrong. "But—"

Maria wrapped her arms around her and gently rubbed her back.

As Maria embraced her, Cesia noticed her pleasant scent and sniffed. Maria always had a feminine fragrance, but after an entire day outside, she smelled like fresh grass and flowers—almost exactly like Marcus. With that, it clicked, and Cesia truly, actually realized that Maria and Marcus were the same person. Both Maria and Marcus were speaking to her now and hugging her tightly. Physical contact with Maria had been nothing special, but now, she blushed.

"I love you, Cesia. You don't have to worry about anything. We're going to be family," Maria said.

That word startled Cesia. "Family," she repeated. It didn't feel like a real word.

"That's right."

She had once had family and had thought she had lost it forever. When she had been with her parents, they had been poor, but she hadn't had anything to fear. Her father and mother were there, and the world was perfect. When they passed away, she had lost everything, and the world had turned cold and

frightful, and everyone had been an enemy. Now, she had no family; it had gone away once before, and she had thought she would never have one again.

“You’ll be my family too, Maria?”

“Of course. Marcus and I both.”

Cesia stared at her. “Can’t even family come to hate each other?”

“You’re still saying that? You’re so persistent,” Maria said, pinching Cesia’s nose and pouting. Her beautiful, jade-green eyes sparkled as she stared at Cesia. “If that ever happens, we can just fight a whole lot. We’ll be getting married, which means we’re making a promise recognized by God, and we can’t easily break that vow. So we can just fight until we’re both satisfied.”

“Fight until we’re satisfied...”

“That’s right. If you make a mistake, I’ll scold you, and if I make a mistake, you’ll scold me. If we can’t come to a compromise, we’ll argue until we’re satisfied.”

“We’ll argue?”

“Of course. We’re family, so let’s fight without holding anything back—we’ll be together for a long time, after all,” Maria said, smiling.

Cesia nodded slowly. “You won’t hate me?”

“Never. Even if I get angry, and even if we fight, I’ll never hate you. If you’re ever worried, we can tell each other what we’re thinking. We can convey our feelings to each other like we are now.”

Tears welled up in Cesia’s eyes. “I wonder if we really can...”

“We can find out how we’re different from each other, then make up for that together, slowly but surely. Eventually, all our rough spots will neatly click together, and we’ll get along even better than we do now.”

Maria smiled, and Cesia felt things really would turn out that way. Maria was strong and honest and had always been by Cesia’s side. If she said it would be okay, Cesia felt like she could move forward, no matter how afraid she might be.

“That’s why it’ll be okay,” Maria said.

“Okay,” Cesia replied, and as she lowered her gaze. Tears ran down her cheeks. A gentle mist of magic energy drifted by, and Cesia felt a kiss on her forehead. Hurriedly looking up, she saw that, without her realizing it, Maria was no longer there, and instead, Marcus was sitting next to her.

“Your Royal Highness?!” Cesia exclaimed, looking all around. It would be a big problem if anyone saw them.

Indifferent to her worries, Marcus carefreely laughed. “Sorry. I might let my friend be the one that gives you advice, but I can’t very well let her kiss you, can I?” he said, smiling mischievously. He pulled her close to him and tenderly kissed her.

Cesia’s prince was strong and kind, and he was also an incorrigible brat.

THAT night, Cesia fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Her soft, dry linen sheets smelled faintly of flowers. She was impressed by her maids, who always carefully made her bed; it was comfortable to fall asleep while thinking of how faithfully they performed their work.

Family—the word warmed Cesia’s heart. It surprised her how much it calmed her down. Marcus always unconditionally believed in her, and he watched over her by her side to make sure she could stand on her own. Mavis had once asked her who her type was, and Marcus was exactly the kind of man she had given in her answer to the princess. *No, maybe it’s the other way around*, she thought. Maybe she had already loved Marcus and had unconsciously described him when she had replied to Mavis. She felt embarrassed. Thinking about her lover before she drifted off to sleep—why, it was like she was the protagonist of some love story.

“I’ll do my best,” she said to herself. She would do her best—to live up to Marcus’s expectations, and so she could remain herself.

DAYS later, Cesia was at a routine evening banquet at the castle. Her

attendance was mandatory as the candidate to be the next princess consort. She was seated next to the wife of a marquess, Lady Olcott, who, being about the same age as Cesia's grandmother might have been, had a male personal attendant for support standing at the ready behind her.

Cesia was nervous but remembered everything Rosary, Maria, and finally, Anita had taught her. Showing consideration for the other person was the most important thing. Of course, it went without saying that proper etiquette and adhering to customs were also crucial.

The dinner began, and the servers brought drinks and plates with appetizers. Though nervous, Cesia began the banquet with elevated spirits.

Sitting some distance away, Marcus looked at Cesia and smiled slightly. She was the type to perform better when it mattered, and her ability to analyze and respond to unexpected situations was better than anyone's. Her own fear was what chipped away at her confidence and made her believe she was making mistakes. She had always put her all into everything, and with great effort, she had increased what she could do.

Cesia was cheerfully conversing with Lady Olcott. The lady herself was kindly responding; she, too, must have thought it heartwarming how Cesia was working hard to be polite despite how nervous she was.

"I understand that your fiancée is lovely, Your Royal Highness, but I must ask that you do the honor of conversing with this old man as well," Marquess Olcott said to Marcus, smiling.

Marcus smiled awkwardly, realizing that he himself had been rude. "If you understand, then isn't it tasteless to bring it up, Marquess? We've just gotten engaged, and we're in the same room, but my fiancée has been seated so far away from me, and I feel lonely. I'm sure you once experienced the same thing."

As he brazenly spoke lovingly about Cesia, the nobles around him laughed cheerfully.

That night was a less formal gathering, and Marcus always took the initiative

to participate and lend an ear to everyone's idle conversation at these kinds of events. He took pride in serving as the eyes and ears of his brother, the crown prince, who found putting on different masks for different occasions difficult, and his father, the king. From now on, Marcus and Cesia would participate in these kinds of gatherings as husband and wife, and he looked forward to having Cesia help by gathering information from the women as well.

Marcus had told the truth when he told Cesia he loved her, so there was no need to worry about anything. However, he wouldn't have proposed to her if she hadn't been qualified to be the princess consort. He had always been a prince, and he was proud of that fact—he knew he wouldn't have been able to convey his feelings to her if she hadn't been suitable for the position. In that case, he would have hidden his feelings for her and married someone chosen for him, just like he had been about to marry Juliette. Luckily, they had stopped her plans, and Cesia was a talented, wonderful woman and more than qualified enough. So, he had her to thank for where he was now. He considered himself an extremely lucky man.

There weren't many opportunities for Marcus to show it, so it wasn't very well known, but he was the type to forgive everything in the one he loved and devote everything to her. Because of that, he knew he was unfit to be a ruler. There had been occasions where some had offered to make him king, but he had laughed in their faces and refused all of them. That was another area in which Juliette had greatly misjudged him. Additionally, he knew he could never hate Cesia, even if she committed something as heinous as treason. It wouldn't have been very persuasive if he had spoken about an uncertain future, so he hadn't said that to her, but he was confident in that. Of course, he would convict her if it ever came to that, but he was also willing to be punished along with her.

He had been born with the duty to devote himself to the kingdom and its people; however, if he had to give up his life, he now wanted it to be for Cesia's sake. He would live for the kingdom and die for her.

He was worried that if she knew how heavy his feelings of love for her were, she—that independence-loving cat—might be disgusted by him and scamper away. He was really the one who would be at a loss if she wasn't there for him.

“Now, Your Royal Highness, do you know where tonight’s wine comes from?”

As someone had asked him a question, Marcus returned to the task at hand. “Hmm. I’m not as knowledgeable about wine as you, sir, so I’m not quite sure, but it feels like it comes from the western provinces.”

“That’s right! It’s from Nabaca, in the west. In recent years, the fertile soil there has...”

Marcus pretended to listen to the man as he spoke extensively about wine, and he looked over at his fiancée again. *I have nothing to worry about*, he thought. After all, he had chosen her, and she was a skilled enforcer and his trusted partner.

Meanwhile, Cesia energetically conversed with the others at her table, just as Marcus had predicted. She could mess up again if she were too eager, so she endeavored to keep herself in check somewhat, and as a result, she could take everything around her into account. She had assumed that anyone and everyone was observing her closely, just waiting for her to slip up, but she had just been paranoid. The servants treated her as another noblewoman, and the nobles around her, especially the elderly, were just concerned about her and had only been watching her so they might help her if she needed it. Their goodwill came from the fact that she was the fiancée of Second Prince Marcus, whom they all trusted—yet again, this was a time when he had kept her safe.

It might’ve been a long time coming, but Cesia could finally see how she could compete. She had no reason to doubt Marcus’s love for her, so no matter where she went, all she had to do was use all the power she could muster to be worthy of the trust he had placed in her.

“I heard you received a barony, Lady Cesia, but where is the territory?” Lady Olcott asked her.

Cesia smiled. “It’s north of the capital. Marquess Acton, who graciously gave me the title, will oversee it as he has been for the time being, which I’m incredibly grateful for.”

“Well, the marquess is quite a caring man.”

“I hear that he’ll soon be bequeathing his estate to his eldest son,” another noble said.

“And, that lady...”

The topic of conversation quickly shifted, and others began talking. With that, Cesia could tell she wasn’t the only object of attention at the table. Thinking about it logically, that was only natural. She had a high profile but was hardly the only person with influence in the country. Tonight’s banquet was partially for exchanging information; it wasn’t only so they could size her up.

The dinner harmoniously continued, and the conversation proceeded at a reasonable pace. People occasionally asked Cesia her opinion on something, and other times, she would insert a short comment.

As one would expect from a banquet in the castle, the food and wine were fantastic. This was the first time in a while that Cesia had been able to enjoy her food when eating in front of others. The way nobles saw her wouldn’t change in a single night, but she had a feeling that everything would work out if she could build up trust and prove herself to them, slowly but surely. Whatever kind of hardship she faced, she just had to fight until she got results and could win.

With a surface-level, friendly smile, Cesia glanced next to her at Lady Olcott. There were small jars of spices and condiments in the center of the table for everyone to add to their food as they pleased, and she looked like she wanted one of them. At that moment, her servant had gone to get a plate to put her food on, so the noblewoman had been left alone for a short time. She took several graceful sips from her glass of wine, waiting for her servant to return, but he must have had some sort of problem because he wasn’t showing up. If this continued, her food would slowly get cold, and if someone else noticed that she wasn’t eating anything, they might grow suspicious of her.

Cesia quickly took a spice jar and sprinkled just a little on her own food. Then, she turned to the noblewoman. “Would you like some, Lady Olcott?”

Lady Olcott took the jar in a manner that said, “If you insist.” Then, she smiled and said. “Thank you, Lady Cesia.”

Cesia was glad to see her happy. It was only a small thing, something so slight that no one had noticed it. Still, she felt like she had been able to express the

consideration toward others Rosary had talked about. Cesia felt a bit embarrassed by the pride she felt, though; it was like she was a child looking forward to a parent praising her.

AFTER that night, Cesia slowly hit her stride. She had always been relatively intellectual, having gone through the academy twice and spent more time on her studies than most, and she wouldn't have had any objections to anyone calling her smart. Not that she could say that out loud. She had no problem with everyday conversation in foreign languages and was decently knowledgeable about history and culture. She wasn't stuck up, so if she ever had a question, she asked it then and there, and there were even people who were impressed by how pertinent her questions were.

Lately, as she steadily raised her reputation in high society, Rosary had stopped waiting for her to provide encouragement after soirees. As always, though, Rosary taught her about noble social etiquette in the afternoon.

"That last question was too personal. Everyone might be curious, but they also know that there are times when you aren't supposed to ask," Rosary said.

Cesia nodded, then tried stating her own opinion, her heart pounding. "You're right. But sometimes I think as I'm listening that everyone's misunderstanding them, and they'd answer more readily if an outsider like me acted like I didn't know anything and asked the question." *It might be too soon to argue against her advice*, Cesia thought. However, she wasn't going to be any normal noblewoman. She was a baroness and would eventually represent the kingdom and have opportunities to state her opinion as princess consort—she couldn't just stick to what everyone else could say. So, she thought that she should make sure to have her own thoughts and opinions.

Seeing Cesia's serious expression, Rosary reflected deeply. Cesia's natural, distinctive charm was that she had that sort of quick-witted boldness. Marcus was well aware of that, and it would be important for the nobles of the country to find that out as well. "You have a point," Rosary said. "But you won't be correct every time, so please understand why it's done this way first. Naturally,

there will be times when it's rude."

Cesia nodded emphatically. "All right."

At that, Rosary felt admiration well up inside her, though she made sure it didn't show on her face. Cesia grew quickly. She readily picked up new things, and her perceptiveness meant she always put what she learned to good use. Rosary had appreciated "Selene's" abilities when they were both students, but lately, whatever the reason, Cesia had been blooming rapidly.

In all honesty, the time had come for Rosary to start reducing the number of days she went to the castle and earnestly focus on preparing for her wedding ceremony. The first princess had already given Rosary permission to resign from her position, but worried about Cesia, she had prolonged her stay to the last moment possible.

With this, it looks like I'll be able to get married without any worries, Rosary thought, pouting. The woman whom she had thought had been so shameless was now an important part of her life—more important than her wedding ceremony. It was frustrating and a bit embarrassing, but it wasn't a bad feeling, either.

AND so, Cesia steadily began to fit into high society. One night, she was attending a soiree hosted by a count. Because Marcus and Cesia had just gotten engaged, Marcus attended more of these parties than usual, bringing her along with him. His primary goal was to help her gain experience, but he would have been lying if he said that he didn't also want to boast about his beautiful and talented fiancée. Additionally, by this time, Cesia was meeting and exceeding Marcus's expectations and had even begun to express her opinions, though she was still a bit reserved. She was well aware of her long history with the word "shameless," and she put on quite a well-behaved act. That gave her a quiet and calm image, which lent her a degree of popularity.

"Cesia," Marcus said. Whenever he called her name, she instantly turned around with a bashful yet happy expression, no matter who she was talking to at the time. He lovingly kissed her hair whorl on the top of her head, and she turned bright red.

“Please refrain from doing that in front of everyone, Your Royal Highness...”

“Okay, let’s continue when no one is watching.” Marcus grinned.

Cesia glared at him, annoyed, but her cheeks were still red, so her sharp expression looked cute. Fully aware that he loved her, she looked dazzling, as if a light were shining from within her. For the first time, Marcus was conflicted; he wanted to show her off, but he also felt like she was too good for them and wanted to hide her from everyone.

