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Chapter 1: By a Twist of Fate, I'm Attending the Royal Academy in Disguise

"YOU'RE so shameless!!"

Behind one of the school buildings at the Royal Academy of the Emeroade Kingdom, Cesia crossed her arms and glared at the group of ladies. Daughters of nobles all. They surrounded her and hurled insults.

"Oh? Can you be more specific?" she challenged. "Is it my family? Or perhaps, my appearance? Or could it be my grades?"

The girls quieted down, at a loss at Cesia's impudent refusal to give in. Their pampered upbringings led them to believe she would submit if they just overwhelmed her with sheer numbers.

Cesia was disguised as Lady Selene Diane, the daughter of a viscount. Selene's flowing, richly blonde hair and beautiful, ocean-blue eyes were her distinctive features, and Cesia's black hair and purple eyes had been magically altered to match them.

Graduating from the Royal Academy was a marker of prestige, so it was customary for young lords and ladies in the royal capital to enroll, even though it wasn't strictly required. The real Selene had refused to attend, so Viscount Diane had called on Cesia to go instead.

I can see why Selene didn't want to attend, Cesia thought.

Selene's fiancé, Lord Raymond Chaser, was a focus of great affection from the ladies at the school. The young nobleman was celebrated for his academic and athletic achievements, and his attractiveness was widely praised. He was even the president of the Academy's student council. In this kingdom, it wasn't uncommon to change one's betrothed before their official entrance into high society, so many, many ladies were trying to displace Selene from her position as his fiancée. Though it was hardly commendable, Viscount Diane's decision to set up Cesia as Selene's double was an effective way to deal with his daughter's

challengers. Cesia's physical resemblance to Selene made her an appropriate choice, too.

At the Academy, her days consisted of routine harassment, and she was constantly called out behind the school buildings. These so-called ladies would tear Cesia's notes and textbooks to shreds; this was such a mundane occurrence that Cesia was confident that she surpassed even the teachers in her skill in restoration magic.

Not cowed by Cesia's defiance, one girl kept up the insults. "I'm saying that you aren't worthy of Lord Raymond."

"Oh? Are you implying that you are, Lady Rosary Hilton?" Cesia shot back.

They weren't in the same class, but there weren't many students in a single year. Cesia had memorized most of the names, faces, and parents' ranks of all the students at the school.

"Yes, I am. I'm the daughter of a count. A viscount's daughter should know that you normally wouldn't even be permitted to speak to me."

Cesia smiled at Rosary's statement. Why do all the spoiled girls at this school always say the same things? Is there a ladies' how-to guide on bullying they all follow? If there was, she wanted to see it. She could publish a manual on how to fight back against their bullying. It would be an autobiography based on her real-life experience. After two years at the Academy, with graduation just ahead, Cesia was a professional at being bullied.

"Of all people, I wouldn't expect someone like the daughter of a count to be unfamiliar with the Academy's foundational principle: equality, regardless of position," Cesia cited. "So long as we're students of this school and within its premises, we're equal, even with someone like His Royal Highness, Prince Marcus."

Officially, at least.

Cesia returned fire, bringing up the popular second prince. However, this school for young nobles was a miniature replica of high society. It wasn't a good idea to pick a fight with those above one's rank. On the other hand, the tactics had been left up to Cesia, and Selene would marry Raymond right after she

graduated, anyway. Then, Selene would become a marchioness. There was no need to suck up to anyone, so Cesia had full latitude to continue her determined resistance.

They should be the ones worried that bullying the future wife of a marquess will work to their disadvantage once they leave the shelter of the Academy, she thought.

"Oh dear! Disrespectfully bringing up His Royal Highness like that... Is that how a lady should talk?"

"Is teaming up to harass a single person something a lady should do?" Cesia retorted. They weren't stupid. They would use any means to force Selene out of her marriage with Raymond, and with graduation approaching, the bullying only intensified. "I can't break off the engagement with Lord Raymond from my end, you know. He's the heir of his house, and I am, as you are all aware, the daughter of a viscount. With my status, it's impossible."

If they had to do something, Cesia sincerely hoped they would focus their efforts on seducing Raymond instead. She was fed up with how pitiful the harassment was. Tearing up her textbooks, hiding her things, not telling her about important announcements, and so on; everything they did was childish. Their how-to guides must not have had anything else written in them. It was a waste of time to even bother to catch the culprits and get back at them.

"Lord Raymond is a gentleman," Rosary said. "If you asked it of him, I'm sure he would break off the engagement without causing any offense."

Cesia frowned, annoyed at Rosary's statement. Her words didn't seem to be getting through to them. "Everyone, are your ears all right? Or do you think it's a problem of language ability? The teachers tell me that my pronunciation of the official language is perfect, but..." Cesia said in a mocking tone and smiled confidently.

"How rude!" Agitated, one of the ladies splashed water all over Cesia with a flower vase she was holding for some reason. With water dripping off of her, Cesia opened her eyes wide.

I can still only barely use drying magic!

Cesia paused, then said, "You really did it this time." She glared at the girl holding the vase, who let out a small shriek of fright.

Cesia's policy was, as always, unrestrained resistance. *Besides, I'm soaked.* Anyone can see that I'm the victim here. Even if she took her revenge a bit too far, she just had to make sure no one found out. As long as there were no visible marks, it would be fine.

She was born differently from these spoiled ladies, standing around her silently glaring. She knew that words or water wouldn't break a person. The fastest way to do that was to break their spirit.

Just as a smiling Cesia was about to open her well-proportioned lips, someone shouted.

"Everyone! A teacher is coming this way!"

As the slightly husky voice echoed throughout the area, the girls scattered like a bunch of baby spiders. Their speed was impressive, and it came with the cliched parting remark, "We won't forget this!"

They might actually have a reference book somewhere.

In the newly emptied area behind the school building, an exasperated Cesia was pushing back her soaked hair when someone suddenly poked their head around the corner.

"Selene, are you okay?"

Cesia looked at her, then said, "Maria, you purposefully picked that time to show up, didn't you?"

With red hair like a burning flame and jade green eyes, the student named Maria gave a friendly smile as she walked up to Cesia. "You looked like you were just about to beat them to a pulp."

"Next time, show up before I get water splashed all over me."

Maria Hawke was the daughter of a count and one of Cesia's few friends. In a way, their similarities brought them together. Maria didn't show up at the Academy often, but despite that, her test scores put her at the top of the class. Thanks to her brilliance, the Academy overlooked her insufficient attendance.

Cesia had heard that she was often absent due to her inborn weak constitution, but the Maria standing before her now was strangely brimming with life.

"Those girls have gotten more intense lately. That must be the first time they've ever splashed water on someone," Maria said, lightly touching Cesia's hair. The water all over Cesia began to disappear as if being sucked away—Maria had just cast drying magic.

"Hey, you dried out my skin, too," Cesia complained.

"Oh? Aren't you supposed to say 'Thank you' first? How ungrateful."

"I'm not going to be grateful for someone who stands by and smirks while watching me get bullied." Cesia turned her face away from Maria. "Hmph!"

"What a performance!" Maria laughed. "It makes me lonely to think that I'll only be able to see it for just a bit longer..."

"Do you know how hurtful what you're saying is?" Cesia glared at her "kind" friend.

Unbothered, Maria smiled gracefully. "After we graduate, we'll still be friends, right?" She grabbed Cesia's hand.

Cesia was momentarily taken aback. Maria rarely initiated physical contact, so her hand suddenly being held surprised her. Maria was taller than Cesia, with a slender body. Her hand felt cool, so Cesia unconsciously grabbed Maria's hand with her other hand.



It wouldn't be good if Maria got sick from being out in the cold for too long.

"It would be nice if we could," Cesia sighed wistfully.

"Selene..." Maria gave her a lonely smile.

Cesia wasn't Selene. After she graduated as Selene, she would have to be herself again and cut all ties with Maria. It wasn't only Maria; everything she had gained at the Academy would become Selene's, and in return, Cesia would receive a large sum of money. She only had to pretend to be the viscount's daughter for a short two years, and, in addition to serving as hush money, the sum would be more than enough to live comfortably for the rest of her life. Two years ago, she hadn't thought anything of it.

JUST after returning to the Dianes' house, Cesia changed from her school uniform into her maid's uniform. After she undid the magic on her hair and eyes and returned to her original appearance, she headed to Selene's room.

"Milady, it's Cesia."

"Come in."

After entering, Cesia saw that, besides Selene, Raymond was also in the room. The two looked like they had just been embracing, and Selene quickly got off Raymond's lap while he wiped his lipstick-smudged lips.

They're really indulging themselves, Cesia thought, but then she corrected herself. They're going to be married in a few weeks; it's nothing to raise an eyebrow at.

"Hey, Cesia," Raymond greeted her.

"Lord Raymond." Cesia gave a deep servant's bow.

"Lord Raymond" was seen as a paragon of moral virtue by many, but from Cesia's perspective, he was an average boy for his age, sexual desire included. As Selene's maid, I suppose I should be happy he's on good terms with her.

"Cesia, thanks again today. Was there anything out of the ordinary?" Selene asked.

"No, nothing in particular. I was called out again like usual, however," Cesia replied. Since it was a daily occurrence, she couldn't call it abnormal.

Hearing Cesia's answer, Selene's beautiful face—which closely resembled Cesia's—contorted into a grimace. "They don't know when to give up, do they? Put the names of the girls who bullied you again on a list. When I become the marchioness, I'll get back at them. Twice as much as what they did to me."

Selene saying she would be the one to take revenge, even though she was making Cesia endure their bullying, was her standard vindictive personality.

"You're scary, Selene," Raymond said.

"Oh? I thought you liked girls who can hold a grudge."

Raymond chuckled and pulled Selene in for another kiss. As the wet kissing noises echoed through the room, Cesia felt fed up when Selene lifted her face during a gap in the kissing.

"You're still here? You can go now. The kitchen needs their dishwasher."

"Excuse me." Cesia nodded and left the room, heading to the kitchen. This time, she was yelled at by the chefs.

"Cesia, what were you doing?! You're late!"

"I'm sorry."

Did nobody else feel like washing the dishes? Seeing the plates piled high in the sink, Cesia felt annoyed again, but no matter how irritated she was, the dishes wouldn't wash themselves. They were delicate and could break if she used cleaning magic, so she began carefully washing off the dirt stuck to each dish, one by one. During a cold season like this one, the water was freezing.

Incidentally, Cesia's close resemblance to Selene was natural. She was Viscount Diane's niece by blood, which made her Selene's cousin. Her mother was Viscount Diane's younger sister, Lilia, who ran away with a servant, the result of which was Cesia. In a cruel stroke of fate, her parents passed away during an epidemic, and, with her mother's final words to guide her, Cesia made her way to the viscount's estate. Viscount Diane refused to take in Cesia as family. Even that was understandable.

His younger sister's son from an elopement years ago would have been a headache, and a daughter was just a nuisance. Still, unable to bring himself to ignore Cesia, or perhaps for some other reason, she was hired as the lowest-ranking maid in the estate. Due to her position, her pay was almost nonexistent. Her meals were leftovers of leftovers, and outside of her uniform, she only had scraps of cloth to wear. However, Cesia had nowhere else to go and was just thankful she had a roof over her head. Eventually, when Selene's engagement to Raymond was finalized, Selene started to say, "I'll get hassled at the Academy, so I don't want to go." Hearing that, her father finally remembered the niece, who closely resembled his daughter.

While washing the dishes with the bubbly detergent, Cesia remembered touching Maria's hand. Cesia's hands were rough from scrubbing plates, so she avoided coming into contact with others as much as possible. She could hide how her hands looked, but if anyone touched them, it would be clear that they weren't the hands of a young noblelady.

And yet, Maria didn't say anything. She was intelligent; Cesia knew she had to have noticed that something was off with her hands.

"Maybe after I graduate..."

We could still be friends.

Entertaining her impossible hope, Cesia sighed. When she got her reward, she would have to quit being a maid. If she stayed around the viscount's estate, it would only be a matter of time before someone caught on to the possibility that Cesia had attended the Academy in place of her cousin. She imagined leaving the capital and searching for a place to live in a faraway village where nobody knew her or Selene.

IT was only a few days before graduation, and the girls who regularly bullied Cesia were bothering her less lately. They wouldn't want to miss preparing for the graduation party.

Cesia wouldn't go to the party. Selene would receive her diploma in person. For that reason, and with the exams complete, Cesia didn't have much to do except leisurely read in the nearly empty school library.

All the knowledge she had gained over the last two years of disguising herself as Selene and studying at the Academy had become a vital part of her. As for her grades, she had eked out third in her class, behind Maria and Raymond. She wouldn't lose that knowledge—it was the only thing Selene couldn't take from her.

"Cesia."

Hearing her real name, Cesia's heart jumped into her throat. Jerking her head up in a panic, she saw Raymond standing there and felt a mixture of relief and displeasure.

"Lord Raymond." Cesia stood up from her seat and curtsied, then continued in a hushed tone. "It may not be to your satisfaction, but please address me as Selene while we're here."

"Ah, that's right. My bad," Raymond casually replied.

"Not at all..."

Cesia lowered her gaze when, out of nowhere, Raymond pushed her up against a bookshelf. She grimaced from the sudden pain in her shoulder.

"Lord Raymond? What are you—"

He grabbed her chest so tight it hurt, and Cesia felt her face go pale.

"Lord Raymond! I'm not Lady Selene!" she harshly whispered, but Raymond smirked. He licked his lips, then brought his hands down to touch Cesia's thighs over her skirt.

"You aren't Selene? Then, who are you?"

"I—"

"Even if anyone asks, I'll say I was just being affectionate with my fiancée. What are you going to say?"

Cesia was at a loss for words. Here, she was Selene. Kicking up a fuss would result in it being written off as a lovers' quarrel. She couldn't complain as herself, either, because continuing to act as Selene at the Academy was a condition for her to be paid.

Raymond lifted her skirt, and she began to shake. When his fingers touched her bare skin, she reflexively pushed him away. "Stop it...!"

Taken by surprise, Raymond fell back on his butt. He looked up at Cesia, his face red from embarrassment and anger, and yelled, "You...! Do you know what you've done?!"

Jumping up, he grabbed Cesia's hair. She trembled, not knowing what else she could do to resist him. Her eyes grew wet with tears, but not willing to give up, she glared at him. Then, an unexpected voice called for her.

"Selene? Where are you?"

It was Maria. Raymond clicked his tongue in frustration. He let go of Cesia and left before Maria reached them. Cesia plopped down on the floor helplessly and sat, hugging her shaking body.

"Selene! Are you okay?" Maria ran to her. She knelt next to Cesia and glared at Raymond's back as he disappeared between a gap in the bookshelves. "Did that man do something to you? Are you all right?" Maria asked anxiously. She reached out to touch Cesia's shoulder, but she stopped her hand in midair. "Selene, do you want to go to the nurse's office?"

"I-I'm fine," Cesia stuttered, forcing herself to speak, "it was nothing... He didn't do anything."

Maria winced and asked, "Can I hold your hand?"

"Yeah," Cesia delicately held out her hand, "please..."

"Selene..." Maria firmly grasped her hand. "If you're ever going to get payback on anyone who's done something awful to you, let me know, okay? I'll help you, no matter what."

Cesia smiled faintly at Maria's bold statement. "What are you saying?" She sighed, feeling deeply reassured by Maria's large, cool hand.

WHEN Cesia returned to the Diane estate that night, Selene slapped her face hard. The sound echoed throughout the room. Cesia's cheek instantly started to swell and turn red. Raymond and Viscount Diane were also there, standing next

to Selene as her face went crimson from anger.

"My lady," Cesia said gingerly.

"You... You whore! You should be ashamed, trying to seduce Lord Raymond!" Selene shouted at Cesia.

Cesia looked at Raymond in surprise. He was smirking, but when Selene looked at him, he corrected his expression.

"Lord Raymond, I'm so sorry that this ill-bred, lowly maid...!"

"No, I don't mind... I'll always love you and only you, Selene... I was at the Academy when she tried to seduce me while pretending to be you." Raymond made an appalled pose. "I'm sure she did it there because she knew that if I rejected her, it would look like you and I were on bad terms."

Cesia glared at him.

"Look, she's still defiant. Selene, Lord Diane, she's not necessary anymore, is she? Graduation is only the day after tomorrow," Raymond pointed out.

"Right now, attendance is optional, too. Father, for now, let's lock her away somewhere."

"Yes, you're right," Viscount Diane nodded in agreement with Selene's statement. He turned to address Cesia. "You tried to seduce Lord Raymond. That's a clear violation of our agreement. As such, your payment is forfeit."

"I...!" Cesia raised her voice, panicking. "I served as Lady Selene's substitute for two years! Does none of that count for anything?!"

"Silence! Trying to seduce your mistress's fiancé is outrageous debauchery! You should be thankful I'm not having you whipped!" the viscount yelled.

Cesia shrank at his reproachment, but she couldn't just sit there and take it. "I didn't seduce Lord Raymond! He assaulted me out of nowhere!"

"Shut up! Stop lying! You tried to entice me to touch your chest!" Raymond shouted.

Raymond's assertion that it was her fault only amplified Cesia's anger. "You're the one who should be ashamed, Raymond Chaser! Trying to shift the blame

after you felt me up without warning! How can you consider yourself worthy of your family name?!"

Raymond's face turned red with anger. He quickly went up to Cesia and pushed her onto the floor. "A woman like you has no right to insult me or my family!"

"Ha," Cesia snorted, "don't make me laugh..." She propped herself up on one arm, then somehow got up. She glared at them with her purple eyes, and the three flinched.

"Someone! Come and shut this maid away in the storeroom!" Viscount Diane yelled, his voice echoing throughout the mansion.

The servants who showed up in the room were surprised to see Cesia, but they followed their master's orders and restrained her before taking her away. Cesia didn't want to be hit again, so she obediently went with them to a cramped, dark storeroom at the north end of the mansion. Once they shut her inside, she heard the cold clank of the lock.

"Locked away, huh?" Cesia sighed as her anger gradually subsided. Raymond had acted faster than she had expected. Then again, it was only natural that the coddled Raymond would be quick to respond to having his pride wounded.

Cesia made a small light with magic, then looked at the antiquated lock. It was a traditional type that unlocked with a certain key. It was harder to open with magic than ones that opened by undoing a hook. She could blow away the door with magic, but the loud noise would give away her escape.

She did, however, have another option.

"This is too easy. If they wanted to restrain me, they could've at least put magic cuffs on my wrists and ankles."

Inside Cesia, an unceasing flame burned brighter.

Her pay had only been agreed upon verbally. Even so, Cesia hadn't expected the viscount to refuse to pay her to keep quiet about substituting for Selene. She had underestimated how stingy he was.

As the lowest-ranking maid, Cesia had rushed around the mansion,

performing all sorts of odd jobs. Thanks to that, she understood even the fine details of the building's layout. She put her hand against the wall closest to the outside.

"I'll make them all regret this."

No matter who she was up against, she always fought with all her power. The only person who could protect her was herself.

A day passed.

The only window in the storeroom, used for ventilation, was so small that not even a child could crawl through. Still, Cesia was glad she could tell when the sun set. She got two meals a day, one in the morning and one at night, and not getting those would've thrown off her internal clock if she couldn't see when it was light outside.

The graduation party would be held tomorrow. Viscount Diane had ordered the servants to keep watch on Cesia, but they didn't have nearly enough free time for that. The viscount hired as few servants as possible, and he worked them like draft horses, wanting to skimp on any expense he could. Cesia, too, had the ostensible job title of maid, but she had been made to do almost anything around the house. In hindsight, she could easily imagine that, even if Raymond hadn't pulled anything, the viscount would've blamed something else on Cesia to get out of paying her.

"I was stupid for letting myself get blinded by the money."

Cesia bit her lip and continued channeling magical energy into the wall. Destroying it in a single blow would cause a commotion, so she had been breaking through little by little to avoid making too much noise.

She had learned this way of using magic at the Academy. Most of what she knew she had to learn as ways to oppose her bullies, but she was still proud that she had become this skilled in even the fine application of magic.

"When I was at the Academy, I was freed from work, and the food was good. And I had fun chatting with my friends..." There were a ton of bad memories, but there were a few good ones, too. The time had been worth it. She had learned how to pretend to be a lady and had gained some general knowledge along the way, even if some of it wasn't very useful to people who weren't nobles. And, of course, her studies and her magical ability had progressed. With this, even after she fled, she could make a decent living somewhere, far from anyone who knew her.

"But first, I can't forget to get even with everyone who made a fool of me!"

Cesia tapped the wall, and some pebbles quietly spilled onto the floor. The hole in the wall was large enough for someone to crawl through.

THE next morning, everyone in the estate was working hard to get Selene ready for the graduation party, and the maids were busy dressing her in jewelry and a specially ordered dress for the big day. It wasn't just Selene; parents were invited, so the viscount had to get ready, too.

Besides, the party would be at the Royal Academy, in the capital. While the king himself wouldn't show up, the students had grown restless with the announcement that Prince Marcus would attend in his place.

In the middle of all the commotion, no servants were available to bring Cesia her breakfast, so naturally, nobody noticed she was gone. In fact, because Cesia wasn't there as a maid to aid in the preparations, they were even busier. Having foreseen all of this, Cesia had escaped the night before.

Luckily, she had been shut away just after returning to the viscount's mansion from the Academy, so she was still wearing her school uniform, not having had the chance to change into her maid's uniform.

As usual, she passed through the gates of the Academy, acting as Selene Diane. However, that was it. She had made it into the Academy but didn't yet have any plans for what to do after that. For the time being, she hid between some shelves in the empty library, brainstorming what to do, when she heard a man's voice.

"Excuse me, are you Lady Cesia Kathrin?"

Cesia paused, sizing up the speaker. He was a handsome young man with

silver hair and blue eyes. He wore an excellently tailored butler's uniform, and despite his age, he had a calm demeanor and a confident tone of voice.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm Prince Marcus's butler, Chris."

"His Royal Highness's?" Cesia frowned, not understanding what he meant. She knew Prince Marcus was coming as a visitor to the Academy, but she had no clue why he knew her name or why he was making the effort to get in touch with her. Cesia asked cautiously, "What business does His Royal Highness's butler have with me?"

Chris made a slight smile with his thin lips. "I have a message from His Royal Highness: 'If you're going to get payback, I'll help you, no matter what."

At those familiar-sounding words, Cesia widened her eyes in surprise.

THAT evening, the graduation ceremony ended without a hitch, and the dressed-up students gathered in the Academy's largest lecture hall. Normally, the hall's neat rows of seats gave the building a solemn air, but they had been cleared away to transform the space into an extravagant venue for the graduation party. This model of high society was a farewell gift to the students who were finally about to enter actual high society as adults. While parents were in attendance, it was only to keep watch on the sidelines over the night's main act: the graduating students.

Rosary Hilton, wearing the dress she had prepared weeks in advance, was impatiently waiting for the party to begin with a few of her friends. While she had been enthusiastically vying for Raymond's affections, it was already graduation—her time was up. If Selene and Raymond's engagement were canceled now, it would be quite a scandal. With this, Raymond will probably stop playing around, too.

Rosary's chances with Raymond were gone. She was realistic, so she was already gearing up to look for a partner as a full-fledged adult while working as a lady's maid for a higher-ranking noblewoman in the royal castle. Her only regret was that she was never able to get one over on that shameless Selene.

Speaking of them, Selene and Raymond had just passed by her, and the handheld fan Selene was carrying hit Rosary.

"Ouch!"

"Excuse me, move it. How rude," Selene said coldly.

Rosary was surprised. She had bullied Selene countless times, so she didn't expect warm treatment from her, but this was the first time Selene had looked at her so contemptuously as if she were an insect. Rosary hesitated slightly before retorting as usual, "You should move and walk farther away next time. You were the one that hit me with your fan."

"You're a countess?" Selene narrowed her eyes. "When I marry Lord Raymond, I'll be a marchioness. Do you think you can take that attitude with me?"

Rosary's eyes widened. The Selene she knew was strong-willed and always quick to fire back, but this was the first time she had assumed Raymond's status as her own in an argument. Even after she married Raymond, his father would still be the marquess. It was quite a pompous way of speaking for someone who wasn't yet the marchioness.

"Are you really Selene Diane?" Rosary asked, unable to help it. At that moment, Selene somehow felt like a stranger, so she inadvertently said what she was thinking.

"Who else would I be?" Selene glared at her and pulled Raymond's arm. "Not only are your grades poor, but your vision is, too. Lord Raymond, let's go."

"Yeah..." Raymond said halfheartedly as Selene forcefully yanked him away. He looked more like he was being dragged as the two left together.

Rosary and the other ladies could only stare in dumbfounded amazement as they watched them go.

FINALLY, grand music filled the hall, and one of the teachers, acting as the master of ceremonies, announced the arrival of the prince. Students, parents, and teachers all dropped to their knees as vassals of the prince and waited for

his arrival, but many of the students and teachers couldn't help but gawk when they saw who appeared on stage next to the prince.

"The Second Prince, His Royal Highness Prince Marcus, and his companion, Lady Cesia Kathrin!"

The woman being led by the hand of the tall, red-haired, jade-green-eyed prince onto the stage was Cesia, whose long black hair and purple eyes were the only things that distinguished her physical appearance from Selene's.

"Huh? Selene?"

"But, he said 'Cesia Kathrin'..."

Whispers spread among the students. Their gazes rapidly alternated between Cesia on stage and Selene on the floor. Marcus confidently stood on stage, not paying any mind to their confusion. Then, he took two glasses from a servant and pulled the gorgeously dressed Cesia close to him. He gazed at her as one would a dearly beloved partner, passed one of the glasses to her, and looked out over the floor.

"These past two years, everyone has worked incredibly hard on their studies. I look at all the brilliant young people here, and I'm proud I can call myself one of them, as part of the next generation who will become the foundation of this kingdom."

His clear, calm voice resonated throughout the hall. The audience, captivated by the prince's attractive features, regained their composure.

"Congratulations on graduating, and a toast!"

Marcus held up his glass, and everyone else in attendance followed. Clinking glasses could be heard across the hall.

"And congratulations, Cesia," Marcus said to Cesia, standing next to him, making a show of his actions to the audience. Then, he affectionately touched his glass to hers.

Cesia remained silent, only able to make a slightly embarrassed smile. Marcus was treating her as if they were in an intimate relationship, but she had only met him today. More precisely, she had only seen him for the first time a few

PRINCE Marcus himself was inside the room Chris led her to after they left the library, and the first thing he told Cesia when he saw her was that he was someone close to Maria and would help her in Maria's place.

"Um...where is Maria?" Cesia asked, surprised. Marcus smiled slightly.

Their hair and eyes are the same color, and his face resembles hers. Could she be his younger sister or someone like that?

"She's not here right now," Marcus said. "But don't worry, I know everything that happened. Let's give those cheats a payback they won't soon forget."

The prince's words were more fit for a delinquent kid in an alleyway than a member of the royal family. Even Cesia couldn't hold back her amazement.

"N-No, no! With all due respect, Your Royal Highness! There's no way I can ask for your assistance in a personal matter like this."

"Why not? Any friend of Maria's is a friend of mine."

Who are you, Maria! Cesia questioned her calmly smiling friend in her mind.

"No, but...it's my personal problem, and it really is just personal." She averted her eyes. "It'd be wrong for me to rely on princely authority."

She wanted to get back at Selene, Raymond, and Viscount Diane. She wouldn't get her payment, and it wouldn't bring her any benefit to expose the fact she had attended the Academy in disguise as Selene. If anything, she was an accomplice. Still, she wanted to embarrass them in the middle of the luxurious graduation before she fled the capital.

Marcus was still staring at Cesia, her gaze lowered.

It would be an issue if someone found her and she looked like Selene, so she had reverted her appearance to normal after she hid in the library. Their faces were similar, but, in contrast with Selene's beautiful features, Cesia's purple eyes and black hair were more plain, reminiscent of a stray cat's.

"Cesia Kathrin. Is that your real name?" Marcus asked.

Cesia nodded. Kathrin was her deceased father's last name.

"It's an excellent name. You look like you're mistaken about something, so let me correct that."

"Hm? Pardon me?"

The topic of conversation kept changing, so before Cesia could express any doubts, his words swept her along. *This must be what talking to royalty is like.*

Marcus, talking cheerfully, looked like he was enjoying himself immensely. "I'm not going to use my authority as a prince to punish them, you know."

"Huh, really?"

"Don't you think that would just be boring?"

Is this country going to turn out fine with a prince who says stuff like this? Cesia looked at Marcus suspiciously and saw Chris standing calmly behind him. This must be every day with him. Really, are we going to be fine? He's supposed to be the incredibly popular Prince Marcus!

"What do you think a person hates the most to have done to them?" Marcus asked.

Cesia hesitated, then said, "Doesn't it depend on the person?"

"That's right. So, when someone hurts someone else, it makes sense that they would do what they themselves would hate the most, right?"

"Well, I suppose that's correct."

"That makes it simple. Raymond Chaser and Selene Diane care about their authority above everything else. They're proud of their high positions and look down on anyone beneath them. It's almost funny, really, that they're living life with their weakness exposed like that."

As Marcus spoke in his clear voice, as if he were delivering a speech, Cesia kept her guard up. She felt like she would start to agree with him if she wasn't careful. I only just met him, but I can tell he'll be a handful. I'll need to keep my eyes on him.

"And so, the type of person they resent the most—someone with more

authority than them—is standing right in front of you—a prince. We should use this piece effectively," Marcus said, then animatedly snapped his fingers once.

Although Marcus was clearly amusing himself with her reactions, Cesia had a general idea of what he was getting at.

"Your Royal Highness, will you be attending tonight's party alone?"

Pleased by Cesia's question, Marcus gave her a mischievous grin.

AND so, presently, Cesia was dressed up, wearing shoes, a dress, and some jewelry Marcus had prepared as if he were a fairy godmother from a certain fairy tale. He had flawlessly escorted her on stage and was treating her like a beloved partner. The most pleasing part was that, as the prince's companion, every single noble in the audience was reverently bowing their heads to her. Everyone. The girls who had bullied her. The teachers who had stood by and let it happen. And the nobles who had visited the Diane estate when she worked as a maid and hadn't even treated her like a human being.

"This is bad; I can't stop smiling. This feels great, Your Royal Highness," Cesia whispered frankly to Marcus, using a fan to hide her mouth.

"That's some personality you've got there," Marcus replied quietly, still smiling. He didn't sound displeased; on the contrary, Cesia could tell he was having fun, too.

"Right back at you, highness."

"Don't be silly, Cesia. Royalty has to be brazen sometimes. Or just cold," he said cheerfully.

Cesia didn't expect him to reply in that lighthearted manner, but when he did, she could understand what he meant. From her point of view, she was enjoying taking advantage of royal authority for her personal vendetta, but at a time like this, Marcus was constantly exposed to the unpleasant, selfish desires of the nobles who came to curry favor with him, showering him with effusive praise and flattery.

"Well, today's been really fun... And look, here comes the viscount's family.

Give me a good show, Cesia."

While Cesia was startled by some of the malicious things Marcus said, she was also pleasantly reminded of the lively conversations she had with Maria, which gave her an increasingly favorable impression of him.

Viscount Diane, Selene, and Raymond came to greet the prince. Raymond's parents didn't seem to be in attendance, so he came on stage towards the end, in line with the parents.

"Your Royal Highness... Lady...Cesia, good evening," Viscount Diane said with difficulty, confused. He had doubted it at first, but up close, it was clear that the prince's companion was his niece, who, instead of being confined in his mansion, was here with the prince tenderly holding her hand. Unable to believe his eyes, he rapidly flicked his gaze between Cesia and Marcus.

"Lord Diane, is there something wrong with my companion?" Marcus asked with an amused look on his face. Cesia had to bite her lip to stop herself from laughing.

"N-No, not at all... She's quite lovely," the viscount said, hurriedly lowering his gaze. Raymond and Selene stared at Cesia hard enough to bore a hole through her, but at the viscount's prompting, they stepped forward.

"It is good to see you again, Your Royal Highness. This is my fiancée," Raymond said.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Your Royal Highness. My name is Selene Diane."

As Raymond and Selene greeted them with bowed heads, Marcus nodded magnanimously.

"Congratulations on graduating. I hear that both of you are quite outstanding students. I'm interested in Professor Gitaris's Theory of Structural Magic, so tell me, what is your opinion of his theory?"

Cesia was startled by what Marcus said. He had asked other students about their plans or their domains, but the question he posed to Selene and Raymond was complex. As Selene's third-place grades were thanks to Cesia, there was no way she would be able to answer him. For Raymond, as the student council president and second in the class, it shouldn't be a difficult question. She

excitedly watched as she waited to see how they would respond, and, as expected, Selene had no clue what Marcus had said and just blinked in confusion. Looking at Raymond, though, she was surprised he had a similar expression to Selene. Cesia grew confused herself and unconsciously squeezed Marcus's hand back.

"Yes? What is it, Cesia? What do you think of the Professor's theory?" Marcus instantly noticed Cesia's puzzlement and moved his face closer to her.

He was behaving as if they were a pair of close lovers. Cesia didn't understand what was happening, so she figured she might as well answer the prince's question.

"Professor Gitaris's Theory of Structural Magic is still awaiting verification, but when referenced alongside last year's paper by Lady Courtney, I believe it to be quite plausible. The theory is notable in that it doesn't overturn existing principles. Instead, it allows them to be applied in more advanced forms than they are currently."

"I see... Does that mean you're a supporter of his theory?"

Cesia nodded, feeling like she made a mistake somewhere. It was an innovative concept, so some scholars who supported the older theory found it difficult to accept.

"Great answer. I always enjoy my conversations with you, Cesia," he said.

"You flatter me... It's something basic that's also in the textbook."

"On the other hand..." Marcus glanced back at Raymond and Selene as if he was showing off.

It had been a difficult question, but for students on the level of Raymond and "Selene," it would've been an appropriate one. Astonishment spread through the audience. Clearly, the two on stage couldn't answer the prince's question. Along with the audience, Cesia looked at Raymond in surprise. Then, she looked at Selene, who had neglected her studies in favor of polishing her appearance in her family's mansion.

"Why can't you answer a question like that?" Cesia muttered despite herself.

Selene exploded, unable to control her embarrassment and rage any longer. "Wh-What is this, Cesia? What's that look on your face? *You* have no right to look down on me like that!" Selene furiously shouted.

Cesia felt dizzy at her cousin's stupidity. While she hadn't been introduced as someone as specific as "fiancée," it was apparent to anyone in attendance that Cesia was important enough to the prince to be his companion on this occasion. Insulting her while greeting the prince in front of all these people, as Selene had done, was bound to be an issue.

Unable to bear standing on a lower platform than Cesia, Selene took advantage of her momentary shock to run up the stairs and grab her hair.

"Selene, what are you doing?!" Viscount Diane shouted, but she didn't stop.

Selene was attending the graduation party with her influential fiancé as third in her class at the Academy. She proudly saw herself as the woman with the highest standing in attendance. But now Cesia, of all people, was in a higher position than her, next to the prince. Having spent her time indulgently lounging around, her social skills were lacking, and her threshold for anger was low.

If it had been a princess or a duchess, Selene might have been able to limit herself to secretly spilling a few drops of wine on the woman's dress. However, it was Cesia, and she couldn't control herself anymore. Seeing Selene charge at her full of rage conversely calmed Cesia. She was more used to a frontal assault than to Marcus's mysterious conversational leaps. And, as always, her policy was determined resistance. She would return any sparks that flew at her and twice as hard.

"You little rat!" Selene shouted.

Seeing Selene's face twisted with rage, Cesia smiled cheerfully. "I'm thrilled I can openly blast you away like this."

"Huh?!" Selene frowned, puzzled.

Cesia took no notice of Selene's confusion and knocked her over with magic. She produced a minute amount of wind at Selene's feet, making it look like Selene tumbled by tripping on the hem of her dress. It was the most

embarrassing mistake one could make as a lady.

"Aah!" Selene fell.

Marcus widened his eyes, impressed at the ingeniousness of Cesia's method and the magical control required to make Selene fall so extravagantly. "Ooh, tricky. That one's gotta sting," he remarked.

"Hmph," Cesia chuckled. "These two years have been quite helpful in making me better at cheap magic like that," she boasted despite herself.

Marcus laughed cheerfully. The hall was deadly quiet. All attention was focused on the fallen Selene, her father, and her fiancé.

"Violence toward my companion is the same as violence toward myself," Marcus began. "I want Selene Diane, Viscount Diane, and Raymond Chaser taken out of here!"

Guards appeared with a clatter of footsteps, and they led away the dazed Selene, the shouting viscount, and the pale Raymond.

"Ah, wait just one moment. Raymond Chaser," Marcus stopped Raymond as if he just remembered something. Raymond turned around in the guards' arms, appearing to be nurturing some faint hope.

"I've received reliable reports of fraud regarding your grades." Marcus gave Raymond a dashing smile as he delivered his final blow. "The Academy doesn't tolerate any fraud. As such, Selene's and your graduation are now invalid."

"N-No!" Raymond bellowed in anguish. Not letting him continue, Marcus coldly motioned for the guards to continue carting him away. Cesia and everyone else watched in stunned silence as the three were taken out of the hall.

"Raymond cheated?" Cesia asked.

"I'll talk to you about it later," Marcus replied, smiling at Cesia. Then, he clapped twice, reestablishing order. With a start, the assembled partygoers refocused their attention on the prince.

"This has been an awful upset to an otherwise joyous occasion. But, outside the Academy, even more unbelievable things are a daily occurrence. Think of tonight's events as a preface for what's ahead, an anecdote we'll be able to laugh about with everyone in the years to come."

Ah, he's merciless. Cesia was convinced. Marcus didn't make any effort to keep quiet the uproar that was bound to occur; on the contrary, he suggested that the story of Selene's and Raymond's disgrace be spread far and wide, handed down as a fun, youthful tale. This is the worst punishment I could imagine for them. They're losing the only things they value: their pride and appearance.

"Ultimately, didn't you use your authority to punish them?" Cesia murmured.

"I guess that's what happened in the end." Marcus nodded happily.

Cesia had thought of herself as someone hardened and worn by conflict, but seeing Marcus, she realized she still had far to go. Without a doubt, he was ruthless.

DESPITE the commotion, the party continued without a hitch and ended while it was still lively. Cesia shared only the first dance with Marcus; afterward, she danced with other students and had her fill of the food and drinks the party had to offer. She noticed Rosary and a few other ladies staring and hanging around her, but she wasn't going to tell them the truth. "Selene" had already been punished, and to *Cesia*, Rosary and the others were strangers.

