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The DO-OVER
DAMSEL
CONQUERS
the DRAGON
EMPEROR

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The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor Vol.1

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YARINAOSHI REIJO WA RYUTEIHEIKA O KORYAKU CHU Vol.1

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CHARACTERS



GERALD DER KRATOS

The crown prince of the Kratos Kingdom.
In the original timeline, he was Jill's fiancé.



RAVE

The Dragon God. He's only visible
to those who possess strong magic power.



SPHERE DE BEIL

One of Hadis's fiancée candidates.



ZEKE

Jill's former subordinate. Swordsman.
Becomes a Knight of the Dragon Consort.



CAMILA (REAL NAME: CAMILO)

Jill's former subordinate. Master archer.
Becomes a Knight of the Dragon Consort.

~THE LEGEND OF THE CONTINENT OF PLATY~

Kratos, the goddess of love and the earth, and Rave, the Dragon God of logic and the sky, bestowed their
divine blessings onto their respective lands. The Kratos Kingdom, with which the Goddess shared her power,
and the Rave Empire, with which the Dragon God shared his power, have been embroiled in a long-standing rivalry.



JILL CERVEL

After breaking off her engagement, Jill was
sentenced to be executed. But at the moment
of her death at 16, time reversed to when
she was 10 years old. Her magic is so powerful
that others fear her as the
"god of war's daughter."

The DO-OVER
DAMSEL
CONQUERS
the DRAGON
EMPEROR

HADIS TEOS RAVE

The young emperor of the Rave Empire. He is the
reincarnation of the Dragon God Rave
and is called the "Dragon Emperor."

Prologue

POWDERED snow whipped around in the gale that struck the young woman's face, blowing back the blood and hair sticking to her cheek on that freezing night.

This young woman, Jill, had somehow managed to ascend the stairs and had finally reached the castle rampart. She got down on one knee. When she glanced over to the other side of the rampart, all she could see was a thick darkness that completely concealed the ground.

Jill pressed down on her injured right shoulder, but the blood spilled right through her fingers. She tried using magic to heal the wound, but it was a useless effort. Someone was interfering, but it didn't seem like she would have time to identify the source.

Besides, Jill's magic was running out after fleeing this far all on her own. There was almost no way she could survive jumping off in this state.

"There she is! Jill Cervel!"

And yet, when Jill heard the enemy's voice, her body moved as if by reflex. After many years of fighting on the battlefield for her first love, the reflex had been drilled into her.

The soldiers pursuing her recoiled when Jill drew the longsword hanging at her waist and launched herself off the stone paving at them. She lunged forward, swung, and then turned her body, sweeping across their ranks. She slashed at the soldiers, her lithe movements like a dance, trying to clear a path to escape. Some of the soldiers quailed before her and fell back, but more took their place.

Eventually, Jill found herself surrounded and cornered.

She didn't want to be fighting these people. Until the day before, they had been her comrades—the countrymen she'd been obligated to protect. The

confusion plaguing her mind, aided by the blood loss, dulled her sword hand.

Finally, Jill fell onto her backside, surrounded by the tips of the soldiers' spears and swords.

"That's enough, Jill."

But that cold voice made Jill tremble more than anything else.

A young man emerged from behind the sea of soldiers, wearing an outfit unsuited for a man standing on a castle rampart. His cloak fluttered in the violent, snowy gales. It was ultramarine—the forbidden color of the Goddess, reserved only for the royal family of the Kratos Kingdom.

"...Gerald," she hissed.

The kingdom's crown prince casually lifted the nosepiece of the glasses he wore to control his magic. "The woman who ought to have been my consort, running away without admitting her wrongdoing... Shame on you. When I think of how heartbroken Faris is feeling, it hurts me as well—"

"Always thinking of your little sister, aren't you?"

Jill shouldn't have mouthed off on the battlefield, but the snide comment had slipped out without a second thought.

Gerald looked back at her calmly. "Of course. Nothing in this world can compare to my dear little sister."

Shut up, you nasty sister-lover!

But Jill didn't shout that at him, not because she was afraid of being punished for the crime of insulting the future king—she was simply too disgusted.

Even if they added that to her list of crimes, she was sentenced to be executed anyway. To make matters worse, they were all false charges—well, actually, there was one crime Jill had been guilty of. Gerald would call it: "The crime of not understanding the relationship between my little sister, the cutest girl in the world, and I." Jill would certainly have called it a "Crime of incomprehension."

The blonde prince standing leisurely in the blizzard was Jill's fiancé. When Jill was ten years old, she visited the royal capital for the first time and attended

the fifteenth birthday party of the first-born prince, Gerald der Kratos. That day, during their first meeting, he had proposed to her, and they'd become engaged.

Jill's hometown, Cervel, was a frontier territory that bordered the Rave Empire, an empire with which the Kratos Kingdom had been in—one way or another—a constant state of conflict since mythical times. Gerald might have proposed to her for political reasons—an attempt to win over Jill's relatives in anticipation of an upcoming conflict with the Rave Empire. Jill had understood that much. But Gerald was also strict with others and himself; he was earnest, responsible, and respectable.

Above all else, he had approved of Jill's monstrous magic power and told her it was indispensable.

That was why Jill had never been concerned about openly using her magic and running out onto the battlefield. Even though her adolescence had been different from that of other girls, and even though people had often ridiculed her—saying that she was a monster, that she only ever smiled on the battlefield, that she was coldblooded, and that she was mannish—when she remembered that she had Prince Gerald all to herself, she never felt inferior.

When Jill turned sixteen, others had called her the god of war's daughter for her feats in battle, and she started receiving more love letters from girls than the boys her age, but she didn't pay it any mind.

The *real* Gerald, however, was a pervert who was too preoccupied with the taboo love he felt towards his little sister.

Gerald's beloved little sister, Princess Faris der Kratos, was a sickly girl who had spent nearly her entire life bedridden. She rarely ventured outside, and Jill could count the number of times they had met on one hand.

But Faris looked like an angel and charmed everyone at first sight. Even Gerald's infatuation with her was understandable. If Gerald ever heard his little sister was feeling unwell, he would stand Jill up, even on her birthday or their engagement anniversary. If Jill ever let it slip that she was dissatisfied about this arrangement, even as a joke, the whole castle would scowl at her with cold eyes, and Gerald would bitterly denounce her for her comment and send her out to the frontlines without even giving her a chance to say her farewells. She

would then be consoled by her kind subordinates and reflect on her own pettiness.

But no one in their right mind would ever suspect it—that their fiancé was cheating on them with his own sister.

Although, technically, Jill was the other woman. Their engagement had always been a camouflage to conceal Gerald's forbidden love for his sister. Jill had been a total fool. Recently, she'd finally learned the truth, a truth that would snuff out even the most devoted love. At this point, she was past feeling angry or sad—all she could do was laugh.

I just thought he was a good older brother, devoted to his little sister... That he just went too far sometimes...

After Jill had found out about their incestuous relationship, however, Gerald became ruthless. First, he called off their engagement. She initially considered that act to be a blessing, but he was just getting started.

The next day, Jill was confined for a crime she had nothing to do with. The day after that, she was thrown in jail. The day after that, her trial had concluded, and the day after that, they had sentenced her to be executed, which brings us to the present day. Her execution, incidentally, was to be held the following day.

It was a swift and impeccable silencing, all to protect the crown prince and his little sister's honor. The public, it seemed, believed that Jill had developed a shameful jealousy towards Princess Faris and had been planning to poison her. Princess Faris had tearfully accused her of this scheme, apparently weaving an entire cover story with Jill as the antagonist. Whether she did this on Gerald's instruction or of her own accord, Jill didn't know.

Jill could only imagine that the two of them had long expected that this day would come and had prepared for it. She found herself strangely impressed by Gerald's brilliance. She was also impressed by Faris, whom she had always thought of as a delicate flower. Truthfully, Jill felt sorry that she had underestimated the cunning princess. Tearfully condemning an innocent person to their doom was a feat that Jill herself could not have pulled off with her lack of feminine wiles.

With all these measures taken so quickly, no one in Cervel nor Jill's own subordinates, who were away on a brief holiday, would have the time to rescue her. They might not even have heard that Jill had been sentenced to death. She didn't even know whether her hometown or subordinates were safe...

"But how did you get out of jail?" Gerald asked. "I thought we'd taken care of those mad dogs you keep."

Jill had been prepared for this, but it sounded as though they had already gotten their hands on her subordinates. Things were getting worse by the second.

"The Cervel family won't be able to act now, either..." Gerald continued his analysis, as if to push her further to the edge. "We just need to find the mole..."

"You don't need to worry, because there is no mole," she said. "I used my magic and busted out of there."

"...Unbelievable," he spat with disgust. "So typical of a member of the Cervel family."

The feeling of nostalgia Jill felt at his exasperated expression was anticlimactic.

"If you had made the wiser choice, I could have given you the honor of training the children of the Kratos royal family at least, but... Well, maybe this was for the best. I don't think I could stand Faris's children being made into magically powerful meatheads."

Jill understood... If she had overlooked Gerald's relationship with his sister, that was the future she could have expected. But Jill's love for him had been pulverized into nothing. There was no way in hell he could crawl back into her good graces again, nor any need for her to force herself to accept him. She wanted to laugh mockingly at herself. She was grateful to be free of her feelings for him.

...I was so blind, even if I say so myself. How could I have thought a man like this was strong? How could I have ever respected him?

With a *thud*, Jill thrust her sword into a gap in the stone pavement and got to her feet. *I have to survive*, she thought.

People die so easily. Jill had learned that all too well on the battlefield. But even if she were to die, she would never rest unless she died in a way that would wipe the smile off this man's face.

"If you had just continued blindly believing me, you probably could have been happy—"

"Out of my way!"



Jill plunged the tip of her sword at Gerald, but he deflected it. That was just what she expected from her former fiancé, the self-proclaimed guardian of the royal capital.

His obsidian eyes glowed slightly behind his glasses, and the black spear in his hand flared with magic power. In a fight against the Sacred Spear of the Goddess, which was said to have been passed down in the Kratos royal family, Jill's weapon would not stand a chance in head-to-head combat.

But Jill's years of training had been unique. She was the god of war's daughter who had charged onto many a battlefield for this man.

Don't underestimate me!

Jill focused her magic on one point, flicking the prince's spear away. Gerald clicked his tongue and took a step back, and in that interval, she ran through the cleared path, climbed up the tallest wall of the rampart, and looked down.

Below Jill was darkness. It was a cliff, and she couldn't see the bottom. But she knew there ought to be an expansive forest packed with fir trees. It was also heavily snowing... If she were lucky, she might be able to survive the fall. Even if she were to survive it, she might still freeze to death, but even so...

"Jill! What are you...?"

"Don't get the wrong idea, Your Highness. You didn't leave me..."

Having the chance at life, at least, was infinitely preferable to staying here.

"...I'm leaving *you*."

And so, in the high-heeled combat boots Jill had always worn to enhance her femininity, the style and quality she had been required to maintain as Gerald's fiancée, she dove off the rampart.

"Fire your arrows! Don't let her get away! What happened to the guns?!"

A storm of arrows came raining down.

An arrow grazed Jill's shoulder. She could tell it had been poisoned. Her eyebrows furrowed at the sensation of numbness in her fingertips, but she smiled. From the top of the rampart, bullets shot out from the muzzles of

several guns. Jill repelled them all with the little magic she had left.

One thing was thrown from overhead, however, that broke through her wall of magic.

A black spear—the Sacred Spear of the Goddess. Gerald must have thrown it. Jill had no time to feel sad—she grabbed the spear, stopping it just before it pierced her chest. She smiled fearlessly.

I'm not going to be beaten by the likes of you.

Jill could smell her palms burning with magic. A blast swept across the area. The freezing wind, her magic, and her tears all vanished.

I'm not going to be beaten. I'm not going to be beaten. It's not going to end like this.

Jill clenched her teeth and tried to focus on what was in front of her, but she could tell her vision was blurring. Magic is known to be the spark of life, but that very spark was slowly dimming and fading from her.

Her strength slowly left her hands, and the point of the black spear inched towards her heart.

If only I'd never become that man's fiancée... she wished.

Oh no. This is my life flashing before my eyes. This isn't good...

But Jill couldn't stop it.

If he had never proposed to her at that party when she was ten years old, Jill might have fought on the battlefield in her homeland, but she probably wouldn't have been on the front lines. She might have fallen in love with a simple but kind and strong man and been able to experience life as a normal girl.

And she would have eaten lots of her favorite sweets and foods—well, that part might be a stretch. But on that day, at that point in time, if Jill hadn't accepted Gerald's proposal, her life *would* have been different.

I don't want my love to end in failure, though...



***NEXT** time. If only there was a next time... Things won't end with me being used.*



"...JILL, what's wrong? Jill?"

"Huh?"

Jill's eyes snapped open. She blinked. There was no pitch-black sky, no white snow painted in blood. This scene was the total opposite.

"What is it? Are you nervous?"

"Even our Jill is losing her nerve! It is her first time at the royal capital, attending such a lively party... Even I feel a bit dazzled! It's like I'm living in a dream."

"It is Prince Gerald's fifteenth birthday celebration, after all. Plus, everyone's saying that he's going to choose a fiancée at this party! The king's probably putting a lot of effort into it."

Jill listened in amazement to the conversation raining down from overhead.

...It's Mom and Dad. They should be long dead... Why are they here?

But Jill's mother grabbed her hand with a little too much force for her to think this was all a dream.

"Maybe you'll get picked, hm, Jill?"

"Huh...? F-For...what?" Jill stammered.

"To be Prince Gerald's fiancée, silly! You may be lousy at embroidery, music, and cooking, but you are beautiful. And you still have more of an appetite for food than you have charm, but you're a nice, dependable girl."

Her parents laughed, undoubtedly joking.

That's right, they had laughed... Jill remembered.

"Well, let's go."

They moved forward and a pair of doors that almost reached the ceiling opened. A voice announced the arrival of Marquess and Marchioness Cervel

and their daughter. Then, they were all led into...

...No way.

Several chandeliers hung from a vaulted ceiling; their twinkling lights reflected against a marble dance floor. Crisscrossing stairs to the second floor were covered in bright red velvet. An orchestra was playing up-tempo music. Silver tableware lined a stark white tablecloth, and colorful ripe fruit sat in bowls. Ladies looked like flowers, dancing around in dresses so brightly colored it rendered the lit candles in golden candelabras around them meaningless.

I've seen this magical scene before... It can't be.

Jill suddenly noticed a window off to the side. The meticulously polished glass reflected her appearance like a mirror.

Her appearance was one of a girl wearing a peach-colored dress, her blonde hair tied up with a large floral ornament. Her violet eyes were opened wide in perfect circles. She must have been around ten years old.

No, she *was* ten years old. This was when she was still just a normal girl.

“His Highness Prince Gerald der Kratos enters!”

Jill vividly remembered the scene—fanfare accompanying Gerald as he descended from the inner chamber with dignified steps.

She had stared at Gerald with intense concentration, the first real prince she had ever seen in her life...until his eyes had met hers from behind his glasses. But that had been Jill from the past—when she had been just ten years old.

Jill suddenly jumped in shock.

Their eyes had met once again.

The Kratos castle clock tower, which had signaled the midnight hour just a short while before, chimed again.

Chapter 1: Announcing “Operation: Conquer the Dragon Emperor”

JILL’S adjutant had a policy for the battlefield: if you’re ever faced with danger, just start running until you can think of an effective strategy. He was an excellent adjutant. He had saved her both when she’d been pincered by the Rave imperial army and when she’d been cut off from the supply lines and isolated.

And at this moment, he saved Jill once again.

She had no idea what was going on, but she knew that this was certainly a dangerous situation, so she fled.

“Dad! Mom! I’m feeling a little under the weather with all this commotion going on, so I’m going to go get some fresh air!” she announced in a flurry. “Bye!”

“Dear, how about you eat something?” her mother suggested. “They even have your favorite: roast pork. You mustn’t gobble it down, though.”

“I’ll get heartburn!” Jill cried.

“What? You, having heartburn?” her father asked, incredulous. “Are you seriously ill?”

Leaving her parents to worry about their daughter and her inability to eat roast pork, Jill fled to the terrace at full speed. Naturally, she remembered the layout of the castle perfectly. This made her head spin even faster.

Calm down, calm down! she instructed herself. *Is this a dream? Or was that life a dream?*

Just before Jill stepped out onto the terrace, she stopped for a moment and looked at her reflection in the glass once more. She softly touched it with her fingertips, confirming that this child was definitely her. Still feeling restless, she went out onto the terrace.

Did I de-age? No, that can't be it, because Mom and Dad are alive. The only thing out of place here are my memories... Does that mean I've gone back in time? That can't be! You'd have to be a god to turn back time! How could this have happened...?

As Jill went to cover her mouth, she looked at her hands. At this age, she was surely already fighting with swords, but her hands were still soft and small.

That's right... Her parents were still alive and well around this time, and Jill was just a very normal girl who, as the daughter of the House of Cervel, the so-called "people of battle," had a fondness for swordsmanship and the military arts.

Setting aside whether a normal girl would even have a fondness for the military arts in the first place, the thought that she was back to that time was the first ray of hope Jill had found in ages. If time really had turned back, she would not yet be called the god of war's daughter, nor would she be running around battlefields for Gerald. She wouldn't even be Gerald's fiancée yet.

"...Can I start over?" Jill muttered, although she had no idea how this had happened. She clenched her small hand tightly. On the battlefield, those who couldn't come to terms with their current situation would die. She took a deep breath.

At any rate, I'll act under the assumption that I've returned to the past. If Gerald asks me to marry him, and I don't accept... No, I wouldn't have that option. If the crown prince proposes to you, you can't say no.

Even though her father was a trusted margrave who defended the kingdom's border, their land was still a territory belonging to the Kratos Kingdom. If the margrave's daughter were to decline the prince's marriage proposal clumsily, it might be regarded as adversarial.

The best course of action would be to let the party pass by without being proposed to at all.

In that case, haven't I already let the opportunity pass by...?

If she were on the same course as before, Gerald would've made a beeline to Jill and proposed to her right after their eyes had met. So she had altered the

past the moment she'd gone out on the terrace.

"Has the problem already been resolved because I ran away?!" she gasped.

"Lady Jill."

"He's...!" Jill shouted involuntarily.

Gerald, the prince who Jill had seen as a young man just ten minutes earlier but was now a young boy, tilted his head. "He's...?" he repeated her strange cry.

"N-N-No... It's not— It's nothing," she stammered. Her panicking had made her manner of speaking strange, but forcing herself to speak like a lady had made it sound even stranger.

Regardless, it was undoubtedly not normal that Gerald, the man of the hour, had come out onto the terrace even though the party had just begun. He was also, for some reason, holding a single rose in his hand. Jill recognized that rose.

He had given it to her when he'd proposed the first time. That memory brought on another one. When Jill had once asked him why he'd proposed to her, Gerald had smiled and said, "The moment I saw you, I thought, *you're the one.*" Jill had been privately pleased by that comment, imagining their union was fate.

Was it too late the moment our eyes met?! she thought, terrified.

As Gerald's eyes softened, Jill wondered what he thought of her, cold sweat dripping down her back. *It's like he's inspecting a product*, she couldn't help but think. Her mind went in that direction because she knew he was already madly in love with his little sister by this point.

"Pardon me," he said, taking charge of the silence stretching between them. "I'm Gerald. Gerald der Kratos...the crown prince of this kingdom."

"Th-That's right."

"You're Lady Jill of the House of Cervel, correct?"

Gerald wiped his glasses somewhat nervously before putting them on again. *That's right...* The last time she found herself in this situation where a dashing prince had addressed her so formally, even though she wasn't a princess or

anything, her heart had soared—

“...There’s something important I need to tell you.”

The prince stepped out under the twinkling, starry night sky. His proposal in the middle of the dance floor under the glittering chandeliers was wonderful, but this was a lovely setting in its own right.

Or it would be...if the person proposing to her wasn’t a nasty sister-loving scumbag.

What if I just scream it and expose him here?! Oh, no, that won’t end well—I got killed for just learning about it.

A lot of things would come to an end the moment she screamed. By this point in time, Gerald was already renowned as a child prodigy.

“I don’t want you to be startled when you hear this. The moment I saw you, I —”

“Oh heavens, my mother and father must be so worried about me!” Jill interrupted him loudly, bolting away like a startled foal.

Gerald’s dazed look of amazement was worth seeing, but Jill had much bigger problems at hand.

I have to run away! There’s a chance this is a dream, but regardless, if this goes on...I will be reliving a nightmare, because this time I know everything! There’s even a chance that my life will come to an early end! But it seems as though he’s already zeroed in on me... What steps can I take now? Jill wondered, pushing her way through the crowd.

She caught a glimpse of Gerald leaving the terrace. She had hoped he would just give up there, but she supposed she ought to have known better. When Gerald saw her, he shouted: “Lady Jill! Why are you running away?”

Jill wondered how good it would feel to shout back, “Because you’re the man I’ve already left!” But eyes were already turning toward the prince since he had called out to her. She could probably only buy a few more moments pretending she couldn’t hear him.

What’s a good strategy to evade the prince’s proposal without a fuss...?

Pretend like I already have a boyfriend?! No, I'm a child right now, that would be impossible! Plus, unless it's a guy who would make the crown prince back down... There's no way there's someone like that just hanging around! At the very least, he'd have to have abnormally high magic power and be physically strong... But people like that come from my family, and Prince Gerald is strong too!

As her thoughts drifted into the realm of escapism, Jill desperately ran away. Her ten-year-old body, however, kept getting swept away by the waves of people. Jill pressed forward, pushing towards a spot with fewer people, but this also meant that it was easier for Gerald to shorten the distance between them.

"Lady Jill!"

Just as Jill managed to slip out of a circle of people, Gerald finally caught up with her.

That's right! If I propose... I'll accept responsibility for getting you involved! I'll make you happy!

As Gerald reached out for Jill's arm, she threw her hand behind her back and grabbed whatever it reached. It was a very fine cloak, strangely pleasant to touch. Jill shrank backward, and her back came into contact with something—probably a knee. From this person's steadfast composure, she guessed that it was an adult man.

If that was the case, this might all be neatly tied up as a child's practical joke. The fact that Gerald gasped also gave Jill courage.

In any event, she needed to escape from this emergency situation—and with that one thought in her mind, she shouted: "I've fallen in love with this person at first sight! I'm going to marry him! I'm going to spend the rest of my life making him happy!"

"Jill?!"

Jill heard her parents' stunned voices as they shouted her name—they must have overheard the disturbance. The room was buzzing, and Gerald's lips were drawn together in a flatline, his expression displeased.

Jill blinked at the crowd's reaction, which was slightly more dramatic than

brushing it aside as a child's practical joke—and then, she heard a voice from above her.

“Okay. Then I will take you as my wife.”

That was not the response Jill had hoped for. It was not the response of an adult deflecting a child's practical joke.

The man's voice was low and pleasing to the ear. It was so alluring that a shiver went down her spine. It was a voice that, if whispered in a woman's ear, would make her knees buckle.

If you had savored that voice once, you would never be able to forget it.

I-I've heard...that voice...before, she realized. *On the battlefield, just recently—or, maybe six years in the future...* Jill was confused. In any event, in the future, when she engaged in a battle against the Rave imperial army, the person that voice belonged to had appeared before her.

“What's your name, miss?”

“Ji...Jill Cervel...” Jill replied without looking back.

The impressive voice answered: “The daughter of Margrave Cervel? No wonder you have high magic power. Most importantly, though you are young, you seem to have a discerning eye. To think that you proposed to me yourself!”

His glass made a soft *thud* when he put it on the table, and Jill could feel the man standing up. At the same time, he gently lifted her up with one arm. The cloak fell from her hand, which had lost its strength.

His glossy black hair reflected the light of the chandelier. Every feature, from the contour of his cheeks to the cut of his jaw—the shape of his eyebrow, the bridge of his nose, his thin lips—looked like it belonged to an intensely beautiful sculpture. The most captivating part of all were his golden eyes. They were as tranquil as the moon, but they also had a merciless, beast-like twinkle to them.

His mannerisms were kind as he looked into Jill's eyes, but she felt as tense, as if he had thrust a sword against her throat. Yet he was so beautiful, she couldn't take her eyes off him.

“I heard that on some island country there is a saying that goes: ‘like a moth

flying into a flame.’ Are you familiar with it?” he asked.

Jill shook her head from side to side. That was exactly why she wanted him to let go of her. But the man’s smile did not falter in the slightest.

“I see. But it’s okay, you have nothing to worry about. I’ve decided to kneel for my wife.”

Gerald said nothing. His face couldn’t look more displeased. His fists were shaking. In that sense, Jill had intuitively chosen the right partner. She had been right in that way, perhaps, but in choosing her life’s course, she had been hopelessly wrong.

“I, Hadis Teos Rave, accept your proposal. Please make me happy, lady with lovely amethyst eyes.”

With that, the young emperor of their neighboring country gracefully knelt in front of Jill, gave her a smile as sickly sweet as poison, and reverently bowed his head.





IT was just a flash.

The silver sword twisted and stretched out like a snake, mowing down the entire region. It was like a beast sloppily devouring the sky and the earth. Mountains were shattered, the earth was split, and the supply lines were broken apart. Their battle lines had collapsed, and they were no longer able to rebuild their shattered formations. The flames of war illuminating the dark night stretched outwards in no time at all.

After the merciless assault from the air, their defeat was assured.

“Kill every last one of them,” the enemy emperor ordered without emotion, looking down at them from the night sky that burned red. “Children, women, infants—it makes no difference. It’s not worth letting that woman’s family live. They’re worthless. Insects. The fact that they’re alive is a crime.”

That voice was more callous than a blizzard in the dead of winter, freezing everything around him.

“But don’t give them easy deaths. Gouge babies’ eyes out in front of their mothers. Torment wives in front of their husbands. Force siblings to kill each other. Make them apologize for being born, make them scream for death. Crush everything—their hopes, their love, their dreams, their ties to one another. Leave nothing behind—just as they did to me!”

It was a massacre. Jill looked up, her eyes rounding into saucers at this unimaginable order. The enemy emperor’s golden eyes gleamed at the angry shouts and shrieks rising up underneath him, a vicious laugh spilling from his lips.

This heinous, cursed emperor... This insane ruler, who enjoyed crushing and tormenting others, never caring about anyone... The reality that Jill had refused to believe before she saw it for herself was right before her eyes.

I’ll stop him!

Gripping her sword, she kicked off the ground with all the magic power she could muster, aiming for the emperor far above her. This was war, but she

wouldn't stand for a massacre involving innocent civilians. But there was something she wouldn't stand for even more.

This man wasn't that kind of enemy.

His silver magic soaring across the night sky, only to protect his people, had once been a truly beautiful sight to behold. Although this man had been her enemy, she had been captivated by the brilliant way he secured victories, executing the finishing blow with the fewest casualties, and then ordering a retreat with a calm smile on his face... He even looked noble.

When did he become like this?

The emperor suddenly looked up. As Jill rushed towards him, he made a gesture like he was swatting away an insect and shot a blast of condensed magic power towards her. Jill caught it with both arms outstretched, clenching her teeth. She concentrated power into her arms, and just as she shouted with effort, the blast of magic in her arms vanished, popping like a balloon.

At the loud bursting sound, everyone on the earth and in the sky fell completely silent, almost as if they had come to their senses. Even the emperor who had ordered this tragedy stared at her with a surprised look on his face.

She had made him look back. Jill felt such a boost from this that she forgot that she had almost died. "We lost!" she shouted. "I admit it! So, pull your troops out of here!"

The emperor furrowed his beautiful eyebrows slightly. "Why are you giving orders when you're at a disadvantage?"

Jill hoped that she could reason with him. He turned his extraordinarily good-looking face towards her, and Jill stood tall.

"If you really want to torment someone, just torment me. I'll be your prisoner of war—so don't lay a hand on anyone else."

The emperor looked Jill up and down, as if he were observing a living curiosity.

"The god of war's daughter," he muttered, a mocking sneer on his thin lips. "Very admirable. But in the end, you'll be pathetically crying and screaming,

‘Why me?’”

“A weak man like you could never make me cry.”

“Weak? Me? You have some nerve saying that to the Dragon Emperor. I’ve had enough. I’m going to kill you, here and now.”

“Then are you a stronger man than me?”

The upper corners of the Dragon Emperor’s lips lifted, but he failed to smile. He looked Jill directly in the eyes for the first time. Jill thrust the tip of her sword straight at his golden, ferocious eyes.

“How can you truly be stronger than me when you bury your sorrows like this?!” she shouted.

For just a split second, those gold eyes shone, almost meaningfully—but then that light went out. “I’ve lost interest,” the emperor said abruptly in a flat voice. “Troops, pull back!”

Jill, who hadn’t thought he would actually pull his troops out, spoke without thinking. “Really...? Hey, answer me! You’re really not going to capture me?!”

“What’s the fun in capturing a woman with no sexual allure like you?”

Then the Dragon Emperor vanished into thin air like a mirage, leaving behind Jill, dumbstruck.

The only other thing left behind were the vestiges of the emperor’s magic power, fluttering around like the flapping wings of butterflies. The Rave imperial soldiers had all vanished too. The battle was over shockingly quick.

Jill’s mind, however, could not be calmed. After a beat of silence, she flew into a rage.

“I-I-I have no sexual allure?!”

All of Jill’s subordinates tried to pacify her. This battle had been just a few days before Gerald had charged her with a litany of false accusations.

And, maybe, six years in the future.

Well, it doesn’t matter if it was yesterday or six years in the future. This is all a dream, after all. It must be a dream...

Jill hoped that when she woke up, she would be alive.

If such a thing were possible, she hoped that she had miraculously gotten caught up in some tree branches or something and had passed out. If her brilliant adjutant was actually safe and had carried her away, all the better.

But the place where Jill was laying now was so warm and soft... She awoke with a jolt. She jumped upright, as if she were waking up in the military barracks.

The large flower that had been adorning her hair fell, and her tied-back hair came undone, spilling down over her shoulders. She opened her clenched hand, but it was smaller than it had been in her memory of the battle. Her legs, buried in a deep crimson down quilt with a gold embroidery design, were short too.

Jill suddenly felt a breeze and climbed down from the bed barefoot. Sunlight was streaming in through a gap in the thick curtains on the window. She stood on her tiptoes and looked outside. It was a familiar courtyard.

“...Is this a castle...guest room?” she wondered aloud.

“Oh, good. You’re awake.”

The man who entered from the adjoining back room was the man who had just been in her dream.

Hadis Teos Rave—younger than in her dream, but there was no mistaking it. This was the beautiful emperor of the neighboring Rave Empire.

Jill involuntarily clenched both hands into fists. If this was six years earlier, they were not yet at war with the Rave Empire. So right now, he was not an enemy. She knew this, but with the memory of her personal experience with the emperor’s devastating power on the battlefield fresh in her mind, she couldn’t relax.

Jill was unsure if he knew how she was feeling or not, but Hadis walked up to her with brisk steps and crouched down in front of her.

Silence stretched throughout the room, broken only by the ticking sound of the second hand on the clock. As this extraordinarily good-looking man stared her down, Jill tried very hard to keep her cheeks from twitching, and after a

while, Hadis spoke.

“I want you to propose to me again.”

“...What?”

“I want to make sure this isn’t a dream.”

Jill was so stunned that she accidentally let her guard down. But Hadis was staring unwaveringly at her, waiting for her response. As Jill looked back at his determined eyes, for some reason the battle dog that lived in her parent’s house sprang to mind.

H-He gives off a very different impression than he did six years in the future...

As Jill fretted over what to do, Hadis furrowed his eyebrows, looking suspicious.

“Why aren’t you answering me...? Do you still feel unwell, perhaps?”

“Uh... Erm... Wh-Why am I here...?” she stammered. “M-My memory’s a little fuzzy.”

“You fainted... I’d better not push you too hard yet. Excuse me.”

“Huh?!”

Jill found herself suddenly plucked up and peremptorily carried over to the bed she had just gotten out of.

“You may not be able to sleep, but you should at least lie down.” Hadis’s movements were full of consideration for her. He carefully lowered her onto the bed. “Or perhaps I should prepare you something light that you can stomach? Oh, and if you’re going to stay awake, then wear these. Otherwise, your feet will probably get cold.”

Hadis grabbed a pair of indoor shoes that had been placed right by the bed and knelt beside her. Jill watched in awe. When he grabbed her bare foot to put the shoe on for her, she almost screamed.

This man was an *emperor*. Even if she were a child, this was going too far.

“Y-Your Majesty! You don’t have to do that for me, I can do it myself!”

“You don’t have to be so modest. I take the knee before my wife. Stay still...

There. All done.”

Hadis smiled at her from below, looking content, and Jill felt a jolt run through her whole body, like she had been struck by lightning. A smile from a man of such unparalleled beauty was a devastating attack, and Jill’s chest had been pierced. She clutched at it, gritting her teeth.

I-It’s true that a man is more than just his looks, but I must admit, I do like his looks... Everything’s perfect! And it’s not just his face, either. He looks slender, but his posture and his muscles are impeccable. Every part of his body resonates power...! Why is a man like this kneeling for me?!

Jill suddenly came back to her senses. She had proposed to this man, and then... What had happened?

“Um...”

But the sounds of the doors being thrown open interrupted Jill’s question. She heard armor clanging around the room, and then armored soldiers lined up on either side of the double doors. The atmosphere was so imposing that Hadis stood up from where he had been kneeling before her.

“It appears *he’s* been waiting for you to wake up, too,” he said.

“What...?”

“Jill Cervel! Could you please tell me what this is all about?”

It was Gerald—he stepped into the room without so much as a hello, heading straight towards Jill with a wild gait, perhaps not registering Hadis’s presence at all.

“What were you thinking? Running away without even listening to what I—”

“Prince Gerald, it’s impolite to accost a young child with questions without any warning,” Hadis interrupted from the side.

“My apologies,” Gerald replied coldly. “However, this has nothing to do with the Rave Empire. Your guest room should be elsewhere, in any case. Why are you here?”

“When one’s fiancée collapses, isn’t it natural to get worried and to be by her side?”

“You are not engaged to her. Neither the king nor her parents would approve. Besides, she’s engaged to me—this has already been decided in private.”

Jill looked up, astonished. She never remembered hearing such a thing, but then the faces of her parents popped into her mind’s eye.

I totally forgot about Mom and Dad...

Jill’s easygoing parents lacked any political power. Therefore, despite the Cervel family’s great accomplishments, they were not wealthy. But if Jill and Gerald’s engagement had been decided in private, it would be incredibly difficult for Jill to refuse him. The crown prince would be totally disgraced.

“I don’t want you barging into this kingdom’s business like you know anything about it, just because you’re an emperor,” Gerald said, not hiding the venom in his voice. “You’re interfering in our internal affairs.”

“Interfering in *your* internal affairs? You’re just upset that she turned you down, aren’t you?” Hadis smiled faintly.

Gerald looked furious. Jill started to feel uneasy in the room’s crackling atmosphere. Gerald was already renowned as a fighter by this time, *and* he had brought soldiers with him. If anything happened, Hadis would be fighting several people at once, all on his own. Hadis was clearly at a disadvantage, but he looked calm.

“Shouldn’t you be focusing on more important things?” Hadis asked Gerald. “You’re going to become the king of this kingdom one day.”

“I graciously accept your advice. Although I can’t use your skills, *cursed emperor*, as much of a reference,” Gerald spat back, his tone full of annoyance and disdain.

Hadis’s fearless smile didn’t even twitch. “As long as you understand, that’s fine by me. It’s foolish to oppose an adversary you cannot win against. You and I are not on the same level.”

“Watch it. If you’re going to insult me—”

Hadis’s gold eyes widened suddenly, as if he had just woken up. The atmosphere completely changed. “Back down.”

The gravity in the entire room immediately increased.

Clanging sounds echoed around the room as the soldiers dropped their weapons and fell to their knees, one after the other. They couldn't get to their feet. Some of them had even lost consciousness—maybe they had fainted.

I-It's not magic power. It's just his intimidating presence...!

Hadis's spiritual energy was overwhelming. Even Jill, who wasn't facing the pressure head-on, felt her hair stand on end. Fighting back the desire to jump aside, she looked at Hadis's profile. Gerald was staring at him, still standing, though sweating. Hadis reached out to him.

"I'll leave you to clean up the mess." As Hadis tapped Gerald on the shoulder, the younger man fell onto his backside.

"You're a monster, just like the rumors said..." Gerald said through gritted teeth, but Hadis just smiled calmly. Then the pressure that had prevented Jill from even taking a breath of air suddenly vanished. Jill let out a relieved sigh, and Hadis picked her up.

"I'm sorry for startling you," he said apologetically. "Let's change locations."

Jill nodded, subduing the elation which felt a lot like her heart fluttering.

I knew this guy was strong...!

Catching Jill's searching gaze, Hadis gave her a broad smile. "You seem fine. I knew my judgment was right."

"If I couldn't make it through that, I couldn't survive on the battlefield—" Jill quickly covered her mouth, remembering that she wasn't the god of war's daughter yet, but Hadis didn't seem to mind as he calmly weaved through the heaps of crumpled soldiers out into the hallway.

"However, it seems unlikely that we'll be able to talk leisurely here," Hadis said. "I can't imagine that Prince Gerald would give up after that... Maybe this was inevitable. I read in a book that love and trouble go hand in hand."

"L-Love... Wait, a book?"

"You'll be fine. I won't let him lay a finger on you," said the handsome man.

Jill nodded without thinking. But then it suddenly hit her.

...I'm ten years old right now, aren't I?

And Hadis ought to have been around twenty at this point in time.

How can an adult man with no political motives become engaged to a ten-year-old child, unless he likes little girls...?!

The blood drained from Jill's head at once, and at the same time, the view in front of her changed completely.

"Your magic power doesn't seem to be stable, so we'll travel by boat. I'm glad I brought it, just in case."

"Huh?! What?!"

Jill quickly looked around. The ceiling, which had been high before, was now low. She saw a bed, a small table, and chairs too. The room they were in was not small, but it wasn't exactly large, either. There were distinctive small, round windows, and the wooden floor creaked—no, they were swaying.

They had been transported somewhere. Hadis smiled, leaving Jill stunned.

"We'll be fine. If we fly with magic, we'll enter the territory of the Rave Empire in a few hours."

"WHAT?!"

As Jill shouted, the boat began to sail, almost as if it were gliding over the surface of the water, and out of the round window, she could see the port of her homeland growing smaller in no time at all.