That night’s soiree felt somewhat strange. Cesia occasionally felt that someone was looking at her, and the intuition she had cultivated from her extensive experience with being bullied told her that they weren’t friendly looks.

As the second prince’s fiancée, she was widely known, but she herself was an obscure newcomer to noble society. She got some harsh looks from noblewomen with daughters of marriageable age, but that was rare in a public place like a party. Most nobles were uninterested, and more settled-down nobles like Lady Olcott were friendly. However, Cesia couldn’t help but feel some hidden meaning in those gazes tonight. Whenever she noticed them, they quickly averted their eyes.

Hiding her mouth with her fan, she brought her face close to Marcus as if she were an ordinary, loving fiancée. “Are they bothering you too, Your Royal Highness?”

“Those looks?” Marcus replied. He had noticed them, too. He drew her close, then glanced around at their surroundings. The two of them headed to the ballroom, still keeping close to one another, and they participated in a waltz. Cesia knew from her enforcer days that dancing with a partner was just right for secret talks.

“It isn’t just one or two people,” Cesia said.

“Yeah, you’re right. Rather than a specific person, it feels more like a signal bouncing all over the place.”

They turned, and Cesia nodded. They could narrow down the culprits, but the

person looking at them was always different, so the most she could say was that there was an unspecified large number of people. “Should we lure them out?” she asked, slightly excited.

Marcus smiled awkwardly. “No, it doesn’t look like they’re picking a fight directly, so let’s let them act while we observe.”

“Ever heard of, ‘the early bird gets the worm?’” Cesia said, dissatisfied. But she went along with Marcus, and they continued to dance.

In the end, the people glancing at them never directly contacted them, and the two took their leave, though they still wondered what was going on. They headed outside, and Marcus escorted Cesia out of the lively ballroom and through a dim hallway.

Cesia casually looked around. A single woman stood in a hallway that led to a building not being used for the party. There were no lights on, and she was quite a distance away, so Cesia could only make out the woman’s long, blonde hair and the fact that she was wearing a dress. However, somehow, she could also tell that the woman suddenly grinned. “Who *is* that?” Cesia said reflexively.

Marcus stopped walking. “What is it?”

“Your Royal Highness. There’s a woman over...there?” They both looked down the dim hallway but couldn’t see anyone. The woman had disappeared in the split second Cesia had looked away to talk to Marcus.

“A woman? If she’s a maid, she might’ve gone into a servants’ passage to avoid being seen by guests.”

Passages for servants to use so they could carry out their duties unseen by guests or their employers crisscrossed noble residences. This was Cesia’s first time at this particular residence, so it wouldn’t be out of place for it to appear to her as if someone had suddenly disappeared—and yet.

“She had blonde hair and was wearing a dress,” Cesia said.

“Hm?” Marcus said, furrowing his eyebrows. The residence was full of visitors coming and going. Normally, he would’ve thought she was paying too much attention to a single woman wearing a dress. Blond hair was common among the nobility, too. However, he felt uneasy somehow. He valued her

perceptiveness.

Accompanied by their attendants and guards, the two went to where Cesia had seen the woman, but when they got there and turned on the lights, she was nowhere to be seen. According to an attendant who worked there, there was a servants' passage there, but none of the servants who knew about it had blonde hair.

"I'm sorry, Your Royal Highness. I might've just been worried over nothing."

Marcus shook his head. "I trust your intuition. Still, it doesn't seem like we can do anything more about it."

As they resumed walking down the corridor, heading outside, for some reason, Cesia couldn't help but still feel uneasy about that woman.

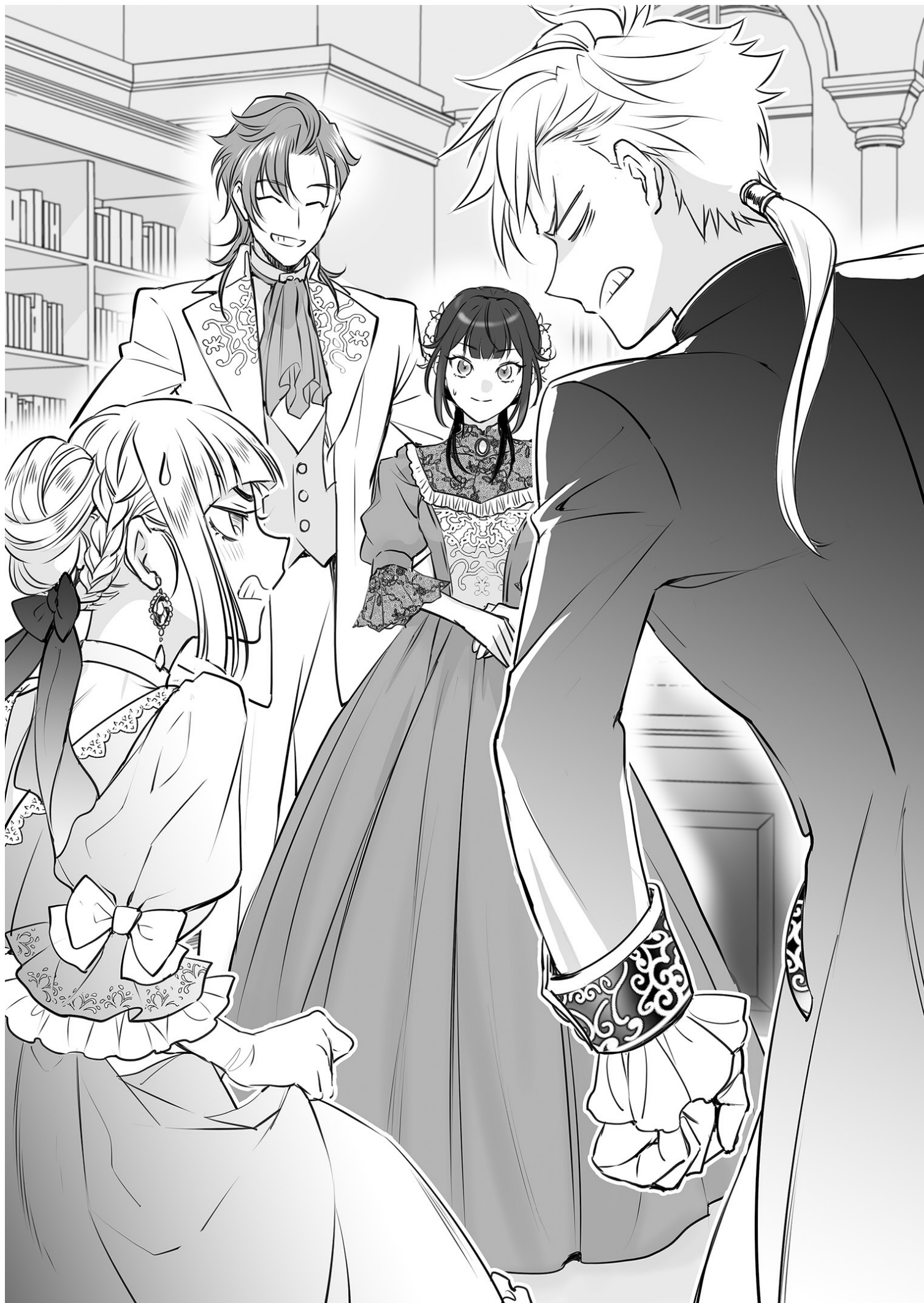
AT succeeding evening parties and tea parties, the odd gazes continued, but the woman Cesia had seen the first night never reappeared. Although things were going well, Cesia's position still wasn't secure, so, just in case, Marcus asked for some support.

"So, is this supposed to be the support?" Cesia asked, a slightly stiff expression on her face. It had been a few days, and after having been called to Marcus's office, she was looking at the people who were going to support her.

"What's with that comment? You seem dissatisfied, Cesia." Felix said. He was wearing his formal knight's uniform. Startled, a woman wearing a dress standing next to him hurriedly stomped on his foot with a stiletto heel. "Oww!" he exclaimed.

"You idiot! She's going to be the princess consort, you know!" the woman said. She had long blonde hair tied back with a bright ribbon.

This was the first time Cesia had seen her, but looking at how she acted around Felix, she assumed she was the new female enforcer that Keith had told her about.



“I’m pleased to meet you, Lady Cesia. My name is Ada Aiden,” the woman said, daintily curtsying.

Cesia nodded at her. *I think I heard she was a commoner, so she must be dyeing her hair with magic*, she idly thought. Blond hair was common among Emeroadian nobility, and both of the king’s wives, as well as the crown prince’s wife, were blonde. At the same time, the country had many immigrants, so people with some foreign lineage with other, vivid hair colors—like Marcus—were common. Among that diversity, Cesia’s black hair was a rare sight. As a color, black was too strong, so Cesia had to use magic to change her hair color when she disguised herself as Selene because powdered dye hadn’t been enough.

“Nice to meet you, Ada,” Cesia said. If she had been her old self, she would’ve told Ada that titles like “lady” were unnecessary and spoken with her in more intimate terms. However, she was now a baroness and would soon be a princess consort. She was reluctant to act like a noble around her former coworkers, but she had to behave in a way that was appropriate to her position. Remembering Layne’s words that she no longer belonged in the Second Division, her heart ached.

“Cesia,” Marcus said, gently taking her hand.

She raised her face and saw that Marcus was looking at her, and his kind eyes comforted her. She relied on his affection for now, though it felt selfish of her to do so. “It’s nice to meet you, Ada. Both of you, thank you for helping out,” Cesia said calmly, greeting the two enforcers again.

Ada nodded knowingly, but Felix made a strange face. Considering their competitive friendship, Cesia’s proper behavior must have been hard for him to handle.

Cesia and Marcus sat side by side on a couch, and the two enforcers took their seats on another couch on the other side of the table. Marcus’s butler, Chris, made some hot tea and set out teacups in front of everyone.

Felix began. “To be blunt, some rumors are going around.”

Cesia furrowed her eyebrows. “Rumors?” she said. The number of nasty looks

people gave her was increasing day by day, so she could assume that they weren't good.

Ada looked at Felix and nodded, then continued where he had left off. "They say that you've done wrong in the past, Lady Cesia."

At that, Cesia abruptly put a hand to her mouth and prevented herself from abruptly screaming. It was quite a sensational story for a rumor that had suddenly begun circulating.

"That's certainly a vague way of putting it. I don't think there's anyone alive who's never done *anything* wrong," Marcus said casually, then rubbed Cesia's shoulder. If she was too shaken by the rumor, Ada and Felix might misunderstand her.

Felix smiled uneasily. "Your Royal Highness must've done all sorts of things..."

Marcus raised an eyebrow. "What's that supposed to mean, Burns?" he asked, purposefully calling Felix by his family name.

"Nothing!" Felix said, vehemently shaking his head. Ada looked fed up as she watched all of this. Cesia couldn't be certain, but she was pretty sure this sort of exchange was common in the current Second Division.

Marcus had purposefully averted the others' attention, which gave Cesia the chance to put on a good face, even though she was still shaken.

There was only one thing she could think of that fit the rumors, namely, the fact that she had faked her identity and attended the Royal Academy as Selene. Back at the graduation ceremony, Selene and Marquess Diane had been taken away by the Security Bureau after Selene had tried to assault Cesia, who was attending as the prince's companion. However, Selene had only almost hit Cesia, so she hadn't been charged with any serious offense, even if she had greatly embarrassed herself by taking a tumble in front of the large crowd of attendees. Still, image was a matter of life and death in high society. The Dienes' reputation had been further damaged after Marcus had encouraged the attendees to spread the details of the incident during the height of that year's social season. Selene hadn't been punished, but the prideful Diane family had withdrawn to their territory and hadn't shown up in the capital for the past three years.

If the fact that Cesia's uncle, Marquess Diane, had made her attend the academy in place of his daughter came to light, he might be formally punished, so he had nothing to gain by going around and telling people about it. He might find the idea of Cesia becoming the princess consort hard to stomach, but he was stingy—he was much more likely to contact her directly and blackmail her rather than spread rumors about her. Cesia was no saint, and combined with her experience as an enforcer, she could easily list all the bad things her uncle might think up. Blackmail was the most likely, but he hadn't contacted her. From that, she could safely assume that her uncle was not the one spreading the rumors.

"Was there anything about the nature of that wrongdoing?" Marcus asked.

"Nothing as of yet. Those who've heard the rumors have had various reactions. Some are of the opinion that someone so wise as Your Royal Highness would never choose a fiancée who was a criminal, whereas others think that it wouldn't be strange if she had made a few poor decisions, given that she was a commoner until only recently," Ada said, making sure to be considerate of Cesia. It was ironic, considering Marcus's last fiancée.

Next, Felix spoke. "If I were the person who started the rumor, I'd be panicked that it wasn't spreading like I thought it would. That makes sense, though—it's just baseless slander."

Marcus tapped his finger on his jaw and reflected on something. "It's weak as slander against Cesia, but I can't help but feel like there's something more..." he said. "Of course, we can't carry out an extensive investigation because that might make them think there's something to the rumors."

"Is that what they're after?" Ada asked.

The other three looked unsure. On one hand, they could tell that whoever was the source of the rumor was spreading it everywhere, but at the same time, no one had openly denounced Cesia, and the rumor wasn't getting more and more embellished as it spread, either. Nobles were aware of the rumor, but they thought nothing of it. In other words, that meant that it wasn't seen as very significant or trustworthy.

"I don't know why they decided to spread a rumor without any substance, but

it really feels like, whoever they are, they aren't very smart," Felix said.

Cesia shot a meaningful look at him when he said that, and he braced himself for her to poke fun at him. Then, Marcus said, "That's quite right." Cesia looked at him instead. Marcus continued. "If you wanted more people to bite, you'd slowly expose more and more details, and it'd be more interesting if it were more suggestive."

Cesia was struck by just how nasty noble gossip could be and frowned.

"Also, the rumor is only spreading among low-ranking nobles, so it doesn't seem likely that the source is a high-ranking noble," Felix added.

Marcus had predicted as much, so he only nodded. The more powerful and prestigious a noble was, the less likely they were to speak about a rumor regarding a prince's fiancée. Then, seeing Cesia's troubled expression, he poked her cheek.

"What is it?" she asked

"You looked like you were sulking."

"I am not," Cesia said with a huff. Her cheeks puffed, giving her a sulky expression, which she hastily corrected.

