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**REVOLUTIONARY  
REPRISE of the**

**Blue Rose  
Princess**

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# 1. Two Queens

**SLIVERS** of the morning sun shone through the heavy curtains. It was too early for the maids to come, but the town outside the window was already awake. The faint echo of ship whistles mingled with the distant calls of seabirds.

The blanket on the bed shifted at the noise, and Alicia, princess of Heilland, poked her head out.

*Another sleepless night...*

In contrast to the clear morning air, Alicia's mood was heavy. Her usually intelligent sky-blue eyes were narrowed in a squint, accompanied by faint dark circles underneath.

Insomnia had plagued her for two days now. The reason was simple and obvious, so much so that she gave it no thought. However, it was still a problem, and though the solution was apparent, putting it into action was another problem altogether.

Lying in bed, Alicia's fingers touched her cheek before coming to rest on her blossom-pink lips.

The memory of a heated sigh on her lips roused her into full wakefulness.

*Oh!! Curses...!*

Alicia slapped herself on the cheek, then got out of bed, moving to the windows to throw the curtains wide open.

The wind carried the scent of the tide, and white birds flew across a blue world where the boundaries between sea and sky seemed to blur. The princess sighed in relief as she stretched, taking a deep breath of fresh air.

She could worry all she wanted or cast the problem aside. Either way, there were so many things Alicia had to accomplish in this place.

Rather than worry, she would step out bravely again today.

Reciting those familiar words in her heart like a mantra, Alicia prepared for the new day.



**THE** day after the banquet, Alicia's entourage moved out of Kingsley Castle to settle in at Foreign Affairs Minister Crowne's villa in the port town of Sampston.

Aside from meeting the Erdalian royals, Alicia's visit had several other purposes. One was to conduct inspection tours to different imperial regions.

Before the trip, Alicia had put in a request to visit the empire's flourishing center of trade and commerce and observe Erdal's local administrative government, hoping to compare it to Heilland's feudal lord system. Based on those requests, Erdal had arranged for her to visit two cities: Sampston and the royal capital, Kingsley.

The Crowne couple and their guards were the only Erdalians accompanying them on this visit to Sampston.

According to the schedule, Alicia would visit Sampston's important landmarks before returning to tour the royal capital. Looking at it now, the timing of this was extremely fortunate.

In truth, what happened in her room that night swamped Alicia's thoughts; she couldn't trust herself to keep all that awkwardness hidden. If Fritz ever found out, it would only spell trouble for everyone.

But something else had also caught her attention. Charlotte had seemed a little strange right before she left the castle.

Her dull mood had sparked Alicia's concern, but when she'd spoken to her, the girl had been silent, keeping her head bowed, preventing Alicia from discovering what troubled her. She had been her usual self until the banquet the day before, so if something had happened, it would have been after the event, but Alicia had no clue what could have occurred.

Despite it all, her inspection tour progressed smoothly.

Sampston was a major Erdalian coastal trading post, similar to Held in Rozen back home.

That said, the two towns felt slightly different. Both were bright, lively, and open places, but while Held was a tidy and cozy country town, Sampston felt like a big city.

Over the years, Erdal had focused on developing its sea routes, with Sampston as its base of operations. At first glance, the town seemed composed of large shadows of the many sailing ships moored along the coast and an exotic townscape born from a mix of many foreign cultures.

On their first day, they toured the town with the foreign affairs minister, seeing how the cultures of distant foreign countries mixed and melded together, and spoke with government officials in Sampston about how the city was run. As expected of the largest known port town among the neighboring countries, the accumulated knowledge and skills of the administration were astonishing to hear.

On the second day, Alicia visited the headquarters of the Ist Trading Company.

“It is an honor to meet you, Your Highness. I am Dudley Hopkins, president of Ist. Please call me Dudley.”

The president of Ist Trading Company was chubby and short, but his squinting eyes shone with a shrewdness that hinted at his capabilities.

“Nice to meet you, Dudley,” Alicia greeted in kind. “Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet me.”

“It’s no trouble. It’s a great honor to meet the Royal Highness Princess of Heiland. And this is—”

“Barnabas McGregor. Please call me Barnabas.”

The man holding out his hand was well-built and tanned, looking more like a man of the sea than a merchant.

“I’m in charge of the overall management of the company and external negotiations while Barnabas handles the actual operations out there,” Dudley explained. “When I heard that Your Highness was interested in learning more about us, I invited him along as a representative from the front line.”

“Thank you for your consideration. I’d love to learn more from you as well, Barnabas.”

Alicia’s wish to visit Ist stemmed from a partnership between Ist and Mercurius that formed several years ago.

Six years ago, when Alicia established Mercurius with Jude Nicol, Lord of Rozen, Erdal was the first to welcome them to trade with the empire. While no one knew exactly why, rumors hinted that the empress had a big part to play in that decision.

However, even with all the best merchants at its helm, Mercurius was still new and unfamiliar with Erdalian trading routes. At that time, Erdal’s wide-area trading company, Ist, had extended an unexpected helping hand.

At first, Jude remained cautious in his interactions with Ist, naturally suspicious of some hidden intention. However, even after conducting checks through merchant networks, he failed to discover any ill will against Mercurius, and after multiple meetings with Dudley, the two companies formed a small partnership.

“Mercurius was able to grow in such a short period of time thanks to Ist’s help,” Alicia said. “Both Jude and I are very grateful to you.”

“We are the ones who should be grateful. Her Majesty the Empress was most pleased with the partnership. I can tell she is interested in Mercurius... Or should I say, in you, Your Highness, as its founder?” Dudley’s narrow, crescent-shaped eyes glinted as he spoke.

Jude had told her before that Dudley was a shrewd man who judged everything based on whether it would bring his company profit or loss. The most important thing for Ist was to stay in the Erdalian empress’s favor.

For the merchants who faced ruin during the previous emperor’s rule, Elizabeth’s accession to the throne was a godsend, and many rallied in support of her. Among them, the Ist Trading Company, which had made a lot of money by trading with other countries, caught the new empress’s interest. Now, Ist maintained its position and power by continuing to meet her standards.

Thus, when the empress showed interest in Mercurius and its founder, Alicia,



Dudley made sure to remain on friendly terms with the Heillander company. Or rather, he had no choice but to do so, Jude had commented with a shrug.

“So, may I tell you more about Ist’s market area...?”

With that, Dudley shifted the conversation in the direction of business. While she trusted Jude and Mercurius’s merchants to make the important decisions, it was essential for Alicia, as the main backer of the company, to meet personally with Ist’s president and hear his ideas.

Her adviser Clovis and knight Robert watched over her from a slight distance as she handled the discussion with ease and skill.



“**IS** everything all right? You didn’t say a word throughout the meeting with Ist.”

They were back at the Crowne villa, and Robert couldn’t help but ask as they enjoyed tea in the sunny salon.

Alicia was changing in her room with the help of Annie and Martha, so Clovis and Robert were alone for the time being. Clovis, who sat across from the knight with his legs crossed, took a sip of tea and placed his cup back on the white garden table.

“I didn’t speak because it was unnecessary. The purpose of the visit was for Her Highness, as Mercurius’s founder, to learn more about Ist. As of now, we have achieved 80 percent of that goal.”

“I guess the final decisions will be made by the Marquis and Mercurius merchants, but it’s not like you to stay away from the princess and let her handle things alone. You’ve always been like a mama bird protecting her chick.”

“I’m not that protective of her,” Clovis retorted with a glare through his dark bangs. “Besides, Her Highness did not require my help. She has really grown up well as a royal.”

“Certainly, her growth is something to behold. She’s always been smart and courageous enough to take on challenges, but her determination now is overwhelming. It’s enough to make an adviser cry... I’m not sure if your heart

can take it,” Robert teased with a smirk. “By the way, you’re taking your tea very sweet today.”

Clovis blinked, then looked down at the silver teaspoon in his hand, piled high with white sugar.

Wordlessly, he returned the sugar to its jar and replaced the lid. Then, giving his tea a good stir, he took a sip, only to slap a hand over his mouth as he grimaced.

“Oi, oi, forget it. There’s no need to force yourself to drink it.”

“...No, I’m in the mood for something sweet today.”

“Oh, there you go, acting tough again.”

“I’m not. This is...not too bad.”

Despite his words, Clovis was hesitant as he took another sip. Robert, casually resting his chin on one hand, smiled as he watched the other man.

“So, what did you *do* to the princess?”

*Cough...!*

An unbecoming grunt escaped Clovis’s lips before he choked on his tea. Robert tutted as he pulled out a handkerchief and passed it to his friend.

“You idiot. For being known for your poker face, you’re surprisingly easy to read.”

“...Leave me alone.”

“Definitely not. As the head of the Imperial Guard and your friend, I can’t sit back and watch as you flounder in cowardice.”

“I’m not floundering!” Clovis retorted, but after a moment’s silence, he followed it with a muttered “I think” as he looked away in embarrassment.

Robert’s gut told him that his friend was in too deep.

It was good that they were alone in the sunny salon.

As the commander of the Imperial Guard, Robert knew that the Erdalian knights were stationed outside the mansion while the Heillander knights were

taking a break elsewhere. Likewise, the Crowne couple and their servants were nowhere near to overhear their conversation.

“So, what happened between Her Highness and you?” Robert coaxed his reluctant friend to speak again. “You can tell me. Maybe I can be of help.”

“I said to leave me alone... This is my problem to solve.”

“No. As an adviser, you can’t afford to lose sight of what’s happening. Do you want to cause trouble for your precious princess?”

Clovis was bound to Alicia by a deep sense of loyalty. Robert knew any mention of her would weaken his resolve. Using that to his advantage, he slowly coaxed the greatly reluctant Clovis to speak of the events on the night of the banquet.

Robert, who prided himself on knowing his friend well, leaned forward as he listened empathetically, but as the story ended, he was left with a dumbfounded expression.

“Well, I’m sorry to say this when you’re clearly suffering... But can’t you do something about it? I mean, don’t just give up like that, you coward,” he said firmly.

“Don’t be stupid! I’m an adviser, and she is my mistress. I really don’t know what to do now. How could I have even—”

“How, indeed... Well, it does make sense, knowing how you feel about her.”

“Stop... It’s impossible between us.”

Robert closed his mouth at his friend’s harsh tone. He looked on in disappointment as Clovis clutched his head with both hands, hiding his expression from view. After a moment, he let out a heavy sigh.

“Impossible? You can say that all you want, but if you think you can ignore your feelings, then you’re an irredeemable idiot.”







“...But you said it yourself,” Clovis said as he lifted his head slightly, though his gaze remained fixed on his hands. “I have to be prepared to let go. I have to be ready. It’s the right thing to do. I’m in no position to be with or accept her, even if she wants it. That’s why I...”

“So you’re finally admitting it? Took you long enough.”

Clovis glared as Robert chuckled. For someone who had never seen himself as anything other than a subject and servant, it was progress that he was no longer speaking words of denial.

Despite that, the whole thing had gone on for too long, in Robert’s opinion. Before he knew it, Clovis had been treating the princess as a man would his lady rather than a subject to his mistress.

“Yes, I did say that because it’ll make things quicker and easier,” Robert said. “If you can give her up that easy, then you should toss those feelings away.”

“What...?!”

“Come on, don’t play dumb. You can’t just give up, can you? That’s why you’re suffering so. You can’t give her up, nor can you toss aside your feelings. In fact, you don’t really want to, do you? In that case, you have to be ready.”

“But you said—”

“I’m saying that you have to make up your mind and stick to it.”

Silence descended upon the pair.

He might be the smartest adviser in the kingdom, but Clovis couldn’t decipher the true meaning of his friend’s words, nor did he know what to say next.

Glancing at his bewildered friend, Robert finished his now-cold tea in one gulp and leaned back in his chair, hands cushioned behind his head. He’d said all he needed to say. The rest was up to Clovis.

But...

*Poor princess. You’ll have such a hard time with this guy.*

Half amused, half sympathetic, Robert stretched his legs out, crossing them as he looked up at the ceiling. An excellent and capable adviser harboring such

great feelings behind his mask, making him confused and turning him into a senseless coward.

But maybe love did that to people.

Robert gazed fondly upon his friend again until a commotion outside drew their attention.



**“YOUR** Highness, Lord Clovis is here.”

“Thank you; please let him in.”

At Alicia’s response, the door opened, and she saw Annie with Clovis standing behind her. The incident from the night of the banquet flashed across her mind, and Alicia gulped. Shaking her head clear of thoughts, she pulled aside the curtain and pointed outside.

“Look. There’s a commotion outside,” she said. “When I glanced out, a bunch of people were gathered.”

“They look poorly dressed. Probably not merchants, then,” Clovis deduced.

“True. And there’s...about twenty?”

Clovis approached the window casually and stood by Alicia’s side, peering through the narrow gap in the curtains. His usual, capable adviser persona was in place.

Since that night, he had been guarded, limiting their interactions to what was appropriate between mistress and subject. While everything seemed fine on the surface, a strange rift had grown between them, and Alicia felt somewhat rejected.

But in this moment, personal feelings didn’t matter. As Heilland’s princess, Alicia needed her adviser.

“Foreign Minister Crowne said he’d take care of the situation and requested all Heillanders remain inside the mansion,” she informed him. “The men outside don’t look like they’re armed, but I agree with Minister Crowne’s judgment... What do you think?”

“We can do that, but we need more information. I’ve told Robert to investigate, so let us wait,” Clovis responded.

The door flung open, and Robert von Belt entered the room, his silver ponytail flowing behind him as he brushed the dust off his shoulder with a frown. “I’ve grasped the situation. They’re a bunch of unionists making a fuss because Heilland’s princess is here.”

Alicia and Clovis looked at each other at the commander’s unexpected report.

“Are you certain of that?”

“Yes. That’s what the commotion is about.”

“But we’ve already been in Erdal for several days. Why are they doing this now?” Clovis murmured with a frown. Robert shook his head.

“Security is high in the royal capital, and protesting so close to the empress’s home can bring trouble. I guess that’s why they waited until Her Highness came to Sampston to kick up a fuss.”

Timidly, Martha raised her hand as she stared blankly at the two young men. “Erm, excuse me. Who are these unionists?”

Alicia answered, “The unionists want to unite Heilland with Erdal to found the Great Erdal Empire. Most disappeared after Empress Elizabeth ascended to the throne, but I think there used to be quite a number of them.”

“Her Highness is right,” Robert added. “Julius the Conqueror, founder of Erdal, used to be part of Heilland’s royal family. That’s why the argument to unite the countries held such weight. Because both royal families are descended from the same ancestors.”

“But isn’t that strange? Heilland was the first to exist, and Erdal was founded independently after that, right? So why will a unification result in the Great Erdal Empire? Shouldn’t it be the Great Heilland Empire?” Annie asked.

“Oh, my dear lady, do not let those outside hear you say that. They’re sensitive about names,” Robert teased with a wink and a finger held up to his lips.

However, the two maids looked confusedly at each other until Clovis

explained.

“Miss Annie has a point. While Erdal has grown in economic and military strength, there’s one aspect they can never win against Heilland. That’s history,” he said. “And it’s a sore point for the unionists.”

“Founding father Estel built Heilland,” Alicia said. “No matter how powerful Erdal becomes, their royalty are not the rightful successors of House Chester unless they take Heilland by force... For the unionists, the unification of Heilland and Erdal is their dearest wish.”

“Well, that bunch outside is a nuisance, but they are just echoing the thoughts of the old noble families. In other words, they’re paid protesters. Look, there’s no way they’re nobles. The real unionists are a bunch of cowards, using money to hire protesters to kick up a fuss while remaining hidden.” Robert shook his head in disapproval.

However, Alicia knew why the real unionists had to hide their identities. Their goal was the opposite of the empress’s wishes.

As Robert said, most unionists belonged to old noble families, namely the original Senate, which the empress banished from politics when she ascended to the throne. After that, when she’d learned that they had nothing to offer and were clinging to their privileges since the former emperor’s turbulent reign, she started reforms that eventually ousted most of them from office.

Moreover, Elizabeth had expressed opposition to the unification of the two countries. The empress was never interested in waging war on Heilland because she was focused on domestic reforms instead of expanding her territory.

Besides, aside from historical ambition, there was no real benefit for Erdal to invade and conquer Heilland. It was far from the best spot for human habitation, with the sun hidden behind clouds on most days and half of the year spent in freezing cold. Erdal was a much better land for crops and life in general.

So, what would Erdal gain by conquering such poor territory? As an empire governed by a central authority, it made no sense, even if it expanded territorial boundaries.

So Alicia, Clovis, and even King James and Chief Adviser Nigel agreed that even if the empress hoped for Heilland to become a vassal state of Erdal, she had no wish for true unification. Erdal's political situation over the past few years further cemented this belief.

Soon, Erdalian soldiers gathered at the gates, and the noise from both parties grew as they shouted at each other.

"Ideologies can be surprisingly deep-rooted and tenacious. Those that form one's identity, particularly those rooted in history and culture, cannot be suppressed with force. The harder you try, the harder they will be to stamp out. I just hope it doesn't culminate in anything disastrous while we're here." Robert sighed in distaste before pulling the curtains closed, shutting out the scene.



**THE** day after the commotion, Alicia and her entourage left for the royal capital, Kingsley, in the early morning just as the sky began to lighten, more than half a day ahead of schedule.

Looking out the carriage window, Alicia bade farewell to the Crowne mansion. Lady Beatrix, wife of the foreign affairs minister, sighed with drooped shoulders as she sat across from her.

"My apologies, Your Highness. I so wish we could show you around the harbor before we leave Sampston."

"It's no problem. I got to see the harbor on our first day here, so I've no regrets."

Lady Beatrix didn't return Alicia's smile, but she did stop lamenting. It was a welcome respite. She'd spent the entire morning complaining about the foods and sights she'd failed to introduce to Alicia.

The reason for the early departure was, of course, because of yesterday's incident with the unionists. The men were discovered to be paid protesters, which meant the real unionists were probably not in Sampston. However, the foreign affairs minister decided that it would be better to return to the royal capital in case a similar incident occurred again.

Besides, regardless of what Alicia and her subjects truly felt, the empress

would not want her guests to witness any more disgraceful behavior from her subjects.

There was no way Empress Elizabeth would take an incident that tarnished her good name during a diplomatic visit lightly. The decision to remove Alicia from Sampston early was probably hers, and plans were likely being made for a massive investigation and clean-up after their departure.

Alicia's heart filled with melancholy at the thought of the unionists behind the protest being exposed. She knew that, as a representative of Heiland (though not as important as her father, the king), she could manipulate the fact that she was placed near harm's way to force the empress to enter negotiations with her. However, she also felt uncomfortable knowing that her visit could result in violence and death. She was certain the empress would not bat an eyelid when putting criminals on death row.

"Empress Elizabeth is such a mysterious lady. Just when I thought she was a merciful ruler towards her subjects, her fierce side appeared in the blink of an eye. She is the only person I feel I understand less and less the more I interact with her," she murmured.

"Her Majesty the Empress is ruthless and sheds no blood or tears. Isn't that what foreigners say about Elizabeth?" Beatrix asked.

"...I wouldn't know," Alicia responded.

"Oh, right. My apologies for asking. Please don't mind me. But Her Majesty is the type of person who will turn rumors into weapons."

Alicia could sense Beatrix's deep trust in her niece within her sweet smile. Recalling that she was the one who aided the empress in gaining the throne, Alicia gathered her thoughts and spoke again.

"Lady Beatrix, I came to Erdal to see this land for myself, but there is still one thing I've yet to learn... Why did you support Her Majesty's ascension to the throne?"

Beatrix continued gazing out the window as if she hadn't heard Alicia. Then a soft smile graced her lips. "It really brings me back. Speaking to you now feels like when I used to speak with Her Majesty when she was young."

“Is that so?”

“Yes, but she was definitely much more of a handful. Now that I think about it, she’s always had that majestic aura about her, so imposing that she could silence a crying child with just a look.” Beatrix chuckled softly, probably recalling the figure of Empress Elizabeth as a young woman of Alicia’s age.

Alicia tried to imagine what the empress would be like as a girl but soon gave up. Ever since Alicia could remember, Elizabeth had always been the absolute ruler of Erdal. It was hard to imagine what such a powerful woman could have been like as a child or teenager.

Beatrix’s gaze slowly shifted to Alicia. Her eyes narrowed as she regarded the princess, not as the foreign minister’s wife but as a concerned relative.

“I’d like to reminisce a little about the old days. Would you care to listen, Your Highness?”



“**ELIZABETH**, the cold and ruthless empress. She was a bright and beautiful young woman, far removed from the line of succession, but this empire changed all that.”

Beatrix’s voice was quiet as she spoke over the rattling of the carriage wheels.

Elizabeth spent her early childhood not at Kingsley Castle but at a rural castle owned by a noble family on her mother’s side. Although she was of the emperor’s blood, she was raised as a noble’s daughter rather than a princess due to her status as an illegitimate child.

In consideration of the former empress’s feelings, the young Elizabeth never had the chance to meet the members of the imperial family. Beatrix herself only met Elizabeth after she married Foreign Minister Crowne.

She smiled as she remembered the day she first met Elizabeth.

“I just felt like she was starving.”

“Starving?” Alicia repeated.

“Yes. She was young, but her eyes spoke of her hunger for love, knowledge, and the world. A castle in the countryside was too small to hold her. And that



was when I became convinced I wanted to become her guardian.”

After Elizabeth was transferred into Beatrix’s care, she was given all the education she craved. Since the Crownes had no biological children, Elizabeth traveled abroad with them on diplomatic missions. It was around this time she first met Alicia’s father, James.

Years passed, and the starving girl eventually grew into a beautiful woman full of talent and defiance in her eyes.

A major turning point came when Edward, Erdal’s former emperor, fell ill.

“Did you know that Erdal suffered a period of chaos before Her Majesty ascended the throne?” Beatrix asked.

“I’ve heard of it. It caused Grandmother a lot of heartache,” Alicia said.

“...Yes. The signs were all there that the situation was getting worse day by day, but it wasn’t until the emperor passed that we realized how close we were to rebellion. There was so much we could and should have done, but we blindly trusted the word of the lords and ignored the screaming voices of the people. My brother was such an utter fool.”

Beaten down by despair, an epiphany struck Beatrix.

“Why had I raised that child? What did she step out of that tiny, cozy castle to achieve? When I realized that it was all for the sake of that day, I couldn’t stop trembling. The only one who could save the empire was Elizabeth. No one else would do. Even now, I believe I made the right choice.”

Erdal had fallen into the worst situation.

The crown prince, who was first in the line of succession, was an integral part of the Senate despised by the people, and his ascension would have pushed the empire into rebellion and ruin. The second prince was born sickly, while the third prince voluntarily abdicated his right to the throne. The first princess was to be married to another kingdom’s ruler, and the second princess was nothing without her father’s guidance. There was no one eligible to take the throne.

That was why Beatrix entrusted all her wishes to Elizabeth, whom she had raised like a sister, and recommended her as the next empress.

“Naturally, there were many voices of opposition, especially from the crown prince and the nobles who supported him,” Beatrix explained. “But Her Majesty was wonderful. Her ambition, hunger, and abundant talent came together and bore fruit. In the truest sense of the word, she was born for the empire... She was to be our Empress Elizabeth.”

Alicia knew how the tale ended. The story of how a concubine’s illegitimate daughter ascended to the throne was oft told.

After that, many nobles in the Senate were ousted for the injustices they had committed in their territories. The lucky ones were stripped of their titles, while others were severely punished through imprisonment, house arrest, or even execution.

Such actions would have destabilized a normal country, but since Erdal was already on the brink of collapse, the people oppressed by the corrupt Senate rallied behind Elizabeth, and the empire barely pulled through the crisis.

The turn of events angered the crown prince, who then plotted to assassinate his rival. However, the plot was quickly uncovered and ended in failure, further depriving the crown prince of his right to the throne and leading to his imprisonment.

Several months later, he collapsed and died in prison.

“Unfortunately, the second prince also died around that time from chronic illness, and lots of speculations were thrown around. Were the princes poisoned or killed by assassins, or was Elizabeth actually a witch who dabbled in black magic? People are so interesting with their limitless imaginations,” Beatrix said with a wry smile.

With the two princes dead and the third withdrawn from the succession, the only other contender to the throne was the second princess’s husband, Eric Yggdrasil, who also ceded the position to Elizabeth after a private discussion.

And that was how Elizabeth became empress.

Now, there was no one in Erdal powerful enough to oppose her.

“If I may ask a question, Lady Beatrix?” Alicia interrupted.

“Yes, go ahead.” Beatrix nodded with a smile.

Encouraged, Alicia voiced her doubts. “It is widely rumored in other countries that Her Majesty had a hand in the deaths of the two princes. If it isn’t true, why does Her Majesty not deny it?”

If Beatrix’s words were to be believed, the crown prince unfortunately died in prison, while the second prince just happened to pass away from illness at the same time. Now that she’d met Elizabeth, Alicia couldn’t believe that the empress would order to have them killed, especially the second prince, who wasn’t even vying for the throne.

Lady Crowne thought for a moment, then let out a mischievous smile.

“That’s because there’s no point in denying it.”

“Huh? Do you mean the rumors are true?” Alicia gasped in shock.

“Her Majesty’s reforms were so radical that they would be impossible to accomplish normally in such a short period of time. So what made it possible was her wit...and the fear she instilled in others. She weaponized the distrust generated by those rumors, and keeping those fears alive worked in her favor.”

Beatrix gazed out the carriage window.

“Besides, it doesn’t matter if the rumors are true or not,” she said. “We asked for a strong ruler, and Elizabeth delivered. When news of the deaths of princes Raven and Gino reached us, I was the only one who knew Elizabeth prayed silently for their souls in the castle chapel. She didn’t want news of her compassion to leak out and destroy the image of the ruthless empress she’d crafted. Tell me, who else is capable of dedicating themselves so utterly to the empire?”

To Alicia, Elizabeth sounded like a strong woman. And for the first time, she understood why her father respected the empress while keeping his guard up. If Empress Elizabeth wanted Heiland, she would come to take it by any means, even if it meant war and bloodshed.

Beatrix frowned as she looked at Alicia.

“Her Majesty has a high opinion of you, Your Highness. Your views on politics

are different from hers, which has intrigued her, and she wants you to marry His Highness Fritz. She rarely gets attached to people like that... But no, let's not talk about it anymore because it seems you've already made up your mind."

Silence fell in the carriage. Alicia shifted her gaze out of her window, and as the scenery drifted by, she thought of the empress with deep green eyes waiting at Kingsley Castle.

The time to face Empress Elizabeth again was drawing near.



**"LOOK.** There is Kingsley, the heart of Erdal."

They'd been riding through a sunlit forest for a while and were now on top of a hill as Empress Elizabeth sat on horseback and pointed at the city. Following her finger, Alicia, who rode a white horse, let her gaze wander over the streets of Kingsley.

It had been two days since her return from Sampston, and Alicia was out riding on the outskirts of the capital city with the empress. Of course, they were not alone. Crown Prince Fritz, Clovis, and knights from both countries were also in attendance.

There hadn't been any reports of arrests of the unionists who organized the protest in Sampston. Upon their return, Clovis lodged a formal complaint with Chancellor Yggdrasil, who assured them that he would investigate the situation and make an official report to the Heillanders.

As the issue remained unresolved, Clovis had guessed that the empress might cancel today's excursion, but Elizabeth had surprisingly decided to go ahead and was already seated on her horse by the time Alicia's entourage came by.

"And that's Kingsley Castle, where all political, military, and economic decisions are made," Empress Elizabeth's words flowed forth like a song. "In other words, the castle is the heart of our empire, with vessels stretched to every corner of our territory, keeping the huge beast that is Erdal alive... And in this allegory, what do you think represents the ruler?"

Her gaze shifted to Fritz as he looked upon the city below.

“What is a ruler? What is the royal family to their kingdom?” she repeated.

“Rulers are a symbol of power,” Crown Prince Fritz answered without hesitation, his soft blond hair flowing in the wind and a small smile upon his lips as he looked towards Alicia. “Things might have been different in the past, but now a ruler holds all power, and they are the country. Fame, money, and, above all, *power*. A ruler embodies all this, and that is what the people see in them.”

“Fair enough. What about you, Alicia? I pose you the same question,” the empress said. “As a contender for Heilland’s throne, do you know what a ruler is? ...And why do you want to be one?”

What was a ruler? Why did she want to become one? Alicia considered that and then looked at the empress seated upon her black horse, a symbol of Erdal’s founder, Julius.

Alicia wanted a future where the people and royals could work together to carve out a new kingdom, and she was willing to dedicate her whole self to fulfilling that vision with unwavering resolve.

However, Alicia had ruminated over the story she had heard from Beatrix during their ride back to Kingsley about how Elizabeth had ascended to the throne. Through that, she understood how Elizabeth had taken the malice, stigma, and fear directed at her and transformed it into power to reign. It was a way of devoting one’s life to the kingdom that she’d never thought about before.

Needless to say, Empress Elizabeth was a completely different person from herself. And even if she tried to implement the same method in Heilland, there was no guarantee that things would work out just as successfully.

But, as a ruler and defender of one’s country, sometimes ruthless judgments were unavoidable. Alicia had always known this, and meeting the empress had strengthened that thinking.

Now, once again, Alicia asked herself:

*What is a ruler? Why do I want to rule Heilland?*

Elizabeth’s red lips quirked in a smile at Alicia’s silence but quickly turned into a frown as an attendant came forward and whispered something in her ear.

“Unfortunately, time is up. Let me show you something good,” the empress said as she turned her horse around.

“Where are we going?” Alicia asked.

The plan was to have a leisurely ride through the forest on the outskirts of the royal capital before returning to the castle. Alicia looked to Clovis, but he was also looking at the empress in confusion.

Elizabeth placed a finger on her lips as if sharing a secret.

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing dangerous... But let’s see if you have what it takes to be a politician.”



**THEY** rode for a short while until they came to a stone wall with a gated entry. Soldiers in armor stood on both sides of the gate, holding giant spears that reflected the sunlight filtering through the foliage, giving them a dull glint.

The soldiers lowered their weapons and knelt as the group on horseback approached. The empress called out to one of the men, so large that he seemed imposing even as he remained kneeling.

“I’ve sent for Yggdrasil,” she said. “And I assume you’ve been told.”

“Of course, Your Majesty. Let us escort you to the north tower right away.”

“No need. I know how to get there. After all, I’m well acquainted with the place.”

From Empress Elizabeth’s sardonic smile, Alicia immediately knew where they were.

Dansk Fortress. Or a prison commonly known as the Western Twilight Castle. In the past, it was a fortress that guarded Kingsley but had been converted into a place to imprison special criminals, such as high-ranking nobles and political prisoners found guilty of treason.

When Elizabeth was vying for the throne, she’d been imprisoned there at the crown prince’s command. However, she was quickly released, thanks to Beatrix’s intervention. When the crown prince’s plan to assassinate Elizabeth came to light, he was, in turn, imprisoned here. In a cruel twist of fate, he was

the one who eventually lost his life inside its walls.

So why did the empress want to bring Alicia here? Fighting a growing unease in her chest, she followed the empress's lead and dismounted.

Unlike the glamorous Kingsley Castle, the Dansk Fortress boasted a more ancient design with a rustic structure. Although small, it resembled Alicia's home, Egdiel Castle, in its architecture.

However, there was no sign of life within the silent premises; the only sound was the echoing cries of crows. Alicia knew it was probably her imagination, but the cold stone floors and dark, closed windows seemed to signal the approach of a god of death, and she shivered.

"Are you all right, Your Highness?" Clovis whispered, perhaps noticing her pale complexion. Alicia just nodded.

Empress Elizabeth had brought her here on the pretext of seeing if she had what it took to be a politician. She didn't know who or what was in this prison, but now that she knew it was a test, she wasn't going to back out.

The empress continued towards the northernmost of the castle's four large towers.

The dark and damp air felt different from the refreshing forest breeze, and Alicia knew a long stay here would probably destroy anyone's health. However, the silence made her wonder if there were really any prisoners here in the first place.

Ascending a long flight of stairs, the empress finally stopped before a door. For the first time, Alicia sensed the presence of another human. Beyond the thick door came a faint groan, and Crown Prince Fritz's eyes immediately darted to the empress at the sound. He looked calm and collected on the surface, but it seemed like he was also in the dark about the purpose of this visit.

Alicia tensed, but the empress's smile widened.

"No need to be afraid," she said. "The person inside will not hurt you; he doesn't have the energy left to do so."

At her command, the soldier guarding the door pulled it open, and everyone

quickly understood what she meant.

At first, Alicia could not understand what she was seeing, but before she could take a step forward, Clovis stepped before her, blocking her path and view.

“Is that the instigator of the protest a few days back?” he asked stiffly.

“A good guess, but no. He is neither a unionist nor a noble. He was the one who gathered and paid the protestors to cause a ruckus outside the foreign minister’s villa, but he’s also someone’s lackey. He claims he has no information on the real instigator... In other words, he is of no use to us.”

The empress shrugged nonchalantly as Alicia peeked around Clovis to see into the small, dark room.

Only a small window with iron bars was in the dimly lit, stagnant room, tinged faintly with the smell of blood. A man was inside, and now Alicia could clearly see the chains binding his hands and holding him suspended from the ceiling. His back was facing them, but he seemed to be unconscious, letting out the occasional wordless groan. Soldiers were stationed along the walls of the room, but none showed the slightest movement, their faces set in stone. The whole scene was strange and unusual.

“My apologies to Heilland.” The empress shook her head in annoyance, and Alicia turned to meet her deep green gaze. “It is truly a pity that he has nothing to divulge even after going through torture...but someone has to pay the price for threatening our guests and trampling on the friendly ties our countries share. Come, Alicia. Tell me what I should do. How can Erdal make amends for such a show of disrespect?”

“If I were Your Majesty...?” Alicia ventured.

“Yes. What would you do if you were the empress of Erdal?”

The empress’s words rang in her head, and Alicia knew. This was the test.

Alicia turned to look at the prisoner again. His bound hands were sticky with black blood, and his ragged clothes were torn in various places, revealing painful wounds.



“...I will command him to make amends with his life,” Alicia said firmly.

Clovis turned at her words, his violet gaze wavering before he stared at the floor. Alicia felt a little relieved. He hadn’t stopped her, which meant she’d said the right thing.

“For the sake of the bond between our two countries and to demonstrate his sincerity and dignity, he should agree to his own execution,” Alicia continued. “It will send a message to the lurking unionists and anyone who seeks to aid them for whatever benefits that the empress of Erdal will not tolerate their actions.”

Her mouth was dry as her heart pounded in her chest, but Alicia held the empress’s eyes with a steady gaze as she answered.

As the empress had said, someone had to take responsibility for the incident. But if uncovering the real instigator was impossible, there weren’t many options left for Erdal. So, the empress had made her decision and wanted to see if Alicia was prepared to make the same ruthless choice.

Silence filled the prison. Then, the empress smiled.

“I see. You’ve made a good point. Prepare the scaffold immediately. After confessing his sins before the people, this man will repent with his life.”

“At once!”

The knights saluted at the empress’s command, but before they could move to convey the message to the castle, Alicia spoke again.

“That would be my decision if I were the empress of Erdal. Now, if I may share my thoughts as princess of Heilland... My kingdom does not desire that man’s life, so please release him.”

Her dignified voice echoed through the cold prison. The knights stopped in their tracks, their eyes turning to the empress for her response. Elizabeth looked at Alicia, her gaze cold enough to freeze everyone present.

“Why?” she prompted. “What’s the value in keeping him alive? Will he bring any benefit to Heilland? Will you sacrifice your kingdom’s dignity over useless sentimentalities?”

“No, but taking a nameless man’s life will not solve my kingdom’s problems. Heiland only desires one thing...and that is the truth.”

“Truth?”

“Yes.”

Alicia’s sky-blue eyes pierced through the empress as she narrowed her own green eyes, trying to guess Alicia’s true intentions. The room filled with tension. Not even Clovis or Fritz dared to intervene.

Finally, the empress’s eyes widened as if she’d realized something. Seeing that, Alicia seized the chance to press her case.

“Please, Your Majesty. Grant me a little time. There’s something I’d like to tell you. Alone.”

“Wait, Alicia,” Fritz cut into the conversation. “If there’s anything you want to say, you’re free to speak here. If it’s something you don’t want the knights to hear, then let them leave, but *I’ll* stay.”

“Step back, Fritz,” Elizabeth said coldly. “This is between Alicia and me.”

Fritz’s eyes widened as his protest was cut short, glancing at his mother, then Alicia. But Alicia’s gaze was fixed on the empress; she didn’t notice the quiet flame flickering within the young man’s eyes.

“You have your wish, Alicia,” the empress responded with a frightening smile. “Let us have a long talk, just you and me.”



**THE** wooden door swung shut with a heavy creak. Before it closed, Alicia caught a glimpse of Fritz, who’d erased all emotion from his expression, and Clovis standing behind him. Their eyes met, and her adviser gave a small nod, but the door closed before Alicia could respond.

“As long as you keep your voice low, there is no need to worry about anyone overhearing us,” Elizabeth said. “And I’ve told the guards not to disturb us until we have finished.”

Alicia turned around to see the empress leaning against one of the two chairs in the middle of the room.

“Why does it feel like I’ve said this before...?” she mused. “Oh yes, it must have been back when Yggdrasil and I were still fighting over the throne.”

“I’ve heard the story from Lady Beatrix,” Alicia said. “Your Majesty and the chancellor had a discussion behind closed doors for many days. When you emerged, Your Majesty was proclaimed empress.”

“How nostalgic. Come, let us sit. It is tiring to stand for so long.”

“Thank you.”

Alicia gave a light bow, then sat across from the empress. When she looked up again, the empress, dressed in a deep red gown, was gazing at her in amusement, chin in hand.

This beautiful but ruthless woman, with her charming smile and imposing presence that could make anyone shrink back in fear, was the absolute ruler of the empire of Erdal. Even in Alicia’s previous life, Elizabeth had been a major player in turning the gears of fate that influenced their lives. Now, it felt a little strange to be sitting in the same room as such a powerful figure.

“Just you and me—how nice. Aren’t you afraid of me?” Elizabeth asked.

“To be honest, I am a little frightened.”

“So, you said you wanted the truth. What do you want to ask?”

“There’s a man who passed in our kingdom several years ago.”

The empress’s smile remained calm, but her eyes narrowed, a sign that she’d already guessed what Alicia wanted to talk about. At the empress’s silence, Alicia took a small, deep breath and pressed on.

“Loid Sutherland was the Duke of Sheraford. Six years ago, he confessed to certain crimes and has unfortunately passed on. His crime was secret collusions with an unknown person from Erdal.”

“And what were they colluding to achieve?” the empress asked.

“In exchange for promises that the Privy Council not be dissolved, the duke would support my betrothal to His Highness Prince Fritz and pave his way to the throne of Heiland. And not just that. Lord Sutherland also leaked state secrets and carried out orders that brought detriment to Heiland’s growth...such as

interfering with the establishment of the Mercurius Company.”

“How bold. So, who is this unknown person?”

“We don’t know, but we have evidence that he is a high-ranking member of the Erdalian Senate,” Alicia said. “The evidence is one of Heilland’s state secrets, so I can’t show it to you, but it is stamped with the black horse of Julius the Conqueror.”

“...Oh?” For the first time since Alicia began, the empress’s eyes took on a mysterious sparkle. “Only those in the Senate are allowed to use the seal of the black horse. So, if I were to believe you, the one who colluded with Loid Sutherland is someone close to me... Do you think they approached Loid on my orders?”

“I’ve always felt Your Majesty has nothing to do with the Loid Sutherland case,” Alicia stated, “and after meeting you in person, I’m convinced that my thinking is correct.”

“Why?”

“Because Erdal was the first to approve of trading with Mercurius. It’s as if someone had given orders to keep the opposition at bay.”

“Is that all?” Elizabeth quirked a brow.

“In addition, when I met with Dudley Hopkins of Ist, I learned that Your Majesty had a deep interest in Mercurius,” Alicia pressed on. “It would be unnatural for you to give orders to undermine something that held your interest... But the biggest factor is my intuition.”

“Intuition?”

“The idea of approaching Loid to secure a betrothal between His Highness and me may not be impossible, but it was a very roundabout way of doing it. So they must have had an ulterior motive...but even then, it still felt far-fetched and not like something Your Majesty would do.”

“I see. It is true; I wouldn’t have done things that way,” the empress agreed with a chuckle.

Alicia fixed her gaze on the empress as she asked her next question. “Your

Majesty had nothing to do with Loid's case. Am I right to say that?"

"...Yes, you are," the empress confirmed as she sat up straight. "However, I have no proof, so it is up to you to choose whether to believe my words. All I have to say is, I don't know these colluders, nor do I recall giving commands to anyone to carry out such plans."

The empress leaned forward, and the sunlight streaming through the narrow, latticed window cast a shadow over half of her face.

"But I'm getting impatient. You haven't gone out of your way to dig up an old case just to confirm my innocence, right?"

"But that is of importance...because it is my hope to uncover that official's identity and have him expelled from the Senate," Alicia said.

Their shadows on the floor grew long and thin as the rustling of the trees and the chirping of the birds receded into the distance, making it feel like they were the last two people on the planet. Finally, Alicia voiced the suspicion threatening to crush her chest.

"Your Majesty... The official behind Loid Sutherland's case and the instigator of the incident in Sampston may very well be the same person."



**"MAYBE** the two incidents are connected?"

It was the night of the unionist protest at Foreign Minister Crowne's villa, and Alicia repeated Clovis's words in puzzlement. Her adviser glanced at Robert, who was standing guard by the door, and seeing the silver-haired knight nod to signal that the coast was clear, Clovis started to speak again.

"Doesn't Your Highness think it strange for the protest to happen where you could witness it? We're only here in Sampston for a few days, and for it to happen right now is too much of a coincidence."

"Maybe they saw the royal carriage entering the town or spotted me as I went around on inspection tours..." she ventured.

"In that case, the unionists would have organized an impromptu protest, and the noble who instigated it would have been easily caught. But it was carefully

planned with hired protestors... In other words, they knew Your Highness would be here and had planned ahead.”