"Did you have fun?" Marcus asked, sitting on a sofa and undoing his tie after retiring to a waiting room he had prepared.

Cesia nodded honestly. "It was incredible. I might be a bad person, though."

"Excellent!" Marcus laughed loudly. No matter how many times Cesia looked at him or how much she racked her brain trying to remember, she knew she had just met him that day. Despite that, he felt very approachable.

"Isn't it about time you told me how you did it?" Cesia asked.

Marcus got up and stood in front of Cesia. He gently smiled and pointed at her hand.

"Can I hold your hand?"

"Sure. Please do," she replied, confident she had said something similar before. Marcus gently took her bare hand with his. He had a large, slightly cool hand, and his supple fingers were slim and feminine for a man.

"I promised I'd help you with your payback, didn't I?" he said.

"I don't think it was you with whom I made that promise."

Marcus sighed. He gathered magical energy around him. His appearance wavered, shimmering as if under hot air. Cesia stared with her eyes wide, making sure not to miss anything. His red hair grew longer, and his shoulders and the outline of his body subtly changed shape. Marcus's face visibly transformed, and a woman who might have been his sister appeared. Cesia and Marcus's hands were still entwined, but now, Cesia was holding hands with that woman.

Cesia hesitated, then said, "Maria."

"We were both disguising ourselves, so don't get mad, okay?" Maria said in a voice Cesia had heard a thousand times before, looking just as she always had as she made that same mischievous smile Marcus did.

"You, a prince, attended the Academy undercover, dressed as a woman?!"

"It would've been perfect if I could just turn myself invisible."

Cesia was sitting on the sofa, hanging her head. On the other hand, Maria, sitting next to her, was smiling in high spirits. The way she smiled suited her ephemeral beauty, but... *To think that she was that willful Marcus! Just, no.*

Cesia looked nervously at Chris standing next to the wall, but his expression gave nothing away. At least she could reassure herself that she wasn't the crazy one here, that not everyone affirmed Marcus.

"Give me back my friendship! You were a *guy*?" Cesia's face went pale as she remembered all sorts of things from the past two years at the Academy. "Wait, huh? Isn't this bad?"

With a glass of wine in one hand, Maria said, as if singing, "As Maria, I took that into account. I made sure we never changed together, remember?"

"Huh? But... No, this is definitely bad. I...I talked with you about my dream

wedding!"

"Oh, Cesia. Even though you're so free-spirited, you said you wanted to have a traditional ceremony in a cathedral. The dreams of a young girl are so cute!"

Cesia was at a loss, and Maria made a purposeful blush.

"If I hit her head hard enough, I wonder if I could knock out some of her memories..." Cesia wondered aloud.

"Hahaha, calm down, Cesia. I'm a prince, you know? How disrespectful," Maria said, imitating Marcus's voice.

"Unfair! You can't bring that up at a time like this!" Cesia shouted, still at a loss. Maria just laughed again. Somehow, Cesia felt a bit calmer after yelling, and she looked up and glared at Maria. "Why did you attend the Academy in disguise?" she asked.

"Did you know that recently, there's been widespread fraud, like backdoor admissions and leaked test problems, among a certain segment of the students?"

Hearing that, Cesia remembered what Marcus had said about Raymond's grades. "And Raymond's class position was because of that fraud?"

"Correct. He wasn't brilliant at all; he spent his time chasing girls and piles of money buying his grades and his student council presidency."

Cesia could see now why Raymond couldn't answer Marcus's question.

"As part of the investigation, we also discovered several teachers and members of the Academy's board of directors were complicit. I had some subordinates attending undercover along with me, and after two years, we finally rounded up the culprits."

For the children of nobles, entering the Academy wasn't required. A great deal of prestige came with the diploma, however, and it was the best way to secure a job in the royal castle or, for a lady, to find a marriage partner, among other benefits. Because of that, the Academy's entrance exams and regular tests demanded high academic proficiency. Exposing that Raymond bought his way through the Academy will make it clear how much corruption has spread

through the nobility, Cesia speculated.

"As the investigation continues, we'll find out who cheated and retroactively revoke their diplomas, and if necessary, deal out the proper punishments."

"That's serious." Cesia shrugged awkwardly. She would never have dreamed that, while she was getting into petty fights with the ladies of the academy, Maria and her subordinates were investigating behind the scenes.

"At first, I thought that Selene Diane, Raymond Chaser's talented fiancée, was also suspicious, so I approached you, but..." Maria said, and as she spoke, her appearance wavered, and Marcus appeared again. As a man she hardly knew appeared in place of her trusted friend, Cesia stiffened. For an instant, Marcus smiled forlornly. "Marcus" was someone she barely knew, but for him, she was a good friend he had gotten close with over the past two years.

"The Selene I got to know was honest, almost to a fault—a serious student who constantly strove to maintain her high grades, as if she was under pressure. But, in a different way, you broke the rules."

Attending the Academy while disguised as Selene to manipulate her grades was fraudulent, too, and it was a punishable offense.

"Yeah..." Cesia felt deflated, and seeing that, Marcus held her hand. It felt like Maria's but was, without a doubt, a man's hand.

"That's why Selene's diploma will be revoked."

Cesia hung her head. "Yes."

Suddenly, Marcus, still holding her small hand, lifted it and gave her an audible kiss on the back of her hand.

"Wha—" Cesia was startled.

"And, Cesia, I also have a proposal. Do you want to attend the Academy as Cesia Kathrin this time?"

"What?!"

"You received fantastic grades through your own effort. You're already at the level where you can apply for a grant as a scholarship student, and besides," Marcus smoothly explained, "it would be a great loss to the kingdom to let

someone with your potential go to waste."

By this point, Cesia had gotten somewhat used to the prince's way of doing things. When he didn't give the other person a chance to get any words in edgewise, it was when he was trying to do something suspicious. To put it plainly, it was when he was trying to trick them.

"I can't! I'm just a commoner," Cesia protested.

"You're a direct relative of the Diane family, and while few, some commoners attend the Academy."

"I already attended!"

"Selene did. But Cesia, you haven't." Marcus insistently drew close to her until Cesia could see his handsome features right in front of her. His green eyes sparkled as he stared at her.

"Someone from the Dianes might say something..." she said.

"What'll they say? Will they go out of their way to bring more shame upon themselves by acknowledging that they sent you to the Academy instead of Selene?"

They wouldn't. They never would. Selene's pride as a lady was in tatters after she publicly attacked the prince's partner, so there was no way she would pile on the embarrassment even more by admitting she committed fraud.

Cesia frantically searched for another excuse, her eyes wandering around the room. She had planned to disappear from the capital with nothing except the clothes on her back, so having a different path open in front of her caused a fair bit of confusion. *Is it really okay for what I did to be pardoned*?

"But, you said that fraud wouldn't be tolerated..." she said.

"It won't be. But the duty of those in power is to show the way to reform," Marcus said, unconcerned.

Is that true? Cesia was still disoriented.

Sensing that she was slowly starting to cast away her doubts, Marcus eagerly awaited her decision. One of his many strong points was his ability to seize a good opportunity. As it happens, he had about as many weak points as he did

strong ones.

"After all this, basically all relations between you and the Diane family have been severed. Rather than going out to the countryside and living a dangerous life of poverty without any money or connections to aid you, wouldn't you much rather stay here in the capital, go to the Academy with a prince as your guardian, and after graduation, enter government service in the royal castle?"

"You're deciding an awful lot about my future!" Cesia interrupted Marcus's eloquent speech. "And a prince as my... guardian?"

"That's right. No matter your age as a student, you'll need a guardian."

"And, after graduation, government service?"

"Isn't that normal? You're not going to inherit any land, after all. Especially for commoners, most enter the Academy with their sights already set on a government job."

Run away to the country as a penniless criminal, or go to the Academy as herself and get a job afterward. She didn't even have to think about it to know that the only choice was the latter.

However, there was still one thing holding her back.

"I get the feeling this is too good to be true," she said.

"That vigilance will serve you well in the future. But, just this time, think of it as a gift from a friend."

Cesia looked at Marcus with a start and saw that he had a surprisingly kind smile.

"I want to help out a good friend who worked hard all by herself. And I want to do what I can. Not as Maria, but as myself."

His calm voice was a source of warmth for Cesia's bitterness, and she felt her eyes tear up.

"So, what'll it be?"

Cesia's answer to that roguish smile was, of course...

IT was spring.

Cesia had been called out behind one of the Academy buildings, and several ladies surrounded her.

"You're just a commoner, but you're so shameless!"

"Don't get so full of yourself just because the prince was your reference!"

Receiving insults from all sides, Cesia, this time with her natural black hair and purple eyes, sighed deeply.

"Haah... This time, I thought I'd be able to spend my time peacefully studying..."

"Remember, the nail that sticks out gets hammered. Talent can be a curse, Cesia!" Maria interjected. At some point, she had appeared next to Cesia, and the ladies were staring.

"Why are you here? Don't you have work to be doing? Poor Chris," Cesia said.

"I'm just taking a break! Besides, you get lonely when I'm not around, don't you, Cesia?"

"No, I don't have time to feel lonely. These girls won't leave me alone."

"You're so popular... It almost makes me jealous."

Cesia sighed again, fed up with the energetic yet ephemerally beautiful woman—who was actually a prince.

Because Prince Marcus was her guardian, she was expected to be at the top of her class when she was readmitted. So, after a long, intense period of study to fulfill that ridiculous request, she retook the entrance exams and restarted her life at the Academy as the top student in her year.

This was her second time as a student, so Cesia took advantage of the opportunity by choosing a different academic course from Selene. Because of that, she had to restart from the beginning. Additionally, her scholarship covered all sorts of fees, including the price of her tuition and her housing, so she had to maintain her high grades to keep it. She was always busy, but compared to before, she had something to call her own, and being able to focus on her studies was like heaven.

And, when Maria felt like it, she would show up.

"Isn't it no longer necessary for you to come here?" Cesia asked dryly.

"How cruel! I have a fantastic reason: I came to see you!" Maria said indignantly, putting a hand on her hip.

Ick, Cesia stuck out her tongue when she saw Maria's cutesy gesture. "You know who you are, right? The whole country would cry if they saw this!"

The fact that the handsome, intelligent second prince is like this has to be a national secret. Cesia worried for her life if she ever accidentally exposed it.

After the graduation party, Raymond's fraud came to light, and even his affairs with various female students became widely known. Due to that, and because Selene attacked the prince's partner, their engagement was called off. Both sides blamed the other, and the Chaser and Diane families were still fighting over who was liable for the damages. Selene gained a reputation for being violent and couldn't keep up appearances in capital high society, so, together with her father, who was guilty of sending Cesia to the Academy in Selene's place, they left the capital.

The surrounding ladies began to make a fuss as they grew impatient with Cesia and Maria's continued squabbling.

"Just wait one second! Stop ignoring us!"

"That's right! This is exactly why you're shameless!"

Their clamoring was cute, like a flock of singing birds, compared to the emotional damage Cesia incurred from Maria's looks and Marcus's personality. She sighed again, recomposing herself as she turned to face the ladies with a cheerful smile.

"You've got some nerve, thinking you can pick a fight with me."

"Awww! Cesia, you're so cool!" Maria shouted happily.

It was spring, and Cesia's life had just started.

No matter who she went up against, she would resist them with all her power. That was the one thing that would never change.

Chapter 2: By a Twist of Fate, I'm an Enforcer at the Prince's Recommendation

"YOU'RE so shameless!" a girl younger than Cesia pointed at her and confronted her.

"And, by shameless...you mean what exactly...?" Cesia asked with a fed-up expression.

The capital of the kingdom of Emeroade, Esmeralda, was one of the world's foremost maritime trading hubs. It had a sizable harbor and, taken together with the numerous other flourishing cities on the kingdom's coast, the whole country was often said to be one large port. Naturally, in addition to all sorts of goods flowing in from other countries, the city served as a gateway for arts and culture, and its lively, thriving atmosphere attracted many tourists. On the other hand, growing illegal immigration had become a problem in recent years.

The room at Emeroade Castle they were in was designed with the preferences of a young girl in mind. The walls and ceiling had sparkling ornamentation, and the furnishings were all warm colors, like pale pink and orange.

"What's with that look?! If you have something to say, then say it!" said the girl.

As the words flew toward Cesia one after the other, in the same rhythm they always did, she felt nostalgic. It's like I'm home with family again. Cesia, who didn't have a family home, changed her train of thought. What's the best way to make this kid give in with the least effort?

Cesia Kathrin, now eighteen years old, had just begun working in the royal castle after her recent graduation from the Royal Academy. She was wearing her long black hair up in a ponytail and was in a government-supplied civil servant's uniform. She had just started in the spring and was so new that she hadn't even gotten her initial salary payment. Nevertheless, for some reason—while still a new hire even among other new hires—Cesia had received a

summons from—believe it or not—the princess and been dragged away to her private quarters. Yes, dragged. She still had work to do!

Returning to the beginning, Cesia was being called names and shouted at by the kingdom of Emeroade's own Princess Mavis. She was fiercely glaring at Cesia, but her soft hair, red like a burning flame, her pale skin, smooth as porcelain, and her sparkling, jade green eyes made the pretty young girl come off more like a harmless doll. She was the younger sister of Prince Marcus, the same prince Cesia had some connection with, and the two were well-known for being very close. She was the sister of, well, *that*.

"Is she obsessed with her brother?" Cesia murmured to herself.

"I can hear you, Cesia Kathrin!" Mavis yelled again. She was in perfect form and had sharp ears to pick up on Cesia's grumblings.

Cesia readjusted her posture and bowed deeply. "Your Royal Highness, I'm currently working. With all due respect, may I inquire as to your business with me?"

"Hmph. Is your job more important than my summons?" Mavis swept her sleek, wavy hair over one shoulder.

Cesia could easily imagine from her physical appearance that she'd be an enchantingly beautiful woman when she was older, but the cheeky way she acted grown-up, despite her young age, was adorable.

"That depends on what you wish to ask of me. But, as a brand-new civil servant, I must make every effort to complete all of my assigned duties. Otherwise, I'll immediately be let go."

Mavis guiltily grimaced as Cesia meekly explained herself and asked, "Can't you just tell your boss the princess wanted to see you?"

"Do you think he'll believe a new person like me if I say something like that?"

Mavis hesitated. "That's true..."

A brand-new civil servant with commoner origins claiming to be late because she was talking with the princess was an even more ridiculous excuse than saying she had to help out a woman who happened to go into labor. Cesia could hear Mavis humming with indecision behind her fan. Easy. And cute. She has a good heart, even though she's that guy's younger sister. Please, never change.

"Very well. Anita!"

At Mavis's call, a woman stepped forward. "Yes, Your Royal Highness."

"Cesia, this is my head maid, Anita," the princess explained.

Many of the maids and lady's maids in the room were around the same age, but the one who stepped forward was slightly older. That said, she definitely wasn't old enough to be Cesia's mother, which meant she was still young for a head maid. From only that, Cesia could tell she was talented. Being the princess's head maid means that, even though she's a servant, she's probably a higher-ranking noblewoman than I am. Anita was composed and had the blonde hair and blue eyes common among the Emeroade nobility.

Mavis continued, "Anita, this is Cesia, that homewrecker my brother is so interested in."

"Homewrecker?" Cesia mumbled. "Where did you pick up that one?"

You're supposed to be a princess! And whose home am I wrecking? Cesia was silently staring at Mavis when Anita coughed lightly to draw her attention. Whoops, that was a close call. She's a rude brat, but she's a princess. She's allowed to be rude.

On the other hand, Cesia was a green civil servant and only a commoner. She had to be careful with every word and glance lest she be seen as disrespectful.



"Umm, Anita. Go to Cesia's workplace and inform them I summoned her!" she said.

"Your Royal Highness, it appears you have no business with Cesia, so ought you not release her back to her duties?" Anita pointed out. "If it's known that the princess is summoning her so soon after starting, it'll make it harder for her to do her job."

"Aah..." Mavis nodded.

Sharp! This is what the head maid of that guy's clueless sister has to be able to do! As Cesia mentally applauded Anita, Mavis hummed and pouted again. At the risk of repeating myself, she really is cute.

"Then, what do you want me to do? I can't even talk to her, then!" the princess protested.

"How about making plans to meet with Cesia on one of her days off?" Anita suggested.

Mavis's jade-green eyes sparkled the same way her brother's did. "Great idea!"

That's some "great idea." Please, let me enjoy my day off in peace.

And so, Cesia was finally released to her post. She returned in a hurry and, after a light scolding, was back to her desk work. I had to sacrifice some of my precious day off. The government can be so cruel.

To make up for the time she had lost, Cesia rushed through her paperwork, checking documents as fast as possible while widening her eyes and making sure not to overlook anything. After graduation, she started work as the lowest-level enforcer in the Second Division of the castle's Financial Audit Bureau, the Second Financial Audit Division.

Put simply, her job involved poring over the minute details of various transactions to uncover any irregularities or fraud. Given her past, it was an ironic position. Being an enforcer meant that she would also go out on investigations, and apparently, things occasionally got violent. Cesia had heard the words "Financial Audit Bureau" and "civil servant" and looked forward to an

easygoing desk job. She was still nursing her betrayed expectations.

"I knew it was too good to be true," she sighed.

After she visually reviewed the documents for imperfections, she used magic to check whether any trickery was in the paper. Double-checking like that was the standard. This type of delicate magic was her specialty, so she didn't have any complaints about the job itself. There was so much of it to do. A few others had been employed at the same time as her, and a decent number of people worked in the department, but Cesia was still busy every day.

Spring was a season with a lot of personnel changes, among other things, so there was more paperwork than usual, and money flowed more freely. Her seniors called it the busy season, but she had only ever experienced this level of activity, so she had no idea what the off-season was like.

"I finished checking this bunch!" Cesia said, taking a sheaf of documents to the desk of the coworker who was mentoring her, Layne.

Layne raised his head. "Good work. I have some more for you. And, take this to Keith."

"Wow..." As he passed her the documents, Cesia made a sour expression.

"What's with that face? Are you dissatisfied with something? Then, take these, too," Layne said, adding more to the pile.

"There's even more..."

Layne was a good guy and capable at his job, and he treated Cesia fairly, even though she was a commoner. All the same, she wouldn't mind being given a bit more slack.

After graduating as valedictorian from the honorable Royal Academy, Cesia proceeded along the path Marcus had suggested for her, although not without feeling some annoyance at doing so. Due to circumstances, she had attended the Academy all the way through twice, so she was slightly older than her colleagues who graduated at the same time. Anyone between fourteen and seventeen could take the academy entrance exams, although the high tuition skewed the pool of those who could attend toward the children of nobles and wealthy merchants.

Cesia began attending as "Selene" at fourteen. After two years of classes, she was sixteen when she graduated. Right after that, she started over, attending as herself, so when she graduated and got her job, she was eighteen. If one applied to the school as soon as possible and graduated two years later, they would be sixteen at the youngest, so Cesia was on the older end of new graduates.

"Cesia, is it true that you're Prince Marcus's mistress?" the man sitting at the desk across from her asked, grinning. He was Keith, a senior of hers who had entered the department the same year as Layne.

Stop talking and get to work, Cesia thought, but she couldn't say it. She looked forward to the day she attained a high enough position to say what she wanted.

"I get that a lot," Cesia smoothly began what had already become her standard explanation, efficiently sorting some documents at the same time. "The prince is one of the directors of the Academy, and while I was there, he served as my guardian. But really, we only ever talked when he greeted me occasionally, you know. He's the guardian to several other promising commoners without any family, so it's not like I was special or anything."

When she attended the Academy, she was bullied for having the prince as her guardian. She was a woman, after all, and after she started her job at the castle, she had often been suspected of being the prince's lover.

"Besides, don't you only use the term 'mistress' for someone who already has a wife?" she asked. "The prince isn't married yet, you know."

Roy, who had started at the same time as Cesia, warned Keith. "Stop harassing her!"

Keith just laughed heartily. "Then, would you rather be his lover, instead?"

Cesia chuckled, then dumped the sheaf of documents Layne had handed her earlier on Keith's desk with a loud *thud*. "Keith, these have to be submitted today. I can't help though."

"Huh? Why? You always help!"

"I have plans today."

These documents were Keith's job in the first place. Payback like this is nothing.

AFTER some overtime due to the time she lost to the princess, Cesia hurried out of work. She didn't want to be late for the meeting time, which was already close at hand. She rushed to her small living quarters at one end of the castle, quickly changed out of her work uniform, and exited through the rear castle gate. From there, she left the upper-class district that contained the castle and the Royal Academy and headed straight to the working-class part of the city. Upon entering, she caught sight of a bar with a hanging wooden sign with a sketch of a black cat, and without hesitating, she opened the door and went inside.

"Welcome!"

An employee cheerfully greeted Cesia as she looked around the bar.

"Ah, Cesia! Over here!" a beautiful woman waved at her. She was Cesia's friend from the Academy, Maria Hawke.

"Haha... Sorry I'm late..." Cesia apologized, awkwardly scratching her head as she sat at the table. She exchanged eye contact with the second prince's butler, Chris, sitting next to Maria.

Cesia had only found this out after she started working at the castle, but the noble family Maria claimed to be from was actually Chris's, and the butler was Count Hawke's second son. The count's family also had a daughter who didn't attend the Academy. Cesia felt sympathy for them, knowing that "Maria" was using the family as cover.

"Welcome. What can I get for you?" the store's hostess came to Cesia to ask for her order, having sharply noticed that Cesia was a new customer.

As it was her "boss" who was treating her, Cesia ordered their strongest and most expensive drink.

Chris blinked when he heard her order. "You must drink often," he remarked.

Cesia shook her head, annoyed. "No, not really. It's too expensive."

"But—" Chris began.

"If I don't get drunk, I can't deal with *this*," Cesia spat. Chris, noble by birth, grimaced at her rough attitude but stopped short of scolding her.

"Oh? What could you be talking about?" Maria asked cheerfully.

I really can't deal with this.

Their drinks were delivered, and after a quiet toast, Maria quickly put both elbows on the table and leaned forward towards Cesia. *Don't flaunt your chest*, Cesia thought.

"So, how have you been? It's been a month since you started working. Have you gotten used to it yet?" Maria asked Cesia.

"For now, everything's going well. My seniors are helping me learn, and I don't make too many mistakes. Of course, I can still only do a few things."

Cesia heaped some fried chicken Maria had ordered onto her plate and sprinkled some citrus juice on top. Then, she pulled a plate with steamed rice and vegetables and a plate with fried potatoes closer to her own. Adults always ignored their food and only drank alcohol, so this food was undoubtedly hers.

"Good, good. You're still growing, Cesia, so eat up and get fatter."

"If you didn't look like that, I'd hit you..." she growled.

"If I didn't look like this, you'd be headed straight to jail if you did," Maria said, briefly changing her tone to a more masculine one while still smiling. Maria had ordered this food for the scrawny Cesia, so she continually placed more and more plates next to her. She knew exactly what Cesia liked. Maria nonchalantly nudged Cesia's glass of alcohol away from her and ordered fruit juice.

"Ahh... This is delicious!" Cesia said, her eyes sparkling.

Maria smiled contentedly. Only the hostess who served her knew that what Maria was drinking was hard liquor.

"THAT'S a couple of beautiful ladies you've got there, sonny! Why don't you

swap with me?" A passing drunk clapped a hand on Chris's shoulder.

I wish I could, Chris fervently thought. Well, one of the ladies is a talented commoner who got top scores on this year's castle employment exams. Cesia, at least, is all right. She's often shameless and sometimes rude. But she's a hardworking, serious girl.

The problem was the other one. Her beautiful appearance and calm, angelic smile were a temporary facade. In actuality, she was a handsome adult man, second in line for the throne: His Royal Highness, the Second Prince, Marcus Emeroade. He had magically changed his appearance to secretly attend the Royal Academy undercover but had gotten attached to it, frequently disguised himself as Maria, and went out to the castle town. Yes, the prince had gotten hooked on cross-dressing!

Chris was always desperately working to hide his respected prince's hobby. Few knew the secret, and Cesia was the one who came in contact with Maria the most. So, while he knew he was out of place, Chris always accompanied the two to gatherings like this one to prevent any leaks.

"I think Chris has a misunderstanding," Cesia said to Maria, her cheeks stuffed with potatoes.

Maria giggled. "He's so serious. But that's what makes him cute."

Cesia looked at Chris, cloaked in an aura of tragic resolve.

Marcus wasn't particularly interested in cross-dressing. Although, he did find it enjoyable.

He's as mean-spirited as always. Even though he knows Chris is misunderstanding him, he's just letting him assume things, Cesia thought as she held an extra plate of roast beef she had ordered. Maria was her friend, but Marcus was like Mavis had been that afternoon: a faraway existence. Cesia couldn't lightly make any uncalled-for remarks about the royals' behavior.

Putting all that aside, she had just started her job and hadn't even received her first paycheck. She was effectively penniless. Meals in the castle's servants' quarters where she lived were free, and she only rarely ate out, so she always took advantage of the opportunity to eat as many delicious foods as she could.

"Cesia, by the way, when you get paid, what are you gonna buy? Accessories sound nice. We should go shopping!" Maria suggested, smiling as she fixed Cesia's slightly crooked collar. She had been in a hurry when she changed earlier.

Cesia took notice of Maria's nails. Why are they the newest color from that popular brand? Maria was pointlessly thorough.

"I think I'll stock up on some daily necessities, then use the rest on easily convertible, small gold nuggets and gemstones," Cesia said.

"Are you a bandit?!"

"That's so rude..." Cesia cast a sharp glance at Maria, who had a serious expression.

"But gold is so uncute! What about a dress or a purse?"

"It's my money, so I'm free to use it as I see fit. I don't know when I might be banished, so I want to save it while I still can."

Maria pouted at Cesia's unromantic statement. "Jeez, I won't banish you!"

"I don't think you..." Cesia hesitated. "I don't think *that* person will do anything, but nobody knows what might happen next, you know."

Maria was silent.

After everything she had lived through until then, Cesia made it a rule not to rely on anyone at work or in the castle. She could only imagine living a solitary life like an abandoned stray cat. No matter how many times Maria repeated her reassurances, Cesia couldn't bring herself to trust anyone. Maria thought that was an unbearably lonely way to live.

Seeing Maria's deeply furrowed eyebrows, Cesia forced a smile. "It's fine. Once I have enough, I'll treat myself. I just want to save up now while money is still tight," she said evasively, averting her gaze from Maria's increasingly pained expression.

Cesia was interested in clothes and accessories like any other girl her age. She just didn't want to waste her money when she still didn't have any savings.

"You will?" Maria asked.

"Yeah, I will."

"Okay. Then, let's go shopping six months from now!" Maria hugged Cesia's arm.

"You're going to hang out with me for that long?" Cesia asked, surprised.

"We're friends. Of course I will," Maria wrapped up the conversation, pointing out that Cesia was the one who was saying something strange.

A few hours later, Maria sent Chris to accompany a full, somewhat drunk Cesia back to her quarters.

"Marc— Maria, what are you going to do?" Chris asked with difficulty, almost saying Marcus's name.

Seeing the serious look on Chris's face, Maria laughed softly and pointed down the road. "Since I'm already in town, I thought I'd take a short walk to clear my head. I'll call a carriage, so don't worry about me."

In addition to his peak physical form, Marcus was also a skilled conjurer. On top of that, because he was secretly in town, multiple guards were stationed in inconspicuous locations nearby. Chris could defend himself, but his main duty was as a butler, so he wasn't very useful in a brawl. The best thing to do here is to use the carriage I arranged to take back the prince's cherished friend.

"Very well. I'll be waiting in your office tomorrow at the same time as always," Chris said.

"Take care of Cesia. She might be cute, but don't try anything funny, mister," Maria emphasized the last word.

"I won't!"

"I'm not going to lag behind just because I'm drunk..." Cesia chimed in, glaring at the two still standing in the road from her slumped-over position in one of the carriage's seats. Her tone was sharp, but her drunk mumbling and red cheeks were cute. Maria smiled, her lips red with lipstick, and leaned into the carriage.

Noticing a shadow above her, Cesia raised her head in confusion. "Maria?"

"Good night, Cesia. I had fun today," Maria said to her, then kissed the back of her hand. Cesia blushed. It wasn't because of the alcohol.

"You..." she glared up at Maria, but Maria was unbothered.

"Good luck with your job. Let's hang out again sometime." Maria grinned and lightly waved.

Cesia made a reluctant expression, then awkwardly smiled. "Thanks for the treat. Next time, an Eastern restaurant sounds good!" she said as if confident she would be treated again. For Cesia, who was rarely honest with her feelings, this was the equivalent of saying, "See you next time."

"I'll look for one," Maria replied, gently smiling. Entrusting Cesia to Chris, she watched the carriage move toward the castle.

It was still too early to call it a late night. It was a weekday, but her surroundings were buzzing with the sound of drunkards' voices, and orange lights illuminated the avenue, filtering out from shops on either side. The scent of greasy food hung in the air.

"I'll walk around for a bit," Maria mumbled, and she faintly sensed her guards in the shadows move. Her slender legs and comfortable, low-heeled shoes took her down the open avenue. If she took one wrong turn off the bustling main road into an alleyway, it would instantly turn dark and quiet. Maria walked unsteadily toward some shops when, before she could take a few steps, an arm extended from a cramped alleyway and pulled her in.

"Aah!" Maria tried pretending to scream, but a hand quickly covered her mouth, and she was pulled further down the alleyway. There, a man pinned her up against the wall and groped her. He seemed like a drunk who had set his eyes on a shaky, weak-looking Maria.

"Disgusting, attacking a drunk woman," Maria muttered and struck the bottom of the man's chin with the heel of her palm. As his brain rocked inside his skull, he momentarily lost consciousness, and Maria separated herself from him as he collapsed.

"Are you hurt?" a voice from the shadows asked her.

"No, but I don't feel great after getting grabbed by him... Although, it would feel worse for a woman," Maria replied, frowning. Her form abruptly became hazy and wavered. When the thin magical mist cleared, there was a grainy sound as a pair of boots stepped on the cobblestone. A red-haired, jade-greeneyed young man appeared, wearing a knight's uniform casually.

"What should we do with this man, Your Royal Highness?"

"Hand him over to a nearby patrol. This time, it happened to be me, but he might try something on an actual woman next. Make him regret what he did."

"Yes, sir!" came a reply, and a generic-looking man appeared from the shadows, held the passed-out drunk by his shoulders, and left toward the main avenue.

Marcus watched the guard go and sighed. "I thought it would work, but it looks like it'll take more than this for them to bite." He ruffled his hair and disappeared into the darkness of the alleyway.

THE next morning, Cesia was again overloaded with paperwork.

"Cesia, get me the documents with these item numbers," Keith requested.

"Yes, sir," Cesia replied. She went to the back of the room, memo in one hand, and picked out a sheaf of papers from a row of documents on the shelf.

"I got those documents," she said, returning to Keith.

"Ah, thanks. Next, can you check the figures on those documents against the figures on these?" Keith pointed at another stack of papers.

Cesia nodded. She could see that, sitting across from her, he was doing the same work, so Cesia consulted with him as she started checking.

"What does this number refer to?" she asked.

"That's the number of illegal immigrants and the number of people who left the country without following the proper procedures."

"Huh? What does that have to do with us?" she asked.

"It's related in a broad sense. Anything that involves money is our

responsibility."

Cesia frowned at Keith's strange phrasing. "Most things in the world have something to do with money. If that's true, couldn't anything be our responsibility?"

Keith stayed silent and smirked. He didn't appear to have any desire to respond as he returned his gaze to the documents in front of him. Not knowing how or where to continue questioning him, Cesia refocused her attention on her job.

"A lot of people are leaving the country," she remarked.

"Yeah. But we don't know if they're leaving because they want to," he said.

Keith was flipping through the pages at a quick pace. Cesia couldn't yet match his speed, so she focused on being accurate while still going as fast as she could through the lists of numbers.

After spending the whole morning on that work, it was time for her lunch break. She went to the lower-floor cafeteria with Roy. The castle's workers were allowed to use it, so it was packed with people from all sorts of jobs.

"Wow, today's crowded, too... Cesia, would you mind grabbing a table? I'll get lunch for both of us," Roy suggested.

The menu only had one dish that changed daily, and it was always cheap, nutritious, and had large servings. Another cafeteria was on an upper floor that officials of noble descent mostly used. Its menu was more diverse, made up of various dishes with long names, but more than anything, it was expensive.

"Okay, thank you," Cesia said, then looked for a two-person table close by. She spotted one that had just emptied, and she slid into one of the seats. "All right!" she quietly muttered and looked up, searching for Roy in line. There, she met eyes with someone walking by.

"You..." the person said. It was Rosary Hilton, the lady who had taken every opportunity to quarrel with "Selene" when Cesia had attended the Academy in disguise.

Cesia was internally surprised, but she had expected something like this.

Without losing her cool or panicking, she tilted her head in confusion. "Is there something I can...?"

"No, you just look like someone I know... Excuse me," Rosary said and left quickly, the women she had in tow following after her.

Looking at her clothing, she's probably working as a lady's maid for some high-ranking noble in the castle. Even high-ranking ladies occasionally worked as attendants to increase their value. That was the first time we've met here, so she probably spends most of her time on the upper floors.

"Apologies for the wait, Cesia!" Roy returned, then paused. "Hm? Who was that? Was she someone you know?" He was carrying two trays of food.

"No, apparently, she thought I was somebody else," Cesia replied.

"Oh? It's hard to imagine someone mistaking a beautiful woman like you for someone else."

"Roy! You have a bright future. Take some of my fried chicken."

"Thank you very much!"

Cesia put a piece of fried chicken on Roy's plate. The two each said a short, pre-meal prayer, then picked up their silverware.

"I've noticed that, lately, you've been helping only Keith with his job. Wasn't Layne supposed to be mentoring you?" Roy asked.

"Right? It's because Layne always tells me to help Keith out."

"Keith's good at pushing his responsibilities onto other people, though, so watch out!"

"You're really speaking your mind, Roy." Against her better judgment, Cesia laughed.

After talking about a few topics, Roy looked at a calendar on the cafeteria wall.

"Aaah, I'm tired of waiting for the next holiday. I'm finally getting my first paycheck, so I'm going to buy a book that the shop's been holding in reserve for me," Roy said. He was cheerfully talking as he chewed on his fried chicken.

Roy always spoke politely with her. Cesia had told him that they had started their jobs at the same time, so there was no need for him to be so formal, but he had replied, "It would be rude of me to speak so informally with a woman older than me." In contrast to many in the capital, Roy had attended a school in the provinces. He had enrolled, then graduated as soon as he could, so he was two years younger than Cesia.

"You're really an avid reader, Roy," Cesia remarked.

"Don't you often read, too?"

"Those are just books on economics I borrowed from the castle library."

The first time Cesia went to the Academy, she took economics as an elective, but that was the extent of her knowledge. A job in the Financial Audit Bureau—although it had turned out to be a somewhat strange place—meant that she was working in what amounted to accounting. Having some basic knowledge of economics couldn't hurt.

"I'm reading them because I felt like I was lacking in some of the fundamentals. It's not like reading is my hobby or anything." Cesia took a sip of her tea.

"I see." Roy nodded. "You're quite studious. I'll have to work hard if I want to keep up," he said innocently.

His purity almost blinded Cesia. She'd also been reading books on economics because she didn't want to look suspicious for knowing things she wouldn't have learned from her second time through the Academy. It wasn't something worthy of Roy's praise.

"Are you excited for your day off, too, Cesia?"

As she chewed on her food, Roy's question abruptly reminded her of her plans. She wasn't excited at all.

"CHOCOLATE mousse, a lemon tart... actually, I'll have a pear tart. And cheesecake, too!"

It was her day off, and Cesia was in the noble quarter of the capital. The high-

class cafe she was at catered to nobles, and it required a group of customers to get a reservation to be seated in one of its private rooms. The room's furniture was an understated amber color, with intricately embroidered cushions, and the chandelier was polished to a shine. Wearing a relatively simple dress for outings, Mavis was sitting across from her. The cute way she sat was like a doll.

Can royalty just come down to the city like this? Cesia wondered. A few days ago, even Maria had—well, it was Maria, so I bet nobody could say anything... But, I never imagined I'd see a full-on princess like the sheltered Mavis drinking tea in a cafe in the city, even if it is in the noble quarter. There are probably a bunch of guards nearby, but I haven't seen anyone besides the waitress and Anita standing by the door. Cesia felt anxious.

"Hey, homewr— Cesia, what will you have?" Mavis asked.

"I'm fine with just some tea."

You were about to call me a "homewrecker" again, weren't you?! Cesia was surprised, but since Mavis properly corrected herself, she reacted calmly.

"You're not going to eat anything? The cakes here are small and delicious. There's no need to hold back. I brought you here, so it'll be my treat, of course."

"Then, I'll take cheesecake and spinach quiche, please."

Cesia's quick change of heart to choosing the most substantial items on the menu left Mavis open-mouthed and flabbergasted. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes. I haven't had anything to eat yet," Cesia replied.

"Should I ask them to prepare a light meal...?"

"No. It's a cake shop, so I don't want to ask for anything unreasonable."

The night before, Cesia had gotten absorbed in reading a paper she had borrowed from the library, and as a result, she had almost been late for her appointment with Mavis. Needless to say, she hadn't had time to eat anything.

Please don't look at me like I'm a schoolchild without a lunch. Although, I won't say no to a free meal.

"Well... Okay."

Looking like she came to an understanding somehow or another, Mavis sat up straight. She stared at Cesia with eyes that matched her brother's and mother's. Cesia had only been able to comb her hair that morning. Combined with her plain-looking clothes, she was out of place in the fancy cafe. Mavis had probably judged that Cesia was unsuitable for the brother she respected so deeply.

"I want you to answer a few questions!" Mavis began.

"His Royal Highness and I aren't in love with each other, and we aren't lovers. He acted as my guardian when I was a student. When we come across each other in the castle, we greet each other, but that's the extent of our relationship," Cesia answered with her standard explanation to cover any of Mavis's potential questions.

The crown prince and direct heir to the throne was the spitting image of his father, the king, and he was well known for his stern and imposing nature, as if he were carved out of a boulder. Of course, the citizens adored him and expected him to one day be an excellent king just as his father currently was, but at the same time, he was seen as unapproachable.

On the other hand, Prince Marcus's biological mother was a princess from another country who had married the king. Marcus had a great love for the arts and was on the board of directors of the Academy. His graceful appearance and attendance as the king's representative at relatively unimportant events made him popular and gave him a friendly image among the people.

While the princes' mothers were different—one was the wife of the king, and the other was his concubine—their relationship as brothers was extremely good, and the royal succession was never an issue. The citizens were confident in the next generation of the kingdom's rulers.