Marcus amusedly watched with a sparkle in his eyes. "Nothing's happened yet, so getting all worked up about it is pointless. The two of them will also be going with us undercover, and besides, you were looking forward to tonight, weren't you?" He tapped her cheek.

Cesia nodded. "I am!"

Marcus was referring to that night's soiree. Baroness Wallen—also known as Cesia—had been the one whose name had been on the invitations this time, not Marcus. That was because it was an invitation to a pre-wedding celebration for Rosary Hilton and her fiancé, the son of a viscount. The wedding itself was open only to relatives due to the groom's family tradition, so they were holding a party before the wedding and invited important nobles to attend. It would have been unusual to invite a prince to celebrate the wedding of a daughter of a countess and a future viscount, but Rosary had invited Cesia because she was working for her, which naturally meant that Marcus would also attend as

Cesia's companion.

Marcus's presence would be an honor for the soon-to-be-wed couple, which Cesia was happy to facilitate. She wouldn't be enhancing Rosary's reputation, but she considered it the least she could do to repay her. Rosary had performed far above and beyond what would have been expected of her, and Cesia had constantly relied on her. So, Cesia was very much looking forward to that night's party.

"Thank you for accompanying me, Your Royal Highness," Cesia said bashfully.

Marcus smiled. "It's only natural—I'm your partner." He put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. Felix coughed loudly and unnaturally. Blushing, Cesia separated from Marcus.

Ada, watching all of this, was impressed. "So Your Royal Highness was the type of person to make such a sickly sweet face at your girlfriend... I always thought you were a heartless guy with a pretty face."

Marcus smiled and crossed his arms. "Ai-den?" he said, enunciating each syllable.

Ada shuddered. "I didn't say anything!" Felix looked exasperated.

At that, Cesia was surprised, and her eyes widened. "Um... His Royal Highness is always kind to his subordinates, isn't he?"

Ada shot her an incredulous look.

Marcus had carefully guided Cesia since she was just one of his subordinates. He had sometimes been strict, but that was because he cared about her. He had never done anything unreasonable or said anything rude, and Cesia saw him as nothing but kind.

"There's nothing kind about that relentless training..." Ada said.

"Uh..." Cesia said, looking to Felix for help, but he quickly turned away. With nowhere else to go, she looked at Marcus, who already had a beautiful, flawless smile, and the other three were at a loss for words. "Shall we get going soon?" Cesia asked after a brief silence.

"Yes, we don't want to be late," Marcus said.

“All right, we’ll be going first, then,” Cesia said, and Felix and Ada jumped out of their seats.

Keith was already at the venue for Rosary’s party disguised as a guard for support. It went without saying that they had discussed this with Rosary and her fiancé, and the couple had even arranged a separate room for them if they needed it. Of course, they would prefer that they didn’t need it, but it was best to be careful.

“**THIS** is a happy occasion, so I hope nothing happens...” Cesia mumbled. She and Marcus were sharing a bumpy ride in a carriage, just them, so they could enter the venue separately from everyone else in the Second Division.

“It’ll be okay, Cesia. I’ll be here for you,” Marcus said, taking her hand.

Cesia raised her face and couldn’t help but smile at her fiancé’s confidence. He hadn’t asked her, “Are you okay,” he had basically said, “I’m here, so you’ll be okay.”

And he *was* there for her. He always would be, even if everyone in the world was against her. With that in mind, she felt encouraged to do the right thing and be someone who could stand by Marcus with her head held high.

She had never thought of things like that back when she was alone. She had been desperately trying to survive. Good and bad had nothing to do with it. Even now, she wasn’t doing the right thing only out of a strong sense of justice; she did the right thing because she wanted to be worthy of the person she loved.

“Thank you. No matter what happens, I won’t lose to anyone or anything because Your Royal Highness is here for me.”

“That’s brave of you.” Marcus smiled. He quickly kissed her on the lips, and Cesia smiled shyly, her face turning red.

Just then, the carriage came to a stop. They had arrived at the venue: the residence owned by Rosary’s father, a count. To avoid casting a shadow on Rosary’s happy day, Cesia fired herself up.

“Should we get going? My fiancée.”

“Yes, my future husband.”

Marcus put out his hand, and Cesia took it and stepped out of the carriage.

MEANWHILE, in a corner of the castle, the office of the Second Financial Audit Division was almost empty. Almost all the members were out at the party. Only Layne and Roy were left, and they were doing some paperwork.

“You planned on going with the others too, right Layne? I can finish the rest,” Roy said.

Layne looked up from the documents in front of him. Even though it was the busy season, he had taken a few days off recently. He had been working faster than usual, but he still had some work left over, which was rare for him. “Sorry, Roy.”

“Not at all, I don’t mind. Keith always pushes his work on me anyway,” Roy said with a smile.

Layne put a hand to his forehead. “You can say no to him.”

“No, it’s fine. And besides, I’m not at all suited to the physical jobs that he’s so good at, so I’m happy to have the opportunity to prove myself here.”

Roy seemed to be sincere. However, Layne was conflicted about how long he ought to keep Roy in the Second Division. While still accomplishing his normal duties, Roy had also researched and published an article on magic theory that became the center of attention for magic researchers from all over the world.

“All right. Sorry, but I’ll leave it to you then. Feel free to go home whenever you feel it’s best,” Layne said.

“Okay, good work today.”

Layne quickly left the office.

Seeing Layne go, Roy thought, *He really must’ve been late after all.*

Keith resented Layne after he had heard about the harsh things Layne said to

Cesia, but no matter how Layne had said it, Roy took it as a sign that he was worried about her. Feeling warmed by Layne's kindness, he finished up the documents Layne had left behind for him first, and he turned back to his desk.

"Haah, I wish I could've gone to the party. I wonder if Cesia's doing well." He hadn't been able to see Cesia much lately, but he was her coworker, so at the very least, he would see her when he attended her wedding.

Keith had said that Cesia had gotten quite pretty, but Roy had thought she was pretty from the moment they had met. He had always thought she was good-looking, but she had never really worn makeup, and she hadn't paid much attention to her appearance, so she hadn't been a typical beauty. But, he had always thought that the determined aura that seemed to be pouring out of her was beautiful.

Roy was the son of a margrave and had been blessed with a talent for magic, which meant that people had always paid attention to him whether he liked it or not. He had gotten fed up with it, and after graduating from his school in the province where he had grown up, he had come to the capital. *Here*, he had thought, *my family and my ability won't stand out*.

His plan had been a success, and he met Cesia there. She was only a commoner, and her abilities were mostly just average, but her strong sense of purpose and overflowing competitive spirit roused the ire of sheltered nobles. To him, everything about her was radiantly beautiful, and since then, he had always been a fan of hers.

When Marcus had suggested that he be Cesia's magic teacher, Roy had enthusiastically accepted. She didn't possess a particularly large amount of magical energy and didn't have any special abilities, but she was clever and a hard worker. She quickly picked up whatever he taught her and steadily learned new skills. There was a simple joy in teaching her, and watching her show off her ability motivated him to devote himself to his research.

Roy sorted the paperwork as he thought about Cesia. Layne hadn't left too much work for him, but paperwork from the other members of the division constantly piled up on the deputy chief's desk. It looked like the real chore would be to dig through it all and sort it.

Marcus had created the Second Financial Audit Division to have more room to act flexibly without formal, official permission, but now that the incident with Juliette was over and the Second Division's merits were widely recognized, it was no longer necessary that he be head of the division. Their relationship with the Security Bureau was good, too, to the point where they sometimes gave the Second Division the duty of investigating before they made an arrest.

"Keith... Please tie up documents with string or do something to keep them together before you submit them..." Roy mumbled to himself as he continued to work smoothly. Just then, he noticed a bundle of documents that looked different from the ones he had been working with and stopped moving his hands. "What's this? Security Bureau? Some other documents must've gotten mixed in."

When he turned the page to check what the document was about, his eyes widened in surprise.

THERE were already a large number of attendees at the Hilton residence, and when Marcus arrived, they greeted him one by one. It wasn't his party, so he kept his responses short and found an empty spot with Cesia. He could see Ada and Felix out of the corner of his eye, acting as if they weren't coworkers, and he also spotted Keith, disguised as a guard.

Eventually, Rosary's father, Count Hilton, appeared at the highest point in the room and began to address the guests.

In Emeroade, there were often noble families whose titles were the same name as their family name. They were old houses with a long history and had received that family name at the same time when they had been bestowed the land. The Hilton family was one of them, and that name alone made Rosary recognizable to anyone as a lady of good birth and noble origin. The Diane family was the same. They were of a low rank but rich in history and tradition; on the strength of that name, Selene had been all but promised a bright future and marriage to Raymond Chaser, the son of a marquess.

As Cesia thought, she shook her head slightly. Selene—her cousin—was the same age as her, but in contrast to her, she had been blessed from birth and

had grown up in the lap of luxury. Selene had hated how similar their faces looked and had often bullied Cesia whenever she was bored and wanted to kill some time. As Cesia had been Selene's servant, the other servants had never protected her. She had suffered greatly. Luckily, they had been young children, and the bullying had always been childish. As the days of Selene splashing water on her, tearing her clothes, and pulling her hair continued, Cesia gradually built up a resistance to it. She had never had to deal with anything a child wouldn't think of, so nothing ever escalated to the level of, say, beatings.

Still, Cesia had found it hard to stomach when Selene had taken her mother's brooch, which was Cesia's only keepsake to remember her by. But Selene had only thought that Cesia didn't deserve to have it—she hadn't actually wanted it—so when she had forgotten about it, Cesia secretly retrieved it from the trash.

With that in mind, it was fair to say that Selene had been a great influence on Cesia's personality. Maybe, when Ada had that Marcus was ruthless, Cesia was the one whose viewpoint was strange. Cesia's perspective of things might not have been typical.

While he listened to Count Hilton's speech, Marcus amused himself by watching Cesia make various troubled expressions. The count spoke eloquently about how proud he was of the daughter he had raised and about the great joy, with a tinge of loneliness, he felt now that she was getting married.

Marcus knew that Cesia had no one who could say something like that about her, and he had decided he would take good care of her and cherish her enough to make up for it. Cesia loved her parents, but he thought that one of the mysterious things about her was that she had never seemed very sad about their passing. Perhaps she had never had the time to feel sad because her life afterward had been so hard. But when he remembered her look of childlike surprise when Maria told her they would be family, he knew that family was truly important to her.

Maybe, sometime soon, she'll eventually have the chance to face how she felt when her parents passed away and left her behind, Marcus thought. I want to be as close to her as I can then so I can hug her tightly.

The count's speech came to a close, and Rosary and her fiancé stepped forward. When Cesia saw how Rosary was dressed, she put a hand to her mouth and looked deeply impressed. "She's so pretty."

"Yeah," Marcus replied after a pause.

"They look happy."

For a moment, he had wondered whether it'd be best to reply, "You're even prettier," but it didn't seem that Cesia had had any ulterior motive behind what she had said, and amid her amazement at Rosary she didn't notice his awkward hesitation.

Marcus had had women he could call a girlfriend in the past, but he had never gotten so worked up over little things like that before. It was like he was a young boy, confused and constantly flustered over a first love. He relished the feeling.

"Do you know the man Rosary is marrying, Your Royal Highness?"

Marcus searched his memory. "If my memory serves me right, I think he's a knight in his third year of service. He's the same age as Lady Hilton."

Cesia widened her eyes. "Huh? Do you know about everyone who works in the castle?"

"No, I could never remember it all. I just remembered looking over his personal details when I assigned Lady Rosary to be your lady's maid."

"Still, you have an incredible memory, Your Royal Highness," Cesia said, impressed.

It's nice to have your girlfriend look at you with such respect, Marcus thought.

AS they talked, there was eventually a toast, and the party began.

Cesia secretly looked around. *The guests here tonight are different from usual. That must be why I don't feel many people looking at me,* she thought. Most of the guests were members of the Hilton family, relatives, or knights. In general, there were more high-ranking nobles there, and few of the nobles who regularly attended parties were there that night. "Even though we're having

them go undercover, it looks like tonight is a swing and a miss,” Cesia mumbled.

Marcus looked uncertain. “Maybe. But we can’t let down our guard.”

“Yeah.”

As they whispered to each other, Rosary and the viscount’s son came up to them to greet them; Marcus was the highest-ranking guest in attendance, so they were the first ones to be greeted.

“I’m a bit early, but best wishes in your marriage,” Marcus said.

“Congratulations,” Cesia said.

Rosary nodded, satisfied with Cesia’s response.

“Thank you very much, Your Royal Highness,” Rosary’s fiancé said. “My entire family is greatly honored to have you here.”

“That’s too much... My fiancée depends a great deal on your wife, so of course we would come running to celebrate you two,” Marcus said.

As the men engaged in friendly conversation, Rosary quietly said to Cesia, “How is it, Baroness?”

“You look very pretty, Rosary!”

Rosary paused. “I wasn’t asking for your impression; I was asking about those gazes...” she said, frowning.

Cesia shook her head. “That’s important, but your wedding matters more, right?”

Rosary smiled bashfully. “Well...”

Cesia smiled and took her hand. “Congratulations, Rosary. I’m sorry I took a bunch of time away from you. You really do look beautiful, and I know you’ll be happy.”

“Why, when you behave so admirably, it knocks me off balance.”

“And to think you don’t understand that I’m trying to be kind. It’s the least I can do on an occasion like this. Hmph, how uncouth of you, Lady Hilton,” Cesia said, speaking to her as they usually did. At that, their bout began with a sharp *ding ding ding*.

“I was saying that part of you still needs work, Baroness.”

“I’ve always thought this, but can you stop with the ‘Baroness?’ It feels like you’re being distant.”

“I’m trying to put distance between us. I was your lady’s maid and served you, after all.”

“But you aren’t now, right? You can call me Cesia.”

“I can’t be so disrespectful as to call someone who will be a princess consort by only her first name,” Rosary said hesitantly.

“Really...” Cesia frowned, annoyed. “That’s too bad. Your Royal Highness, she’s not listening to me even though I’ll be royalty!” she said as if she was going to tattle on Rosary to Marcus.

“Hold on, really, please!” Rosary said hurriedly, looking afraid. “That’s some personality you’ve got there!”

“All right, use my name, then. We won’t be lady’s maid and baroness anymore; we’ll be friends,” Cesia said forcefully, trying to secure a promise out of Rosary, who nodded reluctantly.

Ever since Mavis had acknowledged her as a friend, Cesia had gotten more unashamed in that regard. And now that her and Rosary’s old conflict had been put to rest, she had been eagerly waiting for her opportunity to become friends with Rosary. Their previous master-servant relationship would have been an excuse for Rosary to refuse, so tonight had been the perfect chance for Cesia to make her move. She had been pushy, but it had gone well, and she was pleased.