“I see. But our tour was only confirmed a few days ago, so there wasn’t much time for information to leak out. In that case, the only people who knew of our schedule were the chancellor, the Crownes, the escorting knights, and the Senate... Oh!”

Clovis nodded as Alicia’s mind connected the dots.

“Yes. The person Lord Sutherland colluded with was also an official in the Erdalian Senate.”



“**THERE** were some unexplained points in Loid’s case. The Erdalian official claimed to want to see Crown Prince Fritz successfully ascend to Heilland’s throne but also made demands of Loid that sowed distrust. The more we thought about it, the more unnatural it seemed. He seemed to be working to deepen the conflict between Heilland’s Privy Council and Erdal.”

The empress’s deep green eyes glowed. “And the Sampston protest’s aim was to make you aware of the unionists’ existence and instill distrust in Erdal? Knowing your intelligence, they were banking on you to conclude that the unionists are hidden within the Erdalian elite.”

“Yes,” Alicia affirmed. “If the mastermind behind the two incidents is the same, their goal is to create a deep rift between our two countries... Your Majesty, someone in your court is plotting to sow conflict and lead us to war.”

The empress was silent, then stood and turned away from Alicia to stand by the window. Watching her, Alicia recalled her conversation with Clovis.

Once they’d made the connection between the incidents, Alicia was the one who suggested that they win Elizabeth over to their side.

Clovis had opposed the idea at first. The Senate was chaired by Chancellor Yggdrasil and included many high-ranking officials, such as Foreign Minister Crowne. If the enemy was hidden within their ranks, there was a chance that the empress was aware of it and had chosen to do nothing.

However, Alicia remained convinced that they should try. Otherwise, they would never be able to fully trust the Senate, and, by extension, the chancellor, foreign minister, and even Beatrix. Doubt and distrust would slowly grow and deepen the rift between the countries, just as the enemy intended.

Besides, after speaking to Empress Elizabeth, Alicia was sure she wasn't working with the mastermind. Thus, they should band together in a way that would surprise the enemy.

Even if the worst-case scenario came true and the empress was working with the mastermind, she could not refuse to cooperate with Heiland if she wanted to maintain their friendly relations. A refusal would mean a break of ties between the countries, and Heiland would have to prepare themselves for war.

So, Alicia had taken the risk.

She waited for the empress's response with bated breath. The light streaming through the window lit up Elizabeth from behind, casting her tall, slender frame in shadows. The suffocating silence stretched on.

Then, the empress turned around suddenly, her side profile magnificent and beautiful in the light of the sun.

"Fine," she said with a smile. "If that's how they want to play, I'll oblige. Let us join forces."

"Thank you," Alicia said as she stood. "I knew Your Majesty would agree."

"So, what shall we do? I doubt the mastermind will be caught that easily."

"We'll need the help of two people. One is the prisoner we just met, and the other is Loid Sutherland's son, Riddhe. Please summon him to Erdal as a special ambassador."

The empress raised a brow at Alicia's confident request.

"Riddhe Sutherland? He may be the right person to suss out clues about the mastermind. His presence will also send a message and force the mastermind to take action... But the prisoner is worthless. Our enemy knows that he has no information to offer."

"The prisoner's role is to signal that Your Majesty and I have joined forces. We

will gather an audience at a large plaza and stand together as the prisoner is pardoned and released.”

The empress nodded, seemingly convinced.

A public pardon would serve two purposes. The first was a show to both Heillanders and Erdalians that the strong bond between the two countries would not be broken despite the unionists’ antics. Second, it was a message to the mastermind, who might be hidden nearby, that Alicia and Elizabeth had joined forces.

Since the natural course of events would have led to the prisoner’s execution, the mastermind would conclude that the two royals had come to an agreement behind the scenes and decided to release the convict. In addition, the stationing of Riddhe in Erdal would cause further upset.

“Ideally, this will be an effective warning to the unionists, and they’ll stop their ruckus. But I won’t be so magnanimous if they choose to act up again. I won’t stop until they’re all caught and hung out to dry.”

The empress’s smile was chilling as she uttered those violent words. It would be perilous to get on her bad side, but there was no doubt that Elizabeth was the strongest ally.

Her smile disappeared as quickly as it came as she stared at Alicia.

“By the way, Alicia. Am I the only one you have shared your suspicions with?”

Unable to grasp the meaning of the question, Alicia just nodded. “Yes, Your Majesty. Since the mastermind could be part of the Senate, I have confided in no one else. That was why I requested for us to speak alone.”

“I see,” the empress murmured as she gazed at the heavy wooden door, and for a moment, a look that was not quite melancholy flitted across her face. “That is a pity.”



**WITH** the matter settled, the two royals opened the door.

The empress instructed the waiting knights to release the prisoner first thing the next morning. Of course, Alicia was also present as the man’s crimes were



laid bare before a large crowd of spectators before the pardon was issued. After the verdict, the empress took the stage, standing tall above the noisy crowd.

“Take note, unionists! Know the shame of having burdened the innocent with your sins! I will not forgive those who hurt my people. What Princess Alicia and I desire are the heads of the true masterminds!”

“Long live Your Majesty! Long live Princess Alicia!”

A beat later, the plaza was filled with cheers of “Hurrah!” and “Long live Her Majesty!” but Alicia paid the people no heed. Her attention was on the ones attending the empress. However, she didn’t catch anything strange, not from the chancellor with his gentle smile or the foreign minister, who looked somewhat dissatisfied.

But Alicia was not the only observant one. Crown Prince Fritz’s apathetic, glass-like gaze had been locked on Alicia since his mother concluded her speech. Then he slipped away like smoke without a word.

The die had been cast. The door leading to the conclusion of the fateful battle that began six years ago—or maybe even from Alicia’s previous life—was finally thrown wide open.



**THE** rest of Alicia’s inspection tours proceeded without issue, and the day to return home to Heiland arrived.

The morning of their departure was clear, without a cloud in sight. The number of citizens gathered outside the castle gates was easily double that of the day of their arrival. As the final greeting, Alicia made an appearance on the castle balcony together with the empress, and the crowd erupted in cheers.

“Aren’t you glad you suggested releasing the unionists’ lackey?” Elizabeth asked the wide-eyed Alicia as her eyes scanned the crowd. “The citizens know that if I’d made the decision alone, that man would have been dead. You do things a different way. It may not be the way I’d do it, but it is certainly an alternative.”

With her goodbyes said, Alicia boarded her carriage. As it pulled away, she thought back to two people she had seen during her farewell, Fritz and

Charlotte.

Though she'd had a few chances to speak with Fritz, they had been superficial exchanges. The rift that had separated them since the night of the banquet could no longer be crossed.

It bothered Alicia a little. Fritz might be a complicated person, but they needed to keep in touch if she wanted to maintain friendly ties with Erdal in the future. But trying to repair the relationship by force now was not the best option. She'd already established strong ties with the empress, so she could afford to let time heal the damage between her and the crown prince. She had no need to worry.

Charlotte, however, was more of a concern. She had continued to evade Alicia, and the princess only managed to catch the girl right before her departure.

Only one thing could cause Charlotte to act with so much fear and guilt, and it was the crown prince. Alicia had tried to probe, but as expected, Charlotte would only utter apologies and nothing else. As Alicia's departure time approached, she finally wrangled out a half-hearted promise that they would write to each other to keep in touch.

Despite this little setback, Alicia felt she'd accomplished a lot during this trip.

Thanks to the unionists' protest, negotiations with the empress had been easy, and she'd achieved all the goals and policy changes she'd discussed with her father, King James, prior to her trip.

But it had been an exhausting process, and Alicia and Clovis were tired from their interactions with Elizabeth. Both were silent on the way home as they stared at the scenery outside the window.

"Am I making good progress?" Clovis turned his head at Alicia's sudden question. Not wishing to see herself reflected in that violet gaze, she focused her eyes out the carriage window. "Everything went so well. Perhaps a bit too well. I'm worried. Is this path really the right one? Have I overlooked something crucial?"

"The purpose of this visit is to sow seeds, so to speak," Clovis answered after

a long moment. "Agriculture involves plowing the ground, sowing seeds, growing them, and reaping the crop. If mistakes were made, we just adapt as we go along. Whether our efforts will bear good fruit is up to us."

"...You're right." The tension eased in Alicia. "Fretting will only waste time. We have to forge our path little by little, working towards the future we dream of."

"It'll be fine. Your Highness has the power to make it happen."

"You and me together, right?"

Alicia smiled as she finally turned to gaze at her adviser, the sunlight streaming through the window highlighting her profile. Clovis held his breath at the sight, his eyes narrowing, before he frowned and looked away.

"What's the matter?" she asked sadly.

"I apologize... Maybe I'm a little tired," he muttered with a bitter sigh.

Pain coursed through Alicia's chest as she remembered. She'd ignored the issue under the guise of being too busy, but her relationship with Clovis had been stuck in an awkward rut since that night. Each time she felt them getting closer again, Clovis would erect a thick wall to keep Alicia at arm's length.

Even now, he sat facing the window, chin in hand, to hide his expression from her. She couldn't see his eyes, only his thin lips, but he didn't say anything else.

For the first time, anger at Clovis bubbled in Alicia's heart.

It was true that their relationship as mistress and subject had wavered that night when Clovis almost stole her first kiss. And while the incident left her confused, there was also a small but warm happiness growing inside her.

Clovis, on the other hand, had willfully kept up his adviser persona as if trying to repair the crumbling boundary between them, drawing it deeper and wider than ever before.

If he didn't want her that way, what was that night all about?

What was she to do with the happiness within her?

"...You're not being fair, but neither am I," she whispered.

She heard the rustling of clothes, signaling that Clovis had turned to face her, but Alicia kept her face down, refusing to meet his eyes. She clasped her hands tightly together in her lap.

“I know you’ve been avoiding me these last few days and that something has upset you. After all, I’ve known you so well for so many years, but it feels so lonely. I’m the mistress, and you’re my subject, but we’re more than that, aren’t we? Isn’t there something different...something much stronger between us?”

Her fingers gripped the fabric of her dress as her vision blurred, but before the tears could fall, a warm hand moved to cover hers. Lifting her head, she saw Clovis with a serious expression on his face.

The carriage continued moving as sunlight filtered through the foliage, the rays gently illuminating his smooth porcelain cheeks, casting them in shadow. She could see the slight flush on them and the nervousness in his violet eyes.

“It’s been bothering me all this while. I’m just a mere adviser. To have these feelings...to be so troubled by them is unforgivable,” he whispered with a frown. “But I was wrong. I was so caught up in worry that I’d forgotten the most important thing... And I’ve made you upset.”

“Clovis...?”

“...I love you.”

Time stopped.

She’d longed to hear those words—her hope that she was special to him becoming a reality—but Alicia was still stunned. She had to say something, but she didn’t know what, and the more she panicked, the more useless her mind became.

Clovis, though, didn’t wait for her response, intertwining their fingers instead. Many years had passed since they’d first held hands, but his was still much larger.

He frowned as Alicia stared at him, her mind a total blank. Then he smiled, not as the loyal, talented, perfect adviser, but as a man whose heart had been burned.

“I love you, Alicia. Only you.”

“I...”

Her heart was racing, and her chest was tight.

*Me too; she wanted to scream. I love you too, Clovis.*

But her sky-blue eyes wavered with doubt. The thoughts that troubled her and reduced her to a coward surfaced one by one. She’d been hiding her feelings for so long that she couldn’t even remember when she was free of them.

...And now they won out again.

“In my previous life, Heilland was reduced to ruin because of my love. It may very well happen again,” she confessed her fears.

“I won’t let it,” he vowed. “If you choose the wrong path, I’ll do my best to guide you back.”

“But I’m the princess. Doesn’t that deter you?”

“We can work through it. I’m good at coming up with ideas and strategies.”

“We’ll incur Erdal’s displeasure, and then...”

Alicia’s voice trailed off. She couldn’t bring herself to finish the thought.

But then Clovis pulled her close, and before she knew it, there was a gentle touch on her lips. Her mind blanked out again as she stared at Clovis, pulling back. For a brief moment, his violet eyes, more beautiful than any gem, seemed to hold all the answers. Then he bent down, and this kiss was deeper and more passionate than the last.

Alicia’s whole body felt numb from the dizzying sweetness that spread from their joined lips.

“Do you have any more excuses?”

Clovis rested his forehead against hers, his hands unusually hot as they cradled her face with reverence. It was all new to Alicia, but it didn’t feel strange, and she felt no desire to escape or pull away.

“...First, I’ll make you fall for me so deeply that you’ll be willing to risk

everything,” he said in a husky voice. “So please be prepared. I won’t run away from you any longer.”

“...Idiot,” Alicia muttered, burying her face in his shoulder. “You’re really such an idiot. To think you’ve been avoiding me all this while.”

“Yes. I’m an idiot,” Clovis whispered back, holding Alicia tight as if making up for all the lost time. “The biggest idiot of all, but if that means I can make you mine, then I don’t mind being an idiot.”

Alicia’s face burned, and as if that wasn’t enough, Clovis turned to plant a kiss on her ear, making her flinch.

“So?” Another kiss to the ear. “What is your answer, Alicia? You haven’t said anything yet.”

“H-Huh?!”

Alicia’s voice was screechy, completely at odds with her noble status as the Blue Rose Princess of Heilland. Thankfully, there was no one to hear her but Clovis, whose cheeks were red as he gazed happily at her.

“M-My answer? Haven’t you already guessed it?!”

“No.” Clovis shook his head, his expression serious. “I’m an idiot, remember? So, please enlighten me.”

Alicia averted her eyes from his pleading gaze, her cheeks flaming as she muttered words that made no sense. Her sky-blue eyes filled with tears of embarrassment and conflict, which almost made Clovis relent.

Ten seconds passed, or maybe more, before she finally threw her arms around his neck, lips pressed against his ear, to whisper her confession.

Clovis’s almond-shaped eyes widened before a satisfied, blissful smile graced his lips.



**JUST** as Heilland’s princess and her adviser finally shared their feelings, Crown Prince Fritz was also holding his beloved in his arms in an empty private chamber.

“Please let me go. This won’t do at all!” Charlotte protested.

“It’s okay. There’s nothing to be afraid of, Charlotte.”

“But please, liste—”

Her protests were cut off as he sealed their lips together. Slowly, her struggling ceased as Charlotte grew calm.

But when they separated for air, he looked down to find Charlotte’s cheeks red and her eyes filled with sadness. His heart ached with love as he stroked her cheek.

“If you’re worried about status, don’t be. You may not be royalty, but you are of House Yggdrasil. Besides, I’m the true heir of Erdal. I won’t allow anyone to speak ill of you.”

“That’s not it,” Charlotte murmured, shaking her head, her tear-filled gaze averted from his own. “Your Highness is to marry Princess Alicia, aren’t you? And I really like Her Highness, too. She’s so kind and strong; I love her too much to hurt her.”

“You’re mistaken. Neither of us holds feelings for the other. And those rumors about us getting married are just Mother’s hopes.”

“But Her Majesty won’t allow us to be together.”

“This doesn’t concern Mother!”

Charlotte’s shoulders jumped at the crown prince’s harsh tone. He instantly regretted his outburst, soothing a gentle hand down her back.

“I’ve finally realized that I was born with the right to inherit the empire... So don’t worry. I’ll create a world where you can be happy by my side.”

After a few more moments of tenderness, the crown prince left the room. He gave the closed door a final look of regret before striding forward, cold and determined.

The empty corridor echoed with his sharp footsteps. Soon, he arrived at the door to a large room.

The door opened to reveal Chancellor Yggdrasil and several officials seated

around a table, deep in discussion. The chancellor raised his head as Fritz entered, then stood and spread his arms in welcome.

“What a surprise, Your Highness. It’s rare for you to join—”

“Yggdrasil, I need to speak with you.”

Yggdrasil seemed confused, then turned to the officials and dismissed them with a smile.

Once everyone had left, the chancellor shut the door tight and turned to Fritz, still smiling.

“We rarely get to talk in private, Your Highness. Is something troubling you? Or are you here to talk about my daughter?”

“...You knew?”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t hear it from her. Very few incidents that happen in this castle escape my notice. Oh, of course, Her Majesty does not know about it. I don’t wish to place my daughter in harm’s way, after all.”

“Then we’re on the same page,” the crown prince said with a grimace.

It was just as well that the chancellor was already aware. It saved him the trouble of breaking the news to the man. Now, it was just about negotiations.

And thus, Fritz got straight to the point.

“You told me once that there is a way to surpass the all-powerful empress. I want to know what you mean.”

“I didn’t mean anything. Trust me when I say that treason is the furthest thing from my mind. Everyone knows that Your Highness is the best choice as Erdal’s next emperor.”

“I didn’t come here to listen to compliments. If you have nothing else to say, I have no business with you.”

The chancellor just smiled quietly. Seeing the man’s strong and steady manner, Fritz lowered his voice.

“Lend me your strength, Yggdrasil. Help me steal the throne.”

“What strange words, Your Highness. The throne is already yours; there is no



need to steal it.”

“But I cannot overcome the empress. I don’t want to live as Her Majesty’s—as Mother’s pawn.”

The two men glared at each other, the chancellor with a calm smile and Fritz emotionless with his guard up. For a moment, they looked deep into each other, searching for the answers they sought.

Finally, Yggdrasil broke the silence.

“Let’s say I abandon my position and join forces with Your Highness. What do I stand to gain? And keep Charlotte out of this. My intention is to keep her away from Your Highness, just as Her Majesty wanted.”

“I can give you anything you want. Power, riches, fame, anything. Aside from the throne, you can have anything you want.”

“Power, riches, and fame are things that House Yggdrasil has no shortage of.”

“That’s only true with Mother on the throne! When I become emperor—”

“Which you won’t be for a very long time yet without my help. And until then, my position is fortunately quite secure.”

Fritz frowned. He had so many choice words to say, but he needed to get Yggdrasil on his side if he wanted to fulfill his ambition.

How could he possibly change the man’s mind? Before Fritz could think of anything, the chancellor spoke again.

“But Her Majesty won’t give me what I truly desire. If Your Highness can give it to me, I will help you surpass the great empress and carve your name in history.”

“What do you want?”

Despite Fritz’s impatience, the chancellor took his time, slowly walking to his desk. A map was spread out on top, and Yggdrasil slid his finger across it, stopping at a certain spot.

The chancellor’s smile deepened as Fritz stared with wide eyes.

“I want Heilland, Your Highness. For Erdal’s honor and pride.”

## 2. The Stars Turn

**IN** a deep, dark blue world, countless streaks of bluish-white light raced like shooting stars through a world of nothingness.

“Come, Alicia. Our pact has been made.”

Led by the voice, Alicia moved forward, only to find two people collapsed on the ground. One was shrouded in darkness, and she couldn’t make out their face or clothes. The other’s figure was familiar as the streaks of light illuminated it. It was Alicia herself.

A wooden cylinder lay between the hands of the lifeless pair, the delicate thorns and small roses carved on its surface detailed and beautiful.

“You can change the world, change the future. Your gear will turn history,” the voice said.

Alicia reached for the wooden cylinder but couldn’t touch it because of the hands in her way. She strained, and just as she was about to grasp it, someone’s hand shot out and grabbed it instead.

Looking up, her gaze met Clovis’s.



**HER** consciousness was returning. Alicia frowned slightly and opened her eyes as her hands, fingers, and toes regained their senses.

A familiar sight greeted her. The canopy above her head had heavy hanging curtains and a faint light shining through a small gap. It was a scene that had greeted her every morning since she was a child.

*That’s right. I’m back at home in Heiland.*

She slowly sat up, vestiges of confusion still tugging at her mind. She shook her head lightly to clear it. She knew her dream had been about something important, but the scenes had flown far away the moment she woke,

disappearing beyond the fog. The only thing she remembered was that it had concerned her previous life and that Clovis had made an appearance.

Clovis Cromwell. A young mastermind who led the revolution in her previous life, her biggest ally in this life... And now, a man who stood by her as a lover. When was the last time he'd appeared in her dreams?

The current Clovis still didn't know that he was the one who took Alicia's life in the previous timeline.

She curled into a ball under her blanket, her beautiful blue hair spilling over the white sheets.

"...Maybe I should tell him someday?"

No one answered her whispered question, not even her own heart.



**THEY** were in the audience hall, decorated with a simple but gorgeous chandelier. Alicia sat next to her father, King James, on a dais situated at the back of the room.

The red chairs, lined up on either side of the carpet that stretched through the center of the hall, were occupied by the nobles of the Privy Council, including District Commissioner Dan Dreyfus and Fudge Hobbs, Duke of Geras. The council had been summoned on short notice, but all the seats were filled, a testament to the fact that the incident from six years ago was still fresh on everyone's minds.

Then, at Nigel's signal, the knights stationed on both sides of the door moved to pull it open, revealing the figure of a young man, Riddhe Sutherland.

Riddhe held himself well, befitting his position as District Council Branch Chief of Sheraford. He walked along the carpet and stopped near the royal dais, placing a hand on his chest and bowing.

"Riddhe Sutherland, at your service."

"Good," King James answered, standing up from his throne and descending the steps to stand before the young man. Riddhe raised his head to meet his king's eyes. "You have suffered, but you've endured these six years, serving me

well.”

“Thank you for your kind words.”

“You and I are comrades who share the same sorrow. The words you hear will reach my ears, and the words you speak will be mine as well. I have told Elizabeth... You are free to do whatever you need to, Riddhe. Put an end to our sorrow from six years ago.”

Riddhe’s gaze was determined as he carved the king’s words into his heart. Without glancing away, King James took the scepter from the silver tray Nigel held out. Raising it above Riddhe’s kneeling form, he announced in a resounding voice to all present.

“As a son of Estel and king of Heilland, I appoint Riddhe Sutherland as our special diplomatic ambassador. May our guardian stars guide you well!”

“Yes, sire!”

Riddhe stood up, his eyes catching Alicia’s over the king’s shoulder. She gave a nod, which he returned with a confident smile before turning to the Privy Council.

A moment passed, then applause filled the hall. All the nobles, including the Duke of Geras, Marquis of Morris, and Attorney General Adams, joined in, indicating their approval of the appointment.

Sunlight shone through the stained-glass windows, making the scepter’s jewels sparkle like stars in the sky. With the protection of the stars, Riddhe’s gaze swept over the Privy Council members as they clapped, and then he placed his right hand on his chest and gave a dignified, thankful bow.

At that moment, his action reminded everyone of the late Duke of Sheraford, Loid Sutherland.



**“RIDDHE!”**

Alicia, who excused herself from the audience hall as soon as she could after the appointment ceremony, called out. The young man, who was conversing with Clovis and Robert, turned around, surprise on his face.

“Your Highness! I was just asking Cromwell if I may have an audience with you.”

“I thought that might be the case, so here I am,” Alicia teased with a mischievous smile, but Riddhe’s expression remained serious as he bowed his head.

“I don’t know how to express my gratitude to Your Highness for the chance to see the incident to its conclusion. Thank you for giving me the opportunity.”

“I didn’t give you anything. You’re the right person for the task, and you’ll have to thank yourself for that.”

Before her trip to Erdal, Alicia had raised the idea of stationing Riddhe there to the young man. He’d been shocked at first but agreed resolutely.

Now, with Empress Elizabeth and Alicia having joined forces, the plan was coming to fruition.

And not a moment too soon.

Alicia clasped her hands before her heart.

Six years ago, Erdal had chosen not to conduct any investigations to find out who had colluded with Loid. She’d informed Riddhe about this in the Sutherland mansion back then, and she vividly remembered the anger, regret, and resignation that had flashed across his face. She understood his feelings because she’d experienced them as well.

Now, they could finally make progress from the frustration they’d felt. Once the truth was uncovered and the mastermind found, her pact with the messenger of the stars and wish to save Heiland’s future would be fulfilled.

“Please leave the Sheraford branch to us, though Commissioner Dreyfus will be especially sad when you’re so far away. The advisory office will provide support any way we can,” Clovis said.

“And I’ve also heard that Riddhe boy’s cousin will be appointed as acting branch chief,” Robert added.

“Yeah. He’s been supporting me all this while, so he should be fine, but I’m counting on you, Cromwell,” Riddhe said. “If anything happens to the Sheraford

branch in my absence, I'm gonna sue the advisory office."

"I wouldn't expect anything less," Clovis said with a smile. Alicia also took the chance to pipe up.

"Promise me just one thing, Riddhe. Make sure you come back safely. You mustn't lose your life there."

"Your Highness..."

"Her Majesty Elizabeth may be our ally now," Alicia continued, "but our enemy is also an important political figure in Erdal. You'll need to infiltrate their ranks to uncover more, so please don't forget that this is a dangerous role."

"You're as sweet and kind as ever, Your Highness," Riddhe said with an easy shrug and grin, then placed his hand on his chest. "I'll definitely come back. We Sutherlands always keep our promises, so relax and watch as your loyal subject, Riddhe Sutherland, works his magic. Besides, Your Highness is surrounded by many other talented and loyal subjects. Please make use of them to bring glory to Heiland."

"Wow. Our prideful Riddhe boy has grown into a splendid young man. I'm so proud but also a little sad," Robert sighed, shaking his head before his eyes took on a mischievous glint. "But it's too bad that you have to leave so soon. The Star Festival is just around the corner. You'll miss that passionate, romantic night and the best chance to confess your feelings to the one you love."

"Wha— Hey! Idiot!!!!!" Riddhe exploded.

"Huh? Riddhe has a special someone? Why didn't you tell me?!" Alicia whined.

"Wh-What are you saying, Y-Y-Your Highness?!"

"Someone told me that lovers who exchange promises and share a kiss on the night of the Star Festival will be bound in love for eternity, or something like that," Robert said teasingly. "I wonder, who was the lovestruck guy who shared his hopes with me just the other day?"

"Wait, Robert!! Damn you!!"

Riddhe's voice rose as he pulled at his red hair, his shouts echoing down the

hallways of the usually quiet Egdiel Castle. Passing officials and knights stopped and stared.

His face was scarlet in contrast to Robert's calm one, but Alicia's mind was already somewhere far away.

*A kiss shared on the night of the Star Festival for eternal love...*

Alicia's eyes naturally sought out Clovis, only to find him smiling at her.

"Is something the matter, Your Highness?" he asked.

"Oh? No, it's nothing," she whispered, lowering her head to hide her burning face.

*"Please be prepared. I won't run away from you any longer."*

Alicia's heart beat fast as she remembered the passion in Clovis's eyes as he held her face lovingly in his hands.

Only a few days had passed since she'd resolved her long-unrequited love and confessed to the man, but since they were still princess and adviser, they had to maintain that professional relationship in front of others.

That was why Clovis had yet to touch Alicia as a lover since they alighted from their carriage in Heiland.

Despite that, Alicia couldn't help but feel overwhelmed every time she recalled what happened that day.

Clovis had held up well, calmly playing his role as adviser and treating her like a child again. It was frankly annoying.

*Besides, it's probably impossible for us to find time to be alone together on the night of the Star Festival...* Alicia sighed, shoulders drooping.

As the Star Festival coincided with Heiland's founding day, she'd have to spend the entire day attending ceremonies in the castle as its princess. Meanwhile, Clovis would be busy running around all day, overseeing the proceedings as part of his duties as an adviser. It could be possible, but highly unlikely, that they'd find time to meet in secret.

Disappointed, Alicia raised her eyes to see Clovis holding out a hand, a

flawless and perfect smile on his handsome face.

“Let us go, Your Highness. We’ll miss our next schedule if we wait around watching these two argue.”

Alicia stared at her adviser’s white-gloved hand, then at his smile.

“...Yes, let’s go.”

“As you wish.”

What she wished was to wipe the smug look off her lover’s face, but unfortunately, she had no idea how to do that. In the end, she had to take Clovis’s hand, his gentle smile only aggravating her more.

*Why am I the only one feeling so vulnerable?*

Grumbling to herself, Alicia left the hallway.



**ABOUT** ten days had passed since Riddhe left for Erdal. Preparations for the Star Festival had begun in earnest at Egdiel Castle.

The main man in charge was the king’s right-hand man, Chief Adviser Nigel. Under his command, the advisers were busy organizing the schedule of the festivities and keeping each ministry up to date. Princess Adviser Clovis was especially busy, and Alicia couldn’t find the time to speak to him about Erdal or their previous lives.

Not that Alicia was idling her time away. In addition to seeing to the usual political affairs entrusted to her by the king, she had to attend extra etiquette and dance lessons taught by the enthusiastic chief lady-in-waiting.

It was one of those hectic days when *he* made a sudden appearance.

“Long time no see, Princess Alicia. And Clo, you look great!”

“Jude!! You really made it!” Alicia cheered as she put down her pen and stood from the desk, dashing towards the Marquis of Rozen as he appeared at her door with a dimpled smile and outstretched arms.

Jude Nicol was one of the better-known marquises of Heilland and the head of the Mercurius Company. Despite being one of Alicia’s allies, he hated



socializing with his fellow nobles, so it was rare to see him at the royal castle.

Alicia, who sent him an invitation to attend the festivities celebrating their kingdom's founding every year, was pleasantly surprised to see that he'd actually come this time.

"I thought you'd come up with some excuse and refuse to come again," she laughed.

"That's mean. Does Your Highness really think I'm that rude?"

"But you're the one who skips the festivities every year," Clovis muttered.

"Hahaha! Clo always speaks the harsh truth. But I have my reasons and my moods," Jude answered with a smile and a nonchalant shrug, his tone devoid of sarcasm. Alicia gave a wry smile as he crossed his arms, his gaze switching to that of a shrewd merchant's. "Besides, I'm here in Egdiel not as the Marquis of Rozen but as the head of Mercurius. Your Highness met with the head of Ist during your visit to Erdal, and I'd like to hear more."

Alicia thought of Dudley Hopkins and Barnabas McGregor, the two leaders of Ist whom she'd met during her visit to Erdal. Since then, she'd been thinking about how to progress with concrete talks about a partnership between the two companies.

Jude must have been motivated to visit Egdiel because he'd sensed her intentions. Alicia had also seized upon that and invited several other well-known merchants who held important positions in Mercurius to Egdiel, too, hoping it would spur Jude to join them. It seemed to have worked.

They all sat around a table filled with tea and sweets prepared by Annie and Martha. Jude was the first to dig in, taking a sip of tea and smiling in satisfaction. Then his look turned mischievous as he faced Alicia.

"How did Your Highness find the two leaders of Ist? They're quite astute, aren't they?"

"They are," Alicia agreed. "Honestly, I'm so glad I'm not the one who has to negotiate with them. But now, we're one step closer to forming a true partnership. I'll leave it to you to work on that, Jude."

“Please count on me. I’d much rather work on this than attend some ball. Bargaining with Dudley is always exciting, and I imagine the profits for Mercurius will be enormous. Just thinking about it makes my heart race!”

Jude was right. As evidenced by the huge ships in Sampston’s harbor, Erdal was an expert on trading by sea. Ist was known to sail extensively to trade with faraway lands, purchasing rare items from foreign places and amassing great wealth.

By solidifying the partnership with Ist, Heilland’s goods could be sold in those faraway lands, and they could also purchase unique goods and sell them to collectors and nobles back home.

“But we have to be careful,” Clovis warned. “As we’ve discussed, a partnership like that will only benefit Heilland. Although Ist has the hidden motive of staying in Empress Elizabeth’s favor, their accepting such an unfair partnership may be a sign that we’re being taken advantage of without our knowledge.”

“I’m glad you remember my words, Clo,” Jude said. “Your worries are justified, but I’ve told you I have a plan. That’s why I’m here—to show it to you.”

With that, the young lord opened the wooden box beside him and took out a bundle wrapped in velvet. Carefully opening the cloth revealed a smooth, lustrous white to everyone present.

“Can it really be...?” Alicia said in awe.

“It is. Here, real porcelain produced in Heilland, the long-held dream of House Nicol!”

Jude cheerfully handed the item to Alicia, who took it with timid hands. The rim was delicately painted blue, and when she turned it over, the crest of House Nicol was stamped on its bottom. It looked and felt identical to real porcelain.

“Wow... It’s so beautiful,” she breathed.

“Thank you. I’m glad to hear that Your Highness thinks so.” Jude leaned forward with a proud smile.

The beautiful white color and glass-like hardness of porcelain had long fascinated those who'd had the chance to own a piece. However, the technique to make it had been shrouded in mystery, privy only to artisans from somewhere over the distant sea. Thus, some collectors and nobles had been conducting research into recreating porcelain in their own countries.

House Nicol was one of those fascinated by porcelain, so much so that they had an entire room in their estate dedicated to the pieces, as well as a research facility in Rozen. Jude had shared that his family had been researching the technique to make porcelain for generations but didn't hold out hope that they would succeed.

"It is an unexpected byproduct of Mercurius's establishment."

Jude happily explained that their porcelain research had been close to completion when Alicia visited the Marquisate of Rozen for the first time. However, a huge issue had ground their research to a halt.

But with his new position as head of Mercurius, Jude got the chance to meet with many merchants from the East and eventually gained knowledge, which led to a breakthrough in their research.

"Of course, we still have to develop painting techniques, but we've got a foot in the door now," he said. "I expect not only nobles but also royalty from neighboring countries to start placing orders for these. And Mercurius will be the main distributor, no doubt."

"I see. Is that where our partnership with Ist comes into play?" Alicia asked.

"Yes, Your Highness is quick to figure things out. Our porcelain will only be available through Mercurius and our partner, Ist. When I hinted at this to Dudley, his eyes sparkled in a rare manner. That man definitely knows the value of porcelain."

With a finger, Jude lightly traced the white porcelain plate Alicia had placed back on the desk. Its smooth white surface glimmered in the sunlight streaming through the window.

"When will we show the finished product to Ist?" she asked.

"I'm planning to fire some pieces in a new kiln soon, so I'll show those when

they're done. Besides, things will be easier once Heilland's founding day festivities are over. I don't want to risk being robbed, so we'll sail from Held straight to Sampston."

"Please send word when the pieces are ready," Clovis replied. "This will be an important asset in our negotiations with Ist, so the advisory office would like to check over them before they leave the kingdom."

"Of course. That's what I was planning to do," Jude said. "Will my Clo make a trip down to Rozen too?"

"I can make arrangements," Clovis said.

Jude nodded cheerfully, then blinked. "By the way, I heard a member of House Sutherland was sent to Erdal. Was it Master Riddhe? Didn't he mention that he hoped to start a business or something?"

Alicia and Clovis looked at each other before she replied.

"We did send Riddhe to Erdal, but we've not heard anything about a business."

"Oh, he spoke to me about it when Your Highness was still in Erdal."

According to Jude, Riddhe had visited the Nicol mansion in Rozen and asked the marquis if he had any connections with various Erdalian companies and to recommend some trustworthy merchants.

"Viola is within Sheraford, isn't it? Back then, I thought he was asking for information so he could set up a new business in Viola, but then he suddenly left for Erdal. So I was wondering what that was all about."

Jude looked at Alicia and Clovis quizzically, but neither had an answer for him.

It was highly likely that Riddhe already had plans to move to Erdal when Alicia was away on her trip. In that case, his questions about merchants were probably his way of looking for clues that could lead him to Loid's killer.

"Well, no matter his goal, I gave him names of trustworthy merchants. I doubt Master Riddhe will ever get into serious trouble, but if he does..." Jude's voice trailed off into uncomfortable silence as he gazed out the window. The blue sky had clouded over, and the air was heavy with a mist of rain.

Three days later, on the day before Heilland's founding day, a letter from Riddhe arrived for the anxious trio.



**ALICIA** hurried down the hallway, clutching a scroll tied with red string.

It was a letter from Riddhe Sutherland. Alicia had been busy with lessons all morning. When Nigel delivered the news to her during her dance lesson, it took all her willpower not to rush to the king's office to retrieve the letter. The moment her lesson concluded, she'd dashed to her father's office for it.

"Is Clovis here?!"

The advisers seated at their desks looked up in surprise as the door to their office banged open. Then, their eyes grew even wider at the sight of the princess.

However, the princess's adviser wasn't there. Embarrassed at her loud entrance into the advisory office, Alicia turned to the adviser sitting nearest to the door.

"Sorry, but I'm looking for Clovis," she murmured timidly.

"My apologies, Your Highness," the young adviser replied with a frown. "Clovis has been ordered to take the day off by Lord Nigel."

"Huh?"

Just then, one of the veteran advisers, Ryan, spoke up.

"Lord Nigel found out that Clovis had been working day and night without sleep, so he was sent back to his room to rest, lest he collapse from exhaustion during the festivities."

"Oh... I wasn't aware."

Alicia recalled her adviser's calm face as he handled his tasks skillfully. Even though they saw each other daily, she hadn't noticed that he'd been pushing himself so hard.

But it was to be expected. The advisory office was always busiest in the days leading up to the founding day. Upon their return from Erdal, Clovis took on

tasks to relieve his colleagues on top of supporting Alicia in her government duties. But no matter how composed he looked on the surface, the fatigue must have been building up.

Ryan gave the guilty Alicia a comforting look.

“This isn’t your fault, Your Highness. Clovis may be skilled, but he wasn’t right to try to take everything on by himself. He has never spoken a word of complaint to you, has he?”

“No...”

“I’m sure we can arrange something if Your Highness really needs to see him. Please wait in your rooms; I’ll send word for Clovis to report to you there.”

“Oh, there’s no need! I don’t really need to see him.”

Alicia shook her head in a panic. She’d been so glad to learn Riddhe was safe that she’d dashed all the way here. The letter didn’t contain anything that needed immediate attention.

Besides, she had a dress fitting session to try on a new gown the chief lady-in-waiting had chosen for her. It was a rare day that didn’t require Clovis to report to her. Summoning him now would add to his burden and stress.

“It’s nothing urgent,” she insisted again. “Thank you for your help, Ryan.”

“No worries, Your Highness. I’m sorry you wasted a trip here.”

Then, seeing Alicia’s worried look, Ryan promised to send an errand boy to check up on Clovis and make sure he was all right.



**AFTER** leaving the advisory office, Alicia trudged sadly down the hallway.

She thought back to her meeting with Clovis yesterday. They’d had a fruitful discussion with Jude about the partnership between Mercurius and Ist, and her capable adviser hadn’t seemed any different from his usual self.

*“He has never spoken a word of complaint to you, has he?”*

Ryan’s words made her heart clench in pain.

Clovis had always been so kind and thoughtful towards her, going the extra

mile and staying one step ahead, paying attention to even the smallest change in her.

But what about her? He was her precious subject, now a lover, but he still hid his weaknesses, and she'd never even noticed.

Was this how lovers should be? Aside from that intimate exchange in the carriage, they hadn't even had the chance to speak to each other in private.

To treat each other as lovers, not as a mistress and subject.

As two equal humans, not a teen and an adult.

The differences between them became all the more stark, as if betraying the depth of her emotions. Alicia shook her head vehemently.

*Oh, curses! I have to stop thinking like this!*

Maybe she should go back to the dance hall. The chief lady-in-waiting had been kind enough to wrap up the lesson quickly upon seeing how agitated Alicia became after receiving Nigel's news. It was only right to return and pick up where she left off.

But her feet were carrying her in a different direction. Turning down a series of hallways, she was soon outside the castle and walking across the green lawn, passing by the knights on patrol. Finally, she reached the dorm for civil officials.

It was still daytime, so the dorms were silent. Alicia slipped inside and hurried down a corridor.

When she reached the right door, she stood before it, her face full of apprehension.

If she remembered right, this was Clovis's room. After spending a childhood running around and exploring the main castle, Alicia knew it like the back of her hand, but this was her first time coming all the way out here.

*And now, here I am...*

Ryan had promised to send someone to check on Clovis, but Alicia still felt worried.

Maybe he was catching up on sleep, and she was intruding on his private

time. But she pushed those niggling thoughts aside, wishing to, at least, be the one who took the effort to come to see him herself.

She took a small breath, then exhaled. Timidly, she raised her right hand to knock.

The sound echoed lightly down the hall as Alicia waited with bated breath, but no response came. Maybe he'd gone for a walk in town? So thinking, she grasped the doorknob and was surprised to find that it turned easily.

It would be rude to enter without permission, but she'd come all this way. Tiptoeing in as silently as possible, she shut the door behind her.

The apartment was plain. Clovis wasn't one for extravagance, and the furnishings were standard without decorations or adornments. A door led off to another room, which was probably the bedroom since she couldn't see a bed anywhere.

The most eye-catching decor was a bookcase lined with a staggering number of books, with even more piled up on the carpeted floor. They formed mountains around a couch in the center of the room, indicating that their owner often sat there as he read.

Then, from where Alicia stood by the door, she noticed what looked like a leg sticking out from the side of the couch.

Approaching slowly on tiptoe, she rounded the couch to find a sleeping Clovis. He was without his usual robe, jacket, and tie, which were draped over the back of the other couch opposite his. He was clad in a white shirt, the usually fastened buttons undone and open to reveal his chest.

A hand rested lightly on his stomach, which rose and fell with each breath taken through his slightly parted lips. His sleeping face was unguarded and made him look much younger, and his lashes were surprisingly long and beautiful.

Alicia's face heated up.

She should leave now that she'd seen him, but she couldn't turn away. She moved closer to Clovis instead, crouching to gaze upon her lover's face. He was so beautiful. Her heart thundered.



She wanted to touch him.

Overwhelmed by desire, she slowly reached out.

The next moment, a hand closed around hers, pulling her forward until she fell on top of the man.

“Isn’t it reckless to enter a man’s room like that?”

“Clovis?! You’re awake?!” She gasped in shock as sleepy violet eyes stared at her.

“Only just.”

Belatedly, she realized that she was lying on top of Clovis, her hands resting on his chest, and her brain short-circuited with embarrassment. Hurriedly, she tried to push herself away, but Clovis held her in place.

“L-Let me go!”

“No. Weren’t you the one who wanted to touch me?”

“Y-Yes, but! I mean, no!”

“Stop.”

The word cut through Alicia’s panicked protests, and Clovis took the chance to wrap his arms around her, pulling her even closer.

“C-Clo...”

“When we came back from the empire... No, even before that, I’ve always held back from touching you. Now, I finally have my chance. Don’t you think you’ve kept me waiting long enough?”