Because of that, nobody hesitated to openly declare their affection for Prince Marcus, and even in the castle, he had many fans.

And so, Cesia's days of getting called out and being told, "Don't flatter yourself just because he looks after you," continued. During her school days, she might have been able to resist the people who confronted her, but as a working adult, there was no way she could fight and win against every single person who came after her. In the end, she changed her strategy; she gave her

standard explanation and then found some way to get out of the situation.

In any case, it was true the only connection between her and Marcus was that he had been her guardian. Maria was another story entirely, but her existence was a secret, so there was no point in bringing her up.

"I... I haven't asked about that yet!" a flustered, red-faced Mavis said, again opening her mouth in surprise.

Cesia hadn't intended to make fun of the princess. She had just wanted to save time. However, the princess had flared into a rage.

"Oh? But the only thing you would call me out to ask me about is my relationship with Prince Marcus, right? Don't worry, I'm used to this sort of thing."

Mavis hesitated, then, as if Cesia's response was unexpected, asked, "You're used to it?"

I've been thinking this since we got here—I know she's only thirteen, but even then, is it all right for her to be this pure at that age? I suppose this is better than being like her scheming brother, but she should be a bit more alert. Despite having given up her day off to come, Cesia still worried about Mavis's future.

"Yes. When I was a student, people frequently called me out, splashed water on me, tore up my textbooks..." Cesia explained.

"What?!" Mavis covered her mouth, shaking. "People have done that to you?! I heard the Academy was a place where students devote themselves to their studies!" she was almost shouting.

Mavis looked seriously angry, and Cesia, too, widened her eyes in surprise. Wasn't she calling me out to complain to me?

"Y-You, you're not thinking I'm the same as those bullies, are you? How rude!"

"But, aren't you doing the same thing as them?" Cesia asked.

Instead of getting angry, Mavis went pale. It was true that she had used her authority as a princess to summon Cesia—even though it was her day off.

"That's...that's true. My apologies," Mavis meekly bowed her head.

This time, it was Cesia's turn to be startled. "Ah, please, raise your head. I'm not sure, but isn't royalty not supposed to apologize?" she said hurriedly.

"More accurately, it's that royalty must not make any mistakes." Mavis raised her head and shook it. "But I already did. So, not as royalty, but as a person, it's only natural to apologize."

Being this dignified at such a young age... She really is royalty. Cesia's hostility seeped away, replaced with a vague sense of pity. "Don't worry about it. I'm basically already working on a day off, so I don't mind," she said, trying to downplay it. She's a young girl, so if she's sorry, that's good enough. I want to eat my cake, leave, and go to bed.

"Thank you," Mavis said, looking reassured. Cesia felt relieved, too.

Just then, there was a knock on the door, and a waiter entered the room pushing a tea cart with cakes and a tea set on it.

Feeling their conversation had been cut off unnaturally, Cesia checked with Mavis without saying *prince*. "By the way, was my previous answer good enough? You did want to ask me about my relationship with your brother, right?"

Mavis nodded, albeit with some difficulty. "Lately, he's been busy and turned down a few of my invitations to our regular tea parties."

Making sure the waiter left the room, Cesia said, "Prince Marcus is also a director of the Academy, and spring is a busy time of year."

"Yeah, and since he was your guardian, he's begun acting as the guardian for other promising commoners without family, too..."

Cesia grimaced, internally kicking herself. She had tried to smooth things over, but it felt like Mavis was saying it was her fault.

After Marcus had exposed the fraud at the Academy, several directors were arrested for embezzlement. As the one responsible for the investigation, Marcus took on one of the now-empty positions on the board. Thanks to that, Cesia was able to have him as her guardian and attend the Academy, and after that, Marcus continued to serve as a guardian for a few commoners each year. They all got excellent grades, and after graduation, they devoted themselves to

the country. Marcus called it a "philanthropic publicity stunt," but Cesia, who didn't understand politics, thought it was admirable that he was serving as the guardian to commoners he didn't even know, despite how busy he was.

"I think it's very princely of him," Cesia said.

"Of course it is. There's no one more princely than him in looks or behavior!" Mavis declared, providing more evidence for her obsession with her brother.

However, Cesia couldn't agree with Mavis's statement. For her, Marcus was willful. A mischievous grin fit him more than a dignified, princely smile. Besides, while Cesia met Maria relatively frequently, it was rare for her to see Marcus. As she often explained, he just acted like her former guardian, greeting her and exchanging a few words when they sometimes met by chance in the castle. If anything, Marcus's original appearance as a prince had left a weaker impression on her.

But, from Mavis's admiration for him, he must be a great brother to her and an ideal prince. It was strange knowing she had seen a side of Marcus that not even his sister knew about.

As Cesia felt increasingly uneasy, she cut off a piece of cheesecake with her fork and took a bite. She's paying for this, so I should eat as much as I can.

"This is delicious!" she exclaimed. She realized she'd unconsciously had low expectations because it was a treat, so she was surprised at how good it was. She had imagined something much fancier, flavored with a high-class liqueur, decorated with mysterious leaves, and with the minuscule, edible portion of the cake served in the middle of a large plate. Instead, it was simply delicious; it was a substantially portioned, flavorful, plain, and unsophisticated piece of cheesecake. It was delightfully orthodox for a cafe that looked like nobles frequented it.

This would pair great with some red wine. Although, I can't say that in front of the underage princess.

Mavis made a surprisingly happy smile and said, "Right! This café's cheesecake has an incredibly rare, polished flavor."

"Polished..." Cesia thought out loud. "I suppose that's true." Isn't it just plain

cheesecake? She swallowed her words along with her tea.

Mavis nodded contentedly. "Ever since my brother started going out in secret, he's always brought me home treats from here! Using you as an excuse, I wanted to try coming here at least once."

"Didn't you say that the cakes here were small?"

"Ah, I wasn't lying! I've sent people here to buy them before! Even though this is the first time I've been here, I know how they taste!" she said, embarrassed, turning her red face away from Cesia.

Cute. Even that willful prince would dote on a sister this adorable.

"Did His Royal Highness bring cheesecake back for you?" Cesia asked, smiling.

Mavis was still pouting but happily nodded in agreement. Cesia couldn't help but feel more positive towards Mavis. She didn't have parents, let alone siblings, so it felt good to see Mavis's sincere love for her family. She had heard that it was common for royalty, even in the same family and born from the same mother, to be on bad terms, so she was happy Marcus and Mavis had a good relationship. It might've been simple-minded, but Cesia thought it was crucial to value one's family. It was possible that she felt so strongly about it precisely because she had no family herself.

AFTER a while, the stiff atmosphere between the two broke down, and by the time they left the café, the distance between them had shrunk considerably. *I'm* glad we could talk in a private room because when we get back to the castle, it'll be disrespectful of me to be this friendly with the princess.

Leaving the shop, Anita quickly bowed and said, "I'll go get the carriage." She walked briskly down the road and turned a corner.

She must have a carriage on standby nearby. Capable, as always.

"Cesia, you should ride with us, too," Mavis haughtily offered.

You don't have to invite me if you don't want to. Cesia raised an eyebrow.

"No, thank you, don't mind me. I can walk, anyways," Cesia said.

"How uncute! Are you refusing a princess's favor?"

"I don't want to stand out."

"I can drop you off a short distance from the servants' quarters!" she angrily insisted.

"Sorry, I also want to stop and do some shopping, and..." Cesia said, unsure why Mavis wanted to accompany her so much.

Just as she was about to finish what she was saying, two men abruptly appeared from around a corner, sprinting toward them. One of the men grabbed Mavis, lifting her right off her feet.

"Aaah!" Mavis screamed in surprise.

Cesia reacted instantly, kicking out the back of the knee of the man holding Mavis.

"Gaah!" the man shouted, not expecting one of the women to attack him. He crumpled to the ground.

"Come here!" Cesia extended her arms to Mavis, who grabbed on.

But the other man tackled them from the side, and the two tumbled to the ground. Cesia positioned herself under the princess to protect her from injury and held her in her arms as she dizzily shook her head. *Anita's gone, but as long as I can stave off this surprise attack, Mavis's guards will come to protect her. They have to be close by.*

"Hey, what are you doing?!"

"This damn woman...!"

Their attackers roughly shouted at each other and reached for them again.

Hurry up! Cesia internally screamed for Mavis's guards. The princess had come in secret, so she hesitated to call for help.

That second of doubt was a mistake. She should've called out without worrying about it. Or, she should've blasted the two men with magic, counterattacking in some way or another.

Taking advantage of the break in her attention, a third man appeared behind

Cesia and hit her on the head with a loud *thump*. Just before she lost consciousness, she heard Mavis's ear-piercing shriek.

"Cesia!"

THE next time Cesia opened her eyes, she was lying on the floor of a plain room, her arms and legs tightly bound with rope.

"Ow..." she said falteringly.

Retracing her memories, the last thing she recalled was being hit on the head. Her headache grew more painful. She grimaced in pain and somehow sat up.

"Cesia... Are you okay?" Mavis said, raising her head. She was quietly sitting next to her.

"I got hit on the head, so I can't yet say... Were we abducted together?" Cesia asked, wanting to confirm the situation.

"I'm sorry." Mavis's expression warped. "You got caught up in this because you were with me."

Cesia was silent. What she had said was true, and Cesia had no words to console her. She was tangled up in this, too.

"If you're sorry, then make amends when we get out of here safely."

"I'll do anything...!" Mavis grimly nodded.

Getting abducted along with the princess was troublesome, to say the least, but Mavis wasn't the criminal, and Cesia didn't think she needed to fret that much.

"No, there's no need to... That cheesecake was really good, so you could treat me at that café again," Cesia said frankly.

"Is that fine?" Mavis's large, jade-green eyes widened. "I was prepared to give you one of the royal jewels...!"

"That's too much responsibility for me," Cesia said with a strained smile. She would warmly welcome easily convertible small gemstones but couldn't do anything with a royal treasure. "There's a lot about this that doesn't sit right

with me, so let's get out of here first."

Mavis hesitated, then said, "Yeah." She bit her lip to stop herself from crying.

Cesia unconsciously smiled. She's brave. I bet it's taking her everything she's got not to burst into tears.

"When they brought you here, were you conscious? How far away from the shop are we?" Cesia asked.

Mavis thought it over. "After the kidnappers knocked you out, they put both of us in a carriage nearby. But they blindfolded me right after they started moving... I don't know where we are," she replied apologetically.

There was no way the kidnappers would be that stupid, Cesia thought. She hadn't expected much from Mavis's testimony. Then she remembered that there had been a covered wagon, like one a farmer would use, parked next to the cafe. It had caught her eye because it was a rare sight in the noble quarter. Even if it were delivering goods, it would've been parked near the back. It was probably because of that wagon that Mavis's carriage hadn't been able to wait at the front of the shop. If that was the case, they hadn't just been targeting any random lady walking down the street in the noble quarter; this crime had been meticulously planned, with the princess as its target.

"I wonder if they mistook me for an attendant or something?" Cesia said.

"That's possible... Wearing those shabby clothes, you look like a lady's maid trying to disguise herself...or something..." Mavis said, her statement trailing off at the end.

"You can't call someone's normal clothes 'shabby.' I'll pull your ear," Cesia glared at Mavis. The princess hurriedly tried to cover her ears, struggling to move her bound arms. She's not a bad kid, but she's rude without even thinking about it.

"Y-You're tied up, so there's no way you can pull my ear!" Mavis fussed. She was still trying to cover her ears.

Cesia couldn't tell whether Mavis was being confident or timid. She smiled coldly and laughed softly. "I'm tied up?"

She channeled magic into her arms, strengthening them, and jerked her wrists apart. The ropes made a dull splitting noise as they came apart. "They'll have to use magic cuffs, at least, if they want to hold me."

"S-So strong...!"

"It's ear-pulling time!" Cesia said, making a grabbing motion with her fingers. Mavis trembled in fear, but Cesia ignored her and properly untied the ropes binding her legs.

The room's floor was cold stone. The window was boarded up, and she couldn't see outside. The only way out was through the door. She considered removing the boards and escaping through the window, but it would've been too risky to do that and take Mavis with her while she still didn't know where they were.

"For how long were we in the carriage?" Cesia asked.

"Huh? Umm, it was about..." Mavis answered Cesia.

If it was for that long, then we're in the city outskirts, Cesia guessed. She undid Mavis's arm bindings and investigated the room's interior. Lightly touching the poorly fitting wooden door, she discovered a small gap between it and the surrounding stone wall. The opening was limited, but with it, she could look outside the room into a dark, empty corridor. The kidnappers might have thought a lookout was unnecessary because they had tied Cesia and Mavis up and locked the door, or maybe they didn't have enough people to watch the prisoners. There might even have been some other reason nobody was there.

"The question is whether it's fine for us to go out..." Cesia worried aloud.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Mavis asked, tilting her head in puzzlement. She was rubbing her arms where the ropes had dug into them. "You're good with magic, right? If we run across any of the kidnappers, you can blast them away."

Cesia, unsure of how to explain it to the princess, said, "Your Highness, I have some talent for cheap, tricky magic, but I'm not some soldier trained for combat. I'm just a civil servant. That's like saying I can fight in a battle just because I have a sword."

"Ah... I've made another mistake," Mavis hung her head. "I'm sorry..."

Cesia forced a strained smile. Mavis was too pure, so she was constantly getting knocked off balance. All the ladies Cesia had interacted with up to this point had behaved aggressively toward her, so she was always prepared to snap back.

"I don't mind. Just pull yourself together so you don't mess up next time."

"Yeah... Thank you, Cesia. You're a wonderful person." Mavis smiled awkwardly.

"Nobody has ever told me that before," Cesia said, surprised.

"Really? I think you're a generous, thoughtful, and kind person..."

"You praise me too much, princess." Cesia blushed at the princess's unabashed statement. The awkwardness disappeared from Mavis's smile.

"But, well," Cesia continued, "they left us here tied up, so it doesn't seem like they abducted us just to kill us right away. There's nobody nearby, so let's get out of here."

This is it! Cesia thought as she touched the door again. There was only a simple latch outside, so she lifted it with magic.

"Clever!"

"I get that often." Cesia grinned despite herself. She slowly opened the door and peeked into the dim corridor.

It was quiet, and there was no sign of anyone around. While praying that nobody would see them, Cesia slowly walked down the corridor with Mavis. From the building's internal appearance, she guessed it was a warehouse for storing various raw materials. They had been shut in the room farthest to the back, so there was no worry about going in the wrong direction away from the exit, but on the other hand, it also meant that the terrifying likelihood of running across one of the kidnappers was higher.

"I'll try as hard as I can, but if worse comes to worst, please, leave me behind and run," Cesia said quietly, but Mavis shook her head. Cesia continued, "If one of us gets away, they can call for help. It'll make it more likely for them to be rescued."

"They think you're a servant. They know I'm a princess, so if I stay behind, my likelihood of survival is higher."

The princess wouldn't be killed. She was a valuable bargaining chip. It didn't look like she would give in, and Cesia shrugged. She wasn't going to be able to let just the princess get away.

"If only you were a bit stupider..."

"That's too bad," Mavis said. Her tone was irritable, but she grabbed Cesia's hand as if to say she wouldn't escape alone. Cesia remained silent and squeezed her small hand.

Walking down the corridor, they finally came across a corner. There was a left path and a right path, and it wasn't clear which way they should go. Both corridors had rooms adjoining them, and there were no windows, so the only light came from small, dim night lanterns.

"Cesia," Mavis pulled her arm, whispering, "don't you hear voices coming from that room?"

Cesia nodded.

The two slowly approached the room, straining to hear more. The door was the same as the room they had been shut in, with a latch locking it from the outside.

"Hmm..." Cesia lightly touched the door and cautiously peeked through the same gap the last door had. Inside, she could see multiple women sitting on the floor with their hands bound behind their backs. "Women?" she murmured.

Mavis peeked in the room after Cesia, then asked, "What should we do, Cesia?" tilting her head in confusion.

"I don't know... They're tied up, so they're not with the kidnappers. They were probably abducted, just like we were," Cesia said. She briefly wondered what to do. There's not enough to go off of. In that case, I should do what I think is right.

"I can't just look the other way. We should set them free... And, they might know something."

Cesia undid the latch and slowly opened the door. The women inside tensed

in fear as the door opened, and when they saw that two young women had appeared, they looked at them nervously.

"Please, don't panic. Were all of you abducted and taken here?" Cesia asked.

A few of the women nodded. One asked, "Did you come to help us?" The mood in the room lightened, but Cesia wasn't going to lie, so she shook her head.

"Sorry, but we were abducted, too. However, we unlocked our door and escaped, so we're releasing you all, too," Cesia said and untied the ropes on a woman nearby.

"Until the person next to you," she said softly to calm her. Cesia continued to until them, and the until women began to help, too, so before long, everyone was free.

"Is there anyone who knows anything about how many kidnappers there are or what they're planning?" Cesia asked.

The women exchanged looks and shook their heads. They had all been suddenly abducted, just like Cesia and Mavis. They're all young women. If they had been nobles, there would've been a search for them, and their disappearances would've been a major incident. But they're all commoners. Poor ones, on top of that. It's possible nobody's even noticed that a few of them are gone.

As Cesia was thinking about these things, she looked around one more time, surveying their faces. But, to her surprise, her gaze stopped on a woman in the back with red hair and jade-green eyes. It was, without a doubt, the familiar face of her friend Maria, and she was sitting quietly, just like the women around her. Maria winked at Cesia, making sure nobody else saw her. Feeling like this would turn into something annoying, she held back a fed-up sigh.

"Cesia?" Mavis said.

Cesia turned around awkwardly. She nonchalantly shifted her position to be between Mavis and the red-haired woman, then tilted her head in feigned confusion.

"What is it, Lady May?"

Just in case, they had agreed in advance to use a nickname for Mavis so that her being the princess wouldn't be found out.

The kidnappers probably already know, but it's best that the other women don't find out that the princess was kidnapped. I didn't expect anything like this to happen, so I'm glad we discussed this beforehand, Cesia thought, feeling internally relieved. She wanted to assume the best, but a spy for the kidnappers might have been hiding among the women in the room. Though, it looked like there already was a spy, albeit of a different kind.

"Isn't it best if we don't stay here for too long? If we can't get any information, then we should all escape quickly," Mavis said.

"You're right." Cesia nodded.

Standing in front of her subjects, it seemed like the princess had regained her cool.

Cesia turned around and saw that the women had their eyes focused on her. She wasn't used to being the center of attention, so it was uncomfortable. But I have to explain everything.

"Everyone, listen up. As I said before, we were also taken here against our will, so we don't know where we are or how many kidnappers there are. We aren't knights or anything like that, so we can't protect you while we escape."

"Then why did you release us? If they find us and think we're trying to run, they might kill us!" one woman shouted in distress.

"I released you because I wanted to. I knew I'd feel guilty if I left you here; it wasn't out of a feeling of kindness or care," Cesia straightforwardly stated, her manner of speaking becoming even more informal. She didn't think of what she had done as some sort of heroic gesture. There could've even been some who wanted to aid the kidnappers.

"I don't think I've done anything admirable. The people who want to stay can stay, and the people who want to escape can escape. Decide what you want to do yourself," Cesia continued. She didn't want to see anyone unwillingly dragged along without being able to choose for themselves.

After Cesia finished talking, almost all the women exited the room. They

understood their circumstances, so without shouting or raising their voices, they hurried toward the outside.

"So, why are you here?" Cesia approached Maria and asked her amid the commotion.

"Well," Maria gave her a strained smile and raised her hands in surrender. "I was abducted too, of course. It was so scary..." she started fake crying.

Cesia mercilessly pulled her ear. "You're going to do that in front of your little sister? *That*?" She glared at Maria and gestured at the worried-looking Mavis, who was escorting the women out. Luckily, she hadn't yet noticed the exchange between Cesia and her friend.

Seeing her sister's fragile-looking back, Maria's expression turned serious, and she grabbed Cesia's hand. "Thanks for protecting her. Knowing that you were with her, I was able to calm down and focus on the operation."

"It just happened that way," Cesia shook her head in exhaustion. "Wait, huh? Operation?" she furrowed her eyebrows.

If the princess disappeared, any search for her would be a top priority. The kidnappers would know this, but after they abducted her, they had just left her alone. And, in this large warehouse, Cesia and Mavis still hadn't run into any of them.

"Are you connected to all this?"

"Quick as always, Cesia. Right now, a unit of knights is surrounding the whole warehouse district. The kidnappers were using this area as a place to abduct the beautiful women of Emeroade and smuggle them to other countries... They're human traffickers."

At the words "human trafficking," Cesia's face went pale. "Even the princess?" she whispered.

"May is much too risky as a target." Maria shook her head. "Recently, I finally located their hideout and infiltrated as a decoy, letting myself get abducted. You two were only kidnapped after that..."

"So, they saw it was about time to pull out and decided to kidnap someone

important, even if it meant taking a risk?"

"Something like that seems reasonable."

"That means your movements might have been leaked to the kidnappers. Is that going to be all right?"

Maria, or rather, Marcus and his subordinates, had only recently pinpointed the location of the kidnappers' hideout, but the criminals were already going through with their risky final job. They might be behaving this flashily because they knew they had been exposed.

"On my country's honor, I'll get us through this," Maria said, standing straight. "Sorry, but can you stay with May a bit longer? I'll follow after you once I've informed the others outside of the situation." Magic energy gathered at the tips of Maria's coral-pink fingernails.

She's using magic to send a message. It's magic, but I don't know how to use it yet. She was able to communicate with the outside world even after she was abducted, so she must have known that Mavis and I were kidnapped.

"Fine, but if you're going to come help, do it as the prince!" Cesia said.

"Oh? So even you want to be saved by a prince! You're surprisingly smooth, Cesia!"

Cesia stuck out her tongue at Maria, who was smiling excitedly for some reason.

"Not for me, for your sister! She's crazy about you!" Cesia pointed at Mavis, who looked at Maria uneasily.

Maria looked to see that her sister was uninjured and smiled gently.

"Okay. I'll come to the rescue, gallantly astride a white horse!"

"Normal is fine. I'd feel bad for her if she saw you cross-dressing."

In the end, nobody stayed in the room, and along with Mavis, a relieved Cesia left after everyone else. Mavis grabbed Cesia's hand again, and Cesia held her hand back. The princess's small hand was warm and revitalized Cesia, making her feel braver.

"You're magnificent, Cesia," Mavis said.

"What is it, all of a sudden?"

"Releasing those women made it more dangerous, but you did it regardless because you couldn't bear to leave them. I think that was very heroic of you," Mavis said. She was jogging while attentively looking ahead.

Cesia smiled awkwardly at Mavis's earnest statement. "That's not true. Maybe I calculated that if I released them, they would draw the kidnappers' attention away from us."

"Can't they say the same? I'm valuable to the kidnappers; the other women might be able to get away while they're focused on me."

Cesia was impressed by Mavis's conjecture. She's correct. If they could choose one person to recapture and use as a bargaining chip, it would be her. Cesia had thought of that possibility, but it was impossible to tell who would run across the kidnappers.

"You do overstate my merits, Lady May."

She always takes things too positively. Part of me wants her to be more wary as a royal, and another part of me wants her to stay this way. To her surprise, in only a short time, Cesia had begun to feel protective of Mavis. It was a bizarre sensation; this was the first time she had felt that way about anyone.

"By the way, was that woman you were talking to earlier your friend?" Mavis asked.

Mavis had noticed that Cesia and Maria knew each other and had purposefully separated herself from them while they talked.

"Yes... She is," Cesia replied. It pained her to say it, but it wasn't a lie. It's for her own sake that she doesn't know who Maria is, she thought. Remembering the hollow look in Chris's eyes lately, Cesia avoided saying anything directly.

"Oh... I imagine that you wanted to escape together with your friend... I'm sor __"

Cesia put a finger to Mavis's lips because she sounded like she was about to apologize again.

"She's strong, so there's no need to worry about her, Lady May. Rather than apologizing, don't you think there are other, more proper words for this situation?"

There was no need to worry about Maria, even when she was by herself. Besides, Cesia had planned to escape with Mavis from the beginning, so she wouldn't have entrusted her to Maria. Regardless, it was too late to turn back now.

Mavis blinked, but when Cesia prompted her, saying, "Well?" she smiled broadly.

"Cesia, thank you."

"You're very welcome! We're not out of this thing yet, so stay on your guard, and let's keep moving forward!"

"Yeah."

As they tightly held hands, the two continued down the corridor.

THE warehouse was large, but it was only a single building, and while its many rooms made the corridors feel long and complicated, they eventually came across the entrance. The door was much larger than a normal one and could accommodate the transport of goods of substantial size. Curiously enough, it was wide open.

The other women who left first probably passed through here, Cesia thought as she and Mavis cautiously peeked outside. It felt like forever since she had seen the clear blue sky.

Cesia felt underwhelmed when she saw no kidnappers around, even at the entrance, but quickly sensed the circumstances they were in. The surrounding buildings limited her view, but here and there, she heard fighting as clashes broke out between the unit of knights and the kidnappers, and occasionally even heard the frantic voices of women trying to escape.

"Is everyone all right?" Mavis frowned, looking toward the direction the shouts came from.

"We don't have time to worry about anyone else right now," Cesia said, half to herself. "We're lucky that nobody's here, but they might be lying in wait somewhere, hoping to catch you. First, let's get away from here."

Cesia pulled Mavis's hand, and she obediently followed. The warehouse district had long rows of similar-looking warehouses. They were outside but still had no idea where to go to escape the labyrinthine series of buildings.

Should we go to where it's quieter? The kidnappers are fighting, but if we go toward the noise, the knights are there, too, so should we head there instead? If we can link up with the knights, they'll protect Mavis, but if anything goes wrong, I'll basically be handing over a hostage to the kidnappers.

"Aaah, if only I had learned how to make better decisions in times like this..." Cesia quietly derided herself.

Mavis's eyes widened in surprise. "That's important for knights and soldiers to be able to do, but it's normal for a lady like you not to know how."

"I'm not a lady..."

"That's not true at all. And I think your decisions have all been very appropriate, so please, don't disparage yourself."

Mavis's encouragement embarrassed her. Cesia often put up a front, so for good and for ill, the princess's candid words hit home.

"Becoming a lady is quite a promotion," Cesia grinned, trying to hide her embarrassment, "from calling me a homewrecker."

The expression on Mavis's face stiffened. "Gosh! I was trying to cheer you up! How mean!"

"My bad. Thank you, Lady May. I feel a bit calmer."

"You could've just said that instead!" Mavis turned her face away in a huff but kept holding Cesia's hand. So, that's how it is, huh? I see, I see.

Cesia's tone had been curt, but internally, she was grateful. *I should thank her more properly*, Cesia thought and raised her head. With a start, she released Mavis's hand and thrust her away.

"Aah! Cesia, what—" Mavis protested as she plopped on the ground,

surprised. Before she could finish, she looked at Cesia and froze.

Without either of them realizing it, some of the kidnappers had snuck up on them. A man was standing right where Mavis had just been, and another man pinned Cesia's arms from behind.

"Cesia!" Mavis shouted.

"Lady May, please run!"

Mavis shook her head as if to say, "Didn't I say I wouldn't escape alone?"

If she left Cesia behind, there was no way to know what would happen to her. And, more than that, after holding hands with her the whole time, Mavis didn't want to leave her.

"Y-You! Release that woman! I'll go with you!" Mavis shouted.

Seeing Mavis inch toward them, Cesia bit her lip in frustration. She had brought Mavis this far, only for her to get captured again. Mavis was stubborn but straightforward and a normal girl, especially considering her position. *I can't imagine how frightening it is for her to walk to the kidnappers herself*.

Cesia tried to do something with magic, but with the other man so close, she didn't have any options.

"Gaah, if you don't come help now, do you know how uncool it'll be, Your Royal Highness?!" Cesia shouted as loud as she could.

"Can't you make the dramatic scene of you calling for help a bit cuter?" Marcus dropped in from above with a loud *thud*. He sent the man holding Cesia flying.

"Big Brother?!"

"Please, don't ask me to do that."

Mavis's shout of joy and Cesia's threatening-sounding voice overlapped. Marcus spun around like a top, using his body's momentum to land a roundhouse kick on the other man, slamming him to the ground.

"Marcus! You came to save us...!" Mavis ran up to her brother and clung to him like a spoiled child.

He securely hugged her delicate body, then patted her on the head, asking, "You okay, May? You're not hurt?"

"No, I'm fine, thanks to Cesia."

"I see. Good job, Cesia," Marcus said, looking at Cesia. His gaze softened.

"Wha."

"Wha?" Marcus repeated.

"Where were you?! What would you have done if something had happened to your beloved princess?! I'm just a civil servant! Not long ago, I was still just a student! I'm not strong enough to protect someone so precious... So please, don't depend on me to do crazy things like this!" Cesia protested extensively but grew weak when she realized Marcus had finally come.

She decided to do her best to hide her relief when she saw him. It's annoying, somehow, so I'll never say that he was cool just now, no matter what.

Unfortunately, criminals, not knights, overheard the noise they made. They came streaming in. *I can't lose my energy now!* Cesia put more strength into her legs and stood up.

"You brought more enemies instead of allies?!" she accused.

"Well, well... I went across the roof, so I must have stood out."

"The prince would head toward the princess... You exposed that she was here..."

It was almost as if he brought the criminals there on purpose. Cesia frowned, and Marcus gave her a strained smile.

A man charged at them, and Marcus blew him away with magic. Seeing the power of his attack, Cesia adjusted her own to match it and knocked down another man.

"So, is there anyone else with you? Someone's coming to help, right?" Cesia asked.

Marcus's smile was so perfect it looked forced.

"What? You came alone?!" Cesia yelled angrily. "In the first place, isn't this

the job of a knight or a soldier? It makes no sense for the prince to be on the front lines!"

Another man right in front of the prince was kicked into the air by one of his long legs. He laughed. "I was the fastest!"

"Do you want a medal? How old are you, you brat?!" Cesia pushed over a stack of wooden crates next to her and urged Mavis farther back.

"Twenty." Marcus made a peace sign with his fingers. Cesia wanted to snap them off.

"Shouldn't you know better by now?" Cesia said. Mavis was nearby, so she couldn't say anything directly, but she grimaced when she remembered Maria.

The age of majority in Emeroade was seventeen, and because of that, the limit on enrolling in the Academy was sixteen. That means that when Cesia first met him, he hadn't been an adult yet. She regretted learning this piece of useless information.

"To speak seriously, I'm the most suitable person for this kind of thing. I can fight well enough and have the authority and ability to issue orders and commands on the spot," he reasoned.

"If that's all, then isn't it unnecessary for someone like you to come?" she countered.

"I'm not going to be the next king, and I have a younger brother as well. Even if the worst comes to pass, it'll be fine."

Cesia shivered. Marcus was saying it didn't matter if he died as long as it was for his country.

"You're... You're just one person. Do you have to take on all that responsibility yourself?" she asked.

Next to her, Mavis was silent. For royalty, it might've been just how things were. But Cesia was a commoner. She would hate to see Marcus get hurt in someone else's place.

"No? If anything, compared to the responsibility on my older brother's shoulders or the sacrifices my younger sisters will have to make, I'm lucky to be

able to choose where I can fight," he said with a carefree smile.

He really thinks that. The crown prince was ranked the highest, just beneath the king, but he was burdened with heavy responsibilities irrespective of his own desires. A princess would marry whoever was chosen for her, for the sake of her country. From that perspective, Marcus's position might have a lot of freedom.

"And I'm not doing this all on my own."

By virtue of not having responsibilities pushed onto him, he was free, and he used that freedom to treat himself like a pawn.

"If you weren't a prince, I would hit you," Cesia said after a pause.

"Disrespectful, as always." Marcus laughed.

Cesia was annoyed. She didn't want anyone important to her to get hurt, whether they were a prince or a commoner. She wasn't close to Marcus but was indebted to him, and Maria was a precious friend. The person who treated Marcus least like a human being was Marcus himself; he didn't see himself as important. That, too, made her furious.

Lost in her thoughts, Cesia was startled to see a man who looked like a fisherman rushing toward her. She slid a piece of wood at his feet, knocking him over.

"By the way," Marcus began, "you've been fighting quite passively for some time now. What happened to your 'determined resistance'?"

Cesia glared at him a second time. "It doesn't mean I behave violently; it means I won't give up. I won't kill someone just for carrying a knife!"

Cesia channeled a minuscule amount of wind at her next opponent, sweeping his legs out from under him. She was using the magic she had seen Marcus use. It had looked powerful, and she could adjust its intensity as needed. More enemies streamed in, but luckily, none individually was much of a threat.

"Hm," Marcus nodded. "How kind of you. Could you still say that if you were about to be killed?" he asked, sending several more enemies flying with a wave of his arm.

Cesia was sure she could do the same attack he had just done, but she was more afraid of putting too much power into it and killing the other person. Growing desperate, she shouted, "I've never been about to be killed, so I don't know!"

"I see."

The salty air of the port filled Cesia's nostrils, and the indistinguishable rows of warehouses continued. She hesitated, not knowing where to run next.

"This way," Marcus said, holding Mavis and pulling Cesia's arm as he broke into a run. "May, you'll bite your tongue, so close your mouth, okay? There you go, good girl," he sweetly whispered to his sister.

It was a voice that Cesia had never heard before. *I see, so this is why she says her brother is perfect. He certainly is princely. I didn't know.* She felt ashamed of the slight sense of superiority she had felt at knowing the more willful side of the prince that Mavis hadn't seen.

"Ah," Cesia said.

"What is it?" Marcus asked.

"It's nothing."

Cesia was at a loss for words after receiving two shocks at once. The first was her realization that she had felt superior to Marcus's sister, and the second was the shock of seeing the sweet side of Marcus that he only showed to Mavis.

Isn't this basically like I'm conscious of him? He's a prince. He isn't someone I can hope for anything more than being my former guardian. She knew that when they first met and knew she should know it now.

Approaching the corner of a building, Marcus turned around, attracting their pursuers. He stomped with a loud *boom*, and the ground shook, causing the men to dramatically topple over.

"Take May and run. There are knights over there," Marcus said.

Cesia blinked, then said, "Understood!"

Cesia grabbed Mavis and began to run, but the princess, who had been quiet until then, stopped her.

"Wait! We can't just leave Marcus alone!"

"His Royal Highness didn't come here alone! He'll be fine. And, to him, we're a hindrance. We can help him more if we leave!" Cesia said. The former was her speculation, and the latter was the truth.

Although, thinking back to when Mavis was kidnapped, I can't rely on the assumption that royalty will always have guards nearby. It's possible he came alone. Regardless, he probably has a better chance of victory if he fights by himself.

Mavis paused, then nodded. "All right." She appeared surprised at how forcefully Cesia had spoken to her, but she understood what she had said. "Marcus, be careful!" she said, then started running with Cesia.

Cesia was angry at Marcus for treating himself like a piece in a game earlier, but now, she was frustrated that she had to run and leave everything up to him.

"I will."

After a delay, Cesia heard Marcus's carefree response.

AFTER that, Cesia and Mavis joined up with the knights without difficulty. Just as she thought, Marcus had charged in alone, and she was relieved to hear that backup ran in right after him. Mavis, on the other hand, fainted from the shock. Apparently, she had assumed her brother wasn't suited for fighting.

From our argument earlier, he sounded prepared to kill. He's probably killed in the past, too.

"Cesia, you okay?"

Hearing a familiar voice, Cesia raised her head, and her eyes widened when she saw Keith standing there, dressed like a knight.

She was silent for a moment, then said, "Keith?"

"You helped the other kidnapped women escape, right? Great work. Some knights watching this port discovered them, and the ladies showed them right to the kidnappers' hideout."

"Haah..." Cesia sighed. She wanted to hear something else, not that.

While she stared at Keith in his armor, Marcus and Layne showed up. When she saw the always-agreeable Layne in armor, her frown deepened.



She had a bad feeling about this, but she stayed silent.

"Did May lose consciousness? Poor thing. A princess isn't suited for fighting." Marcus stroked Mavis's red hair. The princess was sleeping with her head on Cesia's lap.

"Your Royal Highness," Cesia said.

Marcus should have noticed Cesia glaring intensely at him, but he made no effort to meet her gaze.

"Yeah?"

"May I get an explanation?"

"Later. First, I have to deal with this place. Then, I have to escort May back to the castle safely," Marcus said. He was extremely calm, despite being aware of her confusion about the situation and her suspicions about him.

"Very well. Please, explain everything properly to me sometime," she conceded.

"Sure, I promise," Marcus said, finally meeting her gaze. The look in his eyes softened. Then, he stooped down next to Cesia and took her hand.

"Your Highness?"

Marcus was silent for a beat, then asked, "You're okay, right?" As if to confirm, he caressed the back of her hand with his thumb. Cesia reflexively blushed. The way he touched her felt indecent, somehow.

"I'm fine! I might have a few scratches, but..."

"Really." Marcus looked down slightly.

Unable to see his expression, Cesia felt anxious and shook her hand.

"And you?"

"Yes?"

"Are you injured, Your Highness?"

Marcus quickly raised his head and said, "Aah... No, I'm not particularly hurt."

His expression was the same as the innocent look of surprise Maria

occasionally made. *He really is Maria*, Cesia again felt keenly. She chuckled without thinking, and Marcus gave her a puzzled look and tilted his head.

"What?"

"No... I just thought, 'Wow, he really is Maria.'"

"What the heck?" A dejected expression flashed across his face, and he quickly hid it with a cheerful smile. "Good job today. It should've been your day off, so I'll tell Layne to give you a break tomorrow. Be sure to take your time and rest up."

Marcus let go of her hand and stood up. It had only been brief, but her hand felt warm where he had been holding it. Cesia watched his hand, unconsciously following that warmth with her gaze.

"No thanks, I want to hear your explanation as soon as I can, so I'll be at work tomorrow," Cesia said.

Marcus grinned with that same mischievous smile.

THE next morning, Cesia arrived at the Second Division of the Financial Audit Bureau. When the always-shut door to the office of the perpetually absent division chief was open, a suspicious expression crossed her face.

It had been a month since she'd started working here. Her days consisted of training with her senior, Layne, but she had never met the division chief, who she had heard was busy. She had a *really* bad feeling about this. If it was possible, she didn't want to know anything.

She was often misunderstood due to her tendency to fight back with all her power against any antagonizers, but at heart, Cesia was a pacifist. If there were things she was better off not knowing, she preferred to stay that way. She only desired a quiet and peaceful life as a civil servant, and she was ignoring the fact that life was already breaking down around her.

However, the god of fate was tricky.

Someone suddenly poked their face out the open door of the division chief's office. As she had predicted, it was Marcus.