DESPITE Jill's unconventional upbringing, she was still an aristocratic lady. Emergency or not, she couldn't just stay in her nightdress in front of a man forever.

When Jill began fidgeting, Hadis immediately sensed the issue and opened the cabin's wardrobe, showing her its contents. "I thought something like this might happen," he explained. He had prepared all sorts of girls' clothing in Jill's approximate size, from evening gowns to dresses and even riding outfits.

Jill was at a loss for words. Hadis left, telling her she could wear whatever she liked. But that wasn't the problem...

Why did he prepare these?! Did he visit Kratos intending to kidnap a little girl from the beginning...? No, stop thinking about that. It's too terrifying.

Jill also wanted to avoid facing the reality that she might *be* a kidnapped little girl. She picked out a uniform that resembled riding clothes. It was probably a uniform of a school for soldiers or knights. No matter what was about to happen, her ease of movement would be paramount. The set even included leather shoes, so she borrowed those as well. Luckily, they were the perfect size.

She had, at least, succeeded in escaping Gerald for now. These circumstances were a change for the better—probably.

But whether things would stay that way was a different story.

Gerald was the crown prince of the Kratos Kingdom—he was a serious young man with a strong sense of responsibility. Because of his brilliance, he was already involved in politics, and his reputation alone was even higher than that of the current king. The quickest and easiest way to reject a proposal of marriage from a man like that was being shielded by a man his equal or better.

Therefore, Jill's engagement to Hadis was the greatest shield she could have. She knew this—and once she reached this point in her thoughts, she circled back to her original problem.

What's going on? So, he likes little girls? From one pervert to the next... She shuddered. Just how terrible is my luck with men?! Or maybe all the powerful men on this continent are actually perverts!

And the biggest problem of all was...could Jill love a man like that?

Jill hadn't intended on being incredibly picky and choosy. After all, you can't tell what somebody's like without spending time with them, and even when she had spent a prolonged period of time with a man, she had still been deceived.

"This next challenge might also be too hard for me to overcome...! Is there no salvation for me?!" she cried.

“Is it okay if I come in?” came a voice alongside a knock at the cabin door.

Jill quickly told him he could. Hadis entered, carrying a teapot and teacups he had fetched.

“I brought you a drink infused with medicine to prevent sickness during travel,” he explained. “You should have some.”

Jill was making the *emperor* prepare her tea. She snapped back to her senses so quickly at this, it felt as if she had been slapped in the face.

“If it’s tea, I’ll prepare it for you!” she said loudly.

“That would be dangerous, wouldn’t it?”

At that brief question, Jill realized...the table where the tea was going to be brewed came to her neck in height. She couldn’t prepare the tea unless she stood on her tiptoes.

“You don’t have to worry about me being the emperor,” he assured her. “Relax. We’re going to be husband and wife, after all.”

“Th-That’s a little hasty...don’t you think...? W-We’re not even officially engaged yet,” she reminded him.

“It’s best to be fully mindful of your circumstances as quickly as possible. Besides, this is a medicinal infusion, it’s not so formal as having tea. It’s a little bitter, so have some of this to get the bad taste out of your mouth.”

With a *pop*, a small cake appeared out of thin air on top of Hadis’s palm. The pure-white whipped cream looked like snow and the surface was covered in strawberries that glittered like jewels.

The cake is shining...! I’ve never seen anything like it!

Now that Jill thought of it, she hadn’t had anything to eat since the party the night before... Her sense of time was a little jarring, but the last time she had eaten was in jail, six years in the future. She pressed a hand over her stomach, which rumbled as if it had remembered itself.

“I really wanted to prepare something a little lighter, but unfortunately, this was all I had,” Hadis told her.

“Th-That’s more than enough! In fact, it’s great! M-M-May I have some?!” she requested, barely restraining her excitement.

“That’s why I made it. Dig in.”

Jill’s appetite had pushed out every other thought. She stuffed her face with a slice of the cake, her eyes shining. The delicate sweetness of the whipped cream mellowed the sourness of the strawberries. The sponge cake was fluffy and bouncy, and when she put it in her mouth, its aroma lingered faintly around her.

It was incredibly delicious.

“Do you like it?” Hadis asked, watching her. Jill simply nodded, speechless from happiness. “I’m glad, then.” He took a seat diagonally in front of her.

I’m so glad I’m alive...! Come to think of it, I’ve never had food from the Rave Empire, have I?

If Jill were to become the wife of the emperor, she could probably eat all the food from the Rave Empire she wanted. Rather unexpectedly, Jill realized that if she had good food, she could ride out this life, even if it was a loveless one.

Just as her heart started to lean towards readily marrying him, a shadow appeared out of the corner of her eye.

“You’ve got whipped cream on you.” Hadis wiped his thumb over the corner of Jill’s lips, and then, of all things, *licked* the whipped cream off his thumb.

Steam nearly burst from Jill’s head, but she quickly snapped out of it.

H-He did that so casually with a child... Isn’t this moving a little fast?!

This was no time to start getting flustered. Jill gulped, replenishing her body with sugar, and looked up with a fire in her eyes.

“With all due respect, Your Majesty, how serious are you about this engagement?”

Hadis placed his cup on the saucer, blinked several times, and then tilted his head. “I don’t understand your question. Could you be more specific?”

“...I’m just ten years old.”

“The ideal age.” Jill immediately got goosebumps, but Hadis looked satisfied and continued, “You have that much magic power before you even turn fourteen... You’re the ideal woman—exactly what I’ve been looking for.”

“.....”

“And you proposed to me. Th-That means you like me, right...?!”

“.....”

“I would have preferred even two or three years younger if I had the time, but...I won’t be choosy. That little detail won’t upset my perfect happy family plan.”

“...I-Is the emperor really a pervert who likes little girls...? I can’t believe he’s such a fool that he’d take a child’s practical joke seriously and then kidnap them...”

As soon as Jill’s thoughts unintentionally came spilling out of her mouth, she slapped a hand over it. She was speaking to the emperor. Not even children were allowed to be disrespectful to an emperor. Hadis’s kind features shifted, and his expression became rather cold.

“...A practical joke...?” he asked in a crisp voice.

“W-Well, it’s...a c-common pastime for nobles, isn’t it?!” she replied.

“Does this mean the proposal was a lie?” he questioned, eyes narrowed.

That’s the part he cares about?

But then Hadis muttered to himself in a disbelieving and self-deprecating tone, “Impossible. Me, getting tricked by a child... Nonsense...”

Hadis pondered this seriously with a hand on his chin. Then he looked at Jill. “I’m going to make sure, just in case... Was it true?”

“...Um...”

“Was it true or not? Which is it? Please, clarify it for me.”

“Well...I do have reasons for doing it, but...! I’m very sorry, Your Majesty, I don’t have any feelings for you! The proposal was a lie!”

After a few moments of silence, Hadis slowly slumped in his chair. The next

second, he suddenly opened his gold eyes and roared, "...Rave, stop laughing and come out!"

A mist of magic power rose from around Hadis's shoulders. Jill instinctively stood at the ready. In front of her, the silver magic began to take the form of a shining white creature.

...A dragon... No, a snake?

It looked like a snake with wings, to be exact. The creature was very strangely shaped. It peacefully opened its gold eyes and then this creature—with its shining silver, lithe form, overflowing with magic power, so celestial it would bring anyone to their knees—started to laugh.

"BAHAHAHAHA! I told you, didn't I?! I told you there was no way such a convenient story was real! But you got so happy and took it seriously, and then, because you have zero intelligence when it comes to love, you went ahead and —FWAH?!"

Hadis threw the god-like creature on the floor with a *whack*, stood up from his chair, and took out the sword at his waist and brandished it. "Tonight's dinner will be grilled Dragon God skewers."

"Be a little more considerate!" the creature squeaked. "I was finally able to come out after we crossed the border!"

"And those are your final words?" Hadis asked.

"Yeah, you did great. You probably thought really hard about that amethyst line!" the creature teased.

Hadis turned bright red and tried to stab the creature with his sword, but it evaded him, slithering away like a snake. "That was because you told me to woo her...! You said it was necessary to make sure I didn't let her get away!"

"I mean, it wasn't so bad, right, Missy?" the creature asked Jill. "His face, at least, is a work of art."

Jill watched the scene before her, which lacked any shred of divinity. Then the creature, avoiding being skewered, slithered up Jill's legs. It plopped onto her shoulder and stared at her.

“You can hear me and see me, can’t you?” it asked. “And you’re not even surprised. You’ve got guts.”

“I-I’m actually pretty surprised...” she admitted.

“Don’t be modest!” the creature said with a laugh. “Most people would scream. Or lose their wits or faint...”

“...She could withstand my pressure back there, so that much is obvious,” said Hadis. “Most importantly, with that much magic power, an unnatural phenomenon like this is probably an everyday occurrence for her.”

The sight of Jill in between him and the creature must have calmed Hadis down, because he sheathed his sword.

“Unnatural phenomenon?! You’re treating the Dragon God like he’s some unnatural phenomenon?!” the creature said, sounding aghast. “This is why I can’t stand humans these days!”

“Excuse me, you’re the Dragon God...? The Dragon God Rave?” Jill asked daringly before the conversation could get derailed again.

Hadis scoffed. “By all appearances, he’s a snake, but that’s what he says.”

“Who’s a snake?! I’m a dragon! I’m the Dragon God Rave!”

Hadis had a point—he just looked like a snake with wings.

S-So it wasn’t a fairy tale...? That legend...

The legend spoke of how the continent of Platy was created from the battle between the Goddess of love and the earth, Kratos, and the Dragon God of logic and the sky, Rave. It was said that some of the gods’ powers were bestowed upon the Kratos royal family and the Rave imperial family. Children of both countries grew up listening to lullabies about their thousand-year conflict, often involving humans, from their myths to the founding of the nations.

The Kratos Kingdom was a powerful nation with magic, which was under the divine protection of the Goddess. Naturally, most of its citizens possessed magic power to some degree, and many of them possessed powerful magic. However, not many people in the Rave Empire were born with magic power. Instead, dragons were born there—creatures that did not exist in Kratos.

There were other small differences, such as variations in the lands' respective crops, so it wasn't as if Jill had thought the legend and the existence of the gods had been a total lie. But it had been a thousand years since the founding of the nations. She didn't think the gods *still* existed.

Rave circled around Jill's collarbone and then climbed onto the top of her head. "She can see me, talk to me... Hmm... She ticks all the boxes, huh? Her age is... Hadis, you're nineteen, right? What about this girl?"

"She's ten years old. It's a difference of nine years, which isn't uncommon. That's a generally accepted age difference."

"What?!" Jill shouted instinctively.

Hadis, who had his arms crossed, looked back at her and frowned. "It is accepted. My mother married my father when she was sixteen, and he was forty."

"B-But I'm just ten...! Wh-What about the problem of an heir?!" Jill pointed out.

"...An heir," Hadis repeated, carefully considering the words. Suddenly, his cheeks flushed pink. "I-I don't know if we should be talking about having children when we've just met...!"

Hadis looked angry, but the way his eyes raced around the room screamed of his innocence. He was reacting as if he were a young woman being dragged off into her marital chambers for the first time, and it made Jill want to perish right then and there. But then he launched into an explanation with wild gestures, as if his life depended on it.

"Th-The process of things is very important for that kind of stuff! It was written that we need to do things like talk more, have tea together, and exchange letters to take the time to get to know each other!"

"Um, excuse me, is it just me, or do his looks not exactly match his personality?" Jill asked Rave.

"Hmm... I knew just making him read that book would skew his perspective!" Rave giggled and stuck his tongue out. So, the Dragon God had been the one responsible for making him this way.

Just as Jill felt the urge to bury her head in her hands, Hadis's gaze suddenly fell. "My looks and personality are different...? You're saying you're disappointed by me?"

"What?"

"...So, your proposal really was a lie."

His voice, so full of grief, pricked at Jill's conscience. But she couldn't let herself be overcome by it, either. She answered nervously. "It's not something most people would take so seriously... I-I mean, look at me. I'm just a kid."

"You're right... I mean, I knew... There was no way a girl under fourteen with unusual magic power and who liked a cursed emperor like me could show up so conveniently... So I was deceived, after all... I'm always like this..."

His melancholy eyes trembled and darkened, the gold swimming with tears that threatened to spill over. An overwhelming sense of guilt surged up inside Jill.

"Yep," Rave muttered on top of Jill's head. "You made him sad. This is all because you proposed to him so carelessly, Missy. You ought to accept responsibility for this!"

"Th-This is my fault?!" she cried.

"Of course! This man is very frail, both physically and mentally."

"Don't blame her, Rave. This is my fault. Taking a ten-year-old's proposal seriously... I've got to be out of my mind. No matter how much I tried to put on a tough front, I always knew I'd never get that kind of happiness..." Hadis continued to speak self-deprecatingly, his hands on the table and his gold eyes filled with anguish. "I really got excited... No one had ever said that they'd spend the rest of their life making me happy before..."

Jill had said that. *She* had told him that.

"No... It's fine," he continued sadly. "You let me live in a pleasant dream, if only for a little while. That's how I'll think of it."

"...I mean... I'm a kid, you know, so I acted childish and behaved carelessly..." Jill mumbled.

“One day, I will repay this debt in some way. I won’t forget your name.” Hadis smiled, his eyes slightly unfocused. “The bordering territory of Cervel, right? I’ll never forget...never.”

“What do you mean by that?!” Jill asked, a little scared.

“That’s not important right now, is it? I’ll get you back home to Kratos,” he told her.

There was no way Jill had imagined the dangerous flash she saw in his gold eyes. Unless she did something, the Rave Empire would be keeping an eye on her family’s territory. She also remembered something very important.

If Jill were to agree to this and go back to Kratos, Gerald would be the one waiting for her.

“But I was truly happy,” Hadis continued. Jill looked up with a start. Hadis was smiling, his eyes shockingly calm. “Thank you.”

Jill wondered if Gerald had been this happy when she had agreed to marry him. Would she ever meet someone this happy with her in the future?

Y-You resolved to accept responsibility for this before you proposed to him, didn’t you, Jill Cervel...?!

No matter how many excuses Jill came up with, she could not betray herself. Worst of all, she had proposed to this man to use him, and now, when she didn’t need him anymore, she was throwing him away... Wasn’t that the same thing Gerald had done to her?

This emperor wasn’t bad. He possibly wasn’t bad. He definitely wasn’t bad. He probably wasn’t bad.

“Kill every last one of them,” an older, more bitter version of his voice echoed in her mind.

Th-That was six years in the future...! she told herself. *He seems sensible right now, so there’s still time. So, what if he likes little girls and is going to turn to the dark side? Unlike a certain sister-lover I know, his proclivities are still just a suspicion of mine. Love is war too! A part of me feels like I should devise a plan to rehabilitate him and launch my attack to conquer him, but another part of*

me feels like I shouldn't...!

“You should take the rest of the cake home as a souvenir,” Hadis told her with a sad smile.

All right—he’s a good man!

“I take back what I said! If you’ll have me, please marry me, Your Majesty!”

Hadis dropped the cup he had been holding with a clatter. “What...? Wh-Why are you saying that again?”

“I’m sorry if I made you worried. Is it too late to take it back?”

“But you weren’t serious, right?” asked Hadis, totally bewildered.

Jill looked up at him sharply. “You should take me seriously from now on. I’m as serious as the effort you put into this cake!”

“S-Stop this. You’re trying to mislead me again.” He shook his head.

“My word is my bond!” said Jill with her chest puffed out.

Hadis’s eyes widened.

“Believe me,” she insisted. “I am absolutely going to rehabili—I mean, make you happy. For the rest of my life!”

“S-So you’ll finally do it? You’ll become my wife...?” Hadis asked. “Rave, did you hear that?!”

“Yep, I’m listening, I’m listening. You and this lady are both a bit strange, eh? How nice. What’s the phrase that describes this... ‘Every Jack has his Jill’?”

“But, um, since I’m still so young, could we not have a relationship of love or romance for a while and just be a married couple in name only— Eep?!”

Hadis had suddenly swept her up, spun her around, and hugged her closely. “In name only is fine. Thank you. I’ll cherish you, my amethyst.”

Jill could tell by his voice that Hadis was truly, genuinely happy, and her cheeks flushed with heat. But Hadis immediately gasped and put her down. “I-I’m sorry. I just got so happy, I got carried away. Our relationship only just reached the tea-drinking stage.”

Jill felt slightly weak when a man with such sharp features said those words to her. *He's a weird guy... But then again, he said a marriage in name only would be fine...* She suddenly felt calm again.

Hadis took her hand. "To be honest with you, I don't know anything about love or romance, but I can show you that I'm serious."

Jill looked up just in time to see his lips lower onto her hand. She jumped back with a squeal, but then she looked at her left ring finger, which had just been kissed, in amazement. It was glittering. A small halo was gently floating above it, made of incredibly pure magic power.

"Rave, bless my wife."

"Righto!"

Rave circled above Jill's head. Glittering beads of light rained down over her—and then, the halo above her left ring finger smoothly slid onto it and transformed into a gold ring.

"What's this...?" she asked.

"The woman who will one day become the true consort of the Dragon Emperor receives this blessing from the Dragon God—the Dragon Consort's ring. It's also a mark."

The ring was the same shade of unclouded gold as Hadis's eyes. Jill tried to remove the ring to look at it, but she realized it wouldn't come off.

"Um... It's not coming off..."

"If it could come off that easily, it would be useless as a mark, wouldn't it?" Hadis said. "Until we have our wedding ceremony, you'll be my fiancée to everyone else, but as long as you have that ring, you'll be my wife from here on out, no matter what. I'll protect you to the end."

It didn't sound like Hadis was lying. Jill looked at the ring with mixed feelings.

A mark, huh...? If it's harmless, then it's fine. So, this means he's serious... But this time, I'll be careful, Jill quietly resolved deep in her heart.

Hadis would sometimes break out into a callous smile out of nowhere. Although he had said the proposal made him happy, he had also said that he

would be fine with a relationship in name only—that he would cherish Jill and protect her. And with that same mouth, he had said that he didn’t know anything about love or romance. He was candid, but not sincere.

There was no way this man was in love with Jill.

Love makes you blind. Jill knew that painfully well. In which case, she wasn’t going to fall for him until she made sure that he was the right man to be her next pick.

At the very least, there’s no way I’m going to fall in love before he does.

That was the only strategy Jill decided to follow. This was her learning from her life-ending mistakes. This time, no one was going to take advantage of her love. This time, she wasn’t going to make any mistakes.

Just as Jill pressed her lips together into a line and brushed a finger against her gold ring, an explosion roared from overhead.

“What the—?”

But it wasn’t just one explosion. A second, and then a third blast rang out. The ship rocked from side to side, creaking loudly, and dust rained down from the ceiling.

“Is this...a-an attack?!” she asked. “It can’t be...”

Could the people from her hometown have caught wind that Jill had been abducted and scrambled to pursue them? Rave, however, having moved from Jill’s head to Hadis’s shoulder, offered a different perspective: “Attacking us the moment we enter the Rave Empire? Has someone planted a detection device on the ship?”

“Y-You mean it’s an attack from your own people?” she asked. “Don’t tell me it’s the Crown Prince Vissel faction...”

It was common knowledge, even in Kratos, that a political conflict had been unfolding in the Rave Empire between two factions—Emperor Hadis’s supporters and supporters of his older brother, Crown Prince Vissel.

But Hadis’s answer was not one Jill had expected.

“My brother wouldn’t do something like this... Speculating about it is a waste

of time. Let's go take a look," he proposed, sounding as if he were suggesting they go on a stroll.

But just as Jill heard those words, the entire scene in front of her changed. She could see the sky and the deep blue horizon of the ocean. They were on the deck of the ship.

The sun, making its climb into the sky, was dazzling. It was an ordinary, peaceful sky, but Jill sensed magic power on the other side of the horizon.

One, two, three... There's not a lot of people, but...

Jill closed her eyes and searched with her senses. If the attackers were approaching them, they were probably close enough that she could observe them with her magic. As she searched above the water, she spotted several shadows. They had their backs to the morning sun and were heading directly towards them—a group of people wearing head coverings that were like masks, concealing their heads down to their mouths, and wearing grimy, moss-colored protective clothing. The outfits were ones hired mercenaries would wear. These weren't ordinary armed forces.

But the fact that these people were soaring through the air on dragons meant that they were probably from the Rave Empire. They were also flying in a neat, tight formation.

They're skilled, but it doesn't look like they have enough magic power to be able to fly on their own.

They would probably reach the ship in just a few minutes. They could surely sink this ship—nothing more than a massive target—with ease.

"Um, shouldn't we return fire?" Jill asked Hadis, who was holding her in his arms. "How many people are on this ship— Your Majesty?!"

All of a sudden, Hadis fell to one knee. He quickly put her down and covered his mouth. His complexion had changed dramatically.

"Damn it... What came over me...?!" he cursed.

"Wh-What's wrong?" Jill asked. "Oh no! Did they attack you in some way—"

"I was careless and exposed myself to sunlight."

Jill's mouth opened, her voice dying in her throat. Hadis fell to both knees and continued in a gravely serious voice, "And I forgot I didn't get enough sleep last night...!"

"Ah, yes, now that you mention it, you didn't take your medicine on time yesterday either," Rave added.

"What? Listen, stop joking around."

Then, just as Jill was about to scold him, Hadis spewed blood from his mouth.

Jill froze in shock. Hadis sunk into the puddle of his own blood in front of her. His fingers were shaking. "This is as far as I go... Rave, take the girl to the harbor."

"Righto."

"What?" asked Jill.

"It's okay, you don't have to worry about me. I'm a monster, so leave me here... I just need to sleep and recover my strength..."

"What?" she repeated.

Hadis closed his eyes, looking like he was drawing his last breath. With a strange *thud* sound, the ship stopped moving.

"Huh...? WHAAAT?! H-Hold on! What do you mean?!" asked Jill, grabbing Hadis's lapels without thinking and screaming in his face. "Wake up! The enemy is coming! What are you going to do?! And shouldn't you have teleported us from the cabin to shore, not to the deck?! Was this ship running on your magic power?! Is there really no one else on board?! You said you'd cherish me and protect me! How do you explain this mess?!"

"That was an impressive verbal barrage," said Rave.

"I can't help it!" she snapped at him.

But no matter how much Jill shook Hadis, he still looked like a corpse—his face was pale, and his eyes never opened. And even though the ship had stopped, no one else had appeared on deck. The blood drained from Jill's face at the eerie stillness.

She was out at sea on a boat that wasn't moving with a completely useless emperor and a Dragon God that looked like a snake. It couldn't get any worse.

What's wrong with me?! I can't believe I didn't get any information out of him...!

Both Rave and Hadis had suggested that the attack had been committed by their own people. That meant that this had to do with the Rave Empire's political conflict. Jill was sure there would have been a way to avoid this conflict if she had been able to get information out of Hadis, but she had been so focused on him liking little girls and cake and relationship strategies, she had fumbled that opportunity.

"Ah, for the sake of Hadis's honor, I will explain," said Rave. "The reason why he chose to take a ship instead of teleporting was because your magic power isn't stable."

"...He said that to me before too, but I don't understand what that means."

"You could also call it your soul. Miss, is that your true form?"

Jill twitched in surprise. Rave stretched out his spine and met Jill's gaze.

"Both your magic power and your soul are gradually taking hold inside that body. Unless something unexpected happens, everything should be fine. But during this unstable time, doing something like teleporting you long distances might make your soul split from your body."

"So then the emperor didn't teleport for my sake, at his own peril..." she muttered.

"No, this is because he's an idiot who doesn't take care of himself. He was so excited after you proposed to him yesterday, he didn't get a wink of sleep."

I see... He was really that happy? I don't know whether I should feel pleased or exasperated...

"His body's weak," Rave continued. "The magic power of the Dragon God isn't something that can be contained in a human vessel."

"...Do you take on another form like that to disperse some of the magic power?" Jill asked.

“Hmm, well, it’s for a lot of reasons. Anyway, we’ll talk about it later. I’ll teleport you myself. But who should I leave you with...? This guy’s got enemies around every corner.”

“Please, wait! If I leave, what’s going to happen to the emperor?” she asked.

“He told you himself, didn’t he? If we just leave him here like this, he’ll be fine.” These words made Jill question her sanity. She looked back at Rave’s tiny eyes. “He’ll operate on his defensive instincts. It’ll all end in a blazing inferno... He and I are monsters, after all.”

That was a label Jill was very familiar with.

She had been the god of war’s daughter, so she had always been fine. She had been the god of war’s daughter, so they had been able to rely on her. But Jill knew—she knew that behind her back, people had called her a monster.

And she knew that as the god of war’s daughter (synonymous with “monster”), they had used Jill as much as they possibly could.

“...I’m going to do something,” she announced.

“Huh?”

Clenching her hands into fists, Jill got to her feet on the deck of the ship. It was probably too optimistic to think that she could wield the same amount of magic power in this body that she could in her sixteen-year-old body. She wasn’t even sure whether she could move her body the way she wanted.

But the emperor tried to help me.

Wasn’t that enough of a reason to help him and have faith in him here and now?

She propped Hadis up, leaned him against the iron railing, and tied him there with some rope so that he wouldn’t get thrown off the ship. Halfway through her work, Hadis suddenly opened his eyes.

“...Why are you still here? Rave, what are you...?”

“It seems that she intends to help you, Hadis.”

“Don’t worry,” said Jill. “I’ll protect you.”

Hadis blinked in mute surprise. His clear gold eyes were perfect circles, which was quite gratifying for Jill to see. It reminded her of how proud she had felt when she had made those eyes turn to look at her that night he had ordered the massacre.

It feels good to have those on me and me alone.

She looked at both eyes in turn and reiterated her promise. “I told you I’d make you happy, didn’t I?”

With a *thud*, Jill kicked off the deck. Floating lightly in the air, she headed towards the stern of the ship. They had been heading towards the Rave Empire, so Jill assumed they were still pointing in the right direction.

Teleportation was magic that distorted time. Magic that moved time—that stopped it, reversed it, or advanced it—was closer to the handiwork of the gods. Most normal people, therefore, weren’t capable of using those spells.

But...

Jill prepared herself for the worst and took a deep breath. She lifted the stern of the ship. It was lighter than she had expected. If it was this light, she could probably make it work with the same senses she had at sixteen years old.

“Ready, and...!”

With both hands, Jill hurled the ship as if she were throwing a ball. The ship sailed across the sky, faster and higher than a bird flying across the sea, cutting through the ocean breeze. She was worried about Hadis slipping off the deck, but she could see that he was still secured to the iron railing with rope. The moment she let out a sigh of relief, an arrow grazed her cheek.

She immediately turned around and instinctively reached for her sword at her waist, but there wasn’t one there. She clicked her tongue.

Bare hands, huh? Oh well.

A bullet came flying straight for her. She grabbed it out of the air with a magic-coated hand and crushed it. Jill was familiar with the smell of battle. She was totally undaunted by it. It’s what made her who she was.

“Now, are you a stronger man than me?”

This was the phrase typically uttered by the god of war's daughter as she soared out onto the battlefield. Smiling fearlessly, Jill charged headfirst into a hailstorm of arrows.



MAGIC sparkled in the midday sky.

Leaning his back against the iron railing, Hadis watched it in a daze.

“Heh heh! Looking sharp, Dragon Emperor. What kind of game involves binding with rope? She wasted no time in putting on the pants in this relationship!”

“...Rave. Could it be that I’m being protected right now?”

“Aren’t you?”

“...I can’t believe it... My chest hurts...”

“Dying from a few flutters of the heart would be way too idiotic of you. The game’s just getting started, after all.”

I know that. That’s why I want my heart to stop throbbing, but it won’t stop. What’s wrong with me? Hadis wondered.

Jill soared through the air, dropping his enemies into the ocean. The image of her fighting was beautiful—it was priceless.

“...I’m doomed. It’s probably hopeless, I mean... A girl like that...”

“You just get overemotional when you’re not feeling well... Hang in there. Don’t lose to yourself.”

“But Rave... I feel hot all over... I feel light-headed and dizzy...”

“Wait, are you being serious? Stop! That’s Hell! What’s the Dragon Consort for, then?!”

“Hell... You’re right, it is Hell... I can’t believe my chest hurts this much...”

Hadis could see the back of a refined woman superimposed onto the child’s back. Was that the girl’s true form?

No—that didn’t matter. Child or not, as long as it was her, that was enough.

In short...Hadis just couldn't help but feel dazzled at the sight of her, looking like a goddess of justice running out onto the battlefield.

"This is definitely seasickness..." Hadis said.

"That's what it is?!"

Hadis was going to cherish her. This girl would be the Dragon Emperor's consort.

Because the poor girl was his ***lure*** who would die unless he protected her till the end.



THE ship, gliding on the surface of the water, finally reached the naval port and looked like it was going to crash into it. Jill landed beside Hadis under the cover of the splash and screams and then shouted: "His Majesty the Emperor is on this ship! He was attacked by someone and escaped! Hurry and get His Majesty to a treatment room!"

A soldier timidly approached, but then quickly ran off to call for backup. Because Jill had used Hadis's title—His Majesty the Emperor—news of the disturbance spread quickly, and people started coming aboard the ship.

"Th-This is His Majesty the Emperor? Then...why is he tied up...?!"

"This must be the work of an enemy!"

"Who in the world are you?!"

"She's the woman...who will be...my wife..." Hadis answered, pausing to gasp for air.

Chatter broke out around them.

"Don't be impolite to...my fiancée...my Lady of Amethyst..."

Is he still carrying on with that?

But just as that thought formed in Jill's mind, Hadis fainted and was loaded onto a stretcher.

"Ah, with the seasickness, lack of sleep, and the way he's been neglecting his health, he's going to be out for a while," said Rave from above the hustle and

bustle of people on deck. Using his tiny wings, Rave flew over and landed on Jill's shoulder. She opened her mouth, but he cut her off in warning. "They'll think you're a crazy girl who talks to herself."

Jill looked forward to avoid looking him in the eye and spoke imperceptibly. "It's true, then, that no one else can see you...? What about your voice?"

"They can't hear me, and they probably can't feel me, either. If I were in my true form, though, it would probably be a different story. But then again, if you can see and hear something so easily, you lose a sense of appreciation for it. I'm still the Dragon God!"

"Are you sure you don't want to stay with the emperor?" she whispered.

"I can't stay away for too long, but he'll be fine for a few hours. Thanks for saving that idiot."

"I just did what was right."

Rave whistled. "That's incredible! Cool as ice! I like you, including the fact that you don't seem like a kid. It took Hadis a long, *long* time to find his consort, so I'll help you for a while, Missy. If you're that idiot's consort, that means you're my consort too, after all!"

Is that how it's going to be?

"Right," Jill replied listlessly.

"Do you know where we are?"

Jill pulled up a map in her mind's eye.

The continent of Platy was divided in two, split between the Kratos Kingdom and the Rave Empire. The continent was shaped like a butterfly's outstretched wings, with the sacred Rakia Mountains in the middle dividing the east and west. Jill thought about them crossing the sea from the royal capital in the Kratos Kingdom to the west and arriving at the Rave Empire in the east.

"A place with a harbor that can be used when leaving or arriving from the Kratos Kingdom... The floating city of Beilburg?" she guessed.

"Oh, correct! How do you know this place?" Rave asked.

“I’ve known about it for a while. The murder-suicide of Beilburg—” Jill stopped herself mid-sentence. That hadn’t happened yet.

This floating city would go up in flames and vanish. It would ignite the wrath of the young Emperor Hadis. Jill suddenly stopped walking on the deck. Rave looked up at her, but she shook her head.

“Never mind, it’s nothing... Um, what significance does this place have for the emperor?”

“That’s just the thing, you see. Hadis said you were his fiancée back there, remember? That might cause a bit of trouble.”

Just as Jill was going to follow up with a question, she heard a shrill voice at the end of the pier where they would be getting off the boat.

“Is Hadis safe?!”

“P-Please calm down, Lady Sphere... We’re currently checking on that ourselves.”

Wondering what all the fuss was about, Jill walked off the gangplank and finally set foot on shore. Meanwhile, on the other side of the pier, the young woman continued to hound the soldier.

Jill could tell just from the look of her that she was the daughter of a noble family. The well-tailored silk dress she wore nicely suited her lovely, still somewhat girlish, facial features. Her hair, which had some gold to it, looked soft and fluffy. Jill thought the girl resembled cotton candy.

“Where is he now? Please, let me talk to Hadis...!”

“I-I know you want to, but I’m no better than a foot soldier, so I can’t just... Why don’t you talk to your father, Marquess Beil, about it?”

“But—but—I just heard he returned from Kratos with a little girl... I don’t know what to do...!”

The woman, her eyes shimmering with anxious tears, caught sight of Jill in her peripheral vision.

Jill came to a halt, unsure how to respond. Rave whispered in her ear: “That girl is one of your rivals in love, Missy. Her name’s Sphere, and she’s the

daughter of the lord who governs this entire region, including this town. The daughter of a marquess...and one of Hadis' fiancée candidates."

"What...?!" Jill exclaimed.

"I-I can't believe it... You're the child Hadis returned with?!"

Trembling, Jill's head shot up, and she saw Sphere walking up to her. The grim yet brave expression on her face, however, had crumpled into sadness.

"S-Such a little girl...! This is so typical of Hadis!"

Isn't it? Jill thought, her cheek twitching.

But Sphere was very serious. She clutched her handkerchief and screamed with all her might: "I-I'm not going to give you Hadis! You...you little homewrecker!"

With that being perhaps the best insult Sphere could come up with, she burst into tears and turned on her heel with a little too much force, falling flat onto the ground with a *slam*.

"....."

"D-Don't you forget! I-I won't lose...!" she shrieked.

But what was Jill not supposed to forget? Sphere hadn't done or said anything yet. But then Sphere, her face red, ran off at an incredible speed. She was running *away*, probably.

Standing there in a stunned daze, Jill muttered: "...A rival in love?"

"Yes, a rival in love. Don't go teasing her too much!"

Jill hoped the Dragon God wasn't going to give a ten-year-old child the tall order of understanding the finer points of men and women just because he was the Dragon God.

But picking me over such a lovely woman.... It's that bad, huh? I knew it.

Jill felt like the road to his rehabilitation was going to be quite a difficult one. She sighed, and a gust of wind blew over her feet.

Chapter 2: Love and the Heart: The Search for the Enemy Begins

JILL wasn't invited into the castle of Marquess Beil, the lord of the city. She was put under house arrest in a corner of the fortified harbor as a visitor. This was apparently because, as the harbor faced the Kratos Kingdom across the sea, a section of it had been converted into a naval port, and the Northern Division of the Rave Imperial Army had been stationed there. Jill had also heard that it was because Sphere had staunchly opposed her entry into the castle.

Hadis hadn't woken up yet, so perhaps the officials in the castle had struggled over how to handle the unconscious emperor's declaration about Jill being his fiancée. Using Sphere's selfishness as a pretext, they had postponed deciding what to do with Jill by tossing her into the naval port, which fell under the jurisdiction of the emperor. Although Jill was a child, she was still from another country and had been on the ship where the emperor had been attacked. There must have certainly been some suspicion of her being a spy.

From what Jill had overheard, it seemed as though the problem had arisen after they had questioned whether Hadis was really the emperor. Hadis wasn't supposed to be back from the Kratos Kingdom yet. The fact that today wasn't his planned return date seemed to have aroused suspicion, and they were in the process of confirming his identity with the imperial capital.

Something smells fishy... Jill thought.

Couldn't they have found out if Hadis was the real emperor by letting Sphere check?

Even if Jill made allowances for the fact that she knew the history of the future, the situation still seemed questionable. But she had no idea what the enemy was thinking or where they were lurking. It would be easy for her to break down the gates, knock out the guards, and escape, but she decided that she should probably stay quiet for the time being.

Alone in her locked room, Jill propped her elbow against the armrest of her chair and cradled her jaw.

“After all,” she muttered aloud, “I don’t know the details of the situation either.”

Six years in the future, the citizens of the Kratos Kingdom had called the incident that occurred here “the murder-suicide of Beilburg.”

A party had been held to entertain Hadis, who had returned from the Kratos Kingdom. The lord’s daughter, Sphere, was one of Hadis’ fiancée candidates, and when he had refused to make her his fiancée, she went around killing the other fiancée candidates who had been invited to the party, one by one, and then finally committed suicide by setting the castle on fire.

Fanned by the strong winds sweeping across the ocean, the fire had spread rapidly and destroyed all of Beilburg. Marquess Beil had argued that his daughter had been innocent and that the Northern Division soldiers, who were permanently stationed there, had been negligent, but Hadis had refused to listen to him. The entire Beil family had been executed, bringing an end to their bloodline.

The Beil family had been at fault for allowing such a disaster to happen in their domain, but they hadn’t committed treason nor attempted to take Hadis’s life. The Northern Division, the troops that protected the emperor, had also been present. And yet, after the incident, Hadis had taken all of Marquess Beil’s territory under imperial control and had rebuilt Beilburg as a naval port city. Supporters of the crown prince had erupted with criticism that Hadis had gone too far with wiping out the entire Beil family, and they had speculated that Hadis might have planned the entire incident just so he could turn Beilburg into a naval port city. This had only intensified the internal strife in the Rave Empire.

That confrontation had been directly linked to the start of the war between the Rave Empire and the Kratos Kingdom—after the Beilburg incident, the crown prince faction had proactively started reaching out to the Kratos Kingdom. As Gerald’s fiancée, Jill had been rigorously trained in etiquette and politics until she began her military service, and she had listened to these messengers herself, so she was very certain about that course of events.

However, all Jill had known for sure was that information was being passed to the Kratos Kingdom. Any incident of internal strife in an enemy nation tended to be turned into propaganda for war by inciting cruelty and inhumanity. And, after all, the informants were from the crown prince faction. It was very possible that they had changed the story to put Hadis in the worst possible light. Jill couldn't just blindly accept the story they had told.

It's so hard to believe that a girl who looks like she can't even hold a sword could do that... Jill thought about Sphere and her "You little homewrecker" comment.

Six years in the future, Jill had learned her lesson that she couldn't judge a woman from her appearance alone, so she wouldn't write Sphere off as having nothing to do with that horrible incident, but Jill felt as though the story might have been exaggerated, or that those events had perhaps been caused by something else.

Maybe there was something Jill could do, while she still had the time to investigate.

Hadis wasn't originally supposed to return home for another half month, and from what Jill remembered, in the original timeline, the Rave Emperor had peacefully remained in the Kratos Kingdom after Jill and Gerald's engagement had been settled. This meant that, historically, the Beilburg incident should have happened after that point in time.