Alicia stilled in his arms, then hesitantly looked up to find Clovis gazing at her seriously. Embarrassed, she quickly looked away. Was he speaking the truth? If this wasn’t a joke and he was speaking from his heart...

*Clovis must have felt so lonely, too.*

Her fingers tightened in his white shirt, happiness and embarrassment battling for dominance in her heart. His large hand gently combed through her long hair.

“...Close your eyes. Let me feel you here with me.”

His words were like magic, washing over her body and draining away all resistance as she obeyed and closed her eyes. His warm hand rested on the nape of her neck, and she leaned closer, wanting more.

At that moment, three sharp knocks sounded on the wooden door.

Before Clovis could stop her, Alicia bolted upright and jumped off the couch like a spooked rabbit.

*Th-Th-That was close!!*

Her heart thudded painfully in her chest. Meanwhile, Clovis remained on the couch, his body half-raised as he looked to the door, then again at Alicia.

Then he let out a small sigh.

“Come in.”

The door opened with a soft creak, and the young adviser Alicia had spoken to earlier at the office poked his head into the room before stepping in with a silver plate covered by a cloche and a pitcher.

“Sorry to bother you, Clovis. How are you feel— Huh? Your Highness?!”

The adviser stopped short, staring at Alicia with wide eyes. She didn’t blame him. Who would have thought he’d run into the princess in his colleague’s room?

His eyes darted between Alicia and Clovis, not knowing what to do, but just as she was about to open her mouth to spew some excuse, her adviser stood up and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Who told Her Highness that I was taking a day off? It made her so worried that she dashed here searching for me,” Clovis said accusingly.

“Oh, erm, oh! I see. My apologies; I was taken by surprise,” the young adviser said before turning to Alicia with an apologetic bow.

“My sincere apologies, Your Highness. I would have escorted you here if I’d known you wanted to see Clovis.”

“It’s okay. I only decided to drop by after I left your office... Erm, what’s that?”

“Oh. Lord Nigel requested the head chef make some lunch for Clovis since he was asleep and missed it just now.”

“I wasn’t sleeping... But I guess I did miss lunch.”

Clovis took the tray from his colleague and lifted the cloche, his eyes widening in hunger at the sight of sandwiches filled with vegetables and cheese.

After exchanging a few more words, the young adviser took his leave, along with the message that Clovis would be returning to the office after his meal since he didn’t wish to spend the entire day resting.

Then, they were alone again.



***SO, what happens now?***

Alicia sat awkwardly on the couch opposite Clovis, who was munching on the sandwiches. At first, he had been hesitant to eat in Alicia’s presence, thinking it rude, but when she offered to leave the room, he resigned himself and picked up the food.

Now, she’d lost the chance to leave.

The pitcher held some grape juice, and Clovis had poured her a small goblet. Taking tiny sips from the cup, she stole a glance at her adviser.

He looked just like his usual self. Maybe he’d gotten a good rest already; he certainly didn’t look like someone on the brink of collapse from exhaustion.

Yesterday, and the day before, too, she was sure she hadn’t noticed any signs of fatigue in him. Maybe he’d just been that good at hiding his true feelings.

“You should have told me if you were tired...” she pouted.

“Huh?”

She hadn’t planned for him to hear her words, but as usual, nothing escaped Clovis, who stopped eating and looked at her. Trapped, she could only continue.

“I’m glad for your support, Clovis, but I’m also capable of doing much by myself now. If you’re busy, you don’t need to force yourself to attend to me.”

“Interesting. Is Your Highness joking, perhaps?”

“It’s not a joke. I’m just...”

“Worried about me? Is that why you’re preventing me from serving you?”

His words were polite, but a hint of dissatisfaction was mixed in his tone. Finishing up the last bite of the sandwich, he shook his head.

“I refuse. First and foremost, I am the princess’s adviser, which means my priority is to serve you, Your Highness. If my other duties at the office hinder my ability to serve you, then that is a big issue.”

“Th-That may be true, but this is the busiest season for the advisers.”

“Second, I... I want to see you.”

“Oh?”

Alicia gasped stupidly. Clovis frowned and turned away, a faint redness on his cheeks.

“I know it is unprofessional of me, but I find myself constantly looking out for you. Even today, when we have no formal plans to meet, I couldn’t help but want to see you.”

“...You’re being very honest...” Alicia muttered.

“It’s uncool, I know. I’m almost ten years your senior; I can’t afford to be like this, yet as your lover, I pray you’d want me just as much as I want you.”

Alicia lowered her eyes; the words she wanted to say stuck in her throat. The urge to jump into Clovis’s arms again was just too strong.

As if reading her mind, he smiled shyly.

“I’m sorry I made you worry,” he said. “I’ve trained my juniors well, and I’ll do my best to entrust duties to them. So please, do not tell me to stay away from you.”

Clovis tilted his head imploringly. That sweet gesture, paired with his expression and voice, stirred up Alicia’s heart. Eventually, she croaked out a quiet yes, and Clovis smiled happily in relief.

Picking up the pitcher, he refilled his cup, gulped down its contents, and wiped his mouth clean with a white handkerchief. Then he looked at her again.

“By the way, what is that letter you’re holding? Is that why you came looking for me?”

With a start, Alicia remembered Riddhe’s letter. So much had happened in the past few moments that she’d forgotten about it.

“It’s a letter from Riddhe. I’ve only just read it myself.”

“From Riddhe?”

Clovis’s eyes widened in surprise as he took the letter from her, untied the string carefully, and unrolled the scroll.

“Dear Royal Highness Alicia, how have you been...”

Alicia watched as Clovis’s eyes skimmed over the rest of the letter. Her adviser put a hand on his chin, as if deep in thought, before rereading the letter again.

She tilted her head, curious about his response.

She had only glanced through it quickly herself, and it seemed like a simple report of Riddhe’s current situation. That was why she’d declined Ryan’s offer to summon Clovis back to the office, deeming the letter of low importance.

He’d written about being housed at the Crowne’s mansion in Kingsley upon his arrival in Erdal, that he’d been granted permission to enter and leave Kingsley Castle at will, and his plans to conduct inspection tours in several locations...

Certainly, nothing important enough to trigger the deep frown on Clovis’s face as he suddenly stood up and strode over to the bookcase. Picking out a book, Clovis walked back to the couch and held the book and Riddhe’s letter side by side.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“My personal records from the Erdalian inspection mission many years ago, sort of like a diary. The official records by the inspection squad are kept by the advisory office...”

The sound of flipping pages stopped as Clovis traced a slender finger along the text. Moving to stand beside him, Alicia peeked at the book and letter.

“These are the places Riddhe plans to inspect: Leger, Yeats, and Fainz. We visited all these places during the inspection mission, too,” Clovis explained.

“What’s special about them?”

Clovis looked up, his almond-shaped eyes narrowing.

“Orphanages. The largest in the empire,” Clovis paused. “All three sponsored by Chancellor Eric Yggdrasil.”



**CLOVIS** had stood up from the couch and was donning his jacket, his hands expertly fixing his tie, all while quickly explaining his thoughts to Alicia.

“What bothers me is how Riddhe chose not to explain why he is visiting these three places in his letter,” he said. “Be it for good or bad, he has always been blunt with his words, so the fact that he’s leaving information out makes me think there is a message hidden in here.”

In no time at all, he was ready.

“Shall we go?”

On their way out, they passed the silver tray to a passing maid to bring back to the kitchens, with a note that Clovis would drop by later to give the chef his thanks. Then, the pair continued on, with Clovis elaborating on the situation.

“Does Your Highness recall my words about Lord Yggdrasil being the sponsor of several orphanages?”

“Yes. Charlotte and her elder brothers were adopted from those places.”

“Miss Charlotte was originally from Golton orphanage in Yeats, her older brothers from Blok orphanage in Leger, and Cerseth orphanage in Fainz,” Clovis elaborated. “Lord Yggdrasil may be the sponsor for other orphanages as well, but he is best known for those three, and that was why our inspection squad was invited to visit. Of course, Riddhe intended for me to read this letter, but there’s no indication of any link between these three places. Maybe he is still looking for proof to support his suspicions.”

“In other words...suspicion that the chancellor was the official colluding with Loid?”

Clovis stopped at Alicia's question. Belatedly, she realized they were standing in front of the door leading to her rooms.

"We still don't know. Is the chancellor someone to be trusted, or are our suspicions right? Riddhe will surely make his move to answer that soon, but he has left us the names of the places first, just in case," Clovis said.

"Just in case...?"

Alicia's heart clenched as she clasped her hands before her chest. Clovis gave her a gentle pat on the head and a reassuring smile.

"There is nothing to worry about. Riddhe is very persistent and bolder than anyone I know. He won't put himself at risk for no reason and never does anything half-heartedly. You believe that, too, right? That's why you requested he be stationed there?"

"...Yes. You're right," Alicia nodded vehemently.

Sutherlands always kept their promises. Riddhe had promised with a fearless smile that he'd come back to Heiland. She knew she was sending him into danger, and now she could only place her faith in him and wait.

That said, it was hard to squash the seeds of doubt in her heart. Clovis stared at Alicia while she was lost in thought. Then, before he could change his mind, he bent down and dropped a quick kiss on her forehead.

"I'm jealous. Are you that worried about him?" he teased, violet eyes dancing with amusement. Alicia panicked.

"O-Of course! But jealousy? I'm not..."

"I was only joking." Clovis smiled. He pulled open the door to her rooms and gently pushed the still-reeling Alicia inside. "If my memory serves me right, the dressmaker should be here soon. Please wait for Lady Fourier here."

"Huh...?"

"I'll see you tomorrow, Your Highness. And I am honored and glad you came to see me."

With a small bow, Clovis let go of the door, and it fell shut with a soft click. Mind still full of her lover, Alicia ran a hand gently along the wood of the door.

*I just can't with him...*

The spot where his lips touched her skin still felt hot.

He'd successfully dispelled her anxiety with a few simple actions and words. And though she was so grateful to him, she didn't know what she could do to thank him. In that manner, she still had so much growing up to do.

He'd said that he wished to be wanted by Alicia as much as he wanted her.

Yet she was the one pining for him the moment they parted ways.

"Your Highness?"

"What's the matter, Your Highness?"

Noticing their mistress was back, her maids emerged from the back chambers.

"It's nothing!" she squeaked, finally turning away from the door.



**THE** gun salute resounded in the skies above Heilland, signaling the start of the three-day founding festivities at Egdiel Castle.

In addition to the Privy Council, many guests from all over the kingdom were in attendance, including lords and nobles like Jude, the commanders of the knight regiments in the north, south, east, and west, performers such as musicians and painters, and famous merchants.

During the festivities, the pact signed between founding father King Estel and the guardian star was relived in various ways as part of tradition. The most representative of these was the worship ceremony led by the King of Time, a personification of the guardian star.

The ceremony was a modern variation of the one once practiced by the Astromancy Sect in the Marquisate of Chester. Because of this, the prayers and chants were all in a now-lost language, and the rituals were based on mythology, giving it an otherworldly aura.

The first day was mostly taken up by the worship ceremony, while the second was dedicated to the founding parade on the main road leading up to the castle from the town of Egdiel. The parade usually featured plays reenacting how the



founding people escaped from pursuers, received guidance from spirits and stars, reached the land of Heilland, and formed a pact with the guardian star.

Finally, on the third day, a large-scale luncheon lasting half a day was held, with the king and guests feasting together. Afterward, the festivities would conclude with a ball.

Naturally, as a royal and potential heir to the throne of Heilland, Alicia had to be present for all the events. Of course, she didn't have to do much, but the constant need to move from one event to the next still tired her out.

Clovis was present at her side when required. Otherwise, he was busy somewhere fulfilling his duties as an adviser.

The first two days flew by in a blur, and the day of the luncheon arrived. During the event, Alicia approached District Commissioner Dan Dreyfus.

"Excuse me, Lady Dreyfus. If I may speak to Lord Dreyfus for a moment?"

"Oh, Your Highness, and Nigel, too."

Dreyfus was the one who answered in a gruff voice on behalf of Lady Dreyfus. Before his wife and children could stop him, he gave his mouth a vigorous wipe with his napkin and stood up quickly.

The luncheon was coming to an end, and everyone was idly chatting while waiting for dessert. Alicia, Chief Adviser Nigel Otto, and District Commissioner Dreyfus gathered in the shadow of a pillar, away from the chatter of the other guests.

Daniel Sutherland, acting District Council Branch Chief of Sheraford, joined them.

As Riddhe's cousin, Daniel was regularly involved in the management of Sheraford. Alicia met him for the first time during the worship ceremony two days prior but could tell he was a strong-hearted young man despite his timid nature.

"A letter from Riddhe...?" Daniel murmured timidly. Despite being older than Riddhe, he stood with his large back hunched, looking up at Alicia like a lost puppy. She nodded.

“Yes. I’d like to let everyone here know that he is well. Now, about the contents of his letter...”

Quickly, Alicia summarized what Clovis had told her a few days ago. Of course, she’d already spoken to Nigel and her father, King James. Feeling that she needed more opinions, she’d decided to confide in Dreyfus and Daniel, too.

“Chancellor Eric Yggdrasil. Isn’t he the empress’s long-time right-hand man? Are you saying he colluded with Loid?” Dreyfus asked, dumbfounded.

“We can’t be certain yet, but looking at this letter, Riddhe is probably already gathering evidence,” Alicia said.

Dreyfus clutched at his head, muttering words like “Pathetic” and “The right-hand man? What a scandal.” He had always been an honest man led by common sense. Such a betrayal was surely hard to accept.

Daniel, on the other hand, looked at Alicia and Nigel. “S-So... What are we to do now?” he asked.

“If I may speak, Your Highness,” Nigel stepped forward, pushing his glasses up his nose.

The fact that the chief adviser was speaking meant his next words had come from King James himself. Daniel, who immediately grasped that, nervously stood a little straighter.

“Dreyfus, please contact the southern knights as soon as possible and raise the security level of the border so they can move quickly in an emergency. If Chancellor Yggdrasil is really the one pulling the strings, he can also easily mobilize the army.”

“Got it. Daniel, I’ll support you, but you have to coordinate the efforts at Sheraford. As for the Duchy of Geras... How much can I tell Fudge?”

“His Grace had expressed concern about Riddhe, and I’m planning to talk to him as well.”

“I see. That’s right; he’s known Riddhe since he was a wee boy,” Dreyfus smiled, showing off a narrow gap between his thumb and index finger.

“Once the founding day festivities are over and things have settled down, I’m

thinking of visiting Sheraford for an inspection,” Alicia said. “Daniel, you will probably be very busy, so I’m wondering if that’s okay with you.”

“A-An inspection?!” Daniel stammered, suddenly trembling.

“What are you scared of? It’s an honor to have Her Highness visit your territory in person.” Dreyfus nodded sagely, patting the young man on the back. “Of course, it’s okay, Your Highness. I’ve been planning to visit Sheraford myself as well, so I will escort you. That way, we can do a thorough check of our border defenses.”

“Ehh—? Are you coming too, Your Lordship?!”

“Of course!! Riddhe’s not around; I can’t leave you to do everything on your own!”

Nigel shook his head in resignation at the loud exchange between the two men while Alicia let out a soft chuckle. Once again, she felt grateful to have someone as caring as Dreyfus as the district commissioner.



**SOON**, it was time for the evening ball.

The dance floor was bright, colored by the gorgeous dresses worn by the ladies. As a light waltz started out, the young men took their ladies’ hands and started dancing gracefully to the tune while the older gentlemen hummed or sang along.

Alicia, escorted by King James, was making her rounds and socializing with the guests.

The nobles of the Privy Council and merchants of Mercurius, who had worked closely with Alicia since she was just a child, greeted her cheerfully when she called on them. In contrast, the other guests who met her for the first time were often rendered speechless by the beauty of Heiland’s Blue Rose, giving nervous responses much to King James’s amusement.

By the time she’d finished greeting most of the guests and accepted a couple of dances, Alicia was exhausted. However, it would be unbecoming to show her tiredness in front of everyone, so she found a chance to slip outside to the

balcony for a breath of night air.

Alone, she leaned against the railing and watched as small lights floated across the darkness. The castle walls were too high for her to get a good view, but the townspeople must've been gathering by the Eram River to release their lanterns onto the water, a beloved tradition to celebrate the Star Festival.

Suddenly, a voice called out to her.

"Good evening, Princess Alicia. May I join you?"

She turned to see the Marquis of Rozen standing behind her, and she broke into a bright smile.

"Jude! Of course, please do."

The marquis returned her smile with his charming, dimpled one as he happily came to stand beside her. She noticed two thin champagne glasses in his hands, one of which he handed to Alicia, and the two clinked the glasses together in a toast.

"So, how were the festivities? Were they boring?" Alicia teased.

"Surprisingly, I enjoyed myself," Jude answered with a joyful smile. "It's been a while since my last public appearance, so it was interesting. The story about Heiland's founding was especially fun. The Mercurius merchants looked like they enjoyed themselves too."

Then he paused for a moment before raising a finger.

"But! This ball is another story. Almost makes me want to escape outside to join the Star Festival. You feel the same, don't you, since you're out here?"

"Amazing, you've read my mind perfectly." Alicia grinned.

"I'm not reading your mind. It's my businessman's intuition. Come, let me demonstrate it again," Jude said with a teasing wink. "When I called out to you just now, you turned around expecting to see someone else. Fufu, am I right? And would that someone happen to be *Clo*?"

Alicia's mouth dropped open, but the marquis's smile remained friendly in the faint darkness of night, his tone absent of any tinge of reproach.

She decided to be honest.

“I guess you’ve noticed, then.”

“That you admire Clo? I’ve always known that. To do business, one must be able to read the subtleties of the heart.” Jude laughed, giving his glass a light swirl. Then his gaze turned gentle as he looked at Alicia again. “That said, your long, unrequited love has now found its happy ending.”

“How did you know?!” she cried.

“Oh dear! You’ve been tricked into revealing it yourself! But that’s good! Congratulations!!”

Despite his words, no gloating was in Jude’s voice as he rejoiced. On the other hand, Alicia glared resentfully at Jude, upset that she’d let her guard down.

Noticing her disapproving look, Jude’s smile turned guilty.

“Please don’t be angry. I’m just so terribly glad you’ve chosen Clo, who has stayed by your side and supported you all this time, rather than some random prince.”

“...Fine, I’ll let it go, but you have to keep it a secret. Erdal is still keen on my betrothal to their crown prince, and father doesn’t know either.”

“Of course. What is identity?! What is status?! Aren’t we all born equal and free?!”

“Y-You’re too loud!”

Alicia quickly moved to calm the marquis, who had launched into a passionate speech with clenched fists, before anyone could see and think him a madman.

Having succeeded, Alicia fanned herself with a hand to cool down. Then, leaning against the railing again, she turned to the townscape glimmering beyond the castle walls with a nostalgic expression.

“Before... Oh, please keep this a secret from Clo. It’s terrible manners to share men’s talk with someone’s lover.” Jude was giving her a beseeching look. She gave a small nod. Relieved, he returned his gaze to the night sky as well. “There was one time when Clo got really drunk when he visited my mansion for a scheduled update about Mercurius. Maybe a few days after Your Highness’s

sixteenth birthday.”

So it happened less than a year ago, but this was the first time she’d heard of this “drunk” incident at Jude’s mansion. Clovis had always been a reserved drinker, and even though he wasn’t as strong as Robert, he’d always been good at holding his liquor.

According to Jude, he’d invited Clovis for an evening drink as usual, but the adviser had seemed unusual that day, swigging glass after glass of whiskey. Heartened by that, Jude had happily opened a new bottle, which Clovis quickly demolished, as well.

Jude, who had been enjoying himself as host and pouring drink after drink for his guest, didn’t notice anything amiss until Clovis passed out.

“Wait. Not to be rude, but what *were* you thinking?” Alicia interjected with a reproachful glare.

“Whoa. I’m sorry,” Jude hurriedly apologized. “I was in the wrong, but I didn’t think Clo was going to drink past his limits!”

He was right. She’d never known Clovis to do such a thing before, so she let it go for now.

Back to the story. Once Jude noticed Clovis’s strange behavior, he hurriedly made the man drink some water. When that didn’t work, he’d laid him down on the couch, where Clovis had slung an arm over his face as if aware that he’d done something stupid.

As host, Jude couldn’t leave his drunk guest and return to his rooms, so he stayed by Clovis’s side, gingerly sipping at his whiskey, and that was when Clovis spoke up.

“Clo started talking about Your Highness’s birthday party a few days before.”

“My birthday?”

“Yes. You made your society debut that night, too, I recall?”

Alicia nodded as Jude took a sip from his glass.

Since the banquet to celebrate Alicia’s sixteenth birthday was also her society debut, it was held on a larger scale than usual. It was the first time Heiland’s

Blue Rose Princess was presented to the eyes of the most esteemed members of society, royalty from neighboring countries, and the entire world.

“Clo described a particular scene that burned into his mind, and he just couldn’t forget.”

Music played by the wind orchestra echoed through the great hall.

A vermilion door opened, revealing a figure on the arm of the king.

Stepping forward slowly, her hair flowed behind her, glimmering with light...

“It occurred to me as I listened to him. Though Clo had always seen you as a little girl he had to protect, I think he realized at that moment that you were no longer that little girl.”

Joy and pain, happiness and suffering. Various emotions colored Clovis’s voice as he rambled on and finally fell asleep.

“That was another problem in itself. As Your Highness knows, my reception room feels fine during the day but can get cold at night. Somehow, I managed to pick Clo up and carry him to his room... But that’s not important.”

Abruptly, Jude cut his story short, and a soft smile graced his lips.

“What I’m trying to say is, please be happy. You have an identity and a status to maintain, which will bring a lot of trouble, but you’ve mustered up the courage to reach him. It’ll be such a waste if you let him go easily!”

Alicia lowered her head at Jude’s words. She’d been a coward for too long, hesitating and doubting until the last minute.

Even now, she was hesitant, but Clovis had put all her fears to rest and broke through the walls to reach her. He’d said they could stand up to anything together.

For a few moments, Jude watched the young princess closely. Suddenly, he snatched the glass from Alicia’s hands and gave her a shove on the back.

“Hey, aah?!”

“Just jump in! Isn’t that what you do best?”

Surprised, Alicia stumbled a few steps before regaining her balance. Turning

back, Jude was already on his way back inside. Giving her a wave, he smiled and repeated.

“Run! The wonderful night is just beginning.”

With that, the Marquis of Rozen disappeared into a crowd of dancers.

Alicia stood stunned for a few more moments. Then, she took a hesitant step forward. Then another. By the third step, she’d broken into a run, and there was no more hesitation in her actions.

She dashed on as if chasing after a festival from a day far away.

The guests swayed to the waltz, the ladies’ dresses fluttering like colorful flowers. Alicia, clad in light blue, weaved expertly between them.

Both of them had been reaching out like this again and again.

She could see him now, a tall figure past this crowd of people.

Him, with the hands, the voice, and the smile she loved.

“Clovis!!”

He turned around in surprise, her figure reflected in his clear violet gaze. Just like on the first day they met, she grabbed his right hand...and ran.

“Ah, Your Highness?!”

“Come!” Alicia shouted. “Come with me!”

Dashing through the crowd again, Alicia glanced over her shoulder to see a shocked Clovis, mouth open in surprise. Then he chuckled softly and gave her a simple grin straight from his heart.

“I’ll go,” he laughed. “I’ll go anywhere with you.”

The colors, the dazzling brilliance, the gorgeous melodies—everything receded into the background.

The pair made their way out of the great hall.



“**WHAT** should I do now...?”

It was nighttime, but the streets of Egdiel were overflowing with people. The



large plaza was lined with stalls, each with candles or lanterns hanging from their eaves, warding away the darkness with their quivering orange glow.

Hidden under a hooded cloak, Alicia whined. Next to her, Clovis tried his best not to laugh.

After leaving the great hall, the pair quickly changed into civilian clothes and ventured into town. Many well-dressed merchants were out and about because of the Star Festival, so their simple disguises would be enough to keep them anonymous.

Alicia clutched at her head.

“I’ll get yelled at for leaving the ball like that... Oh, but if only that were all. What if they grow suspicious of you, Clovis?”

Her anxiety grew the more she spoke, and her face lost all color. Clovis couldn’t hold his laughter in any longer. When Alicia glared at him in protest, he only smiled and spread his arms out.

“It’s too late to talk about all this. It’ll be okay as long as we’re honest. We’ll say that you suddenly thought of something and needed to act upon it, and you took your adviser with you. Nobody would bat an eye.”

“How can you speak so carelessly?!”

“I’m not being careless. I was giving your question a proper answer.”

“...Like an adviser.”

“I am an adviser but also your lover.” He quickly drew her into his arms. Looking up, Alicia felt a gentle finger caress her cheek. “That said, it’ll be troublesome if anyone starts talking. When we return, I’ll take all precautions, just in case. But now...” His voice dropped to a whisper, and Alicia was old enough to understand his meaning. Blushing, she grabbed the hand stroking her cheek.

“...I want to see the lanterns on the river and visit the stalls.”

“With pleasure,” Clovis answered with a smile. “So, shall we go?”

The two walked hand in hand through the streets, illuminated by lanterns. Even at night, colors filled the town from lights tinted with stained glass. If she

could see it from the sky, she was sure the land would look like a starry sky.

*On the night of the Star Festival. How apt.*

The crowd grew thicker as they approached the Eram River, and almost everyone held a lantern.

Stopping by a stall along the way, Clovis bought them a single lantern. The friendly-looking shopkeeper handed it to her, its crimson flame flickering through thin cloth. It was all so magical.

They continued towards the river. Soon, a large crowd was walking with them, all holding lanterns. It felt like everyone was moving together like a great river themselves.

Suddenly, Alicia had a thought. Wouldn't it be nice if she could melt into the crowd like this? She wouldn't be a princess, and Clovis wouldn't be her adviser. They would be ordinary people who met and fell in love, like the most natural thing in the world. If only they could have that.

But she quickly shook her head.

As someone who had died once, she had an entire future ahead of her this time. Looking back on the years she'd spent in this life, Clovis had always stood by her side.

A princess given a reprise on life, and her adviser. Their situation was unique, but this strange coincidence had led to the threads of their destinies weaving together.

Together, they counted to three and pushed the lantern onto the river. It swayed as it floated downstream before joining the others, illuminating the surface of the water. Soon, they lost sight of it, and Clovis breathed a soft sigh.

"May I kiss you?"

"Huh?"

She turned to see Clovis smiling gently at her.

"There is a legend that if lovers share a kiss on the night of the Star Festival, they will be bound in love for eternity."

“Do you believe in that, Clovis?”

It was so unlike her rational adviser, and as expected, he shook his head.

“If you’re asking if I think it’ll work, my answer is no. Miracles are born of human will. Every coincidence comes about because someone has willed it to be. Just like how you chose to take my hand instead of anyone else’s.”

“Then why...?”

“There’s no harm trying since it is one of your wishes. Any excuses?”

The lights of countless lanterns floating along the Eram River reflected in the swirling water, looking like fairies flitting about and playing on the surface.

“No excuses,” she said, the orange light reflecting on her face. “No reasons. I just want to touch you... And I want to kiss you.”

Clovis’s eyes widened in surprise, but Alicia did not see, unable to look at her lover as she lowered her burning face. Then, arms suddenly wrapped around her waist, picking her up.

Shocked, she wrapped her arms around Clovis’s neck for support. Unable to hide any longer, she faced her lover, who looked up at her as he let out a sigh.

“Oh dear,” he whispered in a quavering voice. “I won’t be able to hold back.”

“Then don’t. I am your lover, after all.”

Clovis tried to say something but decided against it. His handsome face twisted with what looked like frustration, and Alicia, who had always thought him too calm, felt a little proud.

Slowly, she bent down... And for the first time, she initiated the kiss.

Their silhouettes shaded the backdrop of the glittering water. Despite being connected by a strange coincidence, at that moment, they were like any other pair of lovers in the crowd.



**RETRACING** their steps, Alicia and Clovis left the Eram River.

If they returned to the castle too soon, they could run into a noble making their way home after the ball. Thus, the pair spent time visiting the stalls along

the street.

The first stall was one of many selling lanterns, while others boasted displays of accessories, just like a day market. Some sold mulled wine and snacks, the indescribable aroma whetting appetites and pulling in customers.

Walking around, a familiar voice called out from behind them.

“Is that Clo? And that’s...?!”

The youth hurriedly clapped a hand over his own mouth before he could utter Alicia’s name. However, his stunned expression had a smile bloom on her face.

“Ed! To think we’d meet here! Have you been well?” Alicia waved.

“Have I been well?! That’s not the point!!” the youth yelled back.

Edmund was the son of a glassmaker and had showed Alicia around the town when she first ventured out for an inspection tour.

Compared to his twelve-year-old self, Edmund was now much larger in size and worked as an apprentice at an artisanal workshop, following in his father’s footsteps. The two had kept in touch every time Alicia snuck out to Egdiel.

So as not to arouse the suspicions of passersby, Edmund hurried towards Alicia and whispered in her ear.

“Are you being serious? I know it’s the Star Festival, but for our princess to be wandering around in such a big crowd! It’s too dangerous!”

“It’s all fine. Nobody has recognized me so far.”

“Of course not! Who would be looking to see if the princess of Heiland is out and about on the streets like this?! Seriously, you’re all grown up now, but you’re still a tomboy inside...”

Suddenly, a hand landed on Alicia’s shoulder, pulling her away from Edmund. Casually pulling her back to his side, Clovis turned calmly to Edmund.

“Isn’t your father with you? I thought you mentioned that all the artisans in your workshop were planning to release lanterns together by the river during the festival?” Clovis questioned.

“We did that already. Everyone’s gone to the pub. I’m going to join them, but

I wanted to put this down at the workshop first.”

So saying, Edmund turned around to show them a heavy-looking bag swinging from his shoulder. According to him, various tools borrowed from a fellow artisan who also came to celebrate the Star Festival filled it.

Then Edmund remembered something. “That’s right. Do you guys have time? There’s something I want to show you, Clo.”

The pair looked at each other, then quickly agreed. Following Edmund as he weaved his way expertly through the crowd, they made their way towards a glassmaker’s workshop they’d once visited a long time ago.

That wasn’t the place Edmund wanted to show them, but a small store on the side of the building facing the street. The interior was packed with miscellaneous goods and ornaments in tight rows, making the room feel even smaller. However, the seemingly random display was actually tasteful and sort of resembled a wizard’s study.

Lighting a lantern, Edmund explained that the store dealt in small pieces and artisans’ pieces that were not selected to be sold by the merchants.

“What about the stall your mother used to have?” Alicia asked.

“Oh. That was set up to sell items made by us apprentices, as well as other reasonably nice pieces,” Edmund explained. “They weren’t good enough to be sold with our workshop’s seal of approval, but it would be a waste to throw them away.”

“I see. So I can buy Ed’s pieces if I go to the market?” Alicia asked with a smile.

“Oh, w-wait! Once I make something good, you guys will be the first to see it, but until then, you’re not allowed to see a thing!”

Slightly panicked, Edmund blocked the entrance to the back rooms of the workshop. Though Alicia was sure that his creations were back there and she wanted to see them, she decided to respect Edmund’s pride as an artisan and held back from insisting.

“So, what did you want to show Clovis?”

“Oh yes. I’m sure I left it somewhere...” Edmund muttered, rummaging

through the counter area. “Here it is!” With a relieved expression, he stood up with a long, narrow wooden box in his hands. “Clo once told me about an artisan who makes interesting things. Recently, I had the chance to meet him, and I bought some of his items for my store. Look!”

Edmund lifted the lid of the wooden box, and Alicia peered inside. An unexpected sight greeted her, and she gasped.

“Is that a kaleidoscope?”

“Huh?”

Clovis and Edmund stared at her, the former in confusion and the latter in admiration.

“So Alicia knows of it. I bet Clo must have told you. How else would you recognize a piece crafted by an old man living in the rural countryside?”

“But I didn’t...” Clovis’s voice trailed off as he looked at Alicia.

It occurred to her that she’d never told Clovis about the kaleidoscope that appeared in her previous life and her encounters with the messenger of the stars.

“Well... I’ve seen one before in the past,” she told a half lie. “Anyway, how do you know about the kaleidoscope, Clovis? Did they make these in your hometown?”

“An artisan by the name of Ford in my hometown of Kelth makes them,” he said. “The kaleidoscope is popular as a lucky charm, but unfortunately, there aren’t many people who can make them. Ford’s workshop is the only one left now.”

“Oh!”

The answer shocked Alicia.

Clovis once told her that House Cromwell was based in the small town of Kelth, on the outskirts of the Marquisate of Morris. However, she had no idea this was also the rural town that made kaleidoscopes.

Clovis still had a dubious expression. Kaleidoscopes were quite rare and were no longer in circulation.

Perhaps she should tell him later that she'd seen the item in her previous life? As Alicia fretted, Edmund laughed.

"No matter. This is for you, Clo."

"Huh? Wait, aren't you going to sell it?" Clovis asked in surprise, his attention shifting away from Alicia.

"True, but you were the one who told me about these, and I didn't just buy one. Besides, didn't you say they're lucky charms? There's no harm in keeping one to help protect your precious princess, right?"

"Then quote me a price. Let me pay for it, at least," Clovis insisted.

"How troublesome! I said it's for you, so take it. As a thank you for always buying my things. It's yours now; come on!"

Clovis gingerly took the kaleidoscope from Edmund. Alicia peered at it closely, seeing its wooden surface carved to resemble thorns interspersed with delicate roses. It looked so familiar. She'd seen it so many times in her dreams that she wouldn't mistake it.

This kaleidoscope was the same one she'd seen on the night of her death.

She'd been lying in a pool of blood, and it had rolled to a stop before her. She'd never paid it much attention since it didn't belong to her. Back then, she'd assumed someone had dropped it.

Clovis had led the revolutionary army into the Hall of Time. It wouldn't be surprising if he had been the one carrying the kaleidoscope in his pocket as a lucky charm.

"Clovis, that kaleidoscope..."

"Yes?"

Alicia jumped. She'd spoken out loud without meaning to, and Clovis was staring at her again, suspicion clear in his gaze.

That was bad.

She hadn't even told him he'd been in the castle when she died in her previous life, much less that he was the one who killed her.

“M-May I see it?”

Before that intelligent violet gaze could guess her intentions, Alicia reached for the kaleidoscope.

...The moment her fingers touched the wooden barrel, a strange feeling came over her.

A tremor arose in her heart, twisting and running like lightning from her head to her toes as if trying to drag out something lurking within. Her body screamed at her not to look, not to peek.

But as Alicia struggled, she couldn't stop herself from obeying the tremor.

Raising her hand, she brought the kaleidoscope to her eye.



**THE** world spun.

The shredded view changed as the pieces of mirrored glass inside shifted. A clear, high-pitched tinkling, like the brilliance of twinkling stars in the sky, accompanied each movement.

She felt it as the world spun around again that things had settled into the way they should.

Suddenly, she began to fall.

Numerous thin streaks of light flowed upwards from below, passing her as she fell. The streaks slowly increased in number. Alicia felt like she'd been swallowed by a meteor shower.

Before she knew it, she was standing on a hard marble floor. The cool air, the sounds of conflict echoing from far away, and the bronze statues staring coldly at her. It was all so familiar.

She was in the Hall of Time.

A shock ran through her chest as if something had hit it. Lowering her gaze, a dull sword stuck out of her body, and red blood spilled from the wound. Strangely enough, it didn't hurt. It felt like she was watching a scene happening in a distant world.



*"The Poisonous Rose of Ruin."*

The voice was familiar and unfamiliar at once. Following the tip of the blade, she looked up to see the Clovis from her previous life, and a sense of nostalgia washed over her.

*"Blinded by love, you have turned your back on the people, and this is the result. Repent for your sins in the afterlife."*

Lying on the cold marble, she calmly accepted his words. She watched as Clovis wiped the blood off his sword with the hem of his cloak with a somewhat pained expression.

But that look soon vanished as he turned to his men.

*"King Fritz is ahead. He's probably going to escape through the waterway. But the people won't rest until that plundering king is captured. After him! Hunt him down and end this rebellion!!"*

*"Yes!!"*

At Clovis's command, several men with swords rushed away. Soon, only one man was left standing beside Clovis. He was wearing a leather glove on his left hand.

*"Will you take the queen's head? It may convince the king to give up his escape."*

*"Do not touch her."*

Clovis's voice was hard without sparing a look at the other. The man shrugged.

*"Oi, oi. Shouldn't we kill without hesitation?"*

*"She was the last descendant of House Chester, blood of the king, and the people's supposed last hope... She shouldn't have died. Not here, and not like this."*

*"Yet you killed her. She was nobody's hope in the end. The Blue Rose Princess? How ironic now."*

The man's lip curled. Clovis did not respond, changing his grip on his sword

before stepping forward.

*“Let’s go. We cannot afford to be—?!”*

Clovis suddenly drew a breath, turning around with his sword ready. A loud clash of metal echoed.

The man had attacked Clovis. Alicia could only watch, dumbfounded, as Clovis cast a glance down the hall as their swords clashed again. She followed his gaze, and her eyes widened at the sight.

The men who had seemingly left the hall just now were emerging from behind the pillars. The others who turned back after hearing Clovis’s shout tried to ready their swords but were swiftly cut down, blood spurting as they fell.

What was happening?

Alicia couldn’t believe her eyes. Men lay on the floor, moaning in pain.

*“Why...?!”* Blocking another strike, Clovis screamed. *“Just what are you—”*

*“Because we aren’t Heillanders.”*

For the first time, an Erdalian accent colored the man’s voice.

No, Alicia wanted to scream, but her throat no longer worked, and she could only watch as a sword struck Clovis from behind.

Bright red blood spilled from his mouth as he fell to his knees, no longer able to support his own body. The man grabbed his hair, yet Clovis still had the energy to glare at him, desperately trying to focus through the pain.

The man drove his sword into his neck.

*“Start a riot and escort King Fritz safely back to Erdal. That is Lord Yggdrasil’s order... No hard feelings; I am just following orders.”*

Then he withdrew his sword.

Her vision was painted red.

She could only look at the fallen Clovis. His handsome face would look like he was sleeping if it wasn’t colored with the paleness of death. Something fell from his clothes and rolled towards her. It was the kaleidoscope.

Unable to speak, she looked at the item, then back at Clovis.

A single tear fell from her eye.

*Clovis. Clovis.*

She reached out desperately with a hand that wouldn't move.





Her vision blurred as tears streamed down her cheeks.

*Clovis. Clovis.*

Silently and cruelly, his crimson blood spread across the marble floor.

Even so, she continued to call out his name in her head.

He mustn't die. She wanted him to live. To smile. To call out to her.

*Clovis. Clovis. Clovis. Clovis...*

"Don't die!! CLOVIS!!!!!!!!!!"

"Alicia!!"



**ALICIA** jumped, her consciousness yanked back by the dignified voice sounding in her ear. Her hands reached out, clutching onto Clovis's clothes. A warmth enveloped her body, and Alicia knew she was in his arms.

Slowly opening her eyes, she saw Edmund standing to one side, his face pale.

"What happened...? You looked possessed... It's..."

"Alicia."

Clovis's voice drowned out Edmund's, and she pressed her ear against his chest, seeking proof that he was alive.

Tears flowed from her sky-blue eyes. The sight of his ghastly pale face, his lifeless limbs, and that sea of red spreading across the cold marble floor was burned into her mind. She couldn't unsee it.

Her lip trembled as she clung to him.

"Don't die, Clovis. I can't take it. I don't want you to die..."

"I'm right here... It's okay, Alicia. I'm right here with you."

His grip on her tightened. His words warmed her up, and her body, frozen with fear, slowly thawed.

He was alive. The truth finally clicked within her.

But the tears didn't stop. She trembled as she held back sobs but couldn't

stop. Clovis continued to hold her, but his eyes wavered with utter confusion.

...The kaleidoscope lay on the desk, forgotten.



A gentle breeze caressed her cheek.

Alicia opened her eyes to countless stars sparkling in a deep blue sky. She was standing alone on a hill, enveloped in complete silence under that endless starry sky. Looking up at it, she spoke.

“So you are unkind, after all. Unkind, cruel, terrible,” she uttered.

“That’s not fair. I’ve been hurt as well.”

The response came readily. Before she knew it, the messenger of the stars had appeared before her. He looked the same as when they’d met that distant night; his beauty was just as otherworldly. He looked at Alicia, his face grim, and spoke again.

“Why are you upset, Alicia? Is it because I failed to tell you that the revolution was part of Erdal’s plan? Or is it because I kept it a secret that all the revolutionaries, including Clovis Cromwell, also lost their lives that night?”

“...Both. But no, that’s not it. You—”

“It wasn’t something for me to tell.”

Alicia gulped, staring at the boy, who furrowed his brows apologetically.

“I have my limits. Tampering with time is a delicate matter. To erase everything that happened in your previous life, I had to break it into tiny pieces, each of which still holds on to its possibility.”

“But if I’d known that the Erdalian chancellor is our enemy—”

“What do you think would have happened?” the messenger retorted. “Would you have built stronger ties with Erdal? Would you have formed an alliance with Elizabeth much sooner?”

Alicia closed her mouth, unable to answer. He’d seen through her and knew all of her doubts.

“See? It wouldn’t have worked. Your suspicions would have created unrest

within Heilland, souring the relationship with Erdal. And when that happened, your enemy might no longer be Eric. It could very well be Elizabeth.” The messenger shrugged lightly. “Also, I hadn’t thought what happened to Clovis would have affected you so much. I know it sounds heartless, but if you had learned early on that he was also killed, your feelings for him now wouldn’t be so strong, would they?”

“Well...”

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of. You were a kind child, but you’d only just met him. Yet even I hadn’t predicted that the man who killed you in your previous life would become such an irreplaceable part of your life this time.”

She lowered her head, silent. The messenger was right. Her relationship with Clovis in this life was vastly different from the one they shared in the previous.

Unable to look up, she finally asked the question she feared the most.

“So if my reprise in life fails, he will die too?”

The boy stared at Alicia as she wrung her hands. After a long moment, he sighed quietly and shook his head.