"Cesia! Good morning. This might be sudden, but come here."

Cesia hesitated. "Do I have any right to refuse?"

"Do you think you do?" Marcus grinned.

Cesia entered the office. It wasn't very large and was almost empty; there was no furniture besides a desk, a chair, and a shelf. Layne was there, too, holding some documents. He smiled at Cesia.

"Good morning, Cesia. Thanks for yesterday."

"Good morning, Layne..."

"I hear that you're getting an explanation from His Royal Highness. Be quite sure to be polite," he said, leaving the room, his business complete.

Please, don't leave me here.

The door mercilessly closed, leaving only Cesia, Marcus, and Marcus's butler, Chris, in the room.

"Shall I open the door?" Chris asked.

"We're here to discuss our work." Marcus shook his head. "This isn't a situation where an unmarried man and woman are getting up to anything untoward."

Cesia wasn't a lady and certainly wasn't Marcus's lover or anything else. She also felt uncomfortable being treated like a noblewoman, so she lightly nodded. Leaving the door open would make it easier for her to run away, too, not that it would accomplish anything if she did.

"I'm sorry I can't offer you a seat. There's only one chair. I don't normally use this room, so I don't leave much in it," Marcus explained.

Not offering the only chair to a woman is truly princely of him.

"I don't mind," Cesia said, internally insulting him. The sole chair in the room was quite plain for a prince.

"So, where should I start?" he asked.

"First...with Lady May, I mean, Princess Mavis. Can you tell me how she's doing?" Cesia began, and Marcus's eyes softened.

The day before, Mavis had remained asleep the rest of the time Cesia was with her. The last Cesia saw of her, she was being carefully carried away to the castle by the pale-faced Anita and the rest of her lady's maids who had come to collect her. Cesia had wanted to be with Mavis until she woke up, but it was impossible for someone of her status to do so.

"May woke up yesterday evening, and after a hot bath and a light meal, she went to sleep in her room that night," Marcus said. "I checked on her before I came here this morning, and she was well, without any injuries. She wanted to see you, so I'll set up a small meeting soon."

"Thank you." Cesia sighed with relief.

Marcus smiled. "I'm the grateful one. You protected my sister. My thanks."

Cesia paused, then said, "Not at all."

"That being the case, I'd like to give you an official reward. Do you have something you want?"

"Huh?" Cesia exclaimed in surprise, flustered. She hadn't expected it.

"If it's what you'd prefer, I can get you easily convertible gold nuggets or small gems." Marcus grinned, bringing up what Cesia had previously told Maria she would spend her pay on.

Those had crossed her mind, too, but in the end, Cesia shook her head and said, "I don't need them."

"There's no need to be modest, you know. The knights that performed well are getting rewards, too, so it's not like I'm giving you special treatment," Marcus said, confused by her rejection.

But Cesia's feelings were unchanged. She smiled, feeling refreshed somehow. "If you'd like to thank me, Lady May promised to treat me to cake again. That's all I ask for."

Marcus paused, then remarked, "How unselfish."

Cesia sensed a hint of dissatisfaction in his tone, as if he had wanted a different response from her. "I protected Lady May back then, but it wasn't because she's a princess. I wanted to save her because she's a good girl who

always tries her best and perseveres. If I get a reward, it'll be as if those feelings were due to my own self-interest... The reward I want the most is cake."

That's probably—no, it's surely what you'd call friendship.

Marcus listened to Cesia until she finished, then nodded. "Very well. Then, as May's brother and the prince, consider me in your debt."

"Your Highness, you can't. Royalty can't be in debt to an individual. And she might be Cesia, but she's a commoner, too. Please, even if she doesn't want it, make her take some gold or something," Chris hurriedly interrupted.

This must be something he absolutely can't do. This time only, Cesia didn't want any gold, but Chris was correct. She stared at Marcus and said, "Did you hear what he said?"

"I heard him, and I'm still doing what I said I would," Marcus said nonchalantly. He didn't appear to have the slightest intention of going against what he had promised. The two were equally stubborn. Maria was the same.

Cesia sighed. "I don't consider you in my debt at all, Your Highness," she tried protesting, but Marcus didn't pay it any mind.

"Well then, your next question?" he prompted.

"Ah, yeah."

Marcus quickly changed the topic, so she asked what she needed to, even as the gaze of a frustrated Chris standing behind the prince made her uncomfortable.

"Why didn't Her H— Lady May's guards help at the café? Even if Anita had been unable to do anything, there's no way nobody else was around the princess, right?" Cesia asked. She had been wondering whether it was still okay to call the princess "Lady May," but she wouldn't get anywhere if she corrected herself every time, so she continued as before.

Marcus massaged his temples with his fingers as if he had a headache. "I told you about how the kidnappers were an international organization that abducted Emeroadian citizens away to other countries, right?"

"Yes. Actually, that's the only thing you've told me..."

Marcus awkwardly grimaced. He probably saw his decision amid the confusion to leave Mavis's protection up to Cesia without a proper explanation as a mistake.

"A member of the kidnapping ring was in contact with one of the princess's guards and obtained information that, on that day and at that time, she was going to that café. Not only that; they got the detailed positions and number of the guards, too," Marcus explained.

"So there was a spy on the inside. But isn't that a strange coincidence? She was abducted at the same time as when you finally located their hideout."

Marcus nodded. "There was a complete and total division of labor among the group; there were fine separations between the kidnappers themselves, those who delivered the people to foreign countries, and those who accepted the deliveries in those countries. They did their jobs without knowing anything about the others' identities or duties."

Cesia frowned. The mastermind who had thought of all that must have been quite sharp. "If that's true, there should've been someone giving the orders," she said.

"Yeah. However, they secretly fled the country before May was abducted."

Cesia was surprised. "Then, that means...!"

"That's right. May's kidnapping was a decoy. They sensed the investigation getting closer, so they cut their losses and sacrificed their subordinates."

Everyone was paying attention to the princess's abduction and had to round up all the kidnappers. So, while that was going on, the ringleader took advantage of the commotion to escape.

"That's...very frustrating," Cesia said, clenching her fist. She was angry just thinking about the fear Mavis had felt. And all of that just to be a decoy.

"For kidnappers who secretly captured women without any relatives, I thought it was too audacious and sloppy for a final job. But to think they already ran away before May was kidnapped! It never even crossed my mind," Marcus said, his voice becoming more passionate. "This is an unforgivable failure. I fully intend to make up for it by hunting down the ringleader and

making him pay, even if I have to go to the ends of the earth to make it happen."

Fiery streaks of anger tinged his stern, jade-green eyes. Cesia felt that even those flickering flames were beautiful.

"I might be repeating myself, but I still have some doubts," Cesia said. "Lady May only decided she would go on an outing away from the castle recently. Even if the criminals had contact with a guard, it would be meaningless if they didn't know she was going out."

Marcus silently nodded in agreement with Cesia's statement. Many within the castle had access to information, including where her guards would be positioned if the princess left the castle. And since the kidnapping, no one had disappeared from the castle. In other words, the person who had passed along information to the criminal organization was still in the country, and they were probably still working in the castle.

"Correct. Besides the ringleader, there's still a mole in the castle, acting as if nothing happened."

Hearing Marcus so clearly reaffirm it, Cesia felt a shiver run down her spine.

"As you might expect from the 'massive port' of Emeroade," Marcus continued, "people and things move in and out of the country incessantly. While the arts and culture flourish, so, too, does the black market. It's the duty of those of us who serve this country to investigate and suppress it."

"Uhh... Yes," Cesia said. Seeing Marcus slowly stand from his seat and take on a more solemn tone, she could sense a change in the room's atmosphere and slowly backed up. The room was too small, and she quickly hit the wall.

"Emeroade has many different jurisdictions, and each has its own organization to investigate. The people who staff those organizations are, without exception, brilliant. However, when a matter encompasses multiple jurisdictions, any investigation or information sharing is seen as an abuse of authority if the party involved hasn't gone through the complicated process of obtaining permission to do so."

"Y-Yeah... That sounds difficult!" Cesia gave a perfunctory response to

Marcus's imposing speech as she searched for a way out. *I should've left the door open*. When Marcus turned away, Cesia fumbled for the door.

"That's right! It is difficult!" Marcus vigorously spun back around.

"Ah! You surprised me." Cesia jumped, this time searching for the doorknob with her hands behind her back.

"So, I had an idea. While I would pretend to be acting on my own selfish initiative, I would use my authority to create an investigation team that could bridge that gap. It's where you're assigned, Cesia: the Second Division of the Financial Audit Bureau."

"The Second Division."

"The Second Division," Marcus said cheerfully, nodding energetically.

That's right. I always thought something was weird!

There was nothing odd about the Financial Audit Bureau. Cesia knew it was occasionally necessary to have people check with those who submitted documents with inconsistencies to the Financial Bureau and visit businesses and investigate anything unusual.

However, one thing that had always bothered her was the explanation of the job she had received when she first started. She was told they would investigate things that would normally be entrusted to specialized organizations and that there might be "violent developments."

What's a "violent development"? What do they mean by accounting in the castle might develop into something violent? Next, there's the suspicious title of "enforcer." What are we enforcing? The fact that it's unclear is pretty odd. And the room for the Second Division is obviously a room for storing documents. When I'm asked to grab a document, I can get it quickly. Because it's a document storage room.

The first division existed in a separate room that looked just like an office. A bunch of serious-looking bookworm types worked there—nobody who looked like the muscular Keith. And finally, the Second Division had few employees.

Even Cesia had thought it was ludicrous. But, only having arrived in the castle

a month ago, she couldn't yet tell the difference between what was normal and what wasn't. She didn't know where to begin regretting it all. She shouldn't have ignored her doubts.

Cesia reflected on her circumstances. She had no parents or relatives and had been lucky enough to have the prince as her guardian and be able to enroll in the Academy. After graduation had been like a dream—employment in the castle, a pathway to the elite, and a position in the Finance Bureau, far from any bullying or danger!

I want to blast away my cheerful past self. It had to have been a trap when the prince offered to be my guardian from the very beginning! Of course, there was a catch. What friendship? Give me back those innocent feelings from back then!

Shaking, Cesia looked at the brilliantly smiling Marcus. *Gotta make sure I don't get carried away and hit him*.

"By the way, why the Second Division of the Financial Audit Bureau?" Cesia asked.

"There was already a first division, and most illegality has some connection with money. The territory's virtually infinite."

In other words, he wants to be able to intervene anywhere. This prince...

"One day, I'll have enough authority to even be allowed to hit a prince!"

"Hahaha, spirited as always," Marcus laughed. He wasn't making any effort to hide his good mood.

"Do I! Have any! Right to refuse?!"

"Do you think you do?" Marcus said, this time in a very cheerful voice.

"Gaah! You... sneaky little...!"

Seeing the grin on his face, she clenched her fist. I wish I had the authority to hit this brat right now.

Marcus started cheerfully counting on his fingers. "You're our long-awaited first female employee. In addition to fighting skills, of course, and how to disguise yourself as a noble, I'm going to drill everything you need to know about covert operations into you, so get ready."

Cesia paused. "So, I won't see Maria as much anymore. That makes me feel a bit lonely..."

I guess it wasn't a hobby after all. He cross-dressed on missions because he didn't have any female employees, Cesia thought, reconciling herself to her fate.

"How presumptive of you. Getting a bit of training doesn't mean you're even close to being able to do what Maria does. Naturally, that goes for honeypot operations, too."

"Huh?! I can't just let that go by without saying something! Are you saying that a man using magic to disguise himself as a woman is better than a one hundred percent biological woman like me?"

"That is what I'm saying." He chuckled, giving her an alluring smile.

One way or another, Cesia had lived all her eighteen years as a woman. She couldn't back down here; she had to counter him somehow. Although, she was already at a disadvantage when she began with the phrase "one way or another." But, she would, as always, continue her determined resistance! That was how she had lived up until this point.

"All right! As your first 'real' female enforcer, I'll show a fake, cross-dressing guy like you how it's done!"

"Ah, you fool!" Chris quietly cursed, but it was too late.

A radiantly smiling Marcus clapped his hands on both of Cesia's shoulders.

"Ah!" Cesia exclaimed in surprise.

"You really will? Thank you! Ahh, this is fantastic! I'm so glad you decided on your own to continue working here. I was just thinking that I couldn't keep you tied down here for much longer," Marcus said happily. "Ahh, this is great! I'm really happy you decided on your own to be an enforcer."

"You..." Cesia shook.

Marcus's smile took on a satisfied air. "This truly is a lucky break. I'll train even a stray cat to be a wonderful lady."

"You princely brat!"

Cesia's yell reverberated throughout the division chief's office.						

Chapter 3: By a Twist of Fate, I'm Attending a Masquerade Ball

"YOU'RE shameless!"

Cesia couldn't comprehend it.

Furrowing her eyebrows and squinting her eyes, she silently returned the glare of her "junior" standing before her. Life may hold innumerable fates for me, but what is the likelihood that I was born under a lame star that doomed me to always have the word "shameless" shouted at me? Cesia's thoughts wandered in an uncharacteristically fatalistic direction. She didn't want to face the reality in front of her.

"Hey, are you listening? Cesia Kathrin!" he pointed a finger at her.

Cesia impulsively grabbed his finger and tried to bend it backward.

"OW! What the heck was that?! Are you a wild monkey or something?!"

She had never met a wild monkey, so there was no way for her to know. Cesia deployed a secret, princessly technique she had recently learned: a graceful smile.

"Oh, did your mother perhaps not teach you that pointing was rude, Felix Burns?" she challenged.

"You... Are you mocking me?!" Felix shouted in exasperation.

"Ah, great. You got that I was mocking you." Cesia folded her arms and maintained her smile as if to say, "I accept your challenge!"

"It's great that you two're all buddy-buddy, but can we start the meeting now?" Marcus butted in, standing in the doorway, looking at the both of them and grinning in amusement.

Instantly, Felix stood at attention and saluted. "Good morning, Your Royal Highness!"

"Morning, Felix," Marcus replied. "Cesia, you're cute today too," he said as he

passed by.

Cesia widened her eyes in shock at Marcus's nonchalant tone. "Why, you...! It might be fun for you, but do you mind not adding more fuel to the fire?" she said. She could feel goosebumps on her skin.

Before Marcus could reply, Felix flared up, "Kathrin! Don't take that tone of voice with His Royal Highness! It's disrespectful!"

"Don't worry," Marcus said before Cesia could say anything. "She's my pupil, after all, so that level of disrespect is forgivable," he said, silencing Felix.

"Your Royal Highness, let us begin," interrupted Layne, unable to continue watching silently.

Marcus's amused expression stiffened.



"Well then, let's start the meeting," Marcus said.

Layne handed out some papers to everyone present. Because he normally substituted for the rarely present division chief, as a rule, he also led their meetings.

"The target of our investigation this time is a drug whose use has lately become widespread among nobles," Layne began.

"A drug... This has less and less to do with accounting," Cesia mumbled a complaint.

Keith laughed. "Don't make me say it again, Cesia."

"Is it: 'anything that involves money is under our jurisdiction'?" she ventured.

"That's right."

That could be anything, Cesia internally despaired.

Created by Marcus so that he could personally participate in investigations, the Second Division of the Financial Audit Bureau performed audits, but the name was also a cover for the on-the-ground investigations—closer to police operations—they undertook to uncover illegal financial dealings. Cesia's title of "enforcer" sounded impressive, but the role was just a label for a jack-of-all-trades, performer of odd jobs, and person in charge of preliminary investigations.

When the criminals the Second Division uncovered were rounded up and arrested, all the bragging rights went to the Security Bureau and the knights deployed to make the arrests. On the other hand, when they looked into something judged as being legitimate, no one ever knew about it, as if the whole investigation had never happened. Due to the difference in how the two divisions in the bureau were treated, the Second Division had a reputation within the First Division for being a do-nothing post.

"But, isn't there another department that investigates drugs?" she asked.

"Yes, the Narcotics Division of the Security Bureau. Unfortunately, they don't have enough influence to infiltrate noble estates and parties to gather evidence."

The Security Bureau had the absolute authority to investigate the powerful drug syndicates lurking in the capital, but when nobility was involved, things got much more complicated, and they didn't interfere.

Running her eyes over the paper in front of her, Cesia frowned. "And anyway, there are probably a few big shots out there we can't arrest, even if we knew they had drugs. I see it all the time in pulp novels."

"Cesia, you read those kinds of books?" Marcus asked, slightly surprised.

Cesia looked at Marcus and tilted her head, puzzled. "I'm not talking about those books. Adults are so dirty. I have the taste of an innocent young lady."

She had received a "princely decree" to drop the overly polite attitude and interact with Marcus candidly, so she spoke with him as usual.

"Cheer up, Cesia. Here, take a candy," Roy said, putting a piece of candy in the irritated Cesia's hand as if to pacify her. She felt like he was mistaking her for someone like a younger sister of his back in the countryside.

"Are you stupid? Or just a kid? Part of having adult taste is being accepting of all sorts of things in life," Felix said.

Cesia stuck out her tongue at him. "I don't want to accept it, so quiet, new guy."

"You know I'm older than you!"

"And I know I've been here for six months longer than you."

In place of his boss, eagerly waiting for the start of the next round from his ringside seating, Layne cleared his throat to get their attention. "Felix, stop letting Cesia provoke you. Cesia, you might have an exemption from His Royal Highness, but don't disrupt the meeting."

"I'll be more careful next time."

"I'm sorry."

Felix and Cesia apologized.

"Layne, aren't you being too strict with Cesia?" Keith intervened. "We call it a meeting, but it's more like a group discussion. And Cesia's opinions have always

been valuable."

At a loss, Layne shook his head. "We are in the presence of His Royal Highness. And, as Cesia's mentor, I must be stricter than anyone else."

"So serious..." Keith grumbled.

"Don't worry." Cesia hurriedly waved her hand. "Thank you, Keith. I shouldn't have been chatting during the meeting. I'm sorry." Cesia faced everyone and lowered her head in apology.

"If you get it, then very well." Layne nodded magnanimously. "However, for this investigation, you'll be paired up with Felix."

Despite his welcoming appearance, Layne gave her a brutal punishment. Cesia could almost see the wings of a demon sprouting from his back.

AFTER the meeting, Cesia headed to the training ground because Marcus summoned her there. It was in a corner of the castle and had the bare minimum equipment. Because Marcus used it for his practice, other knights and soldiers didn't use it.

Cesia was there for her training as an enforcer, which she had started half a year ago after Princess Mavis's kidnapping. Since then, her mornings every day had been full to bursting with practice, where she trained both her skill in combat and her noble, ladylike behavior on alternating days.

According to the schedule, this day's training was to be in combat, which Marcus's former teacher, the retired knight Sir Robert, was in charge of. Occasionally, Marcus would show up under the guise of checking in on her progress, which meant he would be her instructor for the day. Today was one of those days.

"Then, including some magic, attack me," Marcus said in an easygoing tone. He had changed into a set of athletic clothing and hadn't yet taken up a fighting pose.

"Yes, sir," Cesia said, clenching her fist. She had changed into her training clothes, too.

Physical and magical combat training was necessary so she wouldn't mistakenly use too much power and kill someone and could carry out her duties and protect people. Because she had joined with the expectation of the job being just desk work, Cesia was more than a bit lacking in her physical ability compared to Layne, Keith, and Roy. The first two had been initially employed for their prowess in combat, and Roy had gone through a physically demanding curriculum at his school in the provinces. Even Felix, who was older than Cesia, had originally been a knight. He had been brought on because of his high proficiency in fighting, even among the knights. But more than anything, he had strongly requested reassignment to the Second Division on the most recent personnel shift because of his deep admiration of Marcus.

It was certainly possible that Felix was correct; among the Second Division, Cesia was shameless. In the six months since she had started, she had become acutely aware of her physical shortcomings.

She swept Marcus's feet out from under him with magic and attempted to hit him. Marcus, thrown off balance, responded by supporting his body with magic and turning aside her attack. Being physically weaker than most men, Cesia primarily utilized hit-and-run style attacks, where, instead of charging in headon, she fought by trying to induce her opponent into making a mistake. Honestly, the more skilled her opponent was, the more likely her strategy was to fail. Marcus was one of those skilled opponents, and he caught her off guard and shifted to offense.

Cesia's loss was all but certain when it became a one-sided defensive fight, and the longer the fight continued, the greater the advantage the physically adept Marcus gained. In the end, Marcus stopped his strike just as he was about to hit Cesia in the stomach—the fight was over.

Struggling to catch her breath and drenched in sweat, Cesia said, "Thank you for the fight," as she fell to her knees.

Marcus smiled, sitting in front of Cesia and passing her a towel. "Yeah, great job, Cesia. You've really improved."

"That only sounds sarcastic..." Cesia panted, "coming from someone who isn't even breathing hard." She glared bitterly at Marcus.

Marcus laughed cheerfully, pleased at his pupil's growth. "I've said this before, but I recruited you because I needed a female enforcer—one who was adaptive, calm under pressure, and above all, competitive. If I wanted a physically strong woman, I would've just asked a female knight to join."

Cesia paused for a beat, then said, "But, at minimum, I do have to be able to fight."

Marcus shrugged and encouraged her, "You're doing well." He grabbed Cesia's hand, which was limply hanging by her side.

As he had just soundly beaten her, his words didn't improve Cesia's mood.

"It's so frustrating. One day, I'm going to mercilessly blast you away."

"Great! Keep up that spirit... But, during an investigation, don't just attack head-on. It can also be a strategy to let them escape and run into someone else."

"Yes, sir."

For some reason, Marcus held her hand until she caught her breath.

"MARCUS, you're being much too slow," Mavis said.

In the middle of his busy schedule, Marcus somehow made time to have tea with his younger sister, and that was the first sentence out of her mouth.

"What are you talking about?" Marcus tilted his head, puzzled, as he used a knife to cut into his meat pie.

"I'm talking about Cesia! I received a report from Anita!"

Even after she mentioned Cesia, Marcus still didn't understand what she meant. Hearing the name of his sister's head maid, he looked at her, but Anita prudently remained silent and didn't raise her head. Similar to Marcus and Mavis's mother, Anita's mother had come from a foreign country. Anita was very talented; she was proficient in several languages and was Mavis's precious source of information for the detailed goings-on of the castle.

"May, calm down. What about Cesia?" he prompted.

"I hear she's partnering up with the Burns's second son."

Mavis was aware that the Second Division's work included investigative fieldwork. Marcus didn't think she knew that, on the job, the Second Division didn't stop at sticking their nose into the Security Bureau's field; they often stuck their whole head in.

Without letting his expression betray his inner thoughts, Marcus replied cheerfully, "You sure hear about things quickly. Their specialties don't overlap, so I imagine they'll skillfully cover for each other's faults."

"That's exactly it!"

"What?"

"A man and a woman, close in age, spending their time complementing each other's shortcomings in their professional duties... Marcus, work relationships develop into romantic relationships most of all! Are you fine with that Burns kid snatching Cesia away?!"

"Pulp novels sure are popular lately." Marcus took a bite of meat pie and laughed.

"Marcus! You're handsome and lovely, but Cesia is a commoner. If you don't hold onto her, she might wander off! She tries her best to be reliable, but she can be surprisingly careless sometimes!"

Seeing the shy Mavis, who had few friends, sincerely concerned over Cesia, Marcus smiled at how much she had grown.

"You've really taken a liking to her. Are you thinking of making her one of your lady's maids in the future? I won't give you any of my employees!"

"That isn't what I'm saying!" Mavis sternly glared at him. "Well, I would be happy if she became one of my lady's maids, but... I know enough that I can't very well take the genius who graduated with the best scores at the Academy for that reason alone."

"Good girl, May." Marcus lightly stroked her head, careful not to mess up her hair. Mavis looked happy, and her cheeks reddened.

Mavis helped Cesia with her training as a lady, and occasionally, she disguised

Cesia as one of her lady's maids and gave her first-hand experience on the job. There was no better spot than right beside a princess for observing the movements and behavior of noblewomen when they interacted with servants and other nobles. In part because of their continued cooperation, Cesia's and Mavis's friendship had deepened further over the past six months. And while Mavis wouldn't say it so plainly, it was clear to anyone that she truly loved Cesia.

"This isn't about me; it's about you, Marcus! Is it all right with you if Cesia falls in love with another man?"

Hearing it said so blatantly, Marcus widened his eyes in surprise. "I'm not Cesia's guardian, her lover, or anything of the like. I have no right to restrict who she loves," he said as if it was of no concern to him.

"Marcus, if you realize it later on, it'll be too late," Mavis said, not giving an inch. "I'm trying to help you; you ought to securely take Cesia for yourself while you still can."

Hearing Mavis's serious tone, Marcus, left with no other choice, played his trump card. "I'm not going to take her; I'm officially engaged, you know, so talking about a romance with Cesia and whatnot is impolite to both of them, May."

"Yes, that's right..." Mavis said meekly, as if cold water had been poured on her. She pursed her lips. "I don't like that woman."

"Don't say that. She's your future sister-in-law."

She must really hate her, Marcus thought with a strained smile as the beautiful face of his fiancée floated into his mind's eye. While Mavis was pure and often carefree, she was also fair and dignified, as befitting royalty, so her statement about his fiancée was unlike her.

"Very well. Putting aside talk of love and marriage, answer me as an older brother would to his younger sister," Mavis began, her face still serious.

"Yes?"

"Marcus, what do you think of Cesia?"

What do I think? Marcus wondered.

"I think she's a strong, cute, and assertive woman."

"Hmmm... I think it might be better if you didn't say something like that to her," Mavis said with a complex expression. Her brother had a surprising taste in women.

IT was night.

Felix was escorting the beautifully dressed Cesia up a set of stone stairs. The hem of her dress appeared to follow her movements as it smoothly ascended the steps behind her, occasionally giving off brilliant reflections in the pale orange candlelight.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Cesia sighed at the spectacle visible before her. "How cliché...dealing drugs at a masquerade ball..."

"If it's cliché, it means it's an effective strategy," Felix said.

He drew Cesia's waist to him, and she grimaced.

For the investigation, Cesia had disguised herself so that nobody would recognize her, wearing a mask that covered her eyes and sporting magically altered blonde hair and blue eyes. Her open-backed dress was somewhat flashy and accentuated her curves. Perhaps because they could strip off their everyday, external modesty, quite a few of the attendants at the ball were wearing bold outfits. In contrast to Cesia, Felix's hair and eyes were already the light blonde and blue common among nobles, so the only change to his appearance was that he had combed back his bangs. Naturally, he was also wearing a mask, so he fit right in as one of the many nobles at the ball. Although, he did stand out in one respect, thanks to his tall figure, well-built, former knight's physique, and stylish eveningwear.

"If you don't stick close to me, we won't look like partners," Felix said to Cesia.

"Do I have to? We're already at a place like this together, so isn't that good enough?"

In the kingdom of Emeroade, several types of drugs had been legalized for one reason or another. The majority were used for strictly medical purposes, and cultivating the raw ingredients or refining those ingredients was forbidden without the necessary qualifications. Some criminals obtained drugs from legal sources and subsequently adulterated them for illegal sale, but since the Narcotics Division had uncovered and arrested many of them, the rest had scaled down their operations considerably.

Currently, the drug Cesia and the rest of the enforcers were going after was of a different type. Sold via the black market, it was called "Angels' Elixir" for its reputation as a drug that let its users see heaven. The drug entered Emeroade from foreign countries, and its contents weren't approved, so both Customs and the Narcotics Division had been investigating the matter for some time.

"The other departments have spent so much time investigating this stuff... Will we really find it here so easily?" Cesia expressed her doubts to Felix, hiding her mouth behind a glass.

"You heard what he said, right? They don't have anyone who can infiltrate and blend in at parties like this. They probably haven't been able to investigate here," Felix said.

"Places like this should've been where they started their investigation. You can't buy drugs like that unless you have the money and the free time of a noble..." Cesia continued, and Felix nodded.

"Their preliminary investigations here were delayed because they predicted they'd be able to catch the criminals if they investigated around the port first. Thanks to that, we have a chance to make a name for ourselves."

Cesia lost her expression at Felix's ambitious comment. With the extravagant-sounding post of enforcer, they performed investigations under the direct supervision of the second prince. It had only been a short six months since she started, but that time had been densely packed, and thanks to it, Cesia had a painful realization: this post was entirely unsuited to success.

They were often the first ones to infiltrate a criminal operation, so the level of danger was high, but the achievements and praise always went to other departments. On top of that, the Second Division didn't participate much in the

financial audit side of the bureau, so they were disliked by the First Division. Their pay was somewhat higher than the other departments, but compared to what proper hazard pay would look like, Cesia didn't feel like she was better off. Jack-of-all-trades, odd jobs, a do-nothing post—all of these descriptors were the farthest things possible from a position with promotions or achievements.

"Well, dreams are free, I guess," Cesia said to herself. She had tried to tell Felix all this more than a few times, but he never listened. Apparently, he thought of her as "that deceitful woman who's using her charms to curry favor with His Royal Highness." She was no saint, so after Felix refused to listen, she lost any desire to convince him otherwise. I didn't know what this position entailed when I started, either, so I'm sure he'll figure it out on his own sooner or later.

"Let's split up and gather information," Felix suggested.

Did you forget that you said we should be acting like partners? What happened to sticking together? He was far too aggressively trying to distinguish himself. Cesia felt that it was dangerous to move separately in a place where there might be drug deals going on.

"It's too risky. We shouldn't stray too far from each other..."

"Even though there are so many people here? Or are you just afraid because you're a woman? You can just stay here and wander around; I'll go sniffing for clues."

That comment was unnecessary. He was a knight, so if he gets into a fight, he can probably deal with it himself, but... Violence here won't do us any good.

"Shouldn't we let Keith know?" Cesia suggested, hoping to get more instructions from one of the other enforcers who were there too, all in disguise.

"I'll be right back," Felix said with a smile as he quickly disappeared into the crowd.

"I can't believe this..." Cesia mumbled, dumbfounded.

It being a masquerade ball, rather than dancing, everyone in attendance was absorbed in stimulating conversations they wouldn't normally be able to have. Standing blankly alone would draw attention, so Cesia hurriedly pretended to

be part of a nearby circle of women. She was grateful that everyone was wearing masks because she slipped in unnoticed.

"That reminds me; I haven't seen Marquess Acton's daughter around lately."

"Oh? I keep hearing rumors that Lady Amy ran away with one of her servants."

"Ah, how truly romantic! I would never be able to do something like that."

"Truly."

"Oho ho ho!"

Elegant, malicious laughter erupted from the circle of women and crudely echoed across the boisterous hall.

This was the wrong circle, Cesia thought disdainfully. But leaving after only just joining would raise suspicion, so she stayed.

"Wasn't Lady Amy head-over-heels for Prince Marcus only a short while ago?"

Suddenly hearing her boss's name, Cesia's expression stiffened, but she made sure no one noticed. It was normal for the popular second prince's name to come up in conversation just about anywhere.

"I remember that. She was said to be in the running to become his fiancée and got quite carried away, going around everywhere and almost bragging about it."

"But it turned out that his fiancée was going to be the second princess of Gwyllt the whole time! That was quite a hilarious spectacle!"

"Truly, that serves her right!"

"Do you think she was so embarrassed that she couldn't come to parties anymore, so she eloped with a servant instead?"

It doesn't sound like they like Lady Amy very much. Or were they jealous of her? Cesia sighed behind her fan.

She knew the prince of her own country, but she found it hard to think of the two—the second prince, engaged to a princess of a country across the sea, and Marcus, her frequent sparring partner—as the same person. She remained

silent, and her thoughts continued. Marcus was a prince. She could have friendly conversations with him, and he was often intimate with her, but she couldn't get any foolish ideas.

The conversation shifted to badmouthing another lady, so Cesia took the opportunity to quietly slip out of the circle. While pretending to get a drink, she pricked up her ears, listening for any new information, but she didn't hear anything about any suspicious deals.

That's only natural. Who'd discuss something shady in the middle of a bright dance floor? This is why I wanted to stay with Felix and pretend to flirt while we listened for information somewhere more out of the way. Going somewhere dark by myself is just asking for a guy to follow me. Layne had insisted that she didn't have to do anything that dangerous, so it looked like, unfortunately, tonight would end without results.

Cesia knew she had made good progress in her training over the past half year, but she wasn't so conceited as to think she could beat anyone she came across. She sometimes felt frustrated, knowing that if she was a tall, muscular man, she could infiltrate more dangerous places, but there was no use in asking for what she couldn't have. She just had to find her specialty. Marcus had told her he had recruited her because of her unique qualities, so she decided to believe that.

A strategy only a woman can carry out... A honeypot operation? I can't do something like that. Cesia unconsciously laughed dryly. I've even been called a stray cat. I can't imagine that someone like me could seduce a man and obtain information.

Cesia meekly headed to the corner of the room, where she made herself a plate of food and grabbed a drink. She had been listening to the various conversations in the hall but only heard unflattering rumors about someone or another. In a sense, it could even be called peaceful. *Tonight's investigation might be a bust, but the capital's social scene is in full bloom right now—the perfect season for anyone wanting to distribute drugs. Before long, I'm sure we'll be sneaking into another evening party to gather information.*

Cesia spent some time eating. This corset is so tight... I can't eat as much as I

want now to save on food later, she thought, disappointed. Just then, Felix returned. It'd be nice if he found something. Wait... is he feeling sick? He looks a bit shaky. Cesia hid her mouth with her fan and squinted. She placed her finished plate on a serving tray and headed toward Felix. She could smell a sweet-smelling perfume when she drew close, and she raised an eyebrow.

"Felix."

He paused, and then Felix replied, "Kathrin."

"What's wrong? You seem strange," Cesia said. When she got closer to him, he put his arm around her almost unconsciously, his hand settling naturally on her lower back. The feeling of his hand sent a shiver down her spine. To avoid attracting attention, she twisted his arm away from her.

"Ow...!" Felix grunted.

"Are you trying to grope me? Shall I blast you away?" Cesia glared sharply at him.

Felix shook his head and apologized, "Sorry, my hand just..."

"Really, what happened?"

Cesia urged the strangely behaving Felix into a separate lounge. A small waiting room with another door that led further inside was beyond the doorway. Opening the inner door, she saw a large bed that occupied the center of the room. Cesia felt annoyed upon realizing the purpose of the room.

These nobles are shameless, she thought, frowning. Perhaps it was because they were at a masquerade ball, but that tendency was particularly pronounced.

"It doesn't look like we'll find anything tonight, so if you feel bad, can you rest here?" Cesia turned around and suggested. "I'll stand by in the small room we were just in."

Just then, a red-faced Felix hugged Cesia.

"Huh?" Cesia exclaimed. She instantly swept out his legs from under him and hurled him away from her. *I'm glad Marcus made me learn martial arts*, she sincerely thought.

"Wait a minute... Did someone...?"

"Slipped an aphrodisiac into my drink," Felix, on the floor, mumbled in a deeply embarrassed voice.

Cesia shivered and quickly moved to the wall away from him.

"Don't have such an obvious reaction... Damn it..." Felix shook his head, struggling to dispel his desires.

Cesia, her face pale, gripped the knob of the door that led back to the waiting room.

"I'm leaving and locking the door. Try to bear it on your own."

Felix looked at her with a passionate gaze and began, "Kathrin—"

"Quiet," Cesia raised a stern hand. "If you say anything, you'll only regret it tomorrow," she declared. Felix's small amount of remaining composure appeared to make him stop himself.

"Yeah. Sorry."

"Never mind that. Just don't even think about leaving this room. I'll check up on you tomorrow. See you!" Cesia said quickly and exited the bedroom.

Naturally, the bedroom locked from the inside, so she fixed the knob in place with magic and barricaded the door with a display case and a chair that were in the room. She didn't want to hear anything, so after that, she cast soundproofing magic on the door and squatted down next to the door leading to the outside.

"What a night."

She was ready to leave Felix behind and go home, although she knew she couldn't. If Felix Burns of the Financial Audit Bureau is discovered unconscious in this mansion tomorrow morning, it will cause quite a bit of trouble. On the other hand, there's no way I can carry him out of here and take him home in a carriage in that state. If I go back to the hall, Layne or someone else might still be there, but I can't imagine the ambitious Felix eager to have his seniors see him in that state.

She wouldn't be reprimanded if she left him, but they were still a team. While

she was reluctant to do so, she could only hole up in the room for the rest of the night if she wanted to make him feel remorse for recklessly going off on his own.

"I don't think this has any connection to those drugs, though... That perfume stank... I wonder if an older lady somewhere was about to snatch him up..."

I feel bad for him if that's the case, but it's still all his fault. Cesia sighed and hugged her knees, not caring if she wrinkled her dress.

Just then, there was a faint knock on the door from the outside. The sound echoed in the quiet room.

Cesia stood up with a start and readied herself, but she felt relief when she heard the voice on the other side of the door.

"Cesia, are you in there? It's me, Maria."

"Maria!" Cesia said, slowly opening the door to check the outside. When she saw her graceful, red-haired friend, before she knew it, she was hugging her.

"Oh, what happened? How passionate," Maria remarked.

"Mariaaa!"

"This seems serious. For now, can I come inside?"

"Yeah."

Cesia let Maria in. Closing the door to the hallway, she returned to the small, dimly lit waiting room. There, Maria was checking the door and tilting her head in puzzlement, wondering why the knob on the door leading to the bedroom was firmly locked in place and why there was soundproofing magic on the door.

"When I spotted you leaving the hall, I was worried that you or Felix were hurt, so I came to check on you, but... What's this?" Maria asked.

"That idiot got drugged with some aphrodisiacs," Cesia replied calmly.

"Huh?" Maria said with a startled look. "Then, is he all right?"

"Probably. He just seemed excited, so I shut him inside the bedroom alone."

"Should I call Layne or Keith? They could carry him out of here by force," Maria suggested, staring at the bedroom with a troubled look.

Cesia knew that was the best option, but instead, she said, "This is his first assignment, and I was thinking that he wouldn't want his mistake known by his seniors, so..."

Cesia was aware she had just exposed everything to their boss. Still, Maria was a gray area, so Cesia didn't know what to do.

"So, you're keeping watch here? What if he attacks you?" Maria frowned, pouting.

When Maria said that, Cesia shivered again, remembering Felix's feverish body as he hugged her.

Seeing her grow pale, Maria looked at her worriedly.

"He did something, didn't he?" Maria said with certainty.

"No!" Cesia vigorously shook her head. "He...hugged me a bit, but I knocked him away."

"Well then," Maria smiled, touching the fixed doorknob, "I'll be right back. I'm just going to give him a small punishment."

"D-D-Don't! Whatever might've happened to me, you'll be in even more danger!" Cesia said, flustered, grabbing Maria's arm to stop her.