"If I play my cards right, I can prevent it before it happens, or stop it from happening entirely..." she murmured to herself.

The timeline was already out of order because Hadis had rushed back to his home country with Jill. Moreover, he had brought Jill back as his fiancée. It wasn't necessarily set in stone that the same incident would happen at all.

But if it did occur, it would be a factor in the start of the war.

Jill had decided to become Hadis's—Emperor of the Rave Empire's—consort. She was doing this to get away from Gerald, but if at all possible, she selfishly wanted to avoid war with her native land as well.

She wasn't thinking about changing history in any sort of grandiose way, but if

war broke out between the two nations, it wasn't hard to imagine how an empress who had come from the enemy nation would be treated in these lands.

Besides, she didn't want to fight against her homeland or her subordinates, whom she still hadn't met yet.

...But, in that future...they're probably all dead... Jill felt a pain in her chest after imagining it. *At least they should be alive now, though.*

Even if Jill never saw them again, she would feel okay knowing that they were alive and well. Gerald had killed them *because* they had been her subordinates, after all, so she had no choice but to never see them again.

"Missy? You doing okay?"

"Rave!"

"Here, I brought you provisions."

Rave passed through the wall in a semi-transparent state, and then a pie appeared over Jill's head. Jill beamed, took it in her hands, and immediately started shoveling it into her mouth.

The soft dough and the sour-sweetness of the cherries and strawberries that had been simmered with sugar produced an indescribably rich flavor. The cuisine in the Rave Empire seemed to be far superior—Jill couldn't believe something so delicious was being served at a naval port.

Yes—the very first thing Jill had learned after arriving at the Rave Empire was that their food was delicious.

To begin with, there was a greater variety of dishes. Even with bread, there were breads with different textures, slightly different smells, and different flavors. Jill was also impressed that there were different types of bread used depending on the manner in which it was to be eaten—there was bread to be eaten with stew, for instance, and bread to be enjoyed with butter alone. When she had received a flat, square piece of bread with fried egg, sausage, and thinly sliced onion on top of it, she had even believed she'd started her life over again just for the purpose of eating it.

The Kratos Kingdom was abundant in foodstuffs as well. They had the divine protection of Kratos, Goddess of the Earth, after all, so they could grow anything anywhere under her dominion. One of the riches of the Kratos Kingdom was that no matter where you went, you would never have difficulty finding something to eat, at least.

But the cuisine in the Rave Empire, with their divine protection of logic, was outstanding. Logic was, put another way, ingenuity. Crops didn't grow everywhere in the Rave Empire, and this had likely led to the discovery of different food storage methods and different creative ways to eat food.

Surely simmering cherries and strawberries with sugar came from a stroke of genius! Jill believed with all her heart.

In Kratos, cherries and strawberries were eaten in their natural state. They had refined sugar in Kratos as well, but they hadn't established the technology to mass-produce refined sugar, so it wasn't distributed in such quantities that it could be readily used. Of course, cherries and strawberries were delicious enough in their natural state, but when simmered with sugar and made into a pie like this, they were addictive.

"Well, you look like you're enjoying that, Missy," Rave commented. "Aren't you worried at all about being under house arrest?"

Jill was happily chewing away, her cheeks bulging with pie. When she met Rave's flabbergasted eyes, she tilted her head.

"I'm being treated like a guest," she stated. "I've got a clean room with a bed and a table, and I can take proper baths... Best of all, not only do I get three meals a day, but you also bring me sweets!"

"The important thing here is your appetite, eh? So, Hadis wasn't wrong about you..."

"How is His Majesty?" Jill asked.

"Finally got around to asking about him, huh? Are you mad about the Lady Sphere thing, by any chance?"

Jill blinked. The hand she was using to eat the pie froze. "Isn't it normal for an emperor to have lots of potential fiancées and wives? I only just met him, and,

as I said, we're going to be married in name only for a while, so I don't have any reason to be mad." She shrugged.

Rave's small eyes blinked several times, and then a curious smile crept up on his face as he flew around the room. "Well, don't go saying stuff like that, Missy! After he woke up, that idiot's first words were, 'My amethyst wasn't just a dream?!' And then, when he heard that Lady Sphere had confronted you, he was crying out all night in his sleep, 'It's all over... She's gonna dump me...'"

A slight sense of insecurity is fine, but surely he's being overemotional? The fact that he's that troubled over it...well, to be honest...how should I put it... I feel...kind of pleased...but also not really...

Jill chewed the pie with a red face. Rave smirked.

"But he's recovering quickly, you know. He'll probably come here ready to fire on all cylinders, so get fired up to see him! ...Ah, speak of the devil."

They heard the guard's voice from the other side of the door, challenging someone, but Jill immediately sensed a buzzing of magic power, and the guard fell silent.

Perhaps the guard had been put to sleep or stunned. Jill swallowed the last bite of pie with a gulp without tasting much of it. Footsteps approached, and then she heard a single knock at the door.

"It's me. Let me in."

"Okay."

Jill got to her feet, and as soon as she saw the silhouette that resembled Hadis's form, she kneeled with her head bowed, as decorum dictated.

...Hm? Something smells kind of good.

Jill's curiosity was piqued, but she remained fixed in her kneeling position. There had been so much chaos before that she'd forgotten about it entirely, but you weren't supposed to show your face to the emperor until he gave permission.

Hadis seemed bewildered by this reception.

"You don't need to kneel before me."

“Yes, I do. You’re the emperor,” she stated.

“Why are you acting so formally with me? A-Are you upset, my amethyst? If it’s about Sphere, that’s just a misunderstanding. She and I don’t have a relationship like that— You’re the only consort for me.”

“...It makes me happy that you’re so considerate of me, Your Majesty.” Jill squashed down the second half of that sentence—*even if you do have a thing for little girls*. “But if we’re just married in name only,” she continued, “then you don’t have to worry about things like that.”

She didn’t want him to get any weird ideas.

Hadis, who seemed to have sat down in a chair, pondered for some time before quietly saying: “Even if we’re married in name only, we still need to work hard to maintain our relationship, don’t we? I don’t want you to dislike me—I want you to love me, if at all possible. Or is it wrong to strive to one day become a real couple?”

“N-No... It isn’t wrong. But is now really the time for this?”

“To me, how my wife feels is more important than anything else,” Hadis declared. “Are you saying what you really think? Despite your outer strength, you’re really surprisingly delicate, aren’t you? When I put your shoes on for you, you seemed quite flustered.”

Jill was speechless.

“So, I’m right, huh?” Hadis said, the proud smile she knew must be on his face very apparent in his tone of voice. “My interpretation is correct?”

“No! In fact, I’d rather you not do things like that in the future...!” Jill requested loudly.

“But you really enjoyed eating the cakes and pies I made, didn’t you?”

Jill looked up, in spite of herself.

Hadis’s complexion had improved. His strength must have returned. But for some reason, the emperor, descendant of Rave the Dragon God, had a triangular bandana wrapped around his beautiful hair.

Jill was silently taken aback.

Getting to her feet, she looked at Hadis's appearance from above.

There was a low, square neckline—was that an apron?! Incredulously, his long, slender fingers were covered by oven mitts! Each of these articles of clothing was deep crimson, a color forbidden to anyone except the imperial family of the Rave Empire. It was only natural for the emperor to wear these articles of clothing.

Wait—no, it's not!

The real question was, why was the emperor wearing a triangular bandana, an apron, and mittens, with which he was holding a baking sheet with freshly baked bread?

Wait, isn't there a more pressing issue?!

"There are no flaws in my happy family plan, after all," he said, oozing confidence. "Now, here are the croissants I made for you."

Jill accepted the croissant he handed over on his mitten.

It was airy and still warm. Jill could almost hear the crisp of the flaky dough just by looking at it. The outside was a glossy, brown color. This had been the cause of the smell that had been wafting through the air since Hadis had arrived.

A croissant of this quality could not have been produced by a novice. Did it have something to do with the fact that he was the descendant of the Dragon God?

"People try to poison me on a daily basis," Hadis explained. "It was also a pain searching for the culprit every single time, so I started to cook for myself. It ended up being pretty fun, and I've been hooked ever since. Even after becoming an emperor, I don't have enough manpower."

"...Y-You...cook for yourself..."

"It's also been a way I manage my health, but I never thought it'd be helpful in this way... Persistence pays off! Now that I'm emperor, and I can use ingredients and tools more lavishly, breads and sweets are my specialty. I'm pretty much good at everything."

“I-I can’t believe...everything I’ve eaten so far has been...” *The emperor’s home cooking.*

Jill trembled, but she couldn’t let go of her croissant. Hadis smiled faintly, as if he had already seen right through her. Before she knew it, the fiend in the triangular bandana had kneeled on the floor to meet her gaze and whispered: “If you’d like, I’ll treat you to meals personally. I’ve heard that the secret to a happy marriage is keeping your partner’s stomach happy. From the looks of you, I’d wager that’s correct. Sometimes even lowbrow books can come in handy... Now, let’s make you fall in love with me!”

Hadis had apparently learned this from a very subjective book, but when it came to Jill, the tip was spot-on. She couldn’t move.

“I’ll make you eggs benedict in the morning. That dish doesn’t exist in Kratos. I’ll smother the egg with sauce and put it on top of thick-cut bacon and crispy, toasted bread...”

“...I-I’m not going to give in...to a breakfast like that...!” she huffed.

“You’ll change your mind soon enough. Your tongue has come to know my taste. Once you’ve experienced it, there’s no going back. You’re going to taste your fill of me and want even more.”

“D-Don’t talk to me in that obscene way! I’m just a kid!” Jill managed to retort.

Hadis looked puzzled. “So, what if you’re a kid? You’re my wife. What’s wrong with me hitting on you? In fact, it’s being polite.”

“The problem is my age! Use some of your adult common sense!”

“Adults are children who have just gotten older!” Hadis smiled sweetly after brazenly saying something so childish. “Now, open your mouth. I’ll feed you. I want you to learn the form and taste of my love that I’ve made just for you. You’ll never be able to eat anyone else’s food again.”

“S-Stop!”

The appealing croissant was getting ever closer. Hadis grabbed Jill’s chin. She shook her head, but she just couldn’t resist.



The aroma of the freshly baked bread blended with the smell of the butter and sugar. Freshly baking it... Hadis was playing dirty. How could Jill refuse the moment of pure bliss when it slowly entered her mouth and made a crunching sound?

“Good girl. Now you can’t leave me... That’s right, we’re going to become a husband and wife bound by croissants.”

“...That’s...the...”

After gulping the bite down, Jill stepped away and grabbed her croissant back.

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard! Open your eyes and realize how weird you’re acting, you perverted emperor!”

Jill shoved the croissant in Hadis’s mouth, sending him straight to the floor. Rave’s thunderous laughter echoed from the ceiling. After taking the baking sheet Hadis had brought in, Jill huffed to herself aggressively and started on her second croissant.



“I don’t get it... What went wrong?”

“Your head. Your head went wrong.”

“That’s ridiculous! My plan was perfect. But she still hasn’t fallen for me... What didn’t work?!”

“I told you, it was that head of yours,” Rave repeated. “You should have just shut up and let your looks do the talking. You would’ve had this thing in the bag.”

“Your Majesty, Rave... If you two don’t feel like engaging in an intelligent conversation, would you please leave?” asked Jill, her voice icy. The emperor had been conducting some post-operation analysis with the snake-like creature across the table, and Jill had lost any desire to keep up polite appearances.

Hadis, however, did not seem offended at this and simply tilted his head. “Casting me out after you gobbled up those croissants I made?”

“Th-That’s not... A-Anyway, now’s not the time for this! You putting that

guard to sleep suggests that you slipped out of the castle to come here, right? Doesn't that mean something's happened?"

"Not really. I just wanted to see you."

This caught Jill off guard. Her face belatedly turned red.

Hadis, however, didn't seem to notice this. He repositioned himself on the chair, crossing his legs. Even in a triangular bandana and an apron, he looked handsome. "This is a bit of a hassle, though. You should have been released from house arrest long ago on my order and come to nurse me back to health."

Jill didn't remember hearing about an imperial order like that... Which meant...

"So, Marquess Beil is ignoring your orders?"

"He ostensibly acts like he's following them, but you're still here," Hadis said. "He has refused me any contact with the outside, pretending to be concerned that my health will get worse otherwise. I asked for the imperial capital to send someone to come fetch us, but I don't know whether that message was delivered either."

"No way... Is this an insurrection?" Jill asked in a hushed voice. Hadis laughed coldly.

"If so, they've got a lot of guts, taking on the cursed emperor."

"...By cursed, you mean...?"

"You didn't hear about that in Kratos?" he asked, one eyebrow raised.

"We just hear the common tales of people accidentally dying around you, and the never-ending conflict, and things like that," Jill explained.

Hadis's eyes widened slightly at this. "The common tales... I never thought it would be interpreted that way."

"I don't mean to suggest they're made-up stories, but you can't say Kratos and Rave are fond of each other, can you? So, I've taken everything I've learned about you with a grain of salt. I'd like to hear about you in your own words," Jill told him.

“You want to judge me with your own eyes and ears? ...That puts me in a bit of a pickle.”

“What do you mean?” Jill tilted her head to one side.

“I might just fall in love with you,” Hadis grumbled in a sulky tone.

Only after Jill’s face had turned red did her mind catch up and understand his words. “What are you... W-Wait, how is that a problem?! You were trying to woo me just earlier, weren’t you?!”

“I want you to fall in love with me, not the other way around.”

“WHAT?!” Jill yelled.

“Ah, ah!” said Rave, cutting them off. “We’re getting off-topic, so talk about that later! We don’t have time! Hurry and explain!”

Hadis cleared his throat and set aside his perplexing revelation. Truthfully, Jill also wished to avoid those sorts of subjects, so she settled in to listen carefully.

“Did you know that I was originally a very minor imperial prince, very far removed from the line of succession?”

Jill had happened to overhear that much before, so she nodded.

“My mother was a concubine,” he continued, “and her social standing was so low that only one of her sons, me or Vissel, had been permitted to stay in the imperial capital as an imperial prince... So His Majesty the Emperor forced me out to a remote region of the empire.”

As Hadis explained all this, Jill suddenly realized...Hadis’s mother hadn’t chosen him.

Hadis laughed at Jill’s shock and confirmed her suspicion. “Well, I think they cast me away, technically. I guess they thought I was weird because I could see this guy,” he said, winking at Rave. “They said they’d given birth to a monster.”

“The former emperor couldn’t see me, you see,” Rave said with a sneer. “Nor had any emperor for many, *many* generations prior.”

“But I could see him,” Hadis said. “So, I knew... I knew that one day, I would become emperor—no, that I *had to* become emperor.”

Hadis went on to explain that strange accidents then started to occur, beginning on his eleventh birthday.

The crown prince, one of Hadis's half-brothers whom he had never met before, suddenly died. It had been a heart attack. But there were still many other princes of higher social standing worthy of becoming the next crown prince. No one had reached out to Hadis, forgotten completely in the empire's frontier region. The next crown prince was decided, and again that crown prince died. He had drowned in the baths.

"The next crown prince hung himself," Hadis explained. "Apparently, he claimed to have heard a woman's voice every night after becoming the crown prince. The next one suffocated when he was washing his face one morning. Every boy chosen to be crown prince before me died like this, one after the other—every single year, on my birthday, one by one, like a messed-up gift."

Jill was speechless. She unconsciously glanced at Rave, but he became indignant.

"It wasn't me!" he denied. "I wouldn't have even needed to do something like that for him to become emperor."

"I sent a letter to the capital, but my older brother—Prince Vissel—was the only one who would answer me. But my brother was a minor imperial prince too. He didn't have the power to summon me back. If anything, his communicating with me only caused more trouble and broke something inside my mother."

"Broke something inside of her? But you two are brothers... I can't believe it..." Jill felt shaken by this, but Hadis continued with an easiness she couldn't wrap her head around.

"After this went on for five years, though, I guess they couldn't dismiss it as a coincidence anymore. The emperor accepted what my brother told him, summoned me back to the imperial court, and appointed me crown prince. That year, no one died. But that was the decisive blow—my father decided to abdicate the throne to me... He was probably scared of what would happen if he was above me."

The former emperor's retirement felt to Hadis like he was running away. He

bequeathed everything to Hadis, like he was begging for his life.

And so, at the tender age of eighteen, the young emperor came to be—Emperor Rave.

“Finally, on my coronation day, my mother committed suicide,” Hadis said matter-of-factly. “She said she didn’t want to live in a country ruled by a monster. And so now, I’m a cursed emperor.”

So this is what it means to be at a loss for words..., thought Jill, who didn’t have the faintest idea how to respond.

Hadis smiled faintly. “But that’s all in the past now. It’s not something you need to worry about.”

“B-But, Your Majesty... You didn’t do anything, right? You didn’t do anything wrong...” Jill contended.

“It’s fine. My brother went around getting a lot of people on my side, so I can live peacefully—for now, at least.”

“Is... Is that so?”

“Yes. My brother can’t see Rave, but he trusts me,” Hadis said cheerfully.

But Jill nearly broke out into a cold sweat for another reason entirely.

If my memory is correct, you’re going to go around executing your older brother and all your half-brothers in the future because of their treason and rebellion, and you won’t spare a single one...!

What’s more—Prince Vissel would be the one leaking information to Kratos. Jill had seen the man himself having secret talks with Gerald.

“I won’t say that everything is going to go smoothly, of course,” Hadis continued, not noticing her pallid countenance. “I’m sure even my older brother probably feels conflicted. My other brothers avoid me. But I want to believe that one day, we’ll be able to talk about things calmly.”

Will the emperor really continue to be betrayed, even though he has so much faith in them? And in the end, will he really abandon himself to despair? That’s terrible...

But nothing was definite yet, so Jill fought back against the helplessness that made her want to punch the wall. She clenched her concealed fists and changed the subject.

“...In the Kratos Kingdom, the people have wondered why there haven’t been any noticeable developments in the Rave Empire these last few years. I presume it was your curse that caused this?” she asked.

“That’s right,” Hadis nodded. “Because the crown princes were dying every year, a lot of talented people fled the empire. I’ve worked to stabilize the political situation since becoming emperor, but I’ve just been treated like a cursed abomination. My brother tries to keep the rumors in check, but if someone gets even slightly injured, a big fuss is made about my curse. Meanwhile, people suspect that the serial deaths of the crown princes was something I had planned from the very beginning.”

Hadis was an imperial prince who had been driven out to a remote region of the empire and then forgotten about—everyone ought to know such a plan would have been impossible for him to carry out. But it was easy for fear to overpower logic.

“Plus, my older brother is a fine man and popular to boot, so the movement to appoint him emperor has been ramping up lately. It doesn’t matter what my brother wants to do, you know. They’ll say it’s a curse or what have you, but those who don’t learn from their past mistakes are doomed to repeat them.”

“...Then perhaps Crown Prince Vissel or someone around him orchestrated the attack on the ship before?” Jill guessed. “Or maybe one of your other brothers went rogue...”

Hadis shook his head. “Vissel and my other brothers have witnessed first-hand their relatives in the imperial family dying one by one. I was once told that becoming the crown prince was a death sentence. I don’t think that’s a fear they could forget about that easily.”

It was certainly hard to imagine that anyone would try to dethrone Hadis under those circumstances.

“Then for now, the only one we ought to be suspicious of is Marquess Beil, right?” asked Jill, deep in thought.

“I’m sorry,” said Hadis, his expression suddenly despondent. “It’s well-known here that I’m cursed, but I shouldn’t have assumed that meant that you, a native of the Kratos Kingdom, knew all the details. I should have explained it to you before we got married... I guess I was just on cloud nine...”

“And how far did you ride it, exactly...?” Jill couldn’t hide the sarcasm in her voice.

“But you don’t have to worry about the curse anymore. Now that you’re here, it won’t happen anymore.”

“...What’s the curse got to do with me?” asked Jill, dumbfounded.

Hadis cheerfully answered, “I’ll spare you the details, but basically, you can think of it as a curse that occurs if the Dragon Emperor doesn’t have a consort. As long as I have a bride who has received Rave’s blessing, the curse subsides.”

“Then shouldn’t you have gotten married much earlier...?” she asked, pointing out the obvious.

Hadis was nineteen years old, *and* he was the emperor. He probably had his pick of the litter of potential brides. It was a simple enough question, but Hadis smiled uncomfortably.

“I told you, didn’t I? I was an imperial prince sent out to a remote region of the empire. I was a monster who would never starve to death, even when locked up and never given food. No one wanted to come near me.”

Oh crap, Jill thought. But she couldn’t take back the words that had already left her mouth. All she could do now was apologize.

“...I’m so sorry, I didn’t even think about that...”

“I’ve told you many times, that’s in the past. You don’t have to worry. Besides, you can’t receive Rave’s blessing if you can’t see him. Even if I had been treated like the crown prince from the very beginning, it probably wouldn’t have been easy to find a girl with enough magic power to be able to see Rave.”

Jill was beginning to understand why Hadis had welcomed her with open arms. This also explained Hadis’s enthusiastic excitement and why he was trying

so hard to make Jill love him.

So, he was alone all that time, with only Rave to keep him company?

Happy family plan... The phrase Jill had once thought was ridiculous now took on a more profound weight.

“Your Majesty... Don’t you feel outraged? You know...after everything with your family and the nation and the people around you...”

“Why would I? I’m the reincarnation of the Dragon God Rave. I was born to be emperor, and I became one. Those people are my subjects and my family—people I ought to protect. To deny them would be to lose to fate.”

The emperor’s easy smile was beautiful and full of pride.

“I have Rave. Now I have you too. I’m not going to lose.”

Looking at his eyes, eyes that challenged the future, Jill suddenly felt as though a wound that had not yet fully healed was scratched open again. She blinked in mute surprise.

No... This is clearly different. Just calm down. He’s basically saying that he wanted to marry you because he wanted to end the curse.

Thinking about things from that perspective, it all made sense. Jill could see a glimmer of hope.

“Wait—then, is the requirement of your bride being younger than fourteen also related to this curse?!”

“No, the only absolute requirement is that they can see Rave. The age is like a precaution—or just an aspiration, I guess.”

I shouldn’t have asked.

“You really are my ideal partner in every way,” Hadis continued.

“I see... That’s disappointing...” Jill said coolly.

“Because we can be together for the next three years without having to worry about anything.”

Jill felt uneasy about the way he phrased that remark, but Hadis just smiled. When she looked over at Rave, he turned the other way. Neither of them

seemed to be in the mood to disclose the full truth.

He's not lying, but he's not telling the truth, either. There's still something at play in the background that they aren't filling me in on.

Whatever that extra detail was, it didn't seem to have anything to do with the situation at hand. They were pressed for time, so Jill quickly changed the subject.

"I understand that you have many enemies around you, Your Majesty," Jill said, letting the issue go for now. "How do you plan on dealing with them?"

"I'll respond to any danger, so if they want to try anything, I'll crush them. But I don't want to fight anyone unnecessarily, either. As long as they don't interfere with us, I'll have no objections."

Jill took a deep breath and pulled herself together.

Hadis's plan of action was almost the same as hers.

"Then first, we'll need to gather information about what Marquess Beil is up to, won't we? But your health is poor, Your Majesty, so you should just rest inside the castle. They'll probably lower their guard with you in the castle, too, so that would be safest. I'll figure something out in the meantime."

Jill got to her feet. Hadis blinked at her with a blank expression.

"Figure something out? All by yourself? How?"

"I'm pretty good at reconnaissance missions. Plus, I thought something like this might happen."

Jill removed one of the floorboards and took out the boys' clothes she had stashed away. There were also suspenders and a small hat. Rave looked astonished.

"Hey! Where did you get that stuff?" he asked her.

Jill pointed to an air vent near the ceiling. "I used that to go outside the first night I was here and borrowed them from the naval port's church. I felt bad, but it looked like a donation, not someone's actual clothes..."

"Right, they often look after children in the church... But you already did some

reconnaissance? You're a force to be reckoned with, Missy."

"It was nighttime, though, so the best I could do was get a feel for part of the naval port. But I've been very obedient since I've been stuck here, so I think the guard has gotten careless. Besides, frankly speaking, the security here is lax. Are the second and third sons of nobles tossed into these positions as honorary titles or something?"

Hadis nodded, looking impressed with her. "That's right. The North Division is stationed at this naval port, but at the end of the day, this is the dominion of Marquess Beil. We call it a united front against Kratos, but we've also been operating under a truce for a long time. If we were to set up anything too extreme, we would provoke the marquess' animosity."

"In that case, even if they realize that I've escaped, they probably won't make a big deal out of it," Jill said. "They might even try to bury it to cover up their mistake. The fact that I'm a child will also work in my favor. Just leave this to me."

Hadis furrowed his eyebrows. "You've shown me your strength, but it's still dangerous. If anything were to happen—"

"If anything were to happen, Your Majesty, then you'd be the one in danger. If Marquess Beil really is planning something, that means the enemy has trapped you. Besides, don't underestimate me—I'm your wife." Jill looked up and straight into his eyes as she proclaimed, "How can I, your wife, not do anything when my husband is in danger— Your Majesty?!"

Hadis had suddenly staggered, pressing a hand against his chest. Jill ran up to him in panic. "What's wrong? Are you feeling ill again...?"

"I-It seems so," he gasped. "M-My chest is pounding, and it's...hard to breathe..."

"You'd better call it an early night and rest," Jill instructed. "I wish I could walk you back..."

"I-I'll be fine. I can get back on my own... I know this is a bad time, but there's something I want to tell you..." Hadis wrapped both of his hands around one of Jill's. His eyebrows knitted together as if he were in pain, and he spoke through

his heavy panting. “Now...I want to make...all the cakes and breads...that I can... for you...!”

“Really?! Then please get better as quickly as you can...!”

Jill squeezed his hand in hers and they locked eyes. Rave looked at the pair of them, his eyes half-lidded, unamused.

“Oh, jeez... Well, if that’s settled, then hurry and go back, Hadis. You’re still not back to tip-top shape, and if you overdo it, you’ll regress and be bedridden again. Can you teleport?”

“P-Probably...”

Hadis got to his feet and started tottering. He seemed unsteady.

Strangely, however, Jill didn’t think of him as frail or pitiful because of this. She started regarding him like her little brother or a child, and that such things were bound to happen. *I can’t just leave him on his own*, she thought.

Right. That’s it... He’s nine years older than me, but inside there’s only a three-year difference between us. I’ll just turn a blind eye to our age difference, then...

Feeling somewhat relieved, Jill smiled as she watched Hadis leave.



THE next morning, Jill buried herself under her sheets, pretending to be ill. The guard, so worried about her that Jill almost felt guilty, gave her water and medicine. She refused lunch in advance and asked to be allowed to sleep. Then she stuffed her clothes under the sheets to make a lump, changed into her disguise, and crawled into the air vent.

Jill didn’t want to use too much magic power. Even during peaceful times, this was still a naval port. Even though it was rare for magic power to exist in the Rave Empire, it wouldn’t be unusual if there were some soldiers that could use it.

Jill emerged from the vent behind the church. She brushed the dust off her and tucked her tied-up hair into her hat. Her cover was that she was a young boy who was in the care of the church. From the way the soldiers treated her now, Jill seemed to have successfully pulled off her disguise. After all, the only

people who had gotten a good look at her face since she had arrived at Beilburg were Sphere and the guard at her door. As long as they didn't find out that she had escaped, she most likely wouldn't be found out.

...Come to think of it, there aren't any children in the church right now, are there? Did they all go out somewhere?

Jill looked around, wondering where to go first, but just then, she heard a lovely voice.

"Reverend Father, what...what should I do...?!"

It was coming from inside the church. Realizing the window was open, Jill stealthily craned her head to look inside.

Beyond the window was the inside of the chapel. A man stood in front of the altar, wearing clothes that indicated he was a priest. Sphere was in front of this man, hanging her head.

"I have a bad feeling about all of this. He may be bedbound, but he's still Hadis. Why would Father say he might not be the emperor...? What is he thinking? He tells me there's nothing I need to worry about, but should I really just leave it at that?"

"Marquess Beil only has your best interests at heart. Why not have faith in him?" the priest replied gently.

Sphere bit her lip. Her head drooped even farther. "...Even though I'm just the daughter of his first wife from a loveless, political marriage...?"

"You are one of His Majesty's fiancée candidates, after all. Of course, your father treasures you."

"I...I guess you're right. As long as Hadis favors me... But yesterday, Hadis went to visit that girl he brought back with him!"

Jill stared in shock, but her panic was negated by the reverend's next words. "That can't be true. His Majesty is bedbound, isn't he?"

"But that's the only conclusion I can come to! He's agonized every day until yesterday, 'Where's my amethyst?' ...H-He's been worrying so much that I felt ashamed of my own selfishness. But then yesterday, all of a sudden, he started

saying, 'It's dangerous to get too close... My heart beats so fast... I'll recuperate in the castle.'"

"Well, that's... That means he's calmed down then, doesn't it?"

"No! Don't underestimate the intuition of a lovestruck girl! Hadis is falling in love!"

That's not true...

Sphere, however, couldn't hear Jill's thoughts.

"And then this morning, he was reading every book on pastry-making he could get his hands on...!"

That one might be my fault...

"And he asked me for advice on decorations and flavors that girls would like! He was absolutely thinking about that little girl...! And asking me about it... H-How could he be so cruel...?!"

"C-Calm down, Lady Sphere... That's it! Maybe he's making a gift for you."

"W-Well... Perhaps, but...Hadis...needs someone under fourteen as his bride...!" At this, Sphere finally fell to the floor and began to cry. "I a-asked him if he would reconsider our engagement, and he said that because I'm not under fourteen years of age, he c-couldn't...! If it were a-anything else, he could try, but because of my age... Wh-Why under fourteen?! I'm not good enough because I'm sixteen?! A-And when Father heard that, he arranged for a girl under fourteen to be invited to the banquet...!"

It was painful, listening to Sphere's lamentations, but Jill couldn't stay there and listen to them forever. Even though she felt sorry for her, Jill quietly moved away from the window and along the church wall.

Getting rejected because of your age would certainly be a hard thing to accept. Anyone might be tempted to ask why his fiancée has to be under fourteen.

And in fact, why was that the case? Setting aside the possibility that he liked little girls, Jill walked on, wondering. *Fourteen... Fourteen...*

In the Kratos Kingdom, fourteen was said to be the age when the Goddess,

then just a girl in the heavenly realm, awoke to her powers. Because of this, girls born in the Kratos Kingdom had a flower crown made for them on their fourteenth birthday. It was a special celebration... Suddenly, these thoughts brought back a terrible memory.

The night Jill had jumped off the castle rampart... The night that had started all of this... *It had been Princess Faris's fourteenth birthday, so I went back to the royal capital and... Stop. Stop thinking about it.*

In the end, Jill would have no choice but to get the man himself to tell her the reason. She felt slightly afraid to ask.

"But I need to ask him about it before long... If I don't, the question of what will happen when I turn fourteen will be—"

"Hey, there's been no signal yet!"

"It's after the gate closes. Any moment now. Quiet!"

Jill, having turned to the front of the church, quickly hid behind a nearby bush at the sound of those voices. Several men were hurrying down the road in front of the church.

That's strange... If most of the soldiers here are the sons of nobles, then what's this?

A person's good breeding was always evident in their movements. The way these men walked was vaguely brutish, and their words had a bit of an accent to them. It was as if they had come from a region deep in the mountains. But they were definitely wearing the military uniform of the Northern Division.

"The target is definitely here, right?" one asked, pointing to the doors of the church.

Jill blinked.

"Yeah, the priest is keeping her there now. And we already know where the other one is being held on house arrest."

"And how many Northern Division guys are there inside the base?"

"Ten at most, I hear. They're basically useless."

Jill could do nothing but hide there in mute amazement.

H-Hold on! The Northern Division was entirely useless?! They were that weak...?! D-Don't tell me they used the terrible incident that happened here as an opportunity to rebuild in the future...

But she had bigger problems right now. In the time Jill had spent thinking about the terrible situation she was in, the gates of the naval port had come down, and a voice had rung out. The soldiers kicked down the church doors. Jill heard a scream from inside.

“Wh-What are you doing...?!”

It was Sphere's voice.

I knew it, Jill thought, her head falling into her hands. But she quickly made up her mind.

My duty is to gather information!

“I just heard a scream... What's going on?!” asked Jill, bursting into the chapel.

Sphere, her arms restrained, turned to look at Jill with tears in her eyes. It wasn't long before the soldiers shouted, “Who's this kid?!” and grabbed hold of Jill as well.



JUST as Hadis was about to swap out the book he had been reading for a bread recipe, there was a loud banging sound, and then the double doors burst open. It may have been the lord's castle, but this was the room in which the emperor rested. Hadis looked up with cold eyes.

“Who said you could come in?” he asked.

Marquess Beil entered alongside several guards. His hands were clasped behind him, and he stood with his heels together—habits that seemed to have stuck from his time as a soldier.

“My apologies, Your Majesty, but we don't have time for formalities. Someone has seized the naval port. We've received reports that this was done under the guidance of that child you brought here from Kratos. They have closed the gates and taken total control of the port. Moreover, the assailants

have taken my daughter, Sphere, as a hostage.”

The marquess’s tone of voice was rather detached for a man speaking about an emergency involving his own daughter. Hadis didn’t move and looked up only with his eyes as he asked, “What happened to the Northern Division soldiers guarding the naval port?”

“Those spineless cowards are useless. In any case, the naval port has fallen into the enemy’s hands. My private army is on its way. My daughter’s life is at stake here, after all. I’m sure you have no objections.”

“What are you planning to do with my wife?”

Marquess Beil’s eyebrow twitched upward. “Your wife? That girl is a spy. I wish you would open your eyes. And I wish you would take this opportunity to send the useless Northern Division out of this city. After all, the Northern Division has always enjoyed a permanent presence in this city because of Your Majesty’s relationship with my daughter. This is your blunder, Your Majesty.” The corner of Marquess Beil’s mouth rose ever so slightly.

Is that what he’s after? What a fool.

Marquess Beil was a very proud man. He was a former civilian soldier who boasted about his private army of elite soldiers, yet he had allowed the Northern Division to be stationed there permanently since times of peace. It was Sphere, the daughter of his first wife, that Hadis had become friendly with, not the daughter of the second wife whom he truly loved. It must have hurt his pride that things hadn’t gone his way.

Hadis closed the book in his lap. “All right. I’ll leave the invaders who have taken over the naval port to you.”

“I wish you had done so from the start,” Marquess Beil sneered.

“But if we discover that my wife is innocent, I’ll have her appropriately compensated for this.”

Marquess Beil laughed contemptuously. “That’s ridiculous. Besides, you should be more worried about yourself, Your Majesty. If the daughter of a marquess dies because of your blunder, I shudder to think of the political fallout.”

So the daughter of his first wife, who failed to become Hadis's consort, would be used as fodder to denounce the emperor... Hadis looked on with disappointment as the marquess left the room with a triumphant bounce to his step.

"Looking at someone like that makes even a reign of terror seem reasonable."

"I'm not averse, but I don't think the little miss would like that much," advised Rave, appearing from Hadis's body. "She dropped all those guys who attacked our ship into the ocean, but she didn't kill them."

Hadis suddenly came to a realization. "I see now... So, this is the pain of being a married man? I can't carry out a reign of terror...!"

"So, what are you going to do now? Aren't you going to go help the little miss with this?"

"I really want to, but she told me to leave it to her... Besides, I probably shouldn't go anywhere near her. I don't think my heart could take it," Hadis said earnestly.

Rave's face fell. "You really said that without batting an eye... I've raised you so wrong..."

"That's not true, you did a fine job raising me."

"Then I'll ask you this—what do you honestly think of that girl? Do you find her cute? Do you think she's cool?"

"What do I think of her...? I think she might be surprisingly dangerous."

Rave gave him a strange look, so Hadis, assuming he might not have explained it well enough, continued, "I mean, I just can't get her out of my head, you know? No matter what I do, I'm always worried about her, and my heart's even starting to go crazy. She's my wife, so I want to talk to her more and I want to be with her, but just thinking about it makes my chest hurt. She's got a lot of magic power, so maybe it's had some influence on me, and I've contracted a new disease. And if I collapse, I'll just cause trouble for her..."

"Yeah, I guess you're already sick enough as it is..." Rave said sarcastically.

"I thought so... If I don't get better soon, I won't be able to make her a cake. I

love when she really enjoys eating my cooking. She looks so adorable.”

“Gods are totally powerless.”

Hadis puzzled over Rave’s philosophical remark and carried on, “But she needs to stay safe. Rave, could you go see how she’s doing? I don’t think anyone can easily pull something on a girl that can fight as well as she can, but I will take action if I need to.”

“Is that all you want? Anything else?”

“There’s nothing else that really needs to be done. If I interfere with this ineptly, Marquess Beil will probably start killing people to try and achieve something. Besides, for me, this is already over. They came to me with the simplest strategy of the several I had envisioned, but that’s probably because they underestimated me.”

With a *snap*, Hadis closed the book he had been reading.

“No matter who’s behind this, Marquess Beil is just a pawn they’re going to use and then throw away. I had wanted to let him roam freely for a little while longer, but the only use for him now is making an example out of him. Marquess Beil has been taking all the teeth out of the Northern Division too, so it’s high time I started taking drastic measures. This is the perfect opportunity for me to do away with the things I don’t need. In the end, this area will fall under the direct control of the emperor. This whole thing is a farce. I have a plan to rebuild this naval port city all set and ready to be implemented.”

That much was easier than thinking about what kind of cake to make for his wife.

Next is bread, Hadis thought, reaching out for the stack of books on the table.

“I hope a few decent people are left, at least, but if there’s not, that’s how things will end.” He shrugged.

“...What about Lady Sphere?” Rave asked.

“We can save her, but her father, Marquess Beil, will die, and it’s possible that the Beil family will be wiped out. If that’s the case, she’ll have nowhere to go. She’ll be doomed to misery. I’ll do whatever I can for her, but...considering her

future, she might be happier just dying here.”

“Why not make her a concubine? Fortunately, you’ve already got a consort who has received my blessing, and the Goddess can’t enter the Rave Empire anymore. Even if she’s over fourteen years old, there’s no need to be that cautious, is there?” Rave asked.

“There’s another way for the Goddess to get in. Or shall I keep Sphere by my side as a test, to see if she’ll be killed or manipulated by the Goddess? Will she be used as a disposable thing not just by her father, but by me as well?”

Treating a woman who harbored at least some feelings for me that way would be too heartless.

Rave responded to Hadis’s unspoken thoughts with a quiet agreement.



JILL and Sphere had been placed in iron handcuffs and tossed into a storehouse near the church.