“I don’t know. As I’ve said, all that’s left of the future are pieces of possibilities. As to what picture will form as all the players put the pieces back into place, I have no way of knowing, but...” His piercing gaze shot through Alicia. “As long as Heilland is in danger, many of those you hold dear will get hurt. Not just Clovis, but King James and his court, the townspeople and merchants, the Heillanders you want to protect—all of them. But your goal has to remain the same.”

Alicia looked up to see a single shining thread connecting her to the messenger.

“This is our pact. Save Heilland, Alicia. For the sake of all you hold dear.”

Claws dug into her, and pain shot through her body. Ignoring it, she closed her eyes in prayer as she let out a breath. When she next opened them, the fear wavering in them was gone, and she met the messenger’s eyes boldly.

“I understand. My goal remains the same. Even if I lose something along the



way, I will use this life to save the kingdom from destruction.”

The wind blew up the hill, pulling at Alicia’s hair as she closed her bright, sky-blue eyes. Above her dignified form, the painfully beautiful stars shone brightly.



**A** few days had passed since the Star Festival.

Princess Adviser Clovis woke up in his bed, shook his head a few times to clear the sleep from his mind, and got ready to head into the castle. Finishing the breakfast brought in by a maid, he was just about to leave his rooms when his eyes landed on the kaleidoscope on his desk.

It was Edmund’s gift to him when they’d met in town on the night of the Star Festival.

After some hesitation, he reached for the item and picked it up carefully. Turning it around in his hands, he raised it to his eye...but turned away at the last moment.

Returning it to his desk, he adjusted the tie around his neck and stood straighter. With a flip of his long robe, he was off to the advisory office.

Chief Adviser Nigel Otto and several of his colleagues were already there when Clovis arrived. The mood felt somewhat tense, and an ominous feeling assailed Clovis when Nigel stood at his arrival.

“What’s all this, Clovis? Why wasn’t I informed?”

“What...? What do you mean, sir?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Nigel asked, then pressed a hand to his forehead. “Honestly, she’s just impossible...”

Time stopped after the chief adviser’s next words.

“Her Highness has given her opinion to His Majesty this morning. As a show of friendship with Erdal, she would like to proceed with her betrothal to Crown Prince Fritz.”



**RAIN** drizzled from the dim, cloudy sky, wetting the glass windowpanes. Alicia

watched the droplets as a man arguing with a woman echoed in the distance.

Before long, her door opened, and footsteps hurried in.

“Please tell me what’s going on, Your Highness.”

“Lord Clovis, please wait! As close as you are to Her Highness, you cannot just barge in like that!!”

Ignoring Annie’s frantic calls behind him, Clovis stared at Alicia. The maid glared at the anxious and tense adviser, but there was also a look of confusion in her eyes.

Taking a deep breath, Alicia turned around as calmly as she could. She almost flinched as Clovis’s violet gaze bore into her, but she quickly swallowed her turmoil.

“It’s okay, Annie. I knew he would come. Could you leave us alone, please?”

“But Your Highness—”

“Leave us, please.”

Annie glared hard at Clovis, but logic won out in the end. The loyal adviser would not do anything to hurt Alicia. With a small bow, she retreated reluctantly.

The rain had gotten heavier, with the howling wind blowing the chilly rain against the window. Listening to the sounds, Alicia imagined an imaginary wall of rain separating her and Clovis.

“I’ve remembered something from my previous life,” she started. When Clovis failed to show any hint of surprise, she continued. “It happened when we visited Edmund’s workshop. In those memories, I understood that the revolution was planned by Erdal all along, with Chancellor Yggdrasil pulling the strings. After I died, Yggdrasil’s men attacked the revolutionaries and fled Heiland with King Fritz.”

“...I see,” was all her adviser offered in a low voice. “How does that explain your decision to marry Crown Prince Fritz?”

“It will be too risky to let him do as he pleases,” she explained, repeating the words she’d rehearsed in her head. “We don’t know if the crown prince and

chancellor planned the revolution together or if the chancellor took advantage of a situation that Fritz's oppression created. If the former is true, simply ousting Yggdrasil from the Senate will not eliminate all threats to Heilland."

Once Riddhe had gathered the evidence, they could expose the chancellor as the mastermind and have him removed from the political playing field. However, the same could not be done for Crown Prince Fritz, heir to Erdal's throne. In fact, they had no clue as to what his true motives and ambitions were.

If he had been a pawn, then the revolution would have caught him by surprise. Even so, Alicia couldn't trust him completely. So, she had decided to keep him close so she could anticipate any moves.

Despite hearing her explanations, Clovis remained tense. In fact, his manner grew more upset the more she spoke.

"Keep him close? Do you really think that will work? First, he is the heir to Erdal's throne. Neither the Privy Council nor our people will welcome him with open arms."

"I will make sure Father appoints me as Heilland's heir before our marriage. With all doubts about the line of succession cleared, the people should be more willing to accept His Highness."

"And what about Miss Charlotte? No one will accept him keeping her around as his mistress."

"Unfortunately, once Chancellor Yggdrasil loses his position of power, Charlotte will no longer have any right to be with His Highness. Besides, Empress Elizabeth would not approve. I'll make him give her up, even if it makes him hate me."

"But there must be something else we can do. We've gone to such lengths to gain the empress's favor. Surely we can keep an eye on the crown prince from afar and continue working to strengthen our ties with Erdal—"

"But if it doesn't work, then people will die!"

A painful silence filled the room.

The rain tapping against the glass now grated on her ears.

“I’ve made up my mind,” she said again, fighting to keep the quiver from her voice. “I was given a second chance in life to save this kingdom. I cannot fail in that duty. If need be, I’ll even...”

“You’ll even give me up. Is that what you want to say?”

Seeing the shock on her face, Clovis quickly averted his eyes with an apology. He paced the room as if searching for the right words.

Finally, he came to a stop, looking at her with suspicion in his eyes.

“...I’d just like to know one thing. There were two occasions when the sight of me terrified you. Once, when you collapsed in the Hall of Time. Second, in the moment when we first met. At first, I thought you were upset by memories of what my grandfather, Zach Graham, had done. But you didn’t know about any of that until Riddhe told you. So, what were you terrified of? What made you look at me like you would a ghost?”

Coldness crept into Alicia’s limbs. She didn’t want to hear more, but as she sat stunned, the words came.

“I was the one who killed you in your previous life. Am I right?”

Rain slid down the windowpane, casting wavering shadows onto the floor. Through the roar of the downpour, Clovis’s tense sigh echoed loudly through the room.

It was the worst.

She knew how much pain and suffering the truth would cause him, but how could she comfort him now when she needed to push him away...? How cruel she had to be to have to confirm the truth.

“Yes,” she answered hoarsely. “I died by your sword in my previous life, Clovis Cromwell.”

Clovis groaned, his voice squeezed out in agony as he closed his eyes as if in physical pain. After an eternity of silence, he let out a long, deep breath, releasing the tension from his shoulders.

When he next looked at her, she could no longer see herself reflected in his

violet gaze.

“I understand,” he whispered tiredly. “I have business in the Marquisate of Rozen today, and you have to prepare for your inspection tour of Sheraford tomorrow. Let us carry out our respective duties and reconvene hereafter to discuss how we should proceed with Erdal.”

“...I’d like Nigel to be in charge of that.”

“No, I will do it.”

Clovis’s tone left no room for argument, and Alicia swallowed her words.

“I am still your adviser,” he added with a sad smile. “Please don’t take that from me.”

The heavy rain and howling winds sounded so sorrowful that it broke her heart. Clovis bowed and quietly left the room, the click of the shutting door resounding loudly.

Left alone, Alicia stared up at the ceiling, then turned to look out the window.

*Goodbye.*

The unspoken words fell to the ground with her tears.

Everything changed when news carried by an Erdalian envoy arrived a few days later.

### 3. What Will This Hand Choose?

**THE** day after her confrontation with Clovis, Alicia visited Sheraford to check the region's border defenses. Usually, Clovis would have accompanied her on such a trip, but since he had a prior arrangement with the Marquis of Rozen to check on the quality of porcelain to be shown to Erdal's Ist Company, she went without him.

In his stead, Chief Adviser Nigel, together with the commander of the knights of the Imperial Guard and adviser to the southern knight division, Robert, were with her. Nigel and Alicia seldom traveled together, but since national defense was an important issue, it was natural that the king's right-hand man would want to make the trip himself.

Once in Sheraford, District Commissioner Dan Dreyfus and Acting Branch Chief Daniel Sutherland joined them. They made an impressive group for an impromptu visit, but it also showed how important Riddhe's letter was.

The inspection proceeded smoothly. In the past six years, the forces guarding the border had shaped up well under Riddhe's leadership, and they had plenty of stockpiles of food and items in case of emergencies. The group quickly determined that the troops here were ready to be mobilized immediately should anything happen.

If Chancellor Yggdrasil was really the mastermind behind everything, then it was essential for border defenses to remain extra vigilant. A meeting was held with Robert and the commander of the southern knight division to discuss the details, and it was then that a knight guarding the checkpoint into Erdal came rushing in.

Envoys from Erdal had arrived at the border, bearing the message that Riddhe Sutherland had been imprisoned as a traitor.



**A** while back...

When Egdiel Castle had been busy preparing for the Star Festival, Riddhe Sutherland, sent as a special ambassador to Erdal, began his investigation from his base of operations at Foreign Minister Crowne's mansion. Of course, he couldn't go around asking questions, so he had to gather clues in secret.

"If only my arrival had upset the mastermind and made him send an assassin. Things would've progressed much quicker that way," Riddhe grumbled as he got dressed for the day.

"I'd much rather not have such trouble," Albert, a servant serving House Sutherland, replied. "I wouldn't know how to answer to everyone back home if anything were to happen to you, Master."

Albert was the only servant Riddhe brought with him to Erdal. It was a recognition of Albert's efforts during the investigation into Loid's case and because he was an important witness who knew the situation intimately.

Officially, Empress Elizabeth was the only one who knew Riddhe's true purpose in Erdal, though others might have guessed as much. Either way, Albert was the only one Riddhe could speak openly and honestly with.

Albert sighed. Perhaps he understood the sentiment behind Riddhe's words. "Her Highness Princess Alicia might have gotten us in, but our hands are still tied. We can't even be sure if we can trust Foreign Minister Crowne."

"Humph. If the foreign minister is the mastermind, he won't attack us in his own mansion. Our enemy knows that the empress and Princess Alicia have joined forces, so they won't do anything dumb to raise suspicion."

"...Then, the man with the scarred left hand. You're starting the investigation from there, aren't you, Master Riddhe?"

"Of course. That's why I brought you along." Grabbing the decorative cane that once belonged to his father, Riddhe smiled and stepped outside. "Come on, Al!"

The man with the scarred left hand... That was the Erdalian informant who visited the Sutherland mansion in secret to collude with Loid. When Loid was assassinated, the informant had made himself scarce. Even now, nobody knew where he'd gone.

According to the servants who had seen the man, he always wore a leather glove on his left hand, even indoors. Albert came to know the reason by accident. Once, the man spilled his tea and had to remove the glove. A large burn mark scarred the skin beneath.

Now, the scar was their only clue to track down the man. Loid's assassin did not have it, which meant he was probably still alive somewhere. Even if they couldn't catch him, they might be able to gather information that could lead them to discover who sent him.

With that in mind, Riddhe listed several companies as places he'd like to visit on inspection.

The Sutherland servants had shared that the spy had first come to the mansion under the guise of a merchant. It was only after several visits that they noticed something felt off and concluded the man was actually a secret informant.

Unfortunately, no one remembered the exact name of the company the informant had used, though they knew it was an Erdalian one. If the man had used the company name as part of his disguise, there was a chance that a connection was there.

Thus, Riddhe used his position as Branch Chief of Sheraford to investigate several large Erdalian companies that traded extensively at the land trading post of Viola. There, he contacted a merchant whom the Marquis of Rozen had said was trustworthy and started asking after the man with the scarred hand.

However, the incident had occurred six years ago. It wasn't easy finding a man who didn't wish to be found. Even now, as Riddhe and Albert made rounds visiting companies, they had yet to discover any useful information.

Empty-handed, Riddhe headed to Kingsley Castle on foot. In order to maintain the image that Alicia and Empress Elizabeth, and by extension, Heiland and Erdal, were working closely together, he had to be seen visiting the castle frequently.

*The mastermind is part of the Senate? That makes it hard to suss him out...* Deep in thought, Riddhe frowned as he walked down a hallway.



A red-haired girl caught his eye, making him stop in surprise. He recognized her as Charlotte, Chancellor Yggdrasil's daughter.

Riddhe had met Charlotte on his first day in Erdal since the girl had to visit the Crowne mansion as Lady Crowne's apprentice. When it was decided that the Crownes would host Riddhe, Charlotte had moved back to her own home, but he often saw her and Beatrix together in the salon.

Charlotte wasn't alone. She was sitting next to someone who looked like a commoner.

The man wasn't unkempt and was, in fact, dressed in clothes of decent quality, but an undignified air about him hinted that he wasn't of the status to be a regular visitor at the castle. Riddhe could see that he was well-built from his rolled-up sleeves and open shirt. His hair was tied back in a messy style, and Riddhe could tell that this was how the man usually looked.

As if sensing Riddhe's stare, Charlotte turned and stood up quickly, rushing over to the pair.

"Lord Riddhe! And Mister Albert, too!" She greeted them, gathering her skirts in a curtsy.

"Good day, Miss Charlotte"," Riddhe responded with grace. "You look lovely today, as always..."

"What brings you here today, Lord Riddhe? I heard from Father that you are very busy. I hope you are not too tired?"

"Of course not," Riddhe smiled. "In fact, I've never felt more alive. After all, I've been blessed with the chance to inspect this empire twice. And I'm glad to see you doing well, Miss Charlotte. Her Highness Princess Alicia mentioned she was worried about you when she left Erdal."

Riddhe kept his answers simple and vague, not because of Charlotte but her father, Chancellor Yggdrasil. Since he was a member of the Senate, it wouldn't do to provide him with any more information than absolutely necessary.

However, Charlotte herself was also full of mysteries. According to Alicia, her attitude towards the princess had suddenly become tinged with guilt halfway through her time in Erdal. In fact, Charlotte's expression clouded over

immediately upon the mention of Alicia's name.

*Maybe she's worthy of investigation, too.*

With that thought, Riddhe looked over her shoulder casually. "Oh, and is that your friend? I'm not sure we've met."

"I'm sorry. I should have introduced you earlier," Charlotte said. "Lord Riddhe, this is Barnabas McGregor, vice chairman of the Ist Company."

"You must be Lord Riddhe Sutherland of Heilland. It's an honor to meet you," Barnabas said.

"Call me Riddhe. The honor is mine, Mister Barnabas."

The pair shook hands, and Riddhe glanced at Albert, who gave a small nod to show he recognized the name.

Barnabas McGregor of the Ist Company. The Marquis of Rozen had listed him as one of the merchants they could trust.

In truth, Riddhe had not thought about making contact with Barnabas. Ist was a major company backed by the empress and based in Sampston, meaning they traded mostly by sea. As such, they seldom did business at Viola, a land trading post, so Riddhe assumed that Barnabas wouldn't have known his father.

Despite that, it was a stroke of luck to meet him so easily here.

"I've heard about you from Jude," Riddhe said. "He describes you as an excellent merchant with very sharp intuition."

"Lord Jude himself is an interesting one, very unlike a nobleman," Barnabas chuckled.

Taking advantage of the easy mood, Riddhe sat down with them. Albert, of course, stood attentively nearby.

"You must have friends everywhere because of your father's position, Miss Charlotte," Riddhe remarked. "Who knew you'd be acquainted with the top brass from the famous Ist Company?"

"Oh, that's not true," she denied. "It was only because of fate that I met Barnabas."

“Fate?”

Riddhe tilted his head. From his appearance, he guessed that Barnabas would be older than himself, probably in his early thirties. It wasn't strange that the chancellor's daughter and the vice president of Ist were acquaintances, but to say fate brought them together?

Barnabas smiled, probably sensing Riddhe's suspicion. His teeth gleamed white against his tanned skin. “She doesn't mean anything strange,” he assured. “We're just from the same orphanage.”

“Yes, though we weren't there at the same time,” Charlotte added with a nostalgic smile.

According to Charlotte, they were both from the Golton orphanage in Yeats, which Riddhe visited during his time with the inspection squad. Barnabas, with his caring nature and position as leader of the other children, had caught Eric Yggdrasil's eye, and the chancellor had helped him land a job at Ist.

In addition to his natural leadership skills, Barnabas had studied voraciously, blooming into a talented merchant and rising through the ranks. He'd never forgotten the debt he owed the chancellor for giving him an opportunity, and he often visited the Yggdrasil mansion.

There, he'd met recently adopted Charlotte and felt the need to watch over his fellow orphan from Golton.

“So Barnabas is like an elder brother to me,” Charlotte concluded.

“Glad to hear that,” Barnabas returned. “And you'll always be my little sister to look after.”

“Wow.”

Riddhe watched the pair smile at each other. It was clear from Charlotte's demeanor that she trusted Barnabas deeply, and Barnabas's gaze was also filled with warmth as he looked at Charlotte, though he seemed more like a father than a brother. Riddhe crafted the perfect smile.

*Let's dig a little deeper.*

“Looking at you two, it seems Lord Yggdrasil made the right call,” he said. “He

must be a genius at seeing people's true natures."

"You're absolutely right," Barnabas nodded. "I'm where I am today, all thanks to him. No one is more fair or merciful than Lord Yggdrasil."

"I see. Merciful, huh?" Riddhe repeated.

"He's a wonderful man," Barnabas continued. "Lord Yggdrasil cares about everyone, not just for orphans like Charlotte but for merchants and knights too. Even though I don't understand him at times..."

Suddenly, Barnabas stopped, but before Riddhe could wonder why, he started the conversation again but with a different topic.

"Speaking of benefactors, it was truly unfortunate what happened with your father, Lord Loid."

"Did you know my father?" Riddhe asked.

"Yes. I met the Duke of Sheraford once when Ist was considering expanding trade through Viola."

"What?! You're saying that Ist had dealings with Father...?" Riddhe had a hard time hiding his surprise.

"Yes," Barnabas confirmed with nostalgia. "That said, it wasn't a formal meeting. A merchant close to the former duke invited me once to have a luncheon together. That was a long time ago, almost ten years now. The duke was strict and unforgiving, but he definitely held himself to those same high standards."

Ten years ago. That was when Riddhe, as heir to House Sutherland, started assisting Loid in managing their territory. He briefly wondered if he'd been present at that luncheon but quickly gave up on searching his memory.

Raised since his youth as the heir of House Sutherland, Riddhe had been desperate to learn new things once he'd been given the chance to help his father. As one of the most powerful families in Heiland, tons of people, including nobles and merchants, came to their mansion to see the Duke of Sheraford. It would be impossible for Riddhe to remember all of them.

No matter. He'd uncovered an important connection between Ist and Loid.

According to his family servants, the man with the scarred left hand had first disguised himself as a merchant when visiting the mansion. If Ist had been in contact with his father, there was a chance that the secret informant had used Ist's name.

"I wonder if he's from Ist..." Riddhe murmured casually as he placed a hand on his chin in thought.

His words piqued the attention of the pair.

"Do you know someone from Ist, Lord Riddhe?" Charlotte asked.

"Please do share," Barnabas added.

"Oh, I don't know his name. I mean, it happened so long ago, and I didn't meet him personally, but my family's servants often mentioned how Father was indebted to this man," Riddhe said with an easy shrug. "All I know is...he had a large burn scar on his left hand?"

"Huh?"

*Bingo!*

However, the recognition came not from Barnabas but from Charlotte. Riddhe was surprised.

"Does that remind you of someone, Miss Charlotte?" he probed.

"Y-Yes," she stammered. "Someone from Ist with a burn scar on his hand must be—"

"Charlotte," Barnabas's tone was quiet but full of warning.

Charlotte shut her lips in a tight line, looking worriedly between the two men. Barnabas's friendly attitude was gone as he watched Riddhe cautiously.

"Lord Riddhe, are you here in Erdal to look for that man?" he asked.

"Look for him? Of course not; he's just someone I remember from the old days..." Riddhe said, keeping his tone casual.

"...I see. That's fine, then." Barnabas's face relaxed as he sighed, then stood up. "I need to go. That old man may be looking for me. See you soon, Charlotte. I look forward to speaking with you again, Lord Riddhe."

“Mister Barnabas?” Riddhe also stood, pretending to be confused while reminding himself to stay calm. He’d never possessed much patience, but Barnabas was hiding something, and now wasn’t the best time to press him. So he chose to stretch out a hand. “We’ve finally had a chance to meet; it’s a shame you have to go... Where can I go to find you?”

“...I’ll be at the Kingsley trading post for the next two weeks, and I’ll come to visit her too,” Barnabas shared with some reluctance, glancing towards Charlotte. After a moment, he continued, “About the man. If we’re talking about the same person, he’s no longer with us. Even if you are interested, I have nothing to tell you. When one is already dead, no one can know the real truth.”

With these words of frustration, Barnabas turned and left, leaving a shocked Riddhe and an upset Charlotte.

“Barnabas must still be upset about what happened with Adam...”

“Hmm?” Riddhe turned to the girl.

Startled, Charlotte clapped a hand over her mouth as if wishing to take back her words. She must have remembered how Barnabas had warned her against speaking about it. Riddhe’s shoulders slumped. It would be nearly impossible to get any information from her now.

Just then, Albert, who had been silent the entire time, spoke up. “Is Adam that man’s name?”

“Y-Yes. That’s right.”

Charlotte blinked in surprise as if she’d just noticed Albert’s presence. It was expected. In addition to being an excellent servant loyal to House Sutherland, Albert was the only one who had won over even Riddhe. He’d always been good at being invisible, staying silent by Riddhe’s side.

Besides, for better or for worse, the dignity and pride of being a noble bound Riddhe. Albert, being a mere servant, was better at coaxing others to let down their guard. Riddhe huffed a little in annoyance while Albert frowned at Charlotte in concern.

“Were they close? Mister Barnabas looked very upset; we hope we didn’t

offend him..." Albert said worriedly.

"No! I mean, they were very close, but Barnabas wasn't angry! It's just..." After a pause, Charlotte made up her mind about something. Looking in the direction where Barnabas left, she continued, "Actually, Adam was Barnabas's close friend. They both grew up in the Golton orphanage, and Father selected them to join Ist. Then one day, Adam quit Ist and disappeared."

"Quit? Why?"

"I don't know. Apparently, he disappeared without telling anyone, leaving only a note."

Then, several years later, while Barnabas had gained the favor of Dudley Hopkins and was rising through the ranks of the company, Adam's body was discovered in the woods near the Western Castle one early evening.



**ADAM** Fisher. Male, estimated 26 years old.

*Body found in woods near Dansk Fortress.*

*Cause of death: Possible poisoning.*

*Poisoning.* Riddhe couldn't help but frown at the word.

After obtaining special permission from Empress Elizabeth, he'd entered the royal archives, where he'd accessed the security records of the Kingsley area kept by the Royal Capital Guard.

The records confirmed his worst suspicions. There was also a brief summary of witness testimonies and the circumstances in which the body was found. The only other useful piece of information was that Adam had been in Egdiel a few days before he was discovered dead.

Riddhe frowned in thought. There was a chance that the man with the scarred hand was not Adam Fisher, but the circumstances surrounding him were still too suspicious.

First, Adam died just days after Loid was assassinated six years ago. While that might have been a coincidence, if Charlotte's words were to be trusted, Adam had left Ist Company and disappeared just a year prior to when the man

with the scarred hand had first visited the Sutherland mansion.

Now, the cause of Adam's death. Did he ingest the poison himself, or was it given to him? Either option was a cause for concern.

If Adam was the scarred man, he'd traveled to Heiland of his own accord after he left Ist, then contacted Loid. Then he spent the next few years as an informant. When the plot was uncovered, he'd fled back to Erdal but could have been silenced just like Loid.

*...That mastermind is truly repulsive.*

Anger bubbled up inside Riddhe as his grip tightened on the documents. He held no sympathy for the cowardly informant who colluded with his father but had pure rage for the mastermind who killed without hesitation just to keep himself safe.

Riddhe shook his head to clear it. It was dangerous to assume the scarred man was Adam without definitive proof. He had to lay low for a little longer.

"Hey. Do you have more records on this incident?" He called out to the old archivist standing nearby.

"What?"

The old man's gaze was unmoving as he stared at Riddhe. His hunched back made him appear short, but his eyes still held a certain imposing aura. Riddhe stayed clear of the man as he shuffled closer to peer at the documents, his nose almost touching the paper.

Empress Elizabeth had mentioned that the archivist had been dedicated to his job for almost seventy years and knew most of the information here like the back of his hand. Despite the warning, Riddhe was still startled when the old man emerged from the dark depths of the archive rooms like an angry imp crawling out of its cave.

The old man lifted his face from the records, his nose scrunched in disgust. "Nothing. I told you, there's no more. I thought I'd seen the last of you lot, but here you are again..."

"What? So you're saying there's been others interested in this case?" Riddhe



asked.

“Of course. That persistent lad.” The old man frowned and shook his head as if the memory alone disgusted him, all while mumbling, “It’s been six years already” and “He’s obsessed, I tell you...” under his breath. Riddhe was shocked.

“Are you referring to Barnabas McGregor?”

“Don’t know his name. Don’t care what it is.”

“He’s a merchant from Ist. Tanned and looks like a sailor.”

“Yes, yes. That’s him,” the archivist grumbled as if the memory annoyed him. “Had no permit but demanded to see the records, and once he knew I wouldn’t give in, he tried to get me to talk...”

Riddhe nodded. So Barnabas had doubts about Adam’s death as well, which meant that it definitely happened under unusual circumstances.

Satisfied that he’d gotten as much information as he could, Riddhe returned the records to the archivist and left the room. Pushing the heavy iron door open, he left the stink of old, damp paper behind for much-needed fresh air. Taking a quiet breather, he passed by the guards on duty and stepped outside.

“Al! There you are,” he said.

“Oh... Master!!” Albert, who had been waiting fearfully next to a towering knight, lit up in relief at the sight of his master. Quickly, he fell into step behind Riddhe. “You came out quicker than expected. I thought you would take much longer, seeing how big the archive rooms are.”

“That’s because of the archivist. Without him, I probably would have been trapped in the labyrinth of records and become part of the collection of musty papers.”

“I’m grateful for him, then. By the way, you seem to be in a good mood, Master Riddhe.”

“Oh, you can tell? Well, I am in a very good mood. It’s nice to be making progress, especially with all the waiting I’ve had to do lately.” Then Riddhe’s expression darkened. “Next is the Ist trading post. It’s about time I talk to Barnabas.”

“In that case, we should head to Kingsley Castle instead, Master.”

“Why?”

Riddhe stopped in his tracks and turned to Albert with a doubtful look. The servant answered with pride.

“I spoke to Lady Crowne this morning. Barnabas will visit the castle today with Ist’s exclusive fashion designer to take measurements for dresses for Empress Elizabeth’s twin princesses, Her Highnesses Laurencia and Liliana.”

“That’s very useful. Good work, Al.”

“Just doing my best.”

Albert scratched at his cheek, embarrassed by the praise from his master. Despite his humility, Riddhe had known Albert long enough to know his servant had been working hard to gather information, knowing that Riddhe would wish to speak with Barnabas soon.

Albert could probably see through him in the same way, too. Clearing his throat, he gestured to the carriage waiting outside. “Let us get a move on, Master Riddhe. We don’t have all day.”



“**LORD** Riddhe will escort Lili, right?”

“Lord Riddhe will escort Lala, right?”

Liliana and Laurencia, the twin princesses of Erdal, huffed and glared at each other as they clung onto each of Riddhe’s arms.

After leaving the royal archives, Riddhe and Albert had ridden fast to Kingsley Castle, hoping to catch Barnabas, who would be there with the fashion designer.

That said, it would be rude to interrupt them while they were serving the royals. To get around that, Riddhe had sent word to Lady Crowne, and sure enough, a reply soon came with an invitation for him to join the group in the drawing room.

And that was how this situation arose.

“Lord Riddhe is to dance with Lili!”

“Lord Riddhe is to dance with Lala!”

“Your Highnesses, please don’t fight...”

With his right arm captured by Liliana and his left by Laurencia, Riddhe was at a loss. His former upbringing as a duke’s heir had not included details on how to handle such a situation. Looking to his servant for help, he saw Albert’s shoulders shaking as he tried to hold in his laughter.

*Just you wait, Albert...*

“Your Highnesses, you’re putting Lord Riddhe in a tough spot,” Beatrix coaxed gently. “You should be more gracious when responding to an invitation from a gentleman.”

“Besides, you little ladies are still too young to need an escort!” Ist’s designer came to Riddhe’s rescue and clapped his hands. “Come, now! I still need to take your measurements!”

With a reluctant “All right,” the princesses let go of Riddhe and raced over to the designer.

Beatrix smiled as Riddhe drooped in relief and sank onto a sofa. “My apologies, Lord Riddhe. It’s rare for the princesses to meet a young gentleman like you, and it seems you’ve captured their hearts.”

“Oh, no. I should be apologizing for interrupting your session with the designer,” he said.

“It’s all fine. It was a good chance for you to meet the princesses. By the way, what are your plans after this? If you don’t mind, would you like to join us for tea?”

“It’ll be my pleasure. Could I wait while the measurements are taken, if you don’t mind?”

“Of course. We’ve already chosen the fabrics, so it shouldn’t take long.”

Happily, Beatrix called out to a maid waiting nearby to prepare the courtyard for teatime, then followed the princesses into the adjoining room. Once the door was shut, Riddhe turned towards the other man in the room.

“What a coincidence, Mister Barnabas. I didn’t expect to see you two days in a row,” he said with a grin.

“It is a coincidence, indeed.”

Barnabas McGregor’s voice was half surprised, half resigned. He’d probably already guessed the real reason for Riddhe and Albert’s appearance.

So Riddhe decided to get down to business.

“I got the archivist to show me the documents related to Adam Fisher, so let’s get straight to the point. It’s been six years, Mister Barnabas; why are you still investigating the incident? Why did Adam die?”

“The archives? Did you see the records there?” Barnabas bolted up, overwhelmed with emotion, but Riddhe smiled calmly. Soon, Barnabas realized that the other man wasn’t going to talk yet. “...I’ve told you before. It’s no use seeking the truth from the dead.”

“Let me be the one to decide if it’s of use or not,” Riddhe said.

“Are you here to speak to me as an ambassador of Heilland?”

“You may think of it that way, yes. Either way, rest assured that whatever you say will remain top secret.”

Silence fell between them. Then Barnabas sighed.

“I’ve not found much evidence in the past six years. It’s just that he was acting strangely the last time we met. That’s why I felt that he must have gotten mixed up in some kind of trouble.”

“You met him right before his death?”

“Yes. We happened to run into each other in Kingsley the night before his body was found in the woods.”

Slowly, Barnabas recounted the events of that night.



**THAT** day, six years ago, Barnabas came to the royal capital of Kingsley to visit the Yggdrasil mansion. Back then, he was an up-and-coming merchant working under Ist President Hopkins and frequently traveled the world. In his spare

time, it was his custom to visit the chancellor's family and spend time with young Charlotte and her older brothers.

The doors of Yggdrasil mansion were always open to Barnabas, and he was often invited to stay the night. Though he accepted on occasion, he didn't want to impose and often spent the night at Ist's dorms instead.

That night was no different. After having dinner at the Yggdrasil's, he was walking through Kingsley on his way back to the dorms. On the way, he spotted a lone traveler crouching in the dark.

Thinking him a drunk or homeless, Barnabas tried to move past him but stopped when the man called out.

"...Barnabas, is that you?"

"...Adam? Are you really Adam?!"

Shocked, Barnabas peered closer to see that the man was, indeed, Adam Fisher, his long-lost best friend who had disappeared from Ist a while back. There were so many questions he wanted to ask, but seeing Adam suffering with fatigue and hunger, he'd supported the man to a bar nearby.

*Why had he disappeared without a word? And why are his clothes all torn, as if he'd just escaped from somewhere?* Barnabas wondered as Adam ate his fill. They hadn't seen each other in a while; just what had happened to Adam during this time?

"Where have you been, and what have you been up to?" Barnabas asked. "You abandoned your debt and left Ist, so why are you back now, looking like the dead?"

"...Sorry, Barnabas, but I can't tell you."

"No? I guess not. You disappeared after leaving behind a simple letter. Lord Yggdrasil and myself have been searching all over for you to no avail."

Barnabas hadn't wanted to bother Yggdrasil with the personal matter of his missing best friend, but the chancellor had shown concern about Adam himself, and the two had each tried to locate Adam. Even so, they hadn't succeeded, meaning Adam had thoroughly covered his tracks.

And now Adam wouldn't talk.

Didn't want Barnabas to ask about the past few years.

But Barnabas insisted.

In response, all Adam kept saying was that he had failed.

"I failed. I screwed up. He must be disappointed. I'm sure he's given up on me..." Adam murmured with a dry, hopeless smile before gulping down his alcohol as if punishing himself for something.

Despite not knowing anything, Barnabas tried to comfort his friend.

"What's a little failure? Remember our time back in Ist? It won't be easy, but rather than let it go to waste, you should try your best to regain that lost trust."

Barnabas could sense the emptiness of his own words, yet Adam seemed encouraged as he narrowed his eyes in nostalgia and laughed.

"I'm not joking," Barnabas complained.

"I know, but it's funny how you've not changed at all."

After that, the pair drank together, just like in the old days. As Adam slowly came back to himself, they joked about their time back at Ist as they shared drinks happily.

Soon, it was late at night. In a good mood, Barnabas brought Adam back to the dorms and booked another room for him. Pushing his drunk friend inside, Barnabas left with a final word before staggering back to his own room.

"Listen up. You're coming with me to see Lord Yggdrasil tomorrow. He's been worried about you, too. I know you screwed up, but don't run away again."

He wasn't sure if Adam heard him, but he did wave weakly at Barnabas, where he lay collapsed on the bed. Exhausted, Barnabas waved back and shut the door.

And that was the last time he'd seen Adam alive.



"**THE** next morning, the room was empty, and he was gone," Barnabas concluded.

“So he’d disappeared again?” Riddhe asked.

“...I guess that’s what happened,” Barnabas mumbled with a frown. Riddhe tilted his head and waited for the man to continue. “Well, the next time I saw him, he was a corpse. No one at the dorms had seen him leave... I can’t help but wonder what happened after I returned to my room.”

According to Barnabas, Adam’s dead body was discovered in the woods that evening.

The time of discovery was in the records made by the Royal Capital Guard. The military dog of a soldier on patrol had kicked up a fuss, prompting the soldier to venture off his usual route, which led to the discovery.

The door to the adjoining room was still closed, blocking the chatter and bickering of the princesses. The drawing room felt strangely quiet and cold.

“Lord Riddhe, if you are investigating Adam’s case, please tell me,” Barnabas pleaded, the regret of six years without an answer plaguing him. “Who is that person Adam was referring to? And why did he kill him?”



**AFTER** a small tea party in the castle courtyard, Riddhe and Albert bid goodbye to Beatrix and the princesses before taking their leave.

The twin princesses, who seemed to have taken a great liking to Riddhe, waved innocently as they left. Walking away, Riddhe whispered to Albert, who was following him.

“What do you think, Al? I’m thinking the man with the scarred hand is Adam Fisher.”

“I agree, Master,” Albert whispered back. “The time of his death and his condition before that all match. Most importantly, he mentioned ‘failing’... He could be referring to what happened to Master Loid.”

“Probably. In that case, the person he was referring to must be the mastermind... We’re finally getting close to that despicable man.”

Things were falling into place. The mastermind was a high-ranking official in the Erdalian Senate. Among those, only a few would know about and recruit

someone like Adam Fisher, a nameless child born in an orphanage and working as a merchant apprentice.

Riddhe stopped mid-step.

If Adam really was the man with the scarred hand, there was only one possible suspect, and he was standing at the end of the hallway now.

Behind him, Albert gulped.

Chancellor Yggdrasil stood in the faint darkness as if hiding from the rays of the setting sun. The smile on his face was kind, but a chill ran down Riddhe's back.

Knowing he couldn't stand there forever, Riddhe stepped forward. Each step brought him closer to the man, and his heart thumped in fear.

*"Father... Father!!"*

He remembered the hard cobblestones under his feet as he raced to the dungeon and the coldness of his father's skin under his touch.

That day, he had lamented, begged for forgiveness, clung to Loid, and firmly vowed to seek revenge no matter how long it took.

And now, the enemy could very well be the one standing before him.

The man who had possibly ordered Loid's death.

Riddhe swallowed the rage swirling in his chest, putting on a calm expression as he neared the chancellor. The man gave a graceful bow, the dark green robes on his thin body spreading out.

"Lord Riddhe," he greeted. "I was worried that you might have been inconvenienced during your time here, but I see my worries were unfounded. It is good to see that you are well."

"Thank you for your concern. Everything has been proceeding smoothly, all thanks to your consideration."

"That's good to hear. You too, Mister Albert. Please let me know if you need anything."

"Thank you, my Lord."



Yggdrasil bowed slightly again with a smile, and Riddhe responded in kind, careful not to let the other man realize how nervous he was. Just as they were about to leave, the chancellor stopped them again.

“I heard that you visited the archives of the Royal Capital Guard. Please be more careful. There are some who are upset that Her Majesty is showing you such favor, and actions like that speak a little too loudly for their comfort.”

Riddhe sensed Albert stiffening beside him, but he turned back with a confident smile. “You are really something, Lord Yggdrasil. Nothing in this empire escapes your notice.”

“You overestimate me. I just have a tendency to hear about things.”

“Even so, it is surprisingly quick. Almost as if my movements are being watched.”

“Please don’t take offense,” the chancellor frowned in apology. “Some things are necessary considering the circumstances.”

Of course. Everyone was interested in Riddhe, the special ambassador stationed in Erdal, right after Empress Elizabeth and Princess Alicia formed their secret alliance.

Mastermind or not, Yggdrasil had every reason to keep a close eye on Riddhe.

...And naturally, he’d have eyes everywhere to accomplish that.

Riddhe placed a hand on his chest and gave a polite bow. “Thank you for your advice. It is not my intention to create a rift with Erdal... I will be more careful in the future.”

“I’m glad you understand. May the guardian star watch over you, Lord Riddhe.”

With a final kind smile, the chancellor turned and walked away. Riddhe and Albert stood and watched until he turned a corner and went out of sight.



**AFTER** some deliberation, Riddhe wrote a letter to Heilland.

As it stood, Yggdrasil was the most suspicious Erdalian official that could be

connected to Loid's case, but it was still just conjecture. Besides, the only proof he had right now was that Adam Fisher and Eric Yggdrasil had known each other.

However, if Yggdrasil was really the mastermind, then it was necessary to send word to Heiland as soon as possible. Having concluded that, Riddhe framed the letter to hint at his suspicions.

"But, Master, there's no way someone can tell that just from reading the letter. You've made no reference to it at all," Albert pointed out.

"Of course not. We're in enemy territory right now. There's no way I'm going to spell out something so dangerous in case the letter gets intercepted."

"I guess, but..."

"Don't worry," Riddhe answered with a snicker. "The letter will reveal its message to the right reader."

Albert didn't reply as he rolled up the letter. Watching him, Riddhe thought back to the blue-haired princess the letter was addressed to and the loyal adviser who was always with her.

Clovis Cromwell would be able to interpret his letter. This trust in his "friend" was ultimately not misplaced, but Riddhe had no way of knowing for certain at that point.

Albert had asked if they should inform the empress that they'd uncovered a possible suspect so she could get rid of him quickly. However, Riddhe shook his head and called Albert optimistic, advising that they should focus on gathering more information for now.

He had two reasons for this.

First, Yggdrasil was Erdal's chancellor, the leader of the Senate, and the empress's closest confidante. While the empress had joined forces with Alicia, it wasn't wise to make such a big accusation without definite proof.

Second, he still lacked hard evidence. The man with the scarred hand and his unnatural death, and the powerful Senate official who knew him... While these things hinted at Yggdrasil, they were not conclusive evidence.

Even if he took the risk, it was possible the chancellor had already destroyed any damning evidence, such as the contract he signed with Loid. Besides, the chancellor could probably predict what they would do next, so the cons of taking the risk far outweighed the pros.

“Anyway, if Yggdrasil is really the mastermind, there are things that still don’t make sense.”

“Erm, are you referring to the fact that the mastermind is a unionist?”

“Huh, what a great guess”!” Riddhe marveled at his servant’s unexpected insightfulness. “Yes. According to Cromwell, the mastermind’s goal is to unify Heiland and Erdal by destroying the relationship between the countries and instigating war. The whole thing is ridiculous and depressing.”

But it didn’t make sense for Yggdrasil to do something like that. Riddhe frowned.

“I heard Empress Elizabeth opposed the unionists in the Senate and ousted them from office when she ascended to the throne. If Yggdrasil is a unionist, why would she give him the position of chancellor?”

Dealing with Yggdrasil was a big problem for Empress Elizabeth back then. As the husband of the second princess, he was a talented man in ways different from herself. As the empire’s new ruler, she must have been desperate to have such a man as an ally.

But it would be a different story if he was a unionist. To save the empire from the brink of destruction, Elizabeth removed anyone who reminded her of the old regime from the political arena. In such a situation, she should have placed Yggdrasil in a safer, less politically influential position.

“That means Empress Elizabeth doesn’t believe that Eric Yggdrasil is a unionist. And she may actually be right... But then, why does he want to unify Heiland and Erdal? As the chancellor, shouldn’t he be advising the empress instead of coming up with ridiculous plans? Just what does he want to achieve?”

Riddhe was painfully aware he had no information or allies to answer that. That was why he told Albert to focus on gathering more information for now.

“We need to know what kind of person Yggdrasil is, what he wants, and what he doesn’t. We also need to make sure we know who our enemies and allies are.”

With that in mind, Riddhe spent the next week mingling with the nobles, attending tea parties, dinner parties, and watching operas.