Seeing Cesia's trembling hands, Maria frowned.

"You really..."

"No, well... I know I'm being too soft, but... Everyone helped me and smoothed things over when I made mistakes in the beginning..."

Maria wanted to tell her that that was different, but seeing Cesia's troubled smile, she knew there was nothing else she could do. As Marcus, their boss, it would be perfectly appropriate for me to push my way into the bedroom and hit, punch, and kick Felix around, but right now, I'm Cesia's friend, Maria.

Cesia was frightened of men, but she was vulnerable around Maria.

"Oh, well, all right." Maria gave in. She couldn't very well appear as Marcus here, so she resignedly prepared to spend the rest of the night with Cesia.

"Maria?"

"I can't let a girl guard a caged wild animal all by herself, now can I? We have time to spare, so for the first time in a while, let's chat," Maria said, sitting on the ornamental chair by the window and patting the seat next to her.

"Yeah!"

Slowly sitting down to avoid stepping on the hem of her dress, Cesia smiled in relief.

EARLY the next morning, Marcus wrapped the shawl that Maria had been wearing around Cesia, who was in a deep sleep. If, by some chance, Felix lost his senses and broke down the door, it would have been difficult to subdue him with Maria's physique, so he had dispelled his disguise magic when he was sure that Cesia had fallen asleep.

With the bedroom having finally quieted down, Marcus let out an exasperated sigh. Even after Cesia had joined up, their shortage of female enforcers was still painfully apparent. It was more convenient in many ways to have more women, especially when going undercover at an evening party like this one, so he had secretly joined in as Maria.

More than that, I'm glad I tailed those two when I saw them leave midway through, Marcus thought, thankful for his perceptiveness.

Felix was a former knight. His stamina, constitution, and physical strength were greater than Cesia's. It would be absurd for him to let an average woman like Cesia guard a drugged man of his stature, all without letting him outside or being discovered. Remembering her pale face when she said Felix hugged her, Marcus grimaced.

I take back what I thought previously. It would be an appropriate punishment for me to hang Felix with a fine cord from the castle's highest tower.

Without her normal, strong-willed expression, Cesia's sleeping face had an air of innocence.

"I keep saying I'm Maria, but does she really get it?" Marcus said to himself. He poked her cheek, and it felt soft beneath the tip of his finger.



It'd be rude for me to touch an unconscious woman any more than that, Marcus thought. He was just about to disguise himself as Maria again when Cesia woke up. She had been sleeping on Maria's shoulder, so she found herself leaning on him when she awoke.

"Oh," Marcus said.

Cesia noisily slid back, drawing away from Marcus while still seated and making a noiseless scream.

"Sorry. I changed back to conserve my magic," he said.

"No... Conserve... That's right... I'm sorry, I fell asleep." Confused, Cesia managed to gather her thoughts and make a reply.

Marcus gave her a strained smile. At times like this, he wanted Cesia to trust him as fully as she trusted Maria. However, that didn't mean that he wanted to become her friend.

Then, what do I want to be?

Internal alarm bells went off, telling him he shouldn't pursue that line of questioning further, so he obeyed. He magically disguised himself as Maria again and smiled gracefully, pushing everything under a mask.

"Good morning, Cesia. Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah... Sorry for falling asleep," Cesia said, gently smiling with relief.

Even when he transformed right in front of her, it was as if Cesia unconsciously treated Marcus and Maria as entirely separate existences.

"It's totally fine. All-nighters are terrible for your skin."

"You say that, but that's true for you, too, isn't it?" Cesia said.

While listening to the alarm bells in the back corner of his head, Marcus had a trivial thought. To think that I'm jealous of myself. I'm hopeless.

MARIA was still a secret from Felix, so when it seemed like he had woken up, she left the room. Sometime later, Felix came out of the bedroom, and together with Cesia, the two promptly withdrew from the mansion. Then, after each had

returned to their lodgings, taken naps, and changed clothes, they returned to the Second Division's room around noon. When they saw each other, the first words out of Felix's mouth were another apology.

"I'm truly sorry!"

Remorsefully lowering his gaze, Felix resembled a scolded dog, and Cesia felt her mood soften, if only slightly. *He's way taller and stronger than I am; what am I thinking*? Cesia instantly dismissed her previous thought.

"Don't worry about it. I've been doing this job longer, so it was my mistake to let you go off on your own, anyway. Are you feeling better?" she asked.

"Yeah..." Felix raised his red face. "I heard a suspicious-sounding conversation, but when I followed up on it, they were talking about aphrodisiacs, not narcotics..." he said, frustrated.

I have to correct him here properly, Cesia thought, frowning.

"Um, Felix. If it had actually been a drug deal, going to see it all by yourself could've gotten you killed."

"I was a knight, you know."

"Well, that might be the case, but even so, the investigation could've been detected. If that happens, then everything we've done will go to waste," Cesia said in a severe voice, and Felix flinched. "This time, let's say that you taking the aphrodisiac was a mistake on both of our parts. But please, think about why we work as a pair. And next time, don't go off on your own!"

"Okay. I'm really sorry," Felix replied meekly.

Cesia could finally sigh in relief. Felix had asked her to keep just the aphrodisiac secret, so she made her report to Layne and the others while omitting that detail. Hearing that everyone else who had been undercover at the masquerade ball came away empty-handed, too, Cesia felt annoyed. We're going to have to continue going to parties every night?

During the day, they had their primary duties as members of the Financial Audit Bureau. While they were assigned less work than the First Division, after overtime the night before, it was harsh.

HER days consisted of office work and her nights investigating at parties. As part of that routine, Cesia and Felix were walking down a corridor in the morning, carrying documents. At times like this, it was a pain that their place of work was a document storage room in a corner of the castle.

"Oh, Cesia."

They heard a pleasant voice, like the tinkling of a small bell, and Cesia and Felix quickly bowed their heads as Princess Mavis gracefully glided down the corridor toward them. Ever since the previous incident, she had been helping Cesia practice behaving like a high-ranking noblewoman. Originally, they had planned to meet that afternoon. However, because of Cesia's overtime the previous night, she had been instructed to take a nap in the afternoon and recover her strength for the next investigation that night, so she canceled their plans.

"I heard that you canceled our plans," Mavis said. "Good grief! Have you become so important as to be able to renege on your promise with a princess?"

"Ack... I'm very sorry, Lady May," Cesia apologized meekly, but Mavis glared sharply at her.

"You've gotten much better recently, but you still have a long way to go if you want to hide those stray cat-like gestures. If you're not careful, it'll be completely obvious that you're a commoner!"

"I can't deny that..."

First homewrecker, now stray cat? Where do these siblings come up with these names? Cesia internally complained as she shrank into herself further. It seemed like Mavis's scolding would draw on when Felix extended a hand toward the fully processed documents Cesia was carrying.

"Felix."

"I'll gather them up and submit them. That'll give you some time. At least, enough so you can talk with Her Royal Highness, right?"

"Thanks," Cesia said frankly, and Felix nodded.

"Well then, excuse me, Your Highness," Felix said, making a knight's bow before walking away down the corridor.

Cesia gratefully watched Felix's back as he went. Then, she remembered she was neglecting the willful princess and hurriedly turned back to face her.

Mavis stared in blank amazement at Cesia, her jade green eyes opened wide.

"Lady May?" Cesia hesitantly called her name.

"I made sure to tell him, over and over... Oh, Marcus!"

Something had shaken Mavis. She hid her mouth with a trembling hand but couldn't hide her agitation. It was so severe as to worry Cesia, but the princess regained her composure and maintained her royal presence.

"Ahem," Mavis cleared her throat, blatantly restarting their conversation. "Well... Cesia? You seem quite...close to him."

"Hm? With Felix?" Cesia tilted her head, puzzled. "We're coworkers, and right now, we're working as a pair, so we're relatively friendly." It was odd; this was the first time Mavis had ever asked about the people she knew. "Lady May?" Cesia called her name again.

"Cesia," Mavis began with a serious expression. "This might be a sudden question, but I want you to think it over carefully."

Seeing Mavis's expression, she straightened her posture, saying, "Yes, ma'am!"

Is she grappling with an important issue in her duties as a princess? There was nothing Cesia could do to help, but Mavis was taking the time to ask her—specifically her. I'll give her as sincere an answer as I can, Cesia thought, unconsciously clenching her fist.

"Wh-What type of man do you prefer?"

"Pardon me...?"

Cesia stared blankly in response to the unexpected question. Mavis saw her expression and hurriedly continued.

"F-Father... I mean, His Majesty is requesting that I begin the process of

selecting my marriage partner..."

"Ah... And, what will you do?"

"Well, I don't interact much with men outside of family members, and he graciously told me I had some freedom in my choice. I'm at a loss as to what I should base my choice on," Mavis gave a flustered reply, becoming increasingly verbose.

"Lady May, please calm down. I know you can do this." Cesia smiled and grabbed Mavis's hand to encourage her.

"Y-Yeah..."

"Believe in your own judgment. Have you considered trying to meet with any of the candidates?"

Cesia felt Mavis grip her hand back. "I think you could consult with His Royal Highness, Prince Marcus, too. He always speaks with great adoration for you."

"R-Really...? Oh that Marcus..." Mavis's face reddened with embarrassment. She's cute, as always.

"Th-then, for future reference, can you tell me your type, Cesia?" Mavis asked again.

Cesia seriously considered her question. However, lacking in romantic experience, she didn't think she would be much help.

"Well, my type would be..."

SEVERAL days after Cesia's talk with Mavis, she was standing on a fluffy carpet and nervously sweating profusely. It had completely slipped her mind, but Mavis was one of the country's two princesses, and Marcus, sitting before her, was a prince and second in line for the royal throne. If you counted down, starting from the most powerful person in the country, you would quickly get to Marcus.

"Sorry for summoning you, Cesia."

"Not at all..."

Upon entering the second prince's office for the first time, Cesia felt dizzy when she saw how lavish it was. Inside was a civil servant holding some documents standing in front of Marcus's desk, a guard by the wall, and Chris, standing in wait behind his luxurious chair.

With a large window to his back, Marcus turned toward Cesia and began, "Sorry again about the sudden summons, but take a seat and wait there." He casually pointed at a sofa. "Some urgent documents just came."

Cesia couldn't decide whether she ought to obediently follow his instructions and sit or, as a civil servant ranking in the extreme dregs of the bureaucracy, stand while she waited. She reflexively looked to Chris for help. The silverhaired, blue-eyed young man, whose presence Cesia had by this point gotten used to, looked at her like an abandoned kitten and frowned slightly.

"Cesia. His Royal Highness has ordered it, so sit down."

"G-Got it!"

Cesia breathed a sigh of relief upon getting his permission and perched on one corner of the couch. Seeing that, it was Marcus's turn to frown.

"Why does she listen to you?" he asked Chris.

"It is rare for her to be spoken to by *Your Royal Highness*, so I imagine she did not understand what to do."

Maria was the person closest to Cesia, but in Cesia's mind, Maria and Marcus were different people. The Financial Audit Department's Division Chief Marcus was also a prince. Still, her relationships with him as subordinate-and-boss or pupil-and-instructor, while friendly, had a clear line they never crossed. Finally, when he was Prince Marcus, he was to Cesia an exalted, unreachable person. When they passed each other in the castle halls, her position was that of someone who only bowed her head and waited for him to pass.

"Hm..." Marcus held back a sigh, putting a hand to his mouth to prevent himself from looking displeased.

For Marcus, Cesia was someone he had known for more than four years. For the first two, their only interaction had been while they were both disguised. But, the Cesia who had continued to carefreely interact with him after he had revealed to her his true self—even putting aside gender—was a precious existence to him. However, Cesia only ever acted close to him when she was with Maria and never with Marcus. He frequently admonished himself, knowing that if he tried to get any closer, it would be as he had said to Mavis recently: disrespectful to Cesia and his fiancée.

It would be best for everyone if I nipped these half-formed feelings in the bud before they grow. Marcus glanced at Cesia. She looked scared stiff. Maybe I shouldn't have called her here.

He looked over the documents, signed where he needed to sign, and passed them back to the person standing at his desk, who also looked somewhat fearful.

"Done. Take these to the Prime Minister."

"Yes, sir. My deepest apologies for showing up at a bad time," the official went down on his knees and apologized.

Marcus relaxed and smiled. "There's no need to apologize. This is my job, after all. Make sure those get to where they need to go."

"Yes, sir!"

He looked deeply moved as he left the office, so Cesia couldn't help but watch as he went. It's true that it's Marcus's job, but with how apologetic the man was, it has to have been an overtime assignment, or maybe Marcus had to sign because of someone else's mistake.

In a castle where every second of the prince's time was more valuable than gold, Marcus's interactions with his subordinates were a model example of an excellent boss. Cesia genuinely respected that part of him. Of course, when he showed up as Maria without warning, like at the party several days ago, it somewhat diluted her respect for her boss.

"Sorry for the wait," Marcus said.

"N-Not at all..." Cesia said.

"Ah, sorry. Where's my hospitality? Chris, pour some tea," Marcus said. Then, he went to the sofa and sat across from Cesia.

Tea with the prince! Cesia thought, startled.

Chris looked like he knew he would be told to make tea before Marcus had asked him, so while Cesia was still wondering whether to refuse, he placed two cups on the table. Cesia was deeply impressed by the speed of the butler's work.

Marcus gracefully took a sip of tea and nodded. "Chris's tea is always the best."

"Much obliged," Chris thanked Marcus, a hint of pride in his voice.

After being prompted, Cesia drank some of her tea. She could safely assume that Chris had used high-quality leaves, but even bearing that in mind, the tea was incredibly delicious. Her sip of the warm tea settled in her stomach, and her nervousness softly melted away.

Seeing Cesia take a sigh of relief, Marcus smiled broadly behind his teacup.

"Now, as for why I called you here," Marcus suddenly began.

"Yes?"

Cesia hurriedly but silently placed her teacup on her saucer. That impressed Chris, although he didn't show it in his expression.

"It's about the reward I mentioned. I wanted to ask whether you've decided what you want."

"Reward?" Cesia hesitantly spoke. "Is this for that time with Lady May?" "Yes, it is."

Seeing "Why now?" written all over Cesia's face, Marcus was suddenly lost for words. He knew this wasn't the best way of doing things, but he hadn't been able to think of any other reason for calling Cesia.

Only a select few knew that Marcus led the Second Division of the Financial Audit Bureau. When he was performing his official, public duties as the prince and he happened to meet with members of the division, he interacted with them formally, as if they were strangers. Whenever he participated in meetings, trained Cesia, or did anything related to the division, he always made sure he missed the notice of any outsiders. And, during that hard-won time when he

worked as an enforcer, he had always avoided mixing his personal matters with work—including refraining from private discussions when he talked with Cesia.

But now, Marcus was calling Cesia out on personal business. Knowing that he was repeating Mavis's selfish act of summoning Cesia outside of work, he felt slightly embarrassed.

"Um... I believe I said that I didn't need a reward..." Cesia said.

"And I said I wouldn't allow that," Marcus replied.

Cesia couldn't think of a reply to Marcus's response. Thinking back, she had distinguished herself in protecting the princess, but she could only claim that achievement thanks to others' contributions. Nevertheless, Marcus and Mavis were incredibly thankful and did her favors at every opportunity. Because of that, Cesia had recently begun to think she would prefer to put everything behind them and take whatever small gemstones they offered.

"Hmmm... But, I grew up as a commoner, so I don't know what a normal reward would be..."

An envelope of money is probably the most I can expect... And whoever's giving it probably decides the actual sum.

Her second time as a student, Cesia got by thanks to a scholarship and government financial assistance that covered her tuition and her other expenses, but fundamentally, she was still a commoner with a commoner's means. A prince suddenly asking her to request an appropriate reward made everything more difficult.

Incidentally, Cesia didn't have to pay back her scholarship because she had maintained the top grades in her year. The financial assistance was thanks to Chris, who had explored every possible means of obtaining funding and came away with one that left her with nearly no debt. Putting it that way, Cesia was the one who should be thankful—mainly to Chris. Although, Marcus ordered him to do it.

"That's true..." Marcus said. "Generally, there's territory, a noble title, or raising your rank in the castle... Ah, I can't forget, as a valiant hero, you could also take a princess's hand in marriage."

"Those examples are way too much! That didn't help at all!" Cesia paled.

Marcus grinned. "Excuse me. Your reward is for rescuing the kingdom from a crisis. I can't give you a princess for just that."

"I don't want one!"

This brat! Cesia stubbornly glared at Marcus. She took advantage of her back being turned to the wall, knowing the guard wouldn't see her.

"Territory might be too much, but I can give you a small mansion in the capital," Marcus said.

"No way, shut up!" Cesia exclaimed.

"Cesia, language," Chris quickly scolded her.

Cesia hurriedly put a hand to her mouth. "Can I really get something that valuable?"

"It's entirely possible." Marcus nodded kindly, and Cesia's purple eyes sparkled.

My own house!

For Cesia, who had lost both of her parents when she was young and had been continually overworked and underpaid at her uncle's mansion, having a close family of her own had always seemed like a faraway dream. It wasn't a family, but having a place she could always return to might mean she could escape the constant, deeply rooted feeling of being without a place where she belonged. Her friends could visit, and eventually, she might even have a family. She could also get a pet, which wasn't allowed at her accommodations in the castle. She would have neighbors she could get to know and shops she could become a regular at. In other words, she might be able to have an ordinary life, just like anyone else. As a first step, having a small house seemed like an amazing idea to her.

Marcus had said "a small mansion," so it might have been different from the decent-sized house Cesia imagined, but she didn't care to correct him.

"That might be a good idea...a house," Cesia mumbled.

"Right?" Marcus leaned forward in enthusiastic agreement. "Having a place to

work from is always a good thing. And, in a pinch, real estate can be a valuable monetary asset."

With his suggestion seeming like it would be accepted, Marcus was in a good mood, so he listed some reasons she might accept in rapid succession. But just as he was about to seal the deal and press even further, he looked at Cesia's face and froze. Her expression was almost like that of a delighted child, holding herself back but still incredibly eager.

Marcus was surprised—he thought of it as a trivial reward. Although the house was in the capital, many would, for various reasons, relinquish houses and land, and the government often stepped in to manage those properties. As such, they were a common reward for those who had shown distinguished service. And if those who received them already owned a house, it wasn't rare for them to turn around and sell the property. Despite all that, Cesia looked sincerely happy.

Whenever Marcus looked at Cesia one thought always came to mind: *she's* like a rootless, wandering stray cat.

Thanks to her efforts and training, I imagine few would think that of her now. She had gotten used to behaving like a lady and performed her job well—she hardly looked like an orphaned commoner. But, for Marcus, Cesia was still that cute, scrawny stray cat who was always vigilant and put on a strong act. If she eventually found someone else to be with besides him, he just had to smile happily for her. He had always thought that.

If it was possible, he would rather she be with him. Recently, he had noticed that thought, and it had been troubling him. It was still possible for him to turn back. He could still think of Cesia fondly as a friend. And so, he had permitted himself to look after her and care for her within the bounds of friendship.

"So, what'll it be? If it's a mansion, then I can find you some promising properties," Marcus said.

Cesia hurriedly raised her face. She just remembered—there's always a catch, especially when it came to Marcus.

"Let me think about it," Cesia said.

"Cautious, as always." Marcus smiled cheerfully, quickly noticing Cesia's concern. "Good, good. There's no deadline, so worry as much as you need."

Those were hardly the words of a man who had taken the express effort to call her out and urge her to make a decision. Cesia glared sharply at him, but when her eyes met his unexpectedly soft gaze, she internally wavered.

Out of nowhere, her answer to Mavis flashed back into her mind. Cesia had seriously considered the princess's question about what she found desirable in a partner. She had racked her brains for an answer, but the one she came up with was unfit to tell the princess. It wouldn't be of use to her at all.

Cesia had said, "I don't have any family, so I'd want a man who deeply cares about his family."

At Cesia's answer, Mavis made a pained expression as if it hurt her. Then, she held Cesia's hand in her own small, warm hand. That warmth gave Cesia courage, and she continued.

"And... 'Determined resistance' is something of a conviction of mine as someone who didn't have anyone to rely on. They were words that gave me the strength to persevere and to push through adversity."

"You're quite stubborn, after all," Mavis said, a gentle smile in her eyes.

Cesia felt somewhat embarrassed, but she had already begun talking. To stop now would mean not fully answering the princess's question.

"Yes... Well, that's who I am. I'd be happy if someone lovingly watched over me, a short distance away... I want to fight for myself, by myself, and win on my own. But, if I get discouraged, and if it looks like I'll give up..." Cesia cast her eyes slightly downward. "I don't want them to save me. I just want someone there who will give me a light push on the back. Someone who'll say, 'It'll be okay, so don't give up! I'll always be on your side'... I think someone like that would be wonderful."

Her unadorned feelings flowed smoothly out of herself. They weren't anything that would help the sweet princess struggling to choose a partner. Even so, while Cesia was talking, she had felt a strange sense of fulfillment.

Someone had appeared in her mind: he had surprisingly kind, jade green eyes,

and when you looked closely, his gaze was sharp—just like Maria's. His eyes had a mysterious gleam—it wasn't there when he was looking at his trusted subordinates or his precious little sister, but it was there when he looked at Cesia. She loved that soft gleam and had loved it for a long time.

"Cesia? For now, I'll look for a house. Feel free to think about whether you'll take it."

The voice of the person Cesia had been imagining broke her reverie. She hurriedly raised her face. The happily smiling Marcus saw Cesia's distracted gaze, and he tilted his head.

"Are you okay?"

"I-I'm fine..." Cesia said. She didn't know when it had started, but she was blushing.

Marcus looked at her strangely, tilting his head to the other side.

"You don't seem okay. I'll call a doctor."

"I'm fine! I really am!" Cesia hurriedly waved her hand, stopping Marcus. There was no way she could have a doctor examine her over this. I shouldn't have talked about that with Mavis. It didn't help her, and she probably didn't understand me, either.

More than anything, if Cesia hadn't said anything, she wouldn't have seriously confronted her feelings.

"Are you really? You're the kind of person to say, 'I'm fine,' but collapse later..." Marcus grumbled a complaint. He was looking at Cesia with worry in his eyes. Unable to handle his gaze, she averted her eyes.

I love him.

But to have it be doomed to failure the moment I realize it... I knew I was unlucky.

IT was night the same day. Whether she noticed her feelings or felt brokenhearted about their unattainability, the sun kept up a constant pace, setting in the evening and signaling the start of her work. Once again, Cesia and

Felix were attending an evening party, and this time, it was a lot shadier.

Over the past few nights, the enforcers had gone to parties all around the city and were exhausted. Finally, they resolved to narrow the focus of the investigation, excluding parties held by older, higher ranking, and more conservative nobles and zeroing in on the parties picked out by Layne held by relatively younger, more nonconformist nobles. Those parties were smaller, with several held each night.

It being the height of the social season, the capital's nobles were dressed up and out in force, flocking to all sorts of gatherings. Nobody would notice a couple of suspicious parties amid all that commotion.

For tonight's party, both Cesia and Felix had magically altered their hair and eye colors. It wasn't a masquerade ball, so it was the least they could do to disguise themselves. Cesia knew from past experiences that things like hair color could be effective at leaving a surprisingly strong impression on people.

"Felix, is there anybody you know?" she asked.

"It doesn't look like it. I'm a viscount's second son, but I entered a knightly order right after graduating from knights' school, so I'm not well known among high society."

Felix was also wearing glasses as part of his flimsy disguise.

"I was wondering what a shady party was like... So this is it, huh?" Cesia sighed, exasperated.

Through the hazy, tobacco-smoke-filled air, Cesia could see some attendees kissing out in the open without a care for who might see them. The venue, which was something close to a dance hall, had plenty of card tables, and the waitresses wore revealing clothing.

"Stay close to me, Cesia," Felix said. He had a tense expression.

Cesia laughed softly. "Same goes for you, Felix."

She didn't want to drag up Felix's mistake from a few nights before again, but compared to the scrawny, unremarkable Cesia, it was clear that the refined and good-looking Felix would draw much more attention.

"You look like a super easy mark. I'm serious, be careful," Cesia said.

"Ah... Got it."

Felix was straightforward, so his thoughts always showed on his face. If she was being honest, Cesia thought he was more suited to being a knight than an enforcer, but her boss had chosen him, so he must have had some promise, the same way Cesia had. She wasn't going to second-guess his decision. However, his excessive honesty and his clearly good upbringing combined made him look like an obvious sucker to the watchful card players at the party.

The two were sitting on a smallish couch and had to come in close contact to both fit. They were having a whispered conversation while pretending to flirt with each other. If they didn't pretend to be partners, it often happened that unknown women wearing revealing clothing would approach Felix and touch his waist and butt. When this happened, he trembled like a pitiful rabbit in a cage. On the other hand, thanks to Felix flawlessly escorting her, no harm came to Cesia. Unfortunately, neither noticed that this acted as evidence for Cesia's assertion that, as she would put it, "I'm not attractive at all, so I'm fine!"

"But, if we just sit here, we won't get anything done. I wonder if we should play some cards, even if only a bit," Cesia said.

"Isn't that risky? I feel like they'll be able to instantly tell we're clueless," Felix said.

"Yeah... But, everywhere else is like that." Cesia motioned with her eyes.

Felix followed Cesia's gaze and was startled. Some distance away, a couple was sitting on an identical sofa to theirs. The man had his hand under the hem of the woman's dress, and they were kissing so intensely that they looked like they were about to go all the way right on the couch.

"Don't they think that's a bit much!" Felix commented, his face reddening.

"You're so pure..." Cesia said, taken aback.

As a young woman, Cesia was self-aware enough to know that she wasn't experienced in that sort of thing, but after her time as a maid in the Diane household, she was somewhat more knowledgeable than the rest of her peers. When she saw her older junior's naive side, she felt more composed.

Neither of us can act like them on that sofa, and I don't think our boss wants us to, either. So we should find another way to blend in, Cesia thought.

"It looks like the card game is the safer option after all," she said.

"Yeah, looks like it."

"Do you know how to play?"

"I learned the rules at school, but..." Felix said hesitantly. After their first mission together, his overconfident attitude toward her had disappeared.

Cesia didn't care if he won a game and didn't expect him to, either, so she nodded lightly. "That's good enough. It'd be suspicious if a newcomer won big, anyway. Let's let ourselves get taken in by them a bit, then look for the right time to leave."

The issue was whether they would be able to leave easily, but that part was up to Cesia, acting as Felix's girlfriend, to put on a show and pull him away. All they had to do was convincingly play the part of the young, naive man from a wealthy family and his partner, eager to come to a party and misbehave a bit.

As naturally as possible, Felix got up from the sofa, his arm around Cesia's waist, and walked over to the nearest table with an empty spot.

"Can I join in?" he asked.

"Of course," the dealer standing across the table said. "Although the game isn't played with chips. As a rule, bets are made with real money. Do you have enough on hand?"

Felix nodded, and Cesia made a displeased expression.

"But babe, you know you're no good at gambling," she pouted.

"It looks fun, though, right?" Felix said excitedly. Cesia resignedly shrugged.

The dealer nodded happily and flashed a look at the other players seated at the table.

"Very well. When we begin the next round, shall we include him?" the dealer asked.

"Yeah, sure thing."

"Make sure you show your cute girlfriend your good side, buddy."

The other players amicably accepted Felix.

In a good mood, Felix sat in a chair and cracked his knuckles as if to say, "Let's do this!" Seeing his enthusiasm, Cesia forced a smile, thinking, *You're* overselling it.

TIME passed, and as Cesia had expected, Felix, who had begun to make small wins toward the end, got carried away, made a large bet, and lost big. The dealer and the other players weren't conspiring against him; the experience was just a rite of passage that all beginners went through. It was the classic formula of a novice getting too deep into gambling: the pleasurable experience of a small win acted like a drug, and it led them to believe that they might win even more the next time.

"Seriously? You stupidly push your luck, and this is what happens!" Cesia scolded Felix, placing her hand on her hip.

"Sorry...!" Felix apologized. He seemed genuinely depressed, and Cesia could easily visualize a listless tail and droopy dog ears on his head, hanging in shame.

"Next time, learn from this, and stop gambling when you know you're bad at it," Cesia said, nonchalantly pulling his arm and standing him up.

"Oh, leaving already?" the man in the seat next to Felix said to him.

Felix nodded dejectedly and said, "Sorry about acting all high and mighty when I started, but if I keep going, she'll get tired of me."

He seemed shocked at how much he had lost. Staggering away from the table, he gave off a sorrowful aura, and the remaining players behind him lightheartedly laughed, their voices carrying throughout the hall.

"Ugh... Sorry, Cesia. I failed again..."

"Hm? You failed? You played a splendid novice." Cesia laughed cheerfully. They had settled next to the wall.

The image of Felix as a wealthy, naive young noble about to get hooked on gambling had left a strong impression. Cesia couldn't imagine that anyone

would think for even a second that the perfect picture of a gambling novice Felix had presented was an enforcer in disguise—he had been defeated that easily.

"Just as I thought, there's nothing better than the real thing. Well done, Felix."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment...?" Felix said, his face stiffening, irritated by Cesia's manner of speaking.

"It is, it is! If I were a drug dealer, I'd want to unload my merchandise on someone like you." Cesia smiled broadly and snuggled up against him.

"H-Hey, Cesia..." Felix said, flustered.

Cesia put her lips next to his ear and whispered, "Two men are walking toward us. Put your arm around me, and act like we're close."

"...Got it," Felix whispered back and did as she said, wrapping his arm around her.

When he did, he was startled by how dainty her body was. The type of women he went out with had generally been more full-figured and curvier, and even the more feminine-looking of his female knight colleagues had strongly built physiques.

On the other hand, the thin Cesia felt so fragile, so unreliable, that she was almost like a child. In contrast with the lithe beauty of many noble ladies, he felt like she would break in half if he applied too much pressure. *Did I really angrily shout at a woman like this*? Felix thought, feelings of regret spontaneously welling up within him.

"They're here," Cesia said in a sharp voice.

Felix hurriedly changed gears. I'm working. I can feel bad about it later.

The two men, both dressed in well-tailored black evening suits, came up to Cesia and Felix and gave them friendly smiles as they greeted them.

"Good evening to the both of you."

"...It's a nice night."

Cesia glanced up at Felix. At a time like this, it was safer to let a man take the lead. Marcus had said that he was expecting good things from her as a female enforcer, but even in Emeroade, where there was frequent cultural exchange and influence from other countries, the remnants of older, deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes still had a strong foothold.

Felix made a troubled expression, and although he had stopped hugging Cesia, he stood between her and the two men as if to protect her, and she went along with his movements. Seeing that, the two men smiled again, having confirmed who was in charge.

"Is this your first time here?"

"Yeah. I'd only heard rumors before tonight, but it's a fun party," Felix said in a contented voice, pulling Cesia close.

To avoid appearing out of place, Cesia made a wry, displeased smile as if to say to Felix, "I haven't forgotten how much you lost earlier."

"Do you come here often?" Felix asked.

"We do. We know the host, Marquess Acton. Actually, we're good friends with his entire family," the man said cheerfully. The way he spoke clashed with the party's lascivious atmosphere.

Noticing that disconnect, Cesia took another look at the two men. The man with bright blond hair was animatedly chatting, and the man standing next to him with dark brown hair gave off a somewhat gloomy impression. He looked at Cesia and Felix with an appraising eye. It was an odd combination, and Cesia felt something unpleasant in the second man's gaze.

The first man had said a name that caught Cesia's attention: Marquess Acton. According to Cesia's prior research, the host of the party they were at should've been an emergent baron. For a newly ennobled house, the location of the party and its decorations were quite extravagant, but although it was rare, the baron might have been a wealthy merchant or commoner who had distinguished himself and been rewarded by the state with a noble title. He could have also been one of the few but extant nobles who had, after applying and receiving proper permission from the government, been granted a title from a high-ranking noble who held multiple titles at once. Due to that process, low-ranking

nobles with financial resources that far outstripped even some old noble families existed.

Besides that background, the party's theme was audacious. Dignified and haughty nobles with little to their name besides their pride would never come up with it. It all fit well with the host being a new baronial house, so Cesia hadn't doubted that story.

"In another room, there's a bit of amusement that friends of the marquess take part in. You two want to come?" the blond-haired man invited, pointing at the exit door.

"C'mon, let's check it out," Felix told her.

Surprised, she looked up at him. "But, babe, we're not close to that... marquess? Can we really suddenly barge in like that? Won't we just annoy them?"

"Yeah... That's true. But it sounds interesting, right?" Felix said, acting excited to go.

Naturally, the two men were incredibly suspicious, and Cesia and Felix planned to go along with them, but they would also appear suspicious if they instantly jumped at the men's sudden offer. So, Cesia acted hesitant while Felix acted enthusiastic.

"His Lordship is very benevolent, so it'll be all right," the brown-haired man said. This was the first time he had spoken. He seemed restless, and his gaze was flitting about the hall.

"That's right!" The blond-haired man lightly clapped his partner on the back. "We were told that it's fine to bring anyone with us so long as they look like they'll get along with us."

"Hey, they're both saying so, so isn't it fine, darling?" Felix said to Cesia.

Cesia nodded. "If it isn't a bother to His Lordship, then I don't mind."

Because Felix was the leader, the two men only had to convince him for their invitation to succeed.

"Then, it's settled! Ah, I'm Jack, and he's Thomas," the blond-haired man said,

introducing himself and the other man.

"I'm Fritz, and this is Sarah," Felix casually smiled as he gave false names.

"Nice to meet you, Fritz, Sarah. This way," Jack said, leading them out of the hall.

Many candles were in the outside corridor, but each one only illuminated a small area, and a dimness permeated the space. In recent years, the use of magically lighting lamps had spread among the nobility, but the trend hadn't yet reached the mansion they were in.

To avoid being noticed by the two men leading them, Cesia used Felix's body as a barrier behind which she could secretly cast magic. It was a spell that allowed her to send a message to her friends, one she had learned immediately after Mavis's abduction. It only worked with someone she had created a connection with in advance, but at the moment, it was enough. First, she sent a message to her boss, Marcus, but knowing that the busy prince probably wasn't at the party, she knew she quickly had to send another message. *I'll send one to Layne, too*, she thought, but Thomas turned around to look at Cesia just then.

"Just now, did you do something?"

"What do you mean, 'something'? He just groped my butt, so I was smacking him," Cesia said, irritably turning her face away. Felix awkwardly grimaced as if he had been caught in something.

"...Really," Thomas said. His gaze was still uncannily restless.

As he walked slightly ahead, Jack laughed. "You two sure are close. We go down here," he said, opening a door that led to a dark, cavernous passage underground.

Cesia internally shivered, making sure that her feelings didn't show on her face.

"Hey, that man, Thomas. His movements show clear indications of heavy narcotics abuse," Felix whispered to her.

"Yeah. And Jack's strange cheeriness is a sign of mania that regular users have."

After they went underground, Cesia couldn't send a message spell. Of all spells, this was one of the ones she was still unskilled with, and as a result, the magic didn't work well when she was somewhere that didn't connect to the outside.

"I only had enough time to send a message to His Royal Highness," Cesia said.

"Wait, really? But I'm sure he'll pass it along to someone else, like Layne or Keith," Felix whispered back.

While internally hoping Felix was right, Cesia looked for windows that led outside. The staircase they had descended hadn't been that long, so she estimated they were in a semi-basement.

"Also, I'm still bothered about the marquess," Cesia said.

"Marquess Acton? I haven't heard any bad rumors in particular, but... The host of this party should be a baron, so maybe Jack misspoke?" Felix said.

"Are you making out back there? Time to pull your faces apart, kids, we're here," Jack said, still cheerful. Then, he opened the heavy-sounding door ahead of him.

A suffocatingly sweet scent wafted toward them through the open door. Cesia quietly covered her mouth and nose to ward away the sickly, artificial smell. Shifting her gaze to Felix, she saw his stern expression. They exchanged a look, and then Cesia searched for the source of the scent. Her eyes stopped on a foreign-looking incense burner on a table with a fine wisp of smoke coming from the top.

The two had been able to learn the smell of Angel's Elixir in advance from some that had been previously seized, so they could tell that the smoke was from the drug they were looking for. They knew from questioning a habitual user that the drug was taken by mixing it in powder form into a drink or some other liquid, but it had been an oversight that they hadn't known about the possibility of the drug being used like incense until just now. The drug's effect as a fragrance was probably weaker than its effect when directly taken orally, but there was a great danger of them inhaling too much without knowing it while the drug was still taking time to have an effect.

Cesia openly frowned and fanned herself, showing disdain for her situation.

"What's this smell? It's stuffy in here," she said, looking for a skylight or window to vent air. It being a semi-basement, she could expect some sort of opening to the outside.

"Smells good, doesn't it? It helps you relax," Jack said. In contrast with how he had been acting previously, he spoke calmly. The drug had begun to have an effect. There was no doubt that he was an addict and that his behavior earlier had been symptoms of withdrawal.

Quite a few people were in the small room, and everyone was taking the drug. Felix secretly clenched his fists. The nobles around them were in a state of pleasurable intoxication, and it was as if they didn't even see Felix and Cesia.

It was an odd atmosphere. Cesia tugged her partner's sleeve.

"We know they're using the drug here. Let's pull back for now," Cesia whispered.

"Yeah, you're right..." Felix nodded. "There are lots of people here. Not much we can do with just the two of us."

Everyone in the room was taking the drug of their own volition. That in itself was a crime. But there were far too many of them for Cesia and Felix alone to arrest. Their best option was to leave the mansion temporarily and contact the Security Bureau to have everyone arrested.

"Fritz, is something wrong?" Jack asked with a big smile.

"Sorry," Felix said nonchalantly. "This fragrance doesn't seem to agree with Sarah, and she feels under the weather. Apologies for leaving without greeting the marquess, but I think we'll call it a night."

"Really? It smells so good, though... Well, I guess some people don't respond well to it." Jack nodded, seeming incredibly disappointed.

Cesia had suspected Jack and Thomas to be working to create more addicts, but seeing how they let her and Felix go so easily, she had probably been wrong.

"Thanks for inviting us, see you later..." Felix said, cradling the unwell Cesia

and leaving the basement.

Just then, Cesia heard a voice.

"C'mon, Lady Amy, drink some more."

Cesia stopped in surprise.

"Sarah?" Felix urged Cesia forward in a confused voice.

Cesia stared at another door, different from the one they had entered through, which led to another room. She could feel the presence of multiple people using the drug in that room, but in contrast to the atmosphere of contentment in the room she was in, she could hear angry shouting.

"Sarah."