“You stay there and stay quiet! Damn... Hey! Have you found that girl?”

“Not yet. We questioned the guard, but he kept saying he didn’t know where she was.”

“Th-They know I’m the d-daughter of Marquess Beil...” Sphere said in a shaky voice. Her body was trembling too.

The soldier wearing the uniform of the Northern Division sneered. “Of course, we know! I should have explained earlier, huh? You’re a hostage, *Lady* Sphere. Just wait there quietly until it’s your turn.”

“A h-hostage... Wh-What in the empire do you people want...?”

“We came here from Kratos, thanks to the guidance of a certain girl,” he said, grabbing Sphere’s bangs and jerking her face upwards.

Sphere grimaced. “N-No way...the girl Hadis brought back with him...?!”

“That’s right. What was her name...? Jill. That’s right, Jill. We tricked Emperor Rave with a child! That’s gotta be a new level of stupid for him!”

“D-Don’t insult Hadis!” Sphere, who had been trembling all the while, shouted

suddenly. “Th-There’s some—yeah! There’s got to be some deep-laid plan that I can’t even think of right now! The one at fault here is the deceiver, not Hadis, the deceived! That girl is just—that’s it—she’s just the most wicked girl in recent history!”

The soldier snorted, roughly tossed Sphere back onto the ground, and turned on his heel. Jill used her entire body to catch Sphere from behind. Sphere blinked at her with wet eyes.

“Th-Thank...you...”

“No problem.”

“I-I’m so sorry. I hate that such a little boy got detained because of me... H-Hadis got tricked by that evil girl, just because I’m not under fourteen years old...!”

Sphere started to cry, but considering the situation they were in, she was actually holding up quite well.

She’s got some steady nerves, huh? The fact that she’s not ranting and raving alone is a big help.

When the soldier left, leaving Sphere and Jill alone in the storehouse, Jill looked around. There was barely anything inside. There was a solitary window very high up, just near the ceiling, which a child might narrowly be able to squeeze through. The only entrance or exit seemed to be the iron door through which the man had just left. Despite it being midday, the inside of the storehouse was dim, with the sun streaming in through the window as their only light source.

It would be simple for Jill to escape on her own, but if she was going to escape with Sphere, she’d need some help. She also wanted to find out the number of enemies they were dealing with.

I know they’re trying to make me out to be some spy, but...if I don’t figure out exactly what their plan is, I won’t be able to outsmart them.

Unfortunately for them, Jill had broken out of the room where she had been held under house arrest, so they weren’t able to capture *her* with Sphere as planned. That was probably why the naval port was in such chaos. Both Sphere

and the men thought that Jill was a young boy right now. It was still too early for her to reveal her true identity.

I'd better exchange information with Sphere while I still can.

"Lady Sphere, why did you come here today?" she asked.

"Huh...? M-My father... He suggested that I ask the priest for advice about Hadis and urged me to come pray... He even let me take the carriage..."

"Then what happened to your guards? If you're the daughter of a marquess, even if you were coming to pray, surely guards accompanied you to the church, didn't they?"

"...Maybe they all got caught too... Y-You're awfully calm, aren't you? Aren't you scared?"

Before Jill knew it, Sphere had stopped crying and was staring at her. Jill realized that she hadn't been acting like a child, but under the circumstances they were in, she couldn't smooth things over.

"Yeah, well... I'm used to conflict, so..."

"I see... I'm hopeless, aren't I? Getting so flustered..."

"That's not true! I think you're keeping it together pretty well."

"You don't have to be so polite," Sphere said. "I'd probably be crying the whole time if I were here by myself... But we'll be fine. I know my father and Hadis will come save us..."

"Pardon me for asking, but why do you have so much faith in His Majesty the Emperor?" Jill asked. "I just... I heard you were one of his fiancée candidates, but..."

Sphere blinked in surprise and then smiled, looking a little embarrassed. "... Well, I love dragons."

"Dragons..." Jill repeated.

Dragons were only born in the Rave Empire, which received the divine protection of the Dragon God, and they protected the skies. Jill had only ever seen dragons on the battlefield.

...Maybe now I can meet and ride dragons too?! Just as Jill's thoughts almost pivoted in that direction, Sphere suddenly pointed far off in the distance.

"Northeast of here, my father has a villa... There's a place there where dragons gather. My mother died when I was young, so that was where I was raised. There was nowhere in the estate I felt like I belonged, so I often escaped to the place where the dragons rested. Not even my mean governess would come looking for me there. No one would mock me or laugh at me for being a girl abandoned by her own father, either..."

There were no dragons in the Kratos Kingdom, so Jill didn't know much about their behavior, but she was fairly certain they were dangerous. This thought must have been obvious on her face, because Sphere smiled impishly.

"I knew that dragons were dangerous. They're the messengers of the Dragon God Rave, after all. But when I was a small child, they talked to me."

"Dragons talked to you?!" Jill asked, stunned.

"I couldn't understand their language, of course. I could just sense very trivial things, somehow, like if they were saying hello or telling me to be careful... But it made me so happy, feeling as though they were listening to me. I spoke to the dragons every day, and then rumors started to spread that I was a crazy girl who talked to dragons..."

All of a sudden, Sphere's eyes glazed over.

"No one would come near me, and I was so sure that I'd never get married... But! Then Hadis, who had just become emperor, said that he had heard the rumors and really wanted to meet me!"

Sphere ecstatically explained that the way people treated her changed dramatically after that day. After it had been decided that Sphere was going to meet the emperor, Marquess Beil had summoned her back to the castle to get her prepared. All the etiquette lessons and ladylike refinement Sphere had worked so hard at was finally going to be put to use. Sphere's stepmother and her half-sister were as cold to her as ever, but she hoped that her relationships with them might improve slightly, once they understood that she could contribute to the Beil family...

“I worked so hard. I wanted to serve Hadis. But then he made everyone leave and asked me if I could see anything on his shoulder.”

Hadis had probably been hoping that she would be able to see Rave, Jill realized.

“I couldn’t see anything. All I could tell was that there was something invisible there that was very worried about Hadis. So, I answered him honestly. But that was wrong, I guess. When I went back and told my father about it, he got angry. ‘Why didn’t you tell him you could see it?’ he had asked me.”

“...But wouldn’t that be lying to His Majesty the Emperor?” Jill pointed out.

“Yes. But my father said that Hadis always asked that question whenever he met a woman he might take on as a fiancée, like a quiz. He scolded me, saying that not saying I could see it was the wrong choice... He told me to give back all the money he had spent to get me ready for the meeting, and all the money he had ever spent raising me. He said I could earn money by becoming a high-class prostitute.”

In Jill’s mind, Marquess Beil became irrefutably classified as a man she wanted to tear limb from limb. It was painful to see Sphere smiling with embarrassment, without even a trace of pain.

“But then Hadis happened to pass by and saw us... He said he wanted to make me his teatime friend. He protected me.”

At that point, Hadis had not chosen anyone as a fiancée. Therefore, even if he had treated Sphere as a teatime friend, that had still made her a step above the other ladies. Not even Marquess Beil could disregard this, so Sphere ended up living in the Beil estate in the imperial capital.

“His Majesty was very busy, but he made sure to have tea with me once a month so that they wouldn’t start treating me badly. He’d prepare incredibly delicious cakes and cookies for me.”

No way—homemade cakes and cookies? Jill thought, though she refrained from throwing a wrench in the conversation.

“But he told me we couldn’t get engaged. He said that if he made me his fiancée, I’d be in danger.”

“In danger... Getting harassed by the other fiancée candidates, you mean?” Jill guessed.

Sphere shook her head. “The curse... Do you know that the last crown princes died one after the other?”

“I’ve heard about it.”

“Well, I was out in the countryside my whole life, so I didn’t know much about His Majesty’s curse... The first time I heard about it, I was frightened. But His Majesty always seemed so lonely. Even his brothers avoid him. He said it was inevitable, but...he’s such a kind person...”

“So, you didn’t stop being his teatime friend... You’re very brave, Lady Sphere,” Jill told her sincerely.

It must have taken a lot of courage for a girl like her to have faced the cursed emperor all alone. Sphere’s eyes widened, and then she looked down at the filthy floor of the storehouse.

“I don’t think that’s true. If I had stopped being His Majesty’s teatime friend, I would have been kicked out of the house. I just didn’t want that to happen...”

Jill had wondered if Sphere was someone who just went with the flow in situations, but the girl really took a close look at the circumstances she found herself in.

“His Majesty knew all about my ulterior motive, and he still continued to have tea with me. If I had died by an unnatural death, it would’ve been His Majesty’s fault. That probably took a lot more courage on his part, don’t you think?”

“...I suppose so,” Jill agreed.

“That’s why I wanted to be helpful to His Majesty. Before he went to the Kratos Kingdom, I told him how I felt. I asked him to make me his wife. Then...he said he wanted to be honest with me...and he told me in no uncertain terms that he couldn’t marry me because I wasn’t under f-fourteen...”

That was the turning point—the remark that spoiled the wonderful story. Jill looked away in spite of herself.

“I-I was so sure it was a joke to avoid hurting me, but then he brought back a

little girl from Kratos... And now, that girl caused all this chaos! What should I do to keep His Majesty from getting any more criticism...?!”

“J-Just calm down. We have to do something about our current situation first,” Jill said, trying to placate her.

“R-Right... You’re right. I’m sorry for getting emotional...” said Sphere, wiping the tears from the outer corners of her eyes and pressing her lips together.

Jill grinned, slightly pained, at this. *She’s a good person. I want to help her, if I can.* But her father, Marquess Beil, was guilty. *The priest is guilty too... Is the marquess using his daughter as a sacrificial pawn?*

Even if she were to escape with Sphere, wherever they escaped, Jill could be accused of attempting to kidnap or murder her. The only way for Jill to ensure her innocence was to expose Marquess Beil’s plot in broad daylight—clearly and in the full view of a crowd so that he could not escape.

If I ask for the emperor’s help, he’ll be unjustly suspected... How much can I do on my own?

One advantage on Jill’s side was that, although she had been labeled as the double-crosser who had guided the culprits here, the soldiers hadn’t caught her yet. In that laid her chance for victory. But if she was going to do this while protecting Sphere—she would need a little more manpower, at least.

“Get in there! How dare you waste our time...!”

The iron door opened.

“Don’t touch me with your filthy hands, you’ll get me dirty— Agh!”

The first person was kicked into the storehouse with a scream.

“Hah—don’t make me laugh! You guys wasted so much time on just two people because you’re incompetent!”

A second person was pushed inside and fell onto his backside. Then a third person was thrown in like a sack of potatoes and rolled to Jill’s feet. For some reason, he was holding the jacket Jill had been wearing before she had escaped.

Jill’s eyes snapped wide open.

The soldier who guarded my room! This is bad! If he sees my face, then...!

The soldier, however, was totally unconscious. Jill felt a wave of relief.

“And be quiet!”

With that sharp remark, the iron door was shut. The two who had been first thrown into the storeroom slowly lifted their upper bodies off the floor.

“They treated us like the bad guys! This is your fault, you idiot!”

“It’s not my fault! They got us because you went wild!”

“...Zeke? Camila?” Jill muttered in amazement.

These were the names of Jill’s subordinates who, six years in the future, she would be told were dead.

The two of them looked over at her.

“Who’s this kid? Do you know him, Camilo?”

“Shut up! Don’t freakin’ call me by my real name, you little...! Oh crap. I’m sorry! It’s okay, I’m just sweet Camila! This is Zeke. But... No, I don’t know this kid. I’m sorry, have we met somewhere...? Crap! What’s wrong? Are you crying?”

Jill had covered her face with her hands. Camila looked at her nervously. Camila looked younger than Jill remembered, but the mole under her right eye was in the exact same spot.

“Shit! This is your fault, Zeke! Kid got scared ’cause you look so angry! That girl in the back there is pale too! Do something!”

“Do you think I care? I was born with these looks!”

Zeke’s tone was cold, but he sounded a bit embarrassed as he looked the other way. Jill felt like he was shorter than she remembered, but the moody line between his brows was the same as ever.

“Ah,” Jill breathed out, and it sounded like a laugh.

I see... So, nothing has been robbed from me yet. This is just the beginning. For the first time since time had been rewound six years, Jill truly, fully believed that was true.

Chapter 3: The Battle to Recapture Beilburg Naval Port

“**HEY**, don’t cry, don’t cry! I know this guy is kind of crude, condescending, and vulgar, but he’s really just a softie who’s incapable of thinking about anything too difficult, so he’s handy as a meat shield!”

“Oi! I’ll cut that boy and girl in half, for real!”

“And I’ll put so many holes in you, you’ll resemble a beehive, so you just sit there!”

“Oh? And how are you gonna do that with your hands tied?”

“Your hands are tied too, you brute!”

The two adults started bickering, exactly as they would six years in the future. Jill was amazed. Then she looked up, realizing that now was not the time to be relishing in her joy.

Zeke and Camila weren’t her subordinates right now, so she couldn’t give them orders. However, Sphere had remained frozen in fear the entire time.

“Please stop, both of you,” Jill said. “You’re frightening Lady Sphere.”

“*Hmph*,” grunted Zeke. “So what? Kids should keep their mouths—”

Jill suddenly got to her feet and tore off the iron shackles that had been binding her wrists. Silence fell over the storehouse.

“First, let’s compare what we know,” she said, taking charge.

“Oi, hold on a minute! What did you just do, all calmly like that?!” Zeke berated. “Was that a magic trick?!”

“...You possess magic power, don’t you? Does that mean you’ve come from the Kratos Kingdom?” asked Camila calmly.

Jill nodded. Few people in the Rave Empire possessed magic power. And those in the Rave Empire who did possess it had come from the Kratos Kingdom.

“Oi... Does that mean this kid is that g—?”

“Are you two soldiers working for the Northern Division?” Jill asked, looking at the soldier uniforms Zeke, Camila, and the unconscious guard were wearing.

“That’s right. We’re not impersonators, we’re real soldiers,” Camila said. “This mess has been terrible for us in the Northern Division... What do you know about what’s going on?”

“All we know is that the enemy has infiltrated the Northern Division by posing as their soldiers,” Jill said. “They’ve taken over the naval port and taken Lady Sphere Beil here as a hostage. Isn’t that right, Lady Sphere?” She turned to Sphere.

Sphere bowed her head slightly. “Y-Yes. Um, my name—is Sphere de Beil.”

Camila looked at Jill and laughed. “You may be young, but you’re pretty levelheaded. But Marquess Beil hates the Northern Division. Now his daughter is a hostage who got caught up in the raid of the naval port, which the Northern Division defends? Oh my... It’s over for us.”

“O-Over?” asked Sphere. “But they say a girl from Kratos was leading them here...”

“That’s where things get fishy. The insurgents are looking for a kid who helped them. If you believe that guard over there, at least.”

“Wh-What do you mean?” asked Sphere.



“Ugh...” Before they could answer Sphere’s question, the guard who had been lying on the ground stirred. He seemed to have regained consciousness. “Where am I...? W-Wait, where is that girl?! Why was only her jacket there?!”

“You woke up at the perfect time,” said Camila. “Mr. Guard, do you remember us?”

“Yeah... You two heard the commotion and came to lend me a hand...”

Jill quietly moved beside Sphere, so the guard wouldn’t be able to see her face.

“So, um...” said Sphere, “what does this mean? The insurgents who imprisoned us here are looking for the girl who helped them...?”

“It’s not too difficult to figure out if you consider the possible outcomes of this,” Camila said. “The assailants got in impersonating Northern Division soldiers, and then they took Marquess Beil’s daughter hostage and barricaded the naval port. This would obviously mobilize Marquess Beil’s private army. Even the young lady and the brute here can follow that much, right?”

“Are you so messed up in the head that you can’t explain this without the extra commentary?” Zeke interjected.

“Then, what if Marquess Beil’s incredible private army were to defeat the insurgents?” Camila continued, ignoring Zeke. “He would deem the Northern Division worthless, and we’d be withdrawn from Beilburg. Plus, if it turns out the girl His Majesty the Emperor had brought back with him had helped the insurgents, that, along with the blunder of his Northern Division, would be a huge blow for His Majesty. Fortuitously for Marquess Beil, on the day of his daughter’s death, he might very well become unmatched politically in the empire for quite some time.”

The color quickly drained from Sphere’s face. Zeke snorted. “His daughter is the ultimate sacrifice. That’s how an aristocrat would think... It’s disgusting.”

“I agree,” Camila nodded. “But that hinges on a marvelous performance from the marquess, so we don’t have to worry about that yet. That’s not the main issue. When we heard Mr. Guard over there screaming and came running, that spy girl wasn’t in her room. The enemy was panicking big time and asking Mr.

Guard where the girl was. Isn't that right?"

"Y-Yes," the guard replied. "They kept asking me over and over where she was...but I had no idea either. Before I knew it, this was all that was left of her." The guard unfolded Jill's jacket and gave it a confused look.

Camila shrugged. "In other words, the enemy saying that the girl helped them is a lie. But the insurgents have nothing to gain from lying and saying that she helped them. There's someone in the shadows, giving them instructions. Who helped the insurgents, then? In this situation, who stands to ultimately gain from this...?"

"My father..." muttered Sphere, her tone laced with shock, her face falling with the realization.

"It's *how* you say things," Zeke grumbled, poking Camila with the tip of his shoe. Camila just gave him a sly smile.

The guard blinked several times before asking, "Then does that mean they took advantage of the Northern Division too?"

"The guards were extremely short-staffed today. The aristocratic sons in the division were likely paid off. The only ones left are the commoners without any patrons. From our perspective, it doesn't make any logical sense," said Zeke.

"With all the commotion right now about not being able to find that girl, those guys might get arrested just like us. They'll probably eventually be killed too. There's no reason to keep them alive, is there?" added Camila.

The guard hung his head. Zeke plopped onto the floor to sit. "We'll have no choice but to flee the country during all the confusion once Marquess Beil's troops arrive," he said.

"Sh-Shouldn't you tell His Majesty the truth?!" asked Sphere.

"We can't," said Camila. "Guard, the fact that you drew the short end of the stick means you're a commoner like us, right? Who's going to listen to us? We'll just join the pile of dead Northern Division soldiers."

"I... I'll listen," Sphere replied.

Zeke and Camila quietly turned their eyes towards her. In their eyes shone

distrust towards the aristocracy, a privileged class. Even the guard, who seemed to be a good-natured person, looked uneasy.

“If you’re going to ask us to help you, miss, we can’t do that,” said Zeke. “We’ve got our hands full at the moment trying to survive.”

“I-I’m not. I want you all to go into hiding. I-If you can’t hide in this country, you can hide abroad. I...I am His Majesty’s teatime friend.” As Sphere stumbled over her words to explain, the three soldiers looked at her with wide eyes.

“So, they shouldn’t be able to kill me that easily,” she continued. “And they’ll need my testimony as a victim, even more so if they can’t find the spy girl. I’ll tell His Majesty the truth somehow. His Majesty isn’t someone who would ignore something like this.”

“But the Northern Division won’t be able to escape blame for this,” Camila replied. “He might sacrifice us to save his own tail.”

“But he’s the type of person who understands if you explain things to him! It’s just that no one ever wants to talk to him. I’ll talk to him and make him understand that you all have done nothing wrong. So, when you run away, please leave me behind.” Sphere smiled, but it was clear to everyone that she was trying to act tough.

Zeke and Camila looked on in awe. The guard’s eyes were wide.

Sphere was telling them to leave her behind because she would slow them down.

Oh... Maybe she was why Zeke and Camila deserted the Rave Empire.

In the alternate universe that was six years in the future, Sphere was dead. Some of the details of the event were probably different, but Marquess Beil had probably orchestrated some event to set up a blunder on the North Division’s part. Zeke and Camila had gotten involved. The two of them were clever, so they had almost certainly become suspicious of Marquess Beil’s ruse. And then, regardless of the particulars, Sphere had said something similar to what she had said just now, and the two of them had escaped.

But Sphere’s father hadn’t accepted what she had told him. Far from it—he had pinned her with the crime of killing the emperor’s other fiancée candidates

and probably forced her to commit suicide. If Marquess Beil had shamelessly insisted that Hadis take responsibility for this incident and that his daughter was innocent, despite the fact that he himself had killed her, then Jill could understand why Hadis had imposed the severe punishment of ending the Beil family line.

Afterwards, Zeke and Camila had become mercenaries in the Kratos Kingdom, where they had met Jill. They never did return to the Rave Empire. They never spoke much about how they ended up in the Kratos Kingdom, but if this was how, Jill wouldn't be surprised.

The girl who stayed behind, alone, to let them escape safely had been branded with dishonor and died. They hadn't been able to save her. Jill wouldn't have wanted to explain something like that either out of shame for her failure.

Jill was just guessing all of this, of course, but she didn't think her guess was very far off.

"You don't have to do that," Jill said. "There's another way that we can save everyone." The others looked at her. "Do you remember the face of the girl you were guarding?" she asked the guard.

"I do. Oh—I get it! We'll look for the girl and get her to testify?!"

"You won't need to do that."

Jill took off her hat. When she removed the pin and shook her head, her hair came tumbling down. She grabbed the jacket from the guard's hands and put it on.

Both Sphere and the guard who had been watching on in amazement shouted at the same time.

"WHAT?! I-I was just wondering where you had run off to!" shouted the guard.

"T-The...the girl Hadis brought back with him...!" sputtered Sphere.

"I knew it. I thought you were that girl," added Zeke.

"I would think so. There can't be that many kids here from Kratos," said

Camila.

Zeke and Camila looked more relieved than surprised.

Jill looked at each of them. “My name is Jill Cervel. As you all have guessed, I’m the child who’s being painted as a spy. In other words, I’m being framed just like the rest of you. But the enemy hasn’t recognized me yet.”

Jill looked at Zeke and Camila, who were still sitting on the floor. On her feet, she was just barely taller than them. “This is our opportunity for victory. Our plan doesn’t need to be overly complicated—we’ll save the captured soldiers, protect Lady Sphere, and take the naval port back from the insurgents.”

“...So by saving this mistreated girl and taking back the naval port, you’re going to clear yourself of suspicion of being a spy?” asked Camila.

“That’s not all. If we protect Sphere and take back the naval port before Marquess Beil’s private army arrives, the Northern Division will be redeemed. If that happens, others will surely start to think that someone was trying to stir up the suspicion that I was a spy. Marquess Beil won’t be able to hush it all up that easily... But Sphere, you’re the key to all this.”

“Wh-What?” Sphere asked, sounding shaken.

Jill took one knee in front of Sphere, fixed her gaze on Sphere’s large eyes, and tried to persuade her. “If you die, no matter what causes it, Marquess Beil will absolutely use you to his benefit. That’s why I’m going to protect you.”

“Y-You’ll...p-protect me...?”

“Yes. But you will have to accuse your father of orchestrating this.”

Sphere’s face rapidly lost color.

“Can you do it? If you can’t, he’ll put an end to you too, sooner or later.”

If Sphere couldn’t do this, then even if they did save her, it would be meaningless. She needed to prepare herself to do this.

Sphere didn’t lose her composure. Her expression was set with grim but brave resolve. “Can I ask you...just one thing?”

“As long as it’s something I can answer.”

“Wh-Why are you helping me? I’m your romantic rival!”

“I have no plans to fall in love with His Majesty at present, so I’m not your romantic rival, Lady Sphere,” Jill said.

“What?!”

Sphere’s expression transformed into one of shock.

If they didn’t smooth over this point of contention, it would only turn into trouble later, so Jill carefully explained, “His Majesty and I are engaged for a reason—or, I suppose, we’re already sort of married—but it’s a totally separate thing. We’re a married couple in name only. Neither of us have romantic feelings for the other. In fact, wouldn’t it be a problem if His Majesty *did* have romantic feelings towards me, a ten-year-old child?”

“S-So...because of some deeper reason...Hadis...?”

We’ll just leave it at that, thought Jill, dodging the question to avoid answering plainly.

Camila laughed. “M-Married in name only! Kids these days say the craziest things!”

“Oi!” said Zeke. “If that’s true, then even if you do appeal to the emperor, you won’t be able to get him to believe you, will you?”

“Th-That’s true. You might have betrayed Hadis, after all...” Sphere said.

“Even if we’re just married in name only, we both have our reasons for choosing each other to marry. The emperor won’t let go of me so easily.” Hadis needed Jill to prevent the curse, and Jill needed Hadis to avoid her engagement with Gerald. “Besides, I promised to make him happy.”

“...Make Hadis happy?” Sphere repeated.

“Yes. So, I’m the same as you, Lady Sphere—I’m just someone on the emperor’s side. Do you believe me?”

Sphere was silent. She looked like she was fighting to swallow a bitter pill. They didn’t have much time to let her hesitate over this.

But Jill waited. Not even Zeke, Camila, or the guard hurried her.

Sphere was going to accuse her father of his criminal deeds, after all. Even though it was the right thing to do, it was natural to feel conflicted. Jill wouldn't have trusted someone who didn't hesitate to make that call. But she also couldn't help someone who couldn't make up their mind about it, either.

Sphere didn't run away from the uneasy decision. "I believe you, Lady Jill. I'll... accuse my father."

In which case, Jill wanted to live up to the weight of Sphere's decision.

"All right. I'll protect you with everything I have... I really respect your courage." Jill put her hand over her chest and gave a knight's bow.

Sphere's cheeks flushed red, and she blinked repeatedly. "I-I can't do much, but I appreciate it," she said.

"Oi! Are you really ten years old? And a girl, not a boy?" Zeke asked.

"Her age and gender don't matter, Zeke. She's just born that way," Camila said.

"Then let's get started," Jill continued. "We don't have much time. If we don't sort this out before Marquess Beil's private army gets here, they'll steal all the credit for themselves."

Ignoring the whispering going on behind her, Jill tore off Sphere, Zeke, and Camila's handcuffs with her bare hands.

"Even a kid can break iron that easily? I've heard stories about magic, but I guess it's not something you should underestimate, huh?" Zeke said, sounding impressed as he looked at his freed hands.

"Magic isn't *that* strong," said Camila. "This kid is a little unusual."

"Th-That's not a nice thing to say about the emperor's fiancée..." the guard muttered.

"That reminds me, I haven't heard your name yet," Jill said, putting her hands on his chains.

After giving Jill a curious look, the guard nervously replied, "C-Camila has been calling me by my name this entire time... It's Gard."

“Huh?”

“...A truth born from a falsehood, I suppose,” said Camila.

“Y-You mean you’ve been calling me by my name without knowing it?! How did you... Oh, ‘*guard*’?!” the guard—or rather, Gard—cried plaintively.

Sphere smiled slightly.

Zeke got to his feet and did a few calisthenics while muttering, “So, what’s the plan? Even if we steal their weapons along the way, the best we could manage with such little fighting power is to launch a surprise attack and escape.”

“First, we’ll leave here, free the other Northern Division soldiers who are captured like us, and then get them to fight with us,” Jill said. “I imagine they’re either locked up or barricaded somewhere.”

Gard snapped his free hand upward. “I-I heard the other soldiers are being held at the church! But I also heard that many of them are wounded...”

“It doesn’t seem like they’re going to be able to fight with us then,” said Camila. “Maybe it would be best for us to escape on our own after all?”

“We shouldn’t abandon the Northern Division. If they hold a grudge against us and later say that we’re spies and that we’ve tricked Lady Sphere, it’ll cause even more trouble,” Jill said with a nonchalant air. They needed to cooperate with the Northern Division and make people realize that they all protected the marquess’s daughter.

Zeke and Camila exchanged glances.

“If you have a plan, then fine,” said Camila.

“We’ve come too far to turn back now. Let’s see what you can do,” Zeke said.

“Then Gard, you’ll lead the way,” Jill ordered with a practiced air. “Zeke and Camila, you’ll protect Lady Sphere.”

“That’s fine by me,” said Zeke, staring at Jill with a puzzled expression, “but who’s going to be protecting you?”

Camila winced. “Your face says you don’t need protection... I know you’re probably used to fighting, but does Kratos really draft children this young into

the military if they have magic power?”

“That’s not why...” Jill trailed off. “This is just my family’s code. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“You do have magic power, and I did just say, ‘Let’s see what you can do,’ but you’re just a kid,” said Zeke bluntly as Camila pat Jill’s head and Gard nodded along. “You just tell us your plan, and we’ll carry it out. If you screw up and get spotted by the enemy, you’ll just get in the way.”

As Jill wondered how to handle this, Sphere took her hand. “Let’s not interfere,” she said.

“That’s right,” Camila added. “Plus, if we protect the future empress consort—if we aren’t deceived by the enemies—we’ll be praised for that achievement.”

This made Jill see the situation from a different perspective. She *could* facilitate the Northern Division receiving a reward of merit for protecting Sphere as well as herself.

Besides, Jill didn’t doubt Zeke and Camila’s abilities.

I was the one who trained them to develop their magic powers, after all... But maybe I could make up the difference for that shortcoming, at least.

“...In that case, I’ll take you up on your kind offer and count on you guys,” Jill said.

“*Hmph*. Shoulda said that from the beginning. Now, what do we do first to break out of here?” Zeke asked.

“I am, however, going to blast through the wall,” Jill added.

Sphere froze. Jill let go of her hand, walked over to the wall of the storehouse, and put her hand against it. Camila started panicking.

“What?! Wait, are you serious?! You can do something like that? Wait—”

“We don’t have time, so save any complaints you have for later.” Jill took her right fist and, with her magic power enhancing it, slammed it against the wall with all her might. There was a beat of silence, and then a staggering sound rang out, and the wall of the storehouse collapsed.

“By the way, people used to call me the Sergeant from Hell.” Jill kept the words “*It was you two*” hidden behind the smirk on her face.

Amidst the screams and bellows of their enemies, Jill turned to face her party’s dumbfounded expressions.

“I’m expecting great things from you guys. It’ll be fine—just don’t die, and I’ll back you up.”



WHEN the man heard the commotion outside, he couldn’t bring himself to care, like the noise was someone else’s problem entirely.

It doesn’t matter. My life is over...all because the emperor was so incompetent...

Somehow, insurgents had infiltrated and taken over the naval port, all thanks to the help of the child the emperor had brought back with him. Apparently, the insurgents had even taken the marquess’s daughter hostage. The commotion outside was surely Marquess Beil’s private army, who were rumored to be a force of elite soldiers, charging into the port.

The man didn’t have much hope that the marquess’s private army would come save him. The naval port had been overrun, and if the marquess’s daughter were to die, the Northern Division would be held responsible. The first ones who would be punished for this would be people like him—the underlings.

The Northern Division was part of the imperial army. This man had no education or skills—he only had his youth and his strength going for him—and of all the jobs he could do, this one had paid the best. If he could send more money back to his family, that was all that had mattered. The man supposed he had just been unlucky to die in such a shameful manner.

The man really did think it was weird—why did only the soldiers from common birth get caught? Those nobles who were always so stuck-up and said they were so different—where did they go?

But the man supposed that he would never know the truth. In life, these things happen sometimes. If the man were to survive, the only thing he’d be able to do would be to disparage the cursed emperor from the shadows,

declaring the empire doomed while drowning his sorrows.

After all, that would be the only life fitting for a man like me.

That's what the man believed, so when he saw the church ceiling panel open, he couldn't believe his eyes. Then, when that girl they were calling a spy jumped down from the ceiling, he was utterly speechless.

"You!" shouted one of the insurgents who had been patrolling the inside of the church. "Where did you come fr—?!"

The insurgent was then thrown against the wall and knocked unconscious. As the man stood there gawking, he was suddenly grabbed by the back of the head and forced forward. The other patrolling insurgent's sword swept just above him. Just as the man realized that his life had been saved, the insurgent was kicked in the stomach and crumbled to his knees.

"I've come to save you," said the girl.

Because of the situation the man had found himself in, he felt those words of salvation like a weight in the pit of his stomach.

With a *snap*, his ropes were torn away from him like they were made of paper. A small hand reached out to him. Now that the man was finally free, he sat up. The girl was just a child, but her dignified gaze in the gloomy church pierced right through him.

"Four people are about to enter the church," she said. "One of them will be Lady Sphere of the Beil family."

"You...you rescued her?" the man asked.

"Yes."

"But you're...the spy."

"My name is Jill Cervel. By order of His Majesty the Emperor, I've come to save you all."

The loudest stirring yet erupted from the Northern Division soldiers.

"No way... His Majesty the Emperor?"

"That cursed emperor is going around saving people—and commoners like us,

at that? What an idiot...”

“This is a self-staged attack by Marquess Beil himself,” Jill explained. Her voice wasn’t loud, but it carried throughout the church. “It’s a trap he’s laid to ensure the ruin of the Northern Division and to tear down the emperor’s political support. Lady Sphere has been unwittingly used as a pawn. He has cast suspicion on me of being a spy. However,” she added emphatically, “we cannot let his despicable actions be carried out! No—we *will not* let them be carried out!”

This was not the voice of a little girl. It was the voice of someone in an elevated position, leading others into action.

“Those of you who can move, build barricades as soon as Lady Sphere is under the protection of the church! Injured soldiers, your injuries are badges of honor! They are nothing to feel ashamed of! Soldiers, don’t forget that you are fighting for the empire—for His Majesty the Emperor! We will take back this naval port with our own hands! Troops, prepare for battle!”

All the soldiers straightened their backs and returned the salute they had learned by heart. That moment was the first time the Northern Division had shown a willingness to oppose their enemies.



HADIS looked up, sensing magic power. It had come from the naval port.

“Hadis! Hadis, get a load of this! Your wife is too funny!”

Hadis’s dragon partner, whom he’d asked to check on Jill, phased through the wall and appeared in the kitchen. Rave was laughing so boorishly, the dignity of the Dragon God be damned, that Hadis, who had been keeping an eye on the fresh cream, flicked a cold look up at him.

“Didn’t I tell you to protect her? I’m in the middle of preparing her welcome here.”

“But she said she didn’t need me. That girl is something else! She really *doesn’t* need me. She escaped with her own strength, and then when I found her, she was fighting enemies in the church.”

At this unexpected reply, the hand that had been whisking the fresh cream froze.

“What? Fighting? Why would she do that?”

“She said, ‘I’m tied up at the moment,’ and told me to go back to you! Like the Dragon God was just getting in her way!” Rave cackled with laughter and ate one of the peach slices Hadis had cut up for decoration. “Mmm... Yummy. What are you making?”

“Peach mousse. Now stop stealing my ingredients and answer me—what in the dragon realm is going on?”

“Lady Sphere is being protected at the church,” Rave said. “The surviving Northern Division soldiers are fighting valiantly to push back the enemies under the command of your wife. She said they’re going to take back the naval port. Incredible—just incredible!”

“The naval port... She was serious when she said that, was she?”

“I’d say she was serious, as she’s currently doing it.”

Since Jill had previously fought with such a large amount of magic power, Hadis had expected that she could escape on her own, but he never thought that she would go so far as to reclaim the naval port.

“She really kicked butt with a speech she gave in the emperor’s name,” Rave said, sounding especially amused. “The Northern Division believes you sent her to save them. She’s making your reputation shoot through the roof.”

“...So she’s going to save them all? What a reckless plan to come up with...” Though exasperated, Hadis pondered this as he combined the mousse and the whipped cream.

Her actions would preserve the honor of the Northern Division soldiers. Hadis, who wouldn’t have been able to do anything on his own, even began to see a way to save Sphere.

“Is there any chance of the attackers escaping?” he asked. “Is there any damage to the town so far?”

“They’ve just been fighting inside the naval port, so there’s no damage to the

town. The little miss has been destroying things here and there, cutting off the paths of retreat. That's right—she's even destroyed their ships in the harbor too."

"So, she's going to capture the attackers and prevent Marquess Beil from weaseling his way out of this? My wife is brilliant..." Hadis said in awe.

She wasn't just going to clear the Northern Division's name; she was even going to position them as heroes. And if that was the case, they could assert that the naval port being overtaken wasn't a failure of the Northern Division, but part of their strategy. Moreover, if they could drag Marquess Beil out from where he was pulling the strings from behind the scenes...

I thought that she would have escaped with Sphere, at most... She's much more talented than I had imagined.

But just how much destruction had been wrought? Hadis began calculating the damage costs but stopped halfway through.

"Let's squeeze the rebuilding expenses out of the Beil family," he decided. "That should be better than severing their family line."

"Oh? Then we are going to settle things amicably?" Rave asked.

"I don't know if it'll be amicable, but there is a point of compromise."

"That's great!"

Hadis, who'd been pouring the mousse into a mold, blinked in confusion at Rave's remark.

"Lady Sphere, the Northern Division, the Beil family... Now you don't have to resign yourself to forsaking or killing them, right?" Rave said. "Instead of carrying out a reign of terror, maybe you could become an emperor that's not hated by everyone."

Hadis's eyes widened in amazement. Belatedly, a restless feeling welled up inside of him.

"...Y-You mean...I can become an emperor that's liked by everyone...?!"

"No, I wouldn't go that far. But that girl's a good consort, isn't she? She might actually make you happy after all, huh?"

“P-Please don’t...say that...” Hadis’s heart abruptly started to race. He pressed a hand over his mouth. “I-I feel sick... W-Water...”

“And, yeah...maybe do something about that habit of yours... It’s shameful. She’ll totally dump you.”

“D-Don’t say things that! It’s bad for my heart! Why would she dump me?”

“I mean, you’re not even doing anything right now,” Rave pointed out.

Hadis froze, so water trickled from the tilted jug, spilling onto his apron.

“Oi, you’re spilling! Towel, get a towel! If you get wet, you’ll catch a cold!”

“...W-Well, I was making peach mousse... Is that not enough?! Oh! What if I went and annihilated Marquess Beil’s private army?!” Hadis exclaimed.

“Don’t go annihilating an army that hasn’t done anything yet because you’re worked up!” Rave chided him. “Isn’t that reverting to a reign of terror...?”

“Then what do I do to make her like me?! I don’t know! This is so difficult!”

“If you don’t know, then at least make her wishes come true!”

“Okay, so then I should just finish the mousse, right?!”

“That’s not—actually, maybe you’re right?! What?! Hold on—am I no better at this than you are...?” Rave asked, absolutely baffled.

After a sideways glance at him, Hadis started taking off his wet apron. Just then, the door to the kitchen opened. Soldiers shuffled inside. On the sleeves of their uniforms was the crest of the Beil family.

These were soldiers from Marquess Beil’s private army.

“Pardon us, Your Majesty. Marquess Beil has instructed us to guard you!”

“Guard? I’m busy making mousse right now. Please don’t go kicking up dust,” Hadis replied earnestly.