“Very well,” Rosary said. “But now that we’re friends, that means I don’t have to hold anything back.”

“Huh? You were holding back?” Cesia said, her expression quickly shifting. This time, it was Rosary’s turn to look pleased.

“Oh, come on.”

“I might’ve rushed things a bit...”

“You know, you really...” Rosary glared at her. Watching the two of them, her

fiancé and Marcus laughed.

“B-But, we’re fine tonight, right?” Cesia asked, hurriedly checking her own clothes. She wanted to be someone Rosary could be proud of, so she had gotten advice from Mavis and her maids to make sure her outfit was perfect.

Rosary exaggeratedly stared at Cesia with a troubled look. Cesia had always gotten Rosary to do the final check on her outfit, so she felt anxious. But she had nothing to be worried about.

“Well, not bad,” Rosary said.

Cesia sighed, relieved to get a passing grade. Then, Rosary poked her shoulder.

“Don’t look so uneasy every time. You’re the woman with the highest status here. Your smile will protect you, and here, at least, if you say ‘Jump,’ everyone will be in the air before they ask, ‘How high?’”

Cesia hesitated. “But I can’t.”

“I know you hate that side of nobility, and you think it’s unfair. But remember, it’s just another one of your tools, like magic or martial arts. They can all be powerful weapons for you as long as you use them right.”

Rosary’s advice struck a chord somewhere deep inside her.

After Rosary and her fiancé left to greet other guests, Cesia and Marcus took the opportunity to dance and went out onto the floor. With the recent succession of soirees, Cesia had gotten markedly better at dancing, and in front of everyone, she gracefully stepped and executed a perfect turn.

“You’ve really improved,” Marcus commented.

“Constantly stepping on Your Royal Highness’s feet paid off.” Cesia grinned, and Marcus smiled, too. She hadn’t actually ever stepped on Marcus’s feet, but she had made many beginner mistakes when first starting.

“At the soiree to celebrate our wedding, we’ll be dancing the first dance, but if you can dance this well, I’m confident it’ll be all right,” Marcus said.

“I didn’t want to know about that yet!” Cesia paled. *First Rosary earlier, now this. Do nobles always raise you up before sending you crashing down to earth?*

she thought. With her commoner upbringing, she still had much to learn.

In that way, the night progressed unexpectedly peacefully. By the time the moon had made it a fair distance across the sky, Layne appeared. He was immaculately dressed in his full uniform, which brought looks from women across the hall.

“Your Royal Highness, my apologies for being late,” he said to Marcus.

“I’m sorry, Layne,” Marcus replied.

“Not at all...” Layne glanced at Cesia, then quickly averted his eyes. Remembering their exchange several days previously, Cesia also awkwardly lowered her gaze.

Marcus watched them, then continued without paying any special attention to it. “Have you found out anything new?”

“Well... If you don’t mind, sir, can you come this way for a moment?” Layne asked. He guided Marcus to the small room Rosary had prepared in advance for them. Cesia tried to follow, but Layne halted her with a look.

She was disappointed, but on the other hand, it might have been something he didn’t want her to hear, so she smiled at them and said, “I’ll be waiting over here, Your Royal Highness.”

Marcus looked at Layne and her, then nodded. Cesia watched him and Layne enter the room, then leaned against the wall and surveyed the venue. She wouldn’t make the mistake she had last time; she would confidently stand out in front of everyone as she waited for Marcus.

She didn’t know anyone else there and had already greeted everyone along with Marcus, so she didn’t have to speak to anyone. Left with absolutely nothing to do, she could only observe her surroundings. She got a glass from a server and slowly sipped from it, killing some time. Marcus and Layne still weren’t back, and she couldn’t very well go up to Felix and Ada and talk to them, but at the same time, she also couldn’t just walk around as she pleased. This excess of free time left her feeling she had been cut off from the rest of the world.

As she gazed vacantly at the other guests dancing, someone abruptly stood

next to her. When she nonchalantly looked over her shoulder at them, her eyes widened. Standing there was, as if reflected in a mirror, a woman whose face looked very much like hers. Cesia was surprised because she had been letting her thoughts wander, but this was no supernatural phenomenon—she knew this woman well. “Selene,” Cesia said after a pause.

“It’s been a while, Cesia. Or should I say, Baroness?” Selene Diane, Cesia’s cousin, said with an unsightly grin.

Inside the room away from Cesia, Marcus looked over a piece of paper that Layne had given him and frowned.

“This morning, messages like this were delivered anonymously to the residences of various important noble families,” Layne said.

It was an ordinary piece of paper that anyone could purchase from a normal stationery shop. On it, in sloppy handwriting, was the inflammatory message, “Cesia Kathrin has done wrong in the past. She isn’t fit to be the princess consort.”

“It’s certainly a very emotional letter,” Marcus remarked.

“Yes, it is. Like the rumors, most nobles seem to be ignoring it, but with all the rumors flying around about Cesia lately, a worried acquaintance of mine notified me about it,” Layne said.

Marcus furrowed his eyebrows. Just as Felix had said, the person who had started the rumor did indeed appear to be feeling pressed for time, and as a result, they were taking a rather clumsy approach. With the rumor, they may have been able to worm their way out of being found, but now they had left behind a piece of physical evidence. “Did you have Roy trace it?” Marcus asked.

“Not yet. And without any information about the target, even Roy won’t be able to track them,” Layne said hesitantly.

Marcus nodded. It was necessary to find and give information to Roy about people connected with Cesia and anyone who knew her past or might have had a grudge against her. If Cesia had still been a commoner, that would have narrowed things down significantly, but now that she was a baroness and engaged to a prince, there were many potential suspects. With such a large,

unspecified number of people, it would hardly be efficient to have Roy trace each one by one. “I wish we could narrow things down a bit further,” Marcus said. “Though they don’t seem too smart, so they might give themselves away soon.”

“Yes, I’m surprised... I didn’t think they’d be this stupid,” Layne spat.

When he saw Layne’s rare display of emotion, Marcus squinted slightly. A vague sense that something was off settled in the pit of his stomach.

Meanwhile, Cesia was facing off with Selene. She looked her cousin up and down, from the tips of her shoes to the top of her head, then sighed softly. As always, the only impressive thing about Selene’s outfit was the copious amount of money spent obtaining it. Selene had an extravagant-looking dress and ornamentation, with large black pearls adorning her shining blonde hair. Cesia hadn’t known it when she had been Selene’s maid at the Diane residence, but she lacked sophistication no matter how luxurious Selene’s outfit was. Now that Cesia had gone through Rosary’s and Anita’s training and had seen true noblewomen like Mavis and Edith, Cesia could tell. Refinement was something one cultivated, not something one could buy. Noblewomen weren’t just splurging on luxuries; they always had their eyes and ears peeled for new information and went through a constant process of trial and error to improve themselves.

“What did you come here for? How did you get an invitation?” Cesia asked.

“Just when did you get into the position to be able to take that pompous tone of voice with me? I don’t care whether you’re a baroness or a princess consort; you’ll always be a dirty little rat, so watch your tone.”

Cesia’s eyes widened in surprise. The castle’s maids had spent quite some time dressing her up and preparing her for this occasion. Putting the question of whether she was a beauty to the side, she certainly wasn’t dirty. It wasn’t conceit that made her think that; she trusted in her maids, knew they had done a good job, and were skilled enough to turn even a dirty rat into a princess. On top of that, Cesia had learned etiquette from refined noble ladies. Cesia had grown thanks to the skills she had learned from educated professionals and

Marcus's love. It would be rude to them to have her confidence shaken by what someone said to her.

"You're hardly discerning enough to say that. You may be a beauty, but you have disgracefully poor taste," Cesia said. She was giving it everything she had on her first move. Whatever Selene's intention was in coming here and contacting her, it couldn't have been friendly. But Cesia wasn't the powerless maid who had been thrown outside in the winter to do dishes anymore. No matter who she was up against, she would crush them with all her power—and if that person happened to be none other than Selene, then that was all the more reason to give it her all.

As Cesia expected, Selene was instantly infuriated and raised a hand to hit Cesia. But after all the time she had spent dodging Marcus's powerful sword thrusts in training, she saw it coming from a mile away. She might have been able to let herself get hit so she could charge Selene for assault later, but she wanted a complete victory without using any sneaky methods. So, she nimbly dodged Selene and, putting some distance between them, she turned to face her head-on.

"Why did you avoid it?!" Selene yelled.

"I don't want to suffer the humiliation of you hitting me."

However, Selene hadn't attacked without a plan. When Cesia had dodged her, she clapped a metal bracelet on Cesia's wrist.

"What's this?" Cesia asked, puzzled. She tried to remove it, but it felt like it was locked on and wouldn't come off. Uneasy, she tried to break it with magic and realized with a start what it was.

"Oh, have you noticed?" Selene said triumphantly. "It's a magic-sealing bracelet. Now you can't pull your clever little tricks anymore."

It looked like a normal metal bracelet, but apparently, it was a magic item with the same effect as magic cuffs. Cesia tried to see whether she could break it with just the strength of her arms, but after seeing that it was pointless, she lowered her arm. Honestly, even if Cesia couldn't use magic, someone untrained like Selene was still no match for her.

By that point, they had drawn the attention of the other attendees, who were standing in a loose circle around the two of them and watching. Felix and the others were there too, but they didn't know who Selene was, why she had approached Cesia, or whether she was Cesia's enemy, and they seemed to be at a loss.

Cesia knew she was her enemy already—she had tried to hit her, then had unjustly put magic cuffs on her—but this was Rosary's celebration. She didn't want to raise a commotion and ruin it.

"Very well. I have a room ready, so we can talk there," Cesia said. By now, it was obvious that Selene had spread the rumors. Viscount Diane might have tried secretly threatening Cesia, but Selene, who simply didn't like her personally, was the type to take such a foolish approach as this one.

"You're an idiot, as always," Selene said.

Cesia frowned. She didn't want an idiot to call her an idiot, especially not Selene.

Selene continued. "I've already set up everything here. Why would I go somewhere no one can see us? I'll show all these people who think that you're a noble baroness and princess consort who you really are."

"That really isn't a good idea," Cesia said, frowning even more. Being exposed for misrepresenting her identity and attending the Academy would be a serious blow, but Selene would be in the same boat as her. Cesia hadn't thought it would be a smart idea, so she had hardly expected Selene herself to be the one spreading the rumors. And to think, she had left the Diances alone all this time.

"I'm not joking! I was driven out of the capital because of you! You don't know the humiliation I've gone through!"

You're the one who left the capital, Cesia thought, but more and more people were noticing them, and she didn't know what to do. Another more dangerous thought flashed across her mind. *I might as well shut her up physically.*

With Cesia flustered, Selene looked pleased with herself. Meanwhile, the attendees continued to watch the two similar-looking women.

Cesia could see Rosary rushing over to her, but she wouldn't make it in time

for the decisive moment.

Selene opened her lips, red with lipstick, and cheerfully said, “Listen up, everyone! Under my name, Selene Diane, Cesia Kathrin faked her identity and attended the Academy!”

At that, there was a stir, and everyone around them began whispering. Cesia rubbed her temples like she was dealing with a headache and glared at Selene despite herself. “Don’t say it like I pretended to be you for fun. Your father threatened me and ordered me to do it.”

“Ohh? Did you hear that, everyone? She just admitted that she pretended to be me and attended the Academy!” Selene said jubilantly, in a mocking tone. It was doubtful whether she knew that she was denigrating her own family at the same time. Among the attendees to the soiree surrounding them, those with the good sense to see that were grimacing.

“The Diane family will also be charged,” Cesia said.

“And should I care?! I’ll do anything if it means bringing you down.”

“You idiot!”

“Say whatever you like. And what’s this about being a baroness or princess consort?! A rat like you will never be fit for a higher position than me!” Selene yelled. At that, the surrounding nobles soured on Selene, and the atmosphere grew awkward. By then, they all probably saw her as a fool. Still, that and the fact that Cesia’s wrongdoing was now public were different stories. “I also don’t appreciate that all these people are lauding you as some sort of genius. Your diploma should be revoked!”

“I retook the entrance exam and passed, then passed the graduation exam on my own ability. That was all after you left the capital.”

Selene frowned, having assumed that Cesia had been identifying herself as a graduate using the time she had gone to the academy as Selene. But she quickly collected herself. “Even if that’s true, you still falsified your identity to attend. I hear that many were charged with doing something similar. You shouldn’t be an exception!”

She’s absolutely right, Cesia thought. It had always weighed on her mind. The

Diane family hadn't been charged with anything because to do so would mean exposing her. She had been properly readmitted and graduated legitimately, but that didn't change the reality that she had lived a lie for two years. Of course, at this point, Cesia hadn't thought anything would come of it by dredging up the whole incident again. That was why she decided to live the rest of her life honestly. However, the past she had abandoned had come back to haunt her.

"That's...Selene Diane? How did she get here?" Marcus asked when he heard the commotion coming from the hall. He immediately tried to head in that direction, but Layne stood in front of the door, blocking his path. "Layne?"

"If you don't get involved, this'll end up being about Cesia and Cesia alone," Layne said.

Marcus's eyes widened. Layne looked somewhat pale but stared fixedly at him with imploring eyes and a firm expression. "In other words... You planned all this, Layne," Marcus said with melancholic certainty, and Layne nodded. He must have let Selene into the party and helped her with a whole bunch of other things besides.

"I want to help you," Layne said. "Cesia's a good person, but she's a criminal. Her crimes may not be yours, but I couldn't stand the thought that you might be blamed for choosing her as princess consort sometime in the future."

Marcus grimaced. Hearing Cesia called a criminal made him feel worse than he had imagined it would. "You would blame a young girl for doing what her guardian coerced her to do?"

Cesia had taken the Academy entrance exam on Viscount Diane's orders when she was young and attended the Academy in place of Selene afterward. The viscount was her uncle and had been her guardian, legally and publicly. If he had ordered her to do something as a child, she would have had no way to refuse, whether she had known it was wrong or not.

"That troubled me as well. Cesia didn't willingly pose as Selene, after all. However, you convicted Anita for the same type of crime, didn't you?"

Marcus painfully averted his gaze. He had wanted to help Anita, too. He really had. But her actions had exceeded the threshold at which a single prince could

do anything about it. Many people had died or gone missing in the incidents she had been involved in. More than anything else, Anita had no desire to be saved. She had betrayed her benefactor, Juliette, and had lied to Mavis, who had unconditionally accepted her.