Even if they were dealing drugs there, and even if the crime was taking place right before their eyes, it would be impossible for just them to make an arrest; they had to withdraw. Cesia knew that.

Just as she was about to start walking again, she heard a scream from the other room. Felix bit his lip.

"Sorry, Felix. I don't know what's going on, but I'm prepared for any punishment after this."

"Cesia..."

"Because if I run here, I won't be able to forgive myself!"

Before Felix could stop her, Cesia dashed to the door and put her hand on the knob. She threw it open with a slam, and inside, she saw several men and one woman. The woman had her arms restrained by the men, and it looked as if she was just about to be forced to drink something. It was probably water with the drug dissolved in it.

"Release that woman!" Cesia shouted angrily. She drove the heel of her palm, infused with magic, into the man closest to her. She was wearing a dress, so her movements were weaker, and she couldn't put as much force into her attack.

"Ah, you idiot."

"Sorry!" Cesia reflexively apologized to Felix while blasting another man with

magic. Thanks to her training, she was able to knock the man away perfectly without misjudging her power.

Felix was still off-balance and didn't know what was happening, but with no other options, he joined the fight, engaging another man close to hitting Cesia. With the men holding down the woman out of the way, Cesia rushed up to her.

"Are you okay?!"

"Uhh..." she mumbled. She staggered, and Cesia caught her body and speedily checked her for injuries. None were visible, but Cesia wasn't a doctor, so she couldn't make any definitive judgment.

"What's your name?" Cesia asked.

"A-... Amy..." she gasped between faint breaths.

Cesia gained renewed confidence in her previous conviction. Amy was weak, and while Cesia knew she couldn't do anything beyond temporarily helping her, she gently wiped Amy's wet mouth.

"Are you the daughter of Marquess Acton?"

Amy nodded sluggishly. "Help...me..." she said in a hoarse voice.

Those words wiped away all of Cesia's worries. Her resolve strengthened.

"Got it."

Just then, more muscular men appeared, and one yelled at them.

"Hey! Who the hell are you? Are you with Narcotics?!"

The people who had been breathing in the drug in the other room showed no particular interest in the commotion occurring around them. Cesia and Felix shivered at their blank eyes. They couldn't turn back now.

"We aren't with Narcotics! Agh, damn it! You'd better apologize to me after this!" Felix shouted.

"Be grateful! You can get me back for last time!" Cesia shouted back, taking Amy in her arms.

"Who's that woman?" Felix asked.

"She's Marquess Acton's daughter. I heard a rumor that she ran away and eloped and that nobody's seen her since, but it looks like she was being held here and forcefed drugs."

Felix stood in front of Cesia and Amy and assumed a low posture, getting ready to fight. The men who had just appeared were clearly skilled at fighting; they might have also been bodyguards. More of them came, and Cesia could see from their expressions that they hadn't been using drugs. They looked intent on taking down Cesia and Felix, and their anger was evident.

"I'm returning Amy to the marquess," Cesia declared.

"Under what right? She's here because she wants to be! Who are you to think that you can show up out of nowhere and take her away!"

He might not be wrong, Cesia thought, grimacing. Earlier, Cesia had seen that Amy was being forced to drink the drug, but it might not have been like that in the beginning. At that moment, it had been impossible to know whether it was the right decision to rescue Amy. But she had asked Cesia for help, and Cesia had to believe her.

"Who are you to force drugs onto someone who can't decide for herself, who you won't even let move? You're the ones who have no right!" Cesia yelled.

Having judged that they couldn't convince the two with words, the men moved to suppress them.

"Get them!"

"Cesia, get back!" Felix yelled.

In the blink of an eye, the small room became a battlefield. While their opponents were few, they were strong, and Felix didn't seem like he would be able to buy much more time on his own. While looking after Amy, Cesia tried to find an exit, but the only one was the doorway where the men had entered. Luckily, an air vent led to the outside high up on the wall behind her. She put a hand behind her back and confirmed the wall's structure. It was made of stone and sturdy, without a single gap in it—except for one. Thanks to the vent, there was some wiggle room, though it was slight.

"With this, I know I can blow it away," Cesia said to herself. In a cold sweat,

she placed her palm on the wall.

She didn't know any special fighting techniques and didn't have any unique abilities. However, she was a bit handier than most, and, like adjusting the delicate flavors of a dish, she could finely control her magical output. Using that skill, she could put just enough of a check on her magic to avoid destroying her opponent. This time, though, her opponent was a thick wall—she didn't need to hold anything back.

"Felix, get out of the way! I'm about to use everything I've got!" Cesia yelled.

Understanding what she meant, Felix hurriedly disengaged himself from the men and hid under a desk. As magical energy radiated out from Cesia's hand, cracks appeared in the wall, and she blew it away. With a tremendous sound, the wall exploded around her, and rubble went flying.

"Gah!"

"Agh!"

One after another, without any chance to prepare themselves, the men were struck by the debris and collapsed. A bit of wall pierced the top of the desk Felix was hiding under, and he went pale.

"You idiot! What were you thinking?!" he shouted.

"This is what I thought of!"

"That makes it even worse!"

Stepping on the rubble, Cesia went through the hole she had opened, heading above ground. The basement wasn't deep, but she struggled, her petticoat and dress impeding her movement. She somehow got Amy out while crawling through the hole, and when she checked her surroundings, she was in the mansion's front garden, looking out onto the street. They had been some distance away from the hall where the party was being held, so there didn't appear to be anyone hurt.

"Thank God..." Cesia sighed with relief, taking a short breather after she laid Amy on the grass.

But, in an instant, before she had any time to rest, her neck was grabbed from

behind. She gasped, but the grip was too strong, and she couldn't make a sound.

"Do you know what you've done? You screwed everything up!" the man strangling her yelled. He was the same one who had yelled at them earlier. While holding back Felix, who had come out after him, he was strangling Cesia with just enough power not to cause her to lose consciousness.

"The girl was the perfect pawn. With her, we could milk her father for as much money as we wanted until you showed up! I won't be satisfied until I've wrung your thin little neck!"

With her neck in the man's grip, Cesia couldn't focus enough to cast magic. Then, how about this! she thought as she tried to use some of the martial arts she had learned. It's that damn dress again! she thought angrily. The difference in her ease of movement in her dress and the clothes she usually wore for training was like night and day.

I blew up the wall as loudly as I could, so there should already be reports circulating to the regular patrols in the area. In contrast with the capital's outskirts, there was a limit on the amount of land that estates closer to the center of the city occupied. She could safely assume that the commotion could be heard from the outside and that, as a result, the men's criminal enterprise was done for. She would have preferred to arrest every single person who had dealt the drugs, but that would have been difficult.

Cesia often regretted her recklessness, but she couldn't pretend she hadn't heard Amy's scream.

"Let her go!" Felix yelled.

"There's no way I'm doing that!" the man yelled back.

Their shouts overlapped, painfully ringing in Cesia's ears.

She might be done for, but Felix was still here, and he would properly testify and explain everything to the other enforcers. If Cesia gave up her life to save Amy's, everything would be even in the end.

Would that prince praise me, saying, "You did well for a novice enforcer?" she idly wondered, her mind becoming hazy from a lack of oxygen. I wish I could

look into those beautiful green eyes one more time.

Just as she was about to lose consciousness, a woman's enchanting voice rang out.

"Oh, didn't you say you would never give in?"

The woman, wearing an extravagant dress, appeared next to the man holding Cesia, and in a flash, she slashed the man's arms with a long knife.

"Argh!" he yelled out in pain and surprise, and his grip weakened.

The woman who had leapt into the fight—Maria—followed up with another attack aimed at the man's neck. The man, sensing the killing intent emanating from Maria's precise cuts, released Cesia and retreated backward. When he did, Maria safely caught Cesia's body, simultaneously shooting a piercing gale of wind at the man's legs.

"Gah!" the man made a broken scream as he tumbled on the grass, his legs torn apart. But Maria wasn't looking at him anymore.

"Felix, restrain him!" she ordered.

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" Felix replied, confused. He had no idea who Maria was, but he took out the bindings he always carried and tied up the man.

While Felix did that, Maria carefully lowered Cesia to the ground.

"M... Maria...?" she choked out.

"Next time, you'll have to train in a corset and petticoat." Maria smiled. She was somewhat out of breath. This was the first time Cesia had seen her like that, and she was surprised.

"D-Did you hurry here for me?" Cesia asked.

"Would it have been better if I rode in on a white horse?" her friend replied, panting.

Cesia felt relieved and smiled. "R-Right now, even that sounds wonderful," she said. But she was at her limit, and with that, she lost consciousness.

Maria made a grim expression, but after she checked that Cesia had only

fainted, her expression returned to normal.

Standing behind the person who looked like an elegant noblewoman, Felix called out to her in a bewildered voice.

"Um... I restrained him, but... Who are you?"

"I'll explain everything afterwards, I promise," Maria said. "Narcotics and a patrol unit are already within the estate's premises, and they're temporarily rounding up all the partygoers. Can you help them out?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Her voice, husky though it was, was unmistakably a woman's. She spoke sternly, almost like she was his superior in the knights, and Felix straightened his posture.

"What about Cesia?" Felix asked hesitantly.

Maria saw that he was sincerely worried about Cesia and smiled. "She'll be fine. I'll take responsibility for her."

"Understood. She's my precious partner, so please take good care of her," Felix said. He bowed quickly, then dashed away to the dance hall, which was beginning to grow noisy.

When Felix had moved away, one of Maria's—no, Marcus's guards, who had been erasing his presence until then—finally spoke.

"Lady Maria."

"Take that woman there. I'll carry Cesia."

"Yes, ma'am!" the guard unhesitatingly replied. He picked up Amy, who had fainted during the fight, and carried her away.

Maria thought for a moment, then undid her disguise magic and reverted to her original appearance before picking up Cesia.

"Really... You gave me quite the scare," Marcus mumbled to himself in the now-empty garden. Then, carefully holding Cesia in his arms, he left.

THE following day, Cesia awoke from a deep sleep in the castle infirmary after

being warmly nursed back to health the night before. After having a proper breakfast, she changed into her work uniform and went to the office of the chief of the Second Financial Audit Division, where she began with a deep bow.

"I'm incredibly sorry!" Cesia apologized.

Standing beside her with a vaguely troubled look, Felix looked alternatingly at Marcus, sitting in his chair, Layne, standing next to Marcus, and Cesia.

"What are you apologizing for, Cesia?" Layne asked her, frowning.

Cesia raised her head. "My best option back there would've been to leave and then contact the Narcotics Division to call them there. Instead, I pushed my way into the room in the back."

"That's right." Layne nodded. "We were able to capture the boss of the drug ring, but because of what you did, the baron who controlled the drugs' distribution routes was able to evade arrest."

"I am truly, deeply sorry," Cesia apologized again.

The man who had strangled Cesia was the drug ring's boss. A collapsed, low-ranking noble family member, he had led a wandering life of crime in town. Through a series of circumstances, he became the boss of a drug trafficking ring, where he plied his trade night after night together with the baron who had hosted that party. That baron was the same one who had controlled the drug's distribution and escaped the fate of his partner, and, as Cesia had suspected, he was an emergent noble. He had been granted his title in recognition of a monetary contribution to the kingdom. When the investigation set its eyes on him, he had hastily left Emeroade.

"This sounds a lot like that other time." Cesia frowned, and Marcus nodded.

Six months previously, the head of the human traffickers had sidestepped the government's investigation and fled the country. That investigation was still ongoing, but searching for them was difficult, with the leader having left the country.

"But this time, we rounded up the entire organization. It was thanks to your rashness that we could do it," Marcus said.

"Sir, if you commend her for it, she'll never learn." Layne frowned in displeasure.

When Cesia unthinkingly rushed in to confront the men, it caught the rapidly growing drug smuggling ring off guard. That unpreparedness had been their downfall. The baron's quick escape from the country meant that, at the very least, he had been privy to a leak that had exposed the investigation's movements. If they had temporarily withdrawn, as they had in the human trafficking case, the ring's members would have most likely all fled by the time the Narcotics Division came in to make arrests. In other words, Cesia's actions had taken the smugglers by surprise. Of course, they could only say that with the benefit of hindsight.

"No... That was just a coincidence," Cesia said, her expression stiffening. She felt uncomfortable.

Layne nodded in agreement and said, "Sir?"

"Indeed. However, saving Marquess Acton's daughter was quite an achievement." Marcus grinned. Layne was suddenly at a loss for words.

In the beginning, Amy, who had gone to a party with friends, had tried the drug out of curiosity. She ended up having an addictive personality, and the drug ring captured her and used her as a hostage to extort the marquess into being their patron and financing them.

The whole affair came to light, and the investigation expanded to include Amy and her family, but the marquess seemed relieved that he had his daughter back and didn't have to continue supporting the drug ring. Keith, who had eavesdropped on a round of questioning the Narcotics Division had carried out, had secretly told Cesia that.

"I hope Lady Amy recovers from her addiction..." Cesia worriedly mumbled.

Layne nodded in agreement. "We can only wait for the specialists to find a way to help her. Still, I did let Narcotics know that you saw she was being forced to take the drug, so I imagine we can expect her to get a lighter punishment."

"That's good to hear," Felix spoke with some difficulty.

Cesia had hesitated then and still couldn't say what the right thing to do

would be if she were back there again, but at the very least, for Amy, her decision to step in had been the correct choice.

"May I ask a question?" Felix asked.

"Go for it." Marcus nodded.

"I was surprised at how quickly you arrived there after you got Cesia's message," Felix began. "We were prepared to call in Narcotics at any time last night, but it was as if they were already deployed..."

"It's because I had them on standby," Marcus said plainly.

Felix and Cesia widened their eyes in surprise.

Marcus described the sequence of events: he had been at another party the previous night and instantly headed to the baron's mansion when he received Cesia's message. Along the way there, he simultaneously kept in contact with Layne and the other enforcers, reported it to his guards and the patrol troops in the city, and ordered Narcotics, which he had kept on standby, to head to the mansion. In the middle of his description, he also explained that Maria was a close direct subordinate of his.

"That's so much to do in such a short time," Cesia remarked, impressed.

Marcus chuckled and gave a proud, mischievous smile. "You didn't know? I'm brilliant."

"Gah... Yes... I know..." Cesia said, frustrated over her failure. Back at the baron's mansion, she could only run away reluctantly, but Marcus had reversed the situation and taken command all by himself.

Marcus laughed cheerfully and said, "I said it before, didn't I? I can fight, give orders on the spot, and take responsibility for everything. I'm a pawn with the most cards in my hand."

Layne frowned when he heard his boss call himself a pawn but said nothing.

The Second Financial Audit Division doesn't have the power to issue standby orders to the Security Bureau's Narcotics Division, so he used his authority as the prince to send the order. Naturally, that must have been because he expected this outcome.

"Did you predict we'd find the drug ring last night?" Felix asked.

"There's no way I could know that." Marcus shook his head. "In a request to Narcotics, I said, 'Some of my staff are out investigating now, so I want you to keep a few of your officers on constant standby.' It was my own selfish, arbitrary order."

That meant he had been making the same order every night for the past several nights when Cesia and the others had gone undercover to those parties.

"If I'd continued wasting their time, it might've escalated into an issue with my decision-making ability. But, in that case, only my reputation would suffer."

So long as he was a prince, he would keep his authority. The only downside would be their impression of him worsening. *Is that really fine*? Cesia frowned.

"Sir," she began.

"If it ended up being useless, I would have apologized properly. Still, it's much better than not taking necessary countermeasures out of fear of failure and regretting it later."

When he put it that way, Cesia had to agree. While this was, as Cesia repeated to herself, only with the benefit of hindsight, thanks to the officers on standby, Narcotics had quickly rounded up the entire criminal organization, which was quite a feat.

Mavis had once told her that royalty must not make any mistakes and that, if they were wrong, they had to apologize for it properly. The siblings resembled each other in all the ways that they didn't need to.

"Nevertheless, please value yourself more," she said.

Marcus's method was always that if something went wrong, he would take the blame. He never slacked in his efforts to protect his subordinates and subjects, but he never entered himself into that calculation.

Again, Cesia thought, frustrated. She had spent all her energy on training over the past six months, with good results, but she still wasn't strong enough to protect him.

At Cesia's silence, Marcus gave her a strained smile. "I'm not sacrificing myself

for just anything, you know."

"But..." Seeing Marcus laugh in his usual, cheerful way, Cesia pouted childishly.

"I can do what I do because I trust my outstanding subordinates to produce results. I said it earlier, didn't I? I'm not doing this all on my own."

Those were the same words Marcus had spoken to her last time when she was worried he was taking on too much by himself.

"I have the two of you now, too. I'm expecting great things from you rookies," Marcus said, smiling. He had said that even after Felix's failure and Cesia's recklessness. Their chests burned with the desire to meet his expectations.

"I'll continue to strive more," Felix said.

"I'll work even harder, too," Cesia said.

Marcus smiled contentedly, which then changed to a grin.

"Well then, I have an assignment for both of you. Felix, practice making your magic more precise. If you hadn't focused on training your body so much and had instead been able to use magic the way Cesia can, you would've had more options this time."

"Ah... Y-Yes, sir!"

Felix was from a noble family, so he had some magical ability but could barely use it. Until now, Felix's role had been physical combat, while Cesia took on the duty of using magic, but it was true that if Felix had been able to freely use magic and participate in close combat like Maria had last night, the situation would have been different.

"And Cesia. I want you to be able to fight in a dress. Frankly, I'm still unsure about letting you fight on your own, but the cases won't wait until we're ready."

"Yes, sir!" Cesia said, clenching her fist.

"Do you understand?" Layne said. "I'll say this in advance: Even if you've completed your assignments, don't think it's okay to behave recklessly. Always remember that this only means that your options have increased."

Cesia and Felix nodded meekly. Exasperated, Marcus rested his chin in his hands and looked up at Layne standing next to him.

"Aren't you serious?"

"You're too soft on the rookies, sir."

"It's my policy to praise them to make them grow," Marcus said, with a wink so perfect it could've made a sound. Layne shook his head with a troubled look.

You *might be too soft on* him, Chris thought, observing the entire exchange from his position in the corner. Layne never said what needed to be said, and the prince didn't change one bit.

"Well then, with that, this case is closed. Everyone, you did a great job. Reflect on everything you did well, and work just as hard next time," Marcus said.

Cesia and Felix looked at each other, then faced the boss they respected, and together, said, "Yes, sir!"

IT was another day.

"Cesia," Felix casually greeted her in the corridor. She gave him a puzzled look but calmly approached him.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Um, you see..." Felix began. He seemed to be having difficulty saying what he wanted to say.

Cesia internally raised her guard. He looked unsure of himself, but she remembered how he had stuck his finger out and shouted "Shameless!" at her. They were on good terms now, but that didn't mean there couldn't be something new that might spark a conflict.

"It's about that beautiful woman who rescued you from that man in charge of the drug ring," Felix began.

"Beautiful," Cesia repeated. It sounded more like a meaningless collection of sounds than a word.

"Yeah, that graceful woman with red hair and green eyes. You two seemed friendly; do you know her?" Felix asked, blushing slightly.

Someone close to him perfectly fit those criteria. Gender seemed to be playing a massive role in preventing him from seeing it, though.

Speaking of which, Marcus's and Maria's faces resembled each other about as much as siblings' would, but Cesia didn't think that Maria's and Mavis's faces looked alike. That might have been another barrier. And finally, in this case, when Felix saw Maria's face, it was dark out.

But still.

"Beautiful..." Cesia repeated. This was the first time in a while she had been caught off guard, and she still hadn't recovered.

Part of it had to do with the fact that, in her eyes, Marcus and Maria were different people. It required enormous courage to accept that the man she loved was also her close female friend, let alone a beautiful one who was enthusiastic about her disguise—Maria undeniably knew more about makeup than Cesia did. Cesia was still too afraid to ask whether that was necessary.

She had made sure to let Chris know that Marcus wasn't cross-dressing for fun, but his enthusiasm about it sure made it look like he was enjoying it. It was a bit scary. If it was found out, the citizens of the whole kingdom would weep. Cesia wanted to cry herself. While Marcus had points that made him somewhat of a delinquent, in the end, to her, he was an impeccable boss and a flawless prince. It was a source of the omnipresent barrier between him and Maria in Cesia's mind.

"Beautiful," she repeated again.

"Why are you acting like that?" Felix asked, tilting his head in confusion.

"Well... We're friends..."

"So that's it! Can you introduce me next time? I wasn't able to introduce myself back then. She knew my name, but... You said she was His Royal Highness's subordinate?"

"If His Royal Highness hasn't introduced her to you, then I can't do

anything..." Cesia forced out a response. Her face was frozen stiff. Cold sweat was streaming down her back, and she couldn't properly enunciate her words. Felix looked disappointed. He's too simple—for better and for worse.

"Really... Well, I haven't seen her before, so she might be doing covert work or working in another bureau..."

She was right in front of you at the morning meeting, Cesia thought but didn't speak. She assumed a meek expression, deciding she wouldn't say or confirm anything. Marcus ought to explain it, and she shouldn't talk about it. Probably. No, definitely.

"If you train more and polish your skills enough, maybe His Royal Highness will introduce you... You're colleagues, in a general sense."

"Y-Yeah."

They were colleagues in a specific sense, too. She was his direct boss.

Cesia decided not to ask why he wanted to meet Maria. She wanted to make it hurt as little as possible later when he learned the truth. If she didn't mention it, it was the same as it not being there at all. It's fine. I didn't notice a thing. I said I didn't notice a thing!

"Then, let's keep up our training!"

"Yeah..." Cesia replied robotically. There was nothing she could do besides play dumb and smile.

You punk! Explain things to your subordinates! Cesia resigned herself to internally cursing Marcus.

LATER that day, unusually for Cesia, she trained with Mavis in the evening. Dressed as a lady's maid, she devotedly stood in waiting behind the princess.

Her dress was plain, but as something worn by the princess's lady's maids, it was well tailored, and a dedicated maid had done her hair and makeup. The dress restricted her movement, too, and it made Cesia feel a new appreciation for the other lady's maids, who gracefully took care of the princess while wearing it. She felt this especially keenly regarding the princess's head maid,

Anita, who overlooked nothing and whose brisk movements were infused with elegance.

She's about ten years older than Mavis, and I'm sure she's from a distinguished noble family. It wouldn't be strange for her to be thinking of marriage soon. I'd never ask her something private like that, though, Cesia thought.

"Today's schedule is complete, Your Highness," Anita informed Mavis after checking a document. Mavis had just finished an audience with a merchant.

Hearing that, the princess nodded calmly, then, with her back straight, she sat on the couch. Without even being conscious of it, every one of her movements was incredibly elegant. That, too, was an example Cesia strove to follow.

"Thank you, Anita. Everyone, sorry, but I'll need one last push from you all," Mavis said. Then, some maids approached Cesia, their quick movement producing no noise.

"Lady May, what is this?" Cesia asked.

Mavis gracefully sipped her tea from a cup another maid had poured for her, then beamed at Cesia. Cesia knew this face. It was the same mischievous expression her brother often wore.

"Because, no matter how often I say it, there isn't any progress. There's nothing wrong if I interfere, just a little bit."

"Huh? Lady May? I don't know what you mean at all," Cesia said, her eyes darting around in confusion as some maids led her behind a folding screen they had just set up.

Every night when Cesia went to a party disguised to investigate the drug smuggling ring, Mavis's maids had dressed Cesia up as a lady in this manner. The skill the princess's maids displayed in their various duties could put an enforcer to shame. They had brilliantly accommodated Cesia's request to keep her disguise as inexpensive as possible: they retailored used dresses for her, ordered fake jewelry, and so on. Cesia had requested used clothing because she didn't know if or when she might ruin her clothes during an investigation.

"I helped you with your job, so you'll humor my little request, won't you?"

Mavis insisted.

"Ah, so that's what you want..." Cesia spoke through the screen, resigned to her fate.

With Mavis's duties done for the day, Cesia's training was done, too. Mavis and everyone else had been quite a lot of help to Cesia, and she wanted to return that favor if she could.

Cesia was silent as the lady's maids stripped her dress off, helped her put on a different one, and redid her makeup and hair. Her new outfit felt different from her previous disguises.

As Cesia slowly emerged from behind the screen, she asked Mavis, "Am I a dress-up doll?" and tilted her head in puzzlement.

The long, burgundy dress gave her an adult look, and while the skirt puffed out only moderately, it made up for it with its beautiful, flowing look. An exquisite, uncut jade gemstone was in the center of the pearl necklace. In contrast with the used clothing she always wore, the dress was brand-new and appeared to be tailor-made to fit her exactly. On top of that, Cesia could easily tell from the texture of the fabric that it was high-quality.

"Good, good," Mavis nodded, satisfied. "I knew that red would look fantastic with your black hair."

"Um... These colors really remind me of a certain someone..." Cesia said. For Cesia, who had just realized her feelings for Marcus a few days previously, the red dress and jade gemstone were too much.

"They're my colors. I'm sure you feel privileged to wear them," Mavis confidently declared. Cesia abandoned what she was about to say.

"Huh? Y-Yes, I do..."

"Lady's maids wear the colors of their mistress all the time. I know! I'll take you along to the celebration of the birth of Reynold's son, and you can wear this," Mavis energetically suggested.

Cesia stared into the princess's jade-green eyes. Mavis had two older brothers: one was that punk, Marcus, and the other was the kingdom's crown

prince and heir to the throne, named Reynold.

"It'd be too disrespectful. I can't go to something like that!" Cesia shouted, her face pale.

"Why not?" Mavis cutely pouted. "Ronny's so cute!"

"Please, don't bring that into this! Everyone there will be incredibly influential people!"

Reynold's newborn son's name, Ronald, was chosen because it sounded similar to his father's name. His aunt, Mavis, charmingly called him by the affectionate nickname Ronny.

Cesia had gotten relatively used to talking on familiar terms with Marcus and Mavis, but that didn't change the fact that she was just a commoner and a rookie civil servant. Just thinking about participating in a gathering of such influential people made her throat feel parched.

"Really...? I know Ronny would be happier if there were more people to celebrate."

"Well, I can celebrate as much as I can alone in my room."

"What's with you?" Mavis said with a sulky expression.

Cesia waited for a while, and finally, after Mavis stared at her for some time, she nodded.

"Well, all right, let's talk about it again next time. Anita!" Mavis called Anita, and the head maid went over to Cesia, sitting in front of a mirror, and began tying her hair into a complex braid.

"Aaaah, Anita, this dress fits just right and feels incredible. Is it, perhaps, tailor-made?" Cesia said falteringly.

"Her Royal Highness used her allowance, so there's no need to be concerned about the cost. It's fine," Anita said cheerfully.

It's not fine at all.

"Uh... Lady May... Why did you spend your precious allowance on something like this?" Cesia bemoaned.

It may have been a paltry sum to the princess, but Cesia knew it must have been expensive. She was grateful for the gift, but a tasty cake would have been a more fitting reward.

"Ought you not to accept Her Royal Highness's thoughtful gesture without complaining?" Anita said.

"You're right. I'm glad, but I just have mixed feelings about it. Lady May is truly innocent," Cesia said, her face alternatingly turning pale and blushing.

In the mirror, she saw Anita smile, standing behind her and doing her hair. It wasn't a mask Anita was putting on for her job; it was a precious, familiar smile like an older sister would give her younger sister. Anita noticed her staring and instantly snapped back to her usual, serene expression.

"It's one of Lady Mavis's virtues," Anita said.

Hearing Anita lovingly call Mavis "Lady Mavis," Cesia was happy to see how important the princess was to Anita.

"Yeah. Lady May is cute, after all," Cesia said.

"I believe I said, 'virtue.'"

"Yeah, yeah," Cesia giggled. She sensed a slight annoyance behind her, which only deepened her smile.

After looking at and fiddling with the dressed-up Cesia from every angle, Mavis gave a satisfied nod and received a sealed envelope from Anita. Their conversation about inviting Cesia to the crown prince's son's celebration had apparently been Mavis's spur-of-the-moment suggestion, and the princess had another reason for giving her the dress.

"And, that is?"

"For the investigation you and the others were doing this time, you said that you wanted any information I could get about any slightly unusual parties, right? This envelope has an invitation to tonight's masquerade ball."

"Okay. Wait, huh? I have to go undercover to another party?" Cesia asked, flustered.

Mavis sighed, fed up. Her mannerisms were like a child trying to act like an

adult, and they calmed Cesia down.

"Of course not. I happened to have an invitation, so I thought, why don't I give it to you so you can enjoy one of those parties for once? I'm trying to be considerate, you know!"

"Oh, really?"

"You were probably tense the whole time at those parties, right? This is a masquerade ball, so don't take it too seriously, and go have a good time!" Mavis said plainly with a bright smile. She must have thought that Cesia would be glad to accept the invitation.

Cesia had no other choice except to smile and nod.

AFTER receiving a sharp, "You're taking the time to go, so be sure to dance and enjoy the food!" from Mavis, Cesia was sent to the venue of the masquerade ball.

"This feels so awkward," Cesia quietly sighed, adjusting the mask on her face that had slipped from its original position.

She had been to several of these parties in recent nights, but it was true that, because she had been on the job, she hadn't been able to enjoy the ambiance. Still, from the gaudy decorations and flashy outfits to anything and everything—including food and drinks—costing money, coming to another party just impressed Cesia with the feeling of being out of place.

"Putting that aside, why a masquerade ball again? Nobody here knows me, so what..."

As Cesia spoke to herself, she realized why.

"That's right. People might be wary of me if I was at a normal party."

She was a commoner, so she hadn't known it until recently, but the social connections among the nobility were strong and extensive. Unexpectedly, the more low-ranking a noble was, the more they stayed informed on the goings-on of other nobles. On the other hand, high-ranking nobles showed little interest in their lessers, and that tendency intensified the more prestige they had. It all

made Cesia want to shake her fist in the air and yell, "You damn nobles!"

Standing at the top of that hierarchy was Marcus, a member of the royal family. His ability to remember the face and name of nearly any noble he met went past impressive and was almost scary.

"He said it was to make his job smoother, but it must be fun for him, too..."

"My lady," a man suddenly spoke to her.

"Ah," Cesia uttered, so surprised she almost jumped. "Is there something I can...?"

It would be ridiculous for Cesia to ask a man his business when speaking to her when she came alone to a masquerade ball, but she hadn't expected that anyone would find her attractive enough to talk to her in the first place. An undercover investigation was one thing, but it was her personal time, and she had come entirely as her normal, everyday self. It didn't even cross her mind that he might be trying to invite her.

"A dance, if you don't mind?" the man said with a smile as he extended his hand to her, unfazed by her earlier response.

Mavis's order to have fun must've included this. The man was a gentleman, after all, and he might have seen Cesia by herself and called out to her because he had taken pity on her.

At parties in the past, Cesia had danced with Felix and other participants, but that had been for work. She had never considered dancing for her own enjoyment.

I'll dance one song with him, so I have a story to tell Mavis, Cesia thought, staring at the man's hand.

But.

"Sorry," Cesia said quietly and then left as if she were trying to escape.

She glanced back over her shoulder at the man. He didn't appear to have paid any mind to her rejection and lightly shrugged before he went to speak to another woman.

Cesia was relieved that he didn't take it poorly. She could deal with men on

the job, but after multiple bad past experiences, she found them hard to deal with. Or, more accurately, they were frightening. She couldn't shake the terror that had implanted itself into her of being suddenly, forcefully held down. Even after she had become, through her training, able to blast away even a large man with magic, there was no compensating for the sheer gap in physical strength. That might've been why Cesia put more effort into training her magical ability over physical fighting techniques. In addition, magic suited her with her slight build, and all of her teachers had recommended she put more emphasis on it.

Except for Marcus. He had pushed her to train her strength and martial arts ability so she could fight well, even in a dress. He must have urged her in that direction precisely because he had noticed her weakness.

When Marcus was magically disguised, his physical strength—in other words, Maria's physical strength—was that of an average woman's. Despite that, Maria had instantly overpowered the boss of the drug smuggling ring, whom Cesia had struggled so much against. That moment was still fresh in Cesia's mind.

Cesia could fight well using magic, but when it came down to a battle of strength with a man, she couldn't just throw in the towel and say, "Well, I can't win anyway." A time would come when she couldn't lose. Her assignment had been to train enough to be able to win through physical technique, even when she was outmatched in strength and size.

She remembered Layne's words: completing her assignment meant increasing her options. They weighed heavily on her mind. But close by, she had Maria as a fantastic example. *I can do this. Tomorrow's training, I'll keep pushing myself!* Cesia fervently thought.

While deep in thought, Cesia suddenly realized she had walked out into the garden. Neatly trimmed trees ringed it, and the glowing orange lanterns everywhere gave the place a fantastical beauty. The chill, though, prevented any of the other guests from going outside to enjoy the garden. Seeing that nobody was around, she slowed, knowing she could take the time to calm herself down. She heard flowing water, probably a fountain, so she casually headed in that direction. There, she heard a voice, and her eyes widened in surprise.

"Cesia?" Marcus spoke. He was sitting on the rim of the stylish fountain, his legs crossed. He was dressed impeccably in a stylish evening suit and wore a black mask. His outfit resembled what the other guests were wearing, but there was no way Cesia would miss his flaming red hair, jade green eyes, and, above all, that mischievous smile.

"Your Royal Highness..." Cesia let slip before hurriedly covering her mouth with her hands. No matter his reasons for being at the party, Cesia couldn't imagine that he would want the fact that he was there to be known to the other guests.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

Marcus looked Cesia up and down, quickly examining her. He smiled, embarrassed.

"Well, one thing led to another."

His adorable younger sister had pleaded with him to attend this party, although she hadn't said why.

In contrast with the stern crown prince, it wasn't uncommon for the second prince, whose approachability was his selling point, to attend these types of parties in secret. There weren't any shady drug deals or human trafficking going on, and although the party couldn't be called a wholesome affair, it was a place where young nobles could cut loose and even play around for a bit.

After listening to his sister's various reasons why he should go, Marcus figured he might as well, seeing as he could go casually without a disguise.

Now, however, he knew what his sister's aim had been. Standing before him was Cesia, wearing red and jade green—his colors.

There isn't a man alive who wouldn't be overjoyed at a sight as beautiful as this.

"You too, huh? Lady May also told me to come. Ah... And she prepared this dress for me, too!" Cesia said, disoriented. She must have felt embarrassed to wear those colors in front of the man himself.

"I see. You look pretty, Cesia. It suits you," Marcus said. The words had come

naturally to him, but he surprised himself at how kind his tone was.

Cesia blushed and said, "You flatter me."

"I'm not working, you know. It's not flattery," Marcus said, raising an eyebrow at Cesia's conventional, uninteresting response.

"R-Really..." Cesia said, mildly panicking as she meaninglessly patted herself down everywhere. "Achoo!" she sneezed.

Marcus hopped up and went to her, casting warming magic without touching her.

"Thank you," she said.

"Sure thing."

"Lord Marcus... You're good at everything, aren't you? Is there anything you can't do?" Cesia tilted her head in puzzlement.

Her sleek, flowing black hair came down to her exposed shoulders. She rarely ever exposed her skin. Marcus almost felt dizzy looking at her bare, pale skin.

"There is," he said.

"There is?"

The answer seemed like it had been unexpected, and Marcus was internally surprised by her reaction.

"Anyone has a few things they aren't good at."

Marcus thought of his strong, heroic brother and bright, elegant sisters. He had grown and developed his skills and interests in various areas because he didn't have what they had. However, he knew he was still far from being able to boast that he could do anything.

Cesia shrugged and laughed. "You're always there for me when I need you. In my mind, you're truly the image of a gallant prince on horseback," she giggled. Then, realizing what she had just said, she blushed again. Her slightly shy demeanor lent her an air of charming innocence.

"I'm glad I look that way to you," Marcus said.

Music filled the air just then, carried to them by the wind. Marcus took out his

pocket watch and checked the time.

"It looks like it's the last dance. Have you danced with anyone tonight, Cesia?"

Cesia hesitated, then said, "No," and awkwardly looked away.

Marcus gave her a kind look, but her gaze was averted, and she didn't notice.

"Then, how about with me?" Marcus asked.

"Huh?"

"May told you to enjoy the party, right? If neither of us dance even a single song, she'll scold the both of us."

He knew that Mavis had told him and Cesia to go to the party because she wanted them to dance together, so as long as they did that, there would be no problem, even if they did nothing else. Regardless, with it being all but offered to him on a silver platter, Marcus cursed his cowardice for being unable to propose a dance without using Mavis as an excuse.

Over time, he had increased what he could do, but in establishing his position as the casual, relatively free second prince, one thing had appeared that was firmly out of his reach.

He had lost the freedom to convey his feelings to the woman he loved.

"Y-Yes, you're right; Lady May will scold us... Then, if you don't mind, Lord Marcus."

"Leave it to me."

Cesia, her cheeks deepening with color, unblinkingly held out her hand. Marcus took that small hand, his expression on the surface the same smile as always.

He remembered that night. When he had seen Cesia almost get killed by the boss of the drug ring, he nearly screamed. She had been about to give up. Furious, he forgot he was disguised as Maria and charged in, willing to do anything to subjugate the man.

Cesia always told him to take better care of himself, but no matter how much time elapsed, she never got rid of her stray cat mentality. She was the one who wouldn't take care of herself. She often expressed her displeasure at his phrasing, but because he saw himself as a useful pawn, he could pick and choose the critical time to fight. He wanted his death to produce the greatest utility possible.

But Cesia didn't think that way. Marcus loved and cherished her, but she still considered herself worthless. He couldn't remain just a good friend to her anymore—she would never be happy if he stood by and watched. If he left her alone, she would never even try. By himself, with his own two hands, he wanted to make her happier than anyone else.

They danced, moving in time with the leisurely music. Their dance step was the simplest, most popular one, and it was the only one Cesia knew, having hurriedly learned it in preparation for their most recent investigation. Marcus had helped her practice and had even been her dance partner a few times. Compared to back then, Cesia was dancing a great deal more naturally.

"You've improved," Marcus remarked.

"Going to a party and dancing with a few people must have made me more confident."

"So you're the type to get better when it's the real thing, huh? That makes you a good enforcer."

"That's...a compliment, right?"

Marcus laughed loudly at her bewildered expression.

The lanterns' light cast faint shadows on the garden grounds. They were the only two people there.

Now that she was more in the mood, Cesia's expression was calmer, and she looked up at Marcus and smiled. Their gazes met, and the look in his jade-green eyes softened.