The soldier snorted. “We’ve received reports that the attackers who have overtaken the naval port are headed for this castle. As a precaution, the marquess would like for you to take shelter at a safe location, Your Majesty.”

Marquess Beil must have been panicking about the possibility that the

Northern Division would recapture the naval port. Hadis felt exasperated by their makeshift plans to buy time so that he couldn't see Jill.

But this situation must have been much more than Marquess Beil had expected.

How could he be at the mercy of a ten-year-old girl that easily? Hadis thought, and then he grinned. *Doesn't that go for me too?*

There was no way Hadis, the girl's husband, was the same as Marquess Beil.

The soldiers remained at the ready, their hands at the hilt of their swords. Their employer, Marquess Beil, had probably told them not to let Hadis run away, which was funny. There was no reason for the emperor to run away.

He would just cool the mousse. He would put the decorations on later.

"I don't want any dust to be kicked up—stay where you are and kneel before me."

Hadis removed his triangular bandana. His gold eyes glowed, and magic power shot out from under his feet like a ripple. The castle shook.



JILL felt the ground shake for a moment and instinctively stopped moving.

An earthquake... No... Magic? No way—did something happen to Hadis?

Jill had thought that Hadis would be fine if Rave was with him, but she hadn't even made sure that Rave could fight.

Hadis was supposed to be incredibly strong, but he seemed to vomit blood and collapse at the moment of victory, so Jill was out of her mind with worry. She decided that the next time she wound up in a situation like this, the very first thing she would do would be to make sure her husband was safe. Otherwise, she wouldn't be able to concentrate on the battle in front of her.

All that man had to do was cook delicious meals and sweets and quietly wait for her to come home to him.

"Oi, hurry up! I don't know how long the church is gonna hold out!" Zeke shouted, swinging his sword and clearing the way.

From behind, Camila drew her bow and shot through the thick chords of a loading platform. The logs rolled off it, blocking the path to leave.

Now was not the time to be worrying about Hadis.

“That was the last boat! Let’s go back!”

Grabbing Zeke and Camila by the collar, Jill kicked off into the sky. Zeke shouted in alarm.

“Say something before you start flying! I coulda bit my tongue...!”

“Just who are you really, Jill?!” Camila asked.

As they followed the rooftops of the buildings on their way back to the church, Zeke and Camila hurled their grievances at Jill, but she didn’t have time to answer them.

Jill kicked off the castle rampart to avoid being seen by the enemy as much as possible, leaped to the roof of the church, and jumped down from the skylight inside.

Amidst the nervous figures wondering if the sudden visitors were the enemy, Sphere came up to greet them.

“Lady Jill! You’re all here!”

“What’s the situation?” Jill asked.

Gard stood at attention and replied, “As you ordered, we barricaded the entrances and windows and fought defensively. We are surrounded...but the situation is the same as before you left, Captain.”

“...Captain?” Jill asked, pointing at her own face.

Gard and the other soldiers nodded. “We all decided to call you that. If we call you by your name, the enemy will know your real identity, and you’ve taken command, so...”

“I see. I’ll take you up on that, then. I appreciate everyone’s concern.”

The enemy had probably figured out that Jill was in the naval port the moment she had broken out of the storehouse, but this was bigger than that. Faced with the soldiers’ concern and hope for her, she had changed her tone of

voice and given them a salute.

Their prospects in this fight, however, were not good. Half of the soldiers in the church were injured. Only ten of them could fight, and that was including Jill and the others.

But even though the soldiers were still trapped, the mental strain was different when they were surrounded by allies, not held captive by enemies. The soldiers that could move had helped build the barricades and had gone deeper into the church, looking for anything potentially useful. Even the morale of the soldiers with weapons in their hands was boosted.

“Those guys lost their ships,” Zeke said. “They won’t be able to escape that easily. It’s finally time to fight ’till the end.”

“Of course you would suggest that, you meathead,” said Camila. “If we do something like that, we’ll lose.”

“Isn’t that why we destroyed their ships and cut off their paths of retreat? Why else would we do—”

“So that the attackers won’t be able to get away when Marquess Beil’s private army charges in,” Jill explained. “They’ll change their tactics to avoid being killed by Marquess Beil’s troops.”

Even if they were working together behind the scenes, outwardly, they were Marquess Beil’s enemies. With the Northern Division fighting like this, Marquess Beil’s private army was sure to begin attacking the insurgents. This would increase the insurgents’ chances of being killed in the commotion to keep them from talking. Now, the insurgents were likely searching for a way to avoid being disposed of by Marquess Beil.

“But isn’t there a possibility they’ll get desperate and charge at us?” Zeke asked.

“I don’t think they’ll keep going until they totally annihilate us. The most important thing for hired mercenaries is their profit. Right now, they’ll either be running around trying to find an escape route, or—” Before Jill could finish explaining the situation, a voice rang out from outside.

“Hey, Northern Division! I’m the leader of these guys—let’s make a deal!” The

voice sounded more youthful than Jill had expected. “You have that spy girl with you, right? Why don’t you give her to us? If you do, we won’t lay a hand on the marquess’s daughter, and we’ll pull out of the naval port. If you don’t, we might just set fire to the church.”

One of the soldiers keeping watch outside from the crack of a window blocked up with church pews reported, “I see archers readying their bows at us! They’re using fire arrows too...”

Camila grimaced. “The walls here may be made of brick, but many parts are made of wood. If they use fire arrows, this place will burn down in no time.”

“...Now we’re under threat of being totally wiped out,” Zeke groaned. “What do we do, Captain? There’s no way we can regain the naval port.”

“That’s not true,” Jill said with a smile. “The enemy’s leader has finally come out of hiding.”

“You hear me?! We’ll wait forty seconds! Tie up that girl and bring her here before time’s up!” the insurgent leader demanded. “One!” he began counting down.

Jill quickly looked around.

No one averted Jill’s gaze. Even in this unfortunate position, no one seemed to be considering handing her over to the enemy. Even Sphere, who was helping treat the wounded soldiers, shook her head as soon as Jill looked at her, as if to stop her from doing anything.

Looks like they all have hope this will go well.

Everyone seemed to be waiting for Jill to give them instructions. Whenever people looked at her like that, it was in Jill’s nature to want to rise to the occasion.

“I’ll go,” she said.

“Wait,” Camila spoke up. “Did you forget that we said we have to protect you too?”

“That’s right!” Sphere exclaimed. “If Lady Jill’s going to be the only sacrifice, I’ll go too...!”

“I’ll be okay, Lady Sphere. We’re not going to screw up and ruin the plan now.”

Sphere, now on her feet, blinked.

Jill put out her wrists pressed together and ordered them to tie her up. Zeke clicked his tongue and told the soldiers that could move to bring them rope. Camila’s brows furrowed as she tied Jill’s hands together.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

“Yes... Take care of Sphere,” Jill whispered so low that only Camila could hear. “The most effective trump card against Marquess Beil is Lady Sphere, the victim, not me, the spy. It doesn’t seem like he’ll give up.”

“So there might be an enemy in the church, right?”

“The priest ought to be around here. I’ll leave him to you.”

Camila held Jill’s gaze and then nodded. She left to go whisper the information to Zeke. Now Sphere would be safe.

“Gard, please be the one to hand me over—that’s an order from your captain.”

Gard swallowed back the objection that had been on his tongue and then nodded.

They were now past thirty seconds. It was time.

“P-Please come back safely...!” Gard muttered in a small voice before shouting over the counting, “We’ll take the deal! We’ll...we’ll hand over the spy girl, so please stop!” His trembling voice actually seemed appropriate for the situation.

“All right, then come on out!”

“You won’t attack the second I open the door, will you?!”

“Of course not. We need to get ready to get out of here, so we don’t have quite enough time to kill you guys.”

With a *creak*, the door opened inward.

Behind Jill, everyone was hidden, surrounded by the rebuilt barricade.

It was still light outside. The man who seemed to be the insurgent leader took a step forward. He seemed young to be the leader. Jill observed him leisurely, noting that although he seemed flippant, his expression was focused and fearless.

“All right. That’s the kid. Nice work.”

The moment he confirmed Jill’s identity, the leader, still wearing the uniform of the Northern Division, put one hand in the air. The soldiers behind him readied the fire arrows.

“And farewell—”

Jill kicked off the ground and kneed the leader square in the face before the fire arrows could be shot. She then scrambled onto his back and started choking him.

“If you value your leader’s life, fall back!” she shouted.

“She’s bluffing! Don’t worry about me, kill this brat—”

Jill waved her right hand and blasted all the enemies around them away. While she was at it, she also snapped the watchtower in front of the church in two and made it fall towards the group of insurgents who were attempting to shoot fire arrows from a separate location.

“Wh-What...?”

“I’m the one who went around destroying your boats, by the way.” Stepping on the leader’s back, Jill snapped her fingers. “Choose: either we’ll all die here, or you’ll stop resisting and surrender quietly.”

“...Haha! I underestimated you, huh? Hey! Now!” the leader shouted towards the church. “Take care of the marquess’s daugh—” He stopped mid-sentence.

Zeke had just kicked the priest, whom Sphere had turned to for advice, out of the church. He tumbled outside.

“Unfortunately for you, Lady Sphere is safe,” Zeke said.

“I never in a million years expected a priest to attack us with a knife! What is this world coming to?” Camila added.

The insurgent leader, whom Jill was still stepping on, went limp. "...I'll be more than enough to satisfy, won't I? Please let my subordinates go," he requested.

It was quite a chivalrous thing to say. Zeke and Camila looked at each other. Jill answered frankly. "Only if you tell us who hired you."

"...You already know, don't you? Marquess Beil."

"Can you tell that to His Majesty the Emperor?" she pressed.

"My words aren't that important. To those high-and-mighty people, fellas like us are nothin' but trash."

"Ch-Chief! Chief!" cried one of the insurgents, running toward them. "Marquess Beil attacked us! That's not what we agreed—"

Just then, the man was shot through the chest with an arrow and fell to the ground, dead. Sphere, who had left the church, let out a high-pitched scream.

The leader of the insurgents tried to run, but Jill held him back. His eyes were murderous.

"Hold on!" Jill hissed.

"You little...!"

"Do you want everyone to die?! I know that you guys were all just sacrificial pawns to him, and I'll help you as much as I can, so just hold on for now...!" she ordered.

The leader's eyes widened. Knights emerged behind the fallen insurgent. The organized and well-disciplined movements seemed well beyond that of a private army. They had probably been rigorously trained.

"...Are you the child that deceived His Majesty the Emperor?" Of all the imposing knights in formation, the only man riding a horse had moved forward.

"Father..." Sphere said in a feeble voice.

The marquess was an intense-looking man. He looked down at Jill with scorn in his eyes. He had often looked at her with this expression at the Kratos royal castle too.

“You’re a Kratos witch, even at your young age? You’re a monster.”

Jill smiled at him. “It’s nice to meet you, Marquess Beil. The Northern Division has recaptured the naval port. You were just a moment too late in coming to their aid.”

“What do you mean?” he sneered. “I arrived just in time.”

Jill flung the leader of the insurgents towards Zeke. There was no way she was going to let the marquess steal credit for their hard-fought achievement.

Marquess Beil grinned and raised his hand. At the same time, a massive shadow suddenly blanketed them from above.

Jill looked up—it was a dragon. The fire spewing from its mouth wasn’t ordinary fire. They were Flames of Judgement, fire that had been bestowed to dragons by the Dragon God and which burned through everything, even magic.

“It makes no difference if I finish you all off now,” he said.

“Everyone, get inside the church!” Jill shouted.

She could keep *herself* out of the flames’ reach without a problem, but if she did so, the dragon would burn down the church. She had no choice but to prevent the attack entirely. Jill widened her stance and looked upwards. Up in the sky, the dragon opened its mouth.

Bring it on!

A gentle puff of smoke came out of the dragon’s mouth.

As Jill blinked in surprise, the dragon, with its wings still extended, plummeted to the ground. The dragon’s enormous body squashed Marquess Beil’s army. Dust billowed upwards. Jill could hear a horse neighing.

Amidst the chorus of screams, Marquess Beil, who seemed to have fallen from his horse, bellowed angrily at the dragon, “Wh-What are you doing?! Get up! Attack!”

“A dragon could never do such a thing before the Dragon Emperor,” came a clear voice from behind them. The undercurrent of Hadis’s words, however, was not as gentle as his tone of voice.

The chaos immediately subsided, as if everyone had been doused with cold water. The pressure and magic power around the emperor were so strong that goosebumps broke out over Jill's skin, just like they had before in the Kratos Kingdom. Jill gulped.

Marquess Beil had only managed to wriggle his upper body out from under the dragon. "Y-Your Majesty..." he gasped, breathing heavily. "Why are *you* here?"

"There was no way I'd evacuate to a safe location and abandon my wife." Suddenly, with both arms outstretched, Hadis lifted Jill from behind. "You are uninjured, my amethyst?"

"Y-Yes. Are you feeling well, Your Majesty?"

Jill looked up, worried about the fact that Rave was nowhere to be found. Hadis looked pleased—the muscles around his mouth were relaxed.

"It makes me happy that you were worried about me. By the way, what happened to the naval port?"



Jill quickly tried to jump down from his arms, but she couldn't break free from his grip on her. She silently glowered at him. Hadis smiled back. He seemed to have no intention of letting her go.

Reluctantly, Jill gave her report from Hadis's arms. "...The enemy spread disinformation that the naval port had been totally overtaken. The moment the Northern Division soldiers learned that Lady Sphere and I had been captured by the enemy, they launched a rescue mission and took the port back from the insurgents, all while protecting us."

"Your Majesty! Do you still not understand that that girl is a spy?! She's actually working with the people who captured the port!" accused Marquess Beil, pointing to the insurgent leader.

The leader wasn't even being restrained; Zeke was just holding his arm. Even if the marquess was just delaying the inevitable, when Jill saw the insurgent leader gaze at the marquess in amazement and then smirk, she bit her lip.

To the insurgent leader, Marquess Beil's army was the most imminent threat. If he testified that Jill was a spy, Marquess Beil would probably protect him, even if only temporarily. Unless Jill presented a more appealing option to him, it would be senseless for him to accuse Marquess Beil. Without the marquess's protection, Hadis would simply execute the insurgent leader.

Marquess Beil looked foolish, with the lower half of his body still crushed by the dragon, but his expression was triumphant. "There are still enemies in the naval port. Please believe us and wait for us in the castle, Your Majesty. If you want to say that the girl was just taken advantage of by the insurgents and that she should be pitied, that's fine by me. I would be willing to explain that to everyone else."

It was a roundabout threat—sweep the matter under the rug in exchange for saving Jill. Just as Jill was about to lambaste him for his duplicity, Hadis muttered, "Ruling with terror does still seem like an appealing option..."

"...What did you just say, Your Majesty?" Marquess Beil asked.

"Oh, no, it's nothing— Rave, shut up, I know. I'm a married man now. I can't let my wife's hard work go to waste... The reign of terror is an absolute no-go."

As Hadis muttered these incomprehensible things, perhaps talking to Rave inside his body, he put Jill down. Then he walked straight up to Zeke and the others.

Jill had no idea what Hadis was planning to do—all she could do was look on.

“You all have done incredibly well. Zeke, Camila, and Gard, was it?”

Zeke and Camila looked at each other when their names were called. Gard’s voice trembled, “...W-We’re just commoners, and Your Majesty knows our names... Why...?”

“Why? The Northern Division is part of the imperial army. It would be bizarre if I didn’t know the names and faces of the people who served in my army, at least.”

The three of them stared back at Hadis, flabbergasted. Hadis then looked at the insurgent leader.

“And—you’re of the Northern Division too.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?” Zeke asked. “This guy’s... H-Hey!”

Hadis, who plucked the insurgent leader away from Zeke, grabbed the man by the back of the collar and lifted him up.

“You were appointed here so suddenly, it’s not surprising you don’t know what I look like. Hello there, it’s nice to meet you. I’m your emperor.”

“What...? I’m... Gah!” A croaking sound escaped from the insurgent leader’s throat.

Hadis carried on in a clear voice. “The uniform of the Northern Division suits you well. You’ve certainly been through an ordeal so soon into your new appointment, haven’t you? You’ve done well to survive. Now, please report the information you and your squad have gathered about the one behind this.”

“U-Um, Your Majesty, what in the dragon realm are you...?” asked Gard, bewildered.

Hadis ignored him and threw the insurgent leader on the ground. He looked up at Hadis, coughing. “I’m afraid my wife seems to want to save everyone, even sacrificial pawns.”

Jill stared at Hadis with wide eyes. The insurgent leader looked at him in astonishment.

“And I’ve decided to kneel before my wife.” Looking down at the insurgent leader with cold eyes, Hadis put a hand on the hilt of his sword. “But I’m also fickle. I’m quick to change my mind, so you’d better decide quickly.”

The insurgent leader looked back, speechless.

“Y-Your Majesty!” cried Marquess Beil, his face white. “What are you saying?! You can’t really be—”

“I, Hugo, officially took up my post with the Northern Division today,” said the insurgent leader, kneeling before Hadis. “I will report whatever you wish, Your Majesty.”

This was Hugo announcing that he was willing to become Hadis’s pawn. Hadis gave a small grin.

“Then that settles one thing. My wife is innocent. You’re next, Marquess Beil.”

“N-No one would ever admit to this sort of—”

The rest of Marquess Beil’s sentence died in his throat when Hadis stepped on his head. With the sole of his shoe pressed against the back of the marquess’s skull, he admonished him as if he were scolding a child.

“You’re as good as dead. Dead people don’t talk.”

“...Y...You can’t treat a marquess like this, even if you are the emperor! You’ll pay for this!”

“I told you. If my wife was innocent, she’d be appropriately compensated. Did you really think you could engineer my downfall with such a ridiculous plan? You dared to underestimate the Dragon Emperor?”

Hadis tilted his head as he assessed the marquess.

“What sort of execution shall I carry out? It’s hard to think of how I could possibly torment a father who would have killed his own daughter to use as ammunition to criticize his emperor. Or perhaps you feel differently about the daughter you have with your second wife?”

Marquess Beil gasped.

“Oh! You’ve gone pale. I guess all humans have some sentiment, after all. Good. I probably won’t lose all hope in humanity, then. All right, let’s start from there. Will she be burned at the stake? Tortured? This is all because of you and your own incompetence. Poor girl.”

“Y-You...!”

“But I don’t really have a fondness for hurting people. So how about this? Beg for your pathetic life. And give Beilburg to me.”

Hadis’s expression was one of a dictator, but he smiled benevolently.

Seeing this, Camila rubbed at the goosebumps that had erupted on both of her arms. “Oh dear, the emperor’s a heartbreaker, isn’t he? ...My heart just skipped a beat!”

“Isn’t that being a little too soft? He shouldn’t forgive what happened here so easily,” Zeke said.

“What?” said Sphere. “U-Um... So, what’s going to happen to Father now?”

“His Majesty says that if he admits to all his wrongdoings and gives him Beilburg, he’ll be spared,” Jill whispered.

Sphere clasped her hands together as if she had been given a newfound hope. Her prayer, however, was interrupted by a shout of laughter from Marquess Beil.

“You think you’ve shown me mercy?! Oh, the emperor who drove his mother to suicide is indeed kind!”

Everyone froze in the face of Marquess Beil’s contempt. Hadis’s face went blank.

“How many people died before you became emperor? How many people have you killed?! I did the right thing! I tried to protect my country—my territory—from the cursed emperor! From this monster in human skin!”

Hadis let him rant without saying anything.

“There are people who sympathize with me, but no one would defend you!

No one in this country wants you as emperor. No one even wants you alive!”

Everyone watched on, waiting for Hadis’s response with bated breath.

The cursed emperor.

The silence seemed to affirm this rumor, but just as Jill was about to step forward into it, Hadis quietly replied, “You’re probably right.”

Jill gazed at Hadis in shock. His answer was unbelievable.

“But I am the emperor. Whether you want me to be or not. I’m not going to demand that you understand.” Then, in a final, nearly inaudible mutter that only Jill could hear, “That would mean depending on other people...”

“Zeke. Camila. Take Marquess Beil with you,” Hadis ordered.

Zeke and Camila obeyed, though confused.

Marquess Beil was dragged away, laughing all the while. When the sound of his voice became muffled, Hadis turned back towards them, walked past Jill, and looked at Sphere. Sphere, her face ghastly pale, stepped forward, trembling.

“U...Um, Hadis... I’m so sorry about my father—”

“You don’t have to worry. I’m not going to take your life.”

Sphere fell to her knees, alternating between thanking Hadis and apologizing to him.

Hadis smiled and shook his head.

Jill stared at his profile. She wondered if that face would ever show the man’s true feelings, but even after everything was said and done, Hadis’s emperor mask never cracked.



“I asked him, ‘Aren’t you pushing yourself too hard?’ But I guess he has no choice,” said Rave.

After dinner and a bath at Marquess Beil’s castle—the castle that would be transferred to Emperor Hadis—Rave had appeared in front of Jill under the guise of being her guide and was now sitting atop her head.

There was no one else around. Hadis hadn't shown up for dinner either, so Jill had eaten the peach mousse all by herself. Hadis really didn't have any other choice—he didn't trust Marquess Beil's servants to remain in the castle.

Everyone from the marquess's living quarters had been ordered to leave. Since these living quarters made up the entire fifth floor of the castle, Rave was showing Jill the way to her bedroom.

"He can't let it show on his face every single time he gets hurt, can he? He may be an idiot, but he is the emperor, so he keeps these things in mind so that people won't underestimate him. Naturally, he's had the ability and capacity to become emperor from the very beginning... Although that might come as a surprise going off the way he acts normally."

"Yes. I thought he seemed much calmer." Jill had assumed Hadis would have been angrier or more agitated, but he hadn't looked or acted that way at all. "But I hadn't expected him to be able to make such cruel facial expressions or be so threatening, so that was also surprising," she added.

"Well, that... Yeah... I'm in the process of course correcting so that he doesn't rule with terror, so..."

"But I don't think it's good for him to act like that—pretend like he's not hurt when someone hurts him," Jill said. "If that becomes his natural reaction one day, he'll stop feeling anything altogether, and he won't have any empathy for himself or for others... I don't think that would be a good thing for the emperor as a person."

And then Hadis would become merciless. Naturally, he would then be treated with malice, and so, because nothing could hurt him, Hadis would turn into the sort of man who could calmly order a massacre. Jill had seen that outcome for herself.

"I see... It's true that being alienated from people for so long has given him a poor sense of personal boundaries," Rave admitted. "He tends to take things very seriously and to extremes. He believes that if only he could get rid of the curse somehow, then everyone would like him, and he'd make 100 friends—seriously. The happy family plan played a part in that."

"Why did you raise him like that...? That's absolutely going to backfire!" Jill

shouted.

“I didn’t have a choice! If I didn’t make him believe that it was all the curse, that no one was at fault, and that people were inherently good, so many awful things would have happened! Like with his mom... His mom was to blame, but he...he couldn’t hear me,” Rave said sadly.

That sort of distraction was doomed to failure. And yet, Rave had probably just wanted to give Hadis some kind of hope, even though he knew it was naïve.

“...I get the feeling he’s realizing it’s not really true, though... But if he loses hope in people, it’s over. He’s the emperor. More than that, he’s the Dragon Emperor, the reincarnation of the Dragon God. The things he can destroy are too big...”

“But the emperor is here today because you kept telling him not to give up, Rave. I think that’s amazing,” Jill told him. As Rave’s tiny eyes blinked at her in surprise, she raised her index finger and offered a suggestion. “So, let’s tame him before it’s too late. For instance... Well, how about we try to make him a cute emperor? That will make him approachable.”

“A *what* emperor? Like putting a ribbon on his head and having him hand out sweets?” Rave paused for a long moment before saying, “...That might suit him.”

“He should show a little vulnerability!” Jill exclaimed. “The emperor’s incredibly good-looking, so we can leverage that to attack from a ‘looks and personality disparity’ angle. His Majesty is incredible enough even without going out of his way to play up the ‘strong emperor’ role.”

He hadn’t let his emotions get the better of him with Marquess Beil, so he showed that he could be the bigger person in the face of abusive language. It had probably boosted morale, too, that he knew the names of even the lowest-ranking soldiers.

“Besides, I don’t like when people hide that they’re hurt,” Jill said. “When he made that beautiful, emotionless face, it just made me want to punch him and tell him to cry... But then again, it’s also irritating when a grown man cries, and it makes me want to punch them and tell them not to cry...”

“You punch them and tell them to cry, but when they cry, you punch them and tell them not to cry? That’s terrible.”

Jill looked around sheepishly at Rave’s valid criticism and then corrected herself. “But if he would at least not make that beautiful facial expression in front of me... Well, if he didn’t, I guess I’d still want to punch him. I would feel like he was avoiding me.”

“Heh heh! Oh, so that’s what this is about? Missy, have you actually fallen for Hadis?!” Rave looked down at her face from above, his eyes twinkling. Jill stared back, unamused.

“How did you jump to that conclusion?”

“Because that’s the same as picking on a kid you like because you want their attention.”

“I’m not a kid, and that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“But Missy, no matter how you look at it, you *are* a kid.”

He was right... Jill cleared her throat and let Rave know, because he brought it up, “I have no plans to develop a romantic relationship with the emperor right now.”

“*Right now*, you say, eh? Are you worried about the age issue?”

“That’s part of it, but primarily I—I want to become the ideal married couple united only by mutual benefit!” she declared.

“Is it because I’m the Dragon God that I don’t get what you mean by that...?”

“I think there might be differences between gods and humans.”

“...Well, whatever. Hadis is just as odd as you... Oh, here it is. This will be your bedroom.”

Jill could finally see the end of the hallway. It had probably seemed so long because she had such short legs. It looked to be an incredibly large room—even the doorknob was very high. She stretched out, grabbed the doorknob, and with a little bit of magic power, opened the heavy door.

“He’s inside. Good luck!” Rave winked.

“...What?! You don’t seriously mean the emperor is inside, do you?!”

“I do. You are married, even if it’s in name only, so of course you’d share a room. There’s also the issue of security.”

“Wait a second! But it’s—our first night together as a married couple—!”

Just as Jill was about to protest, she saw a massive canopy bed in the center of the room. She stepped back involuntarily, but when she unexpectedly saw the emperor face-down on the bed, his upper body falling off of it, her head cooled.

“...Your Majesty?”

“I...drank...too much...” he groaned.

“You drank wine?!” said Rave. “Missy, get water! Water!”

“O-On it!”

And thus, the scene transformed into a battleground where Jill ran around, trying to save the emperor, who had developed alcohol poisoning after drinking just one sip of wine.



AFTER a parting comment that Hadis rarely ever drank alcohol, Rave went into Hadis’s body. This was apparently an effective way to speed up the healing process.

Indeed, after Rave did this, Hadis’s breathing very quickly returned to normal and the redness left his face.

He was probably more exhausted mentally than physically...

Jill pressed a damp handkerchief against Hadis’s forehead. He was lying down, and his eyelids fluttered open.

“...Are you...my amethyst?”

“Yes. Are you okay? I have water here. I got some fruit from the kitchen too.”

After blinking several times, Hadis quietly asked, “...You’re going to take care of me?”

“Yes. I’m used to taking care of drunk people... I can call for someone else, though, if you feel uneasy.”

Camila and Zeke were probably good at this sort of thing too. But Hadis slowly shook his head and drank water from the jug Jill held out to him.

“As long as you’re here, that’s more than enough...” he said. “I’d like an apple.”

“Sure. Just a moment.”

Jill almost handed the apple over unaltered, but then she remembered that Hadis was the emperor. She picked up the small knife she had brought to cut it into pieces and pondered, *...He won’t like it if I don’t peel the skin, will he...? All right...*

Jill spun the knife around once in her fingers before pressing the blade into the apple. *Slowly...* She moved the blade, trying to cut off just the skin, but it was a rough job, and she cut off a lot of the fruit with it.

She stared at her handiwork mutely. *The point is that the skin is gone. If he complains, then he should just eat it with the skin on.*

Jill pierced the skin of the apple with the blade again, and after making a magnificent cut, a piece of the fruit hit her forehead and fell to the floor. She heard a laugh from behind her.

“Y-You’re so skilled with a blade, but you’re surprisingly clumsy,” he chuckled.

“Just because someone can use a sword doesn’t mean they can cook,” Jill retorted sourly.

Hadis sat up, still laughing. Suddenly Jill was lifted in the air and placed between his legs. Then he draped himself over her back and placed his hands over hers, holding the knife and apple.

“You do it like this.” Hadis moved Jill’s hands by example and peeled the apple cleanly. Jill stared at her hands, being moved for her, and felt impressed.

“So it’s the apple that moves, not the knife?”

“Right... See? All done. Pick up a few tricks, and you’ll be able to do it in no time too.”

“Um...”

“Hm?”

“...Can you...cut them into rabbits? I-I really want to learn how to cut them like that...” Jill wanted to become the sort of woman who could do those sorts of things when she was taking care of someone. She felt embarrassed to admit it, but Hadis didn’t laugh.

Hadis neatly discarded the skin peels into a bowl, cut the dexterously peeled apple onto a plate, removed the core, arranged the apple slices beautifully on the plate, and then picked up another apple.

Then, with his body still draped around Jill, he skillfully started moving the knife again. Like magic, his large hands cut apples into slices that looked like rabbits.

“Ooh!” cried Jill, her eyes twinkling. “Rabbits...!”

“If I had a few more, I could make them into all sorts of edible decorations.”

“You can make decorations too?! Are you some kind of chef prodigy or something?!” she exclaimed in delight.

“They’re not that hard to make... I have a younger half-sister and brother. I thought if I could do this kind of stuff, they might like me a little more, so I just practiced at it. Now, let’s wash our hands...”

Hadis took the bowl that had been filled with water for washing their faces in the morning and dipped his hands, along with Jill’s, inside. He was perhaps excessively considerate when he thoroughly wiped her hands dry with a handkerchief afterwards.

He had really wanted to do this for his younger siblings.

After that realization clicked in her head, Jill pushed her unnecessary doubts about this being their first night together as a married couple—and that he liked little girls—into the back of her mind, and let the night progress uninterrupted.

“You should eat some apples, too,” he suggested.

“Okay.”

She was sure that whenever Hadis had gotten sick, there hadn't been anyone to peel apples for him or eat apple slices with him. Jill took the plate of apples Hadis had arranged and thought for a moment.

...Right now, I'm a kid. This is just an extended game of playing house. Okay! No embarrassment!

She turned around to face Hadis on the bed. Then she held up one of the cute, rabbit-shaped apple slices up to his mouth.

"Okay, Your Majesty. Please open your mouth."

"...Me?"

"That's right. You may just be drunk, but you need to be taken care of, don't you?"

His golden eyes looked bewildered. Eventually, however, Hadis opened his mouth and took a bite out of the apple.

Jill laughed at the disparity between the way he chewed on the apple and the sharp contours of his handsome face. Hadis looked annoyed, but he finished chewing and swallowing the bite before speaking. Jill mused that his good manners were very fitting.

"Why are you laughing? You told me to eat it, didn't you?" he pouted.

"I just thought it was cute. You reminded me of my little brother," she told him.

"...Little brother?" Hadis repeated, his eyebrows furrowed as far as they could go.

"I have a big family, so I have an older sister, an older brother, a younger brother, and a younger sister," Jill explained, holding up her fingers to count them.

"That sounds all lively and fine, but I remind you of your *little* brother?"

"He's fearless, so I'm sure he won't be afraid of you... That reminds me, I haven't sent any word to my family yet, have I? I think things are fine..."

"Things are *not* fine," Hadis stressed. "What in the dragon realm do you

mean, I'm like your little brother...? Wait, your little brother is your *family*, right...?"

"That's right. My parents saw the scene when I proposed to you, and the fact that I didn't return meant that I was captured by a strong man whom I couldn't escape from with my own power, so they probably figured their hands were tied." Jill shrugged.

Hadis, looking put-out, this time grabbed and ate an apple slice on his own. "Is that what families are like?"

"It's what *my* family is like. It would be a different story if I asked them for help, but our family motto is 'strength justifies all.'" Jill ate an apple slice. It was a little sourer than the apples grown in Kratos, but it was refreshing and delicious in its own way. "...Oh, that's right," she added. "Um, thank you."

"For what?"

"For earlier today. For granting my wish."

Hugo could very well have said disadvantageous things about Hadis. Hadis could have killed him and then executed Marquess Beil on the spot. The only reason he hadn't was because he had intuited that Jill wanted to save everyone.

"...Well, you don't like that kind of stuff, right?" Hadis asked for confirmation. "Ruling with fear, massacring...those sorts of things."

"Of course I don't. But that was the first time I'd fought to save everyone. I wasn't confident that it would work."

"...Really?"

Jill smiled at the astonished look on his face. "Really. Until now, I suppose I've always prioritized my orders over what I really wanted..."

It was only natural for a soldier to follow orders. An army wouldn't function otherwise. Moreover, Gerald's orders were always efficient, impeccable, and nothing out of the ordinary. Jill, therefore, had no complaints.

"Wouldn't that make you more like my subordinate than my wife?" Hadis asked, puzzled.

Jill's heart ached at this. She tried to continue, but for some reason, she

became overcome with embarrassment. “Well... Th-That’s why I was so happy when you helped me...”

“You don’t have to thank me for something like that.” Hadis shook his head. “It’s only natural for a man to help his wife.”

“...But because you did, Marquess Beil said such terrible things to you...” Her voice choked up a bit. It probably wasn’t right for her to apologize for this. Jill looked over and covered one of Hadis’s hands with both of her own. “I want you alive, Your Majesty, cursed or not. So the next time someone says something like that to you, please tell them that. Tell them that I want you alive.”

Jill inwardly vowed that she would never let Hadis give anyone such a sad affirmation again. Hadis quickly pulled his hands away. His cheeks suddenly flushed red, and he looked as bashful as a young girl.

“You...actually *love* me, don’t you?” he asked in a scandalous whisper.

“...What?” she croaked.

“You wouldn’t have said you wanted me alive if you didn’t!”

“Isn’t that too low of a baseline for love?! It’s only natural to think that way about family!”

But after Jill said that, she remembered that Hadis had no experience interacting with family members. She panicked, thinking she might have said the wrong thing again.

But Hadis’s eyes suddenly narrowed. He looked as if he had gotten offended rather than hurt. “I see. I’m like a little brother to you, then...?”

“What? Oh, yes. That’s what I’m saying.” Jill was just thinking about how quick Hadis had been on the uptake when he took the plate of apples from her and wrapped a bedsheet around his body. “Your Majesty?”

“...I’ve been shivering for a while... I might have drunk too much water. I’m cold...”

“Please tell me those sorts of things right away!”

Jill grabbed another bedsheet and a jacket that had been discarded right

beside them, made Hadis lay down, and draped them on top of him. When she touched Hadis's cheek, however, it was still cold.

It might take some time for him to warm up.

"...Pardon me, Your Majesty."

Jill crawled under the sheets with Hadis. Because her body was small, she wasn't tall or wide enough to reach all of him, but her body temperature was high. She would act as a hot water bottle.

Hadis's head was lying on a pillow, and Jill's head came up to around the base of his throat.

"You'll warm up faster this way."

"...Yes, you're right."

Hadis wrapped his arms around Jill. In the semi-darkness, Jill could see his gold eyes smiling wickedly. "Got you."

After a beat, it dawned on Jill...

"Y-You tricked me...?!"

"It's not right for a wife to treat her husband like her little brother, after all. I won't allow it."

"Y-You said you were cold! I got worried!" she argued.

"Well, it *is* true that I'm cold. I can't feel my toes. I do feel a little uncomfortable."

If he says that, I won't be able to get away so easily. Shoot! He was acting so childish, I accidentally let my guard down...!

Embarrassed and frustrated, Jill looked down. Hadis hugged her tightly.

"It's fine, I won't do anything," he promised.

Of course, you won't.

But Jill felt like no matter what she said, she would sound like she had a case of sour grapes, so she remained silent.

"Did you know? Being a married couple means it's okay for a wife to fall in

love with her husband.”

“...You’re always going on about that, Your Majesty. What about *you*?”

“I would never do something as cruel as falling in love with you.”

I wonder what that means...

But Jill got the feeling that that should be kept unknown.

“Hey, why don’t you try falling for me?” Hadis asked. His voice was sweet, almost giving the illusion of love. “Otherwise, I’ll want to uncover everything about you.”

Try it, Jill thought, biting her lip. She was sixteen on the inside, her first love had already come to an end, and she had experienced horrendous heartbreak.

She wasn’t going to let her curiosity and desire to know to get the better of her. She wasn’t going to get too emotionally involved. She wasn’t going to fall in love first. That was why Jill could pretend that she didn’t understand the meaning behind her flushed cheeks.



AS Jill resolved herself of this, she quickly fell asleep. Hadis looked down at her.

“I can’t tell if you’re a child or an adult,” he whispered.

But that wasn’t a bad thing.

Hadis had never wished for anything more in his future consort than that she be under fourteen and have enough magic power to be able to see Rave. But Jill was even more outstanding than he had imagined. She made him elated, and it was a different elation than when she had proposed to him.

You’ll make me happy? You want me alive? And you’re serious? Is that arrogance, I wonder?

As Hadis felt a desire to sneer that such a thing was impossible mixed with a hope that she should try anyway, he couldn’t stop the inexplicable elation that followed.

The girl didn’t understand—she didn’t understand just how dangerous of a

thing she was trying to touch. Otherwise, she wouldn't be saying those things that made Hadis feel like she was indiscriminately plunging her hands inside of him.

But it's already too late.

Hadis had long decided that one day, if he got a wife, he would kneel before her and pay respect to her. That was the least Hadis could do to show his sincerity. Asking her to fall in love with him was like a game for him, but as long as she didn't hate him, that was enough.

And yet, this girl made Hadis so discomposed that he had become tempted to relentlessly pursue her until she would eventually run away.

"...If you'd just try to act cool about it, I'd be able to get some peace of mind... It's not like the girl's trying to get a rise out of you."

The sleepy voice spoke from inside his body. It was Rave. Hadis responded with just his thoughts to avoid waking Jill up. *"But pursuing her a little bit would be fine, right? You were the one who said that the Goddess shouldn't be able to interfere anymore."*

"And you were the one who said that she had other means of interfering. Besides, the girl said that she wanted a relationship with you that was only about mutual benefits. If you're always on her heels about it, she'll seriously hate you. Would you be okay with that?"

"It's fine. I'm used to being hated."

That was why he wanted her to like him. Indeed, he wanted her to love him.