In the end, Anita had made the right choice. She had offered up everything she had known and all the evidence she had on Juliette's plans, and after that, she fervently desired to be punished for what she had done. After she had been sentenced, she declined any visits from Mavis or Cesia and quietly waited for her punishment. She had accepted the punishment of drinking a cup of poison so that she would be able to pass without suffering. It had been granted to her in lieu of an execution in recognition of her final contributions. She hadn't left behind any message to anyone.

The family of her now-deceased father, who had been a count, had refused to collect her body, so she had been treated as a Gwylltian immigrant and buried in a common grave, which Marcus had arranged. Normally, it would have been frowned upon for a prince to help out a criminal, but he had been unable to bring himself to deal with Anita's death mechanically. He had spent a significant amount of time with her because she had been his sister's head maid, but having been born a prince—someone with power—he had also always wanted to help those born powerless, like Cesia and Anita.

That was why he had created the Second Financial Division, a post where he could carry out private investigations like the one that had involved disguising himself and attending the Royal Academy. In the beginning, he saved Cesia from the exploitative Diane family and acted as her guardian because of that belief. Helping Cesia, and everything else besides that, had been wonderful and had given him the confidence that what he was doing had helped someone. He was surprised himself when he realized that he loved Cesia as a woman.

On the other hand, even though everything Anita had gone through had been in the past and in a foreign country where his power couldn't reach, he had been devastated by his inability to help her. He had also noticed the same thing that Cesia had. There was a point of divergence between Cesia and Anita—he had found Cesia, but Juliette had found Anita. Marcus knew that he couldn't help everyone, but he wanted to save everyone he could see and reach and all

that were in his power to save.

“I couldn’t do anything about Anita,” Marcus said, frowning. By saying it, it meant that he knew that he had failed.

Layne made the same sad frown. “Yes, what she had done was too serious to be forgiven. No matter how much you might have run around trying to help her, it was too late. She had caused direct harm to Emeroade,” he said, gazing sympathetically at Marcus.

Marcus didn’t reply. He recruited Keith and Layne when he founded the Second Division, and the two were its oldest members. It went without saying that Layne knew very well all of Marcus’s ideals and desires, including his inner conflicts and regrets.

“Your Royal Highness. I’ve said this many times, but your belief that you should try to save everyone is wonderful. However, there is a limit to who you can help and how far you can reach,” Layne admonished him.

Marcus stared straight at Layne. He knew that. But that was no reason not to reach out. He wanted to continue stretching out his hand to help those he hadn’t been able to reach before, if even only by a bit more.

Layne continued, “I believe your ideals are noble. I’ve followed you for all this time, not only because you selected me—really, you saved me—but because I was deeply moved by those ideals.” Marcus nodded slightly. “So, I believe it’s necessary to keep away anything that might interfere with that.”

With that, the conversation had returned to where it had begun.

“You’re saying that Cesia is getting in the way of my wishes?” Marcus asked after a pause.

“Yes. Even if you haven’t made any mistakes, if it becomes widely known that the princess consort is a criminal, some may try to restrict you and prevent your dreams from coming to fruition. I won’t let that happen.”

Marcus knew what Layne was trying to say. However, he wondered if Layne really meant that he didn’t care if he destroyed Marcus’s current dream.

While Marcus certainly believed in and devoted himself to his cause, he

wasn't doing it out of a noble sense of self-sacrifice. He simply didn't want to see the people around him unhappy and wanted to help them if he could. His ego, his selfishness, made him do so. Just like Cesia, he was no saint and prioritized his own pleasure and enjoyment of life within reasonable limits. He could never suppress anything and everything about himself, all for the sake of others—that was another reason why he could never be in a public position like a king.

He wanted to enjoy his life as much as possible, and he had no intention of giving up the woman he loved out of fear of what might happen in the future, not after he had finally met her. In fact, he had even guessed some time ago that when Cesia became his fiancée, someone would try to dig up her past. She had said that she didn't want to become his weakness, and she had strived to win a position with her own ability because of that. In that case, as her partner, it was his duty to protect her from now on.

“Do you mean to tell me that I should give up on Cesia like I did Anita?” Marcus asked.

“Yes. That doesn't mean Cesia can't live as an ordinary person from now on. Even if she returns her barony, she has the knowledge and strength you gave her, and she should have no difficulties living as a commoner.”

Marcus tilted his head, troubled. “So you orchestrated this commotion and called Selene to the capital to prevent me from taking Cesia as my wife?”

“That's right. My hope is that you remain a perfect prince.”

“I don't get a say in all this?”

“Ultimately, it will end up protecting your ideals.”

Marcus felt more and more confused. He had lived his life to fulfill the duties he had inherited by birth, but according to Layne, that meant he could never depart from that framework. “So, Layne, how do you intend to bring this under control?” he asked, frowning as he watched Cesia and Selene's argument from afar. Cesia seemed to have her wits about her still, but he could tell that she was gradually getting more and more agitated as she faced the person who had antagonized her for so long.

“There isn’t anything to control. If this goes on, Cesia and Selene Diane will be taken away, which’ll solve things.”

“You’ll abandon your collaborator?” Marcus asked, surprised.

Layne tilted his head as if to say he didn’t understand what Marcus was so shocked about. “Selene Diane is also a criminal. She only avoided paying for her crime because of Cesia. When Cesia is punished, it stands to reason that she and her father will also be punished.”

He was treating Selene, too, as nothing more than someone who had committed a crime. Marcus supposed that it was fair, in a sense. Still, it didn’t seem like Selene knew that; from the looks of it, she had assumed that she would avoid punishment, even if what Cesia had done came to light. That convenient interpretation was very much like her.

“Even so, was it really necessary to bring strangers into this? Did you have to do it here?” Marcus asked. *Shouldn’t it have been exposed in, say, a courtroom without causing all this trouble for Rosary and her family?*

“You’re right...that imprudent woman was the one who chose this place. In that way, too, she and Cesia are very much alike,” Layne said, looking troubled. Even for him, it seemed Selene’s desire for the limelight and her hatred for Cesia had been hard to deal with. “Still, you truly love Cesia, Your Royal Highness.”

“I do.”

“At this point, even if Cesia had been charged, there might have been some who would have tried to cover up her history, as she’s both a baroness and your fiancée. That wouldn’t do—you can’t change the past. I couldn’t let you marry Cesia, not with those skeletons in her closet.”

At that, Marcus felt a wave of sadness wash over him. Layne was too severe. Simply judging and convicting any and all who had done wrong in the past would only ever lead to a world like the one people like Juliette were trying to create. Marcus had always tried to convey that accepting those who had paid the price for what they had done and reformed was also necessary.

Layne had originally been a mercenary without a country. He had wandered

from battlefield to battlefield, making his living by killing great numbers of people. In the end, he grew tired and came to peaceful Emeroade, where, without a job, he was about to turn to thievery when Marcus found him. At first, Marcus employed him as a guard, where he instilled in him knowledge and culture. In time, he grew into the peaceful and strong-willed Layne of today. After all that, Marcus thought Layne had come to understand his attitude toward forgiving and nurturing people, but he had been mistaken.

Being a mercenary had been Layne's job, but that still meant that he had done wrong—he had killed many people. At the foundation of everything was his thought that he didn't want that part of himself to burden Marcus. So, he had always worked hard to maintain a cool composure as the deputy chief of the Second Division and guide his juniors, all so he could be useful to Marcus without causing trouble for him.

From his perspective, Cesia was like a bomb. It was inconvenient, then, that she and Marcus were in love, and it was likely that Marcus would choose to continue his relationship with her and hide her past, even if Layne gently pointed it out to him behind the scenes. Of course, Layne didn't think of Marcus as a saint. He thought that Marcus's broad-mindedness was one of his virtues. However, he didn't want anyone to attack Marcus because he chose Cesia due to that love and was afraid that if that happened, Marcus might blame himself for it. To avoid that, he spread rumors to try and passively make Cesia's past more widely known, but it didn't go well. Meanwhile, Marcus and Cesia's wedding was fast approaching. So, with the full awareness that he was going about it clumsily, he had been forced to take the hasty measure of bringing Selene to the soiree to expose Cesia.

Still, Cesia now had nowhere to run or hide. Marcus's reputation might take a hit, but if Layne could keep him here, Marcus could feign ignorance afterward. After all, Marcus had already been engaged to another criminal—Juliette. It would be easy to nullify his current engagement because, unfortunately, his second fiancée had committed some minor offenses. And when Cesia had been judged under the law and paid for her crimes, she could live as a commoner again. Layne didn't think that what Cesia had done was deserving of anything more than a light punishment. Of course, it was a different story if someone

who had committed a crime was to become the princess consort. Layne couldn't let her become Marcus's weak point for the rest of his life.

"I understand your point. Now get out of the way," Marcus said.

"You don't understand, Your Royal Highness," Layne said, standing ready to block Marcus in front of the door.

Marcus clenched his fist. He didn't know whether he could fight and win against Layne—he was one of the subordinates he always brought to a fight—but he wasn't just going to stand by and do nothing. He would marry Cesia, and if she was going to fight, it was his duty as her partner to fight by her side. "I won't give up on my wish. I'll exert myself for the people and protect the woman I love."

"You don't really care if that woman is anyone else, do you? There are other wonderful women out there who are more worthy of you and your love."

What is he saying? Marcus thought, laughing despite himself. "I could never replace Cesia, not if I searched the entire world. That's what loving someone means."

"Your Royal Highness! You were here," Roy said as he hurriedly barged into the room. Surprised, Layne left himself wide open. Marcus didn't miss his chance, and he cast a restraint spell on him.

"Your Royal Highness!" Layne yelled reproachfully, but Marcus shook his head and turned to Roy.

"Roy, watch Layne."

"Y-Yes, sir?! I have no clue what's going on..." Roy said. Still, Marcus was his boss, and if he said so, he had to obey and stand guard over Layne. "Um, Your Royal Highness, take this," he said.

Roy had brought a Security Bureau report that contained the results of their investigation into Cesia's background, which they had conducted when she had fled the castle. The Security Bureau was nothing if not thorough, and while they hadn't found any evidence that definitively proved that Cesia had disguised herself as Selene, the report showed that they had nearly the entire story, with almost all the little details. Upon seeing the document, Layne must have taken

time off work to head to the Dianes' territory and establish contact with Selene.

Flipping through the report, Marcus dexterously raised an eyebrow. "Is this all of it, Layne?"

"Huh?" Layne paused. "Yes, it is." He was restrained, but Marcus was still his boss, who he respected. He didn't understand what Marcus was getting at, but he nodded.

"Those slackers at Security... Write your report after you've investigated everything, damn it. Though I guess Cesia was still a commoner and an enforcer at the time, so maybe this was as much as they could get?" Marcus mumbled, then returned the report to Roy.

"Your Royal Highness?" Layne asked.

"This isn't like you, Layne. Were you feeling a bit rushed? You didn't even corroborate their report on your own."

Layne looked puzzled. "What, you're not saying that the report is wrong, are you?"

"No, this is all correct. But whoever submitted the report left off in the middle of things...well, with everything going on at the time, I suppose it couldn't be helped," Marcus said with a sigh. He put his hand on the doorknob. "Layne... before you cause trouble, I would've hoped you'd consult me first. I would've been able to explain everything properly, and strangers wouldn't have been caught up in it like this." Marcus's frustration was evident in his voice.

Layne looked sad. "If possible, I didn't want to upset you."

Marcus paused. "I wish you'd believed in me more. Your leader wouldn't go mad with love and bend the truth."

"You might be right..." Layne said, his voice trailing off into silence. He must have asked himself the same thing countless times, and only after that did he find himself unable to overlook his uncertainties about Cesia.

"And I protect the people I love," Marcus said. Then, he smiled mischievously, consciously making the expression that Cesia always said made him look like a spoiled, bratty child. This farce had already begun, and as Cesia had already

been forced to take center stage, Marcus figured he ought to hurry up and join her. “Do you think I’d leave a weakness exposed like that? Who do you think I am, Layne?”

Leaving Layne with Roy, Marcus exited the room, and Keith was right outside. When their eyes met, Keith instantly lowered his head and greeted him as a knight. “My deepest apologies for not noticing my coworker’s rebelliousness.”

“No matter. What Layne did wasn’t quite a rebellion, either. I should have explained things better. It was my mistake,” Marcus said, casting his eyes downward.

Keith shook his head. “Making anything and everything your responsibility is one of your few faults.”

“So it isn’t my only fault, then?” Marcus grumbled, then laughed dryly. Keith smiled slightly. After working with Layne for a long time, both of them were hurt by what he had done.

In contrast with his usual joyful energy, Keith looked like the battle-hardened knight he was. “It’s arrogant to try and make someone understand you completely. Everyone in the Second Division is fully aware that you ran out of ways to explain yourself, sir. Layne only did what he did after you did everything you could. The blame for not noticing lies with me, his coworker, and not you, his commanding officer.”

That was Keith’s way of consoling him. Marcus and Layne might have been better off if they had talked more, but on the other hand, as Keith had said, it was wrong to demand complete understanding from someone. Even if they had talked, Layne might not have understood Marcus anyway.

“Still, we can’t give up on trying to understand each other.”

“One of Your Royal Highness’s virtues has always been that you don’t know when to give up.”

“It’s a virtue? Then you should try to make it sound like you’re praising me for it,” Marcus said. The tension disappeared from his shoulders, and he burst into laughter.

Still in the middle of her predicament, Cesia glanced fleetingly at Marcus,

seeing that he had exited the small room. She had been surprised when Roy had barged in there, and now, she wondered what had happened. Marcus looked a bit drained. She couldn't focus her attention over there for too long, however, as she had to continue patiently enduring Selene's loud proclamations of her guilt to everyone around them.

It might've been a bad move to admit that I acted as Selene's double, Cesia thought. It might've been better if I had declared Selene suspicious and left it to the others from the Second Division or the count's guards. But with Selene right in front of her, her long-simmering rage at her cousin's constant persecution of her came rushing back into her mind, and she couldn't keep her composure. She reflexively retorted to what Selene said and thought she might spontaneously hit her if she wasn't careful.