Marcus believed that it was the role of people in charge of the country like him to provide better and more stable lives for their subjects. He constantly desired for even just one more person to attain happiness. However, for a single one of those people, for Cesia, he wanted to be the source of her joy. He was proud to call himself a talented prince. But, because of that, there was someone who would never be his. Next spring, Marcus would marry the princess of a neighboring country. He had no right to love Cesia.

From far away, the slow waltz echoed through the air over the faint sound of leaves rustling in the wind. Beneath the light of the lanterns, in the beautiful, dreamlike garden, they danced together, just the two of them, until the music ended.

Chapter 4, Part 1: By a Twist of Fate, I'm Working as My Rival's Maid

"YOU'RE shameless."

Splash!

The instant the water from the vase was dumped on her head, Cesia closed her eyes. She could only stand there silently and submit to the irrational abuse. *Being a maid is tough. Some things never change*.

"I'm deeply sorry," she apologized.

If she had been her old self, she would have fought to the bitter end against the person standing in front of her. Determined resistance—it was Cesia's creed that had gotten her through life with nobody to rely on except for herself. She had graduated from the Academy and entered government service in the castle so she could survive on her own. But one thing led to another, and here she was again, bowing to someone she would never willingly bow to.

"Learn from this, and cease your silly little play at trying to defy me. I can easily ruin your pathetic life any time I want," the arrogant voice spoke from above Cesia's head.

A wave of tension spread among the other assembled maids, who were prostrating themselves on the floor to avoid incurring their mistress's wrath. Cesia, with her head still bowed, mechanically repeated her previous apology.

"I'm deeply sorry, Princess Juliette."

The beautiful woman with blue eyes and bright blonde hair was Juliette Lani Gwyllt, the second princess of the kingdom of Gwyllt and Marcus's fiancée.

When Juliette left the room, taking the lady's maids she had brought from her country, Cesia finally raised her head. The Emeroadian and lady's maids that were supposed to be in the room were gone, too, leaving Cesia alone. She sighed once, then, with the tip of a finger, traced the water still on her, and like

a video in reverse, the scattered droplets returned to the vase.

Cesia used to be bad at drying magic, but now she could easily cast it. The magic she had just used, however, was a different kind. It allowed the caster to return things to a condition they had been in just previously. It required an accurate grasp of the original state of things, and if too much time elapsed, the spell became impossible to use. Its requirements for casting were quite restrictive, but it was still a respectable, high-ranking magic.

According to Cesia's magic teachers, what made a spell high-ranking was not that it required a massive amount of magical energy but the one casting it to be skilled at manipulating magic so that they could channel the appropriate amount of magical energy as efficiently as possible. Along those lines, Cesia could cast several high-ranking spells she ordinarily couldn't, thanks to her ability to exercise proper control of her available magical energy, which was by no means large. Ultimately, she had chosen that spell out of laziness; it saved her the effort of fetching water to refill the vase.

Checking that all the water was back in the vase, Cesia picked up the scattered flowers and sloppily rearranged them. Seeing some of the broken flower stems, Cesia frowned slightly. The spell didn't work on flowers—or people.

Cesia had been born under the unlucky star that doomed her to be cursed as "shameless" frequently, but there was a more specific reason why she was working as Juliette's maid.

Currently, all of Emeroade was in a festive mood, celebrating the long-awaited birth of Crown Prince Reynold's first child. Due to a lack of celebratory events in recent years and because the child was a boy, the people of Emeroade took this as an opportunity to indulge in the festivities. However, as neighboring countries sent more and more gifts, and as foreign envoys and messengers unceasingly flowed into the country, the regular duties of the government began to be hindered by the need to entertain all of them. So, to wrap everything together, one large, official festival would be held on the sixth month anniversary of young Ronald's birthday. At the present moment, it was about a month away.

After the official announcement, the flow of envoys turned into a rush, jamming the castle to bursting with activity. So that none of the guests would feel even the slightest inconvenience, even Cesia, who normally worked as a civil servant, was conscripted as a maid for one of the visitors.

And, through some caprice of fate, she was assigned to Juliette. The externally beautiful princess acted the graceful lady in front of other nobles, but in her private quarters, she was the embodiment of arrogant audacity, constantly complaining to and harassing her maids and lady's maids. The Emeroadian servants—Cesia among them—were shocked to see that Prince Marcus's fiancée was such an unpleasant person.

Though Cesia was aware of her feelings for Marcus, she knew he would never be within her reach. But the thought of him marrying such a twisted woman filled Cesia with rage every time she saw her. That rage, which Cesia had most likely not completely suppressed, had probably caused Juliette to have it out for her. Day after day, she berated Cesia as shameless, and Juliette would pour water on her and throw trash at her.

Cesia chuckled. "No matter how noble they are, they all do the same things."

She wasn't proud of it, but Cesia had some experience with being bullied. She had turned nineteen in the spring, and in the last five years of her still-short life —four at the Academy and one in the castle—she had been the victim of one form of harassment or another for pretty much the entire time. She had often fruitlessly wondered whether, given the sheer amount of bullying, she was partially to blame, but as of the present, nobody had been so kind as to show her why. It was entirely possible she *had* been born under an unlucky star.

Now, on to her role as a pinch hitter for the castle's worker shortage. That was only the public reason for her brief stint as a maid, and naturally, there was another reason why she had been assigned to the powerful, important princess of a neighboring country. In reality, it was part of her job as an enforcer.

Several days earlier, Marcus, who rarely showed up for work, came to the file room that served as the office for the Second Division of the Financial Audit Bureau.

"I want all of you to keep watch on the foreign dignitaries arriving in

Emeroade," Marcus suddenly said.

When she heard him, Cesia's eyes widened in surprise, and she looked at the others. Felix and Roy looked surprised by the risky assignment, too, but Layne and Keith seemed calm. *Marcus must have told those two already*, Cesia thought.

As usual, Marcus had begun from his conclusion and left the explanation to Layne.

"As you all may have already noticed, the masterminds behind these recent big incidents have always just barely evaded arrest and escaped the country. That timing is too perfect to be a coincidence," Layne began.

Everyone nodded silently. The main members of the gang of kidnappers and the drug smuggling ring had been arrested, but in both cases, the all-important ringleader had escaped just in time, as if they had had information on the investigation team's movements. Nobody wanted to admit it, but what it meant was clear.

"Someone working at a high position within the castle, or possibly very close to us, is in secret communications with a foreign criminal organization," Layne declared. He spoke with his normal low, easily understandable voice, but his strong words were effective. Cesia felt alarmed.

Cesia wasn't an enforcer because she wanted to do good for her country; she just did it because it was her job. She faced cruelty and danger because her duty was to prevent harm from reaching average citizens. But when it came down to it, her job consisted of receiving orders from Marcus and Layne, putting those orders into effect, and finally, working with other bureaus to capture the bad guys. Her enemies were always clear "bad guys," but now she knew that one of the good guys who worked in the castle with her was a traitor.

Marcus saw Cesia grow pale and slightly smiled, trying to comfort her. She finally learned to trust the people around her, so it must be hard to know that someone nearby is secretly an enemy, he thought.

He would be lying if he said that he hadn't at least fleetingly considered removing her from this assignment. It was natural for Marcus to put the people important to him under his protection, just as how he acted with his younger sister, and that was all the more true for the woman he loved.

However, the country couldn't afford any incident during the steadily progressing preparations to welcome foreign guests to the hectic castle. Marcus had made her an enforcer, and she was a vital asset to the Second Division.

I'll believe in her, Marcus decided.

"Can I ask a question?" Roy asked, raising his hand. Layne nodded, and Roy continued with a somewhat troubled expression. "I get someone in the castle is connected with a foreign criminal organization. Given the timing and the similar modus operandi, I believe it also makes sense to conclude that it's the same organization for both incidents."

Felix and Cesia nodded. The possibility that the kidnappers and the smugglers were both part of one large, foreign criminal syndicate had been a frequent topic of discussion in the division.

"But, one thing I don't understand is... What about the person passing along information? The order to watch foreign guests is...well..." Roy trailed off. This was rare for him; he usually spoke very clearly.

Layne glanced at Marcus, who nodded and spoke.

"You're right. My guess is that a member of that criminal syndicate is among the foreign visitors, and I believe they're using the festivities as an opportunity to establish contact with their source of information in the castle."

Cesia was surprised again. Marcus had just said that one of the important, high-ranking visitors was connected with a criminal organization. It would've been strange for her not to feel surprised.

"Why do you think they're among the visitors, sir?" Felix interjected, unable to stay silent. But, maybe because he wanted to ask the same question, Roy yielded the floor.

"They're trying to weaken the strength of our country," Marcus said sharply.

Cesia thought she had gotten used to it over the past year, but she shivered at the cold undertone in his voice.

Layne exchanged looks with Marcus, then continued the explanation.

"I'm sure you all have noticed something in the investigations you participated in. To start with, the crimes all took place centered on the capital, and the drugs were being sold primarily to nobles."

Cesia thought back to the cases she'd worked on until that point and realized that Layne was correct. Ports dotted the coast of Emeroade, and there were cities besides the capital where commerce flourished, but the drug sales had been targeted especially toward the capital's nobles. If the goal had been pure profit, they would have made much more money by spreading out their operations to other cities with laxer law enforcement.

"Just because a country is sending a delegation for the birth of the young prince doesn't mean that our relations with them are perfect, and there are probably countries that secretly think ill of our prosperity, too."

By taking advantage of its geography, Emeroade had grown rich. A considerable number of nearby countries would stand to gain if they saw their fortunes decline.

"But, thanks to our recent successes, we've discovered multiple criminal operations connected to foreign countries. So, there's a high possibility that the foreign ringleader, seeking to strengthen their relationship with their source of intelligence, is using the festivities to establish direct contact with their spy on the inside," Layne concluded. "And, besides that, the Security Bureau is on high alert due to the large influx of foreign guests. It's up to us to leave that to them and focus on what we can do."

What we can do? Cesia made a face. Marcus noticed it and grinned. She sensed something unpleasant was coming.

"In other words, your specialty: undercover investigations," Marcus said.

It's not our specialty, Cesia internally retorted. They just didn't have the authority, so they had to keep their investigations a secret from their enemies and allies.

SO, Cesia was working as Juliette's maid. One thing that still bothered her was the targets of their investigation, which Marcus, Layne, and Keith had chosen

beforehand. There were few enforcers, so one person each had been dispatched to cover the most suspicious visitors, and Cesia had been sent to investigate Juliette.

Does that mean that Marcus is suspicious of Juliette? At any rate, her nastiness is something to behold. Cesia remembered feeling goosebumps on her arms while standing behind Juliette as she met with other important figures and guests, so flawless was the princess's innocent act. Even if Juliette wasn't associated with the criminal syndicate, and even if it wasn't Marcus to whom she was getting married, Cesia was frightened for the future when she became a member of Emeroade's royal family.

What was also scary was how Juliette made no effort to hide her rudeness around servants. They couldn't admonish Juliette and couldn't ask for help from anyone with authority, either, but servants talked, and rumors traveled quickly.

Does she not even consider that her innocent act might be exposed once rumors reach other high-ranking nobles?

"I wonder if Prince Marcus knows," Cesia muttered, then frowned. Saying it out loud sounded pathetic, almost as if she was jealous. No matter how disagreeable Juliette was, she had the proper position and right to marry Marcus. Cesia remembered saying that she wished she had the authority to hit Marcus. She hadn't been aware of it then, but thinking back on it, she had said something quite embarrassingly suggestive: she had basically admitted that she wanted to be equal in status with him.

Cesia had felt herself growing weaker ever since she realized she loved Marcus. She used to think she only had to protect herself, which still should've been the case, but she still felt softer somehow.

Still frowning, she continued cleaning the room Juliette had assigned her. In addition to flower vases here and there, cushions and other furnishings had been scattered around after one of the princess's fits of rage. Cesia would've much preferred to keep cleaning forever, but it was her duty to keep watch on Juliette. She had to finish quickly and return to her mistress, no matter how much Juliette ostracized her.

Unfortunately, Cesia finally finished cleaning the room. Unwilling to leave, she

searched for a corner that still needed tidying up. Just then, the door to the corridor opened, and a lady's maid entered the room.

It was Cesia's classmate from when she had attended the Academy as Selene, Rosary Hilton, the daughter of a count. She had also been temporarily assigned to work as Juliette's lady's maid. Apparently, she had previously worked as the first princess's lady's maid, meaning Emeroade was assigning fairly high-ranking, skilled attendants to their guests. Still, as if to say her service was unsatisfactory, Juliette treated even Rosary with contempt despite the lady's maid's lack of deficiency.

Rosary noticed Cesia, too, and awkwardly averted her eyes.

She definitely suspects that I was Selene, Cesia thought. She didn't know what happened between Rosary and the real Selene in the brief moment that the two had met, but every time Cesia and Rosary came across each other in the castle, the lady's maid always looked as if she wanted to say something. However, Cesia had no intention of telling Rosary the truth. If it became known that she had attended the Academy as Selene, the blowback might even reach Marcus, who had served as her guardian for her second time through.

After their improprieties had been exposed, the Diane family had withdrawn to their estate in the country. Selene has been away from the capital for three years, and nobody talks about the scandal anymore. Although, maybe that'd be different if she showed up again.

Cesia had heard through the grapevine that Selene rejected a return to the capital, not wanting to be the focus of rumors again. Instead, she married a noble in the provinces, where she still acted like a pompous bully.

Rosary spotted a book Juliette had been reading on a table and took it. Juliette must've told her to get it. But a simple chore like that isn't something you would ask the daughter of a count like Rosary to perform.

Rosary was the same age as Cesia, making her nineteen, too. She was a shade past the ideal marriageable age for a young noblewoman, but when one took into account Rosary's family and her talents, it was unlikely that she was wanting in potential partners. Rosary probably continued to serve the first princess because she wanted to. Juliette frivolously ordering around the

devoted Rosary, then, was another example of the princess's *impeccable* personality.

Rosary glanced at Cesia again but left the room without saying a word. Cesia wanted to head back to watch Juliette, but if she left now, it would look like she was following Rosary. She decided to stay back for a moment before going.

Until several years ago, hardly anyone had been aware of Cesia. Even at the Diane estate, her only presence had been that of a lowly maid. She had gone from that to a foreign princess bullying her and the daughter of a countess being conscious of her. She didn't know whether that was a good or bad thing, but her circumstances had certainly changed. After meeting Maria and then Marcus, her world opened up, and it continued to expand further.

Waiting for Rosary to go ahead, Cesia counted for around half a minute in her head, then quietly left the room. She looked around the corridor, and seeing no sign of Rosary, she began walking. Juliette had gone to the drawing room, so Rosary must've followed her.

Cesia had spent too much time away from Juliette and wanted to rejoin her quickly. Marcus and Layne ordered me to monitor Juliette as her maid, but wouldn't I normally watch the guards and servants she brought over from Gwyllt rather than the princess?

Juliette was the representative from the kingdom of Gwyllt, but there were also male noble diplomats within the country's delegation. Nevertheless, no one was watching them. The other enforcers were attached to diplomats and high-ranking representatives from countries besides Gwyllt, so it was possible that Juliette was an unlikely candidate and Cesia was just assigned to her because, as a woman, she could watch her. It was also possible that Marcus's prediction had been off, and the syndicate's ringleader wasn't in the country or coming to meet their spy in the castle.

However, Cesia had never seen one of Marcus's predictions turn out wrong. Next to his unpleasant ability to always know a good chance when he saw one, he was also highly adept at sketching the mental state of the criminals he was tracking. At the same time, it was also true that it would be risky for their targets to attempt to contact a spy while under heavy guard. Then again, the

accumulation of unfounded worries ended up protecting the country when it needed it.

"Of course, it'd be best if nothing happened," Cesia muttered. Heard by nobody, her words melted away into the air.

There was no sign of life in the early afternoon corridor, and the only sound was the faint chirping of distant birds. Cesia was hurrying as quickly as possible while remaining quiet when she saw a woman she knew walking down the corridor toward her.

"Anita," Cesia greeted her.

Anita's eyes widened in surprise. "Cesia? What are you doing in that outfit?"

"They were short on workers, so I'm working as a maid temporarily," Cesia explained with a sour look, pulling on the skirt of her uniform.

Anita laughed elegantly. "I sent two of Princess Mavis's maids, too. But, I didn't know that we were so busy that even a civil servant like you was dragged into it. It must be hard."

"Indeed, it is... I was worried I wouldn't be fit to be a lady's maid, so I'm working as a maid instead, but there are so many chores..." Cesia hung her head in exhaustion.

Anita frowned with worry. "Then, you won't be able to come to Princess Mavis's lady's maid training... I'm sure Her Royal Highness will be lonely, too."

Mavis was cheeky and selfish, using Cesia as a dress-up doll and leaving the castle incognito, but she was an angel compared to Juliette. Wishing she could see her, Cesia nodded sadly.

"Please let Her Royal Highness know I won't be available..."

"Haha, I will. It really must be difficult. Who are you working for right now?"

"Princess Juliette from Gwyllt..." Cesia said in a quiet voice.

"She's certainly tougher to work for than most." Anita gave an understanding nod. "I feel for you, Cesia."

Oh? Cesia thought, momentarily discomforted by the knowing look on Anita's

face. Legends of Juliette's temper must already be spreading among the castle's servants. That, or Anita is just well-informed. Cesia remembered that once, Mavis had boasted of Anita's abilities. Her mother was from another country. Partly thanks to that, Anita was gifted in foreign languages and skilled at gathering information. She was Mavis's head maid but also acted as her source of information.

Could Anita have enough sway with people in power to get them to tell off Juliette for her behavior? Cesia wondered. However, she couldn't think of a person who could do it. The common servants would just have to bear with Juliette's excesses, being told something like, "The more important a person is, the more likely a disagreement will cause an international incident." Cesia erased the thought of asking Anita for help.

"Cesia?" Anita asked.

"Ah, it's nothing. Sorry for stopping you, Anita. I'll get scolded again, so I'll be going."

"All right. Hang in there!"

Cesia made a perfect servant's bow, just as Anita had taught her when she had first begun training to be a lady's maid under her.

"Well done," Anita said.

"Thank you!" Cesia replied.

The two smiled.

CRACK! The sound of two hard objects colliding with each other echoed through the training ground in the corner of the castle.

Several days later, Cesia was practicing using a staff with the retired knight Sir Robert. After a year, Cesia received a passing grade in unarmed martial arts from Marcus, so the focus of her training had shifted to combat using weapons. She had an average build for a woman, so it was determined that the type of weapon most suited to her was either a knife or something she was likely to be able to obtain on-site, like a staff. So, while still wearing her maid's uniform, she

had earnestly begun her training for the day.

Ever since the drug smuggling case, Cesia had stopped training in athletic clothes. She wanted to make sure she was agile, even while wearing a dress with a corset, so she had been purposefully training while wearing clothes that restricted her movements. Robert had been surprised at first, but once he saw how Cesia's duties were likely to result in situations where she was thrown into combat while still wearing a dress, he proactively created scenarios for her where she was at a disadvantage. Besides, it was common for knights to wear heavy armor, even during field training.

Crack, crack! The sound of two staffs colliding grew more frequent as Robert turned up the tempo of their bout. It was all she could do to keep up with his pace frantically.

She counterattacked, making sure her staff wasn't knocked out of her grip, but she was careless about her step and abruptly fell when Robert tripped her.

"Ah!" she exclaimed.

Robert picked up Cesia's staff, which had rolled away from her, and said, "Let's end here for today." He gently smiled.

Robert had retired from his position after an injury but still trained regularly, so he maintained a solid build. He was about as old as Cesia's father would have been. Marcus had trained with the retired knight from a young age, which would make Robert the teacher of her teacher.

"I can keep going," Cesia said, hastily standing up. Robert shook his head.

"It'd be best if we didn't do anything that hindered your afternoon duties."

Cesia paused, then replied, "Yes, sir," still out of breath. She hung her head. Robert was right. She would be getting her priorities backward if she spent all her energy on training and let that affect her work.

"I'll go wash my face," Cesia said.

"Go ahead."

After Robert's reply, Cesia went to get water nearby, still hanging her head.

Marcus used the small training ground himself, which was off-limits to others.

Felix and the others had permission to train with the knights, and Layne and Keith had their own spaces where they could train on their own. Lately, Cesia had been feeling restless, wanting to catch up with them, even if only a little bit.

Robert did some light maintenance on the equipment they used and put them away. This was the perfect exercise for after retirement; it was as if he were training a new recruit. Cesia was passionate about her training and got the hang of things quickly.

Robert thought that, after only a year of training, which she had done while simultaneously accomplishing her other duties, Cesia had shown great progress. He had said as much to her, too, but she always compared herself with those ahead of her, like Keith and Marcus. If channeled properly, that impatience could become good fuel for further progress, so he had refrained from speaking to her about it too much. Still, if she worked too hard, she would hurt herself, so Robert paid attention to make sure that didn't happen.

While Robert was deep in thought, Marcus appeared on the training ground. When Robert saw his princely outfit, he guessed he had been meeting with an ambassador from another country. He found the time to come to this corner of the castle to see her. She must've been weighing on his mind.

"Sir Robert, sorry for the sudden visit," Marcus said.

"Not at all! We just finished for today. Did you come all the way here to observe, Your Royal Highness?" Robert grinned.

"Don't be such a pain." Marcus gave a sulky frown. "I've been busy lately, and I haven't been able to see Cesia practice, so I was wondering how she's doing, that's all."

"Oh, that's all?"

"Don't grin at me, old man!" Marcus sharply glared at him.

"Try to hide it better, boy."

Robert had been his teacher from a young age, so even Marcus was at a disadvantage when it came to him.

"How's Cesia?" Marcus asked. "I was wondering whether it was the right idea

to let her use weapons this early."

Robert smiled happily. "You're too overprotective. She's talented, quick to learn, and always ready for more. I'd be happy to have her as a knight."

"I won't give you my employee," Marcus said surprisingly forcefully.

Robert smiled again. I might be able to recruit her as a knight after she gets rejected, he thought.

Naturally, Cesia took great pains to hide her feelings for Marcus, but her emotional guard was weaker on the training ground. Perhaps because her feelings were closer to the surface when she fought, her respect and love for Marcus shone through. He could often feel himself smiling despite himself whenever he saw Cesia's expression when she spoke about Marcus. Her face was that of a girl in love.

Robert had three sons, all of whom had become knights. He didn't feel dissatisfied as a parent, but he often thought that if he had a daughter, this was what it would feel like. Along with how hardworking she was, Robert saw Cesia as an undeniably cute student.

While it didn't appear that Marcus was aware of Cesia's feelings, Robert was happy to see that Marcus held his own feelings for her. It was a love between a student Robert found unpleasant—but whom he still loved and respected—and a student who was like a cute daughter to him; obstacles would fill their path, but as an old soldier, he was rooting for them.

"Isn't that up to Cesia?" Robert said. Just as he finished speaking, she returned.

"Sir Robert, I'm sorry for making you tidy up everything!" Cesia said. She had rushed over when she saw that the training ground was cleaned up. When she noticed Marcus, she stopped in her tracks, surprised. "Your Royal Highness," she greeted him, dropping to one knee and lowering her head.

Marcus gazed at the whorl of hair on the top of her head and smiled slightly.

Robert looked at them and shrugged.

"Cesia, I'll leave ahead of you, but make sure you do a cool-down exercise

before you go. And, Your Highness, would you please watch her so she doesn't do anything reckless?"

"Sir Robert! I won't do anything reckless, and I can't take His Royal Highness's time—"

"All right," Marcus said. Cesia had been about to protest Robert's decision, but Marcus's reply left her words hanging in the air.

After a simple goodbye, Robert exited the training ground. Left behind, Cesia uncomfortably lowered her gaze to the ground. As soon as she met Marcus, the feelings that had been congealing within her as she devoted herself to her work and training suddenly grew more pronounced.

She had gone over it in her mind countless times, but her feelings for Marcus weren't something that had any possibility of success. He would marry Juliette. And even if he didn't, a commoner like her would never have a chance with him. When she wasn't aware of her feelings, she had been able to interact more calmly with Marcus, but now, she was a bit awkward.

"By the way, you haven't decided on your house yet," Marcus said, breaking the silence.

"Ah."

"Did you forget? Chris was bothered, saying he couldn't start the purchase yet."

"But I thought it would be a house, with maybe a couple of rooms, like what a commoner would live in... A garden would be nice, but... That wasn't a house. It was closer to a mansion," Cesia said with a troubled expression.

The houses in the capital Chris had selected—all in the royal family's possession for one reason or another—had all been owned by nobles. The smallest was a two-story building that could comfortably house a four-person family. It was far too much for her.

"I can't take something like that..." she mumbled.

"I can't give you just a single-room apartment as a reward for rescuing a princess," Marcus said. He tilted his head, deep in thought. She had only begun

to acquiesce to the idea of choosing a house after he had suggested that he could have Chris arrange the sale of the house if she wouldn't use it.

"It's been almost a year. Hurry up and decide."

"Hmm... I don't think you should push it on me."

"Actually, speaking of rewards, there's another one in line after this one. Marquess Acton is making incessant requests to be allowed to give some sort of thanks to you."

"Marquess Acton?" Cesia muttered.

Marcus gave her an exasperated look. "You forgot? He's the father of the woman you saved with your recklessness, Lady Amy Langton."

"I didn't forget! How rude! I was just wondering what I did for the marquess to deserve a reward," Cesia hurriedly protested. Marcus peered into Cesia's eyes doubtfully. *Please, don't do that,* Cesia thought.

"After the marquess's wife passed away, he doted on his youngest daughter, Amy. He encouraged her spoiled behavior so much that it affected her reputation."

That part of the story was beyond a doubt; the rumors Cesia had heard about Amy at one of the parties she had been undercover at were far from positive. Despite that, the fact that she had been a candidate for Marcus's fiancée showed how much the marquess had advocated for his daughter and tried to boost her status.

"Since you rescued her, Amy's been in a long-term rehabilitation facility for her addiction, and the marquess is planning to transfer his estate to his oldest son and move to be closer to her."

"How is Lady Amy's condition?" she asked.

"Not very good. Probably because she was forced to take all those drugs... But she's getting the best treatment the country has to offer."

Hearing Marcus say it so plainly, Cesia cast her eyes downwards. *If only I had stepped in faster*. She couldn't change the past, and there hadn't been any opportunity to rescue Amy faster than she had, but she couldn't help but

wonder anyway. Those kinds of built-up regrets pushed her to do more and train harder. *If Marcus had been in my position, things would've turned out better,* she sometimes thought. She couldn't become him, but she wanted to be able to do half or even a quarter of what he could do.

"Hey."

Feeling Marcus flick her forehead, Cesia raised her head with a start. Marcus was making a slight, strained smile.

"If you had withdrawn back then, it's impossible to know what would've happened to Amy. At the very least, she would be worse off than she is now."

Marcus's words were a port in a storm to Cesia's floundering thoughts and gently showed the way past her worries.

"It's important to regret what you couldn't do, but it's just as important to be proud of what you could accomplish."

"Yeah..."

"Because one day, it'll be the foundation that supports you." Marcus patted her head.

Cesia still felt inadequate.

Marcus had undoubtedly gone through more bitter experiences than she had. Though he was only two years older than her, she had never seen him thrown off balance. She loved him, but she knew that even if she didn't, she would want to be of use to him.

After some time, Cesia felt calmer. She worried whether she should tell Marcus she was leaving soon so as not to take up too much of his busy schedule. She didn't even have to think about it; she should tell him that she was going to leave right away.

However, when she had been disguised as Juliette's maid, her regular duties in the Second Financial Audit Division had been put on hold. To avoid being suspected by the princess, she also refrained from interacting with any of her colleagues. Because of that, it had been some time since she had last met Marcus. He was a prince, not someone she would normally be able to meet at a

moment's notice, but she had gotten used to seeing him as the division chief. She felt lonely when she couldn't meet him, and when she did, she began to feel her love for him keenly.

"How is Princess Juliette?" Marcus suddenly asked.

Cesia furrowed her eyebrows. Seeing her pained expression, Marcus made a bitter, sympathetic laugh.

"Sorry about assigning you to someone so horrible. But Maria couldn't very well go undercover herself."

He was right. Maria was a disguise that only worked on people who hadn't interacted closely with Marcus before; if they knew Marcus well enough, Maria would bear too much of a resemblance to him, and they'd be suspicious of her.

"By that, you mean that you're aware of her true personality, correct?" Cesia asked with a grim look.

"I am." He frowned. "She does make an effort to hide it, but she doesn't really care whether she's exposed."

Cesia hesitated. "Huh? What do you mean?"

"Our marriage is political, as part of the commercial relationship between Gwyllt and Emeroade. In the view of both countries, her personality is irrelevant. So, she doesn't try to hide the fact that there's no love between us, and she knows that, even if she loses her temper at her servants, it won't be an issue at all."

Cesia's frown deepened. "So, she's just a bad person, then."

"Exactly."

"But her personality doesn't matter."

"Unfortunately." Marcus nodded sympathetically. "She's an incredibly shrewd businesswoman. Enough to where it's a waste for her to be a princess. Right now, with guests from various countries around, she's showing the bare minimum of agreeability, but I am worried about what happens after we get married."

"And you're still going to marry her?" Cesia said despite herself. Marcus shot

her a look. With a start, Cesia covered her mouth with a hand. She had said too much.

Marcus smiled. "I will. For Emeroade, whose primary industry is maritime transport, improving the terms under which we're allowed passage through the canal in Gwyllt's territory is a pressing issue. If just my marrying and a bit of selfishness on her part can settle it, then I'll consider it a price well paid. And a cheap one at that."

He's always like this, Cesia internally insulted him so as not to be noticed. He always tried to use himself in the most effective way possible. For the first time in a while, she felt the strong urge to hit him.

Gwyllt was considered a neighbor of Emeroade's, but in reality, an ocean separated the two countries. In contrast with Emeroade, Gwyllt's borders were almost all encompassed by mountain ranges, with only a small part open to the ocean. That part, however, was a section of a vital sea route that led to even more countries on the other side. It was possible to take a detour, but it more than doubled the cost and time of the trip. Gwyllt took advantage of this fact, and tolls had been increasing year by year.

Thus, Marcus and Juliette's marriage was literally a marriage of convenience; it was part of a settlement between their two countries that included both the mitigation of the canal toll and, for Gwyllt, the ability to trade more freely with Emeroade.

"When we marry, and she becomes part of the royal family, I can order her to behave better toward the servants. She's a princess of Gwyllt, so I can't do that right now, but... If there's anything you find inexcusable, let me know. As her fiancé, I'll warn her as much as I can," Marcus said, his tone turning apologetic.

This is why I can't stand him.

"Hmph," Cesia pretended to be strong. "As someone with a long history of being bullied, a temper like hers is nothing to me."

"I've wondered this for some time, but don't you think that shameless attitude is what makes them want to bully you in the first place?"

"All right, please pretend we're training, and let me hit you once," Cesia said,

clenching her fist, trying to shatter the strangely gloomy mood that had developed. Marcus laughed cheerfully.

For Cesia and Marcus, times like this were truly precious.

IT was night, and finally, after everything, the day was coming to a close, and Cesia's time serving as a maid for Juliette was almost over for the day. As she heated water and prepared Juliette's bath with the other maids, she glanced out of the corner of her eye at Juliette's lady's maid, combing the princess's hair as she sat in front of a mirror, about to take a bath. The lady's maid combing Juliette's hair was Rosary.

Far from just slacking on every bit of work, the maids Juliette had brought with her were even making the maids Emeroade had provided care for them. Like mistress, like servant. Both had poor reputations. Oddly enough, those Gwylltian lady's maids were grinning at each other.

They were identical to their mistress in all the worst ways. They behaved pompously around the Emeroadian servants and took their mistress's authority as their own, and Juliette approved it.

Did something happen just now to incite them?

Looking carefully, Cesia saw that the comb Rosary was holding had gotten caught on Juliette's blonde hair. As a strand of her hair was pulled taut, Juliette shouted in anger.

"That hurts! Are you even incapable of combing my hair?!"

"My deepest apologies!" Rosary instantly apologized, but Juliette, even angrier than usual, brushed Rosary's hands aside and pushed her to the floor.

"Ah?!" Rosary's eyes widened in surprise, and an expression of fear appeared on her face. She had probably never been treated so violently before.

"You Emerodian servants are truly useless. You and *that* woman," Juliette said.

Could she mean me? Cesia carefreely thought, picking up the comb that had fallen and slid across the floor toward her. Looking at the comb, she noticed it

had been tampered with so the hair would get caught on it.

They went this far just to frame Rosary? She was skilled, and Juliette often praised her, but it seemed that had displeased the Gwylltian lady's maids. Do your jobs and quit the harassment, you incompetent slackers.

Having thought Rosary was relatively useful, her failure displeased Juliette immensely and caused an even greater fit than usual. If it had been Cesia, whom Juliette didn't expect much of, it probably would've ended with only some verbal abuse.

"Lady Juliette, I'm truly sorry!" Rosary begged for forgiveness, kneeling on the floor.

"She won't forgive you."

"That's right! You harmed Her Royal Highness's hair, you know."

Seeing this as their chance, the Gwylltian lady's maids eagerly chimed in. Because her subordinates behaved in that way, Juliette had to give out such harsh punishments to keep face. What a vicious cycle. Her hair only got caught in a comb!

"I'm a guest, and you harmed my hair. This deserves a whipping."

Cesia sharply inhaled, stopping just short of a scream as she looked at the princess and her lady's maids in sheer disbelief. Luckily, nobody heard her. You're whipping someone over something so small? That's going way too far.

Even if she showed Juliette the modified comb, she couldn't imagine anyone on the Gwyllt side would acknowledge it.

"P-Please, forgive me..." Rosary said from the ground, her face pale.

Cesia unthinkingly grabbed the basin of water they used to adjust the temperature of the bath.

Don't be reckless, a grim-faced Layne implored her inside her mind. Even if I get fired here, it's better than just standing by and acting like nothing's happening. Good grief. No matter how much I train, deep down, I haven't changed, Cesia thought, fed up with herself. She did think of one way she might not lose her job, which she supposed was a sign of growth.

Firmly grasping the basin's edge, she heaved its contents onto Rosary in a single, clean motion.

"Aah!"

Splash!

Rosary froze in surprise, looking up from the floor in blank amazement at Cesia.

Using magic, Cesia had made sure that not even a drop of water landed on Juliette or her lady's maids. Holding the basin in one hand, she quickly exchanged a look with Rosary. With speed reserved only for times like this, the lazy lady's maids had already brought out an elaborately ornamented riding crop. Whip in hand, Juliette stared in surprise at the soaked Rosary and the inundated floor.

"What do you think you're doing, you idiotic maid!" she quickly snapped out of her amazement and yelled at Cesia.

Hearing Juliette's familiar, scornful voice, Cesia quickly bowed.

"My apologies, Lady Juliette. It would be dreadful if you caught a cold, and the bath is ready, so please, allow me to guide you to the bathroom."

"I'm completely dry. I asked you a question: what sort of idiotic thing are you doing, you idiot?" Juliette irritably bent the whip in her hands.

Trying to whip a person with something like that was nothing more than violence, plain and simple. Cesia couldn't forgive her for treating a human like an animal.

"My apologies. Rosary behaved insolently toward Your Royal Highness, so I threw water on her to make her reflect on her actions."



Juliette hesitated. "Are you sure you aren't crazy?" she said, furrowing her eyebrows.

You're the last person I want to ask me that, Cesia thought, her head still bowed. Then, she said, "Rosary is an Emeroadian lady's maid. Rather than make you go to the trouble of doing so, ma'am, I judged I ought to deliver a punishment quickly."

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. And, an absurdity for an absurdity.

By splashing water on Rosary before Juliette and her lady's maids could punish her, Cesia showed that she was even more erratic than they were. Water soaked the luxury carpet of the noble guest room and drenched Rosary. Next to Cesia, several more basins were filled with water, and Juliette must have judged that it would be even more troublesome if the room was flooded any further. She must have also thought that reasoning wouldn't work on a crazy woman like Cesia.

"Very well. Rosary, if you regret your actions, then never harm me again. Next time, you'll pay with your life."

"Y-Yes, Your Highness, my deepest apologies..." Rosary bowed, shivering from fear and the cold.

Though it was the beginning of spring, it was still a cold season to be soaked. Satisfied by Rosary's unsightly appearance, Juliette hurried to the bath, escaping the now chilly room.

"Cesia! Expect your punishment for your heedless action later. Right now, return this room to how it was before I'm done with my bath!"

Finally, of course, she would punish Cesia.

Juliette, her lady's maids, and the maids who would care for her while bathing exited the room, leaving only the bowing Cesia behind with Rosary.

"Cesia Kathrin," a miserable voice escaped the shaking Rosary's throat. "What do you think you're doing...?"

"What? I helped you. Would you rather get whipped?" Cesia replied, quickly lifting her head. Then, she placed the empty basin on the floor and cast drying

magic on Rosary, whose eyes widened in surprise. The water filled the basin again as it quickly and visibly disappeared off of her. Thanks to Cesia's significant improvement in magical control over the past year, she only transferred the necessary water to the basin without drying out Rosary's skin. As a finishing touch, she cast warming magic on Rosary. Marcus had cast it on Cesia before, and it had seemed useful, so she had taken the time to practice and master the spell.

"You're back to normal now, right? Ah, and your skin looked a bit dry, so I did you the favor of leaving behind the moisture there," Cesia said to the dumbfounded Rosary. Then, she grinned. "Consider it payback."

"You! I knew it... The Dianes...!" Rosary said, her mouth open in shock.

Cesia purposely ignored her and began her next task, transferring the water on the floor back to the basin. She could easily see herself being blamed for it, for some reason, so she made sure the floor was cleaner than it was before, fluffing up the carpet while she was at it.

She would probably still be punished, but it was better than seeing Rosary whipped. If she was fired, she wouldn't be able to accomplish her duty of keeping a close watch on Juliette as a maid, but all she would have to do is secretly monitor her from afar. If she was being honest, this was perfect; she had been wondering lately whether it would be easier to do just that.

Bubbles of water continuously floated up from the carpet and floor and, as if being guided, went back into the basin. A splendid performance, if I do say so myself.

Rosary commented, "You're quite skilled."

"Well, it's common practice for ladies to splash water on people. You get used to it."

Perhaps because she picked up on Cesia's implication that she had been frequently splashed with water, Rosary made an uncomfortable expression.

"You're right; it is better than getting whipped. I'll say my thanks to you."

Cesia paused, then grinned, saying, "That means you're saying you're going to thank me; it doesn't mean you're actually thanking me."

She was no saint; this didn't mean that she had generously forgiven Rosary for her past actions. She couldn't bear to watch her punishment, but forgiveness was a separate story.

"Thanks," Rosary said after a pause.