Hadis wouldn't love her. He would dig out that girl's stubbornness and pull out everything inside of her...

Before she dug out what was inside of him.

And to do that...

"I have to make delicious bread for breakfast tomorrow...!"

"...Yeah, sure. Go for it. I'll be sleeping."

Chapter 4: An Assault of Sweets, Spears, and Swords

JILL felt awful. The cause? *Hadis*.

“I think today’s roast duck was cooked at the perfect temperature, if I do say so myself.”

“I-It appears so...”

“It’s nice to eat with sauce, but it’s also good sandwiched between a baguette with cheese and boiled eggs...and then you put some herbs in there. Now, try it!”

Jill and Hadis weren’t sitting at a long, narrow table in the dining room, but under the gazebo in the courtyard. Hadis had brought over a wicker basket filled with ingredients, which he had then arranged before offering Jill a baguette sandwich of roast duck.

Jill accepted the sandwich and almost sobbed as she took a bite.

“Is it good?”

“Y-Yes, very...! This is truly, incredibly delicious...!”

“I’m glad to hear that... So?” asked Hadis, tilting his head. “Have you fallen in love with me yet?”

Jill shot him a blank look in response. “No. How many times are you going to ask me that?”

“Until you say yes, of course.” Hadis was smiling, but his eyes were those of a beast hunting its prey.

I feel like I’ve been marked in a weird way.

But the food *was* delicious. Taking advantage of that, Hadis was tenaciously trying to win Jill over through her stomach.

Jill had assumed they would head to the imperial capital immediately after the Marquess Beil insurgency had been taken care of, but they ended up

remaining in the Beilburg castle because, as Hadis explained, “No one’s coming to get us.”

In the meantime, Hadis had re-interviewed all the servants, reorganized the Northern Division (Hugo included), forced the Beil family to fork over the costs for the naval port repairs, and then began discussions with commercial organizations because he said he might as well make Beilburg a trading city while he was at it. Hadis had demonstrated incredible administrative skills, including the way he had dealt with the aftermath of the attack. In no time at all, Hadis began reigning as the new lord of Beilburg.

When Jill had asked him if it was okay that he wasn’t returning to the imperial capital, Hadis had replied that the imperial capital was wherever the emperor was, so if no one would come get him, he would simply relocate the capital. In the meantime, Jill had spotted him drafting and playing around with a plan of attack called the “Imperial Capital War of Annihilation.” That was the kind of game a noble with too much free time on his hands engaged in.

I can’t help him if someone takes it seriously one day.

If that were the extent of his behavior, one could simply admire the incredible brilliance of the young emperor, but this excessively talented emperor also managed to carve out the time to manage Jill’s eating habits. She had initially thought this was to prevent her from being poisoned, but she soon realized that was *not* the case.

“Could you at least tell me what type of guy you like?”

Astonishingly, it appeared as if Hadis was courting Jill.

Hadis didn’t want Jill to dislike him. Hadis wanted her to like him. Jill had heard that so many times, but his desire that she not dislike him had probably been the stronger emotion until now. He had never so explicitly tried to elicit a reaction from her.

But that had changed. Jill had no clue what had caused it, and she had no choice but to discourage it.

“Please don’t ask a ten-year-old something like that with a straight face.”

“You may be ten, but you’re still a lady. You shouldn’t use age as an excuse,”

Hadis retorted.

“That’s a terribly fine idea, but if we’re married, surely my preferences don’t matter, do they?” she countered.

“Are you telling me not to court my wife? How heartless! This is blasphemy against your husband!”

At Hadis’s offended tone, Jill looked at him with the coldest glare she could muster. Then, for some reason, Hadis smiled back at her cheerfully. The fact that she liked that face was irritating.

“Recently, I’ve started to think that I also like when you look at me with frosty eyes,” Hadis continued.

This guy is a pervert, after all, huh?

Hadis’s eyes gazed into Jill’s reproachful ones, utterly undiscouraged. “If you fall in love with me, I promise to make your favorite foods every day.”

“I’m not sure if it’s right to tempt people with material things,” she chided. “Thank you for the food! I’ll be off, then.”

“Before dessert?”

Jill turned back. Hadis took out a pie he had wrapped in paper.

Tempted by the material thing herself, Jill quietly returned to her seat. Annoyed, she started chowing down, but just then, Camila hopped over the courtyard stream and came up to them with Zeke in tow.

“Ah, there you are, there you are! Jill...and His Majesty is with you too, of course.”

They were both wearing Northern Division uniforms, but they had removed the badges indicating their rank. This wasn’t obvious at first glance because they had hung short cloaks with ornamental cords from their shoulders. They had changed jobs. As if to make this apparent, the two of them kneeled in unison. Not to Hadis, but to Jill.

“Our lady looks to be in very good spirits. However, it is time for your studies, Jill,” Camila said.

“Apologies, Your Majesty, we didn’t know you were here too...” Zeke said politely to Hadis, then changed to casual speech with Jill. “We’ve come to get you, Jill. Time to go; hop to it.”

“I see... It’s already time for us to part...? I’m going to miss you,” said Hadis, sounding so dejected that Zeke looked up and scratched the back of his head.

“It won’t be for that long... Just an hour or two. Why don’t you make sweets while you wait, Your Majesty?” suggested Zeke.

“That’s right,” Camila added. “We’ll wait with you, Your Majesty. How about that? Hold the fort, hold the fort!”

“Sure. You two are always so nice... That’s right! You guys can eat these if you want.”

Camila and Zeke’s eyes lit up at the cookies Hadis offered them. Jill groaned.

“And what’s going to happen after he gets you guys used to accepting food from him...?! And speak more respectfully towards His Majesty! Use your manners!” she warned them.

“Come now! Weren’t you the one who told us not to be so formal, Jill? His Majesty will be so pitiful if he’s the only one left out! Isn’t that right?”

“Yeah, I can’t be the only one left out. You guys teach me all sorts of things.” Hadis looked delighted, and Jill got a very ominous feeling about that.

Zeke’s next question hit that ominous feeling right on the nose.

“So, how did things go this time? Did you progress things a little bit with our captain?”

“Not quite,” Hadis shook his head. “I don’t know what’s missing. I’m trying my best to think up recipes.”

“Ah, don’t just go cooking things all the time!” said Camila. “You have to attack from all sorts of different angles! What about a present next? Jill’s a girl of that age, after all. How about a cute stuffed animal or something?!”

“Hold on a second! Just what are you guys teaching His Majesty...?!” asked Jill, resisting the oncoming headache.

Camila and Zeke exchanged glances.

“I’d like to say it’s how to court a woman, but you’re so young that we honestly don’t know what to do either. I just can’t contain my curiosity about the whole thing,” Zeke said.

“That’s right. His Majesty is just so cute!” Camila squeed.

“R-Really? I’m cute...?” Hadis asked, sounding bashful.

“Your Majesty, please don’t look so happy about that! I’m at my wit’s end here...!” As Jill covered her face with both hands, Hadis blinked, confused, and then sagged his shoulders.

“Maybe...you don’t like cute guys...?” he pouted.

“Oh dear! Jill is bullying His Majesty!” Camila crowed.

“You may be the Dragon Consort, but this is the Dragon Emperor! Be a little more conscientious about how you speak to him!” Zeke told her.

“And how is this *my* fault?! Aren’t you two supposed to be on my side, not His Majesty’s?! You’re the Knights of the Dragon Consort! You dedicated your swords to me...!”

Jill had had no intention of making Camila or Zeke her subordinates. The fact that they were now able to live out their lives happily had been enough. But when Hadis had asked the two of them what reward they wanted for the naval port affair, they both requested to be made Knights of the Dragon Consort.

Like the emperor of the Rave Empire being called the Dragon Emperor, his consort was also called the Dragon Consort. The elite guards who had sworn loyalty to the Dragon Consort were called Knights of the Dragon Consort.

Although it was a respectable title, it was a completely honorary position, and the skills utilized lacked any broader career applicability. When Jill had asked them why they had wanted to work with her when they could have just asked for a straightforward promotion, Camila had said “It sounds like fun,” and Zeke had replied “I’m fascinated by your strength.” Hadis had told her that she could refuse them if she didn’t want them, but Jill had accepted them both.

Jill might have felt regret about what had happened to them in the alternative

timeline, but if she could build new relationships with them, that would make her happy in its own way. Now, however, things had taken an altogether unexpected turn, and they were luring Jill into a crisis.

“Don’t worry, Your Majesty,” said Zeke. “We can see that our captain, unbelievably, has a thing for you.”

“Really?!” Hadis perked up.

“That’s right!” added Camila. “I think there’s hope! We’re rooting for you, so go for it! Jill is our master, and she’s very dear to us! You like Jill, don’t you?”

“Huh?! Th-That’s not true...!” grumbled Hadis, suddenly flustered. His face flushed red, and his eyes darted wildly around. “I-I don’t—like my amethyst—that’s not...! L-Like...my amethyst... I-I...like...my amethyst...?!”

“...Oi! Is that really our baseline here?!” Zeke groaned.

“Like...me? Huh? My amethyst—likes me...?! How sudden!”

“Hold your horses there, Your Majesty!” Camila warned. “You can’t just go switching it around like that! She’ll think you’re a loon!”

Hadis nodded meekly in understanding. Zeke and Camila sighed heavily, but Jill had little room for sympathy. Hadis was just suffering the consequences of his own actions.

Despite the fact that Jill complained, she finished eating every last bite of his cunningly prepared home cooking and then hopped off her seat under the gazebo.

“Thank you for the meal, Your Majesty. Now it’s time for me to leave. Excuse me.”

“Okay. I’ll be making cheesecake for you while I wait!”

Jill was at a loss for words, but Hadis just smiled and waved at her. Feeling as though any opposition would be futile, she quickly turned on her heel.

“I can’t believe he doesn’t realize...” Zeke said. “What should we do?”

“But how funny would it be to open his eyes! We can definitely have fun with that,” Camila grinned wickedly.

“Please stop messing around with me and His Majesty,” Jill ordered, sending a sharp look at the two knights following behind her.

Camila opened her eyes wide. “What are you saying, Jill?! No matter how strong you say you are, you’re still a potential enemy in these lands, aren’t you? The only thing protecting you is the emperor’s favor!”

“That’s right,” added Zeke. “And it’s the task of subordinates to shore up their master’s position. Listen, you’ve got to make sure that you ravish the emperor.”

After hearing her subordinates’ frightfully rational opinions, Jill inadvertently staggered into the middle of the courtyard. “R-Ravish...” the words died on her tongue.

“You could do it. With an emperor like that, it’d be easier for you than for Marquess Beil’s daughter,” Zeke pointed out.

“He’s right! Just hold him down and do it!”

“What exactly are you trying to make a ten-year-old child do?!” Jill asked, indignant.

“Zeke and I decided not to treat you like a child, you know.”

“Right,” Zeke agreed. “Besides, you did all that stuff for the emperor before. You don’t hate him, right?”

Jill’s eyes started darting around evasively at Zeke’s calm question. “O-Of course not. But the emperor and I aren’t like *that*.”

“Here’s some advice,” Zeke began. “If you don’t like a guy, don’t just thoughtlessly tag along to places with him, even if he invites you for food.”

Jill made a noise of protest. “But...but there’s nothing wrong with the food! It’s delicious—really delicious!”

“But that kind of behavior gives a guy hope,” explained Camila. “If your relationship with the emperor is in name only, then you have to totally turn him down.”

“R-Really...?” Jill was becoming less confident in how she had handled the situation.

As Jill became rather confused, Camila blinked at her. “Now you’ve gone and surprised me too! You’ve been doing that without realizing it?”

“To the contrary, isn’t that the appropriate reaction for her age?” asked Zeke. “I feel like our perception is starting to get warped too.”

“But we’re Jill’s allies,” Camila stated firmly. “The emperor is the one doing such childish courting. Don’t take it so seriously—just stay cool and go with the flow like you always do.”

“Th-That’s all easy for you guys to say, but...I’ve never been courted by a man before, so I don’t know how to respond,” said Jill, heat rising to her cheeks as she spoke.

Suddenly, there was silence behind her. Jill could even hear the chirping of birds. Then, out of the blue, Camila hugged her from behind.

“Oh my god, that’s so cute! Adorable! Jill, you’re so cute!”

“Well! Just one more push then, huh?” Zeke said. “It’s like you two are kids playing house.”

“I-I told you, please don’t jump to the wrong conclusion!” Jill demanded in a fluster. “It’s precisely *because* we’re going to be husband and wife that I don’t want to bring love or romance into the mix. I won’t be able to admonish His Majesty when he makes a mistake if my feelings get in the way.”

After she said that, Camila’s arms slackened around Jill. “That’s a very dry way of putting it... Age difference aside, the emperor is incredibly handsome. Don’t you get giddy or lightheaded around him?”

A love that makes you happy, that makes you work harder, that makes your heart leap just at the thought of it... “...I’ve already experienced more than enough of that for a lifetime,” Jill declared coolly.

“You’re kidding!” exclaimed Camila. “That’s too soon! What does that mean?!”

“Don’t ask me,” said Zeke. “Well...I don’t know what happened to you, but don’t go rushing to conclusions. The truth is, you’re still just a kid, and the emperor is a kid on the inside too.” Zeke lightly put his hand on the top of Jill’s

head.

But because of that past love, I got you guys involved in my misery... Jill bit her lip at the sudden rush of regret. So many people got involved in the fallout resulting from Jill's first love. It ruined so many lives...

That was why this time, she couldn't make that mistake again.

"Jill! Jill, there's trouble...! Oof?!" As soon as Sphere stepped out from the cloister onto the courtyard, she tumbled head-first. Camila rushed forward to help her.

"Keep it together, Sphere. You're Jill's teacher, aren't you?"

"U-Ugh... I'm sorry, I was in a rush..." Sphere apologized, a blush creeping up her cheeks.

Marquess Beil was recuperating with his second wife and their daughter in the same remote villa where Sphere had previously lived. The marquess was still confined, and the investigation was still ongoing, but documents had already been submitted to make Sphere's future husband the next marquess.

Sphere didn't object to Hadis's decision, nor did she run from the heavy responsibility that had so suddenly befallen her of choosing the next marquess. Far from it—she took advantage of the situation by asking Hadis if she could serve as Jill's private teacher while she looked for a husband.

Sphere had severed her feelings for Hadis. When she and Jill had tea together one day, she had confessed that she now felt such gratitude that Hadis had spared her father's life, she no longer had any right to those sorts of feelings anymore.

Later during the same tea party, though, Sphere had asked Jill to join her for embroidery. Jill had only very begrudgingly taken up the needle, which had made Sphere's head spin. "What about dancing?! What about poetry?! What about etiquette?!" she had cried.

Sphere had concluded that Jill could not survive in the imperial court in her current state. Sphere, who'd actually survived the imperial court at the imperial capital, was very persuasive, and so it was decided that Sphere would teach Jill what it meant to be a genteel lady.

So why had Sphere come running for Jill?

“Th-This letter just arrived, addressed to Jill... I had to hurry and let her know.”

Camila took the letter Sphere was holding and offered it to Jill.

Jill’s name was written on the white envelope in blue-black ink. Her family wouldn’t have known that she was currently in the Rave Empire, much less in Beilburg. She also understood that Sphere had rushed here to inform her of this... What gave her the biggest feeling of foreboding, however, was the familiar handwriting.

Jill ripped one end of the envelope and opened the letter. Then she was rendered speechless. She was so shocked that the envelope and the letter fell from her hands.

“H-Hold on, Jill! What’s wrong? Are you breathing?!” asked Camila.

“I-I’m fine... I just sort of wish I was somewhere far away...”

“Oi, the wind is going to blow your letter away...” Zeke said. “Uh-oh...”

“Well, well! I didn’t really think he would give up, but this is something else.”

Jill turned around in short bursts at the low voice, its cheerfulness from before dampened. Hadis had put his things away and left the gazebo. He had picked up the letter that had fallen at their feet and smiled.

That smile was so fiendish that Jill couldn’t help but make a small squeak.

“I had no idea the Kratos crown prince could be so passionate,” Hadis said. “I’ll have to follow his example. Don’t you think so, my amethyst?”

“I-It might not be what you think...” Jill managed to say.

“Now, shall we prepare a fun welcome party for him? I accept the challenge. Love is war.” Hadis’s face was smiling, but his eyes were not.

Jill put her head in her hands, punching her former fiancée in her mind.

Why won’t you just give up?! I could have dealt with you treating me like a traitor, but—

“I’m coming to get you.”

The quirks of Gerald der Kratos's handwriting lingered in his written work, and they were the same now as they would be in the future.



AT the same time, a messenger from the Kratos Kingdom had arrived. He brought with him a preliminary announcement that Gerald wanted to discuss the future relationship of the two countries. This messenger had also been the one who had brought the letter addressed to Jill.

It wasn't to be an official meeting, so the talks would be held not at the imperial capital, but there, in the floating city of Beilburg, where Gerald was to arrive the next morning. They had neither the time nor the mental space to prepare for his visit—or rather, Gerald had no intention of letting them prepare for his visit.

"Jill, your eyes are unfocused. Please smile more like a lady," said Sphere the moment she saw Jill's face. Sphere had decided to help Jill prepare for the informal meeting with the crown prince.

Jill forcibly lifted her cheeks, just as she was told. "Like this?"

"...You look absolutely evil."

"Then like this?"

"That's even worse. It looks like you're licking your lips in front of juicy prey."

"Then how does this look?"

"...God, you'd be better off with a blank expression," advised Camila, dashing in from the entrance.

Sphere sighed.

Jill started to feel guilty at everyone's reactions. "I'm sorry, I'm not good at smiling cutely... Um, do you have any dresses that I can move my legs around in? I'd feel more comfortable that way."

"Show your legs? I see... That is trending, and since you are a child, it will come off as cute rather than shameless, so that might be fine," Sphere said.

"No, it's not about that. It's because I can't do any footwork. I also want

something like a garter for my thigh where I can keep a concealed weapon,” Jill told her.

“Oi—you’re going into a meeting, not a battlefield. That would put us guards in an awkward position,” Zeke warned. His perspective was reasonable, but Jill personally would have wanted nothing more than to end the life of the young man she was about to meet, if at all possible.

“...Your face is becoming even more diabolical...” Sphere opined.

“That’s just how it always looks,” Jill huffed.

“You’re a lovely person, Jill!” insisted Sphere. “Don’t be nervous. Have more confidence in yourself! Is there a certain color or style of dress that you would prefer?”

“A dress in which I can do a roundhouse kick to kill him before he can take a single breath would be fine.”

“...I understand that you really hate Crown Prince Gerald, but...Jill, the weapon of a lady is her smile.”

Jill reacted slightly at the word “weapon.”

“Regardless of the circumstances, the people in Kratos are convinced that you were kidnapped, right?” Sphere asked to confirm.

“...Right.”

“If you’re going to refute that claim, then you’ll need to be happy. A smile that’s graceful, that doesn’t diminish your elegance, and that says: ‘I’m being treated so well here!’ Like this...” Sphere gently put her hands together, posed beautifully, tilted her chin downwards, and gave them a lovely smile.

A chill ran down Jill’s back. *This isn’t the usual Sphere.*

It was a sweet, gentle smile, with enough tenderness to make the onlooker feel at ease. When Jill saw Sphere smile like that, she couldn’t help believing from that smile alone that Sphere was happy.

“What do you think?” Sphere asked.

“...I get what you were saying. I’ll give it my best shot... You’re strong, aren’t

you?”

Sphere’s face lit up with happiness. She had transformed back into the usual Sphere. “I’ll go pick out a dress with room for your legs to move. Whatever your reason for it, I’d rather you feel a little more comfortable, at least.”

Then Sphere went into the walk-in closet Hadis had prepared for Jill and chose a dress that fit her description. It was a cute, colorful dress with a massive ribbon attached. It certainly seemed like she could move her legs around in it, but because there was so much lace and so many ribbons on it, Jill reminded herself that she had to be careful not to get the dress snagged on something and torn in the event of a fight.

After that, Jill got ready in earnest. She got into a milk-white bath that included an ingredient to make her skin soft, had rose water dabbed onto her cheeks and forehead, had a milky lotion applied to her entire body, and then had perfumed oil combed through her hair. She was relieved when she was told that she didn’t need a corset. Because she was a child, very minimal makeup was applied to her face, but honey was applied to her mouth to make her lips look healthy and vibrant.

The newly hired servants of the castle were incredibly competent—they totally treated Jill as a doll and made her up into a magnificent lady.

Jill couldn’t even recognize herself when she saw her reflection in the mirror.

Now for the smile...the smile!

As Jill repeated this over and over in her mind, she walked behind Zeke and Camila, who were serving as her guards.

At the end of the marble hallway, Hadis was standing in front of massive double doors. He looked nearly the same as he always did, except for the fact that he had changed his cloak into a more luxurious one. But his default appearance was so handsome that by just standing there, his dignified beauty was as stunning as a flower in the fullness of bloom. The serious look on his face just made him even more handsome.

...When we get dressed up, he actually outshines me... The smile that Jill had been working so hard to maintain disappeared again, but this time for a

different reason.

“We’ve brought Jill, Your Majesty,” Camila announced.

Hadis looked over at them and smiled immediately. “Is that what Sphere chose for you? I like the way you normally look, but you look nice in a dress, too,” he said cheerfully, squatting down and smiling at Jill’s eye level. “You look very lovely. How about we braid your hair next time? I’m really good at that kind of stuff.”

His long finger curled around a lock of hair by her earlobe. Jill broke free, panicking at the surprise attack.

“Y-You don’t have to right now! I’m fine. You look lovelier than I do, anyway!” she blurted.

“...Are you saying that I’m not the kind of man you like because of that?!” Hadis asked, aghast.

“Oi, save this unhinged conversation for later,” Zeke chided. “Are you sure you only want guards outside of the room?”

“Oh, yes...that’s fine. It’s not an official meeting, apparently, and it’ll just be the crown prince in there,” Hadis said.

That’s right, thought Jill with a cold look in her eyes. Gerald was strong. Even I have never bested him in a match... If he tries anything...

Hadis suddenly stood up from where he had been squatting in front of Jill. “Kratos is claiming that I abducted you. Your presence at the meeting will serve as proof that that isn’t the case, but basically, all you have to do is...smile...but... why is your face darkening in anger?”

With both hands balled into fists, Jill shut her eyes tightly. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty. When I think about the enemy attacking, I just can’t help feeling vindictive...!”

“I-I see... But he’s coming to get you, you know? You might have some mixed feelings, or—”

“I won’t,” she said definitively. “Besides, there’s no way that Crown Prince Gerald’s true purpose here is me.” That much she could say for certain. “I will

always protect you,” Jill continued, “so please don’t leave my side, Your Majesty.”

“...Oh! Your Majesty?!” cried Camila.

Hadis had just staggered forward, a hand pressed over his heart.

“Your Majesty!” Jill said, running forward as well.

“B-Breathing...hurts...!”

“Oi! Are you okay?!” asked Zeke. “The meeting’s just about to start... Should we call it off?”

“Come on, Jill! You can’t go toying with His Majesty’s heart at a time like this!” said Camila.

“Huh?” *Why am I being scolded?*

Zeke rubbed Hadis’s back, and Hadis drank some water offered by Camila. Then he took a deep breath and picked Jill up.

“It’s almost time. Shall we go?”

“Will you really be okay?” Jill asked him. “If you’re too unwell to face Crown Prince Gerald...”

“...Are you trying to say that I would lose to that prince?” he asked, his tone suddenly bone-chilling.

Jill quickly shook her head. “O-Of course not!”

“Okay then.” As Hadis looked forward, a fire burned somewhere in the depths of his gold eyes. His face transformed into that of a statesman right before her eyes.

...He’s fairly erratic in many ways, but he’s a real adult when it comes to things like this...

As Jill stared at him, Hadis, who had been fixing his collar with an index finger, looked back at her with a questioning look. “Is there something else you’re worried about?”

“Just my own incompetence—I can’t smile cutely,” she admitted. “I have to make Prince Gerald believe that you and I are an affectionate couple, but I just

want to kill him so badly...!”

Hadis squinted his eyes. “...You’ve been thinking about that prince more than me, haven’t you?”

“Huh? Please don’t—of course, I haven’t. I just want his life to end as soon as possible.”

“But don’t they say that there’s a fine line between love and hate?”

Just as Jill was about to deny that outrageous assertion, Hadis started to get a glassy look to his eyes. “...There’s something else between you and the crown prince, isn’t there? Other than the fact that he informally proposed to you.”

“No, not even remotely. Absolutely not.”

That was the truth. At this point in time, at least, their only connection was Gerald’s informal proposal, which had come to nothing.

But Hadis looked frustrated as he put Jill down in the corridor. “Change of plan. I’m going to leave you here. I’m not going to let you meet the crown prince.”

“What?! Y-Your Majesty, that’s too dangerous!” In Jill’s panic, she pulled at Hadis’s cloak with both hands. Hadis turned and also grabbed his cloak to snatch it back, creating a match of tug-of-war.

“I told you, I’m going to go in alone...! You stay here!” Hadis demanded.

“But then I won’t be able to clear up the misunderstanding that I was abducted!” Jill argued.

“Still! There’s no way I’m going to hand you over to the crown prince! You’re my wife!”

“Exactly! That’s why I can’t let you go alone! Camila, Zeke, please stop His Majesty!”

“You do have a point, Captain, but...why are you fighting over something like this?” asked Zeke.

“Your strength isn’t going to help you with this one, Jill,” Camila added. “His Majesty is jealous.”

“What?!”

Hadis and Jill were so surprised that the cloak fell away from their hands.

Silence fell over the corridor.

“Don’t go looking at us, you two,” Zeke remarked. “Resolve this on your own.”

“Don’t forget, you’re going to have to play up being an affectionate couple!” Camila reminded them.

Jill realized with a start that this was not the time for arguing. They were running out of time. “U-Um, Your Majesty... This is sort of, you know, like a job,” she said.

“...I know. I can’t fill your head with thoughts of me. I’m pathetic...” Hadis’s dejection made Jill feel embarrassed.

“L-Look, Your Majesty... I-I do...think about you. I worry about you.”

“You mean you think I’m helpless, right? You think I’m lame,” he pouted.

That’s not true, Jill thought, but she didn’t know the right way to phrase it. Meanwhile, Hadis was spiraling.

“It’s fine. I certainly am a coward... I do have a way of dealing with the ‘acting cutesy’ thing you’re so worried about, but I can’t bring myself to say it...”

“What?! P-Please hurry and tell it to me!” Jill pressed him, flinging all her embarrassment behind her. “Please tell me!”

“B-But I can’t. It’s too drastic, and it’s too early for us,” said Hadis, now nervously looking away.

But Jill wouldn’t be deterred. “I’ll deal with it, no matter how drastic it is! Please do it! I don’t want to be a liability!”

“Y...You won’t trick me this time,” Hadis said. “If you take it seriously and get mad at me or start hating me again...”

“I won’t get mad, and I won’t hate you! Be brave, Your Majesty!”

“...You absolutely won’t get mad or start hating me?”

“Yes, I promise!”

After pondering for a moment, Hadis picked Jill up. "...You absolutely, absolutely, absolutely won't?"

Jill smiled slightly at Hadis's repetitive insistence. Even though Hadis had been aggressively trying to court her, he still seemed to be afraid of her hating him.

"I'll be absolutely, absolutely, absolutely fine. Don't you know that my word is my bond, Your Majesty?"

"...I do. I believe you."

"So, what exactly is your plan?" she asked.

"Simple. I just have to fill your head with me."

"Wha—hnnn?!"

Jill heard the sound of something falling to the ground with a crash. It must have been Zeke or Camila.

Jill's vision was totally blocked by Hadis's face. The sound snapped her back to her senses. When she found that she couldn't take a breath, she understood what was going on.

He was kissing her. In front of Camila and Zeke, without any preamble... Jill's confusion transformed into shame and anger. Then Hadis opened his eyes, and it looked as if the kiss had been well-aimed. Faced with Hadis's golden eyes, filled with such a fierce hunger that Jill thought he would tear her throat to shreds, Jill was unable to move.

"See? You let your guard down right away. You look so adorable."



Hadis's bewitching smile at such close proximity, coupled with Jill's inability to catch her breath, made steam start to rise from her head. She limply leaned against the bottom of his neck. She probably couldn't stand on her own.

"And now you're the adorable girl you wanted to be. Just stay in a charmed daze like that," Hadis muttered, holding Jill gently.

"A-As a grown man, you probably shouldn't have done what you just did, Your Majesty... That was playing dirty..." Camila said.

"Oi, as an adult, I feel like I'm gonna explode after seeing that."

"But this is the best way to show off our relationship to Crown Prince Gerald," Hadis said. "She just has to look like her mind is full of me."

I won't get mad. I won't hate him. I promised him that. But I will offer a brief complaint.

"...Th-That was...my first kiss...!" Jill said, meeting Hadis's eyes just as he was about to begin walking. His cheeks flushed slightly.

"...Well...do you want to redo it later...just the two of us?" he asked timidly.

It was then that Jill remembered that she hadn't promised not to hit him.



"**I'D** like to thank you for meeting me like this despite the sudden visit," said Gerald from the other side of the table in the large parlor. "Now, regarding what I'd like to...discuss..." he continued, tapering off at the end of his sentence. There was confusion in his eyes.

Well, that makes sense, Jill thought scathingly.

There was a distinct handprint on the emperor's left cheek. It was a small handprint, and it must have made a loud sound, so it had probably been easy for Gerald to deduce that Jill had slapped him. It was probably even easier for him to come to that conclusion after seeing Jill and Hadis sitting on the same long sofa, Jill's face turned away from Hadis.

Hadis, however, was smiling, so Gerald was at a loss for how to continue.

"What is it?" asked Hadis. "Go on."

“It’s...nothing... Well, first I’d like to discuss Lady Jill Cervel.”

“Right.”

“There’s nothing to discuss,” Jill said in a cold voice.

Gerald’s brows crept closer together at this.

Hadis, however, remained poised. “My apologies,” he said. “We had a little lovers’ spat before coming here.”

“A lovers’ spat?!” shouted Jill immediately.

“We’re in front of our guest,” Hadis reminded her—a warning. The fact that Hadis could act like an adult at a time like this aggravated Jill even more.

“Prince Gerald, my fiancée is still young. Might you overlook this behavior? You’re partially responsible for it, you see.”

“...I don’t know what you mean,” Gerald said.

“I got jealous because you said you were coming to get her.”

Hadis certainly had gotten jealous because of that. As he recrossed his legs, however, there was no jealousy to be found in his placid expression. “When I asked her if she wanted to go home, she slapped me and asked, ‘Do you not believe my love for you?!’”

That had absolutely not happened, but, seeing Gerald’s eyes suddenly narrow, Jill remained silent.

Hadis was trying to make it seem as though that was the source of Jill’s ire. He was the emperor, so it made sense that he could pull off deception like this, even if it wasn’t malicious by design.

Even though Jill felt impressed by his quick thinking, his choice of deception also made her upset, and realizing that Gerald was taking his word for it made her even angrier.

Most of all, Jill was irritated that her head was filled with thoughts of Hadis, just as he had intended. Every time her guard came down, her thoughts were filled with his long eyelashes, the feel of his thin yet soft lips, and the sound of his voice that made her weak at the knees. Jill would suppress these thoughts

each time, but only after a frantic struggle.

I'll never let my guard down again. I'll never give him another opportunity. I'll never let him do that again...! As Jill repeated this over and over in her mind, Hadis calmly rested his head against his hand.

"My ineptitude also explains my delay in contacting the Cervel family," he said. "I apologize for that. But please don't suspect me of kidnapping. That will earn me a slap on my other cheek too."

"...An emperor, getting beaten by a small child?" Gerald asked. "What a curious turn of events..."

"I'm an emperor that bends the knee to his wife," Hadis replied impressively, uncrossing his legs and getting to his feet. "We'll be leaving now. This is a personal visit, isn't it? I hope you enjoy your sightseeing."

"This conversation isn't over yet," Gerald said.

"Are you going to mediate our lovers' quarrel?" Hadis shot back.

Gerald looked at Jill and clicked his tongue. It looked as though he believed the lovers' quarrel story. That made Jill feel strangely relieved.

So there was another way of securing this result...?

Jill had been under the impression that only an adorable smile would gain their victory here. Then again, the lovers' quarrel excuse had only been possible because they weren't in an official setting. Jill looked at Hadis, self-conscious of her own shortsightedness when it came to these things. Staying mad at him forever made her feel like she was the sore loser here, too.

"...I don't need mediation or anything like that. As long as His Majesty sincerely apologizes." Jill hadn't said anything improper, but her cheeks flushed for some reason. She felt uncomfortable and skittish, like they really were having a lovers' quarrel.

Hadis—the root cause of all of this—looked composed. "Yes, I'll apologize as many times as it takes. How can I butter you up? Those sorts of worries are wonderful to have, aren't they?"

"...You don't really have to butter me up."

“You really don’t want them?” Hadis said suggestively.

Visions of breads and sweets popped into Jill’s head. She quickly shook off the delicious daydreams. Hadis seemed to be suppressing a smile. Jill took a deep breath, shooting him a glare out of the corner of her eyes.

Jill straightened her back and fixed her eyes on Gerald, who seemed to be struggling internally for some reason. “That’s the truth of the situation, so there’s no need to worry about me. I’m very sorry for any trouble I’ve caused. I will contact my family, as well.”

“...You don’t want to return to Kratos?” Gerald asked. “I gave you an unofficial offer to make you my fiancée. You’d give up a future as the crown prince’s consort, your family, and your homeland... *Why?*”

“Because His Majesty needs me,” Jill answered.

Gerald’s eyes softened with pity. “He needs you, does he? I see... Then we should eliminate that need. That reminds me, Your Majesty...” Hadis didn’t respond, but Gerald leaned back in the sofa and continued, “I heard that your requirements for a fiancée were that she be under fourteen years old and be able to see something that you would show to her. I think you’re looking for a girl with enough magic power to be able to see the Dragon God. And this is all to prevent the curse, isn’t that right?”

As Jill stared at him, Gerald gave her a rare smile.

Hadis sat back down beside Jill with a sigh. “That insight is worthy of a prince from Kratos, the great country of magic. I do not deny it.”

“What if I told you that the emperor’s curse has not yet been broken?”

“As you’ve got no grounds for such a statement, it would not be worth considering.”

“I heard about the incident at the naval port. That you let Marquess Beilburg live. It was a wise decision made after weighing the political situation. The citizens are reassured that the ‘cursed emperor’ was only a rumor. But if the curse is still alive and well, my analysis concludes that Marquess Beil will die. What then?”

They heard a knock at the door. Any news at a time like this was sure to be bad.

But Hadis did not hesitate.

“Enter.”

“Forgive me for interrupting your conversation.”

Gard entered the room. Although he had gained Hadis’s trust after the previous battle, Gard had realized that his nature was better suited for protection exclusively, so he had been transferred from the Northern Division to the Imperial Guard and was now a castle guard.

After Gard saluted, he looked at Gerald. Jill presumed that the news was something Gard didn’t want their visitor to hear, but it was something he needed to inform them of immediately. He waited for Hadis’s decision.

Hadis, never taking his eyes off Gerald, cut to the chase. “Marquess Beilburg is dead?” he asked.

“Yes,” Gard replied, standing at attention.

In the silent room, only Gerald sunk back into his sofa, looking amused as he smiled.



MARQUESS Beil, whose belongings had been strictly controlled to prevent any attempts at suicide, had strangled himself to death with his own hands in front of his prison guard. The prison guard testified that the marquess had asked to be saved.

A gag order was issued, but rumors about the incident spread quickly. The story of Marquess Beil’s mysterious death had already spread not just inside the castle, but even in town. These rumors were also taking on various embellishments.

Jill heard these rumors from Camila and Zeke, who had gone into town to see how things were playing out. Sitting in her private chambers, Jill sighed heavily.

“So they’re convinced that it’s the emperor’s curse at work, after all...” she said.

“It’s tense down there. The story’s getting exaggerated. They’re saying that the curse hasn’t been lifted after all, and that everyone in town is going to get massacred because this is Marquess Beil’s territory. They’re all scared,” Camila explained.

“I spoke with Hugo of the Northern Division at the military port,” said Zeke. “He says there are people in town who are agitating the situation.”

“I’m sure the guys Prince Gerald brought with him are stirring things up,” Jill mused.

Camila tilted her head. “Why do you suspect Prince Gerald? I think the timing is certainly suspicious too, but...”

“What if Prince Gerald has links with the group that’s hostile towards the emperor?” asked Jill.

Gerald was a warrior, but he was also exceptionally resourceful. Marquess Beil had obviously been involved with the faction that was hostile towards Hadis. But Marquess Beil had been killed before they’d been able to trace that connection, causing the subject of Hadis’s curse, once thought to have been lifted, to erupt once more.

“Besides,” Jill continued, “His Majesty had been able to become the emperor so easily, at such a young age, and with no one backing him precisely because people thought that if he became emperor, the curse would be lifted. If that premise collapses, people will start trying to kill the emperor to get rid of the curse, as he is the source of it.”

“...The crown prince faction would get more powerful. So you suspect that Prince Gerald is acting to support the crown prince faction, Jill?” asked Zeke.

In fact, in the future Jill had experienced, Gerald had been agitating, extracting information from, and manipulating the crown prince faction. It was a natural strategy to weaken the power of the Rave Empire.

“But what’s the truth? Is the curse not an exaggeration? Does it really exist?” asked Zeke, raising the question that got to the heart of the matter.

Camila nodded. “At the very least, it’s true that the way Marquess Beil died wasn’t normal.”

“I don’t know the details, but His Majesty told me that as long as I was here, the curse would subside.” Jill thought it would probably be best to tell these two the truth. She summarized Rave and his blessing for them. She also showed them the ring of the Dragon Consort that couldn’t be removed.

Camila crossed her arms and furrowed her brows. “This *is* hard to believe, but...I did hear that the emperor would test his prospective fiancées by asking them what they could see. If he did that to decide whether or not they could see the Dragon God Rave, that clears up any doubt.”

“I don’t really get magic power or stuff like that,” said Zeke. “If that’s what you say, Captain, then I guess it’s true...but doesn’t that mean that the curse definitely does exist?”

“Isn’t there something we need to clarify before that?” asked Camila. “Just what is the curse?”

Jill, still sitting in her chair, looked up at Camila and repeated, “What is the curse...?”

“Right. Everyone’s in a tizzy over the curse, but ultimately, what *is* it? Why is it set up so that it subsides when the Dragon Emperor gets married? Besides, if there is a curse, doesn’t that mean someone is putting the curse on him?”