Cesia bit her lip to prevent herself from saying anything unnecessary and clenched her fist. If she could think calmly, she knew she could probably defeat Selene and make it through. Not that she had any clue about what she should do right now. Still, she had surmounted various difficulties in the past year and wouldn't let Selene do as she wished. Besides, Cesia wouldn't give up her spot by Marcus's side to anyone. She was ready to be charged for what she had done, so long as it meant that what Viscount Diane and Selene had done also saw the light of day. It might cause trouble for Marcus, but she didn't want to hide away, shaking in fear of that possibility. What she had done was wrong. But that didn't mean that, if it was exposed, she had to be afraid of losing Marcus. So, she would fight to the end. She would do anything necessary to make up for what she had done. And she wouldn't give up Marcus. With his words to guide her, she wouldn't lose to anyone.

"Just where do you think you're looking?! You have some nerve," Selene said.

With Selene's unusually perceptive comment, Cesia returned her attention to her. Seemingly, the only thing that Selene had against her was the fact that she had attended the Academy under Selene's name. That was enough to cause a scandal, given that she was about to become the princess consort, but as a commoner, it was hardly a crime. As a crime, it ought to be punished, of course, but the law would ultimately decide that, not Selene or their current audience. At the moment, what she had to do was get Selene to leave without causing too

much chaos and get the venue to settle down. After all, this was an important day for Rosary.

Speaking of Rosary, she looked surprised that Cesia had acknowledged what she had done, and her eyes were wide open. Cesia couldn't look at Felix, Ada, or anyone else she knew, afraid to find out what they thought of it.

"It's true that I attended the Academy as you after your father ordered me to," Cesia said, and Selene made a look like she had just won. *Don't think that it's over just yet*, Cesia thought. "Three years ago, after the crackdown on the large-scale fraud at the Academy, the grades and the diploma I achieved as you, Selene, were rightfully revoked. You and your father had run away to your territory by then, so you might not have known. After that, as I was still a minor, His Royal Highness, Prince Marcus, served as my guardian, and I retook the Academy entrance exam. Then, I passed, and after attending on a scholarship and achieving the best grades in the school, I graduated. If that's a crime, I'll accept any punishment necessary." She purposely clicked her heel on the floor. "However, if I am to be punished, then the one who initiated the crime, Viscount Diane, and the one who was supposed to benefit, you, will also have to pay the price!"

"Putting aside my father, I haven't done anything wrong," Selene said after a pause.

"That excuse won't work, Selene," Cesia admonished her. Selene hadn't grown one bit in the past three years, and it was as if she was still a child. Cesia had heard that Selene had gotten married, but Selene hardly seemed qualified for the role of mistress of the house.

Internally conflicted, Cesia held back the urge to shout. She had to focus on settling this thing as fast as possible before it got out of hand any further. As she endured those pressures, Selene laughed derisively at her.

"Hmph, you aren't looking too well, Cesia. Don't you think you might be getting a bit full of yourself after the prince fell in love with you at first sight and you became a noble? No matter how much you struggle, you'll always be a dirty rat. I can only wonder what the prince saw in someone like you or why that marquess gave you one of his titles."

A low voice escaped Cesia's lips. "You'll pay for insulting them."

Seeing rage flare up in Cesia's purple eyes, Selene chuckled. Compared to Cesia's previous, boring reactions, which had involved bottling up her explosive anger, this was a clear change. The more Selene hurt Cesia, the better she felt.

Selene had no desire to change places with Cesia; she had never even considered it. It had been unbearable to be tricked by her lowly, unimpressive cousin and forced to leave the capital. On top of that, her father, Viscount Diane, afraid of any further repercussions, had only strongly urged her to keep quiet, saying, "Don't bother with Cesia anymore." After that, Selene married some wealthy provincial noble, but that didn't make her happy. She was supposed to be a gorgeous capital noblewoman whom everyone served hand and foot; she wasn't supposed to be leading this wretched existence.

Amid that quietly simmering rage came unexpected news: Cesia was to become the second princess consort. That had truly made Selene's blood boil. Unable to take it, she had considered going to the capital and spilling the truth about everything when Layne had arrived at the Diances' estate.

So, after a string of fateful events, Selene had come to Rosary's party to take everything away from Cesia: her position, her dignity, and her love—just as Cesia had once taken everything from her. To do so, she wanted some sort of obviously scandalous piece of information, not some non-issue like the fact that Cesia had falsified her academic record. It had to be something that would expose her unsightly nature and make her unfit to be princess consort in everyone's eyes.

Selene wanted to enrage Cesia enough to where she would be seen, in front of a crowd of spectators, assaulting someone. She had even spent a small fortune on the magic item that restricted Cesia's magic, so Cesia couldn't cast a spell at her that no one noticed like the last time, three years ago. Now, it was Selene's turn to make Cesia taste every bit of the humiliation she had gone through back then, and just as she had hoped, Cesia was trembling with anger, and her hands were balled into fists by her side. It looked as if Cesia had been living a thoroughly pampered existence, and she was growing angrier and

angrier, not at whatever Selene said about her but about the insults she flung at the prince and the people who had helped her out in the past.

Selene grinned nastily and was about to continue her verbal assault when someone spoke.

“All right, I think we can stop things here, Selene Diane.”

The prince had arrived.

Though Cesia was thinking, *I won't do what she wants me to*, and enduring Selene's insults, she was growing more indignant by the second, and she couldn't get her thoughts straight. Cesia was close to hitting Selene when she heard Marcus's chilly voice, which made her suddenly realize what she was about to do. “Your Royal Highness,” she said.

Noticing the angry tears that had formed at the corners of Cesia's eyes, Marcus smiled reassuringly at her, and with just that, her anger and tension disappeared.

“Hello, Your Royal Highness. It has been quite some time,” Selene said with a curtsy as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

Marcus calmly nodded at her. “It seems you've been having a very interesting conversation. Was there something about my fiancée being a criminal?”

“Yes.”

“Isn't your information a bit out of date?”

Hearing that, Cesia was startled. She thought that Marcus was teasing Selene and that he was going to say, “Aren't you confusing her with Juliette?” but this was no joke. A strange mood formed as the nobles around them found it difficult to laugh.

Selene shook her head, not wanting to be outmaneuvered. “No, sir, I am not mistaken. The criminal I speak of is the woman standing next to you: Cesia Kathrin.” She thrust a finger at Cesia, but Cesia's only reaction was to frown. As soon as Marcus arrived, she regained her previous composure, which seemed to irritate Selene.

Selene's plan seemed to have been to charge in with just one piece of dirt on

Cesia and enrage her so much by exposing it that things would escalate to violence in front of everybody. If someone like Juliette had gotten wind of such a sloppy strategy, she might have fainted.

“Layne brought Selene here,” Marcus whispered to Cesia. “He learned about your past and chose this place to charge you with not being suitable to be princess consort.”

Cesia’s eyes widened. Back then, Layne’s cold gaze had been one of contempt—he had seen her as a criminal. From Cesia’s perspective, Layne’s respect for Marcus bordered on worship. He had already resented that Marcus had chosen the commoner Cesia as his wife, so he must have been unable to tolerate the idea that Cesia had committed a crime in her past and hidden it.

“You can think about Layne and admonish yourself later, Cesia,” Marcus said calmly, and Cesia straightened her back.

She was surprised by just how relaxed she suddenly felt when she looked into his jade-green eyes. Nothing had changed, and she had just learned that someone she loved and respected had betrayed her. Nevertheless, her thoughts had been wiped clean when Marcus had arrived, and as her anger subsided, her fighting spirit grew. Now, all she had to do was think about her next steps and put them into action.

“Got it,” Cesia quietly replied. Whenever this crafty prince had that bratty, mischievous smile, it meant that he was thinking of something truly naughty. Now that she thought of it, she realized that she had first sensed that roguish streak in him at a time very much like this when they had faced down Selene at a soiree. This time, too, she knew he would again lead her to victory.

“Are you ready, my fiancée?”

“Of course, my future husband.”

After Cesia responded to Marcus’s usual term of address for her with the one she used for him, Marcus smiled incredibly charmingly. It was time for their counterattack.

“Y-Your Royal Highness...is what that lady says really true? Baroness Wallen faked her academic record?” a strict-looking, elderly nobleman nearby asked.

“That’s not quite accurate, Sir Norwood,” Marcus replied, and the man he called Sir Norwood grimaced. Many seasoned veterans among the male-dominated Knights were skeptical of Cesia. That was because she was a former commoner; she had suddenly risen to prominence as the prince’s fiancée, and, while it was accepted under the kingdom’s laws, she had received a barony while being a woman. As a result, this venue, with many knights in attendance, was slightly advantageous to Selene. *Layne must have selected this soiree because of that*, Marcus thought. *He’s such a perceptive person. Why did it have to come to this?*

Marcus surveyed his surroundings, then clearly spoke so Sir Norwood and anyone who shared his doubts could hear him. “As Lady Selene has pointed out and Baroness Wallen has recognized, the baroness, Cesia Kathrin, was made to attend the Royal Academy in Selene Diane’s place and under her name.”

With that unmistakable pronouncement, there was a wave of murmurs among the crowd. At worst, if it had ended at only an argument between Cesia and Selene, someone might have been able to use a large amount of influence to suppress the incident, but now, it was an incontrovertible fact that Prince Marcus had acknowledged it.

Cesia’s lips trembled slightly, but she calmed herself down. She believed in Marcus and knew he wouldn’t abandon her. If he acknowledged her crime, it meant there was some sort of opening ahead. Marcus had always believed in her, and this time, it was her turn to leave things to him. Her love was such that she trusted that he wouldn’t betray her.

Marcus continued, “However, Baroness Wallen only did it because she was ordered to by her guardian at the time, her uncle, Viscount Diane. As only a child with no other relatives, it’s clear that she had no choice but to obey.”

Sir Norwood made a pained look. Under their code of chivalry, he and the other knights were there to protect weak and fragile women and children. Sighs could be heard here and there, perhaps because the attendees were imagining the pitiable environment Cesia had grown up in.

“So is all forgiven, simply because she was a minor?” Selene quickly rebutted, interrupting Marcus. A section of the noblewomen grimaced. It might not have

been the place for such a reaction, but Selene had just made quite an impertinent remark to a prince.

“Of course, a crime is a crime. I’m saying that there is room to take the extenuating circumstances into consideration.”

All the knights there, beginning with Sir Norwood, looked as if they were beginning to agree, and Selene mentally cursed herself. *This happened last time. This prince has a way with words*, she thought. He methodically advanced his pieces up the board, and in the end, everything would be flipped on its head, and all go how he wished. “If a crime is a crime, then Cesia ought to be punished,” Selene said, still determined to have her way.

Marcus beamed, and Selene shivered. It was just a beautiful, well-proportioned smile. She didn’t understand why she could feel chills running down her spine.

“I’ve always believed that, after those who have committed a crime have received the appropriate punishment, they ought to be given a chance to make up for what they’ve done.”

“How soft...”

“Would you say, then, that no matter the crime, whoever does wrong once should never have the chance to atone?” Marcus said smoothly.

Selene nodded, somewhat confused. She was wary of making a thoughtless reply that Marcus might seize on. However, she had to agree to be able to denounce Cesia. “Yes, that’s right!” Selene said hesitantly. “It’s only right that anyone who commits a crime is called a criminal. Don’t people keep themselves disciplined and make sure to do the right thing so that doesn’t happen?” Her voice got louder as she spoke, as she realized that this was a line that the justice-obsessed knights would like.

“Then, Lady Selene, you trying to hit Cesia three years ago would make you a criminal. She’s a baroness now and my fiancée, after all. We were going back to the past to investigate guilt, right?” Marcus said with a grin.

Darn it! Selene thought, and she bit her lip. *But this isn’t about me. I won’t let him confuse things.* “Please don’t confuse the two! I’m not talking about myself;

I'm saying that that woman is a criminal who isn't fit to be the princess consort!"

Cesia's frown deepened when Selene called her a criminal yet again.

Marcus looked tenderly at his partner, readying himself to deliver the finishing blow. Just why was anyone and everyone all right with calling his beloved Cesia a criminal? She herself acknowledged what she had done and was willing to be punished for it.

When Marcus loved someone, he would protect them from everything that might harm them, and he didn't skimp on the effort it took to do so.

"You may wish to deny it, but Emeroade has a constitution, and the courts decide the punishment based on the seriousness of the crime. That also means a person who has paid for what they've done cannot be tried for the same crime twice."

Anita's crimes had been too severe. No matter the circumstances she may have been in, and even though she had been a minor for part of it, too many people had lost their lives as a result of her actions. It might have been lucky, then, that the punishment for what Cesia had done already had precedent.

"Cesia attended the Academy under a false name. Afterward, she was readmitted under her own name and on her own ability, then graduated, so the charge of falsifying her *academic record* isn't quite accurate," Marcus said, tapping his chin. The attendees nodded—he was right, and Cesia had, after all, been admitted and graduated on her own efforts. "So, to announce the punishment the court handed down: a reasonable fee and a period of house arrest under supervision from a guardian—"

"Just hold on!" Selene shouted.

"What is it now?" Marcus said with a cold look.

Selene answered, though not without flinching. "The court handed down a punishment? What's that supposed to mean? You're making it sound like Cesia was already punished!"

While Cesia made sure not to let it show on her face, she was in agreement. If she was being honest, she had no memory of ever being punished. She looked

anxiously up at Marcus, and without looking back, he held her hand.

“Not knowing about it is no excuse for thoughtlessly acting as if it never happened, Selene Diane.”

“Wha—!” Selene said, angrily turning red at Marcus’s direct insult.

“Cesia Kathrin was already charged and punished three years ago for falsifying her identity and attending the Academy.”

There was another wave of loud murmuring. The other members of the Second Division, including Layne, who was already restrained and was listening from the side, were also greatly shocked by this information.

“A fine?” Cesia hesitantly whispered to Marcus. She had no memory of ever paying anything and didn’t remember being placed under house arrest, either. Marcus grinned mischievously at her confusion, then continued.

“Cesia Kathrin’s fine was paid by the man who was her guardian at the time, Viscount Diane.”

“My father?!”

“Of course; he was her guardian, after all. The money he paid was originally supposed to be her payment for attending the Academy in place of you, Lady Selene, so if the viscount hadn’t paid, he would have been liable to receive further punishment as a result of breaching the contract between him and Cesia. So, he listened to counsel and gladly paid.”

Marcus said he would be “liable to” be punished, but I would bet anything that he threatened to charge the viscount if he didn’t pay up, Cesia thought. That’s just how Marcus is.

“After that, the viscount stepped down from being Cesia’s guardian, and I, the second prince, took on the role and supervised her during her house arrest.”

“Could you be talking about the study camp I went to so I could be admitted at the top of my class?” Cesia again whispered to Marcus, and he wordlessly smiled.