"You're welcome."

Nothing could be done about the beaming smile Cesia inadvertently made as if to say, "I won!" as Rosary frustratedly thanked her.

And so, finally, the long day was over.

Except for one final thing.

Juliette, not one to do things halfway when it came to punishment, already had something in mind for Cesia. Though the princess didn't administer the punishment herself, as she had already bathed and was getting ready to go to bed, she had ordered Cesia to do something incredibly tiresome—washing the kitchen's dishes.

"How did a princess come up with something so suited to a maid? She's unexpectedly proletarian," Cesia muttered as she looked at the pile of tableware in the sink outside the kitchen.

The kitchen was by no means free of the effects of the surge of visitors to the castle. While the kitchen staff behaved sympathetically toward Cesia, they simultaneously thanked her for saving them the trouble when they received Juliette's unauthorized order that Cesia do all the dishes herself. Well, if it helps the busy servants, then it's fine, I guess, Cesia thought as she grabbed some dishes.

All the tableware provided to visitors was expensive—in other words, it was fragile. It would probably break when exposed to normal cleaning magic. When Cesia worked as a low-ranking maid at the Diane residence, she wasn't allowed to use magic to wash the dishes for that reason. However, thanks to the excellent magical control she had just demonstrated, she could now wash plates, cups, and glasses all at once.

"This is simpler than I thought. I haven't washed dishes in a while, but I'll be done in no time."

The job was intended as a punishment, but seeing the results of her progress put Cesia in a good mood. Whether it was drying magic or cleaning magic, she felt happy knowing that, after coming to the castle, she had mastered everything she hadn't been able to do before.

"If I lose my job as an enforcer, maybe I can work at a large restaurant somewhere," she mused.

Her magical power wasn't especially high, so her skill at squeezing the best possible results out of the minimum amount of energy suited her as a plain, unassuming commoner.

Meanwhile, after ordering everyone to leave her bedroom, Juliette looked over a scrap of paper with information that her spy had passed to her.

As Marcus had suspected, Juliette was the ringleader of multiple criminal organizations that had been active in Emeroade. She had placed someone at the head of each, but she was the one who provided the financial support and decided the general direction of their activities. For her, the organizations were simply businesses set in other countries—their methods were illegal and criminal, but that was all.

She couldn't harm the citizens of her own country, after all. Besides, as a princess of Gwyllt, she couldn't be tried under another country's laws. She targeted Emeroade because, as a neighboring country, if she weakened it to a certain degree, it would make achieving her primary goal easier.

However, one thing had struck her as strange. The plan had been going smoothly until, for some reason, over the past year, multiple organizations of hers had been exposed one after the other within the borders of Emeroade. Thanks to her spy, her close subordinates had barely escaped safely, but even then, Juliette had been impressed by the skill of the investigators—even Emeroade had talented people working for them.

Wanting to know who exactly was getting in the way of her plans, Juliette had received multiple scraps of paper from her spy as they passed in the castle corridors. The information on those paper slips surprised her: the department that had been such a thorn in her side was commanded by Second Prince Marcus under the unassuming name of the Second Financial Audit Division. It

sounded as if its staff were all civil servants—bookish types, mostly—but in reality, it was made up of a select few former knights, mercenaries, and some magic users, who formed quite an effective squad.

What's more, one of those enforcers was someone she had thought was just a shameless maid—Cesia. That meant that Marcus's subordinates had been observing Juliette since she had arrived in Emeroade.

Juliette was relieved that she had taken care beforehand to decide that contact with her spy would be limited to exchanges on scraps of paper they passed each other. It would've been dangerous to speak directly with the spy she had secretly placed in Emeroade castle several years before.

"But still, Cesia...! That shameless woman... I should've given her a harsher punishment."

Juliette visited Emeroade, this time as the kingdom of Gwyllt's representative, in part to confirm whether her spy hadn't betrayed her. Her businesses had been exposed, and while her subordinates had escaped, the organizations themselves were nearly completely destroyed. Couldn't her spy have leaked information to her faster? Could they have been won over to Emeroade's side? All questions she came in person to answer.

In the end, she learned her spy hadn't betrayed her, but also that there were new, large obstacles, and as a result, her plans weren't proceeding on schedule.

Marcus was a vital piece in her plan. She had thought his stupidity was perfect for her plans, but that man's carefree smile hid someone unexpectedly sharp.

"Oh, well... I'll have to make a slight change of plans," she said to herself. Her tone was disappointed, but she was smiling.

Cesia.

An idea to frame that pest of a maid while simultaneously realizing her plans took shape in her head. Juliette was delighted.

At the same time, the Second Division was getting closer to the truth that Juliette was the secret mastermind of the criminal syndicate. Besides Cesia, the other members of the Second Division were men, and it was difficult for them to observe their targets as closely as she could. Luckily, though, because of their

recent distinguished achievements, all of which had gone to the Security Bureau, the Bureau was in their debt. So, they were able to indirectly request that castle security take the time to monitor their targets while they were in the middle of the present state of high alert.

Thus, unknown to Cesia, who was spending her time being harassed by Juliette while diligently working as a maid, the other members of the Second Division had time to spare for investigative duties besides surveillance. As a result, they obtained information that showed that the profits of the criminal organizations had been flowing into Gwyllt, strengthening the probability that Juliette was the mastermind behind everything.

Because of Juliette's extensive business operations in her own country, she could also be said to have the expertise necessary to run a criminal organization. Additionally, because of the large scale of the criminal organization, the possibility emerged that the Gwyllt royal family knew what Juliette was doing and gave their tacit approval.

"Isn't this an international issue, then?" Roy said, his expression serious.

The Second Division was operating under the pretense that it had dispatched personnel to places that needed extra workers, so they were making the utmost effort not to enter the division's office. Nevertheless, it was the middle of the night, and everyone besides Cesia was in the office. Gathering at a time like this was all the more suspicious, but it had been the only time that everyone's schedules allowed, and besides, they couldn't meet normally during the day.

"It is." Marcus nodded. His face betrayed no emotion.

His cheerful smile suited him, but in front of recruits like Cesia, Roy, and Felix, he often had a severe expression during discussions like this. For his butler, Chris, who always accompanied the prince during overtime even when he was told to go home for the day, it was an expression he was more familiar with.

If it was the king and crown prince's role to protect the country publicly, then Marcus's role was to protect it privately. Though the activities of the Second Division might have seemed like the idle amusement of a prince, thanks to Marcus's effective management, authority, and judgment, the division had often prevented crimes before they even happened. He couldn't support the

country as a king or contribute by marrying to strengthen its bonds with nobles and other countries as a princess. Still, his simple desire to, at the very least, contribute using his methods spurred him on, which were available to him only because he was born as a prince. If he was told that he was already doing plenty, he would just push himself harder, telling himself that he had much more to accomplish and improve on, no matter how clever or talented he might seem.

"She's a state guest, and we don't have any definitive evidence, so we can't detain her," Marcus said.

Layne nodded with a vexed expression. "That's right. If we could at least figure out who the spy is, then things would be different, but..."

"Any information from Cesia?" Keith asked.

Felix, who had been flipping through her report, shook his head. "She's struggling. Princess Juliette hates her, not that I don't understand the princess's feelings. She really is shameless..." he said. Having insulted Cesia in the past by calling her shameless, he hung his head apologetically. Still, it was a failure as an undercover investigator for one's target to behave with hostility and distance themselves.

Keith scratched his cheek. "Rather than magic or martial arts, maybe we should've made her practice her customer service skills."

"I'll make that her next assignment," Marcus said, kneading his temples as if he had a headache.

Still, Juliette might hate Cesia and avoid her, but it would be noticeable if the princess met with anyone suspicious. The spy would have to be someone in an important position for them not to be questioned by Cesia or the guards. If they weren't able to, to a certain degree, freely obtain information, then it would be impossible to leak anything to Juliette.

Just who exactly was the spy? Despite the ongoing high alert, that question remained unanswered.

After it was decided to focus their attention on Juliette, the night's meeting ended.

A few days later, Mavis, Juliette, and the crown princess, Edith, were enjoying a tea party together. During her visit, Juliette had more chances to meet with Emeroade royals than other visitors, with the reason she gave being that she wanted to build a friendly relationship with the royal family she was going to marry into in several months' time.

The tea party was in a drawing room on the top floor of the castle, used exclusively by the royal family. The distant forests and mountains were visible from the large, overhanging balcony, and from far away, the distinctive, early spring scent of new leaves wafted into the room. On days with good weather, they could even see birds flying, and Mavis loved to watch them through the windows secretly.

Originally, the king's concubine and second wife, Mavis's and Marcus's mother, was going to join them, but she couldn't find the time due to sudden official business. Mavis felt somewhat intimidated by the idea of a tea party with Juliette and was thankful that Edith was there.

The second princess of Gwyllt, Juliette, would soon be her sister-in-law. Mavis had been raised to be fair, but to tell the truth, she couldn't help but find Juliette hard to deal with. At first, she scolded herself for what she thought was a childish jealousy of the person marrying her brother. However, that was wrong.

For example, Mavis loved her brother's subordinate, Cesia. Again, she had been raised to treat people fairly and tried her hardest to restrain herself from showing more favoritism than necessary towards a single citizen, but she still overflowed with adoration for Cesia. For some reason, Cesia thought of herself as just a plain and ordinary person, but she was beautiful in body and mind. She didn't abase herself or flatter Mavis; she respected the princess as just another person and was her treasured associate. Sometimes, Mavis worried whether Cesia treated her a bit too casually for a princess, but the way Cesia acted was simply how she felt, without any hidden meaning, and it comforted Mavis. She quietly wondered whether Cesia might count as a friend, but she hadn't yet confided that to anyone.

It was also thanks to Cesia that she knew the friction she felt with Juliette wasn't out of feelings of jealousy. Her brother loved Cesia as a woman—Mavis could tell because she was his sister, and she loved him and always paid attention to him. Marcus was adept in secrecy, but his guard was more relaxed around Mavis, and whenever he spoke about Cesia, he completely changed.

Marcus was Mavis's ideal model of a just royal and an exemplary prince, and he always looked happy when he spoke with her about his subordinates' good and bad sides alike. He wondered whether it was okay to tell Mavis about something; he told her about how so-and-so messed something up; he praised them for a wonderful accomplishment, and so on—he animatedly explained everything to her. It made her think that her brother's subordinates must be happy to have a boss they could respect so much, even though she knew she was biased.

However, only when he talked about Cesia was Marcus vague and evasive.

"She's too reckless, and it worries me," he had said about Cesia to Mavis in a faint voice.

Rather than worrying, it sounded as if he was annoyed, and there was a hint of anger. He never spoke about his other subordinates in that way; he gave them suitable advice and sometimes brainstormed with them to find the best way to resolve the situation. It was only with Cesia that he felt annoyed when things didn't go as he wanted. He didn't think of the best way for her; there was a certain way he wanted her to be for him. The only time the normally fair Marcus wanted to be selfish and have his way was with Cesia. Mavis believed it could only be love.

When she noticed this, she was overjoyed. Her beloved brother and her beloved Cesia—if only they *could* be in love. It made her feel a bit lonely, but much, much more than that, it made her happy. And when she closely observed Cesia and saw that she, too, was struggling with her budding feelings for Marcus, Mavis could have shouted with joy. However, the two had both decided their love would never come to fruition because of their positions.

That might have been true; no, it was undoubtedly the right decision. Their love would never ripen, yet the more it grew, the more it would hurt them. But

Mavis wanted them to resist that foregone conclusion. Marcus was a prince, engaged to a princess of another country. Even though she knew it was wrong, she found herself encouraging his relationship with Cesia. It was her selfish wish, but she wanted them to be happy together, and she didn't spare any effort trying to support them.

Her brother suppressed his desires and devoted himself to the kingdom, and her friend assumed she was worthless. Mavis's wish was for their wishes to be fulfilled.

In short, Mavis didn't find the thought of her brother being taken by someone unpleasant; she just thought Juliette to be an incredibly difficult person. Still, it was hard to put it into words; Juliette was a bit pushy, but she was kind to Mavis. She was friendly enough to tell Mavis, "When I get married and come to Emeroade, there'll be plenty of things I don't understand, so please, I hope you can help me out."

Mavis had thought at first that, while they might have been awkward initially, they would slowly open up to each other, and their relationship would resemble that of sisters. However, she was wrong.

It was only a hunch, and she didn't have any evidence, but she suspected Juliette had no intention of being friendly with her or getting used to life in Emeroade. And Juliette skillfully hid that from everyone around her. It was also possible that Mavis just didn't mesh well with her, so she hadn't told anyone about her suspicions. But in the end, she couldn't help but feel that Juliette was hiding something and that the foreign princess wasn't even thinking about her.

"Princess Mavis," Juliette said, and Mavis smiled. "These are delicious. Are they from a shop somewhere?" she asked, holding a colorfully wrapped baked treat that hadn't been made in the kitchen in her hand.

Mavis nodded and clasped her hands together. "Yes, they're from my favorite shop in town. I occasionally have someone buy them for me; their cakes are absolutely incredible, too."

The shop was that café she had gone to with Cesia. After Mavis's abduction caused quite a disturbance for the shop, her security became even more rigorous. She didn't know how much extra work it would be for them if she

went again, so since then, she hadn't been able to go in person, but Anita, Marcus, and sometimes Cesia bought her sweets from the shop. So, even as a princess with her circumstances, she had become somewhat well-versed in their newest treats. For the tea party, she had selected and ordered a particularly tasty variety.

Although she still found it hard to deal with Juliette, she was glad she could please her when the princess was trying to be friendly.

"Oh, did you go to the castle town yourself?" Juliette asked Mavis.

"Ah, no; I had one of my lady's maids get them for me."

"I see. Well, it's after that awful affair, after all. Do be careful." Juliette affectionately rubbed Mavis's shoulder.

She behaved as if they were close sisters, but Mavis still felt something was off. Before she could pinpoint what it was, there was a knock on the door of the drawing room, and a bodyguard opened it.

"Oh, Marcus," Edith spoke, surprised but calm.

Marcus entered the room, curiously holding the wailing baby Ronald in his arms. Edith instantly rushed over to them.

"What's this about?" she asked.

"Ronald wanted to see his mother and started to throw a tantrum. He was struggling so much that the wet nurses were having a difficult time. Though it may have been presumptuous of me, I brought the little prince here," Marcus said cheerfully, stifling a laugh. Then, he carefully passed his naughty nephew to his sister-in-law.

The wet nurses watching fearfully behind Marcus sighed with relief. The infant was surprisingly strong, and they had struggled not to drop him while taking him to his mother.

The baby was the son of the crown prince and the next in line for the throne after his father. By virtue of his position, even his wet nurses had been selected from among the best. Normally, they perfectly responded to Ronald's spoiled behavior and tantrums as a team, but today, for some reason, as if he had

noticed something was wrong, the baby was out of control.

While struggling, they had attempted to bring Ronald to his mother, but it was challenging. When Marcus passed them on the way and suddenly took his nephew into his arms, the wet nurses were thankful for the help. With a cheerful smile, Marcus had comforted and soothed the struggling Ronald, holding him securely as he took him to the drawing room.

"I... thank you for going to all the trouble, Marcus," Edith said to him as she cradled Ronald.

Marcus smiled and shook his head. "I've been busy, and I haven't been able to see him much, so I'm glad to have had the chance. The naughtier boys are, the more reliable they are," he said, petting Ronald's small head.

The baby happily clung to his mother as if his earlier tantrum had been nothing.

"Thank you... Oh?" Edith furrowed her eyebrows, troubled, as she noticed Ronald's wrist was somewhat red.

"As I was coming here, Ronald was struggling in my arms and hit his wrist on the wall," Marcus explained.

Mavis looked at the shaking wet nurses behind him. He probably hit his wrist before Marcus met them.

Not wanting to scold the wet nurses for something her son had done himself, Edith quickly cast healing magic on the boy.

"Edith," Marcus stopped his sister-in-law. "Children heal quickly, and an injury like that will get better in no time. Using healing magic on him from such a young age might hinder his natural healing ability, so it's best to let it heal naturally."

"You're right..." Edith nodded and smiled. "Thank you, Marcus."

Marcus returned her smile, then glanced at Cesia, standing at the ready by the wall with the other maids.

Cesia noticed Marcus's brief look, but her expression remained unchanged. She was working. For some reason, Juliette had selected her as one of the maids she brought to the tea party. Normally, she chose other maids or those she brought from Gwyllt.

Juliette had said something like, because it was an invitation to a tea party with the Emeroade royal family, it would be courteous to bring a maid from Emeroade, who would understand better how they did things. It was suspicious.

Is she trying to embarrass me in front of the royal family? If so, I'm her maid right now, so any disgrace will also be hers. Or will she cause trouble and then protest to Emeroade, saying that it was because they assigned me to her?

Cesia poured tea into an empty teacup and set it in front of Juliette. As a maid, she was the person in the room with the lowest social status, so the serving duties fell to her. Strictly speaking, someone might have been dedicated to pouring tea, but Cesia was a commoner, and she didn't know for sure.

Juliette took a sip of tea and blinked.

Is she going to blame me and say that the tea I poured is gross? Too bad for her.

Cesia had undergone intense training with Anita, Mavis's head maid. Just like in magic and martial arts, learning the basics was a crucial part of being a maid. An experienced maid might've been able to apply her practical skills instantly, but as a temporary maid without any real training, Cesia had been instructed to study the fundamentals faithfully first. Thanks to that, she had managed to put up a good surface impression of herself.

Touching the teapot through a tea towel, Cesia ruminated over the basics Anita had taught her.

Lately, it's like I'm losing sight of what exactly I'm aiming for. But if I do quit being an enforcer, with my background of service in the royal castle and my maid skills, I can probably find an estate somewhere to hire me. With magic, I can do laundry and clean dishes faster and more efficiently than the average person, and I can even use magic to chop firewood.

After all... Cesia thought. She made a fleeting glance, and her gaze settled on Marcus, who was greeting Juliette. They were engaged, so it was perfectly normal for them to greet each other if they happened to meet, but the sight

made Cesia feel a flash of anger in her chest.

When she thought of how she would see them like that all the time once they were married, she felt sincerely irritated.

She wasn't like the heroine of some story, who trembled with jealousy and cried into her pillow at night. If she had any chance of getting something, she used all her energy to take it herself. However, her opponent was just too remote, too far away for her to reach. No matter how much she struggled or exerted herself, the day of Marcus and Juliette's wedding was approaching, moment by moment.

In a move unlike her, she felt like she was about to retreat, not wanting to see anymore. No matter what the future held for her, though, she had her current duty as an enforcer. Even if her love for Marcus went unrealized, she wanted to carry out her role as his subordinate properly.

For a tea party in a drawing room in the innermost part of the castle, there were fewer guards than Cesia had expected. There was also the bare minimum of servers; in short, it felt understaffed for a gathering with five royals. However, even if Juliette was the mastermind of a criminal syndicate, there were several points where she and her belongings would have been searched, so it would be fairly difficult for her to cause harm to any member of the Emeroade royal family.

Cesia had accompanied Juliette, and Mavis had brought Anita. Edith had two lady's maids and three bodyguards. There were more servants and guards outside, but that was everyone in the room. The wet nurses had been dismissed, and Marcus had only stopped by on a break in his duties, so he was about to leave. Cesia knew she and the knights on duty could stop anything Juliette tried to pull.

"Then, I'll take my leave. Excuse my interruption," Marcus said.

"Not at all, thank you very much," Edith replied.

Marcus left the room, and the peaceful tea party continued.

Mavis was enthralled by her nephew, whom Edith was holding, and she constantly played with him. When the crown princess asked Juliette if she

wanted to hold Ronald, Cesia suddenly felt a chill. But the princess refused, saying, "I'm not good with children, and I don't think I'll be able to do it well." Cesia felt relieved.

After a time, Ronald sulked. It was time for milk and a diaper change. Though Edith left the day-to-day role of caring for Ronald to the wet nurses, she was more or less capable of ordinary motherly duties.

Still holding the baby, she smoothly stood up. "I'll have to excuse myself a bit early. Apologies for how frantic everything is, Princess Juliette," she said, bending her knees in replacement for a curtsy.

Juliette shook her head. "The baby comes first. By all means, go take care of him. There's no need to rush," she said, smiling.

Who is this person? Cesia thought, puzzled. She had never seen Juliette behave so pleasantly before. Could she be someone else in disguise, using magic to change their appearance? She discarded that thought. No, it's too difficult to magically change your appearance to look exactly like a real person. You have to alter your whole skeletal structure; if you make any mistake, the discrepancy would be too much, and the disguise would fail.

Cesia often used disguise magic in her position and frequently observed people's faces, so there was no doubt about it; the person sitting before her was none other than Juliette Lani Gwyllt. Still, her friendly act was impeccable. It was as if her insides had been swapped out for another person's.

It felt creepy. Cesia tightened her guard by yet another level.

When Edith and her lady's maids left to retire to a separate room, Ronald wouldn't let go of Mavis's finger, so she, too, left with them. Their guards followed right behind. The only people left in the room were Juliette, Cesia, and Anita.

Anita probably hadn't received combat training, so she could shout and call the guards outside if anything happened.

Cesia nervously stood at the ready as she waited for the time to pass.

Then, out of nowhere, Juliette stood up, raising the hot pot of tea above her head.

"Lady Juliette, what are you...?" Cesia mumbled, bewildered by the princess's odd, sudden movement.

Juliette looked at Cesia and grinned nastily, then cast the teapot toward herself. Cesia jumped in surprise, but Juliette had purposefully missed; the teapot landed on the floor right next to the princess with a loud crash, breaking and scattering bits and pieces everywhere. Then, Juliette deliberately sat on the floor and made a scream rivaling the sound of the pot shattering.

"Aaahhh! Cesia! What are you doing?! Stop it!"

"Huh?" Cesia froze in surprise. She didn't understand what Juliette had begun. The princess was sitting in the fragments of ceramic, the pool of tea on the floor slowly soaking the hem of her dress. As she watched the stain spread, Cesia thought, What would it look like if someone else saw this? And, as if struck by lightning, trembled. She quickly raised her head, and her eyes met Anita's, standing by the wall across from her. But the lady's maid at once averted her eyes.

Anita is the spy!

Cesia's heart raced at the stunning realization. At the same time, having heard Juliette's scream, guards from the corridor barged into the room.

"What is the meaning of this?!"

"Your Royal Highness, are you all right?"

"Help! Cesia...this maid tried to hit me with a teapot!" Juliette begged for help, clinging to the guard who had rushed to her aid.

Cesia shook her head, but without anyone else to back her story, it was painfully clear that nobody would believe her.

"No! Princess Juliette threw the teapot at herse—"

"What reason would I have for doing that?!" Juliette shouted, her echoing voice drowning out Cesia's explanation.

"What's this all about?!"

Another shout came from Mavis, who had just appeared from the inner room, accompanied by two lady's maids and guards. Seeing the spectacle before her,

she grimaced. Without missing a beat, Juliette called out to her in a pitiful voice.

"Princess Mavis! Cesia attacked me!"

"Cesia...? Is this some sort of mistake? She would never."

Though her jade green eyes widened in surprise, Mavis defended Cesia. For a moment, Cesia was relieved, but Anita ran to Mavis's side as if to protect her and, unbelievably, shook her head.

"Your Royal Highness, she's correct. I saw Cesia swing the teapot at Lady Juliette."

"That's a lie! I didn't do anything!" Cesia shouted shrilly, but Anita shook her head again. Covered by Anita, Mavis looked around the room, trying to discern the truth.

If they brought a highly skilled magic user to the room, they might be able to use the high-level magic that allowed them to reconstruct past events, but the drawing room was for royal use. First, they would have to dispel the large-scale defensive spell cast on the room to prevent any magical interference like people listening in, then cast the spell of past sight. However, that would take too much time, and it would be impossible to see anything.

Mavis didn't want to believe that Cesia had done it, but Juliette hadn't been the only person there; even Anita had testified against her, so there was no room for doubt. Mavis bit her lip, then spoke as the person in the room with the greatest authority.

"Cesia Kathrin. You are under arrest for disrespect and violence toward Princess Gwyllt... I'll investigate everything properly, so come quietly."

Mavis's words were stern, but her gaze was sincere. If it had been any other situation, Cesia would have complied. But, right now, she couldn't.

The Second Division didn't yet have the crucial evidence to show that Juliette was the mastermind behind the criminal syndicate. Yet, she had gone as far as exposing that Anita was the spy for a chance to bring Cesia down. That meant Juliette and Anita had orchestrated this whole situation. There was no way a proper investigation would be carried out if Cesia was captured here—the truth would remain hidden. It was possible they had already prepared evidence that

made Cesia look bad.

With all those thoughts going through her head, Cesia started to run.

Guards were in front of the door leading to the corridor, and Mavis and Anita were in front of the door leading to the inner room. The only escape route left was the large, open window leading out to the balcony. Cesia raced outside and set her hands on the balcony railing.

"Cesia!"

She could hear Mavis scream. My deepest apologies for showing the princess something too exciting for her. But her capture here meant not only her defeat, but also Marcus's and the others.

The balcony was higher up than she had thought. It protruded from the rest of the building, so it was a long distance to the balcony of the neighboring room. It didn't look like she would be able to make the jump.

She was five floors up. She might not die if she jumped off, but she definitely wouldn't come away unscathed. It would be far too much to hope for to expect the trees to cushion her fall.

While she used wind magic to contain the guards trying to restrain her, she ran around the cramped-feeling balcony. She missed a few times, and bolts of magical energy flew into the room, piercing the floor. The remaining guards and Anita protected Mavis and Juliette and shepherded them into the inner room.

Thanks to that, Cesia finally saw an opening. She fired wind magic and another type of magic into the room, then, without looking back, kicked the railing and jumped off the balcony.

The hem of Cesia's skirt gently fluttered in the wind, and before anyone could react, she disappeared.

"Cesia!" Mavis screamed again, falling to her knees.

Surprised, everyone headed to the balcony and checked down below. Even Anita and Juliette had returned to take a look, but Mavis couldn't bear to witness it. She covered her mouth with a trembling hand, suppressing another scream.

There had to have been a reason for Cesia's outrageous actions. She did tend to behave recklessly, but she always knew what she was doing, no matter how rash it may appear. Mavis couldn't understand why she had jumped off the balcony without even an explanation.

Trying to stand up, Mavis put her hands on the floor and noticed something.

"This..." she said to herself. After some thought, she nodded once and hid it under the hem of her dress. Then, she grabbed the edge of the tablecloth on a table next to her and pulled it.

With a succession of loud crashes, the remaining cups, dishes, and pastries fell to the floor, adding to the chaotic scene. Everyone in the room felt sympathy for Mavis, who was still sitting on the floor in the middle of everything and dejectedly hanging her head. They could tell from the earlier exchange that she and Cesia had been close, and they carefully contemplated the sheltered princess's feelings after seeing her friend jump off the balcony.

"Princess Mavis, we'll..."

"It might be best if Your Royal Highness returned to your room for the time being."

Supported by Anita and the guards, Mavis gradually stood up.

"You're right, sorry. I have to pull myself together... First, escort Princess Juliette to her room," Mavis mumbled, her face still pale.

Juliette anxiously looked at her. Mavis spent the utmost effort trying to conceal her emotions. If she didn't, she felt like she would burst into unsightly tears.

"Princess Juliette, my apologies that someone from our country has caused such trouble for you. I'll report this to His Majesty, and I'll make a formal apology."

"Princess Mavis, please, don't worry about it. It's that Cesia who was in the wrong."

Mavis nodded thankfully at Juliette's kindness and ordered the guards to escort Juliette to her room.

"I will explain this to the crown princess," one of Edith's lady's maids said.

Anita tenderly put a hand on Mavis's shoulder.

"I believe it would be best if Your Royal Highness also returned to your room and rested."

Mavis paused, then said, "Yeah. Thank you." Pretending to grab the skirt of her dress, she gingerly lifted the object she had hidden within. Then, feigning exhaustion, she slowly left the room.

To be continued in Volume Two

Digital Bonus: A Candle Within the Heart

ON a certain evening, in the office of the Second Financial Audit Division, Cesia had just reached a stopping point in the materials she had been organizing and was rolling her stiff shoulders, trying to relax them. The division's other employees had already finished and gone home for the day, and she was thinking of locking up and returning to her accommodations when she finished what she was working on. The overtime she had taken had paid off, and the precisely sorted documents were neatly lined up in a row in front of her.

"Well then... This is looking good, right? I'll have to get Layne to check this one and that one before I file them," she muttered, nodding as she reconfirmed what she still had left. As she scribbled a note on a piece of paper and continued sorting, the door to the office opened, and Marcus poked his head in.

"Good job!" He looked around the room. "Wait, Cesia, are you the only one here?"

With his red hair like a burning flame and his sparkling, jade-green eyes, his expression was as lively as always. It was already evening, but his face betrayed no sign of fatigue.

Cesia blinked her purple eyes and answered, "Your Royal Highness! Yes, everyone has already gone home for the day. Did you have some business here?"

Her boss's visit was sudden, but then again, his behavior always was.

"I thought I'd invite everyone to go drinking for the first time in a while, but..."

The prince is saying strange things again. Cesia looked at him suspiciously. What's the prince of a kingdom doing, saying that he'll go drinking with his subordinates?

Although Cesia frequently went out to eat in town with Maria, she still thought of her and Marcus as separate people.

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"All right, we'll go, just me and you, then," Marcus said.

"Me?"

"Yeah."

"With Your Royal Highness?"

"Yeah!"

Cesia hesitated, then said, "Not with Maria?"
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Marcus gave her a satisfied, mischievous grin, then nodded. "Yeah, with me!"

"UH, this is too scary. Why did it have to happen like this?"

"Memory loss, Sarah?" the young man with pale blond hair and dark brown eyes sitting in front of Cesia—Marcus, with magically altered hair and eye color—laughed loudly and cheerfully.

At first, Cesia had been nervous that someone would instantly notice that he was Marcus, just with different hair and eye color, but it didn't look like he'd be found out. In addition to commoners holding the assumption that the prince had red hair and green eyes, they had also never had the chance to see his face up close. Sitting across from him, Cesia had altered her hair to be shoulder length and the same color as Marcus's. From just the color of their hair, they might have looked like siblings.

Additionally, they had taken the thorough step of using false names, just as they did while on an undercover investigation. This was just like Marcus; he had gone to the Royal Academy in disguise for two years, after all. Cesia herself had done the same thing, but ignoring that, she was amazed by Marcus's boldness.

"Marc— Marvin, do you often visit places like this?" she asked. She had just learned Marcus's male alias that day. It still felt unfamiliar, and she couldn't help but mumble when she said it.

"Me? Yeah, once in a while." He gave a lighthearted smile. There was no doubt that he came much more often than that.

Is that really fine, Prince Marcus?

They were seated at a table in a bar in the more working-class part of the city. The noisy, rustic atmosphere, the savory smell of food, and the buzzing voices coming from every which way were all unfamiliar to Cesia. She was a commoner herself, but she had always worked in nobles' houses, so she had only seldom come to this part of the city. On top of that, her pay had always been poor, so she hardly ever had a chance to shop at popular stores. And, though Chris often accompanied them when she got something to eat with Maria, as two women, the places they went to were a bit more refined.

Seeing Cesia looking curiously all around the bar, Marcus smiled carefreely.

"Everything here is good, but you like salty-sweet soy sauce, right? The chicken kebab here is great," he happily told Cesia, pointing at a yellowed piece of paper on the wall.

A wonderful scent permeated the air, and the food on the tables around them all looked delicious.

"Then... I'll take what you suggest, Marvin."

"Great choice," he said, smiling wider. He stopped a waiter and unhesitatingly ordered a long list of food and alcohol, rattling them off one by one.

That side of him is just like Maria, Cesia thought, feeling the tension in her shoulders ease somewhat. I'm already here, so I might as well eat plenty of good food.

Their food came out with surprising speed and was neatly lined up on the table. In addition to what Marcus had suggested, there were grilled vegetables, some dishes with eggs, and a fluffy loaf of bread. Marcus, holding a bottle of fruit wine, poured a glass for Cesia.

"Thank you, you shouldn't have," Cesia said.

"Why thank me? I just did what I normally do." Marcus winked.

She felt guilty for having her boss pour her drink for her, but for friends eating out together, it was a perfectly normal thing. Marcus seemed like he was having fun.

"Yeah...you're right." Cesia smiled, and Marcus smiled, too.

"Well then, good work today! A toast!"

"You too."

There was a dull clink as they toasted with their thick glasses. The fruit wine was refreshingly sweet and easy to drink, but when Cesia finished taking a sip, she felt momentarily dizzy. Contrary to how easily it went down, it was a strong drink. I'll have to be careful. And now, she thought, filling her plate with food.

At a time like this, I should make his plate, too, right? Wait, he's a prince; do I have to taste his food for poison first? What did Chris always do again? Cesia fell into deep thought, trying to remember what to do, when Marcus promptly grabbed a piece of bread, put some meat and vegetables on it, and stuffed the whole thing into his cheeks with a big bite.

"Marvin, you're very...uninhibited..."

Marcus licked the sauce off of his lips. "It tastes best when you eat it like this. I won't force you, but you should try it," he said, gesturing at her plate.

Even though he's eating like that, it doesn't feel rude. I guess that's what you get with a prince, she thought, taking a small piece of bread and following his example.

Nibbling the edge of the bread, the overlapping flavors of the sweet and salty meat sauce, and the tender, steaming hot, fragrant vegetables were delicious; it was much better than if she had eaten everything separately.

"This is delicious!"

"Right? I don't normally eat like this, but... There are things I can only eat here. It's a luxury that the castle doesn't have," he said happily, then drained his glass of wine.

This time, Cesia refilled his glass. She was impressed by his unwavering attitude. She could tell that Marcus wanted to protect everyday moments like this one. Because he was born as a prince, he wanted to do as much as he could in that position, just as commoners did in theirs.

Nobles and commoners had a sense of happiness that suited their respective ways of life. Marcus had created that strangely-named department—the

Second Financial Audit Division—to protect that happiness.

"SHOULD we call it a night?" Marcus asked, checking the time.

Cesia felt disappointed. Before she knew it, she had begun to enjoy herself immensely. Apparently, that showed on her face; Marcus looked at her and smiled. *He really smiles often*.

"If you make a face like that, it'll make me reluctant to leave, too."

"I didn't mean...!" Cesia hurriedly put both hands to her cheeks, trying to hide her awkwardness. If anything, it just made him look happier, and his eyes softened.

"Let's do this again soon. There are plenty of other great places I want to take you to," Marcus said.

"What's the point of you knowing so much about the town?"

Feeling embarrassed by her feelings so blatantly showing, she disparaged Marcus despite herself, but he just smiled even wider.

When the bill came, Cesia insisted on paying for her share, but Marcus reminded her that he had invited her and told her not to embarrass him as her boss. In the end, she relented, and Marcus paid for everything. She was used to Maria treating her, but this was the first time Marcus had done it. She knew they were the same person, but no matter how much she tried, she couldn't connect the two together in her head.

Standing behind Marcus as he carried on a lively conversation with the owner as he paid, Cesia sighed softly. It was dangerous for her to feel closer to him.

He was always approachable and friendly with everyone, but his attitude had no hidden meaning. He would've behaved the same had Layne, Keith, or Felix been at the bar with him; she absolutely shouldn't think of herself as special.

Still, spending time with the person she cared about was fun, and a sense of happiness filled her. There was a twinge of sadness in her chest, but she decided to cherish the delicious food, good drinks, and the moments she could share with him.

Like stoking a small candle flame, she decided to preserve that warm feeling within herself, making sure nobody else could sense it.

As she stared at Marcus's back, she told herself that again and again.

Afterword

HELLO, this is Ringo.

Thank you for reading *By a Twist of Fate, I'm Attending the Royal Academy in Disguise Volume 1*. This book began as a short story with the same title. The full-length novel, which I revised after its serial publication online, is my solo debut novel. A love story between two similarly reckless people: Cesia, a commoner frantically trying to make a living, and Marcus, the prince who'll stop at nothing to fulfill his duty.

I treasure the days when I was publishing this book online, and I'm very thankful for the many people who cheered me on and supported me back then. It's thanks to everyone who read along that I was able to have fun the entire time I was writing, all the way until the very end.

As I received people's impressions in real-time, I wrote with the exhilarating, heart-pounding feeling of getting a present for someone, as I thought, "Will they enjoy it if I write it like this?" or "Will this development surprise them?"

Since I was young, reading has been a hobby of mine. As someone who was raised by a great many stories, the feeling of wonder and excitement at being the person who writes and tells the story still has a fresh and lasting impression within me. It's been quite a surprise, and I even wonder whether this might be a dream. It's a great dream!

I'm glad this book made it into your hands, and just as I've been excited and charmed by many different stories, I'd be overjoyed if even just a few of you could immerse yourselves in my work.

Cesia's days of determined resistance are far from over. If you're interested, I'd be incredibly delighted if you read what comes next!

Finally, I'd like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who helped me along the way.

To my editor, who always kindly guided me: As a novice who didn't know my left from my right, you thoroughly answered even my most insignificant

questions. You were truly dependable. Thank you. Anything and everything is because you were there.

To Tsukasa Satsuki, who created the wonderful cover and illustrations and was responsible for the character designs: I was already a big fan and was on top of the world when I learned you'd be in charge of the art. I love the charming Cesia and Marcus you drew. Thank you for everything you've done and will do.

I've received a great deal of help from many people at the publisher, so I'll take this time to thank all of you again. Thank you very much. Thanks to everyone, this has become a fantastic book!

And, of course, to everyone who read this book. Stories spread when they're read, and it's thanks to you all that I've come this far.

Thank you all very much!

Ringo January, 2023



Let's Get to Villainessin': Stratagems of a Former Commoner

By Hiironoame

Illust Misumi

Would you become the villainess to save your beloved baby sister? Mio agrees to do just that! Survive three years at an elite academy where the progeny of tycoons and moguls roam, and in return, the real villainess will cure Mio's terminally ill sister. What lengths will Mio go for her sister?



Soup Forest: The Story of the Woman Who Speaks with Animals and the Former Mercenary

By Syuu



Olivia has a secret she can't tell anyone: she can hear not only people's thoughts, but also animals'. She's lived surrounded by animals at her soup restaurant on the edge of the forest, until a former mercenary appears on her doorstep. How will they change each other's lives?



The Former Assassin Who Got Reincarnated as a Noble Girl

By Satsuki Otonashi Illust MiRea

High Society Is Rough For Assassins!

A cold-blooded former assassin has to figure out a new use for their killer skillset in high society after they reincarnate into a noble young lady!









Cross Infinite World