“...If we assume that the legend is true, then it’s Goddess Kratos’s curse, isn’t it?”

Jill was surprised to hear that name come from Zeke’s mouth.

Camila twirled a side tendril of hair around her finger, wearing a frown. “I wonder if it’ll really happen, after all... The Dragon God Rave does exist in the legend...”

“The passage about the consort becoming a shield for the Dragon God matches the current situation exactly,” Zeke agreed. “We probably can’t outright dismiss it as unrelated.”

“Huh? Hold on a minute. What are you talking about?” asked Jill.

Zeke and Camila exchanged glances. The story seemed to be commonplace to the two of them.

“That reminds me... You’re from the Kratos Kingdom, aren’t you, Jill?” asked Camila. “Oh! Then maybe the legend is different over there?”

“I don’t know,” replied Jill. “I’ve never really paid that much attention to the legends before... A long time ago, the Goddess and the Dragon God fought over differing opinions on how to treat humans, and then the continent was divided into two countries.”

Protect humans with love, or guide them with logic?

These doctrines were manifested in the divine protections bestowed upon each country. The land of Kratos, where anything could be grown, was protected by love—magic. The skies of Rave where dragons soared were protected by logic—knowledge.

“The story we’re talking about isn’t something written in the sacred books,” explained Zeke. “It’s a folk tale...”

“If you’re talking about the story about how Kratos and Rave were originally supposed to rule over the earth and skies together as a couple, I’ve heard that one before in Kratos,” Jill said.

“Exactly! It’s that sort of story. In the conflict with the Goddess, the blessings on the land transformed into a curse, and there was a time when nothing would grow in Rave soil. But the Dragon Emperor married an incredibly magically strong woman—the Dragon Consort—and she cast a magic shield at the peak of the Rakia Mountains, protecting the Rave Empire from the Goddess’s curse. People say that the magic shield is the empire’s current border.”

The Goddess’s curse could be thwarted as long as they had the Dragon Consort... That certainly sounded like Jill’s current situation.

“The Goddess was furious that her curse became ineffective. But because the Goddess was repelled by the shield in her true form, she took the form of a black spear and had the people of her kingdom carry her across the sea a great distance to come to these lands.”

“Spear... You mean the Sacred Spear of the Goddess?” Jill guessed. “The one that’s been passed down in the Kratos royal family for generations?”

“The Sacred Spear of the Goddess actually exists? In Kratos?” asked Zeke,

sounding impressed. “I thought it was just a legend, like the Heavenly Sword of the Dragon God.”

Common knowledge seemed to be different in Kratos and Rave, after all.

“The Sacred Spear does exist in the Kratos royal family. An imitation is used for ceremonies, though. The Heavenly Sword doesn’t exist in Rave?” Jill asked.

“They say it disappeared all of a sudden hundreds of years ago. I would pray to both the Sacred Spear and the Heavenly Sword if I could.”

The weapon-loving Zeke was very interested in the sacred weapons, but Jill was inwardly puzzled.

I was so sure the emperor had used the Heavenly Sword on the battlefield, though... Perhaps he hadn’t revealed the sword because the war hadn’t started yet.

Camila steered the conversation back to the story. “I guess that’s a blend of myth and reality. So then, when the Goddess was presented to the Dragon Emperor and his consort as an incredible spear, she stabbed the Dragon Consort. The Dragon Consort, realizing the true nature of the spear, plunged the Heavenly Sword into her own chest, trapping the Goddess in her own shadow. The magic shield disappeared as a result, but the Goddess became unable to revert back to her original form, and the curse on the land disappeared. That is the story of the Dragon Consort who protected logic.”

It was a legend. It was a legend, but the Sacred Spear of the Goddess was real. In fact, Gerald had attacked Jill with that very weapon, six years in the future.

...Plus, Prince Gerald is able to bring out the real Sacred Spear of the Goddess.

Was that why the Goddess’s curse had returned?

Zeke sighed heavily and put his hand to his chin in thought. “But it’s a legend, after all. We can’t just blindly believe that it’s all true. Even the substance of the curse is different. The succession of strange deaths of the crown princes seemed to have *helped* the emperor ascend to the throne, after all.”

“...But we can also think of the situation like this,” Jill interjected. “The prince who ought to have become the emperor even without the curse was forced

into solitude as a cursed prince, and then became emperor afterwards.”

If what Rave had said was true and Hadis had been destined to become emperor even if none of the crown princes had died, then the serial, unnatural deaths of the crown princes had simply been harassment against Hadis.

“Now that you mention it, that’s true... This affair is also ultimately working against the emperor...” said Camila.

“Besides, if the myth is true, the ultimate goal of the curse is taking the life of the Dragon Consort—your life, Captain,” Zeke concluded. “That would make this situation even more confusing. Does that mean the magic shield exists?”

“I have no recollection of making such a thing, at least,” said Jill. “Besides, if I died, that would only create a rift between the Kratos Kingdom and the Rave Empire. But if the goal is to isolate the emperor...”

But what would Gerald gain from doing that? It would probably help the crown prince faction, but it was a very roundabout way of helping them. Jill pondered this and then suddenly realized...

Come to think of it, didn’t the murder-suicide of Beilburg happen around this time...?

If Jill looked at how things had historically played out, Hadis’s political purge had instilled fear into the hearts of the people. Coupled with his conflict with the crown prince faction, Hadis had been ostracized and isolated.

Now, even though the process had been different, Marquess Beil was dead. The same result was unfolding because people saw it as a product of Hadis’s curse.

Why? For what purpose? Who? No, I should first be concerned about the person who was said to have caused the murder-suicide of Beilburg...

“...Where is Sphere?”

“Huh? Oh... She went with the emperor to verify Marquess Beil’s death. Shouldn’t they be back by now?”

“Even a father like *that* dying would be upsetting,” said Zeke. “It’s probably best to give her some space.” Zeke had a point, but Jill felt strangely uneasy.

“I’m going to look for her,” she said.

“What?” said Camila. “Jill, hold on—oh!”

Just as Jill jumped off her chair, there was a knock at the door.

“Pardon me,” said a voice, and then the girl Jill had just been about to look for entered the room.

Camila greeted her with a gentle smile. “Welcome back, Sphere.”

“...Thanks.”

“Why don’t you go rest? You must be exhausted,” Zeke said.

“...But...I have to...say hello...”

Sphere slipped in between Camila and Zeke, wavering left and right as she tottered towards Jill. Jill frowned at the way Sphere was walking, and when she looked up, she stared at Sphere in shock.

Sphere’s eyes, which were open wide, had turned pitch black, and something was wafting upwards from her body like mist—was that magic power?

“Look out!”

Faster than Camila could shout, magic power had gathered in Sphere’s right hand and transformed into a black spear. Jill dodged the tip of the spear and moved back, but Sphere chased after her at a terrifying speed.

“Camila, Zeke, be careful!” Jill shouted. “Something’s possessed Sphere!”

These weren’t the movements of a klutzy girl who often tripped over her own feet. The motion of her swinging the black spear down and her steps were those of a seasoned warrior. Jill couldn’t see any light in Sphere’s enormously dilated eyes.

“Scampering...little...girl...” hissed Sphere, turning back to look at Jill and raising only the corner of her lips in a smile. Her movements were strange, almost like a puppet.

“Who are you...?” Jill asked.

“I...I.../ am the consort of the Dragon Emperor. You are—an imposter.”

Camila cleanly shot through the hem of Sphere's dress and tried to pin her to the furniture, but Sphere tore the arrow off. She shook off Zeke too, who tried to grab her arms, and then charged forward.

Jill somersaulted and pinned Sphere's arms behind her back, but the black sphere, which had fallen from Sphere's hand, spun around, its tip aiming at Jill.

Did that spear just move on its own?! Is that the creature's main body?!

Pushing Sphere away, Jill dodged the spear that came flying towards her just in time. But then, all of a sudden, another shadow joined the fray in the room.

"Your Majesty!" Jill shouted, her eyes wide.

Hadis was just about to swing a sword at Sphere, who had fallen onto the floor.

The presence of the black sphere was upstaged by Hadis's shining silver sword—the sacred weapon that Jill had seen split the earth with a single flourish on the battlefield.

Without hesitation, Hadis aimed it at Sphere's heart. Jill kicked off the floor. She grabbed Sphere, dodged Hadis's sword, and tumbled across the floor.

"Your Majesty, something is controlling Sphere—"

"I'm going to kill it with her."

The words of Jill's argument died in her throat at Hadis's clear intent to kill. In Jill's arms, Sphere started to laugh.

"Kill? Me? I'm the only one who can love you!" Sphere cried.

"Oi! Captain, behind you!" Zeke shouted.

When Jill turned around, she saw the spear she had just dodged flying at her. But before it could pierce her back, Hadis grabbed it. Smoke and the terrible stench of burning skin filled the room.

"Your Majesty...!"

"Heh heh! I won't let you go!"

As Sphere muttered these words, the spear coiled from Hadis's hands to his arm. The black mist liquefied and eventually took the shape of a woman right

before Jill's eyes. The black figure reached out to Hadis's cheek.

She nestled up to him as if she were his lover. "I'm the only one for you."

From behind, Jill grabbed the black figure of a woman by the neck.

The black figure, lacking any discernible eyes or other facial features, turned and clearly met Jill's eyes. Jill said just one thing.

"Get lost."

She charged her magic power.

With a loud crack, the black figure of a woman exploded, leaving a black smudge on the floor. But this smudge also quickly vanished, evaporating into thin air.

"She's gone?" asked Camila, holding an arrow at the ready.

Jill nodded. "I don't sense her anymore... Your Majesty, you've hurt your hand —"

"Why did you save her? If you hadn't protected her, I could have killed her," said Hadis, his voice and expression icy.

Jill tightened her arms around Sphere's unconscious body. "Someone was controlling her. Sphere didn't do anything wrong."

"That's not the issue here. That *thing* is a very cunning woman. She might still be lurking inside her even now."

"We need to think of a way to deal with her without hurting Sphere!" Jill said.

"I'll be the one making that call—not you."

"Then please explain what's going on, at least! What *was* that? And what about that black spear? Was that the Sacred Spear of the Goddess Kratos?" Jill asked.

"I don't need to explain anything," Hadis said coldly. "Just let go of Sphere. That's an order from your emperor. She won't suffer."

"Then what did that woman mean when she said that she was the consort of the Dragon Emperor?" Jill pressed. "She said I was an imposter. The one who's supposed to be your consort—the Dragon Consort—is *me*."

Hadis's eyebrows remained frozen in place. In fact, he didn't even look at Jill. He just glowered loathsomely at the mark where the spear had vanished.

"I have the right to ask, Your Majesty!" Jill said in a raised voice.

"...I never thought you would accuse me of cheating. You don't even *love* me."

Jill was at a loss for an answer, nor was she sure if Hadis was even aware of her. He took a step back.

"Fine. My first priority is preventing that thing from moving. Camila, Zeke. Keep a constant watch over my wife. Gard, are you there?"

Gard appeared from the other side of the door.

"I have orders for the Northern Division," Hadis continued. "Bring all the women of Beilburg to the castle, immediately."

"Y-Your Majesty?"

"Issue an official notice. A monster that possesses women has infiltrated the town. Be especially careful of women fourteen years or older. If any of them become violent, kill them immediately... I don't think there are any women in Rave who are compatible vessels for the Goddess, but her rebirth would spell nothing but trouble," Hadis explained in a quiet voice.

Jill gasped.

The Goddess Kratos was unable to return to her original form. The Goddess had awoken when she was fourteen years old. If these were not just legends, but vestiges of fact, then if the Goddess could be reborn like the Dragon God, then there must be a vessel for the Goddess out there, as Hadis had been for Rave.

The Dragon God exists, so it only makes sense that the Goddess exists too.

A "cunning woman." That was what Hadis had called her. Those words had confirmed her existence.

In other words, the condition that his fiancée be younger than fourteen meant...

A girl that couldn't act as a vessel for the Goddess and would never become

the Goddess. This condition was to keep the Goddess away.

“I will not accept any exceptions,” Hadis said. “Consider any refusal treason. Make it seem like an evacuation. We will monitor them within my magical barrier. Take Sphere there too.”

“Your Majesty, if you do that, the people will revolt!” Jill said. “Plus, considering the current circumstances, they’ll blame it on the curse!”

“So what? If we don’t kill them, they won’t complain. This is another concession I’ve made for you. I’ve decided to kneel before my wife, after all,” Hadis said in a tone that made it clear there would be no further rebuttal before turning on his heel.

He looked just as he had on the battlefield, when he had ordered that massacre. Jill could no longer see herself reflected in those gold eyes.



“YOU’RE kidding me! You ‘kneel before your wife’?! You fool of a husband! You won’t even talk to me...!” Jill was alone on her bed, lifting and then slamming her soft pillow down. She knew she was just venting her anger, but she couldn’t contain her frustration.

It was late at night. She hadn’t seen Hadis since the events earlier that day—he hadn’t even shown up for dinner. Despite the late hour, everyone was busy running around to evacuate the residents. Jill wasn’t permitted to take part in any of this work. Sphere had also been taken to a place where Hadis determined she could be kept safe.

...I have a bad feeling about this. I mean, how else am I supposed to feel?! Jill rolled to her side, still holding the pillow. She hadn’t put on her nightclothes in case something happened.

Whatever it was—the curse, the Goddess, the black spear—*something* was attacking them right now. If she believed what Hadis said, it could attach itself to any woman aged fourteen or older and control them. So Hadis’s plan was simple. First, he’d lock up all the women in the castle and then observe them.

...But the black spear was moving on its own, wasn’t it? In other words, it’s an embodiment of magic power and attaches itself to people, but it has a will of its

own, right?

A weapon with a will of its own had to be the Sacred Spear of the Goddess Kratos. And if that were true, then it made sense that she said that she was the Dragon Emperor's consort.

"The folk legend that the Goddess Kratos and the Dragon Emperor Rave were supposed to get married was true...? And I got dragged into the middle of it?"

Oh, come on!

Jill let out a long sigh.

But Jill was the one who had driven away that thing that had been clinging to Hadis. Now that she had gotten involved, that creature almost certainly saw her as the enemy.

I was too rash. Why can't I just take a few seconds to think before I act...?

"You don't even love me." His words haunted her.

That's true. Why did I interfere? All I had to do was save Sphere and watch Hadis get rid of that black thing. And yet...

There was only one conclusion that could be drawn from her actions.

Just calm down for a second... What's so good about him? He vomits up blood and collapses, and if all I want is the esteem of others and masculine dependability, then Prince Gerald would be better. Even though I hate him with a passion.

But Hadis's cooking was delicious. He made her apples cut into rabbits. Even though his words were harsh, he made Jill's wishes come true. He wanted her love. He wanted to become a real married couple, not for her to be his subordinate.

In other words...am I hoping for that to happen between us?

Jill had hoped that in this attempt at life, she might be able to find a love that was mutually helpful and supportive, without getting taken advantage of—even in these circumstances.

"...Come to think of it, I didn't thank the emperor for saving me."

Was his hand injury doing okay? Did he treat it properly? Jill started to feel restless.

The first thing she needed to do was talk to him. If she couldn't do that, then she would at least thank him. Resolved, Jill got up. If Hadis was already asleep, she would just leave.

Above all else, Jill wanted to make sure of her own feelings. She'd never be able to reach a conclusion otherwise.

Putting on her usual coat, Jill pushed open the large bedroom door, but there was already someone on the other side of it.

"Your Majesty?" asked Jill with wide eyes.

Hadis, gasping and going very still, looked just as surprised as Jill felt. It seemed as though he had just been standing behind the bedroom door.

"...What's wrong?" Jill asked.

"...Wh-What's wrong with *you*?" he retorted.

Rave suddenly flew out from behind Hadis and whacked him on the back of the head with his tail. "What do you think you're doing?! Isn't it a good thing that the little miss is awake? Go on, apologize!"

"Apologize...? I made the right call," Hadis stated.

"Never mind that, just apologize!" Rave insisted. "At a time like this, anything will do, so go apologize first! You've already got a handsome face, so just go with the flow and talk your way out of this!"

Well, you've just said that in front of me—now what?

But Hadis huffed and turned to the side. "I'm not sure if I agree with that opinion. I'm unimpressed."

"Your only redeeming feature is your face, so don't pretend to be respectable now!" Rave shouted.

"Excuse me, but I've always been respectable. So this isn't my fault."

"...Then why are you here?" Jill asked. Her brief question made Hadis's face flinch.

Rave, perched on Hadis's shoulder, sighed. "Even though you were *so* self-assured when you were talking back to me...this is how you get when we're in front of the little lady."

"Shut up, Rave... It's not my fault. I didn't say anything wrong. But..." Hadis's cold, emperor-like eyes suddenly softened. "...You...hating me...is... Well, what about *you*?!"

"Now you're lashing out..." lamented Rave.

"...Your Majesty, please show me your hand," Jill said.

Hadis's face ran through a loop of different facial expressions, and as they were getting nowhere, Jill reached out and took his left hand. There was a distinct burn mark on the palm that had grabbed the black spear to protect her.

"Did you treat it at all?" she asked.

"I-It doesn't really hurt, and...it'll be healed by tomorrow," he said meekly.

"That's not the issue. There's no way this thing doesn't hurt. And you have such beautiful hands..." Jill muttered quietly.

Hadis immediately stopped his restless fidgeting. "...Y-You're angry...aren't you?"

"We should at least apply ointment to it. And a bandage, just in case...please come inside." Jill opened the door and pulled his hand to lead him into the room, but Hadis didn't budge.

"...Please don't be nice to me now. I won't know what to do," Hadis eventually said in a feeble voice, which grated on Jill's nerves.

"In that case, please don't come over here to apologize half-heartedly, either."

"I-I didn't come here to apologize, I just..."

"Just what? If you're the emperor, then please stick to acting like an emperor... Besides, you're always going on about how you don't want me to hate you, you want me to like you, but you keep doing these confusing things...!" she snapped.

“C-Confuse? You? Hold on a second, I don’t understand what you—”

“Why do you ask me to fall in love with you? Stop messing around! Do you think I haven’t noticed? You’ve never even called me by my name!”

Hadis’s gold eyes were wide. Jill, breathing hard, felt tempted to click her tongue at him. A married couple in name only. It was difficult to tell which one of them wanted to cross that line.

Rave’s voice broke the silence from overhead. “Missy, that’s...”

“Rave, stop. It’s fine.”

The way Hadis spoke like he understood everything made Jill’s anger flare up. She had turned her face away, but she turned back to look at him, and after she saw his face, her anger fizzled out.

“...You’re right. Don’t fall in love with me. I won’t fall in love with you either... That would be the beginning of hell.”

Hadis took a step back from Jill. *That’s not a rejection*, she thought.

It was the end of his dream, and the beginning of reality.

“Your Majesty!” came the voice of a soldier. They heard several footsteps racing down the corridor. “Are you there?!”

Hadis turned his body towards them. “This late at night? What is it?”

“There’s a fire in the town of Beilburg. There are strong winds out, too, so the fire is spreading fast. Also, some of the civilians are saying that it’s because of the emperor’s curse. They’ve started a riot and are heading this way!”

“Leave the North Division to extinguish the fire, but keep the castle gates closed. Don’t let any of the women out,” Hadis ordered.

Jill looked up at the soldiers’ faces belatedly and realized that she had never seen them before. Gard was the one who had previously patrolled this floor. Why did they get here before him? Just before that thought could fully form in Jill’s mind, she realized that one of the soldiers was hiding a short sword behind his back.

“Your Majesty! These guys are—”

“Rave, take care of her.”

An invisible wall stood in the way of Jill’s outstretched hand. At the same time, faster than even Jill could perceive, Hadis drew a sword from his waist.

Before her mind could catch up, three of the soldiers fell to the ground, slashed.

“Ah! ...Th-The curse! It’s the curse of the emperor, after all!”

“D-Don’t worry about that, just run! We need to find the women first...!”

The remaining soldiers, trembling in fear, ran off.

Hadis did not pursue them, but muttered, with his sword still in hand, “They’re still alive, so you should have just taken them and ran away... Quite convenient to blame everything on the curse.”

“...Give her back.” One of the collapsed men had grabbed Hadis’s leg. Hadis looked down at him with a blank expression. “Don’t let...my wife...be sacrificed...”

“I thought I had explained that I was protecting them. Well, I suppose you have no reason to believe the words of a cursed emperor, do you?” Hadis asked curtly, shaking off the man’s hand.

Finally becoming aware of the commotion, Gard flew out from around the corner of the corridor. “Your Majesty, I just heard screaming...! A-Are these burglars?!”

“They’re civilians from town. They probably snuck in to take the women back... Is it true that the town is on fire?”

“Oh—y-yes! Also...the town’s residents are heading towards the castle... You might want to take Lady Jill and evacuate, Your Majesty.”

“I can’t do that. They’re after my head, aren’t they?” asked Hadis, smiling slightly.

Gard was speechless.

Hadis’s face was the face of an emperor—a face that entranced, inspired awe, and brought everyone who witnessed it to their knees.

“I’ve sent my wife to a safe location. It’s my job to stop the riot.”

“B-By ‘stop’...you mean...”

Hadis did not answer. The soles of his shoes trampled over the bloodstained floor as he walked away.

Jill, her face pale, screamed, “Your Majesty, wait! Gard, where are Camila and Zeke?! Please stop the emperor! If he doesn’t stop, the emperor will... Gard?”

Gard, with his lips pressed together in a tight line, checked the condition of the three bleeding men on the floor as if he couldn’t hear her voice. He took their weapons and tied them up off to the side of the corridor. Then, without even turning her way, he went after Hadis.

A voice spoke from behind her. “He can’t hear you, Missy. After all, you’re in the safest place in the world right now... Inside the magical barrier of the Dragon God Rave.”

Jill turned around. The shining Dragon God floated buoyantly in midair with a troubled look on his face. “I’m sorry. We can’t lose you, Missy.”

Chapter 5: The Dragon Emperor's Battle of Love and Logic

FLAMES rose from the town in the distance. The red blaze scorched the darkness of the night. Camila was more amazed than surprised by the fire, visible from where she stood on the rampart of the naval port. Zeke quietly scratched his head and then murmured, "Just like the captain predicted, huh?"

"...I wonder who Jill really is?"

It was blasphemous to harbor such doubts about someone you had decided was your master, but Camila couldn't help but wonder.

Jill had been attacked by a strange spear that evening, but she hadn't lost her wits or increased the number of guards around her—the first thing she had done afterwards was ask Camila and Zeke a question.

"If you were to start a fire to turn the floating city into a sea of flames, where would you start?" Camila repeated thoughtfully. "You don't think Jill is really the mastermind behind this, do you?"

"If she were, she probably wouldn't have made us run here and kept it from the emperor."

"Yo! Knights of that little monster," came a carefree voice as someone climbed up the rampart ladder. It was Hugo, the leader of the insurgents—now, shrewdly, a soldier of the Northern Division. "We caught the culprit of the arson you were worried about. As promised, we get the credit."

"What credit?!" Camila shot back. "The town's burning!"

"Now don't say that! You should be praising me for stopping nearly all the planned simultaneous arson. It was spooky, though. The way they had been planning to light the fires was almost the same way Marquess Beil had instructed us to do it. Maybe that little girl is right, and he's still alive."

Jill had also told Camila and Zeke that Marquess Beil might have laid a plan to

start fires, and that Hugo might know about it.

“There was just one location where we didn’t make it in time to put the fire out,” Hugo explained. “Plus, I guess these winds are making the fire spread quickly. I thought I’d be able to put it out before anyone died, but I got caught up with people panicking and starting a riot.”

Camila nodded. The fire was certainly a nuisance. But this fire was clearly an intentional trigger to whip up terror and discontent towards the emperor.

“Were there agitators?”

“Yeah, a group of shady-looking guys in black hoods. They’re being led this way to escape. This is fine work from the Northern Division—or it would be, if not for the group of civilians with axes and knives heading towards the castle. So, I’ve got to go there and protect the emperor.”

“You’re awfully calm,” said Zeke with a threatening edge to his voice. “You’re not going to betray us, right?”

Hugo simply shrugged. “I’m used to walking on a tightrope and wading through scenes of carnage. Besides, we also understand that the emperor threw us a bone. When I was appointed to the Northern Division, I really thought the emperor might be an idiot. There was barely anyone left in the Northern Division. It’s all my guys, ya know?”

Inwardly, Camila was surprised. High-class people were quick to scrap their promises. Particularly with promises made to commoners—most nobles probably didn’t even remember them.

And yet, the most noble man in the empire had kept his promise.

“It’s my chance to go back to a respectable life,” Hugo said. “I’ll work for my pay. Besides, my gut is telling me that defying the emperor would be one thing, but that I really shouldn’t turn against that little girl. A riot really broke out, and the town is about to turn into a sea of flames. It’s just too spooky! Can she see the future or something?”

“But we still weren’t able to stop it,” said Camila. The riot was still ongoing, and the fire had not been put out.

Hugo nodded. “That’s right. And stopping the riot doesn’t mean the town will be safe. The way the emperor deals with the riots might send him head-first down the path of becoming a brutal emperor. Well, I’m lookin’ forward to it!”

“Listen... You’re a member of the Northern Division, aren’t you? Have faith in the emperor,” said Camila.

“Let’s talk about that later,” said Zeke. “What about the crown prince of Kratos?”

Hugo’s expression changed. “We weren’t able to get any conclusive evidence that he has the black spear. But we’ve got witnesses in custody, like the prison guard and whatnot.”

“Understood,” Camila said. “We’ve received orders from the Dragon Consort, so we’ll take over from here. Please have the Northern Division protect the town.”

“Roger that. The people who were supposed to attack the city will put out its fires. Life sure is funny, eh?”

Hugo suddenly shifted his gaze. He saw the fire attempting to consume more of the town; people trying to put out the flames; and others gathering in the main street to the castle, trying to squash their fear rather than the fire by taking up weapons.

“Nothing comes from the emperor’s efforts. He’s just trying to protect the town, but it all backfires.”

“...That’s true,” said Camila. “If only that curse thing were gone...”

“But if he can turn things around now, he might become a surprisingly good emperor. This might be a history-changing moment. That’s why I’ll be keeping an eye on him until his dying day.” After Hugo had said all that he had wanted to say, his men called out to him, and he left.

Camila and Zeke watched Hugo depart in silence. Zeke spoke first. “The emperor is certainly mysterious in many ways, but do ‘history-changing moments’ really exist?”

“Stuff like that is only decided after the fact, by people who only see the

results.”

Zeke quickly nodded back, as if to say, “You have a point there.” Then, seeing his eyes sharpen, Camila got to her feet as well.

Camila and Zeke were keeping watch over a ship on the other side of the naval port, where the crown prince of the Kratos Kingdom was staying. That was surely where the people who had instigated the riot would be escaping to. Camila and Zeke would follow them and then sneak onto the ship—the ship carrying the crown prince of a foreign kingdom.

It was an outrageous strategy—the slightest mistake would mean failure. However, with the manpower needed to agitate the town and guard the crown prince, the ship was short-staffed. In the meantime, they would take control of the ship—the ship the crown prince of a foreign country would use to escape.

“And here they come. Just as the captain planned,” Zeke said.

“My goodness. Just who or what *is* Jill?” Camila repeated her earlier query.

Several shadows were running from town. As Hugo had reported, they were a suspicious group with their hoods pulled up to hide their appearance. They scanned the group at once, looking for the man the Dragon Consort was after. They had already seen him once before—they wouldn’t miss him now.

“He’s there!” said Camila. “Marquess Beil!”

“It’s not that I didn’t believe the captain, but...I really didn’t think he was alive.”

Camila drew her bow and lowered her voice even more. “And the crown prince is with him too? This can’t get any worse.”

“I guess that prince is surprisingly hardworking...” Zeke said dryly. “They’re going to set fire to the harbor.”

The group had started to prepare oil and torches, probably to prevent the civilians from escaping through the harbor. Then their plan was to escape in the chaos.

“I’m not changing my plans, even if the prince is with them. The Dragon Consort wants to make the deceased Marquess Beil come back to life, after all,”

Zeke muttered, drawing his long sword.

Camila grew exasperated by the excited tone in his voice. “We can’t let the crown prince get hurt. We’re here to arrest the people who whipped the town into a frenzy and their ringleader, Marquess Beil. We’re going to make it seem like His Highness the Prince has been deceived, and that we’re just protecting him, *okay*? If he takes Marquess Beil, this will all be for nothing. Don’t be so hostile.”

“Let’s go. If they start that fire, that settles it.”

“Listen to me!” Though Camila objected, she never took her eyes off the group.

If they set a fire here, it would look like the Knights of the Dragon Consort had come to stop the insurgents who had set fire to the town. They would be arresting the criminals in the act. As long as they were going to screw over the prince, though, trouble was sure to follow. But the fact that Jill had ordered them to do this meant that she was prepared to take responsibility for it.

Even though Jill was young, the Dragon Consort was going to go toe-to-toe with the crown prince of Kratos, a young man renowned as a child prodigy. She was incredible.

“I can’t listen to you,” said Zeke. “My intuition is telling me that the crown prince is the enemy.”

“That’s unusual. You never usually get flashes of intuition.”

“Maybe he killed me in a previous life.”

What nonsense, thought Camila. But she had no intention of letting the crown prince go either.

Camila drew the bow as far as it would go and smirked. “What a coincidence. I feel the same way.”



JILL could hear sounds. She could touch the floor and the door. But no one could see or hear her. She couldn’t use her magic, either.

Rave didn’t stop her from going out onto the castle balcony. The town was

burning, bathed in red. She could even hear screams from people who sounded nauseated from the bloodshed. It was a sign that the fighting had begun.

“Rave!” shouted Jill, turning around. “Please let me out!”

Rave was floating in the air a short distance away. “I can’t.”

“But if you don’t, the emperor will...!”

“If you’re worried about Hadis, don’t be. He could burn a town like this to the ground in an instant if he wanted to.”

“But if he does that, he’ll become even more isolated! Are you okay with that?!”

Rave didn’t answer. Jill bit her lip and put a hand against her forehead.

Calm down. Rave already knows what the emperor is going to try to do. If I’m going to persuade him, it won’t be like this...!

Jill had definitely secured a lead. Rave had tried to smooth things over between her and Hadis. He had probably done that to keep Hadis from ending up all alone.

“I sent Camila and Zeke to go find Marquess Beil,” she told him.

Rave’s small eyes blinked at her. Apparently, that was something he hadn’t expected. Jill quickly pressed on.

“The emperor said the curse wouldn’t happen if I was here, right? And anyway, the timing of this was too perfect. That black spear—if that were the cause of this, and it can only control women, then it couldn’t have controlled Marquess Beil and made him commit suicide. Also, I realized that Sphere had already been possessed when she went to confirm Marquess Beil’s death, and then I concluded that it was very likely the marquess’s death had been faked.”

“...Just how could you go to such lengths on such little information?”

“I knew Crown Prince Gerald would try something... Marquess Beil would disappear into all this chaos, and then he would either be killed by Gerald or flee. If I’m right, then if we show that Marquess Beil is alive, we can explain that this turmoil was not the emperor’s curse—it was orchestrated all along.”

“The people won’t want to listen, though. Either way, now that they brought that spear here, possessed girls like Lady Sphere are going to keep popping up, and things are going to spiral out of control.” Still floating in midair, Rave drifted inside the room from the terrace. Jill followed him.

“Then please, explain this situation to me. I’ll think of a way to deal with it! Is that black spear the Sacred Spear of the Goddess Kratos?”

“That’s right. It’s part of the Goddess, to be exact. It’s kind of like me. I suppose when Hadis made you his wife and strengthened his protections, she panicked when she wasn’t able to interfere anymore and staged this operation to test our strength.”

Jill hadn’t expected a response like that. She stopped in her tracks. Rave spun around to face her. “Is the story of the magic shield of the Rakia Mountains told in Kratos?” he asked.

“...I heard it from Camila and Zeke.”

“Then this will be quick. The Goddess Kratos, who can’t return to her original form, is trying to find a reincarnation of herself—a suitable human vessel—to come back. The condition is that the girl must be at least fourteen years old. But Kratos can control any girl fourteen or older, even if she isn’t a suitable vessel. Lady Sphere was an example of this. And you, Missy, are the magic shield that protects Hadis from the Goddess Kratos’s love.”

Huh? Jill thought, unintentionally knitting her brows.

“...Love?”

“Yes, love. Kratos is the Goddess of love. Kratos believes that you can do anything if you love someone. I’m the Dragon God of logic. I *don’t* think you can do anything just because you love someone.” Rave prompted Jill to sit down in a chair in the room. “The Goddess Kratos’s objective is to marry the Dragon Emperor.”

Jill put a finger to her forehead for a few seconds, pondering. “...So if you marry that spear, Rave, this problem will be solved?”

“Oh, a splendid attempt at getting rid of me! But unfortunately, her groom would be the Dragon Emperor—*Hadis*, that is. I’m the Dragon God, the

protector—or rather, the weapon—of the person who will become the Dragon Emperor.”

“Then why doesn’t the emperor just marry that spear?! If it’s a spear, can’t he just put it on display?!”

Rave smiled wryly at Jill’s crude solution. “That wouldn’t be the end of it. Kratos is deeply jealous. She’ll try to get all of Hadis to herself. She will destroy the Rave Empire, and if things go terribly, all the women on this continent will disappear.”

“Why is she so extreme?!” Jill cried.

“I told you, she thinks that as long as she loves someone, she can do anything! I should mention that if Hadis does accept the Goddess, I think you will die, Missy. Do you think she’ll be forgiving towards his former wife?”

Jill did not. Gods tended to be unsympathetic.

“...I agree with you that any respectable attempts at persuading her right now would be impossible,” she said. “But what have you got me locked up in a place like this for?”

“You’re right. I share those sentiments.”

“What?”

Rave cackled, and his expression suddenly transformed. Jill immediately braced herself.

“...I’m the Dragon God. The God of logic. That’s why I don’t make the same mistake twice. But *she’s* different. Hadis should know that. Missy, let’s review the legend. Do you know how to defeat an invading Goddess disguised as a black spear?”

“How to...?” Jill repeated blankly. “Well, in the legend, the Dragon Consort stabbed herself with the Heavenly Sword and sealed the Goddess... Wait!”

“The Goddess Kratos will always come after you. That’s the kind of being she is. She’ll never lose sight of the lady wearing the ring of the Dragon Consort.”

Jill looked at the gold ring without thinking.

So that's what he meant by a mark!

Suddenly, Rave's silhouette started to unravel. Jill gasped as she saw his smooth limbs transform into a glistening, shining silver blade. He didn't even have to tell her the name of that weapon. It was the Heavenly Sword of the Dragon Emperor. The only divine weapon that could fight against the Sacred Spear of the Goddess.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. You understand, don't you?"

Rave's voice echoed in Jill's head. The silver tip of the sword thrust at Jill's throat as if he were staring fixedly at her, although his small eyes were gone.

I see, Jill thought, smiling fearlessly as she hid the fact that a cold sweat had broken out on her back.

"You'll kill the Goddess, and me with her. Is that what you mean? Was that your intention from the beginning when you made me the Dragon Consort?"

"Telling you that it was not would be a lie. At the very least, I expected that this development might unfold."

Rave's self-deprecating attitude reminded Jill of the way Hadis had acted before. She could almost see Hadis turning away from her and telling her not to love him.

"Then why is he protecting me?"

The Dragon God of reason went silent. Jill pressed on. The only way out of this was through persuasion. "Protecting me in all this mess and using me as bait for the Goddess are totally contradictory."

"...Maybe he's protecting you to incite the Goddess's wrath."

"Well, he shouldn't have to worry about that, then, because I've already picked a fight with her. Please remove your magical barrier. If you do, the Goddess will come after me. There's no need to lock me up. So why won't you?"

"Why do you think?"

"I'm the one asking you that—"

Jill, suddenly struck with a flash of inspiration, stopped mid-question.

Hadis didn't understand love or romance. The Dragon Emperor had said that himself... It couldn't be...

"He's an idiot, that one, isn't he? There's no way he doesn't know that there's such an easy way to kill the Goddess right in front of him."

Jill was stunned into silence.

"I wonder what his plan is. He's got to know that he's toast if he fights the Sacred Spear without me. Why did he make you his bride in the first place? It had to be to use you as a shield and bait."

Rave was right—Hadis's behavior was strange. If he really had been intending to use Jill, he should use her now.

"He hasn't realized," said the Dragon God gently—Hadis's guardian, still in the form of a sword that could cut down everything. **"But I can't go along with that. I have to protect that idiot."**

"Then that's all the more reason to let me out of here! Please!" said Jill, leaping to her feet. The tip of the sword got even closer, as if he were on guard against her.

"I can't. I already know that you're not just an ordinary girl. If you really try to run away, chasing after you would be a huge ordeal. That's why I agreed to put you in my barrier."

"I won't run away—I'm going to repel the Goddess!"

"That's impossible. The Heavenly Sword of the Dragon Emperor is the only thing that can fight the Sacred Spear of the Goddess."

"Then why don't I just use you?!"

The sword recoiled ever so slightly, but he quickly came back with a rebuttal. **"Even that would be impossible. I mean, with your vast magic power, you could probably use me to some extent, but beyond that, the only way to win against the Goddess is to—"**

"Enough of this pompous lecture, let's go!" shouted Jill, who had lost her patience. She grabbed the Heavenly Sword. The blade of the sword struggled

insolently from side to side, as though he had been taken by surprise. “We don’t have time for this! This is so tedious! All I have to do is defeat the Goddess, don’t I? Then everything will be okay!”

“Th-That’s such a boorish conclusion!”

“I know the future!” Jill shouted.

The Heavenly Sword—Rave—immediately stopped moving.

“This won’t end with just the destruction of Beilburg. The crown prince faction is about to start conspiring with Prince Gerald and going after the emperor! If we don’t settle things here, war will eventually break out with Kratos. But everyone is going to continue to ostracize the emperor, even as he protects the kingdom. Are you going to let that future come to pass?!”

Rave did not respond.

“I’m going to stop this here. If you don’t believe me, that’s fine. If I lose to the Goddess, just stab me in the back before she does! But...” Jill added, looking at Rave in her hand, “cooperate with me until then.”

“...Are you really okay with that? We tried to use you as bait.”

“That was preferable to this!”

Rave went still again, as if taken aback. Jill was so frustrated that she unleashed her anger in earnest.

“Why won’t he use me until the end? That would be nothing new to me! He washed his hands of me so quickly! Why would he try to protect me? Why am I so angry, not because he used me as bait, but because he didn’t ask me for help?!”