When Marcus had become her guardian, he had told her that, as the prince’s charge, she had to get a perfect score on the entrance exam and begin at the

top of her class and that after she had been admitted, she had to maintain those grades as a scholarship student. To do so, she had to spend some time at a villa in the capital, where she had to prepare for the test under the watchful eye of Chris and several different instructors. At the time, she had just lost her home because Viscount Diane had left to go to his territory outside the capital, so she had accepted it without thinking about it too deeply. All she had to do was study and was guaranteed food, clothing, and shelter, so it had basically been heaven compared to where she had been before. She had thought that it was Marcus's way of keeping her out of the uproar that had ensued after the graduation as the scandal at the Academy came to a close. She had had no clue that it had actually been house arrest.

Cesia stared at Marcus, her eyes wide with disbelief, but he still didn't look at her, and he was again making that awful, nonchalant expression.

"Do you get it now?" Marcus asked Selene. "In other words, judgment has already been passed on Cesia's crimes, and she was punished. She's already paid for what she did," he said calmly. Selene, as well as everyone else, listened in mute amazement. "So, does anyone have any questions? Well?" He looked around, then said in a clear, powerful voice, "I guess not. Then, to the conclusion. According to the laws of Emeroade, Cesia Kathrin is not a criminal!"

The hall was completely silent. Then, Layne's voice rang out. "B-But, even so... even so, it is true that Cesia was a criminal in the past."

Roy quickly cast a silencing spell on him. If he said anything more, things might get out of hand. But Roy had been a second too late, and as expected, Selene shouted in a high-pitched voice, saying, "He's right! It makes no difference whether Cesia was a criminal or is one now! She isn't fit to be princess consort!"

It was as much as the audience could do to keep up with everything being said.

"I didn't make it public because if someone had pointed it out, it would've been an issue for me," Marcus said.

Selene frowned, not sure what Marcus was trying to say, but Layne noticed where he was going and suddenly went pale. Meanwhile, Cesia swore to herself

that she would hit Marcus after this for letting her know about everything way too late.

“Cesia can no longer be called a criminal, but the reason you say that she isn’t fit to be the princess consort is because she’s marrying me.”

He was right. If Cesia had been getting married to a commoner, it wouldn’t have been an issue, so long as the man she was marrying didn’t care about her history.

“Do you get it? There’s no reason to attack Cesia anymore, which means *I’m* the reason we can’t get married.”

Both Cesia and the audience realized with a start what he was saying. If Layne hadn’t been silenced, he would have undoubtedly tried to prevent Marcus from continuing.

“If the fact that I’m a prince is in the way of me marrying Cesia, then I’ll just step down.”

“You can’t!” Cesia shouted without thinking and grabbed Marcus’s arm, urging him to stop. “Look, you just can’t! And His Majesty and His Royal Highness, the crown prince, will never accept it.”

Marcus raised an eyebrow. “But I’ve heard that if I don’t, I can’t marry you,” he said sarcastically.

Cesia wanted to slap that good-looking face of his as soon as she could.

“Or, are you going to give up on marrying me?”

“I’ll marry you,” Cesia said with certainty, shaking her head. “I love you.”

“That’s good to hear. I love you, too. I want to get married, even if it means resigning from my position.”

Marcus was speaking passionately, but Cesia went pale at the suggestion. He wasn’t the type of person to make mean-spirited jokes to test people at a time like this—which meant that he was serious. He had put so much of himself and his life into being a prince, but he was ready to give all of it up because of what she had done in her past.

“Anyway, you just can’t...” Cesia said. “Let’s look for another way. Maybe I can

accept a harsher punishment, or—”

“Cesia, calm down. My resignation won’t affect things one bit. I might lose my authority as a prince, but I’ll still do everything in my power for the country.”

“But surely there are things you can only do as a prince, right?” Cesia said beside herself, trying to convince Marcus.

Marcus smiled. “A great number of people protect this country, and none of them are princes. The knights here, most nobles, and many of the people play a part. I’ve been a prince all this time, so I’ve done what I could in that role, but there are plenty of things I can’t do because I’m a prince. I just have to be of service in a different way from now on.”

His words made Cesia remember visiting the orphanage on the outskirts of the capital with Maria. Whatever pressure he exerted as a prince, the conditions at the orphanage never improved much. However, if he could, as a noble, bring up the topic of supporting the orphanage in parliament, something might change. That was what he must have been referring to.

Even so, Cesia shook her head. She still wanted him to change his mind. Without her noticing it, her desperate attempts to convince him to rethink things made the people around her want to root for her.

Every prince of Emeroade received a knighthood for ceremonial reasons, but Marcus wasn’t just a knight on paper. He participated in their training, and many knights in attendance had even shared a friendly conversation with him. In fact, every citizen of Emeroade was proud of their second prince, and they knew he would represent them well wherever he was. Some were so intensely proud of him that, like Layne, they took things too far to protect him sometimes. And now, he was saying that he would quit to marry the woman he loved. She had already atoned for her sins, and what she had done was hardly severe in the first place. So, they thought losing the prince they loved for that would be a waste.

Representing the crowd, Sir Norwood spoke. “Your Royal Highness.”

Marcus looked at him. “What could it be, Sir Norwood?” he said pompously.

Cesia looked pleadingly at the nobleman. She didn’t care what it was as long

as he could tell her some way to keep Marcus from stepping down.

Sir Norwood nodded, recognizing her fervent wish. Everyone there was on Marcus's side—not necessarily on Cesia's side, but at the very least, at that moment, their goals were the same. "We people of Emeroade don't think that Baroness Wallen, who has already been punished for what she did, is a criminal," Sir Norwood said. He spread out both arms, and to show their collective agreement, the nobles around them nodded.

Seeing that, Marcus purposely tilted his head as if confused. "Really? To me, it looked like all of you were supporting Lady Selene a moment ago."

"We value freedom and equality above anything, and we believe that someone trying to reform after doing wrong is wonderful."

"It's reassuring to hear you say that," Marcus said, smiling.

In a show of allegiance, Sir Norwood knelt, and the other knights followed suit. The noblewomen did the same.

"As the commander of the knights of Emeroade, I, Gran Norwood, do declare that I believe Baroness Wallen to be an appropriate partner to Your Royal Highness."

The scene made Cesia's heart leap in her chest. Everyone there wanted Marcus to remain prince, and in accordance with his wishes, they had decided not to pursue the issue of Cesia's crime any further. "Your Royal Highness..." Cesia said to Marcus, dumbfounded, and he smiled at her.

Felix, Rosary, and Ada were among those who were kneeling. Most of the people there hadn't approved of Cesia, but they had accepted her for Marcus's sake. They were showing their support because Marcus had declared he wouldn't abandon her.

Cesia could feel her eyes burn with tears. She remembered what Rosary had said that night. She may have disliked using her authority, but depending on how she used it, it could be either a shield or a weapon to protect herself. Marcus smiled his usual, unwavering smile. Her authority could also be a weapon to protect him.

"Cesia," Marcus said, and she gingerly raised her face.

With her purple eyes, Cesia gazed into his jade-green eyes. He was strong, kind, and graceful. She wanted to be someone who could stand next to him, as his equal. She nodded once, then looked at Felix and Ada and, with the most dignity she could muster, said, “Burns, Aiden, please restrain Selene Diane.” They sprung into action and did as she asked. “Selene Diane,” Cesia continued, “for throwing this place into chaos, the Security Bureau will take you into their custody.”

“You... Rat!” Selene howled. She tried to leap at Cesia, but Felix and Ada stopped her.

Cesia stood proudly, without flinching, and proclaimed, “I am Cesia Kathrin, Baroness Wallen. I won’t run away, and I won’t hide. Your actions against me will be judged fairly under the law.”

A weapon, different from magic or martial arts, had protected Cesia and made her stronger.

As Selene screamed about something or other, Felix and Ada took her away. Cesia looked around and saw that Layne was being led away by Keith and Roy in much the same way. She reflexively tried to approach them, but she stopped herself. If Layne had caused all this commotion because he didn’t think Cesia was fit to be Marcus’s partner, then it was thanks to Marcus that the situation had been resolved. Whatever she said to Layne would be meaningless. She had to prove with her future actions that she was worthy to be by Marcus’s side, not just to Layne but to the other nobles and the entire country.

“Bring it on,” she said to herself and clenched her fist. Just then, Marcus’s large hand enveloped her fist, and when she turned to look at him, he was awkwardly smiling at her.

Marcus had conclusively parted ways with Layne and was no doubt hurt by that. But she couldn’t come up with the right words to say to him, as he once had when she was having a hard time. She could only quietly swear to him, above anyone else, that she would continually prove that he was right to choose her.

THE faraway calling of bells echoed around them, and the lace hem of Cesia’s

dress, specially made for this day, gently fluttered in the wind. Feeling a pair of warm lips separate from her own, she opened her eyes, and the first thing that jumped out at her was flame-red hair, followed by a well-proportioned nose, then long eyelashes. The jade-green eyes before her narrowed as their owner smiled about something.

“Isn’t it proper etiquette to close your eyes during a kiss?”

“I had them closed a second ago,” Cesia said after a pause.

Marcus smiled, delighted even by their pointless argument.

“You know, I had no idea you dealt with what I did like that,” Cesia said.

“I didn’t manage it all with just a frontal assault, of course. I didn’t do anything illegal, but I did use my authority to do it,” Marcus replied. Unusually for him, he was being evasive. “I should’ve announced it when we got engaged. But...I guess I wanted to cheat a bit and leave it alone so long as no one noticed.” Marcus lowered his eyes, and Cesia grabbed his hand, hanging loosely by his side. She felt guilty for making him feel that way, all because of her.

After the incident at Rosary’s soiree, Felix and Ada took Selene away, and Selene went to trial for gravely insulting a baroness and trying to harm her reputation. Because she had brazenly exposed her and her father’s crime, they were formally charged and waiting to be sentenced.

Cesia couldn’t guess how light or harsh their punishment might be, but she had made it known that she wanted a fair judgment without any consideration for her position. That did mean that her past would become public knowledge, but at this point, she thought it was only reasonable. She should have faced up to what she had done earlier. If she had, at the very least, Layne wouldn’t have had to leave Marcus.

Speaking of Layne, he had been questioned for helping incite Selene, but he hadn’t done anything directly, so he hadn’t been charged with anything. However, to take responsibility for his actions, he quit his position at the Second Division and chose to work as a construction worker by a river on the outskirts of the capital. It was clear that was the way he had chosen to punish himself to atone for what he had done. With how much he respected Marcus, it must have been a difficult choice for him to leave. The two had known each

other for a long time, and it had been a hard blow from Marcus's perspective, too—he had lost a close friend and trusted confidant. Still, the prince was continuing on as if nothing had happened.

Though it might have been presumptuous of her, Cesia hoped that Layne would one day return to work under Marcus again. It was an emotional issue, however, and just because Layne had atoned, that didn't mean everything was suddenly sorted out. So, she didn't yet know what would happen.

As for the Second Division, Keith had taken Layne's place as acting division chief, and the rest of them keenly felt how much of the burden of their work Layne had shouldered when he had still been there.

"Hey, even after you become the princess consort, if you have some free time, could you come back in disguise?" Felix had asked her, fed up with all the paperwork he had to do. After he had said that, Ada had hit Felix in the head, completing their standard routine, one that Cesia had gotten used to by then.

Then, regarding her hiding her past, Roy had said, "Because you reentered the Academy, it can't be called falsifying your academic record. And I know you, so nothing will change." Everyone else had nodded. His words had been a balm for Cesia's worries, afraid they would look down on her for hiding it from them.

Incidentally, after the soiree, Rosary fiercely scolded her. She had told Cesia that if something like that had been a possibility, she wished Cesia had said something before so she could have responded better.

"I'm sorry for messing up your wedding celebration," Cesia had said.

Rosary grimaced. "As you should be! Just how much time do you think I spent getting everything together?! I'll be expecting you to give me the best seat at your wedding celebration! As your friend!"

"Huh?" Cesia widened her eyes in surprise. "You'll still be my friend?"

"Hmph. Of course, I will. I'll consider this payoff for what I did when we were students and overlook it."

She had been referring to the times when she had bullied Cesia, who had been attending the Academy as Selene. Cesia, on the other hand, had considered the help Rosary had given her since she had gotten engaged to

Marcus as more than enough and, for her part, had already thought that she ought to overlook what Rosary had done even before the latest incident had occurred.

“Now that I think about it, you’ve been weighing on my mind since then... Now we can continue as friends and equals without anything between us,” Rosary said, cheerily laughing it all off.

Cesia felt incredibly endeared to Rosary just then. Rosary had always felt guilty about how she had acted; when Cesia thought of that, the strange feeling that attending the Academy as Selene had been worth it filled her. After all, she had made such a wonderful friend. She wanted to be grateful for that much, at least.

As Cesia thought back to various things, Marcus kissed her forehead and smiled. “Welcome back?” he said.

Cesia blushed, then replied, “Hello, I’m back.” *I still can’t get used to this prince’s sweet kisses.*

“What were you thinking about?” Marcus asked.

After a pause, Cesia said, “If I had been stronger and smarter, things might’ve gone differently.”

Marcus blinked. Cesia had always done her best wherever she was. It was important to bemoan one’s shortcomings and reflect, but she was more than capable enough and had no reason to feel down. The Cesia Kathrin he had chosen had grown into a formidable enforcer, and now, she had blossomed into a beautiful woman.

“It’s arrogant to try and make everything go exactly as you wish,” Marcus said. He knew she was broken up about Layne—he felt the same way. However, neither he nor Cesia were omnipotent, and some things wouldn’t work out, no matter how much they struggled. That was why their only option was to correct their mistakes, forgive, and walk ahead, always with one eye on themselves.

“You might be right,” Cesia said. “There are times when things don’t go well, but still, I want to follow my heart and do the right thing.”

Marcus nodded. They might come to a stop out of regret, but they absolutely could not give up on moving forward. On that point, Marcus thought that the creed Cesia had always held up as her ideal fit her perfectly. “And I’m here for you. If there’s anything you can’t do alone, we can do it together.”

“But, Your Royal Highness, I can’t always be the one needing your help,” Cesia said, smiling awkwardly. Marcus shook his head, and his flame-red hair shone in the sun. While Cesia was taken in by the dazzling sight, he kissed her again. The lovely sound of his lips made her blush again.

“I’ll help you whenever you’re in trouble, so you’ll do the same whenever I need your help,” Marcus said.