Fortunately, the foreign minister’s wife often sent him tons of invitations to social events. He was Empress Elizabeth’s special guest from Heilland, after all. Rumors of the empress’s secret alliance with the Heillander princess had gotten out, and many influential Erdalians were eager to meet Riddhe. As the former heir to a duchy, Riddhe was a natural in such social settings, knowing the best ways to navigate the world of splendor.

When he was still alive, his father complained that Riddhe always wore his heart on his sleeve, but he believed that he had grown in that respect over the past six years. As a special ambassador, he charmed the nobles well, skillfully extracting the information he needed. He was so adept that Albert, who had served him since childhood, couldn’t help but feel his eyes burning with tears of pride.

In that way, Riddhe learned who Yggdrasil’s allies were and who Heilland’s were.



“...**SO**, you’ve come to the conclusion that I’m an ally and a true friend of Heilland’s?”

“Yes, Lady Crowne... I mean, Lady Beatrix.”

Riddhe nodded as Beatrix, seated opposite him, smiled sweetly.

Warm sunlight shone on the well-kept garden of the Crowne residence. At this time, Heilland would be on the brink of colder weather, but the climate in Erdal was different. Come to think of it, today was the final day of Heilland’s founding festivities.

“When I left Heilland, Princess Alicia said that I am free to make all my own decisions during my visit to Erdal,” Riddhe said. “On top of that, I have concluded through observation that you can be trusted because you will never

betray Princess Alicia or Empress Elizabeth.”

“Well! I’m honored that you think that of me.” Beatrix smiled again as she lifted her teacup elegantly to take a sip.

There was neither surprise nor upset in her demeanor, which meant she’d figured out that Riddhe was no mere guest and was on a secret mission.

Aside from the reasons he listed, Riddhe also decided to secure Beatrix as an ally because of her powerful influence over both domestic and international affairs, despite the fact that she was no longer a royal.

Needless to say, Riddhe was in an extremely dangerous situation. Even with the empress’s backing, he had no other allies in Erdal, which meant that he would be in trouble if the empress decided to turn against him.

In that respect, it would be good to have Beatrix on his side. Outside of the chancellor, she was the only one Elizabeth would listen to. With her help, Riddhe should be able to stay in the empress’s favor.

And there was one last reason.

“The man I’m after sent an assassin to Heilland six years ago to kill my father. I won’t be surprised if he tries that again,” he said.

“Yes, Lord Riddhe... I understand your worry for Her Majesty.”

“It’s definitely a situation I don’t want to imagine.” Riddhe grimaced and shrugged, not denying her words.

The fact that the empress was still safe meant the mastermind had no wish to harm her, but that might change if he was backed into a corner. Should such a situation arise, Riddhe would need someone other than the empress to know the truth.

“I’ll request an audience with Her Majesty tonight.”

The wind, scented with autumnal flowers, blew between them, ruffling Riddhe’s red hair as he leaned in close to whisper.

“Things will be set in motion tonight, one way or another. When that happens, Lady Beatrix, I hope you will continue to be Heilland’s ally.”

Beatrix returned her cup to its saucer with a clink. Closing her eyes for a moment, she opened them again and looked straight at Riddhe. “Lord Riddhe, as the foreign minister’s wife, I cannot make any promises. I may be Heilland’s ally, but I am, first and foremost, a loyal subject of Erdal. But...”

Riddhe held his breath.

“This is my answer as Beatrix. As a member of House Jorum, with Chester blood flowing within me, I accept your appeal. I will not forgive anyone who tries to hurt my beloved children.”

Beatrix giggled like a young girl as Riddhe floundered for a response.

“You’re not very good at dealing with women, Lord Riddhe. Sometimes, it’s easier to appeal to a woman’s emotions rather than using logic or potential benefits. Her Majesty is not the only one precious to me. James and Alicia are my lovely children, too.”

The eyes of the most powerful noble in Erdal, also the sister of the former emperor and pseudo-parent to the current empress, shone with affection.

“I, Beatrix, swear on my royal blood to protect you, Lord Riddhe.”



**THAT** night, Riddhe and Albert paid the empress a visit.

“Apologies for the late hour, but I simply cannot find another time,” the empress greeted him with a raised glass as Riddhe entered the room.

She looked to be winding down after a day of official duties. Sitting in her armchair, her long, wavy hair reminiscent of the scorching sun, she was dressed in a glossy velvet dress. Her aura was powerful, like the king of beasts, but she was also extremely attractive.

The knight who had escorted them in had disappeared out the door, leaving the three alone in the room. After confirming they were indeed alone, Riddhe approached the empress.

“Is your inspection going well?” she inquired. “Or have you perhaps been neglecting your duties? It seems like you’ve been getting invited to various social events to secure your popularity these days.”

“Everyone has been very kind to me, and I’ve heard many interesting stories, some of which I’d like to hear Your Majesty’s opinions on.”

“Fine.”

The empress looked at a chair, and Riddhe took the signal to sit close to her. Pouring out a glass of wine, she passed it to him. As she moved to do the same for Albert, she noticed him standing by the door and tilted her head.

“What are you doing, standing so far away? Come. You may be a servant, but you’re also a guest and allowed some wine.”

“O-Oh, that’s...” Albert stuttered as he turned pale, looking to Riddhe for help.

“Please forgive Albert, Your Majesty,” Riddhe cut in smoothly with humor. “He’s overwhelmed with emotion at the chance to see you up close like this. He’s served my family since childhood, but the sight of the mighty empress is very humbling for him.”

Elizabeth seemed convinced, probably aware of her intimidating and fearsome reputation. Only a rare few were like Alicia, able to hold their own against her.

“To the enduring friendship and prosperity of our two countries,” she said instead, her red lips quirking in a smile. “So, who are you investigating right now?”

“Your Majesty’s right-hand man, Chancellor Eric Yggdrasil.”

The empress’s eyebrow twitched at Riddhe’s answer. She took a sip of wine and shrugged in a bored manner. “That man is not a unionist.”

“Yes, that is true,” Riddhe agreed. “The Lord Chancellor is not a unionist, at least not until he is nominated as the next potential emperor.”

The empress remained silent as she took another sip from her glass.

Though they disappeared from the public eye when the empress ascended the throne, the unionists were a long-standing political faction with a long history. At their peak, they held power over Erdal’s rulers and sent countless armies north to Heilland.

When Elizabeth was caught in the struggle for succession, many conservatives

in the Erdalian Senate called for unification with Heilland, hoping to achieve their desired wish to rebuild the collapsing empire.

As the Senate's figurehead, former Crown Prince Raven supported the idea of unification as well. On the other hand, Elizabeth, a rising star backed by Beatrix's support, dismissed the idea with a laugh.

Another prominent figure against unification was Eric Yggdrasil, Crown Prince Raven's close friend and right-hand man.

"It seems that Lord Yggdrasil was promised the position of chancellor should His Highness Raven become emperor," Riddhe said.

"...My people like telling you old stories, I see."

"It is through no fault of theirs. I was the one who asked, and they kindly shared with me."

Chancellor Eric Yggdrasil served in a position closest to Empress Elizabeth, supporting the empire by promoting her radical policies and acting as liaison with the nobles.

In the past, he was a close confidante to Raven, first in line to the throne, and Elizabeth's political rival. When Erdal was in turmoil, he admonished his friend, who had become a puppet of the Senate, and tried to guide him away.

However, Yggdrasil's repeated warnings failed to rouse Raven, and the two eventually parted ways.

That happened shortly before Raven was imprisoned on suspicion of a plot to assassinate Elizabeth. According to one theory, the assassination was planned by the crown prince's retainers, and Raven was innocent. Whatever the truth was, the crown prince died in prison.

It set the nobles talking.

That Raven was not suited to be emperor.

It was fortunate that Yggdrasil did not fall along with him...

Unlike Elizabeth, who commanded her subjects with an overwhelming charisma that bordered on fear, Yggdrasil gained trust with his intelligent and gentle nature. The nobles had nothing but praise for his respectful and familiar



manner.

“I heard something that bothered me about Lord Yggdrasil. However, the few who shared that information with me didn’t believe it themselves, so it’s probably nothing more than a baseless rumor,” Riddhe said.

“Doesn’t matter. Speak freely.”

Riddhe bowed respectfully to the empress as he reached for the carafe and poured more wine into the empress’s empty glass while watching her through his long bangs.

“Chancellor Yggdrasil once mentioned unification with Heilland to Your Majesty. However, he was unable to change your mind about the issue.”

The empress’s expression remained stony as she swirled the wine in her glass. Riddhe leaned forward boldly when neither confirmation nor denial came forth.

“I think the rumor is true. Lord Yggdrasil has a reason to wish for the unification of our countries. Or rather, he had a reason that he’d since lost. Am I right to say that?”

The empress didn’t answer; her red lips tightly closed as she stared at Riddhe.

Finally, just as her lips parted, her glass slipped from her fingers and shattered loudly on the floor.



**“...HUH?”**

Sparkling glass shards and red wine scattered about Elizabeth’s feet. Her dark green eyes focused on her hand in shock as it trembled slightly. Riddhe regained his senses and surged forward.

“Are you hurt, Your Majesty? Let me call someo—”

“Wait. This is...?!”

“Your Majesty!!”

The empress’s body swayed. Riddhe caught her before she collapsed onto the floor. Her body shivered in his arms, but as he was about to call for Albert to summon someone, Elizabeth stopped him.

“Stop! Don’t!”

“But Your Majesty—”

“This was planned!”

The empress coughed painfully, and Riddhe tightened his arms around her. The wine spreading across the floor reached Elizabeth’s dress and seeped into the hem, staining it. Finally, Riddhe understood.

It was poison. Someone had poisoned Empress Elizabeth’s drink.

But who would do such a thing? And when? Questions ran through his head. Suddenly, he heard a young woman’s voice and whipped his head up.

“Excuse me, Your Majesty. I thought I heard something fall...?”

A maid had timidly entered the room, probably concerned about the sound of breaking glass. She gasped at the scene, her wide eyes taking in the fallen empress held in Riddhe’s arms. Riddhe could almost see the gears clicking into place in her head.

“S-Someone! Someone, help...!!”

“Wait!”

His cry went unheeded as the maid fled the scene.

His mind was a blank.

All the palace guards would soon be here.

He would be arrested on the spot as a traitor who killed the empress.

Just then, a dry clap echoed, and Riddhe regained his senses as pain blossomed on his cheek.

“Stay calm, idiot!!” The empress gasped as she clutched at his shirt. “There must be...a way. Think! Think of...your next step. Didn’t you...promise Alicia?!”

Elizabeth’s pained but strong voice cleared the fog in Riddhe’s head.

Yes. He had to calm down and think.

*A Sutherland always keeps his promise.*

That was the proud motto of their house, passed down through the

generations.

“Albert!!”

Supporting the empress in his arms, Riddhe looked back at his servant, who was standing dumbfounded, and quickly issued instructions.

“Go, Al. Go to the foreign minister’s residence and look for Lady Crowne. Tell her the truth about what happened here.”

“B-But Master, what about y—”

“Hurry, before the guards get here! You’re our only hope! Please.”

Meeting his master’s serious gaze, Albert swallowed nervously. Then a look of determination took over his face as he nodded.

The guards would arrive through the door. With that in mind, Albert rushed towards the open window and leapt out it. Riddhe stared after his servant in shock, but only for a moment. They’d known each other since they were children, and he was fully aware of Albert’s physical capabilities. He’d get safely to the ground and escape under the cover of darkness.

*I’m counting on you, Al.*

While Riddhe was focused on the window, a commotion sounded behind him before the door banged open, and the room flooded with guards.

This was it. With a bead of sweat trickling down his forehead, Riddhe turned back confidently to face the men.

Empress Elizabeth had collapsed during her meeting with him, so he knew he could not escape as Al did. If he’d run away, it would have caused further suspicion.

At the same time, he was certain. There was no doubt that the mastermind he was seeking would show up here to witness his arrest.

That was why he remained calm without the slightest hesitation in the face of the guards, behaving as he would a special ambassador sent by his king.

His eyes widened.

Two people behind the guards had caught his attention. One was, as

expected, Chancellor Yggdrasil. The man was smiling calmly, just like when they'd met in the hallway the previous day. The other man besides the chancellor, and glaring at him coldly, was Crown Prince Fritz.





There was nothing suspicious about his presence here, but as soon as their eyes met, the crown prince's lips quirked into a slight smile. The look in his eyes was dark and cold, and in that moment, Riddhe understood.

"So that's how it is," Riddhe spat with a fearless smile. "Who would the mastermind choose to work with to betray Her Majesty? What a bold choice you've made. Even I didn't suspect a thing."

A guard swung the hilt of his sword. A dull thud echoed as lightning spread from the back of his head, and Riddhe's consciousness melted into darkness.



**MANY** years ago, Erdal was in a state of turmoil.

The land was ruined, and politics became a battle for personal power. The rich lined their own pockets, while the weak and poor were left to suffer.

In the midst of that, a struggle for succession to the throne broke out. There was Crown Prince Raven, part of the Senate and its figurehead, and the talented but illegitimate Elizabeth. The struggle between the two only came to an end following Raven's imprisonment.

Raven was kept at Dansk Fortress—also known as the Western Twilight Castle. Not many were aware that Eric Yggdrasil paid the crown prince a visit in his cell.

As the guard pulled open the door and Yggdrasil entered, Crown Prince Raven sat up from his hard bed and greeted his old friend with a grin.

"So you've come, friend," Raven laughed as he spread his arms out. "Look how far I've fallen."

"Yes, you have fallen far."

Yggdrasil looked down at his friend with an unreadable expression filled with emotion. It had only been a few months, but the prince had lost a lot of weight. There was no trace of the fearless, dignified royal that was Raven, only a pitiful man forced out of his position.

"You have fallen..." he repeated. "It was a truly foolish thing you did."

“Stop that. Do I still have to listen to your nagging even when in prison? I rarely have visitors. Can’t you be a little more entertaining?”

So saying, Raven looked around the inside of his cell. The place was furnished with the basics such as a bed, chair, and desk. Considering his status as crown prince, Raven’s situation was probably closer to house arrest than imprisonment.

However, the stagnant air of the Western Twilight Castle was definitely taking its toll on the crown prince, who broke out in a violent coughing fit. Yggdrasil supported his ailing friend and laid him back down while Raven let out a long breath as if to soothe his chest.

“This is my end,” the crown prince declared as he stared at the ceiling. “As you said, I was foolish and let my insecurities get the better of me. I was arrogant and overconfident and only listened to what I wanted to hear. You were right to leave me.”

Yggdrasil didn’t answer. He had no words to say.

As Raven’s friend and adviser, Yggdrasil was a loyal subject who understood the crown prince the most. After his confrontation with Raven, Yggdrasil had been determined to leave him. Words were not enough to convey the emotions swirling in his chest.

Perhaps sensing his inner conflict, Raven reached out. Yggdrasil hesitated, wondering if he had any right to accept the crown prince’s offered hand, but Raven grabbed his sleeve and pulled Yggdrasil towards him.

“Please,” the crown prince begged in a tone he’d never heard before. “Please help the Senate.”

“...Do you really mean that?”

Yggdrasil’s voice was cold as his eyes narrowed. The empire’s turmoil and Raven’s current sorry state were all brought on by the Senate. Was the crown prince really still so naive?

Besides, Elizabeth’s path to the throne was almost certainly clear at this point. She’d already ousted more than half of the Senate from office and would probably not stop.



However, Raven clung harder to his friend.

“I’m not asking for you to retain the Senate, but...!” The crown prince’s words dissolved into painful coughs.

“Raven!”

Yggdrasil hurriedly bent down to stroke his friend’s back as he writhed in pain and was shocked to see red blood bloom like a flower on Raven’s hand.

“But...” the crown prince took a deep breath and continued as Yggdrasil stood speechless. “Unlike me, they still have time. Time to make things right.”

He’d done nothing to correct his weak-willed father’s rule, nor had he been able to change the Senate, which had taken him as their figurehead, then abandoned him in crisis to save themselves. It was his own fault that he’d ended up here.

“So, as a royal, I’ll take my punishment. That should be enough, right?”

Yggdrasil closed his eyes. “You’ve always been too kind, Master,” he muttered.

Yggdrasil had advised Raven countless times to distance himself from the Senate and oust them from office, but the crown prince had always answered that he just needed time to bring them around to his side. However, it proved an impossible task. Why couldn’t those selfish individuals born into privilege ever change their ways?

Even with the plan to assassinate Elizabeth. Rumors claimed that Raven’s evil advisers misled him and sent the assassin after Elizabeth, but nothing could be further from the truth. Raven hadn’t wanted her to die. The Senate was the only one pulling the strings. Elizabeth herself knew this and used the plot to clear her way to the throne.

As Raven’s adviser, Yggdrasil knew the crown prince was dangerously incompetent, yet even now, at the very end, he couldn’t bring himself to hate the naivety of his old friend.

“You,” Yggdrasil spat, his heart burning. “You’re a failure because of your good heart.”

“Speak for yourself.” The crown prince gave a disappointed, wry smile. “To see me like this and still grieve for me, I think you’re the one cursed with a good heart.”

Not long after the secret meeting between the two friends, Crown Prince Raven of Erdal passed away quietly.



A dead leaf fell from a branch outside the window. Eric Yggdrasil, chancellor of Erdal, sat at his desk with his back to the window and did not notice it. As his brush flowed smoothly over the documents, there was a knock on the door with a messenger bearing a note from the crown prince.

“This is good.” The chancellor calmly smiled as he put the brush down. “Please tell the crown prince that I will be there right away.”

Before long, Yggdrasil was standing before a set of extravagant doors. After exchanging a few words with the medic, who exited the room, the chancellor slipped inside.

“I am here, Your Highness.”

Crown Prince Fritz turned at his voice.

“Come. Mother is awake.”

Empress Elizabeth lay on the large bed in the center of the room, her gaze fixed on the bed canopy. She blinked as Yggdrasil drew near.

“I thought you’d had me poisoned, but it was just a numbing drug...” she huffed.

“Don’t underestimate it, Mother. Without control of your body, you won’t be able to protect yourself should anyone try to stab or strangle you. The numbness will recede soon, but it will take about seven days for you to fully recover.”

“Seven days... How short, but long enough to get so much done. Once the gears start to turn, they will be impossible to stop, especially when it concerns matters of war.”

“We will move you to Mylene Hall, so please don’t worry and leave all matters

regarding Heilland to me,” Fritz declared.

The empress was silent. The crown prince frowned but stood to get ready to leave. Yggdrasil turned to follow Fritz out of the room, but Elizabeth’s voice stopped him.

“Why didn’t you just kill me?”

The chancellor stopped and turned back slowly to see a pair of dark green eyes staring at him.

“You were the one who supplied the drug,” she continued. “Once the empire heads into crisis, one of us will have to die, so why did you hold back from finishing your task?”

“Why...? Well, I’m sure all my actions will seem meaningless and baseless to you.”

Yggdrasil’s tone was calm, sounding just like he always did during their daily exchanges. Left alone in the large room, the two stared at each other for a long moment.

Finally, Yggdrasil broke the silence.

“Do you remember the last time we were truly alone? Back when it all started, you told me a lie.”

The empress moved to speak, but the chancellor continued.

“I don’t blame you for that. Lies are sometimes necessary to save a country, but that one lie held true significance to me and still affects me to this day. And that is what this is all about.”

“You speak of your promise to Raven?”

The smile finally dropped from Yggdrasil’s face at the empress’s hoarse question.



**CROWN** Prince Raven had passed away quietly at the Western Twilight Castle. As husband of the second princess, Yggdrasil was quickly nominated as a candidate to rival Elizabeth’s claim to the throne. It resulted in the fateful

meeting between the two.

Immediately upon entering the small room, Yggdrasil told his sister-in-law he had no intention of fighting with her and would willingly cede the throne to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was obviously suspicious and questioned why Yggdrasil still wanted them to meet. In answer, Yggdrasil replied that there was one condition he wanted met for him to give up the throne.

That condition was for Erdal and Heilland to be unified as one.

“Unification with Heilland? If I remember right, weren’t you the one who was advising Raven to distance himself from the nobles who touted that nonsense?” she asked.

“Your Highness, I believe that unification to create the Great Erdal Empire is the key to bringing our divided people together, be it the conservatives or the commoners. The Senate has already lost many of its members, and with Raven gone too, they are too unstable to pose a threat to you. Now is the time to resolve the turmoil, Elizabeth. It is your duty as a ruler to forgive past mistakes and lead our people down the right path.”



**“AND** if I approved the idea of unification, even the conservatives who opposed me would recognize my rule. Once that was done, you would help them regroup and make sure they behaved. That was what you said back then.”

“Yes. You were hesitant, but you agreed to my suggestion to end the turmoil troubling Erdal.”

With the promise made, the positions of ruler and chancellor were decided, and the pair discussed politics for several days before emerging from the room.

But the empress failed to keep her promise.



**ON** coronation day, the newly crowned Elizabeth addressed the masses from the castle balcony and explicitly denied the possibility of Erdal’s unification with Heilland.

When approached by Yggdrasil, Elizabeth was cold, saying that she'd only agreed to end the turmoil and nothing else.

"That means you had no intention of following my suggestion from the beginning...!"

"That's not true. If I understood the rationale behind why you wanted unification, I would have taken your advice and followed through, but I've come to the conclusion that such a move is unnecessary."

Yggdrasil was enraged by the empress's dismissal. Gritting his teeth and clenching his fists, the image of his dying friend flashed in his mind's eye.

"But the Senate!" he shouted. "Aren't they also part of the empire that is now yours?!"

"What I'm saying is, they are unnecessary," was the empress's cold reply. "Unfortunately, they are not part of the new empire I'm aiming to build."

After that, the conflict between the old Senate and the empress ended. One by one, the empress removed the conservative nobles who opposed her, strengthening her political standing in court. As she carved out a bright trajectory and new future for Erdal, many were left behind, mercilessly punished with confiscated territories, imprisonment, or death.

Yggdrasil was unable to grant Raven's last wish to save the Senate.



**"WHAT** do you hope to achieve with this, Yggdrasil?" The chancellor looked down to meet the empress's narrowed eyes. "Raven is dead, and his cronies are in hiding. Why do you still want Heilland? What has obsessed you this much?"

"Nothing that will mean anything to anyone else but me." Yggdrasil stood quietly, fatigue showing on his thin frame as he smiled sadly as if yearning for someone no longer there. "This is my personal vendetta, my challenge. Can I take what you denied and rejected as unnecessary and make it succeed? Do I have the power to override your choices? Most importantly, I've unwittingly discovered something far more interesting."

Yggdrasil bent down to whisper into Elizabeth's ear.

“I swear to the guardian star that my next words are true. It was His Highness Fritz who decided to drug you and frame Heilland’s ambassador as an excuse to start a war. He longs to become an emperor that surpasses you, and all I did was give him a push. Should he succeed in unifying the two countries, he will go down in history as a greater ruler than you.”

“What...?”

The chancellor stared calmly at the empress’s shocked look.

“Now that you know the truth, what will you do? Will you remain cruel and condemn your own child? Or would you betray your morals and forgive him? Or better yet, would you choose to join us in our quest to take Heilland? Not that your choice matters to me.”

“Have you become so obsessed that you’ve lost your entire mind?” the empress growled through gritted teeth, her gaze deadly even as she lay unmoving on the bed.

Yggdrasil just chuckled and shook his head.

“Think whatever you want of me, but I’ll see this to the end.”

With that, Yggdrasil left the room, signaling to the waiting medic that he was done. Soon, arrangements would be made to transfer the empress to Mylene Hall, a separate villa on the castle grounds.

The chancellor was surprised to see Crown Prince Fritz, whom he’d thought had returned to his rooms, lingering by the window in the hallway. Seeing Yggdrasil, the prince frowned.

“Took you long enough,” he muttered in complaint. “Don’t sneak around and do things without my knowledge. What did you speak to Mother about?”

“Nothing much, just a little story about the old days.”

“And you think I’ll be satisfied with that answer?”

The crown prince moved quickly to grab Yggdrasil’s shoulder. The look in the young man’s deep green eyes showed he was of the empress’s blood.

Yggdrasil didn’t respond, and after a period of silence, the crown prince let him go.

“Whatever,” he murmured. “No matter what your intentions are, things are already set in motion. Neither of us can afford to back out now, so you’ll have to support me till the end.”

The chancellor smiled calmly. If only the crown prince knew who was the support in the other’s cause.

“It’s my pleasure,” he answered instead.

Just then, a soldier hurried down the hallway, announcing they had a visitor.



“**WELL**, Your Highness. We haven’t seen each other in a bit, but your manner has certainly changed.”

Foreign Minister’s wife, Lady Beatrix, tilted her head in greeting as Crown Prince Fritz and Chancellor Yggdrasil entered the audience hall.

With the empress out of commission and the “culprit” imprisoned, this was a waste of time, but considering Beatrix’s lineage, Fritz knew that it would be folly to treat her poorly, so he had no choice but to accept an audience with her.

However, he could still make his displeasure known. Stalking past his visitor, he took the seat reserved for the empress and eyed Beatrix coldly.

“Lady Beatrix, I don’t really want to say this to you, but I’m very busy right now. If you have any concerns, I’d appreciate it if you made it quick.”

“Oh, of course.” Beatrix nodded sagely. “Erdal’s fate is in the balance; we don’t have time for long stories.” With this, she placed a hand on her cheek and sighed in annoyance. “It’s just that the Heillander guest residing with us hasn’t returned since last night. Since he’s such an honored guest, I’ve been so worried about him...”

Fritz stared at Beatrix before his deep green gaze turned piercing. “...No need to worry about your guest. He’s locked up in our dungeons. Didn’t someone already come by with the news?”

“What?!” Lady Crowne exclaimed loudly. “So the news is true! Oh dear, I just couldn’t believe it... But what is he imprisoned for?”

“Stop this! Are you making a fool of me?”

Fritz stood up in anger but stopped and gulped when he saw the look on Lady Crowne's face. Beatrix was still smiling, but it was clear it was only a mask shielding her true emotions.

Beatrix tilted her head as she watched Fritz try to reel in his anger.

"I'm not making a fool of Your Highness. I truly don't understand... The news said that Her Majesty was poisoned. Are you saying that Lord Riddhe was the culprit?"

"...Yes."

"Did someone see Lord Riddhe do it?"

"No."

"I see. So, did he harm Her Majesty after she was poisoned and unable to protect herself?"

"No, but—"

"Oh dear, then was Her Majesty the one who ordered his arrest...?"

"He was there when Mother collapsed! He and his servant were the only ones present when it happened!"

Beatrix only shrugged as Fritz's voice rose in panic. "But poison doesn't work that way. Don't you agree, Eric?"

"...Yes, you're right, Lady Crowne."

But before the chancellor could continue, Fritz had lost his patience, interrupting with rage.

"The empress collapsed in the presence of a foreigner! Isn't that suspicious enough? What's wrong with putting suspects in prison?!"

"Oh, I see. So Lord Riddhe is just a suspect!"

Fritz stared in confusion as Lady Crowne's face lit up. Chancellor Yggdrasil's brow twitched in annoyance as Beatrix smiled brightly despite the tense situation.

"Then, Your Highness. We must hold a trial as soon as possible."



“...A trial?”

The crown prince frowned as he parroted the words, not understanding. But Lady Crowne’s eyes had moved to Eric Yggdrasil as if she were addressing the chancellor.

“Yes, a trial. You must be familiar with those, Your Highness. When someone is a suspect in a crime, we call upon witnesses in a trial and decide on a judgment.”

“But we can’t do that. Mother needs to rest—”

“If the ruler is absent, they can select three representatives who will make the judgment on their behalf.”

The crown prince stared at Beatrix, then turned to the chancellor with confusion in his eyes.

“Is that true?”

“I guess it’s natural that you’re unaware.” Beatrix shook her head ruefully. “Her Majesty has always been so active in politics that we’ve never experienced her absence. I only know about it because I’ve witnessed it once.”

“You’ve witnessed it...? Could it be?!”

The crown prince’s eyes widened as he remembered. At a recent point in Erdal’s history, shortly before his own birth, Erdal had been without a ruler, and there was only one major incident that required a trial.

“...The assassination attempt on Mother.”

“Yes. At the time of that incident, a trial was held with three representatives as judges. That’s right, Eric. I recall you applied to be one of the three, but it wasn’t granted, was it?” Beatrix taunted.

“So you knew this was going to happen?” Fritz rounded upon the chancellor with a furious glare.

Yggdrasil had known and chosen to remain silent. Driven by doubt, Fritz stared at the other man. Met with no response, Fritz gritted his teeth and turned back to Lady Crowne. He’d deal with this troublesome visitor first, and then he’d have plenty of time to confront Yggdrasil later.

“In any case, there is no time to spare now. Ostre and Reinsus to the south are on the brink of forming an alliance,” he said. “We cannot let our empire’s power be questioned at a time like this. If a foreign ambassador has poisoned Her Majesty, we should retaliate with force to make our presence felt far and wide.”

“A reasonable decision, Your Highness, but we are not above the law set by our ancestors.”

“Fine! Then let us do this representative trial thing as quickly as possible!”

Fritz rose to indicate that the conversation was over, instructing Yggdrasil to select two representatives. The third representative would, of course, be the crown prince himself.

“If you really believe that man is innocent, then you may stand witness,” Fritz told Beatrix. “However, your priority is to carry the news of his arrest to Heiland along with the foreign minister, so you may participate if you return in time for the trial.”

“Do not worry, Your Highness. I can still ride hard when the need arises. Oh, there is one more thing.”

“What now?!” Fritz spat in frustration as she prevented him from leaving again. Lady Crowne, however, looked unperturbed as she smiled and clapped her hands twice. The sound echoed in the large room, and after a moment, the door to the audience hall creaked open slowly.

The person who appeared at the door stunned the crown prince to his core.

“...Charlotte?”

As the shocked prince watched, Charlotte Yggdrasil slipped quietly into the room and bowed her head. Then she looked at the crown prince and her father, the chancellor, in turn, with no trace of fear or hesitation in her gaze.

Fritz was still speechless as Lady Crowne waved a hand in Charlotte’s direction.

“Until the trial is concluded, Lord Riddhe is still our honored guest, so please allow me to assign someone to watch over his care. I believe both Your

Highness and the Lord Chancellor are well acquainted with this young lady here? I made sure to select someone that all of us can trust.”

“...So even you are not on my side?” Fritz’s expression twisted in hurt as he looked at Charlotte, but aside from a flash of sadness in her narrowed gaze, her stance remained determined and strong. An awkward silence filled the room before a calm voice spoke up.

“I agree,” the chancellor declared as he moved to stand before Lady Crowne as if shielding the shocked crown prince. Turning to Charlotte, he gave her a small smile. “Lady Crowne is right. Our guest must be treated with respect until proven guilty. Normally, I wouldn’t have agreed to let him out of the dungeons...but if you are in charge, then I have nothing to worry about. Will this arrangement do, Your Highness?”

“...Do whatever you like. Serve Erdal well without slighting our ‘guest.’”

“Yes, Your Highness. Thank you.”

With that, Charlotte politely bowed as Fritz stepped off the dais. Brushing past the girl, he whispered a few words in her ear and left the audience hall without waiting for an answer.

The sound of his footsteps echoed dryly on the hard floor. His heart felt as cold and tight as a winter morning.

No one truly wanted him. That was why he sought to find a place of his own.

But perhaps his trauma of being unwanted had tainted his interactions, for Fritz could never truly trust another. Not even the chancellor, who was supposed to be his ally.

...Now, even the only girl whose heart he wanted to win had turned out the same way.

“...But I can’t stop now.”

His murmured words reached nobody as they disappeared into the chilly air.



**A** dull pain lanced through the back of his head, accompanied by aches everywhere. On his back, his hips, and all his joints.

Riddhe groaned in his sleep from the discomfort plaguing his body until he heard the clank of metal. Opening his eyes, his vision cleared slowly, and he jumped as he recognized the two people standing before him.

“Lady Cro— Oww?!”

“Oh dear! Please remain still, Lord Riddhe. Charlotte, tend to him quickly! This won’t do. No sudden movements when you are injured, please.”

“No worries, this is nothi— Oww!!”

Charlotte crouched down to examine his wounds.

“I knew it. It’s swollen back here, and there’s a small cut on the forehead too... It’s all right; I’ll take care of it right away,” she assured as she clasped her hands together and nodded.

Swiftly, she cleaned the area with a cloth and applied some medicine, then wrapped a bandage around Riddhe’s head before he could speak another word of protest.

“Done,” she declared. “Now, it’s best if you don’t move your head too much... Yes, just lean back and sit down. Don’t move around!”

“Y-Yes. Thanks... But, Lady Crowne, why are you here?”

Riddhe’s voice trembled slightly with worry, but relief flooded through him as Beatrix gave a soft smile.

“I’m here to protect you, of course. Didn’t I swear on my royal blood to remain a friend of Heilland, Lord Riddhe?”

“Great...! That means Al—I mean Albert—got to your mansion safely and informed you of that night’s events?”

Beatrix’s expression grew troubled at the mention of Albert’s name.

“To tell the truth, I haven’t been able to see Mister Albert myself. Security at the mansion is tight, so it’s almost impossible for anyone to break in... But don’t worry. I’ve asked someone trustworthy to ensure his safety. Besides, I have to let him know about the trial. Either way, I’ll make arrangements for him to join us soon.”

Beatrix updated Riddhe on her talk with the crown prince and chancellor as he listened quietly. However, when the issue of Charlotte being his caretaker was mentioned, he couldn't help but sit up.

"Miss Charlotte?! But—"

"No, Lord Riddhe! Please lean back!" Charlotte scolded immediately.

"S-Sorry," Riddhe apologized as he hurried to comply and leaned back again. Lady Crowne laughed and shook her head at the exchange.

"Don't worry about Charlotte. She is here of her own free will and determination."

"But..."

Riddhe stared at Charlotte. He'd told Lady Crowne that Yggdrasil could be the mastermind he was looking for, and Charlotte here was the man's daughter. All things considered, the girl wasn't someone they should be trusting as an ally.

"I'm sorry!" As if sensing Riddhe's doubt, Charlotte bowed before the shocked man. "I know that perhaps... No, I know for sure that Father and His Highness Fritz were the ones who framed you, Lord Riddhe."

"...May I ask why you think that?"

Charlotte shrank back and trembled slightly at Riddhe's question, then confessed it all. About her special relationship with Crown Prince Fritz, his strange behavior recently, and how he spent most of his time with her father these days.

"I just thought it strange when I heard that Her Majesty had collapsed and Lord Riddhe was arrested," she concluded, tears welling up in her eyes. "I thought it must be some kind of mistake... That something bad was happening."

Troubled, she'd gone to see the crown prince, advising him not to label Riddhe as a criminal as it could lead to war. But the prince had shook his head and told her not to worry and that all their problems would soon be gone.

That alone had been enough to turn Charlotte's suspicion into certainty.

"His Highness has always had a strong desire to surpass Her Majesty Empress Elizabeth. But this way of doing it is wrong! Framing someone for a crime and

inciting a needless war is just...”

She had to stop the crown prince. With that thought, she hurried to her father but was faced with the same response. Her usually rational and kind father had agreed with Fritz’s decision, which told Charlotte the two men were working together, and her father was the one pulling the strings behind the entire plot.

“I’m not smart. I may not understand the greatness of His Highness’s dream or why Father is doing all this, but...but if things continue, so many people will get hurt. That’s why I...”

“I see,” Riddhe whispered, seeing the strong light shining in Charlotte’s eyes. The most important people in her life were about to go down the wrong path, and she wished to stop them. His heart burned with the same emotion as he remembered what happened six years ago. “I understand your determination... Please, Lady Crowne, tell me. I know that the mastermind, Chancellor Yggdrasil, will surely try to prove my guilt. What is our best course of action from now?”

Beatrix nodded. “I have an idea, but it will be a gamble for Erdal...”

As various intentions crossed paths, the gears of history started to move.

Scattered pieces gathered once again, putting together a new picture.

On a hill under a sky full of stars, a boy spun the wooden cylinder in his hand. Peering inside, he smiled.

The path leading to a new future was just around the corner.

## 4. Revolutionary Reprise of the Blue Rose Princess

**ENVOYS** from Erdal had arrived at the border checkpoint. The news was immediately relayed to Chief Adviser Nigel Otto, who happened to be in Sheraford on a visit. Nigel excused himself from the inspection he'd been conducting with the princess, heading towards the border to welcome the unexpected visitors.

There, he learned that Riddhe Sutherland had been imprisoned.

After receiving a summary of the news from Nigel, Alicia hurried to the border as well. The Erdalian envoys—Foreign Minister Crowne and his wife Beatrix—stood swiftly to greet her as she burst into the room.

“Lady Beatrix!”

“Your Highness! I’m so glad to see you. It’s a stroke of luck that you’re in Viola.”

“I’m so glad, too. What’s this about Riddhe being imprisoned?”

Alicia took a seat as Chief Adviser Otto and Robert took positions behind her. Foreign Minister Crowne updated the group about the events in Erdal over the past few days. He concluded, with Erdal’s official stance on the matter, that Riddhe Sutherland was suspected of the attempted assassination of the empress.

“Riddhe poisoning Empress Elizabeth? That can’t be true!” Alicia exclaimed.

“Lord Riddhe will be put on trial at noon in two days, and Erdal will decide his fate after that... To be honest, Lord Riddhe is in a truly dire predicament. His Highness Fritz seems entirely convinced that he is the culprit,” Beatrix said.

“That’s impossible... Was it His Highness who ordered the arrest of Riddhe?” Alicia asked.

“He’d rushed to the room where Her Majesty had collapsed and ordered the

arrest of Lord Riddhe there. I heard that Chancellor Yggdrasil and some guards were present at the scene as well.”

“Lord Yggdrasil...”

Alicia glanced at Nigel, who returned her gaze with a brief nod and a glint in his eye. He must have come to the same conclusion.

Riddhe had been framed, and the culprit was none other than Erdalian Chancellor Eric Yggdrasil. Riddhe’s letter had hinted that he might be the mastermind who had colluded with Loid. Yggdrasil must have felt threatened by Riddhe’s investigations and taken drastic measures to stop him...

“Please, Your Highness. Come back to Erdal with me,” Lady Crowne pleaded.

“Pardon?”

Alicia’s mind went blank as she stared at Lady Crowne, who looked back at her seriously.

“Prince Fritz plans for our countries to go to war. The truth, justice—he has lost sight of it all. So please, come to Erdal and stop him. You’re the only one who holds Her Majesty’s favor; you’re our last hope.”

“Wait.” Nigel stepped forward, his tone sharp and his expression stern, but after a moment, the chief adviser bowed to Alicia. “My apologies, Your Highness, if I may be allowed to speak?”

“Of course,” Alicia nodded. “I need your advice as Father’s right-hand man.”

“Thank you.”

With Alicia’s permission, Nigel bowed again before adjusting his glasses and turning towards Beatrix with a harsh glare.

“Pardon my bluntness, Lady Crowne, but what you’re suggesting is a risky gamble. Do you really think Heilland will willingly allow you to take someone as important as Her Highness into the heart of danger?”

“I am aware of how reckless the idea is and that it will be difficult for Heilland to accept it. However, I must still say it. Please trust me. I’m willing to give you anything in exchange, along with the promise that I will protect Her Highness,” Lady Crowne vowed.



“It’s out of the question,” Nigel declined. “You are an envoy from Erdal, and that is where your loyalty ultimately lies, not with Heilland.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I am only loyal to one person. That is the great Empress Elizabeth, my lovely Beth.” Lady Crowne’s gaze dropped to her hands. “But there are many others whom I cherish. The day before the incident, I asked Lord Riddhe the real reason he was in Erdal. Then, I swore to him that I would continue to be an ally of Heilland’s... That was why he informed me of what happened that night with the empress.”

“Then why didn’t you tell the truth and stop Crown Prince Fritz?”

“Unfortunately, His Highness will not listen to me. I can’t tell you the real reason, but I’m sure you both already know the answer.”

Nigel pressed a hand to his forehead and let out a deep sigh while Alicia pursed her lips tightly. Lady Crowne was suggesting that Yggdrasil didn’t plan the plot alone. Crown Prince Fritz had been involved as well.

A high, clear sound echoed like the falling twinkle of stars.

Alicia closed her eyes.

Nigel shook his head in displeasure as Beatrix reasoned with him, but none of their words reached Alicia’s ears. Soon, there was no sound, no light, and no sensation. She was alone in a world of darkness.

It was so cold here. Why was she alone? It was because she had chosen to be.

There was no path forward. She couldn’t tell up from down.

There was no exit.

Then, a violet light twinkled in the endless darkness.

*“What is important is how you think and act when opportunities arise. At the very least, I understand Your Highness’s true intentions, and I’m glad you are my mistress.”*

Alicia gasped as she turned her head to chase the violet light. A green light flickered from the opposite side.

*“Just jump in! Isn’t that what you do best?”*

Alicia wrapped her arms around herself and shook her head in fear. She didn't want to destroy anything; didn't want to lose anyone. But the most precious things were always the most fragile, slipping away through the gaps in her fingers.

Now, a red light jumped before her eyes.

*"Just relax and watch as your loyal subject, Riddhe Sutherland, works his magic. Besides, Your Highness is surrounded by many other talented and loyal subjects."*

"Is it really all right?" she asked the red light as it quivered. "Everyone believes in me and trusts me with the future, but I'm really no one special. I've once lost everything and am terrified of making the same mistake. I'm just a small and weak human."

The red light bounced and flew away, and the violet light blinked into existence once again. Slowly, it grew larger, gently pushing back the darkness and bathing everything in shades of amethyst.

Drawn towards it, she reached out a hand, fearful and hesitant but yearning to touch. Finally, her slender fingers brushed against it.

Numerous rays burst forth from the light's center, bringing visions of different people. There was the Privy Council, united once again for Heilland's future. A reliable merchant and a noble achieving brilliant success. A young man surpassing his mentor and walking down his own path. A knight swearing to use his sword to protect, not to hurt.

And that one person closest and most precious to her.

*"I am still your adviser. Please don't take that from me."*

Yes. A warmth welled up in Alicia's chest.

The past was nothing to be feared, and she still knew her way. She should focus on herself and all those who walked with her and trust them with all her heart.