With the silent Rave in her hand, Jill returned to the terrace.

The people of the town had gathered in front of the castle gate and were carrying logs—they were going to try to break through the gates. If they broke through the castle gates, there would be casualties. But if Jill acted now, there was still time.

“...Come on Missy, you can’t be—”

“Mad at the emperor? I am! He said she was a cunning woman, didn’t he? They’re so chummy.”

“N-No, he said that because he really hates her! She’s been bothering him since he was a kid!”

“They’ve known each other for a long time, haven’t they? Even the emperor said there was a fine line between love and hate. In fact, he never had his eyes on me at all.”

Rave chose to remain silent. It was the right decision. Anything he said would only irritate Jill further.

Ugh! Why did I decide not to fall in love first?

Jill still didn’t know whether Hadis was a partner she could love. But she liked him, so she was going to help him. She wouldn’t even let a god tell her that was wrong.

“...Listen, the reason why Hadis never called you by your name was so that the Goddess wouldn’t be able to sense your presence in the slightest.”

“So that’s why the Goddess came to kill me in person. I see.”

“He really did want to call you by your name. I did too.”

Neither Rave nor Hadis seemed to understand that by doing that, they had just made the Goddess even more upset. Men—be it gods or emperors—really were hopeless.

And Jill, who looked at their buffoonery with fondness, was probably just as hopeless.



“I have a father, mother, and siblings...but why aren’t they here?”

Hadis asked the Dragon God one day, the only being that had been by his side unwaveringly since he was born. The Dragon God replied, “I’m sorry, it’s my fault your life is like this. You are my reincarnation, so you are to pay the price for what I’ve done.”

Not wanting to make Rave apologize to him, Hadis decided to think: *This must*

be the Goddess's fault.

That curse, given the name of love, had taken everyone from him. Therefore, all he had to do was do something about the curse. No one was to blame.

I'll study hard so that, when the day comes that the curse is lifted, I can become an incredible emperor. I'll become strong enough to protect everyone from the Goddess. That is the meaning of my birth. I won't make my adoptive parent, whom no one else can see, cry.

The Goddess, who occasionally came without Rave's knowledge to see how Hadis was doing, smiled. "Do you think anyone will ever need you?" she asked in that seductive voice of hers. "Do you think someone will show up who will love you? You know the truth, don't you? Come on—look around and see for yourself. There's *no one*. I'm the only one who has ever, and who will ever, truly love you."

Rave chased her away and told Hadis not to listen to her. "It's okay. She won't come around anymore after you get a Dragon Consort. I'll be with you until then, so don't let her draw you in. Don't be swept away by love, and don't forget logic."

Hadis nodded. He put on a convincing smile, to not worry Rave.

Even though the first time Hadis met his father, he fell from the throne and begged him, "Please don't kill me!" Even though his brothers, frightened of him, would not look him in the eye. And even though his mother had slashed her own throat right in front of him, and the blood had splattered on his cheek... Hadis would deal with everything resolutely, like an emperor would. He would try to smile and say, "It's all right, I'm not giving up yet. I know there's a future for me."

But every time he would do this, the Goddess would smile too. "I love you," she whispered in his ear. "Even though no one else loves you, I alone love you. I'm never going to give you up to anyone. Okay? So have eyes only for me. If you do that, I'll make things easy for you. Because I know you. I'm the only one that knows the real you—the you that even the Dragon God doesn't know."

"I know that you really only pretend to believe in a promising future," she would tell him. "I know that you're a monster who took a little girl who said she

would make you happy and turned her into bait. No one but me can love you the way you are. Right? You've realized it too, haven't you? No matter what you do, you can never escape me."

Even if the Goddess didn't corporeally appear, she was always smiling gleefully, cloaked in the darkness that clung to the depths of Hadis's heart.

Yeah, you're right. In the end, you're the only one who loves me. Even my older brother really hates me. Nobody wants me. Nobody expects anything of me. Nobody even wants me alive.

"Tell them that I want you alive." Jill's words flashed forward in his mind.

Abruptly, like a bubble popping, Hadis's consciousness was pulled back to reality. He suddenly wondered why he had locked that girl up.

...Wait, it's because we can't lose her yet...right?

The current turmoil was almost certainly caused by the Sacred Spear of the Goddess, which had been physically carried here and protected by Prince Gerald, a descendant of the Goddess bloodline. As long as the Dragon Consort was here, the Goddess herself couldn't pass across the magic shield—the national border.

That was why the girl had been locked up inside Rave's magic barrier. But she was a smart girl—she had probably already realized that they were using her.

There goes any affection she might have had for you—she probably despises you now, whispered a corner of his mind. Of course, she would. And that was fine. Hadis had known from the beginning that this would happen. He couldn't help feeling silly, now, that he had ever, even for a moment, hoped for anything.

Still, he needed to confine her. He would never find someone as talented as her. Anyway, he needed to do something about the Goddess first. His judgment had not been wrong.

But if that was the case, why did he protect her small back—the back that had been targeted by the Sacred Spear of the Goddess?

Hadis had been holding Rave then—the Heavenly Sword of the Dragon

Emperor. If he had let the spear attack the girl and then cut it down, the goddess would have been rendered temporarily immobile, unless she were to be resurrected.

Even now, weren't there better ways to use the girl than having her be protected by Rave?

"...I don't get it at all."

This grumble, however, was drowned out by angry shouting. The townsfolk were trying to destroy the closed castle gates. Hadis looked down at them from the balcony, jutting out from the center of the castle, from which he had an unbroken view of the town.

"Our women have been stolen. Let's take them back," they cried out.

"The Dragon Emperor wants to destroy our country with his curse. Let's protect the country."

"Kill him, kill him. We don't need an emperor like that. No one wants him. Die, die."

But I'm the Dragon Emperor. Without me, the empire will lose the divine protection of the Dragon God and be overrun by the Goddess. If that happens, Rave will definitely try to save the country, even if that means losing his divinity...

Hadis understood this, but a voice muttered from somewhere in his mind: *Let's just kill them all.*

No matter how Hadis acted, he was still the Dragon Emperor. He was still the emperor. In that case, surely it didn't matter how he acted. If they said they didn't need him, then he wouldn't need them either. What would be so wrong with killing them in that scenario?

"Rave, how long should I keep pretending like I believe in the future?"

Hadis was so sure that he had said that for the last time when he found his consort.

"...How unfortunate." Suddenly, a grim smile appeared on Hadis's face. He smiled to himself, and to the country and people that his future self would

subdue.

“Oi, Your Majesty! I can’t believe you’re still here!” Hugo called.

“Pull back the Northern Division,” Hadis ordered. “I’ll be the only one remaining in the castle.”

“Huh?” asked Hugo, who couldn’t totally rid himself of his irreverent attitude. He looked suspicious. Gard had probably asked him to come because Hadis hadn’t moved.

I can’t get them involved, Hadis suddenly thought. It sounded like a fragment of his conscience. *That’s right. I have to stand until the bitter end—even if I’m all alone.*

Loved by no one, loving no one, until the day he killed the Goddess.

“Move everyone to the naval port...” Hadis said. “The townsfolk probably won’t go after the soldiers.”

And so, to kill the Goddess, he would use *her* as bait—but if he did that, what would happen to her?

My chest hurts, thought Hadis. Now that he thought about it, he hadn’t drunk any of his nourishing medical decoction that day, and it was already past his bedtime. He was sure to be in terrible shape the next day. But compared to the people who were about to lose their lives, Hadis’s agony was surely nothing.

“Oi, hold on a sec. What about you, then?” Hugo asked.

“It doesn’t matter. Just leave.”

There was the sound of a massive impact. It was the sound of the castle gate being broken. Hadis closed his eyes, and then opened them again. This was the end.

There was no way to stop them now. If there was a curse, then this reality was it.

“I’m a monster,” Hadis muttered to himself, and then he remembered...

Hadn’t he said that very recently?

That’s right. When the ship was attacked. And then that girl said...

“I said I’d make you happy, didn’t I?”

Suddenly, a loud sound rang out from the castle bell tower.

Hadis’s eyes widened.

The tranquil tolling of the bell blew away the heavy, stagnant air. It echoed across the entire town, drowning out the chaos and hateful shouts. It was the echo of one’s spirit, and it seemed to shout, “Don’t make this mistake! Come back to your senses!”

A beautiful voice rang out that rattled Hadis’s eardrums and shook his heart.

“Come out, Goddess Kratos!”

The voice was so loud, it even drowned out the sound of the bell.

“Oi, oi,” said Hugo, taking a step forward. The fighting, the shouting—everything came to a standstill as everyone looked up at her. They saw a small body with hair fluttering in the hot wind. Her violet eyes were determined, unwavering.

The person standing on top of the bell tower was supposed to be nothing more than a girl.

“I am Jill Cervel. I am the true consort of the Dragon Emperor! Do not burn the town! Do not curse the women! The one you really have business with is me and me alone!” Jill cried out into the night, brandishing the Heavenly Sword of the Dragon Emperor. “Hadis Teos Rave is mine! If you want to steal him from me, face me head-on! I’m not going to hand him over to you!”

That’s right... Back then...

She had made a vow that she was going to protect, of all people, the Dragon Emperor.



AFTER hearing Jill’s declaration, Rave was the first to shout, **“Hold on, Missy! What do you think you’re doing, picking a fight from here?!”**

“Now everyone will know that everything—the arson, the emperor’s curse—is the Goddess’s fault!” Jill proclaimed.

“You can’t be serious!” Rave cried, sounding miserable.

Jill tightened her grip on Rave—on the Heavenly Sword—and stared out at the harbor. She was certain that the Goddess would come. There was no way a woman who was revered as a goddess wouldn’t get angry when someone else claimed the man she wanted as their own.

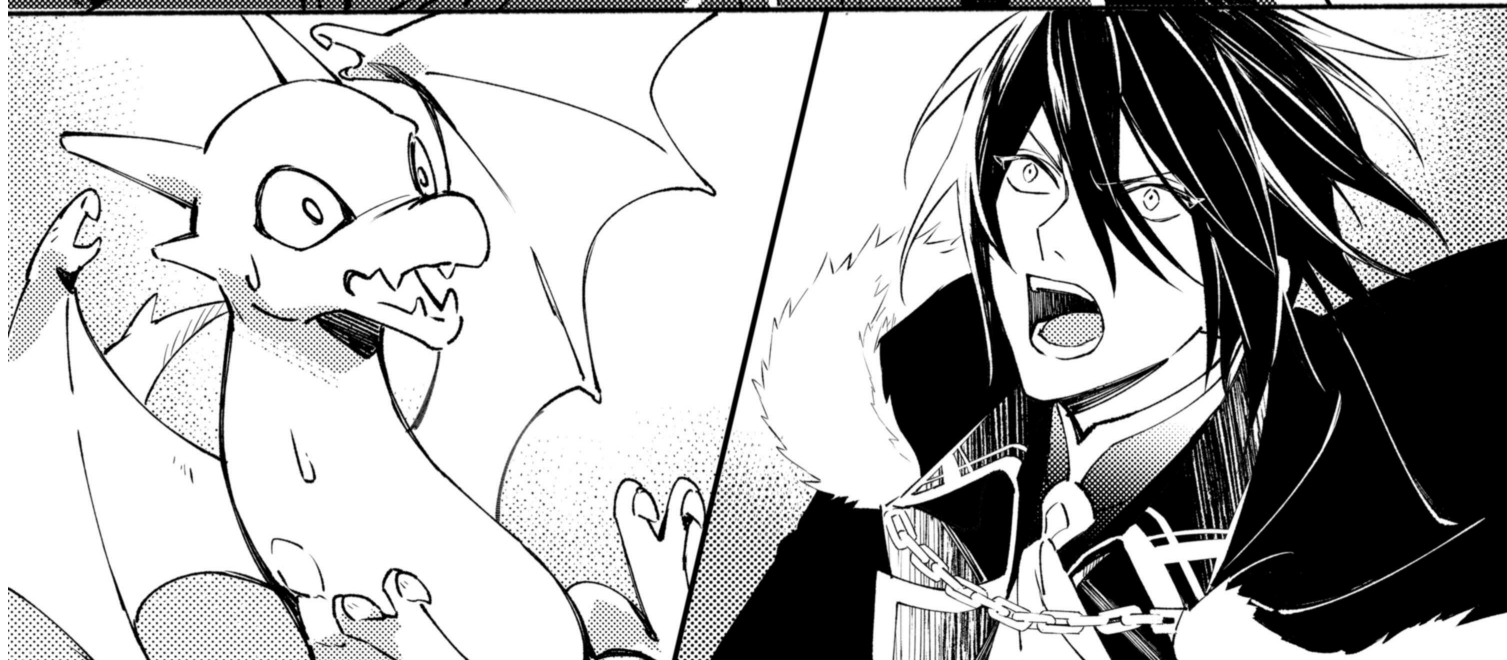
As if right on cue, something flew upward in a straight line from the harbor.

“This is going to be really tough for her too! And you’re not the true wielder. I can’t unleash my true potential, so you’ve got a few minutes at most!”

“I know!”

Jill focused on the black spear soaring right at her, piercing through the clouds.

A voice rang out from below her. It was Hadis, and his expression had changed. “Why are you there?! What the hell are you doing, Rave?!”



“Be quiet! The trophy should just wait there quietly!” she shouted down at him.

“Tr-Trophy?! You don’t mean me, do you?! I’m the emperor!”

“Then do what an emperor ought to do! I don’t care if she’s a goddess or not, don’t let that strange woman deceive you! What happened to the happy family plan?!” Jill snapped back at Hadis, whose eyes were wide with astonishment and confusion. “You’re a stronger man than I am, so see it through to the end!”

“—Jill!”

Oh, so you remember my name? Jill inadvertently smiled, but the black spear was already right in front of her.

She stopped the spearhead with the blade of the Heavenly Sword. An explosion erupted from the clashing magic power, and the light emitted from the bell-tower steeple illuminated the entire town. Jill kicked off the roof and flew away. Just as she had expected, the black spear pursued her.

She seriously wants me dead.

Jill didn’t want to cause damage to the town. She tried to ascend, but the spear overtook her from the side. She clicked her tongue. The spear was faster than she was.

The spear had risen above her. Just as Jill thought it might come soaring back down, the spear split into several pieces.

The spears came showering down like stars, aiming straight for Jill’s heart. She was able to block them using the Heavenly Sword’s blade and her magic power, but she was overpowered and tumbled backwards.

Perhaps impatient that she couldn’t totally overpower Jill, the spear split into more spears at an incredible rate. There was enough to blanket the entire town. Jill made a frustrated noise, pushed her magic to its maximum power, and cast a magical barrier that covered the town.

The spears rained down over the town and exploded in the sky. They looked like fireworks.

Everyone lowered their weapons and looked up at the spectacle.

That's right, take a good look. This is your enemy, not the emperor. The curse doesn't exist. What does exist is a meddling goddess of love. Realize that you're being attacked by a clearly visible enemy!

The number of spears was dwindling. Perhaps the Goddess had given up using a single point of attack—all the spears surrounded Jill and attacked her in unison. Jill adjusted her grip on the sword and flew around the sky, knocking the spears down one after the other. Each time she did, her magic power fell to the ground like fragments of stardust.

“A-Aren’t you a little too powerful, Missy...?”

“But I’m rapidly exhausting my magic power. Unless I hit her main body... I guess I have no choice.” Jill twirled the Heavenly Sword into an underhand grip, and then immediately threw it like a javelin.

She heard Rave scream as he flew through the air. Just as she planned, the black spear took advantage of the opening and hurled itself at her, now unarmed, in one piece.

“Jill!” Hadis cried, his face as white as a sheet. It was actually a comforting sound.

Jill caught the spear that had been plunging towards her heart with both hands. The corners of her mouth curled upwards. “Nice to see you again. Though I don’t know if you remember me,” she said, not expecting an answer.

Slowly, however, a thought crept into her mind from her hands. **“WhY—dO yOu—rEmeMbeR?”**

Jill’s eyes opened wide, but at the same time, her lingering suspicion was cleared up.

Why had time rewind for Jill? It was the Goddess. The Goddess’s power had caused time to rewind. And from the way she had phrased the question, it seemed as though the Goddess had not planned for it to happen, either.

“WhY—wHy did hE mAke yOu, of aLl peOple, the DraGon ConSort?!”

Jill suddenly felt the desire to laugh. Now that she thought about it, this situation was the spitting image of that night.

Now, from this moment onward, I'll start over. I won't let him be taken from me this time.

"I can't believe that a goddess, of all things, would get so mad with jealousy that you'd come all the way across an ocean."

"GiVe hlm bAck, GiVe hlm bAck, GiVe hlm bAck, GiVe hlm bAck to MEEEE!"

"He's not yours in the first place!" Jill shouted, lifting the resisting spear with both of her hands and imbuing them with power.

The magic power crackled and sparked around them like flashes of lightning. As the spear resisted, her cries grew even louder.

"I'm tHe oNly oNe thAt mAn LoVes!"

With a flash of annoyance, Jill put all her power into the hands that held onto the spear.

"Give me a break! The person he's going to love is *me*!" With a loud *snap*, the black spear broke right in the middle. "Never put your hands on someone's husband ever again!"

With a mighty wind up, Jill launched the broken spear across the sea, back towards the Kratos Kingdom. The spear, tearing through the darkness of the night, glowed in the distance like a star before vanishing.

Chest heaving with her heavy breaths, Jill growled, "This is why...a woman's jealousy...is...!"

Just then, Jill started to feel dizzy, but it was too late.

Crap, I used too much magic power.

In her anger, Jill had miscalculated. The energy immediately drained from her entire body, and she fell. She managed to move her eyes around, at least, but when she did, she gasped.

Obsidian eyes held her gaze. Gerald, his eyes the same color as that black spear, flew at Jill and caught her in midair.

"Incredible. I'm taking you home with me after all. My little sister will probably accept you too."

“...!” Jill wanted to punch him, but her body wouldn’t move. Then an arrow grazed the side of Gerald’s face.

“Jill!”

It was Camila. Beside her, Zeke jumped off the rampart of the naval port with a large sword in his hands. “What are you doing?!”

Gerald turned to look at them. *No*, Jill tried to shout, but no sound came out.

As Gerald’s obsidian eyes flashed, he threw Zeke to the side with a cluster of magic power. Seeing her subordinate smash against a wall, Jill tried to reach out her hand to him, but she couldn’t.

“...How about in exchange for letting these two live?” asked Gerald with a smile, perhaps noticing Jill’s feeble attempts to try to save them.

Damn it, move! If you can’t move, it’s going to happen again. Everyone’s going to...

But her body wouldn’t react. Just when she thought she had finally won...

“If you obey me,” Gerald said in a sweet voice, “I can do at least that much—”

Then, suddenly, Gerald looked up. The next moment, he was hit from behind with an enormous amount of magic power, and his body went flying through the air.

As Jill’s body was gently caught from behind, she blinked in confusion. She was carefully carried back down to earth, and then the first thing that came into her vision was the white Dragon God.

“Sup, Missy. Thanks so much for that stupendous chucking earlier.”

“Rave, talk to her later.”

At that quiet voice, the Dragon God transformed into the Heavenly Sword of the Dragon Emperor.

A shadow fell upon them from above, covering the sword’s brilliance. It was Gerald. Jill’s sluggish tongue was finally able to move enough for her to shout, “Your Majesty!”

Holding Jill with his right hand and the Heavenly Sword with his left, Hadis

sent Gerald's spear flying back without even the twitch of an eyebrow. Then a ferocious sword and spear battle unfolded.

Jill managed to follow the exchange of blows between Hadis and Gerald with her eyes, but everyone in the surrounding area were probably only seeing blast waves. Jill was grateful the fight was unfolding in the fountain plaza, but no one could get close.

Hadis was holding Jill close with one arm and parrying all of Gerald's attacks with the other. In fact, he was beginning to turn the tides and apply pressure himself. The only reason Jill could feel no pleasure in this was because of the look on Hadis's face.

It wasn't just a blank expression—it was as if the light had been snuffed from his eyes, and he seemed to be holding something back.

Wh-Why does he look like that in the middle of a fight?

Gerald clicked his tongue in annoyance. The black spear Gerald wielded—whether it was an imitation of the Sacred Spear or the divine weapon of legend—was no ordinary weapon once it had been imbued with Gerald's magic power. But he was going up against the Heavenly Sword.

Unsurprisingly, the spear was starting to wear down.

Gerald looked likely to put all his energy into the fight. He took a large step forward. Hadis drew his chin back slightly and then, suddenly, opened his golden eyes wide.

At that moment, Gerald was blown back by a gust of wind and fell with both hands on the ground. But he immediately reached out for the spear that had tumbled away from him—and then he froze.

Gerald looked up from behind his cracked glasses, the Heavenly Sword pointed at his throat. "...Are you going to declare war on our kingdom, Your Majesty?" Gerald asked.

"I can't believe it. It just..." Hadis suddenly turned his face away, and his shoulders started to shake. Jill and Gerald blinked in surprise. "I-It broke... The spear of the Goddess..."

“...Your Majesty?”

“I h-hope the broken Goddess g-gets well soon,” Hadis said, covering his mouth and desperately trying to suppress his laughter.

Jill’s face was blank with shock.

No way—the thing he had been trying to hold back was his laughter?

Even Rave, who had returned to his original form, shook and turned his head away. “D-Don’t say it like that,” said Rave between chuckles. “Q-Quit it—I’m not gonna be able to stop laughing, and I was trying too hard to keep it in... B-Broken Goddess... A goddess, *snapped*, right down the middle...!”

“R-Rave! Don’t...laugh! I-It’s awful! Th-The Goddess broke—it’s an emergency situation! I guess... I guess the Goddess can actually be broken, huh...?!”

“You dare insult our kingdom’s Goddess?!” shouted Gerald, an angry vein bulging on his forehead. He tried to get to his feet, but when Rave immediately changed back into the Heavenly Sword and thrust the point back at him, he stopped.

“Tell her to take care of herself,” Hadis said. “Next time, I won’t use my wife as bait. I will be her opponent.”

Gerald glared back silently.

“I’ll invite your goddess to the wedding,” Hadis sneered. “She can come—if she can make it in her broken state, that is.”

Muscles were twitching in Gerald’s face. His body started to float in the air. It wasn’t just Gerald, either—several people at the naval port also started floating in the air. These were the people who had come from the Kratos Kingdom.

“We’ll take the one who caused this disturbance into custody, so rest easy and scurry home to your kingdom,” Hadis said. “Since it was a personal visit, you won’t need us to see you off, right?”

“Wh-What...?” Gerald croaked.

“I told you, didn’t I? You and I are not on the same level.”

Gerald’s cheeks convulsed in anger. Hadis swung the Heavenly Sword in a

wide arc. The resulting blast of wind blew away the people floating in midair, sending them past the horizon of the sky that was just breaking with the light of dawn.

“...Um... Where are they going?” Jill asked.

“They’ll probably fall near the peak of the Rakia Mountains,” Hadis replied casually.

But at that time of year, the Rakia Mountains would be covered in snow.

Surely, they’ll freeze and die...

If the crown prince of Kratos, who had secretly entered the Rave Empire, were to go missing, the fallout would be awful... But Gerald did have magic power, after all, so Jill decided to assume he would be fine.

As Jill felt a measure of relief, she started to hear commotion around her.

The townspeople poked their heads out of hiding, nervously looking at her. Camila was heading in her direction, dragging the bewildered-looking Marquess Beil. Zeke was standing too, his arm around Gard’s shoulder. The Northern Division, who had been diligently working to put out the fires, were smiling and waving up at them.

“Some people were injured, but there were no deaths,” Hadis said. “You are incredible.”

“I-I’m not, really...” Jill said.

“Nonsense. Everyone pulled themselves together because they saw you protecting the town from the Goddess,” said Hadis, putting Jill on the ground.

Then, before anyone else could do anything, he went down on one knee in front of Jill. “I want you to marry me.”

Jill was wide-eyed, marveling at his sincere and heartfelt words. His beautiful, gold eyes saw nothing but her.

“You probably expect that I have more to say. But my heart is so full right now, I can’t say anything else,” Hadis admitted, tilting his head and grinning, looking slightly embarrassed.

The pleasant sea breeze that seemed to have brushed the dark night away blew against his face—a face that looked incredibly beautiful and radiant. Yes, it resembled the silver magic power Jill had seen when she had looked up at him on the battlefield in that alternate timeline.

“Please say something, Jill.”

Hearing him call her by her name with such adoration, Jill took a deep breath.

Jill had made the decision not to fall in love first. But now, she had no choice but to admit it. After all, her heart raced loudly, even though she was trying to calm down; she wanted to know if the smile he was giving her was genuine; and she was thrilled just because he had called her by her name.

And the emperor...feels the same, doesn't he?

Maybe the feelings were mutual. As Jill considered this, her cheeks turned red, and her heart began to swell. But she still thought it was awful of Hadis to use her as bait without telling her, so she wanted to get the tiniest measure of revenge.

Jill turned her face away slightly, like she was frustrated, so that he wouldn't be able to see that her heart was about to jump out of her chest as she spilled her feelings:

“...T-To be honest...I want to break up.”

But I love—

But before Jill could say the rest, the heart of the Dragon Emperor, a man weak in both body and spirit, stopped beating.

Epilogue

“I thought I was going to die,” Hadis muttered from the bed. “No, I did die. You killed the Dragon Emperor. That’s a crime. You turned your blade against the emperor...”

“I apologized, didn’t I? Besides, it’s partially your own fault for stopping your heart without listening until the end of my answer.”

“Then you love me?!”

“How many times are you going to ask me that? I already told you how I feel, didn’t I?” asked Jill, glowering and looking exasperated.

Hadis’s eyes darted around the room. “Y-You did say, ‘Your Majesty, I love you, so please open your eyes.’ I heard it in a field of flowers... But I feel like it was just an auditory hallucination conjured up by my subconscious...”

“That’s true. I did tell you that I love you. But I think you hallucinated the field of flowers.”

“Really?! I didn’t hallucinate what you said?! You love me?!”

“How many times a day am I going to have to...?” Jill grumbled, trailing off. “Please don’t look at me like that. Yes, yes. I love you.”

“You’re doing it again?” Rave’s head popped out from the fruit basket that had been placed beside the bed. He dexterously put an apple onto his head, moved it into a plate, and began biting into it. Where the food Rave ate actually went was a far too mind-boggling puzzle for Jill to consider.

“But Rave, Jill is being so cold!” Hadis whined. “The books I read didn’t say it would be like this!”

“It’s about time you learned that books are different from reality.”

“But...I’m plagued with nightmares every night of Jill rejecting me...!”

“Yeah... You’ve been hugging me so tightly in the middle of the night, Your

Majesty. It hurts, so I want you to stop,” Jill said.

“See?! See how she phrased that? Something’s not right! Do you really, *really* love me?!”

“Then what about you?” Jill asked.

“Huh?!” All the momentum Hadis had built up immediately puttered out, and he started getting flustered. “W-Well... Of... Of course, I... I...lo...”

Unable to speak—almost as if the word had gotten caught in his throat—Hadis fidgeted and blinked restlessly. He threw the duvet over his head and curled up in a ball.

“...I’m thinking about how to phrase it,” came Hadis’s voice. “A cool way to phrase it.”

Rave, chewing on his apple, looked up at Jill. “He’s hopeless. Sorry, Missy.”

“It’s fine. His behavior is very easy to understand, and with him acting like this, it seems like he’ll be harmless for a little while, which is a relief.”

“That’s an awful way of phrasing that! It hurts me as a man...” said Hadis, poking out just his face from the duvet. He seemed to be getting sulky, so Jill decided to change the subject. She didn’t want him to start going on about how he could confess his love too.

Jill already knew that Hadis was a man who could do anything he put his mind to. “This is really tasty, Your Majesty. Let’s have some together.” The bedroom was filled with get-well gifts. Jill picked one and offered it to Hadis. “There are so many gifts, aren’t there? All the townsfolk are wishing for your swift recovery, Your Majesty.”

“Yeah,” added Rave. “This idiot got rejected in public view in spectacular fashion, and then his heart stopped. He seems to be getting a *lot* of sympathy. They’ve found out you’ve got a weak constitution, and there’s a rumor going around that if you’re not nice to the emperor, he’ll die of a sudden heart attack.”

“And the weather’s going to be getting colder, so someone even gave you a shawl so that you won’t catch a cold,” said Jill, spotting the shawl among the

get-well gifts.

Hadis had sat back up, so Jill wrapped the shawl around his shoulders. He blinked, looking surprised, but he smiled softly. "...I see. They're worried about my health..."

"Isn't it great? They now understand that the curse wasn't your fault, either," Jill smiled.

Beilburg had not burned to the ground. The Northern Division and the townsfolk were working together to help repair the town. The women who'd been locked up in the castle had all been freed, and they came to understand that the measure had been taken to protect them from the Goddess's curse. Sphere was also feeling better, and she would be coming with them to the imperial capital as Jill's private tutor.

It may have just been Beilburg that had changed, but it was an important step. Coupled with the fact that Marquess Beil was still alive, there had been calls that the series of strange deaths of the crown princes may have been some sort of plot. Although Marquess Beil himself couldn't escape being stripped of his power, Sphere declared that, in appreciation for the emperor's amnesty, the Beil family would support Hadis from now on.

I hope things will change for the better, even if it's little by little.

The confrontation with Kratos was the only thing Jill couldn't change, but the extent of the conflict had been relatively private. The outbreak of war, at least, had been avoided.

"Yeah... Wait, no it's not," said Hadis, snapping back to his senses mid-sentence. "It's weird. It's weird that they're all supporting me after I was rejected."

Rave smiled. "Don't you know? What the townsfolk want right now is for His Majesty the Emperor to marry Jill as quickly as possible and settle down."

"...I'm happy for their support, but this emperor thinks that it's a bit strange that that's the very first thing the people demand..."

"Well, when you go to the imperial capital, there won't be people saying things like that anymore, so it's fine."

Word had finally arrived the day before that a party from the imperial capital was coming down to retrieve them. Jill couldn't help but think they had been waiting for the conclusion of the Beilburg affair.

"...I wonder if my brother will be upset about my relationship with you," Hadis muttered.

"It's fine. As long as I have this ring, I'm your wife."

Regardless of what others thought of her, Jill was the Dragon Consort. Even though it had been none other than Hadis who'd previously told her that, he blinked, stunned.

"...You're too powerful. I'm starting to think that this might be a dream after all, in more ways than one," he said.

"Why are you making this so complicated?"

"Because I can't believe that you love me..." Hadis peered at Jill's composed face. She looked back into his eyes.

"You can't see it?" she asked.

"...I feel like...I can...but also...I can't.... I mean, you broke the Goddess! Would you go that far for a guy you didn't even love? There's no way! ...Oh! Don't tell me you did that to toy with me...?!"

"Your Majesty, it's almost time for your medicine," she said coolly.

"I knew it! That's an even colder reply than before!"

That was true. Jill was being very careful about her behavior to avoid spoiling him.

"Rave, what do you think? Do you think that Jill really loves me?" Hadis asked.

"I can't be here for this ridiculousness," Rave sighed. "I'm going to eat outside. Take care of this idiot for me."

"You..." Hadis stammered. "If you abandon me, I'll snap you in two like the Sacred Spear of the Goddess!"

"You can't break me. I'm the Dragon God of logic. I won't be defeated by something so illogical. I'm not like the Goddess, who can be broken by love."

Rave's verbal lashing had come from an unexpected direction. Jill froze.

The ever-perceptive Hadis looked from the window where Rave had vanished outside over to Jill. She prayed he couldn't see the twitch in her cheek as her veneer of composure crumbled. But the golden eyes continued to observe Jill, trying to uncover every last piece of her.

"....."

"....."

"Um... Your Majesty, I think you should probably get some rest—"

"Jill. You were mad at me for not calling you by your name. But maybe you don't call me by my name for the same reason—so that you would never fall in love with me."

This was not a man who would pass up any opening left by Jill, even if it was just to take the smallest breath.

"I see," Hadis murmured. "I'm starting to feel a little bit more confident. Yeah. You love me, and I love you. You love me. I love you. You love—"

"I-I get it, so please stop saying it over and over— AH!"

Just as Jill had been trying to shut Hadis up, he had suddenly lifted her into the air. As he sat on the bed, he lightly placed her on his lap.

"Do you love me?" Hadis stared at Jill with hopeful eyes.

Jill looked down. His tone was so sweet that she couldn't brush it off with, "You're asking that again?"

"Y-You're persistent, Your Majesty."

"Hmm... You love me so much that you can't say it now, even though you said it before?"

"You know what you're doing, Your Majesty!"

It wasn't something a grown man would do to a child.

When Jill grabbed a large pillow nearby and tried in vain to block out his beautiful face, Hadis laughed, and after pushing it away, he ended up hugging Jill from behind.

“Come *on*, Your Majesty! If you fool around too much, I’ll get really upset!”

“This is something I keep from Rave... But it’s something I want you to know.” His voice was lower and colder than usual. Jill’s heart thudded. “I don’t think I believe in the future all that much. The happy family plan is just a pipe dream. I don’t want to do what the Goddess wants. And I don’t want to make Rave sad. So, I’m just trying to act like a great emperor. I always wonder if I might end up an emperor who was all talk and never accomplished anything.”

Hadis held Jill tighter, as if he were frightened.

“I don’t believe in myself. But I can’t tell Rave about this.”

Jill’s heart fluttered as he exposed the weakness hidden beneath his brilliance.

And only to me...

Jill probably should have felt angry or sad, but when she thought that this was a privilege for no one but her, the resulting sweet love-drunkenness made her feel restless.

Ah, this is why love is selfish!



“Even though I knew this, I got you involved in my problems,” he said. “And I even want you to help me. I’m awful.”

“Th-That’s not true! You’re working really hard! It’s normal to feel anxious.”

“But I love you.”

A small squeak escaped Jill’s throat. She had been trying to look over her shoulder at him, but she quickly snapped her head forward again.

Hadis held her even tighter. “...I don’t want you to leave me. When I think about you running off, I just don’t know what I’d do.”

“I-I’m not planning on running off!”

“But don’t look at my face. I’m not decent... I want to look cool in front of the girl I love.”

Jill wished he wouldn’t whisper so heartbreakingly in that hoarse voice. Her heart rate was already going wild. Perhaps he was toying with her heart like she had toyed with his.

Don’t suddenly get serious about a ten-year-old! Or are those your true feelings?! Is that your real self?! It almost slips my mind all the time, but he’s too capable for his own good.

“But to be honest...recently I’ve been unsure how to feel about having these sorts of feelings for a ten-year-old.”

And he was just as good as ever at immediately ruining the moment. But now Jill was feeling a little relieved. If he had carried on like that, she would have been killed from the agony.

“That’s right! Then let’s end today on that note,” she said at once.

“But I do love you, and I want you to tell me that you love me too...”

Hadis brought it up again, having been spoiled by her slight faintheartedness. Now, Jill couldn’t help but think that Hadis having zero romantic intelligence was a terrible lie.

Jill chided him, desperately feigning her own composure. “L-Look, regardless of what you say...you’re an adult, Your Majesty!”

“Adults are children who have just gotten older.”

“Please just do your best without making excuses like that! I expect great things from you, Your Majesty...!”

“It makes me feel weak when you say that. But there are times when I’m glad that you’re a child. I can watch you every second as you become more beautiful. But I am a little worried. You’re going to become a great beauty, so I’ll definitely get impatient. Even now, you’re so cute I don’t know whether I can control myself.”

“*Ugh,*” said Jill, her cheeks turning red. Whenever the words “beautiful,” “a beauty,” or “cute” came out of that man’s mouth, she started feeling dizzy and tripping over her words.

“But if you tell me that you love me, I’ll be patient and wait.” Hadis rested his chin on Jill’s shoulder and went perfectly still. His posture was that of complete patience.

What is this sweet torture? Is this another battle? Love really is war! No! I can’t tell him how I feel now! This is all too much!

She would wriggle her way out of this and then run! She shouldn’t engage in an unwinnable battle. Even though she didn’t know what “winning” or “losing” meant in this situation.

“I’m already done for the day! I’ve just decided that I’m only going to say it three times a day—morning, noon, and night!” she declared.

“So, I don’t have to wait? You’re surprisingly aggressive. What do I do now?”

“No! I’ll say it again three times tomorrow, so please restrain yourself!”

“No, I want it now. If you don’t say it now, you won’t be off the hook. I learned a thing or two, you know.”

“I-I decided not to spoil you, Your Majesty! There’s the age difference too, and you should think more carefully about how your actions will appear in the eyes of everyone else before you—”

Before Jill could perceive what was happening, their lips were pressed together, like it was the natural next step in their conversation. It was probably

because Hadis had just eaten a confectionery earlier, but...his lips were sweet.

Sweeter than any confectionery in the entire world.

As Jill sat there frozen, unable to speak, Hadis said with a serious look on his face, “So it’s okay if no one sees. You’re too adorable.”



RAVE sighed as he listened to the sound of a loud, reverberating slap and subsequent yelling voices.

“They can’t beat the Goddess without love. And really, they’re both a bit odd.”

But that was fine, because humans were not creatures that could be comprehended with logic.

That was why Rave would watch over them.

And this town, and the people, and the ocean, and the kingdom, and the earth, and the sky. As long as the logic that is love lived on.

Afterword

HELLO, nice to meet you or perhaps, see you again. My name is Sarasa Nagase.

Thank you for picking up my work. This is the novelization of a story I posted online. I've made some revisions for the novelization. Whether you have supported me since the original web version, or this is your first time reading my work, I hope you enjoy this chronicle of our main character—a tomboyish, overpowered young lady—as she struggles, almost physically, to avert our apron-wearing hero's fall to evil.

To Mitsuya Fuji, who drew the illustrations, including the amazingly cool depictions of Jill and Hadis, I'd like to extend my sincere thanks. I would also like to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who worked on this book, including the staff, everyone from the editing department, the designer, the proofreader, and everyone from the printing office.

I'd also like to thank everyone who has read this book. Because of your support, plans to turn this story into a manga are currently underway. I'm going to work hard to bring you all stories that you will hopefully find at least a little interesting, so I hope you'll continue to support Jill and the rest of the gang.

I hope to see you again.



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I REJECT THESE
HAPPY-BAD ENDINGS!**

STORY BY: IOTA AIUE
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After being dumped by her fiancé and expelled from the kingdom, Laetitia decides to live her life in leisure, cooking for cute and fluffy mythical creatures!



THE WEAKEST MANGA VILLAINESS WANTS HER FREEDOM!

STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



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