“Definitely,” Cesia answered instantly, and Marcus beamed. “So please don’t ever say you’ll step down from being a prince. I don’t want to make you lose even a single bit of who you are.”

“Being a prince is just one method among many; it isn’t my ultimate goal. I’m always ready to throw it away for the person I love.”

Cesia felt her eyes burn with tears. He would happily discard the pride and dignity he had always held dear to him as a prince if it was for her. She knew she shouldn’t feel happy about it, but she couldn’t help it. At the same time, she swore that she would never make him have to give it up. She was in agreement with Layne on that point. Being a prince was Marcus’s calling; taking it away from him would be a loss to the country and irrevocably change who he was.

“Understood,” she said. “You’ll never have to do that—I won’t let you.” She swore to herself that it was the end of her constantly having to be protected by him. She would become his partner, someone who could protect him.

Marcus tenderly smiled at Cesia’s enthusiasm. He wanted to make the country better and devote himself to where he had grown up. He had always thought that way; that was why he sought out people who shared his goal and created the Second Division. Of course, he had no desire to postpone his own happiness, but he had always treated it as secondary anyway.

However, thanks to that, he had met Cesia. She fought by his side, and he believed they would be happy together. As long as they were a couple, he knew they would have to deal with various difficulties, but if he was with her, they

could face them together.

“But still,” Marcus said, “it’s been a rocky road from the start.”

At that, Cesia smiled confidently.

With Cesia and Marcus’s wedding still recent, the Emeroade royal family had officially made Cesia’s past known. The fact that she had already been punished for what she had done and that the royal family had known had also been announced, so while there was no big controversy, opinions from both sides were flying around. While the people took it positively—they were glad to see that she was a commoner and had been valedictorian at the Academy—many stubborn authority figures, stuck in their ways, looked upon it much less kindly.

I can only prove that I’m worthy with what I do from now on, Cesia had thought in response. She would fight on, guided by everything she had gained from Marcus, the Second Division, and everyone else.

The sparkling early afternoon sun filtered in from outside, brightly illuminating the otherwise unlit room. When the glass door leading to the balcony from the antechamber was thrown open, the large crowd shouted in joy, welcoming the second prince and the new princess consort. The smell of celebratory flowers and the sound of the band’s trumpets floated on the light breeze to the balcony where Cesia and Marcus were, holding hands with their fingers entwined.

Cesia was, as of today, officially and in reality, Marcus’s partner. She took another step forward, still holding Marcus’s hand, and with brilliantly shining eyes and a determined smile on her lips, she said, “So long as we’re together, I’ll be all right. I won’t lose to anyone anymore.”

After all, Cesia’s creed is constant, determined resistance!



Extra: A Dinner Incognito

AFTER she and Marcus married, one might have wondered whether Cesia would settle down in her new role as princess consort and become a bit more well-behaved and ladylike. Needless to say, that was not the case. In fact, her mischievous prince of a husband was even less well-behaved than her.

“Hey! We haven’t been here in a while,” Marcus said, smiling cheerfully. He had used disguise magic to change his hair and eye color, and his hair was a brilliant blond.

They were at a bar in the more working-class part of the capital city. Many customers had gathered inside the spacious restaurant, and everyone was enjoying their drinks and stuffing their cheeks with delicious-looking food. The menu was written on several pieces of paper tacked to the wall, and customers ordered by pointing at what they wanted.

That night, both Cesia and Marcus were free, without any official duties, so when Marcus said “Let’s go on a date!” she readily accepted his invitation. The bar they had arrived at stuck out in her memory; they had come to the bar once before they had fallen in love.

Seeing her husband so excited, Cesia—who’d used magic to alter her hair and eye color to be the same as his—smiled awkwardly. Just as Cesia’s creed was constant, determined resistance, Marcus’s cheerful attitude never changed. *Whether there’s trouble or not, this prince is always ready to meddle in all sorts of things*, Cesia thought. She had sworn before God that she would spend the rest of her life with Marcus as her husband, so she had no choice but to accompany him wherever he went. Not that she disliked doing so.

“Marvin, let’s take a seat first,” Cesia said, urging Marcus onward using his fake name.

“Yeah, Sarah,” Marcus replied, using her fake name as well, then obediently followed her.

A server showed them to a two-person table in the corner, where they had a good view of the rest of the bar. Marcus liked the food there, but he also seemed to be a fan of the atmosphere. He looked around the place with childlike wonder in his eyes.

Cesia jabbed his upper arm several times to get him to pay attention. “All right, let’s order!” she said cheerfully, and Marcus nodded.

“Oh, yeah,” he said.

Cesia mostly ordered the tasty food she had the last time Marcus had brought her there, but she also took a couple of suggestions from Marcus and went for some dishes newly added since she’d last seen the menu. In no time, plates full of food crowded their small table.

“This looks good! Let’s eat,” Cesia said. She and Marcus quickly did a pre-meal prayer, then she put some food on Marcus’s plate before filling her own. There was mouthwatering smoked meat and grilled vegetables—and she couldn’t forget the soft, fluffy bread, either. “Mmm! The bean salad is great, too!”

Castle food was delicious and often quite luxurious, but there were some tastes that only a restaurant in the city could provide. Savoring the commoner cuisine for the first time in a while had its own special charm, and Cesia cleaned off plate after plate with a smile.

“You must’ve had quite an appetite. I feel good just watching you,” Marcus said. He cut some thick slices of meat, then put them on Cesia’s plate as if to say, “Here, eat these too.”

The last time they had come to the bar, Cesia had felt embarrassed to be served by her boss, but this time was different. It wasn’t because he was her husband but because she had learned that he liked to look after others. *He’s a natural older brother*, Cesia thought. Normally, he behaved like a prince, and his servants always treated him with reverence, but that wasn’t particularly remarkable—it was his duty. But as he looked after her, he seemed to be enjoying himself immensely.

Marcus poured a strong fruit wine into his own glass and smiled as he took a sip. At the castle, they often had dinner together, just the two of them, but a large number of servants were always nearby. It had been a while since they

had gone out for dinner like this. Many other customers were all around them, but they were enjoying their meals, and no one knew that he and Cesia were the prince and the princess consort. In that way, it was just the two of them in their own little world.

The word “date” perfectly fit what they were doing, and Cesia felt more excited. “Thanks,” she said, happily smiling as Marcus served her diligently. Marcus smiled, too. *That part of him is a bit cute*, she thought, then said, “Hey, don’t just look at me. You should eat, too. You ordered a bunch of food, after all!” She piled some grilled vegetables on Marcus’s plate, and he smiled childishly and carefreely. *That expression is also cute*.

To take care of someone and be taken care of—that was the true essence of a family relationship, and to Cesia, it all still felt a bit embarrassing. She had lived alone for much of her life, and Marcus was the only person besides her parents to fawn over her like family. He behaved like it was only natural, and he hoped Cesia would accept it as such.

Cesia was overjoyed that the person who’d become the family she had long hoped for was so considerate, and she beamed.

Marcus tilted his head, puzzled. “What is it?” he asked.

“I was just feeling satisfied over my aesthetic sense.”

“I don’t get it, but I assume I’m being praised right now.”

Cesia pursed her lips and pouted. “You sure have a strong sense of self-esteem...” He was right, but it was frustrating to admit it.

Marcus chuckled. As always, he was excellent at managing his facial expressions.

Just then, a man grabbed Marcus’s shoulder out of nowhere. “Heeey, kiddo, you look like you’re having a good time! Why don’t you share some of that with me!” the man said.

The clearly drunk man startled Cesia, but Marcus appeared to have sensed this, smiled, and replied amiably. “Yeah, it sure is a nice night tonight. Let’s drink to that and enjoy ourselves,” he said. He was probably sincere when he said that, but unfortunately, the man wasn’t moved.

“It’s not good to lie, sonny. I bet you’re happy because you’re drinking with such a pretty girl.” He looked at the table, then shifted his gaze to Cesia, sitting across from Marcus, and smiled crudely. “Nice. Is she your sister? Pour me a drink too,” he said to Cesia, then reached out to her.

Cesia could easily bat away the shaky hand of a drunk, but that would cause a commotion. Troubled, she shrunk back slightly when Marcus firmly grabbed the man’s arm and stopped him.

Marcus looked at Cesia, who was surprised, then winked so perfectly she would have sworn it made a sound. “She’s not my sister; she’s my wife,” he said. Then, with the man’s arm still in his grip, Marcus looked at him. “Thank you for your kind words of praise. She truly is beautiful, isn’t she?” He was smiling and speaking in his usual, cheery voice, but the man’s arm began to tremble. Marcus held it so tightly that the man couldn’t shake him off.

Then, Marcus nimbly let go, and the man blushed, though not from the alcohol. He left awkwardly, mumbling something. *My condolences*, Cesia thought. Unfortunately for him, he had chosen the wrong person. He had tried to hassle her and had instead ended up on the receiving end of Marcus’s earnest, lovey-dovey talk about her.

Marcus watched the man’s back as he skulked off, then turned to the table and grinned at a blushing Cesia. “You’re embarrassed.”

“I certainly am...” Cesia pouted. In addition to that drunk, more and more people told her that she had grown prettier lately. Always wanting to be a worthy partner to Marcus, she was happy to hear it, but at the same time, the castle’s maids were helping her, so she thought it was only natural for her to look more refined. That was all the more true because, as Cesia herself was well aware, she had been lax regarding her appearance before she’d gotten married. She had started from well behind and had only recently made it past the starting line, and even then, she was far from being comparable to the ladies who had always paid careful attention to how they looked.

Still, when she had brought that up to her new sister-in-law, Mavis, the princess had said, “That’s not true at all!” According to her, “When someone falls in love, they get way prettier! They look much better as if a light is shining

out of them.” The cute princess was quite partial to Cesia, and she always complimented her without reserve. This effusive praise made Cesia feel awkward. And embarrassed. Incredibly, awfully embarrassed.

However, Cesia was glad to hear that, rather than it all being thanks to her maids’ skilled work, she had gotten a bit more beautiful because of her love for Marcus and his love for her. From now on, she wanted to strive to become a stronger, better, and more beautiful person—someone fit to be with Marcus and who anyone would approve of as the princess consort.

“I’m already proud of you enough as my wife,” Marcus had said. Whether he knew what she was thinking or not, he always indulged her like that. His love and trust for her encouraged her and made her want to exert herself even more for him.

“Just you watch. I’ll be someone you can be even more proud of,” Cesia declared with a broad grin.

Marcus smiled carefreely. “Even better. If you get any lovelier, I’ll have to put in more effort myself to be someone worthy of you.”

As he spoke, he raised his glass. *You’re on*, Cesia thought, crashing her glass against his, and they each drained their drinks.

Afterword

HELLO! Or, hello again. My name is Ringo. Thank you for reading *By a Twist of Fate, I'm Attending the Royal Academy in Disguise Volume 2*. I'm thrilled to have seen Cesia through her journey from being a solitary girl to, with some love and guidance, having a family and becoming happy.

When I began publishing this story online, serialized, I first wrote a beginning of around 4,000 words, then immediately wrote the final section of about 2,500 words. I rewrote bits and pieces of it, but the final scene is almost the same as what I originally wrote. With the beginning and the end done, I began the story with the idea that I would savor the experience by writing it based on a rough, chapter-by-chapter plot outline. Until then, I had never written anything that way before, but for some incomprehensible reason, my mindset was something like, "Anyway, this time, I'll just do it like this!"

I wrote and updated the story almost every day for about three months. There were all sorts of hurdles, and it was hard at the time, but looking back on it now that it's over, it was loads of fun. The only things I still remember are all the kind words of support I received from everyone reading along.

When I was still in the middle of serializing the story, the publisher, PASH!, graciously contacted me and asked if I was interested in adapting it into a novel. I was very surprised and thought, "Are you really sure? I haven't even finished yet!" But, while it was stressful knowing that I had to write everything all the way to the end properly, I had that final 2,500 words, which gave me an odd sense of security. Even though you can't actually do anything with only the final scene, of course.

When the serialization was over, I even received a comment that said they would feel lonely now that there wouldn't be any more updates. I was so touched I cried. I was happy that all my work wasn't just some self-conceit on my part; I had been a part of someone's life that they had looked forward to every day.

With all that said and done, the story is now complete. I wrote it alone, but it

was only thanks to many people that I was able to complete it.

Additionally, I'm pleased to announce that this novel is getting a manga adaptation by Nazuna Nanano! There's also a wonderful key visual from the manga printed at the end of this volume! There will be further updates in time, so please look forward to it! I can't wait!

In the second volume, Tsukasa Satsuki again drew the wonderful illustrations! Thank you! The cover with Cesia confidently smiling as she wears Marcus's colors is truly breathtaking, and Marcus looks lovely as he tenderly gazes at her.

To my editor, who reached out to me when I was still a nobody: thank you for everything you've done. When I had absolutely no confidence in myself, you encouraged me countless times and said to me, "This is really good!" I am incredibly grateful for that. Also, I would like to thank everyone who was involved in publishing. And to my friends, who were always rooting for me; to my family, who taught me the joy of reading. And to everyone who reads this far: I'm very thankful to all of you. Thanks to you, I was happy the whole time I was working on this book. Thank you very much!

Ringo

February, 2023





Rising from Ashes: My Dear Emperor, You're Putty in My Hands!

By **Makino Maeburu** Illustration by **Yoko Matsuoka**

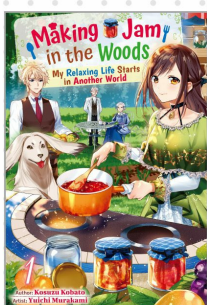
When Sai reincarnates into an otome game as an NPC destined to die, she's saved by the winged Orient Emperor who shares a similar fate! How'll they rewrite their story?



I Guess This Dragon Who Lost Her Egg to Disaster Is My Mom Now

By **Suzume Kirisaki** Illustration by **Cosmic**

A gender bender fantasy series about a betrayed adventurer who ends up not only turning into a girl, but being raised by a powerful dragon too!



Making Jam in the Woods: My Relaxing Life Starts in Another World

By **Kosuzu Kobato** Illustration by **Yuichi Murakami**

What Awaits Her In Another World Is Delicious Food And A Relaxing Life Surrounded By Spirits!

Margaret's life is cut short when she gets into a fatal accident at her workplace, except instead of the afterlife, she finds herself in another world!



APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA
-WORLD CONQUEST STARTS WITH THE CIVILIZATION OF RUIN-

Author: **Fehu Kazuno**

Illustration by: **Jun**

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