Nobles, merchants, friends. Everyone had their own problems, made their own decisions, and chose their own paths. The result was the present, and the

progress she'd made with everyone would lead her into the future.

That was Princess Alicia's reprise.

It was everyone's reprise.

"I apologize, but I cannot accept," Nigel repeated. "I'm sure His Majesty would feel the same way as well."

"But your being here must be destiny," Beatrix countered. "Please, we don't have time. If we don't hurry, we'll—"

"Wait."

Alicia raised a hand, and Nigel and Beatrix ceased their argument. Lord Crowne and Robert also turned their gazes to her.

Once she had their attention, Alicia slowly lowered her hand. Then she gazed at everyone with clear eyes. "I will go to Erdal. Nigel, return to the capital and tell Father everything. Foreign Minister Crowne, Lady Beatrix, please escort me to Kingsley right away."

"Your Highness...!" Nigel cried out.

"I know what I'm doing; please don't worry."

The chief adviser seemed about to protest again, but a smile from Alicia made him swallow his words. The unpleasant tension that had plagued the princess for the past few days was suddenly gone, and he sensed a quiet but dignified fighting spirit within her in its place.

"War will break out if we do nothing, and we'll lose Riddhe and many of our citizens," she said. "That's why I have to take the gamble, for the people of Heiland, and for myself."

"But—"

"In any case, I'll have to face this enemy sooner or later, and it just so happens that things are occurring sooner than expected. If I don't go to Erdal, what else can we do, Nigel?"

The princess tilted her head, and the mannerisms resembled the king so much that Nigel could only massage his temple in frustration. But Alicia was right. If

they didn't take action, Riddhe would be found guilty in a few days, and the Erdalian crown prince and chancellor would leverage that to start a war.

If Alicia went to Erdal, several other possibilities would arise. Since she requested for Riddhe to be stationed in Erdal, it wasn't strange that she would now travel there to give her testimony in the trial. Besides, she and the empress were working together as allies. If she could get in touch with the empress and reveal the true enemy, they had a good chance of avoiding the war altogether.

That said, Crown Prince Fritz seemed to be as deeply involved in this as the chancellor. That could potentially sour the alliance between the empress and Alicia. And if Riddhe were to be found guilty after all, Alicia might also be taken as Erdal's prisoner.

"Two days," the adviser finally answered. "Your Highness will stay in Kingsley for two days. After that, please return to Heiland, no matter what the outcome of the trial may be."

"That's...not a lot of time at all."

"As Your Highness said, this is a gamble. Will investing more time make a difference in our chances of winning?"

Alicia thought, then nodded in understanding. Time wasn't on their side. They only had limited cards to play with, and how the game would end was up to luck.

"Thank you for understanding. Well, as for the exchange of allowing Her Highness to go to Erdal...?"

"I'll stay in Heiland," Foreign Minister Crowne offered. "It is true that my wife makes a more valuable political hostage, but it will be better if she accompanies Her Highness. Besides, I am still bound by duty to carry the news to King James," he paused for a moment before continuing in a low voice. "I am against war. Unless Her Majesty Empress Elizabeth orders it, I want to help prevent it in any way I can."

"I agree that you aren't the ideal political hostage, but we have no other choice," Nigel sighed. "You will stay with us until Her Highness's safe return."

With that decided, the group dispersed and hurried to their respective

destinations.



**NIGEL** immediately set off for Egdiel Castle with Foreign Minister Crowne to inform King James of the latest developments.

...What if Alicia was not allowed to return to Heilland after this? The question remained unspoken, but both the chief adviser and princess were thinking about it. That was why they had a political hostage and knights.

“...I have to come back at any cost to protect everyone,” she murmured as she watched the knights hurry about her.

She was ready to go and was waiting for the carriage to be prepared for the trip. Robert, who stood next to her, shrugged and threw her a wink.

“Of course. My sword will always be ready to aid you,” the silver-haired knight teased as he placed a hand on the weapon at his hip. Alicia gave a wry smile.

“I hope it won’t have to come to that.”

Robert and a few other knights would escort Alicia into Erdal. While she had no qualms about her decision, her heart ached at the thought of putting those knights in harm’s way.

“I’m sorry for dragging all of you into this,” she said solemnly.

“My, I was just joking. A knight’s sword has the sole purpose of protecting their master... And it’s not just the knights. I think you fail to recognize how beloved you are, princess. Many would beg for the opportunity to serve you.” He chuckled. “Besides, if *he* found out that I let you go alone, he’ll probably kill me. You may not know this, but he’s very scary when he’s angry.”

“...Oh, I know it well.”

Alicia giggled, too, as she imagined the reaction her beloved adviser and lover would have to her decision. There was so much she wanted to tell him, but she didn’t know if he would accept it or even forgive her. Despite it all, she had a duty to fulfill.

Looking up at the sky, Alicia called out to him in her heart and made a promise.

She would return to Heilland, no matter what.



**“CLO?”**

Princess Adviser Clovis was pulled out of his thoughts at the sound of his name. Turning away from the sky, he saw Jude Nicol, Marquis of Rozen, looking at him curiously.

“What’s the matter? Did you see something in the sky?”

“...No.” Clovis shook his head. In fact, he’d thought he heard a certain someone calling his name, but she was far away, in the town of Viola. There was no way he could have heard her.

Taking a breath to clear his mind, Clovis looked up again at the towering ship before his eyes. Its white sails stood out against the clear skies magnificently, and he was sure the sails billowing in the wind as they sailed across the sea would be a beautiful sight to behold.

“Isn’t it wonderful? This beautiful ship can carry us anywhere we wish to go. Beyond the ocean and into unknown lands, that’s how free we are!”

“Yes, it is very exciting.”

Jude nodded in satisfaction at Clovis’s words. Nearby, sailors loaded the ship with cargo such as a day’s worth of food, water, and more, enough for a trip to Erdal.

They were in Held, the port town in the Marquisate of Rozen. The ship belonged to the Mercurius Company and was preparing to set sail for Sampston, carrying a precious souvenir for Ist Trading Company.

“Oh, I can’t wait to see the surprise on Dudley’s face,” Jude said. “He’ll surely, definitely, love this.”

“Yes. I’m just a layman, but even I can appreciate its beauty.”

“And that’s very important. Having a discerning eye is good, but there is no logic behind beauty that captures the heart.” The Marquis of Rozen shrugged. “I think the best thing is to be drawn to something, even if you don’t really understand it.”

Clovis smiled at that.

News came from the Nicol Research Facility that the porcelain had been fired during the founding day festivities. The workers had pushed themselves so they could present a good product for Jude's inspection once he returned home. As such, Clovis also brought his scheduled visit forward to check on the goods before they were shipped to Ist.

The quality of the white porcelain turned out excellent and should be enough to capture Ist's interest. With that confirmed, they set about preparing the ship for their trip to Erdal to meet with Dudley Hopkins, Ist's president.

"Since you're already here, why don't you come with us, Clo? A cruise will be nice, especially with good winds, as long as you don't mind the swaying."

"Well, it might be fun to take a trip like that once in a while."

"Ooh, how rare!" Jude exclaimed, arms crossed. "I was so sure you'd reject my offer because Princess Alicia is waiting for you! ...So, what's the story?"

"What do you mean?"

Clovis blinked at Jude's sudden change in tone, but the marquis just smiled and looked at him with bright green eyes.

"You may not realize it, but your expression stiffens every time the princess's name is brought up. You can talk to me if there's been any trouble."

"No, there's nothing of—"

"Nothing? That won't fool me..." Jude's voice dropped to a whisper. "You were so happy during the festivities, so what happened after that?"

"Huh?"

Clovis panicked, unsure of what to say. After a moment, he reined in his shock. But before he could question Jude about his intentions, a knight appeared at the end of the port.

Clovis frowned. The man was dressed like a member of the imperial guard, not someone from the northern knight division like Robert.

The knight quickly spotted Clovis, deftly dodging the crowds of people to

hurry towards them.

“Adviser Clovis Cromwell, I bear an urgent message from Chief Adviser Nigel Otto from the castle.”

Clovis’s frown deepened at these words. Nigel should have been in Sheraford on an inspection, so why had the message come from Egdiel? Suspicious, he broke the seal and read through the letter, his violet eyes widening in surprise.

“It can’t be...”

Jude glanced at the adviser with concern, but Clovis ignored the marquis as he read the letter again. His hands started to tremble.

Riddhe Sutherland had been arrested, and war was imminent. Princess Alicia was on her way to Erdal to diffuse the situation.

That was all the letter contained, without any instructions for Clovis.

“...I need to leave for the capital now,” he said darkly.

“No! Please wait, Adviser Cromwell!”

Clovis stopped and turned back impatiently to the knight and saw that the man was holding two more letters.

“This letter bears the message from His Majesty that Adviser Cromwell does not need to return to the castle immediately... And the other is from Her Highness.”

“...From Her Highness.” Clovis gulped as he took the two letters. Looking down at them, he opened the one from King James.

*--You must be shocked and worried after learning that Cia is heading to Erdal, but you are not needed back at the castle right now. I have another task for you.*

Clovis read on in all seriousness, then couldn’t help but gasp when he read the next section.

*--By the way, Clovis, I’m aware of what’s going on, but I won’t spell it out here. I will just say that, yes, isn’t my treasure so lovely and charming?*

“Wh-Wh-What...?!” Clovis sputtered.

“Hey, are you all right?”



Jude shook the stunned Clovis lightly by the shoulder, which helped him break out of his shock. King James's bombshell confession had buried his heart with confusion, but there was no time to waste on that now.

*--So, Cia has headed into Erdal from Viola, which, as you know, is a land trading post. By coincidence or luck, you are in Held, a port town a day away from Sampston, if you happen to be on a large sailing ship.*

The wind blew hard, spraying his cheeks with the salty tang of the waves. The king's letter then issued his command.

*--Sail to Erdal, Clovis. Save Cia and Heilland. If you can do that, then I'll bestow my treasure to you.*

Clovis was silent, his expression blank, as he unrolled Alicia's letter. Unlike the king's, this one only contained a single sentence, written in a familiar hand.

...However, that one sentence completely repainted his world.

"...Hahaha!"

"C-Clo?"

"Adviser Cromwell?"

Jude and the knight looked at each other, confused, as Clovis burst into laughter, wondering if he'd gone mad from all the shocking news. Jude reached out, ready to comfort him, but Clovis quickly turned to him.

"I have a request, Jude."

"Whoa?!"

The marquis leaned back instinctively, surprised by the strong light shining in Clovis's violet gaze. He gulped, trying to grasp the situation, as Clovis continued calmly.

"Please, let us set sail immediately for Sampston. We're going to save Heilland...and her."



**WITHIN** a few hours, the sailing ship departed for the open sea, much ahead of schedule. Clovis stood on the bridge with his hand on the railing, gazing at

Erdal, faintly visible across the water.

On his way to the Marquisate of Rozen, and even after he reached Held, he'd been thinking hard. Now that he knew the truth about their previous lives, was he still worthy of being by Alicia's side? Should he give up his position as her adviser?

But no matter how hard he thought, he knew he couldn't do that.

Something in the back of his mind was screaming he couldn't go on like this.

She'd said a betrothal to Crown Prince Fritz might save Heilland, but that wasn't enough. A future without a happy ending for Alicia was worthless to Clovis.

...To be completely honest, he wanted a future where he could be by her side, not just as an adviser but as a partner who loved her and was loved in return.

*I've also become quite greedy.*

Clovis smiled bitterly as he shook his head. It was something he'd never dared to wish for back when his grandfather, Graham's, legacy still cursed him.

She had been the one to open up his world, teaching him to reach out. She had changed his life for the better.

So, was he worthy to be with her?

The days they'd spent together thus far had already answered that question, and he would continue to prove himself in the future, too. He wasn't hesitant anymore. Now, he would do whatever it took to get her back, to protect her smile and the kingdom.

...Now that he had finally found his answer, he would go to her.

"By the way, Clo. About Princess Alicia's letter..."

Jude joined him after confirming their course with the crew. Clovis turned around, his black hair flowing in the sea breeze, and the marquis smiled at him with a curious look.

"You laughed when you read her letter. Just what did she write in it?" he asked.

“Oh. Here it is. Feel free to read it; there’s nothing shameful inside.”

Jude smiled as he took the letter and read the tall, thin handwriting, but his expression morphed into surprise.

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

*--I need you.*

Jude shrugged as he passed the letter back to Clovis.

“I honestly expected more romantic sentiments.”

“Really?”

Clovis chuckled as he looked back to the sea, his eyes narrowing against the dazzling blue.

“She says that she needs me. Those words are more precious to me than any other.”

White sails billowed full under the blue sky, catching the wind and moving the ship forward rapidly. The young man looked straight into the future, preparing to save his beloved.



**THE** carriage passed through the main gate and headed towards Kingsley Castle.

Pulling back the curtain, Alicia peeked out and spotted a small building far beyond the garden: Mylene Hall. According to Beatrix, that was where Empress Elizabeth was residing during her recovery.

The building slipped out of sight, and the carriage slowed as it neared its destination. After it had come to a complete stop, the driver opened the door, and Alicia took a tentative step out.

Unlike her previous visit, there were no large crowds of citizens to greet her. Instead, guards lined both sides of the stairs leading to the large doors, standing motionless with the tips of their shining spears pointed towards the sky.

Behind Alicia, Lady Beatrix and the escort knights led by Robert alighted, and

the group made its way up the stairs. Soon, the large doors opened, revealing a thin figure waiting behind.

*Chancellor Yggdrasil...*

“We’ve been expecting you, Your Highness. Thank you for making the journey here.”

Alicia looked up as Yggdrasil pointed into the castle with a gentle smile that reminded her of the calm surface of a bottomless lake. It was just like the first time they met.

“Follow me. Prince Fritz is looking forward to seeing you again.”



“I was surprised to hear the news from Lady Crowne. You were in Sheraford on an inspection tour?”

“Yes, it was a coincidence. It must be fate that I could meet Lady Beatrix there and rush here in time,” Alicia answered carefully. She watched the chancellor’s back as he walked ahead of her. It was hard to imagine this kind and thoughtful man leading their countries into war. However, Riddhe’s letter and her memories from the previous life were enough to convince her that he was the mastermind they sought.

Still, she didn’t know why he insisted on taking Heiland. But no matter what his interests or beliefs were, she would not back down and let him have his way. She would sacrifice her entire soul to challenge the chancellor and save her people and kingdom from ruin, leading them to the future she’d been striving for ever since she was given this second chance.

Besides, the chancellor wasn’t her only opponent.

“Your Highness, I have brought Princess Alicia.”

“Enter.”

The crown prince’s response was curt as he signaled for the chancellor to return to his side. Alicia’s eyes narrowed as she saw Fritz seated upon Empress Elizabeth’s throne.

Fritz’s aura had drastically changed since she’d last seen him. His handsome

but expressionless face now held the sharpness of a finely honed blade, and his deep green eyes, just like his mother's, gazed upon Alicia coldly. He looked dignified on the throne, his stance filled with determination.

Leaning forward slightly on his elbows, he raised a brow and addressed her. "I'm surprised to see you came here uninvited after hearing the news... I admire your courage. Perhaps you don't know fear?"

"I fear the ties between our countries being severed and the shedding of the blood of innocents. That is the only reason I have come," Alicia said, holding her ground.

"Blood of innocents? You always know how to give the ideal answers." The crown prince's gaze turned sharper as the corner of his lip curled. But that was gone in a flash, and his expression returned to its usual bored look. "How unfortunate, then. You've come here with such conviction, but this whole precarious situation was caused by the scheming of your ignorant subject."

"I believe my strong will and justice will bring the truth to light, Your Highness."

"So you think him innocent?"

"Of course. I trust Riddhe. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have sent him here."

Fritz snorted at Alicia's answer. Then he took a piece of parchment and quill from the chancellor, signing it.

"Here's your permit," he declared as the chancellor passed the parchment to Alicia. "To ensure fairness, those who will take the witness stand are given a chance to meet with the accused. Apparently, that's our tradition; isn't that right, Yggdrasil?"

"Yes. It is as you said, Your Highness." The chancellor smiled.

His tone made Alicia shiver. If they were allowing her to meet with Riddhe so easily, it could only mean one thing. The trial outcome was mostly decided, and Heilland was in danger.

"That's all. The trial will begin tomorrow at noon. Until then, you are free to do whatever you please."

At the crown prince's signal, the guards opened the throne room doors. Alicia bowed slightly and turned to leave, but not before she looked up at Fritz one last time.

"Prince Fritz. There is one thing I'd like to ask you."

"What is it?" The crown prince tilted his head and probed.

Staring into his cold, deep green eyes, Alicia remembered the question Empress Elizabeth had posed to them that day while out riding on the hill.

"When Her Majesty asked us what a ruler was, you answered that a ruler holds all power and represents the country. Do you still believe that?"

The prince remained silent for a while as he stared at Alicia as if trying to find out her true intentions. Slowly, he opened his mouth.

"Yes. And that won't change... I know that you have a different answer, but that's where I beg to differ. It's not about who's right and who's wrong, so I choose to chase my own ideals. You're probably no different yourself," he finished with a smile.

Alicia nodded. "Yes. I will also stick to my beliefs, and that's why I'm here."

A quiet but intense spark ignited between the crown prince and Alicia before she turned and left the throne room.

The two were too different. Their ideals as royalty and how they viewed their countries were as different as night and day. As Fritz said, it wasn't about right or wrong, so there was no way she would be able to stop him with mere words.

...They had to win the trial.

"He's as stubborn as you, princess. This isn't going to be easy," Robert commented in his usual easygoing way. He'd been the only Heillander to accompany Alicia into the throne room while Beatrix and the other escort knights waited in a separate room. "So, now that you're a proper guest, what will you do next? No matter where you go, I'll be there to protect you."

"I'll be using this." Alicia smiled as she held up the permit from Fritz. Robert grinned as if he'd expected that answer all along.

"Of course."



**“YOUR** Highness?!”

Riddhe Sutherland bolted up in shock as Alicia descended the cold, dark steps into the dungeon, accompanied by Lady Crowne and Robert.

Seeing Riddhe in better shape than she’d expected despite his slightly dirty clothes, Alicia breathed a sigh of relief. Lady Crowne had informed her that aside from the wound on his head, Riddhe showed no other signs of injury, meaning that he hadn’t been tortured.

A guard unlocked the cell door, and Alicia rushed to Riddhe’s side.

“Riddhe! I’m so glad you’re all right...”

Riddhe looked between Alicia and Robert with confusion.

“How did you get to Erdal so quickly? I thought you’d arrive during the trial at the earliest, but...”

Lady Crowne had told him that she’d bring Alicia into Erdal as a last resort, though she didn’t hold out hope that King James would agree to it. Despite it all, the princess had rushed here so quickly, so it was natural for Riddhe to be surprised.

Before Alicia could explain what happened, they heard more footsteps coming down the stairs.

“Your Highness! Lady Beatrix!!”

“Charlotte!”

The red-haired girl dashed out from the shadows and into the cell when she spotted Alicia.

“I’m so glad Your Highness could come... I’m so sorry, Your Highness. My father and His Highness—”

“Don’t worry. Thank you for protecting Riddhe.” Alicia took Charlotte’s hand in gratitude, but the girl’s large eyes filled with tears.

If Beatrix and Charlotte weren’t on their side, Riddhe would have been in grave danger. The crown prince and chancellor could have had him executed

without a trial or arranged an “accident” that would cause his death, inciting war between the countries. The only reason that hadn’t happened was because of Charlotte, Fritz’s lover and emotional support.

So, where should they start?

Alicia, Riddhe, and Charlotte, all caught up in the maelstrom of politics, stood facing each other, at a loss for what to say.

Suddenly, two loud claps sounded out, pulling them from their thoughts. They turned to see Beatrix smiling with her hands clasped and a relaxed Robert, who stood with his arms loosely crossed.

“I know how all of you must feel right now, but let us calm down.”

“The lady is right. Ready? Breathe in; now breathe out. Feel better?” Robert teased.

“Y-Yes.”

“I guess so...”

“So, here we are,” Riddhe began, scratching at his cheek awkwardly.

Alicia blinked, and Charlotte giggled, and suddenly, the damp and dark atmosphere in the dungeon felt a little brighter.

Robert winked and raised his right hand elegantly. “Shall we update each other? My motto is ladies first, but that doesn’t matter now. Let’s start with you, Riddhe boy. Do tell us all that has happened to you since you arrived in Erdal.”



“**CHARLOTTE**, when will Mother get better?”

“Can’t we go to see Mother yet?”

“Your Highnesses...”

The sweet scent of seasonal flowers wafted through the air. Charlotte, sitting on the edge of the fountain in the courtyard of Kingsley Castle, was at a loss. The twin princesses were clinging to the hem of her dress and looking up at her anxiously, yet she had no answer for them.



She recalled the determination in Princess Alicia's sky-blue eyes in the dungeon.

After the knight, Robert, started the conversation, Riddhe and Charlotte told Alicia everything that had happened the night Empress Elizabeth was poisoned.

Charlotte had shared the story she'd already told Riddhe about how she came to suspect Fritz and her father. She also confessed about the special relationship she shared with Fritz to explain how she noticed the crown prince's strange behavior.

Her legs trembled with terror and guilt as she spoke about how Fritz had confessed his feelings for her and how they'd become secret lovers.

It was the first time she'd confided in anyone about her relationship with Fritz. He was the heir to Erdal's throne, while she was just the chancellor's daughter and an adopted one, at that. The crown prince had often told her not to worry about their status, but she'd never believed they could end up together.

Besides, Charlotte greatly admired Alicia and her dignified strength despite not having had much chance to interact. Thus, she felt that her relationship with Fritz was betraying Alicia and suffered from guilt.

Charlotte confessed everything with tears in her eyes, but Alicia showed no anger. On the contrary, the princess comforted and accepted her.

*"Thank you for telling me. It was so brave of you to confess it all."* The princess said as she hugged Charlotte, then nodded and told her to leave everything to her. Charlotte had been dazzled by the conviction in Alicia's eyes.

After that, Charlotte left the others and exited the dungeon. She'd sensed that Riddhe and Alicia had more to talk about but didn't want to share too much in her presence because of her connection to Fritz and her father.

"Charlotte, big brother has been so listless too."

"He looks so scary."

"We can't see Lord Riddhe either. Everyone tells us we can't."

"Charlotte, I wanna see Mother..."

Charlotte saw her lost and helpless look reflected in two pairs of eyes and reminded herself to pull it together. She thought of Alicia again and wished to be as reliable to the twins as the Heillander princess had been to her.

“Don’t worry, Lili and Lala.” Charlotte smiled as she took both princesses’ hands in her own. “Princess Alicia has come to us. She’ll work together with Lady Beatrix and Lord Riddhe. As for His Highness...”

“Big brother!!”

Liliana was looking behind her with wide eyes, and Charlotte stood and turned around. On the other side of the fountain, between the walkway framed by hedges, was Crown Prince Fritz, staring at them with expressionless eyes.

Her heart clenched in pain, but the crown prince spared her nothing more than a glance before calling to the twins.

“Liliana, Laurencia, it’s getting chilly, so go back to your rooms. Mother will be upset if either of you falls sick.”

“...Yes, big brother.”

The crown prince’s tone was kind but held no room for argument, and the twins walked obediently towards their maid. Before long, Charlotte was alone with Fritz.

It was their first time seeing each other since Lady Beatrix had confronted Fritz in the throne room and since Charlotte had shown the prince where her allegiance lay.

She waited for him to speak, but Fritz remained unmoving. Just as she was beginning to think of leaving, he suddenly stepped out and strode to her side.

“Your Highness, I—”

“Shut up.”

Suddenly, he grabbed her shoulders, closing the distance between them and crashing their lips together. The kiss was rough, cutting off her words and preventing her escape.

“I told you,” the crown prince muttered as he pulled away, glaring at her from between his messy blond hair. “I don’t care about your opinions. No matter

who you choose to follow, even if it's not me, I won't let you go."

Anger and desire raged in Fritz's eyes, and Charlotte remembered.

Back in the throne room, when she'd declared that she wanted to be Riddhe Sutherland's caretaker during his imprisonment, the crown prince had stopped and whispered these exact words in her ear before he'd stalked out.

*"I won't let you go."*

It was like that night at the banquet when he'd stolen her lips for the first time. The force that restrained her, his gaze, and everything about him spoke of a hidden strength but also of tragedy.

He didn't want to lose her; didn't want her to be taken away. That deep yearning cast a long shadow on his person.

But even so...

"No!"

With all the strength she could muster, Charlotte pushed at Fritz's chest, glaring sharply at the crown prince when he looked down at her.

"It's true that I'm weak. A powerless girl far beneath Your Highness, but I'm still me, and I won't give up on my goal to stop you!"

Fritz's face twisted in hurt. "Don't refuse me, Charlotte," he begged. "This empire will be mine. No one will get in my way, and no one can take away what's mine, and that includes you... Are you dissatisfied with the new world I'm creating?"

"Yes! Very much so!"

Fritz's grip on her shoulder loosened, perhaps frightened by the intensity of her yell. Seizing the chance, she brushed his hand off and took a few steps backward, putting some distance between them.

"Do you intend to become emperor for yourself, Your Highness?"

"...What?"

"You only think about yourself, Your Highness. If we go to war, what will happen to the weak? What will happen to Her Highnesses Lili and Lala? And

that's not all. Everyone in the city, in the whole empire, will weep and suffer!"

"And what about it? Commoners are made to obey and follow a great ruler."

"Yes, we can't fight back, nor can we change the world. Even if we get hurt, even when we're torn from our families, we have no choice but to accept it without complaint."

"That's..."

For the first time, she saw doubt in Fritz's eyes. As expected, he did not possess the cruelty to dismiss real tragedy so flippantly.

Charlotte didn't miss that slight change. She believed in her prince, in the kindness of the one who once protected her, and in the warmth of his gaze towards his twin sisters.

"I'll be waiting. Until you can truly love me and us."

"...Charlotte!"

Charlotte dashed away without looking back, flying through the hedges with the hem of her dress flapping. Fritz didn't chase her, but she didn't slow her pace.

When she finally stopped to catch her breath, she shook herself and looked up at the sky as it turned dark blue. A bright star was sparkling.

*"No one, not even my own mother, acknowledges me. Lost in the shadow cast by the great empress's glory, small disappointments accumulate with each passing day. You will never understand the weight and pain of that."*

Fritz's words ran through her mind.

He was right. Charlotte had driven him into a corner, but she didn't understand half of what he was going through, nor did she know how to share his burden and guide him down the right path.

"Your Highness... Fritz," she whispered. "Can you see it? The stars are so pretty. Can you see them?"

She hoped he was still in the garden, looking up at the same sky.

Hoped that the stars would show him the right path.



**THE** autumnal wind blew, and the fallen leaves danced. The sunlight filtering through the thin clouds was unexpectedly warm and calm. It was easy to forget that a fierce battle was about to begin.

“How do you feel, princess, knowing you’re about to confront a longtime adversary?”

They were in the carriage when Robert asked this of Alicia. Usually, the black-haired adviser would be riding with her, but in his absence, Robert took up the position as a knight sworn to protect the princess.

Alicia thought back on her exchange with Riddhe in the dungeon.

They’d talked about the mystery surrounding the man with the scarred hand, about Adam Fisher’s strange death, about rumors of chancellor Yggdrasil, the night of the poisoning, and the crown prince’s cold smile...

“I’m fine.” Alicia nodded. “Riddhe did his job well, and the truth he uncovered will be our weapon.”

“Haha! You’re as brave as usual, princess,” Robert chuckled sheepishly, then shrugged. “But if I can voice one complaint, it’s that he’s not here. Not that I’m praising him because he’s my friend, but Clovis is smart and quick-witted; there’s no one better suited for today’s showdown than him.”

“Agreed,” Alicia said with a laugh as she recalled what happened yesterday.

When Riddhe noticed Clovis’s absence, he’d become distraught, upset the adviser hadn’t come to rescue his precious rival.

“I wonder what he’s doing,” Robert mused. “Will he come to Erdal or stay in Heiland and plan some diplomatic strategy?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t give him any instructions in my letter...but knowing Clovis, he’ll surely come up with the best solution and save us from this crisis. I believe he can do it.”

“You really trust him.”

“Yes, with all my heart,” Alicia confirmed with a teasing smile. “You know, too, how he’s exceeded all expectations since I took his hand six years ago.”

“Without a doubt.”

Just then, the carriage slowed to a stop. Robert looked out the window, where the footman announced they’d arrived at Kingsley Castle.

Robert opened the door and stepped out, then turned to offer Alicia a hand. Looking up at the ornate Kingsley Castle towering before her, she took a deep breath and let it out, her sky-blue eyes filled with conviction.

“Let’s go,” she called to Robert, who was leading the escort knights, and Beatrix, who had also gotten off her own carriage. “I’ll protect Heiland...!”

The trial was to be held in the castle’s throne room. Three chairs, one of which was a throne, were arranged for the representatives who would act as judges.

Shortly after Alicia’s group arrived, Crown Prince Fritz also arrived, making his way to the throne. Chancellor Yggdrasil took a seat next to him while the third was taken by another man. If Alicia’s memory served her well, the man was a scholar who served as an adviser to Erdal’s rulers. Witnesses and Erdal’s nobility were also gathered to see the outcome of the trial.

Soon, the large doors opened with a heavy creak, revealing Riddhe Sutherland flanked by knights. The chains binding his hands clanked with each step. Perhaps noticing Alicia’s dark expression, Riddhe grinned at his princess in reassurance.

When he reached the center of the hall, Riddhe was tied to the witness stand.

“Please pardon the discomfort, Lord Riddhe of Heiland,” the knight said.

Hearing this, the crown prince piped up, “If you are indeed innocent, then please pardon us, but this trial will determine that soon.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Riddhe retorted. “It’s not necessarily bad to experience new things. This will become a heroic tale to tell my grandchildren someday.”

“I sincerely hope that such a day will come for you.”

Despite his words, Fritz’s tone was cold as he raised his right hand to signal the chancellor. Yggdrasil stood, declaring that Riddhe Sutherland was now on

trial on suspicion of attempting to assassinate Empress Elizabeth.



**NEEDLESS** to say, the trial was skewed against Riddhe. First to take the stand was the maid who witnessed Empress Elizabeth's collapse, followed by others who all accused Riddhe of being the culprit, backed by explanations and "proof."

Some of the evidence was clearly made up to provoke Riddhe and lead him to say something incriminating, which made Alicia cringe inwardly. The young man had mellowed out in recent years, but he used to be very hot-tempered. She feared that if the false accusations didn't stop, he would lapse back to his old personality.

But her worry was needless. Riddhe frowned in displeasure but didn't lash out, choosing instead to listen calmly from start to finish. He answered all questions in a cool manner, a testament to his inner strength and trust in Alicia.

"Your Highness, a moment of your time?"

They were having a short break after hearing from four witnesses, and Beatrix had slipped close to whisper in Alicia's ear.

"I've received a message from our ally, who is protecting Mister Albert. The situation has changed, and they will not join us here. They'll be providing alternate support elsewhere."

"What do you mean? Alternate support?" Alicia whispered back in surprise, but Beatrix frowned and shook her head.

"I don't know the details, but our ally...he will not betray us. Besides, he has a good reason to continue cooperating with us."

"But... So Albert won't take the stand?"

"No, but our ally assures us it will be worth it."

"I see..."

Alicia placed a hand on her chin and thought. Aside from Riddhe himself, Albert had also been present at the scene that night and was a valuable witness who knew the truth. Not being able to get his testimony was a setback, and his

failure to appear might put Heilland at a further disadvantage.

However, the Erdalians all knew that Albert was Riddhe's faithful servant. No matter what truth he spoke, the crown prince would probably dismiss his words as lies to protect Riddhe.

"...I understand. We'll try to make up for Albert's absence and do the best we can."

"Yes, that's exactly it." Beatrix nodded with a relieved smile.

Soon, the trial resumed, and she left Alicia's side to return to her seat.

In fact, Beatrix was next to take the stand. Proudly standing as a noblewoman, her light voice broke up the stagnant mood in the room, though she spoke with a clarity that befitted her status.

"I, Beatrix Crowne, hereby testify by the stars of heaven that my guest, Riddhe Sutherland, is innocent."

She spoke of what she knew about the night of the incident.

Riddhe Sutherland had been invited to Erdal on a special mission. The mission was not only approved by Princess Alicia but also by Empress Elizabeth herself.

On the night of the incident, Riddhe had met the empress to update her on the mission, which was why the empress had ensured that they were the only ones present in the room. Since they were working together to achieve the same goal, it was hard to imagine Riddhe wanting to poison Elizabeth.

Beatrix's clear explanation caused a ripple of shock through the assembled Erdalians.

Everyone was aware that Beatrix was on good terms with Heilland and was the one who invited Alicia back to Erdal. However, she was also one of the closest people to the empress, and her belief that Riddhe wasn't the culprit behind the assassination attempt planted a seed of doubt in everyone's minds.

The true battle was unfolding. It was no longer about Erdal versus Heilland but about the crown prince and the empress's fight for the throne.

The revelation was frightening, and the people looked between the crown prince on the throne, staring down coldly at everyone, and the peaceful Beatrix



in her seat, searching for an answer. Meanwhile, the elderly scholar, one of the three representatives, spoke up.

“Thank you for your testimony, Lady Crowne. But what exactly is the special mission you mentioned? Unless that is revealed, we cannot judge the strength of the alliance between Lord Sutherland and Her Majesty.”

Beatrix chose not to answer, shaking her head.

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s a special mission, after all. Why don’t we ask someone in the know?”

At that, the people turned to see Princess Alicia, the Blue Rose of Heilland, get to her feet.



**UNDER** the scrutiny of everyone present, Alicia calmly walked to the center of the room and took the witness stand next to Riddhe.

Alicia observed the Erdalians with her sky-blue eyes. Lady Crowne was amazing, gathering all attention on Alicia through her skillful direction and words.

However, Chancellor Yggdrasil and Crown Prince Fritz showed no signs of panic. They’d probably already predicted that Alicia was Heilland’s trump card.

Casually resting his cheek on his hand, Fritz gave a faint smile. Beside him, Yggdrasil gave a slight nod.

“Thank you for your time, Your Highness. You may give your testimony.”

“Thank you.”

Alicia let out a small sigh to calm down, then straightened and spoke in a dignified voice to the crowd.

“Lady Crowne’s testimony is true. I, Alicia Chester, formed a secret alliance with Her Majesty during my last trip, and we agreed to have Riddhe Sutherland stationed in Erdal. Hence, there is no reason for him to harm Her Majesty. That’s all I can say.”

With that, Alicia gave a polite curtsy.

The crowd, however, broke out in an uproar as the witness chose not to reveal anything. Alicia stood firm, looking straight ahead. Suddenly, Fritz stood and waved a hand as if trying to silence the confusion that had overtaken the room.

“Alicia. Are you making a fool of this trial and of Erdal?”

“No, Your Highness. I am not.”

“Then why don’t you tell us the entire truth?”

“As I mentioned, I’ve said all I can say.”

“What?”

Confused whispers broke out throughout the room again until Alicia raised her voice and spoke clearly.

“The alliance between Her Majesty and I was formed on the basis of mutual agreement. Thus, I cannot testify alone. So, in order to ensure a fair trial, I request to have Her Majesty called as a witness.”

The crowd stared at each other, unable to believe what they’d heard, but Alicia’s sky-blue eyes were focused only on the crown prince. Fritz stood motionless, stunned, while Chancellor Yggdrasil frowned apologetically.

“My sincere apologies, but we cannot do that. Her Majesty is currently recuperating in bed. That is why us representatives are overseeing the trial in her stead.”

“I understand. However, I heard Her Majesty’s condition is already stable. Even if she can’t stay for the whole trial, she can surely be present for a few minutes.”

“That’s not up to me... The medic will have to approve it.”

“Then, at least allow me to visit Mylene Hall to get Her Majesty’s approval.”

“My answer remains the same. Please understand, Your Highness.”

“...I see.”

Yggdrasil remained rational, his tone sincere, as he addressed Alicia. His argument made sense, so everyone expected the princess to accept it, but...

“That’s going against our promise, Chancellor Yggdrasil.” Suddenly, Alicia’s voice turned stern and questioning as she shook her head.

“Promise? What promise?” For the first time since Alicia took the stand, Crown Prince Fritz’s eyes moved away from her to stare at Yggdrasil.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what Your Highness is talking about,” Yggdrasil replied, head tilted in suspicion.

“Are you playing innocent? Apart from Her Majesty, the Lord Chancellor has also formed your own alliance with Heilland, haven’t you?”

“What are you talking about? I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Have you forgotten about this?”

With that, Alicia threw something onto the table before her. The rolled scroll crinkled as it landed on the wood.

The chancellor’s frown deepened as Fritz ordered a guard to bring the scroll over. Once in hand, he quickly unrolled it, and his eyes widened.

“What’s this...?!” He choked out.

“I swear on Heaven’s guardian star to welcome you as a friend.”

The one who spoke the words written on the scroll aloud was not Alicia but Riddhe Sutherland, who’d remained silent until now. Usually, the accused was not allowed to speak without permission, but the Erdalians were all too stunned to criticize him.

Riddhe glared at Chancellor Yggdrasil with fire in his eyes.

“Eric Yggdrasil, you were the one who invoked this ancient oath and stamped it with the seal of Julius the Conqueror’s black horse.”

“No! It can’t be!!” Crown Prince Fritz shouted. Distraught, he turned to the chancellor. “You were the one who signed the oath...? But...” His voice trailed off as he shook his head.

Alicia’s assumption had been right.

When she’d spoken with Fritz alone in the garden on the night of the banquet, he hadn’t seemed eager to overthrow his mother and take the throne

in her place. That meant that his current ambition was born after that night.

From there, it was easy to conclude that the alliance between the chancellor and crown prince was formed recently. In other words, no trust existed between the two, and Alicia was determined to destroy this fragile relationship.

So she had hinted at the shocking “truth” and Fritz’s greatest fear: that the chancellor was betraying him. With the oath, she’d suggested that Yggdrasil had formed a secret alliance with Heilland, breaking the already fragile trust between the two and raising the crown prince’s suspicions.

*But to be fair, I hadn’t expected it to go this well...*

A bead of sweat trickled down Alicia’s forehead as she watched a clearly upset Fritz glare at the chancellor.

Of course, she and Riddhe were speaking half-truths. Yggdrasil had signed an oath with Loid Sutherland, but it had been to destroy the relationship between Erdal and Heilland, not to strengthen it.

If the crown prince calmed down, he would quickly realize this was a trap.



**HOWEVER**, the only thing Fritz felt was panic.

The truth was that he’d poisoned his own mother, even if it was just with a numbing drug. The pain of being betrayed by his beloved, the one he was doing all this for. The suspicion that his only ally, the chancellor, was working to fulfill his own motives. All of it tormented Fritz, and Alicia’s surprise attack caused him to explode into uncontrollable anxiety.

If Alicia spoke the truth, then the chancellor could very well have formed the alliance to frame him.

In that case, would it be right to support Yggdrasil’s decision to keep Empress Elizabeth away from the trial? Rather than hang on to the treacherous relationship with the chancellor, wouldn’t it be wiser to summon his mother and blame Yggdrasil for everything?

“Please, please make a decision,” Alicia pleaded.

“No, Your Highness! She is lying!” Yggdrasil shouted.

“Your Highness!”

“Your Highness!”

Alicia and Yggdrasil’s voices echoed throughout the room, and it took all of Fritz’s willpower not to scream at them to shut up. He had to decide what to do next.

To believe the chancellor and deny Alicia’s request.

Or to overrule the chancellor and grant Alicia’s request.

...Which was the path to his salvation?

Before he could answer, the door to the throne room burst open, and a knight rushed in. With a hurried bow, he moved to Fritz, apologized again to the crowd, and whispered something in the crown prince’s ear.

“We’ve received word that our citizens are gathering outside the main gate. There are several hundred present already, with more coming. The Royal Capital Guard is responding to the situation, but there is a possibility that a riot will break out if this continues. Please tell us how to proceed...”



**IN** the early hours of the day of Riddhe Sutherland’s trial, a ship from Heilland arrived in the port town of Sampston.

Due to the tense situation between the two countries, the Coast Guard was initially reluctant to allow the ship to dock. However, a strong request from Dudley Hopkins of Ist Company cut through the red tape, and the crew was permitted to land.

Dudley intervened because the ship belonged to the Mercurius Company. Though the ship had arrived far ahead of schedule, they still had arranged to meet. Moreover, Dudley’s extraordinary business intuition told him that the Heillanders were sure to bring a priceless gift to the meeting.

The Coast Guard was less convinced and leveled cold glares at him, whispering that the president was acting willfully again because he had the empress’s favor. Despite that, Dudley stood proud in the harbor, his small eyes narrowing as he spotted the man who’d just stepped off the ship.

“Dudley! My friend!”

“Lord Nicol, I’m glad you made it safely.”

Jude Nicol, the Marquis of Rozen, strode forward and clasped the shorter man in a hug while Dudley gave Jude a pat on the back. Pulling away, Jude looked down at the chubby president of Ist.

“Wow, you really helped us. The Coast Guard was so thick-headed, they would have turned us back to Held if you hadn’t stepped in... We almost had to dock at that cliff over there and climb into Erdal.”

“Let’s be thankful you didn’t have to resort to that. It’s a pain for Ist to cover for smugglers entering our empire unless it’s worth the effort.” Dudley looked up at Jude with a raised brow as the two walked along. Jude just smiled mischievously in return.

“Oh, you’ll find this extremely worthwhile—much more than you can imagine! In fact, today’s gift comes with an intended bonus, too... And whether the gift is yours to claim will depend on your next actions.”

With that, Jude turned back and signaled to the ship. Dudley turned as well to see Princess Alicia’s adviser, Clovis Cromwell, make his way off the ship, a nondescript robe clutched in hand.

Dudley’s eyes widened at the sight of the Heillander princess’s closest subject before him, then burst into laughter.

“I see, I see!” Dudley laughed heartily. “This is indeed an amazing gift! Rejoice, Lord of Rozen; the guardian star must be smiling upon you.”

Clovis and Jude looked at each other, relieved at Dudley’s unexpectedly welcome reception. Soon, they were leaving Sampston in a carriage.

It was strange to see Dudley in such a hurry, but the president must have been as desperate for time as they were. Luckily, Ist’s carriage passed through all the checkpoints without issue, and the group quickly arrived at Kingsley. Stopping at Ist’s office in the capital, Clovis finally learned why Dudley was in such a good mood.

“Lord Clovis?! Why are you here?!”

The one who had shouted looked at Clovis with wide eyes, reflecting the adviser's exact response. Pressing a hand to his temple, Clovis took a moment to gather his thoughts, then looked once again at Albert, House Sutherland's servant.

"I'm glad you're safe, Mister Albert. Could you please update me on the situation right away?"



***"GO, Al. Go to the foreign minister's residence and look for Lady Crowne. Tell her the truth about what happened here."***

Riddhe had just ordered Albert to escape through the window into the garden and look for help, so how did he end up at Ist's office?

Fortunately, the clouds had hidden the moon on the night of Albert's escape. Since all the guards had rushed to Empress Elizabeth, Albert escaped from Kingsley Castle without much fuss. But that was the start of his problems.

The moment Riddhe was arrested, it became clear that the servant who usually accompanied him was missing. Soon, the Royal Capital Guard began patrols in search of Albert.

Following Riddhe's instructions, Albert made his way to the Crowne mansion as stealthily as he could, but the guards had already been alerted, and a large number were stationed around it, making it impossible for Albert to approach.

Despite that, he had to press on. Riddhe's life depended on it. His master might not be executed immediately, but he would not be safe until Albert could get the truth to Lady Beatrix.

He could try to force his way past the guards. It would be risky, but he would be safe as long as he could get to Lady Crowne...

Decision made, Albert was about to dash out of the bushes when someone grabbed his shoulder. It was Barnabas McGregor, vice chairman of Ist.

"Mister Barnabas, why did you protect Albert?" Clovis asked the man seated across from him. He had joined the group at Ist's office in Kingsley, and the five men were now seated in a private room together.

“Why...? It’ll take quite a bit of time to explain that.” Pushing his hair back with a hand, Barnabas explained how he’d come to work with Beatrix to protect Albert.

In fact, Barnabas had spotted Albert in the bushes by chance. After his workday, he’d exited Ist’s office to a city flooded with guards and rampant gossip about the empress’s dire situation. Even more surprising was the news that Heillander Riddhe Sutherland had been arrested as the culprit.

Barnabas had headed immediately to the Crowne mansion, where Riddhe was staying. Ever since the man revealed that he was also looking into the case of his best friend, Adam Fisher, Barnabas had been curious about Riddhe and his secret mission.

However, he arrived to see the Royal Capital Guard swarming the mansion. Anxious, he’d thought about heading to the Yggdrasil mansion instead to look for Charlotte but spotted Albert in the darkness just as he was about to leave.

“I then brought Mister Albert here and learned that the man who framed Lord Riddhe...and the man who killed my friend was Lord Yggdrasil.”

In a pained voice, Barnabas confessed that he’d always suspected it. There was only one person whom Adam could be so loyal and protective of, and that was Yggdrasil, the man who discovered him at the orphanage.

Barnabas hadn’t wanted to believe it, but like a stain spreading on fabric, the doubt grew within him. That was when he put aside his grief and mourning and started to investigate Adam’s death zealously, hoping to clear the suspicion surrounding the benefactor he respected so much.

However, contrary to his hopes, his doubts turned into truth.

Barnabas was conflicted. Yggdrasil was his benefactor but also the one who took his friend’s life, the confidante of the empress, and the sponsor of Ist. How was he going to face up to Eric Yggdrasil?

In the end, he’d gotten in touch with Beatrix and offered to shelter Albert, promising to deliver him safely to Kingsley Castle for Riddhe’s trial.

“I was an orphan and now am vice president of Ist. Either way, I can’t sit back and watch the war happen. I have to uncover his true motives and then sort my



inner self out. Nothing else matters.”

He’d shared his plans with Dudley, who showed support. It was a good chance for Ist to repay their favor to Beatrix and the empress. Even if Riddhe was found guilty and their plot was discovered by the chancellor, they decided it would be fine as long as Barnabas took the fall on his own.

“Well, fate sure loves to play tricks. Just how many coincidences did it orchestrate to gather us all here?” Jude smiled with a shrug. “Nevertheless, I guess it’s a relief. The trial should start soon. We’ll head to the castle together with Albert and meet up with Princess Alicia, then decide how to deal with the chancellor.”

“...Is that really the best plan?”

In contrast to Jude’s enthusiasm, Clovis remained pensive as he placed a hand on his chin in thought. Seeing the adviser’s unexpected reaction, the marquis tilted his head.

“What are you saying, Clo? We’ve already come this far. Didn’t you cross the sea to get to Princess Alicia?”

Ignoring Jude’s question, Clovis turned to Barnabas. “Mister Barnabas, can you get word to Lady Crowne?”

The vice president blinked in surprise but answered quickly.

“We update each other once or twice per day. She will send a messenger, and I’ll send him back with an update. Our last communication was this morning.”

“Has Lady Crowne said anything about Empress Elizabeth? Are they able to see each other?”

“No, she said she was not allowed to visit Her Majesty. I think she requested an audience multiple times, but the medic always rejected the suggestion.”

“I see. The medic must be following orders from Chancellor Yggdrasil, then?”

“Strictly speaking, it’s His Highness Fritz’s orders. I heard that since Her Majesty collapsed, His Highness has taken charge of the castle. However, Lord Yggdrasil is probably advising him in reality.”

Clovis mulled over Barnabas’s answer for a moment.

Needless to say, the only one who could change the verdict of the trial was Empress Elizabeth. Alicia and the others probably knew it, too, and would try all methods to bring the empress over, but the chancellor would be working against them.

However, even if the plan worked and they could bring the empress out, would things go well from there?

What Clovis didn't know was if Empress Elizabeth was still allied with Alicia. Beatrix probably knew the answer but chose to keep it, specifically Dudley Hopkins, in the dark, afraid that the president would withdraw his support. Either way, the chancellor was definitely supporting Crown Prince Fritz, or he wouldn't have done something as bold as poisoning his own mother.

Elizabeth was known for her harsh personality and would certainly not forgive the chancellor for his deeds, but how would she react if she found out that her son and heir, Fritz, was an accomplice? Would she side with the chancellor to protect the crown prince and seal Riddhe's fate?

Alicia and her allies couldn't contact the empress before the trial, so everything hinged on the trial itself. King James had also asked him to save Alicia. He didn't say that Clovis had to meet up with her.

So, what was his best course of action?

How could he help Alicia?

"I'm heading to Kingsley Castle, but not for the trial. I have something to accomplish first."

Everyone in the room turned to him. His next words were received with a mix of expectation and interest.

"Everyone, I'll need your help to get me to Empress Elizabeth."



A few hours later, a crowd gathered at Kingsley Castle's main gate. It started with about a hundred people, but the commotion attracted more, and now the number had swelled to a few hundred.

At first glance, they looked like they were on the verge of a riot, but they had

no weapons. Instead, they raised clenched fists and shouted in anger.

“Let the star bless Her Majesty! Death to the traitors!”

“Long live Empress Elizabeth! Long live Erdal!”

A flag emblazoned with the silhouette of Erdal’s black horse fluttered, and people bravely raised their fists in support. They were calling for the criminal who poisoned Empress Elizabeth to be brought to justice.

The soldiers guarding the main gate were at a loss as to how to deal with the situation. The people’s patriotism and deep loyalty to the empress were driving their anger towards the one who harmed her. If that was the case, was there any real reason to drive the crowd away?

However, the crowd was growing out of control, and a spark could turn the scene into a riot. So, a knight was assigned to report the situation to the crown prince in the throne room.

What went unnoticed was that most of the crowd was originally made up of merchants. Furthermore, all were affiliated with Ist or from companies with ties to Ist. Among them, a tall, slender man held the flag high and shouted.

“Long live Erdal! Come on, everyone! Let’s make our voices heard even within the castle!”

The chubby man beside him, the instigator of the commotion, also spoke up. “That’s enough, Lord Nicol. It won’t do to have you stand out so conspicuously.”

Despite Dudley’s warning, Jude puffed out his chest with pride.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m a recluse noble. Nobody in the castle will recognize me.”

Dudley shrugged and looked at the other citizens in the crowd. Jude had a point. The Marquis of Rozen was barely known in Erdal, and they were standing quite far back from the castle gate. It should be safe.

“But this is amazing,” Jude laughed. “I can’t believe you organized this in such a short time.”

“Of course. I won’t promise something I cannot deliver. In other words, once we receive an order, we’ll do everything in our power to exceed the customer’s expectations. That’s the essence of Ist.” Dudley paused and glared at Jude.

“Besides, we have no choice but to run like a workhorse when you dangle such a tasty carrot before us. Your negotiations were a tad unfair.”

“It was,” Jude agreed with a grin. Having seen that same grin just hours before, Dudley’s expression soured even more.



“**YOU** have two choices. Help us, and the gift is yours. Or you can withdraw and let the gift slip away.”

Clovis had just shared his strategy with the group in Ist’s office. Dudley had been reluctant until Jude held up a beautiful piece of white porcelain and started “negotiations.”

Even so, Dudley hadn’t agreed right away. If he followed Clovis’s plan and Riddhe lost the trial, Ist could get into trouble.

But Jude didn’t back down. On the contrary, he pressed even harder.

“Look. If you back out, you won’t be the only one who loses the gift. If war breaks out, I plan to close the research facility in Rozen and destroy all porcelain research done over the generations.”

Dudley gasped in shock.

“What...?! Are you insane?! As the sponsor of the research, you, of all people, should know the true value of porcelain. We can’t destroy it, no matter the reason. In fact, after our countries are devastated by war, we’ll need treasure to rebuild it!”

“But I have no choice. This is my only bargaining chip.”

Jude’s answer was calm as he traced the white finish of the porcelain with a slender finger. Dudley swallowed thickly at the look of sadness on his face. It was clear that the marquis was serious about getting rid of all the porcelain research should the need arise.

“Don’t worry. If you help us, you’ll get the gift, no matter what the outcome is. Of course, if everything goes well, I’ll work to add color to the porcelain. Heh, that’s right. The first series produced by Rozen will be named The Blue Rose. What shall I do after that? Maybe I’ll make a pattern that appeals to Empress

Elizabeth. What do you think?”

That was the deciding factor. Dudley accepted the terms and utilized Ist’s network to gather people and start a commotion at the castle.



“**YOU** surprise me, Lord Nicol.” Dudley shook his head as people around them raised their fists. “You always said that you cared about nothing other than Rozen, business, and porcelain, but that was a lie.”

“That’s not fair. I didn’t lie. In fact, I am surprised to learn about my true self,” Jude said happily, his eyes crinkling as he thought of his princess fighting the battle within the castle. “I used to envy Erdal, but Heiland is where the fun is now! I can proudly say that I love my country and will continue to do so. Because the future she is dreaming of is just so captivating!”

Jude’s voice then dropped, gentleness creeping into his tone.

“That’s why I want to help her. I want to repay the one who has changed me, and I’m willing to invest anything to do so.”

“You’re quite in love with her, aren’t you? I know that feeling, too,” Dudley admitted quietly. Because, contrary to his own expectations, he’d grown to feel the same for Empress Elizabeth.

Suddenly, a shout came from behind them. A horse-drawn carriage had pulled up but couldn’t get through to the castle due to the crowd. Pointing at the carriage, Jude yelled.

“Look. Seems like we’re finally getting started.”

“So it seems.”

Dudley watched the commotion with hands held behind his back, just like when he met Jude at Sampston. Then, his eyebrow twitched.

“If my carriage gets destroyed because of this, I will charge Mercurius for it.”

“Didn’t I say I’m willing to invest anything?” Jude countered with a smile. “Carriage or horse, it doesn’t matter. So let’s take this to the top!”

The carriage was still stuck, unable to move forward. The emblem of Ist

decorated the door, and soon it opened to reveal Barnabas, the vice president, as he started arguing with the assembled citizens.

“That’s why I’m telling you! I don’t have time to argue with you guys. Now, give way, and let me pass!”

However, the crowd remained firm, yelling for Barnabas to leave and get out of there. Of course, most were following Dudley’s orders on what to do. Anyone who knew the men would never believe that they’d get into an argument with Ist’s vice president.

Thankfully, none of the guards knew much about merchant affairs, and they watched the escalating argument with growing concern.

They had been told that Riddhe Sutherland’s servant would arrive via the gate, escorted in one of Ist’s carriages, to testify at the trial.

Thus, as soon as they recognized the carriage, they assumed Albert was inside.

Fortunately, the rest of the crowd was unaware that Albert was under the protection of Ist. If they discovered the man in the carriage was the servant of the Heillander on trial, a real riot would probably break out.

A knight stationed inside the main gate tutted, then turned to give instructions to his subordinates. They were to clear the way for the carriage before things got out of hand. To achieve that, they would need backup at the main gate.

Upon receiving the order, several units patrolling the castle headed to the gate. Only the ones guarding the throne room where the trial was taking place remained at their stations.

The troops patrolling Mylene Hall and Empress Elizabeth were also mobilized. Seeing that Mylene Hall was far from the gate and thus safe from danger, only a bare minimum number stayed behind to guard the villa.

Two figures watched as the security at Mylene Hall dwindled.

“Wow... It’s all happening as you predicted, Lord Clovis,” Albert breathed in admiration as the soldiers headed towards the main gate.

However, Clovis remained cool and indifferent despite Albert's admiring gaze.

"I have a close friend among the knights of the Imperial Guard, so I kind of understand how men are deployed. You did well, too, Mister Albert. We wouldn't have gotten in here without you."

"The others helped by drawing attention to the main gate, but I didn't think I'd have to scale the castle wall again." Albert scratched at his cheek in embarrassment, and Clovis smiled at him.

While Jude and Dudley's people were gathering at the main gate, Clovis and Albert climbed over the eastern wall and snuck onto the grounds of Kingsley Castle.

Albert had passed through here on the night when the empress was poisoned and knew that it was a good spot. The wall was high, but the area was far from buildings and covered with trees. Now, with all attention on the main gate, it was child's play to scale the wall and get close to Mylene Hall without being noticed.

But the main task lay ahead. Their goal was to speak to Empress Elizabeth; to do that, they had to enter Mylene Hall.

After checking that the area was clear of guards, the pair moved.

Their plan was to stay hidden while moving forward as much as possible to avoid making a fuss and attracting attention. If they encountered any guards, one would act as a distraction while the other snuck behind to strike the enemy unconscious. They only had to do this twice, once at the entrance of the building and once before the door leading into the room where they thought the empress lay.

"I wonder how the trial is going?" Albert frowned with worry as he pushed the unconscious, tied-up guard into a shadowy corner. "It's been a while since it started. If Master has already been found guilty, I..."

"I have a plan in case that happens, but for now, please focus on our current mission," Clovis encouraged.

For a moment, Alicia's figure appeared in his mind's eye.

Naturally, Clovis had anticipated every possible outcome and had thought of various strategies. At this very moment, she was fighting against Yggdrasil and Fritz. As her longtime adviser and irreplaceable partner, he needed to believe in her.

Checking Albert was ready, Clovis placed a hand on the door and boldly pushed it open.

The first thing that caught his eye was the large window leading to a balcony and the magnificent garden that spread beyond it. Then, Albert quickly noticed a tall woman standing with her back to them, looking down at the garden below her.

Taking a step into the room, Clovis got down on one knee. Albert hurriedly followed as the adviser called out to the woman.

“Please forgive our audacity. I am Clovis Cromwell, adviser to Her Highness, Princess Alicia of Heilland. Please grant us an audience.”

“How strange. Aren’t you already here? What do I have to forgive?”

The woman’s low voice echoed through the room. Raising his bowed head slightly, Albert snuck a peek at the empress, clad in a shiny golden dress, as she looked down at them.

Albert was confused. The empress was beautiful and dignified but lacked the intimidating aura that had made her infamous. Her expression was grim, but her voice was quiet as she addressed Clovis.

“Tell me. What do you want? What do you wish from me? ...I’m sure you’ve realized why I’m staying put in Mylene. Or do you think that my fate is intertwined with Alicia’s?”

It was just as Clovis had expected.

The crown prince was probably the one who requested for his mother to stay in Mylene Hall during the trial, and Elizabeth had agreed. That explained why so few soldiers were stationed here. If the empress hadn’t been willing to stay, the security around the villa would have been much tighter.

And there was only one reason that had caused the fierce Empress Elizabeth



to hesitate.

“I believe it is possible to reach a mutual compromise. That is why I have come,” Clovis declared as he looked up and placed a hand upon his chest, his beautiful violet eyes fixed on the empress. “Please trust me. I’ll carve out the ideal path, both for my mistress, Her Highness Alicia, and for His Highness Fritz, too.”







**THE** commotion at the main gate of Kingsley Castle had reached its peak. As guards gathered to let Ist's carriage pass, the crowd grew enraged, with skirmishes breaking out here and there.

One of the knights guarding the gate was stumped. It would be easy to draw his sword, but a riot was sure to happen if he cut someone down. The crown prince had also commanded them to handle the situation with care and avoid violence. So, what was the best way to deal with this?

Just then, the mood shifted. Surprise and agitation spread like a wave among the guards inside the gate.

The knight turned back to see what was happening, but before he could find the cause, the opening of the main gate caught him by surprise.

"Close the gate!! Who gave permission to open it?!!"

Screaming loudly, the knight pushed back through the guards towards the gate again. However, that soon became unnecessary as the guards moved to the left and right, opening up a single path from the main gate to where the knight stood.

When he saw what was at the end of the path, the knight's shock increased as he fell to his knees.

A woman on a black horse, the symbol of Erdal, looked down at the people, the castle glittering behind her. Her wavy hair, reminiscent of the scorching sun, and golden dress fit for an empress flowed down over the back of her horse.

"Your Majesty...!!"

"Make way."

Her voice was quiet, but her command cut through the air. The knights and guards panicked as they rushed to the sides, creating a path for Empress Elizabeth as she rode forward, accompanied by Clovis and Albert.

"Listen, people of Erdal!!" the empress shouted as she turned to look at the citizens. "A usurper with evil in his heart is attempting to steal the crown in my absence. But I will not yield, for he believes in no faith and works with no

justice.”

Clovis reverently raised his sword and handed it to the empress, who held it straight in front of her.

“If you love peace and seek prosperity, follow me! I am protected by the guardian star!!”

The black horse neighed, and an earth-shattering cheer followed. The people followed the empress as she rode forward, and before the guards could even react, they rushed into the castle after her.

“Th-This is amazing!” Albert yelled excitedly to Clovis as he chased after the empress, jostled left and right by the enthusiastic crowd. “I don’t know how to describe it. It’s like being part of a revolution!”

“A revolution,” Clovis chuckled. “I guess that’s what this is.”

“Is something the matter, Lord Clovis?”

Albert frowned as a strange smile spread across the adviser’s face, but Clovis shrugged lightly.

“Actually, I guess this is my second time joining a revolution.”

“Second time? Have you experienced one before?”

“In the distant past, or, should I say, in a future that is no more.”

Albert’s confusion deepened at Clovis’s strange response, but that was to be expected. The only one who could understand his words in this world was Alicia.

Clovis smiled and shook his head.

“I’m sorry, I was just joking. Let us go and rescue our princess.”



**AFTER** the knight’s whispered report to the crown prince, Riddhe Sutherland’s trial was put on hold as the most important representative, namely Fritz, left the throne room.

The plan seemed to be going well. Returning to her seat, Alicia glanced at Chancellor Yggdrasil over the sea of people as he sat next to the empty throne.

The man had tried to follow Fritz when he'd left the room but was told to stay back by the prince himself. Though she couldn't hear their conversation, Alicia saw that Fritz didn't even look at the chancellor once, waving a hand as if to dismiss his argument.

In any case, they'd succeeded in the first step of creating a rift between the two. But she was still concerned. What had made the crown prince leave so urgently?

A long time passed. Something major must have happened to warrant this, and it could be a setback for their side. Ideally, they should have continued striking while the crown prince was disoriented and won the battle.

That said, they'd come well-prepared for this possibility and had several backup plans. Now, if only they could find out what was happening outside...

Just then, the door opened, and the crown prince reentered the throne room. Everyone stood while he made his way back to the throne, and once he was seated, he signaled for the rest to do the same.

"We'll pick up where we left off. Take the stand, Alicia."

She stood and returned to the witness stand next to Riddhe. "Is everything all right? Has anything happened outside?" she asked.

"Nothing that concerns you or anyone else here."

Stonewalled, Alicia just curtsied. In response, Fritz raised his voice to address the room. "As the representative of the empress, I hereby grant Princess Alicia's request."

The chancellor's brow twitched as the crowd murmured.

"If I may speak, Your Highness," surprisingly, it was the third representative, the scholar, who spoke up. "I'm afraid Your Highness is not the only representative of this trial. Following the rules set by our ancestors, the decision to grant a request from Her Highness Alicia should be decided by all three representatives..."

"Are you saying that you are dissatisfied with the decision of the crown prince of Erdal?" Fritz asked calmly, though the gaze he leveled at the elderly scholar

was freezing cold.

Sensing the crown prince's aura, the man gave up, lowering his head as he murmured, "I was out of line."

"You're forgiven... Now, I was going to summon my mother, Elizabeth, to this sacred trial, as per Princess Alicia's request, but..."

A feeling of unease grew in Alicia's chest, but the crown prince raised his hand before she could speak. Seeing Fritz's signal, the door to the throne room was pulled open, and guards armed with swords rushed in. Several nobles screamed at the sudden threat.

"Princess!!"

A flash of silver, and Robert had leapt to the center of the room. The other escort knights quickly followed, shielding Alicia and the chained and defenseless Riddhe.

"Robert—!"

"Please stay back, princess. This looks bad."

Despite his smile, Robert's gaze was sharp and alert as he scanned the room. She could see the Erdalian guards reflected in the shiny surface of his sword.

The guards had formed a line, moving to surround Robert and the Heillander escort knights, with her trapped in the middle.

Another group of guards surround Beatrix and Charlotte. She glanced at the chancellor on the dais, only to see a grim expression on his face. Apparently, this was a surprise to him as well.

The room fell silent as the last guards got into position, and then the sound of scraping metal echoed as they all drew their swords and pointed them at her.

"Princess Alicia of Heilland, Lady Beatrix Crowne, and Charlotte Yggdrasil, you are now being charged," Fritz declared as he stood from his seat and stared down at Alicia.

"Charged? What do you mean?" Alicia asked as calmly as she could.

"My mother, Elizabeth, empress of Erdal, has gone missing from Mylene Hall."

Alicia stood resolutely, trying to hide her shock. The chancellor, on the other hand, decided that he could no longer be a silent bystander. He stood and moved next to Fritz.

“Your Highness, what do you mean that Her Majesty is missing...?”

“It means exactly what it means.”

After checking on the situation at the castle gates with the knight, Fritz took a detour to Mylene Hall to see his mother. Did he intend to summon her to the trial as per Alicia’s request or to convince her to join his side? It didn’t matter because there he’d learned the shocking truth.

“When I arrived, it was clear Mylene Hall had been attacked, and Her Majesty was missing. It was a secret mission executed with brilliant precision, but one of the guards we found told us about the assailant and his unusual black hair.”

Riddhe sucked in a breath while Robert tutted. Alicia’s hands flew to her chest as she clasped them tightly together.

Of course, the mention of black hair made all of them think of one person, but if he was in Erdal, why hadn’t he rushed to meet with Alicia? Why did he abduct Empress Elizabeth instead?

Alicia shook her head.

It was impossible to guess Clovis’s motives behind this bold step. But if he was really the assailant, then she shouldn’t have to worry. As she’d told Robert before the trial, Clovis had never disappointed her in the six years since he became the princess’s adviser.

He would always put Alicia first.

Knowing his feelings, she knew she could trust him.

“Our men are already tracking Her Majesty down and will be able to rescue her soon,” Fritz continued. “If you’re smart, you’ll know that your best course of action now is to put away your swords and follow my orders obediently.”

Robert looked over his shoulder at Alicia and shook his head slightly. She knew what he was implying. If they surrendered now, Alicia would be thrown into prison. She wouldn’t be able to keep her promise to Nigel Otto, and if she



didn't return by the stipulated date, King James would be forced to make a move that could lead to war.

Alicia nodded in understanding.

"Fine, but Your Highness, are you certain Her Majesty was really abducted?" she questioned.

"What?" Fritz frowned at her challenge, then flinched as he caught sight of her strong, sky-blue gaze.

"Her Majesty is a strong and courageous woman, not the type who will meekly submit to a despicable abductor even when threatened... Are you certain she didn't leave Mylene Hall of her own volition, on her own two legs?"

"What...?!"

"If you can't answer that, then I see no need for us to comply with your orders."

Fritz's expression twisted at her words, but before he could raise his arm to signal the guards, Robert moved. Quick as a flash, three Erdalian guards staggered back from the force of his swinging sword.

"Well said, princess!" he shouted as he grinned at Alicia. "Men! From now on, we're on a rescue mission to safely bring Her Royal Highness and Lord Riddhe Sutherland back to Heiland. But mind you, do it with as little bloodshed as possible!"

Robert moved again. Before Alicia could grasp what was happening, she heard a small scream and the sound of something breaking next to her. Turning in a panic, she saw the chains that bound Riddhe were broken, and he was looking dumbfoundedly at his freed hands.

"Over here! Quick!"

"Y-Yes. Let's go, Your Highness!!"

Recovering from the shock of having Robert's sword slice so closely to his wrists, Riddhe turned to Alicia and urged her forward. However, Robert was not there. Looking around, she saw him attacking the guards surrounding Beatrix and Charlotte.

True to his word, none of the Erdalian soldiers he'd felled were dealt fatal wounds. With his flawless movements well-versed in combat, Robert could use the tip of his sword to knock away his opponents' weapons, stunning them and mowing them down in an instant. As expected of the man hailed as the reincarnation of the Sword Saint, his impressive skills showcased why he was able to become the commander of the knights of the Imperial Guard at such a young age.

Breaking through the circle of guards, Robert reached out to the women.

"Come! Run with us."

"Y-Yes!"

Charlotte immediately understood Robert's intention. She grabbed Beatrix's hand and rushed after the knight. With Robert fighting off the guards trying to block their path, the pair caught up to Alicia and Riddhe.

"Your Highness!!"

"I'm glad you're here, Charlotte! Let's go!"

"Wait! Charlotte!!"

Charlotte glanced back at the sound of Fritz's voice for only a second, a hint of sadness on her face, before she turned away again. Sensing the determination and strength in the girl's grip, Alicia gave Charlotte's hand a squeeze as they hurried to the exit.

The Erdalian nobles gathered to witness the trial were also rushing to escape from the battle, getting in the guards' way and making it difficult for them to chase down Alicia and her group effectively. Then, amidst the chaos, something strange happened.

The escort knight clearing the way for Alicia's group was the first to stop. Next, the Erdalian guards froze before readjusting the grip on their swords and adopting a cautious stance. Their gazes wavered as if unsure whether the escaping Heillanders or what lay beyond the doors was a bigger threat.

"What now...?!" Riddhe groaned as he moved to stand before the women, attempting to shield them despite his lack of a weapon. Alicia peeked around

him to look into the hallway, rumbling with heavy footsteps that seemed to shake the floor.

The next moment, a wave of black rounded the corner as countless people rushed towards them, causing the nobles who had just escaped to scream and hurry back into the throne room.

“Wh-What’s that?!”

“Just get back, Riddhe boy!!”

Robert yelled as he grabbed Riddhe by the shoulder and pulled him backward. In a similar fashion, Beatrix wrapped her arms around Alicia and Charlotte as the girls stepped back and the escort knights moved to the front line.

The Erdalian guards rushed to the doors to close them, but before they could, the door shook with the impact of numerous people slamming into it and flying open. Men poured into the room.

“What’s the meaning of this?!!”

“Over here, Your Highness! Men, protect the crown prince!”

Chancellor Yggdrasil held Fritz back as he shouted at the guards. Alicia’s group stayed alert as well, glaring at the intruders as they filled up the space.

The men parted to clear a path, and the clapping of hooves echoed on the floor as a majestic black horse entered the throne room. Everyone gasped, eyes wide, as they stared at the rider. Alicia was the only one whose eyes were on the black-haired man by the rider’s side, and tears welled up in her eyes.

“I’m here to retake my throne.”

Empress Elizabeth, escorted by Clovis Cromwell, declared coldly as she raised her sword and pointed it straight at Fritz, who stood frozen on the dais, then Yggdrasil. Her red lips quirked into a smile.

“...Game over, usurper.”



**USURPER...** The word cast a shadow of anxiety on the people gathered in the room, like a stain slowly spreading on white cloth.

As everyone waited with bated breath, the two men accompanying the empress slipped away from her side. Albert dashed toward Riddhe and Clovis toward Alicia.

Coming to stand before her, the black-haired adviser bowed and placed a hand on his chest.

“I apologize for being late, Your Highness. Are you all right?”

“Probably... You made quite an entrance.”

Clovis gave a small smile, then quietly leaned down until his handsome face was beside her ear. “Apologies. I’ve promised Empress Elizabeth something that goes beyond my authority... Do you trust me?”

“Of course,” she whispered back without hesitation. “I’ll always believe in you, no matter what. Do whatever you think is best.”

“Thank you,” his low voice answered with a hint of sweetness before he pulled away and glanced at the empress sitting atop her horse.

Seeing that, the empress dismounted and stepped forward. The crowd cleared to the sides with each step as Elizabeth made her way to the dais, sword still in hand.

Climbing the stairs, she came to stand before Fritz.

“...Usurper. Is that what you think I am?” he asked, his expression stiff and his voice trembling. His eyes, as deep green as his mother’s, were wide. Then he steeled himself. “That’s right. I took the throne from you, but this empire will be —”

“Shut up,” the empress cut in, her tone full of unyielding strength. She looked coldly at Fritz as he gulped, then continued in a bored voice. “Move aside, Fritz. I have no business with you... You’re in the way.”

“What...?!”

Lightly pushing the speechless crown prince to one side with her scabbard, the empress stepped forward again until she stood before Chancellor Yggdrasil. Then she spoke loudly and clearly so everyone present could hear.

“Arrest Chancellor Eric Yggdrasil. He is the usurper who poisoned me and

stole the throne.”

The assembled nobles were in an uproar, with cries of “It can’t be,” “Impossible,” and “There must be some mistake” echoing. Doubt clouded their faces, but no one dared to speak out against the empress’s accusation.

Meanwhile, the chancellor looked at the empress with surprise before his gaze turned to Clovis. There, he seemed to find his answer. He understood their plot. The great and fearsome empress and talented young adviser were planning to place all the blame on him alone.

For the first time, rage flashed within Yggdrasil’s eyes. Gone was the gentle gaze that bore a touch of loneliness, reminiscent of a calm night sea, replaced by a passion burning bright within the man.

“Is that your answer?” Yggdrasil spat in a tone no one had ever heard from him, earning shocked reactions from the people. “How boring. Is that truly the answer of the Empress Elizabeth? The ruthless woman who would condemn her own family if it meant prosperity for Erdal. And you’re acting like a normal human now, protecting your child...?!”

“Protecting? You are mistaken.” The empress shook her head once, brow raised. “An innocent party needs no form of protection.”

Gritting his teeth, Yggdrasil took a step towards the empress but was apprehended by two Erdalian guards and forced to his knees.

Looking down at him with emotionless eyes, the empress drew her sword and tossed its scabbard aside. The female nobles in the room screamed as she placed the cold blade against the chancellor’s neck.

“Confess,” the empress demanded coolly despite the chaos surrounding them. “Acknowledge all your sins before the heavenly stars and wise men of the earth, and I will not take your life.”

All his sins. Only a few in the room truly understood the meaning behind the empress’s words. Yggdrasil had been ordered to shoulder Fritz’s sins as his own.

However, Yggdrasil smiled defiantly, hatred and anger burning in his eyes.

“You’re a fool if you think you can threaten me like that. If you’re going to kill

me, then just do it. Do it right now, but you really wish to protect him.”

The empress narrowed her eyes, trying to guess Yggdrasil’s true intentions. However, the man shook off the guards holding him, turning to face the stunned crowd.

“Look at me!!”

Charlotte flinched at Yggdrasil’s shout, her hands clasped so tightly that they’d turned white. Ignoring her, the chancellor cast a sharp gaze over everyone, the empress’s sword still against his neck.

“I will die here today, but no matter if my blood is shed, my pride will not be tarnished. Open your eyes, listen, and you will see... See the truth and understand who ought to be judged.”

Yggdrasil’s eyes landed on Fritz as he spoke those last words, and the stunned crown prince flinched slightly under the fierce gaze.

The damage was done. Many Erdalians, not just within the Senate, held a deep respect for Yggdrasil. His trustworthy nature and resolute manner in dealing with the empress had always impressed the nobles who looked up to him.

If she executed him now, the nobles would think that the empress had killed an innocent man, her closest adviser, and a support to the other nobles. Elizabeth could instantly lose the people’s support, especially the conservatives. She’d been able to suppress them thus far with her power, but a sudden loss of support could mean the fall of Erdal.

On the other hand, if the chancellor were allowed to live, the empress’s wish to protect Fritz would be forfeited. When he was inevitably put on trial, he would expose the crown prince and all his crimes.

Yggdrasil had seen through the empress’s plan and defeated her.

Perhaps Empress Elizabeth had also realized her defeat, for she remained motionless for a minute. Finally, she whispered lowly so only the chancellor could hear.

“I admit defeat, Yggdrasil. You’ve reduced me to a mere woman and

degraded me even further. It's admirable... But I will win in the end. I hope you'll be watching in the afterlife."

Someone screamed.

The empress raised her sword, putting all her strength into her grip on the golden hilt. Its sharp, polished edge caught the sunlight shining through the tall windows, giving off a dull silver shine.

A whistling sound echoed through the room before the blade struck the ground with such force that it shattered the marble floor.

"...Stay out of this, you two."

The people who had averted their eyes from the scene looked back at the dais in shock upon hearing the empress's low voice.

Clovis was standing before the empress, one hand blocking the empress's sword arm, which had caused it to miss its mark.

In front of them, a red-haired girl had both arms wrapped around Chancellor Yggdrasil's neck, her body shielding the man from the empress.

"...Charlotte, let go." The chancellor's eyes were wide with surprise, then narrowed when the girl didn't obey, shaking her head instead. "Listen to me, Charlotte."

"...No."

"Charlotte—"

"No, no!!" The girl wailed as large tears fell from her eyes, rolling down her cheeks and upon the chancellor's shoulder.

Yggdrasil remained unmoving, unsure what to do, when a different voice spoke.

"Why don't we just stop this?"

It was Barnabas McGregor, vice chairman of Ist. Stepping forward from his comrades, he looked at the chancellor, his expression mixed.

"No matter what you're planning, no matter what your heart truly desires, you're an important father and benefactor to her. And to me, too... Please don't

let us down.”

The guards nearby hesitated, too, not knowing if they should pull Charlotte away from her father. The empress hadn’t made a move either, remaining restrained by the Heillander adviser.

At that moment, Alicia made her move. The crowd parted for her as the Blue Rose Princess of Heilland made her way up the dais to stand next to the empress. There, she whispered some words to the empress, then curtsied. Moving towards the crown prince, she picked up the written oath from six years ago that Fritz had dropped in the frenzy and turned to face the chancellor.

“Chancellor Yggdrasil, I hereby withdraw my earlier statement and am once again accusing you.”

With Charlotte still clinging to him, the chancellor raised his head. His usual gentle smile was absent, as was the passion that burned in his eyes just a moment ago. Now, he looked blankly at Alicia as she held the oath out.

“This oath was not signed between you and me but between you and the late Duke of Sheraford, Loid Sutherland. Is that not true?”

Yggdrasil didn’t, or couldn’t, answer because Charlotte tightened her arms around him before he could speak, making him hesitate.

Alicia hadn’t been expecting a response, anyway. Looking down at the frowning Yggdrasil, she continued.

“Your goal is to establish a unified empire. To that end, you tried to worsen the relationship between Heilland and Erdal, inciting war. However, six years ago, your attempt failed, and you had the people involved killed. That included Loid Sutherland as well as Adam Fisher. All this has been uncovered by Loid’s son, Riddhe.”

Riddhe bit his lip and clasped his hands tightly as he watched the exchange. Robert gave him a light pat on the shoulder, though their gazes remained fixed on the dais.

“You grew wary of Riddhe as he got closer to the truth. In a panic, you devised a plan to poison Her Majesty and frame him as the culprit... That is the true series of events that has led up to this trial.”



Crouching down to Yggdrasil's level, Alicia met his eyes and asked, "Why are you doing this?"

The empress's brow twitched. Though she remained silent, everyone could clearly tell she was displeased that Alicia was asking a question with an obvious answer. Even so, Alicia continued unhurriedly.

"You're a smart man, well-liked, and admired by everyone... I believe there must be some truth in that. With that drive, I'm sure you would have made a great politician."

"...Yes, perhaps." Yggdrasil finally answered in a hoarse voice, his expression twisted as he leaned into his daughter, who still hadn't let go. "Yes, you're right, but I am no longer capable of being a politician. Not that it matters now. She's always treated human lives like those of insects, killing anyone who stood in her way. She and the foolish citizens who admire her made me sick. So, I promised. What she deems unnecessary, I will prove essential. I will reduce that great, admired empress to nothing... Prove with my own two hands that her glorious legacy is worthless...!"

"That's stupid."

For a moment, everyone present, even Clovis, couldn't believe what they'd just heard. Alicia's voice was colder than anyone had ever heard it before. The chancellor's eyes blazed with rage at her dismissal.

"Stupid...? What do you know about me?!"

"Nothing, and I don't care to know," she snapped back with a sharp glare. "Disrespecting lives and eliminating those who get in the way? Who do you think you're talking about? I say that you're just referring to yourself."

"That's—"

"I hope you are ashamed of yourself, Yggdrasil. And I hope you repent." Alicia stood, looking down at Yggdrasil as she proclaimed in a noble and dignified voice. "I will not allow you to hurt the people for your selfish justice. I will not let you do as you please. I will deny you again and again for the sake of the people I serve!"

Yggdrasil's eyes widened.

For the sake of the people... Those words had struck a chord in him.

The young princess, with faith burning in her eyes and powerful declarations, dazzled him, filling him with envy. While it would be easy to dismiss her thinking as youthful naivety, something about her made him unable to do it.

After a long moment, Yggdrasil understood.

He'd always hated Elizabeth. The cries of those she'd defeated echoed endlessly in the darkness of night, screaming that she'd fooled them and it was all her fault. Each time, he'd cursed his own helplessness, apologized to the dead, and vowed to take revenge for all the comrades who'd entrusted their wishes to him.

However, deep in his heart, he knew she was a capable ruler. The forceful passing of radical policies and oppression of the opposition didn't sit right with him, but her firm commitment to the Erdalian Empire was definitely admirable.

Would it benefit the empire? The answer to that question formed the basis of her judgments, which sometimes led her to make ruthless decisions that lacked humanity.

He knew that. Elizabeth didn't lie to steal the throne from him. She'd weighed the empire's future against her personal feelings and made her choice based on that.

But how could he have accepted that? If he'd given it up as a lost cause, who would be left to mourn the dead? Who was left to remember Raven's last wish?

The one who'd made that decision and cursed his own life was none other than himself.

"...Maybe I was the fool," the chancellor whispered, head bowed.

Then he whispered something to Charlotte, whose face was still buried in his shoulder. As if sensing the change in her father, she obediently complied this time and let go, allowing Yggdrasil to turn and face Empress Elizabeth.

"I confess to all my sins," he declared, looking up at her.

With those words, the battle of Alicia's reprise on life was over.

## 5. Heiland Forever

A single shooting star streaked across the blue sky.

“Congratulations, Alicia... And thank you.”

Under the fading trail of the shooting star, the boy’s hair moved with the wind. Even though the messenger of the stars was standing before her, Alicia somehow felt that he was so far away.

“You did it... Oh, I’ve always known you can. He is rejoicing, and not just him. All my precious old friends are cheering, too.”

Alicia’s heart ached with a strange certainty that this would be their last meeting. As if seeing through her thoughts, the messenger gave her a kind, beautiful smile.

“I have to go but don’t forget. I’m the guardian star who protects Heiland, and Heiland will always have my blessing. You too, miraculous Blue Rose Princess, for changing destiny.”

Slowly, the stars drifted across the night sky as if someone had cast a spell on them. Under the countless streaks of light, the messenger cupped Alicia’s cheeks in his small, pale hands.

“You have the star’s blessing.”

The whispered promise was followed by a light kiss on the cheek.

When Alicia next opened her eyes, the messenger was gone. As she stood alone in the field, all she could see was the starry night sky above her head.



**THE** carriage violently shook as if moving over a rough, stony path.

The motion shocked Crown Prince Fritz out of a deep sleep, his long lashes fluttering as he slowly opened his eyes. Listlessly sitting up from a drugged sleep, his eyes quickly focused on his surroundings, and he gasped.

“Where—”

“Please calm down, Your Highness. You are safe now.”

Fritz pushed aside the curtain and tried to look out the carriage window, but the strong sunlight just made him groan and shield his eyes. Charlotte placed a gentle hand on his arm, murmuring in a soothing voice.

He seemed unaware of her presence until she spoke again. Blinking his eyes repeatedly to focus them, he looked at her quizzically.

“Charlotte...? Where are we now? Where are we going?”

“To Ostre. We’re still in Erdal now, but we should be reaching Ostre Palace by tomorrow evening.”

“Ostre?! Why are we headed there?!”

“To study. Her Majesty has decided that Your Highness should spend some time in Ostre for now.”

The crown prince was speechless.

His confusion was understandable. After the events at Kingsley Castle, Fritz had been placed under house arrest in his rooms. However, Empress Elizabeth, escorted by several guards, paid him a sudden visit that morning. Before he could even speak to her, a strange liquid had been forced down his throat, and now here he was.

Under the crown prince’s shocked gaze, Charlotte drew out a letter.

“Here. Her Majesty entrusted it to me to give to you when you wake. Please read it, and you will understand everything...”

“No!!”

The letter fell from Charlotte’s hand as he slapped it away. Then, Fritz seemed to realize what he’d done and looked at the girl in a panic, but Charlotte seemed calm as she looked at him as if she understood his rude actions.

“Your Highness... Fritz, please. Please read the letter.”

“...I don’t need to.”

“Why not? It’s a message from Her Majesty.”

“I already know what she’ll say!” he shouted as his face twisted, looking away from Charlotte.

It was pure misery—not being given a chance to redeem himself. He felt dizzy with despair and anger as if trapped in a bottomless pit. His grief lashed out like a broken dam.

“She’ll say that I’m useless. The fact that she’s sending me to Ostre proves it.”

“That’s not true! It’s—”

“I’ll be a political hostage. Even you can understand that, right?”

Ostre had caused a stir recently by reaching a truce and forming an alliance with long-time rival Reinsus, all to stand strong against the growing Erdal empire. It was also one of the reasons why Empress Elizabeth had invited Heiland’s Princess Alicia on a visit a while back.

Now, to send the crown prince to Ostre under the guise of a study abroad stint when the reality was that he was being reduced to a diplomatic bargaining chip.

“I may not be her only flesh and blood, but as the heir who will be emperor one day, disposing of me will still cause scandal and gossip. So yes, it’s much better to use me as a political hostage. What a rational decision, how perfectly motherly of her.”

“No! That’s not why Her Majesty is sending you to Ostre,” Charlotte countered.

“Then why aren’t I being put on trial?!!” The girl gulped at his pained outburst, watching as he gritted his teeth. “I did what I did out of my own free will. I don’t want to live life as the empress’s pawn, and yet, here I am... She should have just killed me. My free will means nothing to Her Majesty. I’m not even worthy enough to be punished, so why do I—!”

Fritz felt his cheek sting.

“Please get a hold of yourself!!” Shock overwhelmed the pain as Fritz stared at his beloved, her pretty face full of anger as she glared at him. “Why is Your Highness always like this?! Why are you always so cynical?!”

“Cynical? Me?”

“Yes! You’re so cynical and ignorant!”

Fritz held his throbbing cheek, stunned that the girl had spoken such words to him, the crown prince. Ignoring his stare, Charlotte picked up the letter and thrust it towards him again.

“Please read it.”

“But—”

“Read it now!!”

He gasped at the sharpness in her tone. After some hesitation, he took the letter and unrolled it reluctantly.

What was written within was not what he’d expected. In his mother’s familiar handwriting were simple administrative instructions to study and learn about Ostre’s culture and politics.

However, the last line caught all his attention. As he remained silent, Charlotte spoke up quietly.

“Her Majesty wishes a reprise for Your Highness.”

“Reprise...?”

“Yes, but she cannot protect Your Highness right now should you remain in Erdal; that’s why she sent you abroad.”

Fritz looked down at the letter again in disbelief.

*Grow ties with Ostre and prove your worth. Then, come back to Erdal...*

Those were the empress’s final instructions.

“Father has agreed to take all the blame, but some witnesses that day are still suspicious of you... So what we need now is time. If your mission in Ostre is successful, everyone will acknowledge you upon your return. That’s why Her Majesty chose this path.”

The letter slipped from his hand with a rustle. As he bent to pick it up, he saw his own hand trembling.

“Why?” he whispered, struggling to hide the quiver in his voice. “Why would Mother do this?”

“You still don’t understand?” Charlotte’s shoulders drooped in weary surprise. Her large eyes were filled with disapproval as she looked at him. Heaving a small sigh, she spoke again. “Because she loves you and has high hopes for you. Isn’t that it?”

It shocked Fritz straight to his core.

“...Oh.”

Before he knew it, a tear had tracked down his cheek, falling on the letter and staining it. He could only stare helplessly as more drops followed in their wake.

Then, a soft sensation enveloped him, rendering him motionless.

“It’s okay. It’s all okay now,” Charlotte whispered in a warm and gentle voice, holding him close as she ran a hand through his hair, comforting him like a mother would a crying child. “You’ll see many things and meet lots of people. You can start afresh. So don’t worry. I will be here should Your Highness need support. Let’s look at the sky together and think of a way out. So, please... please love yourself and everyone properly this time.”

Fritz’s lip twisted.

Timidly, he raised a weak hand up to Charlotte’s back. Touching her carefully, fearfully, gently, before his strength returned and he hugged her tight.

The turmoil had passed, and the carriage carried them away on a path that would surely lead them to a new future...



**IN** the meantime, Chancellor Eric Yggdrasil was arrested as the mastermind behind all recent events. Several other collaborators were also imprisoned, though Yggdrasil bore the heaviest responsibility. While it was the empress’s intention all along, it was also what Yggdrasil wanted.

The chancellor had quickly revealed all his schemes, aside from the singular truth that Crown Prince Fritz was also a collaborator. As a result, Yggdrasil’s interference in Heiland’s internal affairs and involvement in Loid Sutherland’s

assassination were officially acknowledged, and Empress Elizabeth issued an official apology to King James.

Confessing all crimes, he was stripped of his position as chancellor, expelled from Kingsley and House Yggdrasil, and sent to a monastery to repent.

Of course, some detractors were skeptical of Empress Elizabeth's decision. Yggdrasil should have been executed or at least imprisoned in Dansk Fortress.

However, Elizabeth chose not to explain her decision, even to her closest advisers, only saying that Yggdrasil would spend the rest of his days praying for those whose deaths he had caused.

Crown Prince Fritz had also left for his two-year study abroad trip to Ostre, with Charlotte Yggdrasil as his attendant.

After Yggdrasil's downfall, his wife and children were left in dire straits. As a criminal who rebelled against the empress, Eric had been expelled from the prestigious House Yggdrasil. Furthermore, Lady Yggdrasil was a former princess, and their children were all adopted with no blood ties to the family. No one in House Yggdrasil was eager to extend a helping hand.

In the end, Foreign Minister Crowne and his wife stepped forward to take over guardianship of the family.

Beatrix and Lady Yggdrasil were both former royals, and since Charlotte often stayed at the Crowne residence as an apprentice, the two families were on good terms. The public was also aware that Charlotte was on Beatrix's side during the recent events.

With the backing of the Crownes, Charlotte was assigned as the crown prince's attendant and sent to Ostre. What was kept secret was that both the empress and Beatrix had an ulterior motive for the decision.

Despite everything, the empress still held out hope for the crown prince and decided that the brave, strong-willed girl would do well as his emotional support. *And if she chooses to stay with Fritz after he returns from Ostre, then...*



**ALICIA'S** long journey of struggle since her previous life had finally reached its



goal.

“An unexpected confession from the chancellor, an apology from Her Majesty, the empress, and the sudden decision to send the crown prince on a study abroad mission...? It’s insane that you were involved in all that.”

Navale, the second prince of Ostre, shook his head as he flipped his hair back in an appealing manner. He was just as Alicia remembered him from the ball.

Seated across from him, Alicia took a sip of tea. The suggestion to send Fritz to Ostre hadn’t actually been her idea at all. Not that Navale had to know that. Returning her cup to its saucer, she smiled teasingly.

“Is it all right for you to stay here, Your Highness? Prince Fritz should be arriving in Ostre tomorrow, and I thought you were the one assigned to welcome him at the border?”

“It’s fine. My brother, the crown prince, can do that. In fact, he’s delighted to. If he can forge a friendship with Prince Fritz, his standing will skyrocket. There’s nothing greater than that for a crown prince...though I’m sure you already know.”

“Oh? I hadn’t actually thought about that.” Alicia smiled. Navale just shrugged.

In Mylene Hall, Clovis had promised the empress that Fritz would be absolved of all guilt, with all blame placed solely on Yggdrasil. In fact, he was the one who proposed the idea of a study-abroad mission to Elizabeth.

While the empress had been recovering from the poisoning, Fritz had temporarily assumed the role of ruler of Erdal. Unfortunately, he had insulted Heilland during that time, and some were suspicious he was actually working with Yggdrasil to deliberately worsen relations with Heilland.

That was why Clovis had persuaded the empress to send the crown prince away on a mission to clear his name and let the controversy die down.

Clovis had also been the one to suggest Ostre as the mission destination.

Everyone knew that Ostre and Reinsus had recently formed an alliance through a royal marriage. However, it was still unclear if the two countries were

intending to wage war against Erdal. Since Heilland had not entered into the alliance, neither Ostre nor Reinsus had any advantage over Erdal in terms of power or geography.

Thus, the only way forward would be for them to strengthen ties with Erdal and grow their influence until they became just as powerful as the empire. To achieve this, the crown prince of Ostre had been working actively on diplomacy, which Clovis had discovered through his work at the advisory office.

Empress Elizabeth had thus approved his proposal and acted immediately.

A study abroad mission by the crown prince of Erdal was a unique offer for the allied countries. They could use the chance to build ties with Erdal and maybe even gain the empress's recognition as equal diplomatic partners.

Of course, Ostre was also wary of the sudden offer, but thanks to Heilland's intervention, they'd focused on the merits of having Crown Prince Fritz as their guest and had accepted quickly.

"Ostre and Reinsus allied, the Erdalian empire, and the neutral Heilland. The balance of these three powers is exquisite... But a prosperous people leads to a prosperous country. Isn't that what Heilland and you truly wish for?" Navale prompted.

"Perhaps, but don't you think the world would be a more peaceful place if everyone thought that way?"

"That's a truly romantic dream, indeed," Navale chuckled. "But it's not bad to indulge in those dreams once in a while."

With that, Navale uncrossed his long legs and stood up. Alicia followed suit as the prince flashed her a beautiful smile full of white teeth.

"I need to go. If I ride hard, I can make it for the friendship ceremony the day after tomorrow. My brother can deal with Crown Prince Fritz, but the beautiful maidens are mine."

"Do take care, and send my regards to your brother," Alicia said.

"Thanks."

With a final wink, Navale stepped towards the door. Then he stopped as if a

thought occurred to him and turned back to Alicia with a heated gaze she remembered well from the ball.

“By the way, Alicia, do you remember what I said the last time? If you ever fall out of love, you can shed all your tears on my chest. My offer still stands...but what is your answer?”

Alicia stared speechless as Navale looked at her with amusement.

“There is no need,” she answered shyly after a pause. “I plan to deliver my feelings again and again until he accepts them.”

“A wonderful answer! I love strong maidens like you. You have my support! Ciao!” With a hearty laugh and a wave, Navale turned and left the room with his attendants.

Alone, Alicia placed a hand on her cheek, feeling the hotness beneath her palm.

“Your Highness.”

Alicia turned to the door at the sudden voice. There stood Princess Adviser Clovis, who returned after seeing off Navale and his entourage.

“Thank you,” she sounded nervous but suppressed it as she turned to point out the large window that reached up to the ceiling. “The weather is amazing. Shall we go for a stroll outside? ...There’s something I want to say to you.”



“**WHERE** are we going?” Clovis asked as he followed behind Alicia.

It was a legitimate question. Alicia had suggested they take a stroll outside, and Clovis assumed they would stay in the garden, but she’d hurried through, and they were already back in the castle.

Their footsteps echoed in the quiet hallway. After taking several turns and descending some stairs, Clovis caught a glimpse of their destination.

“That’s...”

“The Hall of Time,” Alicia finished, stopping and turning to face him. Her blue hair flowed behind her, contrasting gray statues lining the hallway.

“Why are we here?” Clovis frowned. “This was where...”

“Where I died in my previous life... And where I first met you. That’s why we’re here.”

Clovis stared hard at his mistress, trying to figure out her true intention, then turned his gaze back to the room.

The Hall of Time—a place where the figures of past Heiland kings and saints lined up in imposing rows. It was a sacred space full of the history and majesty of the kingdom.

And it was the place where it all started.

“You were so frightening, filled with anger, hatred, and rage, concentrating them into your sword without mercy,” Alicia recounted. “When I first saw you at the ceremony at ten years old, I thought my heart would stop. You seemed like the black God of Death.”

In the center of the large hall filled with light, his glossy black hair swayed as he lifted his handsome face, those violet eyes slowly looking up at her...

She could still remember the terror she’d felt.

“But when you turned to leave, I knew I couldn’t let you go. That’s why I reached out... Making you my adviser was the best decision of my life. Because of you, I’ve learned so much, recognized my foolishness, found my path, and discovered love.”

Clovis took a deep breath and looked at Alicia’s wry smile.

“Didn’t you know? I guess not. I mean, I was just a child, and you could have any lady you wanted. So I kept my heart hidden, and rightly so. I made a mistake in my previous life and had no right to love anyone until I had achieved a successful reprise. That was my thought.”

“You...”

“Yes, Clovis. I’ve been in love with you for the longest time. Much longer than you can imagine.”

His violet eyes widened as his mouth dropped open in surprise. After a moment, he looked away and folded his arms in disapproval.

“...And yet you rejected me.”

“Because I didn’t want you to die, but it was the wrong choice after all,” she explained bitterly. “Rather than letting fears from my previous life get to me, I should have believed in the present, walking on with you and everyone else. Because of that mistake, I hurt you deeply. I can’t ask for forgiveness, but please. I’d like another chance if you’d allow it...!!”

“If I allow it? That’s a very half-hearted request.”

Alicia was speechless. Glancing up fearfully, she saw Clovis looking down at her, arms crossed and a grim expression on his face.

“Then let me ask. Will you give up if I say no? Are you planning to seal away your first love as a beautiful memory, go against your heart, and accept a foreign royal as your husband?” he challenged.

“That’s... I mean...”

“Unfortunately, Your Highness’s inability to answer tells me to expect the worst.”

The merciless words pierced through her heart. Suddenly, she couldn’t breathe as sharp pain coursed through her entire body.

Alicia looked at the floor, not knowing what to say. Tears filled her eyes and blurred her vision until she felt a sigh and the warmth of a hand on her head.

“Why does it look like I’m bullying you?”

“Clovis...?”

“Fine. Let me show you something.”

The adviser pulled out several scrolls from a pocket in his long robe. As Alicia blinked in confusion, he undid the string on the first scroll and held it out to her. Taking it from Clovis, she looked at the signature at the bottom and gasped.

“What’s this?”

“A royal decree from His Majesty. ‘I hereby welcome Clovis of House Cromwell as the husband of my daughter Alicia.’ That was the message he sent to the advisory office.”

“Oh?”

“There’s more.” Clovis passed the next scrolls to the dumbfounded Alicia. “This is the letter sent by the advisory office to the Privy Council in response to the king’s decree. And this is the response from the Privy Council showing their approval... And the Duke of Geras, being as shrewd as ever, has offered the Hobbs mansion as the venue for the wedding ceremony.”

“Huh? What?”

“This last one is from Empress Elizabeth. She has shown her support for Princess Alicia as the next ruler of Heilland and welcomed her husband as a symbol of friendship between the two countries. Her Majesty has recommended me to be a diplomatic ambassador between Heilland and Erdal.”

Alicia stood still, mouth hanging open as her sky-blue eyes scanned the first document again, then turned towards the calm Clovis.

“I have some questions,” she said.

“Please go ahead.”

“When was all this prepared?”

“After we returned from Erdal, of course, though His Majesty’s royal decree came before I could speak to him.”

“And the letter from Empress Elizabeth?”

“It arrived yesterday, though I spoke with Her Majesty when I infiltrated Mylene Hall to persuade her to join our side.”

“You spoke about marriage to her then?!” Alicia couldn’t help but shout. Clovis just shrugged, taking no offense.

“The empress agreed immediately, as expected, once I vowed not to accuse Crown Prince Fritz of framing Riddhe for the crime and promised to arrange his study abroad mission.”

Alicia could only stare at Clovis, not knowing what to say.

“It can’t be helped,” Clovis continued in all seriousness. “I had to do certain things if I wanted to have you. His Majesty would ensure Heilland’s approval of

our union, but Empress Elizabeth's letter is the most efficient way to prevent other countries from voicing any disapproval and interfering."

"But this seems a little too much...?"

"There's no such thing as too much in the quest to have you."

With that, he pulled her into his arms, his handsome face looking down at Alicia as she fumbled for words. Stroking her long blue hair slowly, he spoke again.

"That is what I've done... So I will give you another chance. What do you want from me? How do you want me? Answer me, Alicia."

His voice was low as he whispered the last words sweetly in her ear. Alicia suppressed the shiver that ran down her spine, finally looking up. Sky-blue and violet met, and a blush stained her cheeks.

"I-I..."

She looked at Clovis as he waited.

Fate was such a strange thing.

When she first regained her memories, she was terrified of the man. Before she knew it, he grew into a reliable ally, an irreplaceable friend, and finally, someone she loved dearly.

Someone she loved more than anyone else.

How often had she yearned for him to feel the same way for her?

"I want to become your one and only," she whispered, raising a hand to caress his pale cheek as Clovis blinked. "I will never let you go again, so please don't let go of me either. Please, Clovis. I wish for you to accept me, not as an adviser, but as Clovis Cromwell..."

Clovis bent and captured her lips. The kiss was soft and warm, hopelessly comforting, and almost brought tears to her eyes.

"I'd say the same," he answered as he pulled away, wrapping his arms around her. She thought she could feel his heart beating a little faster. "I am already all yours... Now, it's my turn to steal you away."

Alicia closed her eyes. A single tear slid down her cheek.

That's right. Ever since that day six years ago, when Alicia took his hand, they'd both been searching for their goal.

The road had been treacherous, dark, and filled with uncertainty. At times, she met with severe storms, suffering, and sorrow. But because he'd never let go, Alicia could keep going. She knew that there was always light at the end of the storm, and the pair had rejoiced in its beauty.

Now, they were standing in a brand new field.

This place was both endlessly free and endlessly unfree. Thick grass covered the land, but there were many hidden roads to be discovered. With no set goal, it was a world where they could be explorers, choosing their own destinations, paths, and routes.

And with Clovis by her side, she had nothing to fear.

And somewhere past the field, she should find an amazing starry sky she'd never seen before...

She wrapped her arms around his neck as he tilted her chin up. She looked right into his violet eyes and saw the sweet passion there.

Taking a small breath, she answered. "I'll gladly go with you."

Clovis smiled and held her tight.



**BELLS** echoed as white pigeons took off into the clear blue sky, drawing a beautiful arc.

They were all gathered at St. Jules Cathedral, east of Egdiel Castle. Inside the magnificent cathedral, watched over by a large crowd, the Blue Rose of Heiland was united with the man she loved.

"Do you vow to love your wife, Alicia, and walk together with her from now until the end of time?"

The vows read by the priest echoed loudly off the high ceiling.

"I do," Clovis answered confidently.



The elderly priest nodded at his response and then turned his head towards Alicia.

“Do you vow to love and care for your husband, Clovis, until the end of time?”

Alicia glanced down at their hands held tightly together and the violet gaze looking down at her.

“I do.”

Clovis squeezed her hand.





After the exchange of vows, the pair turned to face the crowd gathered to catch a glimpse of the wedding of their next queen and her husband. Everyone erupted with cheers that resounded throughout the cathedral.

The beauty of the couple, dressed in pure white and bathed in sunlight shining through the stained-glass windows, appeared almost divine. Alicia was the princess who saved the kingdom, and Clovis was the man who aided her victory. No one could make a finer pair.

“Bless this union!” the priest continued from behind them. “A vow has been made, and man and woman have become one. May the divine protection of the guardian star shine and guide them to eternity.”

“In times of happiness and in times of misfortune, I am yours forever.”

As the pair answered in unison, the crowd burst into cheers and applause. Her hand still in Clovis’s, Alicia looked over the crowd again.

In the front row were the nobles of the Privy Council, including the Duke of Geras, the Marquis of Haber, Attorney General Adams, and District Commissioner Dreyfus. Riddhe was seated near Dreyfus, looking slightly annoyed but resigned as the bearded commissioner slung an arm over his shoulder.

Further back were several merchants from the Mercurius Company, led by Jude, of course. Alicia couldn’t help but smile as she spotted him amongst his comrades instead of with the other nobles.

There were also huge crowds of citizens waiting outside the cathedral in the streets. Though she couldn’t see them, she was sure that the church folks and Edmund were among them.

So many smiles gathered in one place.

They were able to have this moment because of everyone’s efforts.

“Alicia, Clovis, my children.”

King James, who had been watching nearby, stepped forward as the couple turned to face their king. Behind him were Chief Adviser Nigel and Imperial Guard Robert.

Nigel's smile was strained as he looked at the pair as if about to burst into tears. On the other hand, Robert, dressed in a knight's formal attire, had his usual grin as he drew Alicia's attention and glanced behind him.

Following his gaze, Alicia giggled as she caught sight of Annie and Martha hidden behind a pillar, sobbing as they held onto each other. Next to them was Chief Lady-in-Waiting Lady Fourier, who couldn't stop dabbing at her eyes with her sleeve. The maids offered a handkerchief before turning back to Alicia and nodding vigorously.

The priest withdrew as King James took the stage. Looking up, Alicia saw her father's almond-colored eyes squinting in happiness as he pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"Be happy, my sweet Cia."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"You too, Clovis."

"Thank you for your kind words."

After a brief hug, King James took the royal scepter from Nigel. Encrusted with countless jewels, it was the true symbol of the king. Showing it to Alicia, King James winked at her as if asking if she wanted to take it.

Alicia smiled and shook her head. Though the king had already appointed her as the official heir of Heiland, it would be many years before she inherited the throne. Until then, she had lots to learn and things to do.

She would walk on with Clovis and everyone else whose lives were intertwined with hers in this reprise of life. Looking up at her partner with determination, he smiled back at her.

Behind them, the king raised his scepter and proclaimed:

"Blessings be upon Heiland!"

## Side Story: The Future Woven

**THE** door opened quietly, and a boy peeked through the gap.

After confirming the coast was clear, he opened the door a little wider and stuck his head out. Checking the hallway from end to end with big eyes, he boldly stepped out.

He walked down the hallway with tottering steps. Once he reached the courtyard, someone cried out, dry wood smacked together, and he hurried to look.

“Ow... Oi, Robert! Can’t you be a little gentler?!”

“What do you mean, Riddhe boy? Weren’t you the one eager to learn some self-defense so you could travel freely around Sheraford to oversee its development? Besides, if I have to teach swordsmanship to a lordling, isn’t this the best way to do it?”

“True,” Riddhe pouted as he sat heavily on the ground. In contrast to his exhaustion, Robert stood nearby, leaning on a wooden sword, relaxed. Then Robert noticed the boy and frowned.

“Out on a stroll alone, Your Highness?”

“Your Highness? ...Whoa! Hope you are well today, Your Highness!”

As the men watched, the boy made his way out into the courtyard, heading for Riddhe’s dropped wooden sword. Robert smiled before handing him a thinner, lighter stick.

“That one’s too heavy, Your Highness. Come! Shall we have a little fun?”

“Oi, oi, you’d better not hurt His Highness,” Riddhe warned worriedly.

In response, Robert drew a beautiful arc with his wooden sword and swung it lightly. As the boy raised his stick and hit the sword, Robert grinned back at Riddhe.

“See, Riddhe boy? His Highness is already a better swordsman than you.”

“Seriously... Can’t you be a little nicer to me?”

“I am nice, but I won’t spoil you. Don’t worry, though. When the time comes, I’ll train up your kid too, along with His Highness here, of course.”

After clashing their swords for a while, the boy waved to the two men and left the courtyard.

Before leaving, Riddhe promised the boy he’d bring his son along the next time he visited the castle. The news delighted him, as he loved playing with the boy with hair as red as his father’s. He skipped down the hallway excitedly, looking forward to their next meeting.

Then, someone beckoned to him as he passed by a large door. He approached, seeing King James with his almond-colored eyes sparkling as he invited the boy into his office.

“Hoho, you came at a good time. Shall we have some snacks together?”

“But Your Majesty, the documents are still... Oh dear.”

Nigel sighed as he watched his master happily summon a maid to prepare snacks and tea. The boy climbed onto the king’s lap as the tea items were set up, prompting the old man to poke at his chubby cheek with a finger as he opened up the registry of nobles.

“Come now; let’s do a revision of yesterday’s lesson. Which house does this crest belong to? They often write letters to your parents... Yes, it’s House Nicol’s! How about this one? ...Oh, that’s not right. This one’s a good friend of Riddhe’s... Yes, it’s House Hobbs! Whatever shall we do, Nigel? This child may be a genius.”

“You’re truly a besotted grandfather, Your Majesty,” Nigel responded from where he sat on the opposite sofa, sipping at his tea. Then he leaned over and pointed at the registry. “So, here’s a question from me. Which of these crests belongs to House Chester? Yes, Your Highness is also part of the Chester heritage... Yes, that’s right. Your Majesty, His Highness does seem to possess a unique memory.”

“See?”

As a reward for his performance, the boy received a slice of his favorite pie and took a big bite. The sweet taste of marmalade spread across his tongue, and he broke out in a smile. It was a secret the king kept from the boy’s parents that he’d ordered his head chef to prepare such pastries every day so he could see his grandson’s smile.

“By the way, can you call me that again today? Come, say Grandp—”

“Your Majesty, his parents are going to get mad again,” Chief Adviser Nigel interrupted, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Your Majesty in public, Grandfather in private. His Highness will be confused if you get him to break the rules.”

“Don’t be stubborn. He can call me Your Majesty in public, Grandfather when Cia is around, and Grandpapa when it’s just us. Nothing wrong with that.”

“Is Your Majesty not going to heed my advice?”

“Yes, yes, you’re the expert.”

As the banter continued, the boy, sleepy with a full stomach, soon began to nod off, but before he could really fall asleep, Lady Fourier arrived at the king’s office, summoned by Nigel.



“**YOUR** Highness is just like your mother, always sneaking out of your room.”

The boy walked along slowly, holding on to the chief lady-in-waiting’s hand. His steps were a little unsteady, probably due to his tiredness.

“I think I’ve mentioned before, but your mother, Her Highness, was such a tomboy as a child. She hated studying and would play tag with her maids all day long... So I guess Your Highness does resemble your father more in terms of your attitude toward learning.”

Though she spoke in a matter-of-fact way, Lady Fourier’s tone carried a hint of nostalgia. Pulling on her hand, the boy requested to be brought to his parents.

Lady Fourier raised a brow and thought for a moment.



“Your parents must be busy... Oh, but maybe they’ll have some free time now... All right. Let’s go see them, but just for a while.”

With a new destination in mind, the pair headed in a different direction. Rounding a corner, they came across the maids, Annie and Martha, pushing a trolley.

“Oh, Lady Fourier. Are you taking a stroll with His Highness?”

“I’m bringing His Highness to see his parents at their office. That tea set... I guess they’re about to take a break?”

“Hello, Your Highness. You’re as cute as always.” Martha smiled as she bent to look at him.

Because of his age, he didn’t mind being called cute and smiled happily as the maid ruffled his hair.

“Oh, what an angel! He’s truly Her Highness’s child,” Annie gushed.

“He has his father’s hair but his mother’s eyes,” Martha added.

“As for his features, I guess he looks more like Her Highness?”

“He’s honest like Her Highness but neat and proper like his father...”

Then, the maids gasped and looked at each other before holding hands and continuing in trembling voices.

“Oh, no. The castle is going to be filled with suitors for His Highness...!”

“No more nonsense. Let’s go.” With a sharp reprimand, Lady Fourier cut the maids’ ramblings short and pulled on the boy’s hand. Annie and Martha hurried after them.

As they arrived outside the office, the chief lady-in-waiting called out to the occupants within.

“Lord Clovis, Your Highness. Your tea is ready.”

“Thank you...” Clovis said as he opened the door, and his eyes widened when he saw the boy. “Oh!”

Gesturing for the group to enter, they came upon Alicia seated at her desk, who also gasped in surprise.

“Hmm? What’s the matter? Oh dear!”

Letting go of Lady Fourier’s hand, the boy turned to embrace his father. Clovis frowned as the child clutched at the hem of his robe and buried his face in the fabric, unwilling to let go.

“Apologies, Lady Fourier,” he sighed. “Was he bothering His Majesty in his office again?”

“They had some snacks together, and I went to fetch him back to his room, but he said he wanted to see you.”

“So that’s why he’s here. Thank you, Lady Fourier,” Alicia smiled teasingly as she crouched down to pat the boy on the head. “But you’re such a spoiled child. I wonder who you got that from?”

“Who knows?” Clovis responded. Alicia was the only one who noticed the emotion in her husband’s eyes.

For now, the boy was back with his beloved parents.



**THE** lace curtains and half-read documents on the desk fluttered gently with the early summer breeze. Lulled by the faint fragrance of roses carried on the wind, the little prince smiled in his sleep as he rested on his mother’s lap.

It was a soft, lovely moment.

Clovis took a sip of tea and breathed a sigh.

“Hey, Clovis. Are you happy?” she asked.

He placed his cup on the table and turned towards Alicia, who was leaning slightly against him. Her eyes were fixed on their son as he breathed peacefully in his sleep, her hand stroking lovingly through the black locks just like his father’s.

She continued with a gentle smile, “I’m really happy. I have you, and I have him. Every day, I see the smiles of everyone I hold dear. It all feels so normal, but I know it’s not to be taken for granted. I get scared sometimes,” she admitted with a bitter smile, “wondering if all this is just a dream. It’s strange, isn’t it? The happier I become, the more afraid I am of losing it. Even when I

have the two of you right here.”

“That’s not strange at all,” Clovis answered as he wrapped an arm around his wife, pulling her close gently so as not to wake the boy. He looked down at Alicia. “It means that you care about us... I feel the same. I love both of you more than anyone else in the world, and I’m proud to be able to support you and protect this kingdom by your side.”

“You’re exaggerating again.”

“Do you think so?” he asked with a smile.

Alicia looked away, and he knew his words always made her a little shy.

“Also,” he continued as he kissed his beloved’s cheek. “I used to hate it, but now I’m glad for my hair color. It’s all thanks to you, Alicia. Thank you for seeing me and giving me this child.”

“Clovis...”

“I’ll have to work even harder so that he can always be proud of his hair color.”

Alicia leaned in, giving her surprised husband a soft kiss on the lips before looking into his eyes. “I love you too, Clovis, my beloved husband.”

His heart filled with warmth at her words.

How many times had he been saved by her? Enveloped in her love?

“...I know,” he whispered, his voice sweet and melancholic.

A hint of hesitation flashed across Alicia’s eyes before she gently closed them. Taking that as a hint, Clovis leaned in to kiss her cherry lips.

But before their lips could meet, the prince whined as he moved.

“...Father? Mother?”

The parents looked at each other and smiled. Clovis was a little disappointed, but it couldn’t be helped.

“Are you awake, my spoiled child?” Alicia teased.

“You do love sleeping on your mother’s lap.”

The boy rubbed his eyes and sat up slowly.

With black hair that resembled the silence of night and blue eyes like the bright spring sky, the boy was, without a doubt, Alicia and Clovis's treasure.

Looking around the room curiously, the boy finally turned to look up at his parents.

"Father, Mother, I had a dream."

"A dream? What was it about?"

"I had a sister. A cute little sister."

Alicia and Clovis looked at each other and smiled.

"Well, well." Clovis nodded wisely before picking the prince up and placing him on his lap, patting him gently on the head. "What a nice dream! Who knows, maybe it'll become a reality."

"Really?"

"Really. Right, Alicia?"

"Yes," Alicia agreed, her hand gently rubbing her belly. It was just starting to swell a little. Her eyes crinkled with happiness as she whispered, "I'd love to meet you soon."

The Blue Rose had woven a new destiny. Uncertain yet endearing, extending far into the future...

## Side Story: Black Memories

**HARSH** breathing echoed in his ears.

The world was swaying, and an unpleasant warmth spread from his chest. His ears were ringing. He knew the end of his life was near.

“No hard feelings; I’m just following orders,” the man before him said without emotion.

He felt a cold blade against his neck, and a slight pressure was enough to end his life.

Even so.

*Your Majesty...*

Clovis looked over the man’s shoulder at the fallen queen, and his expression twisted in pain.

Why were the memories coming back now?

Why was his very last living memory that of the sole encounter he had with her many years ago?

When he’d told her a lie...



**“WAIT,** Clovis! Oi, I said, wait!”

A strong hand on his shoulder forced Clovis to stop. All around him, the nobles dressed in gorgeous gowns and suits whispered, wondering what had happened. Reluctantly, he turned around to see an unusually serious expression on Robert’s face.

“Are you stupid? Are you really planning to run away now?”

“...No. I’m just going back to where I belong.”

“That’s the definition of running away!”

He grimaced as Robert's grip on his shoulder tightened, then shook the other man off. Looking over Robert's shoulder as his friend glared at him, he caught sight of that red-haired man.

The man with hatred and contempt in his eyes, who'd told him to get lost.

"No," he said again. "I don't belong here. I knew it from the start. And now, I know that this is my turning point."

Before Robert could argue further, Clovis turned around with fierce determination and continued walking away. This time, his friend did not give chase.

A ceremony was organized by the king to personally welcome the return of the inspection squad from Erdal. It was supposed to be a high honor for a young man like him to be invited, yet Clovis felt lighter the moment he left the room, standing alone in the deserted hallway.

Then he laughed.

He'd known that he would be bombarded with heartless words. Riddhe had spoken nothing but the truth, which the king was probably well aware of. Clovis had no ground to stand on.

No, he wasn't upset.

He'd just realized his own foolish dreams.

*It was a short dream, but it was nice while it lasted...*

He laughed softly again, shaking his head to clear the foolish dream away. Serving under the respected king, under the chief adviser, and carving out an endless path with them. He threw it all away.

With the most important part of the ceremony over, he shouldn't get into trouble if he left the castle now. He stepped forward, heading out to look for House Cromwell's carriage.

"Who are you?"

He stopped at the sound of a sweet voice as light as a bird's. A girl was peeking at him from behind a pillar, staring at him with sky-blue eyes full of curiosity.

“Who are you?” she asked again. “Are you lost?”

Clovis placed a hand on his chest and bowed to the girl.

“I-I am Clovis of House Cromwell. Please forgive my rudeness...!”

While some nobles had brought their children along to attend the ceremony, there was no way they’d be wandering about the castle unattended. Besides, those sky-blue eyes and hair were a dead giveaway.

There was no mistake. The girl was Her Royal Highness Princess Alicia, the only daughter of the king.

In contrast to Clovis’s internal panic, Alicia nodded at his answer, walking towards him with curiosity evident on her face as she stared.

“Clovis... Clovis... You have black hair. I’ve never seen that before.”

“Well, that’s because...”

The princess tilted her head in confusion as Clovis’s voice trailed off. Judging by her innocent manner, she probably had no knowledge about Graham’s scandal.

Suddenly, Alicia stiffened and turned around. Then, before Clovis could wonder what was happening, she jumped back behind the pillar with a whispered command, “Don’t you tell!”

Not a moment later, a stern-looking lady appeared around the corner.

“Apologies, I am Chief Lady-in-Waiting Fourier. You must be an honored guest at the ceremony,” she stated as she stopped before Clovis.

“I am Clovis of House Cromwell. I was just heading out to my carriage.”

“Thank you for your efforts in Erdal, Lord Cromwell. By the way, did you happen to see Her Highness Princess Alicia pass by here? She has blue hair and is about this tall.”

“Erm...”

Glancing towards the pillar, he saw Alicia shaking her head vigorously while trying to remain hidden.

“...No. I haven’t seen her since I left the throne room.”

“I see. Thank you.”

With a curtsy, the chief lady-in-waiting continued on her way. Alicia only emerged after she was out of sight.

“Thanks, you saved me.”

“Please don’t mention it, Your Highness, but why are you running away?”

“Because Lady Fourier wants me to rest until I get better. I’m tired of resting.”

“Are you unwell?!”

Clovis panicked again, realizing he was now an accomplice to the princess’s misbehavior. However, Alicia seemed in perfect health and fully capable of running and jumping as she pleased.

The princess stuck out her tongue.

“I’m fine. I just pretended to be sick, so I didn’t need to attend the ceremony.”

“I see...”

“I hate those. They’re so long and boring. It’s much more fun to play with the maids. Don’t you agree?”

“Yes?”

Clovis had only been listening half-heartedly and gasped as he realized what he’d just agreed with. Alicia looked up at him, her sky-blue eyes wide.

“You left the ceremony, right? Were you bored, too?”

He gaped at her innocent question. After a moment’s thought, he gave a bitter smile.

“No, not really. It was a wonderful ceremony.”

“Really? Then why didn’t you stay till the end?”

“It was too beautiful a place for me,” Clovis whispered as he looked up at the ceiling.

It was a beautiful, fleeting dream. That he could overcome his cursed past and be accepted as a normal person.



But at the end of the beautiful dream was an ugly wish.

He had to leave before it got to that.

“—vis, Clovis!”

Clovis was snapped back to reality. Looking down, he saw the princess tugging on the hem of his ceremonial robe.

After a moment, he crouched down, unsure of her intentions. Now, he had to look up at her. She was staring at him again, but before he could avert his eyes in discomfort, she threw her arms around him.

“Your Highness...?”

“Come to see me again, Clovis.”

He stilled at the sound of her voice in his ear. The princess’s arms around his neck tightened.

“If you don’t want to attend the ceremony, you don’t have to. Be like me. You can come talk to me, right? I’d be happy to be your friend. So you must come back,” she concluded with a smile.

A warmth filled his chest, and Clovis lowered his eyes to hide his embarrassment.

It was eye-opening to see how free-spirited yet intelligent this girl was. Above all, her heart was full of kindness. Her essence would be a treasure that would surely help the kingdom.

Joy flooded his heart, together with a tinge of sadness that he wouldn’t be present to witness her growth. Amid all these complicated emotions, he spoke a lie.

“Yes, of course.” He smiled as he pulled away to look into her eyes. “Let’s meet again, Your Highness.”



**NOW**, the day had come.

Ironically, the promise he never intended to fulfill had become a reality when he again met Alicia at Egdiel Castle—her as the queen of ruin and him as the

revolution mastermind sent to arrest her.

As he watched Heilland struggle over the years, he was filled with increasing frustration, anger, and irritation because, in his heart, he'd somehow always believed in her.

Perhaps it had been a wish. A wish that the kind and intelligent girl was worthy of inheriting the late King James's legacy and rising up in response to the suffering of her people. Or maybe it had been a prayer.

The former members of the inspection squad were working in secret to oust King Fritz, but the people had had enough. Riot after riot broke out across the kingdom, and they were forced to carry out the revolution before Heilland collapsed into ruin.

Now, they finally met again, but she had changed.

As his senses slowly faded in death, he realized their defeat was decided that day when he'd turned his back on Heilland, run away, and lied to the princess.

*Your Majesty, I...*

Their paths crossed only once by chance, but he had believed in the brilliance he felt in her at that moment. It was probably a selfish idea, but he couldn't help but imagine what could have happened if he'd taken the first step that day and accepted her outstretched hand.

Would it have resulted in a different future for him, for her, and for Heilland?

Summoning his remaining strength, he moved a heavy hand to his chest. Closing his eyes, he felt for the wooden cylinder hidden in his clothes—the kaleidoscope that was his talisman.

Prayers were useless, and wishes were foolish. This wish would never come true.

But if only he had a chance at a reprise.

He would surely...

With a final wish, his world fell into darkness.



**“...WAIT, Clovis Cromwell!”**

A voice as light as a bird's, echoing on the high ceiling, and a tiny warmth wrapped around his right hand. He stopped in shock, turning around with wide eyes.

There, Clovis met her again.

Him, unaware that this wasn't their first meeting.

Her, unaware that he'd wished for this reprise.

The mischievous gears start turning.

And the story of two individual paths, once separated but converging again, continues...

# Afterword

**THANK** you very much for picking up Book 3 of *Blue Rose Princess*. My name is Roku.

The final book is here, all too soon. It feels happy at times but lonely at others.

My conflicting feelings aside, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who supported this series until the end. Thank you so much.

In fact, one of the themes of the series was the "salvation of villains."

In the beginning, protagonist Alicia dies as the Poisonous Rose who ruined her kingdom and starts her reprise. Clovis first appears as a villain and opponent to her but finds salvation in the new life and begins to walk alongside Alicia. There were other "villains," too, such as the Sutherland father and son and Crown Prince Fritz, but Chancellor Yggdrasil was particularly difficult to write.

Yggdrasil has a distorted sense of "justice" due to his past, contrasting with Alicia, who truly cares for her people and walks onward with eyes fixed on the future. That's why it seemed destined for the two to come into conflict at the end of the story.

However, Yggdrasil is, at heart, a wise and rational character, so maybe he realizes his own mistakes somewhere in his heart. In that sense, Alicia's direct denial is the key to breaking his curse and becomes his salvation. That's what led to the ending.

What will happen to Heilland from now on? And most importantly, their future?

I revealed some of this in the newly written short story. It was really fun to think about the future of Heilland. Because they overcame many difficulties in the main story, the characters will continue to move towards a bright future. Yes, as the author, I truly believe this.

Last but not least, I'd like to express my gratitude to those who have helped me.

First up is Hazuki Futaba. I'm always captivated by the many wonderful illustrations she does, but Book 3's were particularly moving since I could see my main couple full of happiness!! Thank you so much for breathing life into them with your amazing illustrations.

Next are Kuroda and Egawa from the editorial department at PASH! Your passionate words about the series have encouraged me many times to continue doing my best! Sorry for all the trouble I've caused, and thank you so much for all your support.

And to my readers, thank you, as always.

I look forward to our next meeting, so let me end here with one phrase.

Blessings be upon Heiland!

Kaname Roku

September 2018 (Good Day)





## The Inconvenient Life of an Arousing Priestess

By Makino Maebaru Illustration: Hachi Uehara

What adventures await a priestess with the inconvenient power to rouse the baser instincts of others and the imperial prince who's unaffected by her?!



## The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor

By Sarasa Nagase Illustration: Mitsuya Fuji

A young woman with overpowered magic gets sent back 6 years after being killed. She takes this second chance at life to get with her greatest enemy, the dragon emperor!



## Reincarnated as the Last of My Kind

By Kiri Komori Illustration: Yamigo

An endearing slice of life fantasy light novel series about a nonhuman girl's journey to become an alchemist to repay the family who took her in!



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