

Sarasa Nagase 9  
ILLUSTRATION BY  
Mai Murasaki



I'm the  
**VILLAINESS,**  
so I'm Taming



9

**Sarasa Nagase**

ILLUSTRATION BY  
**Mai Murasaki**

  
New York

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I'M THE VILLAINESS, SO I'M TAMING THE FINAL BOSS, Vol. 9

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AKUYAKU REIJO NANODE LAST BOSS O KATTE MIMASHITA Vol. 9

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# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[First Act: The Marriage of Elefas Levi](#)

[Second Act: The Guards' Engagements](#)

[Third Act: The Couple's Holiday](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



## Aileen Jean Ellmeyer

A villainess who has remembered her past life. Empress of Ellmeyer.

## Claude Jean Ellmeyer

Emperor of Ellmeyer, demon king, and Aileen's husband. The final boss of *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 1*.

# I'm the **VILLAINESS**, So I'm Taming the Final Boss

Character Introductions  
and Glossary



## The Story Thus Far

When her engagement is broken, memories of Aileen's past life surface, and she realizes she's been reincarnated into the world of an *otome* game as its villainess. To escape destruction, she decides to romance Claude, the final boss! After many twists and turns, Claude becomes emperor of Imperial Ellmeyer, and Aileen becomes his empress. This is the tale of a villainess's fight to secure a happy ending that doesn't exist in the game, conquering all the final bosses that stand in her way.

### Claude's Advisers



#### Keith Eigrid

Claude's adviser. Human.

#### Beelzebuth

Claude's right-hand man.  
Humanoid demon.



#### Almond

Crow demon. Colonel in the  
demon king's first air force.

### Claude's Guards



#### Walt Lizanis

Former Nameless Priest  
of the church.

#### Kyle Elford

Former Nameless Priest  
of the church.



### Claude's Body Double



#### Elefas Levi

Aileen and Claude's  
retainer. Mage from  
the Levi tribe of  
magic grand dukes.



## Aileen's Ladies-in-Waiting



### Rachel Lombard

Aileen's first lady-in-waiting.  
Isaac's wife.



### Serena Gilbert

A bureaucrat. Auguste's wife.

## Aileen's Lackeys



### Isaac Lombard

Aileen's right-hand man and the third son of a count. President of the Oberon Trading Firm. Rachel's husband.



### Denis

Architect.

### Jasper Varie

Newspaper journalist.



### Quartz

Botanist.

### Luc

Doctor.



### James Mirchetta

Aileen and Claude's retainer.  
A young nobleman of the duchy of Mirchetta. Cambion.



### Auguste Gilbert

Next captain of the Holy Knights of Imperial Ellmeyer. Serena's husband.



## Claude and Aileen's Siblings-in-Law



### Lilia Reinoise

The heroine of *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 1*. Cedric's consort.  
Like Aileen, she's actually reincarnated.

### Cedric Jean Ellmeyer

Claude's younger half brother.  
The second prince.



## The Kingdom of Ashmael



### Baal Shah Ashmael

The holy king of the Kingdom of Ashmael.  
Claude's friend.



### Neifa

Holy King Baal's former consort.

### Roxane Fusca

Baal's principal consort.



## Mysterious "Fairies"

### Lira Revanche

A count's daughter.

### Viola Revanche

Lira's older sister.

## ◆ First Act ◆

### The Marriage of Elefas Levi

In the emperor's private chambers of the imperial castle of Ellmeyer, Elefas blinks, hearing a word that, until then, has been entirely foreign to him: *vacation*. The emperor's two guards look equally taken aback.

"Huh? Master Claude. This is a trap, right?"

"We won't fall for it. What are you plotting?"

Walt is immediately rude, while Kyle, who would ordinarily have rebuked him for it, begins to cross-examine his lord with a straight face instead.

The man who'd summoned them, Emperor Claude Jean Ellmeyer, props an elbow on his armrest and sets his chin in his hand, frowning. "Why would you talk about me like that? I'm trying to be kind."

"Master Claude, you're currently besotted after achieving your long-cherished ambition with Lady Aileen, correct? Which must make this the part where you, once again, set me up as your standin and shove your imperial duties off onto me."

"Elefas. Your rebukes have started to sound quite a bit like Keith's lately."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he responds, completely unfazed.

The emperor—who had turned the capital into a field of flowers on the night of his coronation ceremony two days ago—glances at his adviser. The man is making tea. "What do you think of this?"

"You're reaping what you've sown, milord," Keith says.

"...None of you had any rest up until the coronation, which is why I thought I'd give you some time away from your duties. And this is the thanks I get?"

"I told you, it's your own fault. Rest assured, you three: This isn't a trap."

"All right, so it's a prank."

“Is it a mission disguised as a vacation?”

“It’s a vacation, full stop. I guarantee it.”

Keith smiles warmly as he listens to Walt and Kyle’s skepticism.

All of a sudden, a shock seems to run through the two guards.

“Huh? What do you mean? Are you dying, Master Claude?!”

“Why didn’t you tell us before it got this serious?!”

“I only said I was giving you a break. Why are you giving me such a hard time?”

“I see this conversation’s going nowhere, so let me explain. Your concerns are valid. We can’t leave Master Claude unguarded, so you’ll be taking your vacations by turns.”

“By turns...?” Elefas asks.

Keith confirms with a nod. “The holy king attended the coronation ceremony and is staying for two weeks, which we can use to our advantage.”

“What are you bringing him up for, Keith?”

“Found you, Claude! We’re supposed to take a stroll through the demons’ forest today, remember?!”

Right on cue, Baal appears in midair. The holy king of the neighboring Kingdom of Ashmael had established the position of “demon king’s friend”—previously considered an impossibility—and he continues his demands without so much as a blush, “Hurry and get ready, or we’ll go without you.”

“Wait, you’ll scare the demons. You always start chasing them around.”

“Only because they run.”

“If the holy king’s chasing them, what else are they supposed to do?!”

“Never mind, just hurry up. There’s a banquet this evening; tell us about the guests. Oh right, and you’re coming drinking with us tonight.”

“You’re planning to leave your pregnant wife to go out for a night on the town?”

“Roxane already said we could. Aileen is being an excellent hostess, and apparently she’s enjoying her time here. She said they want to watch the moon tonight, just the two of them. They won’t need husbands for that.”

“Nobody mentioned those plans to me.”

“Let her rest. We hear Aileen’s hardly getting any sleep. You’re being too greedy, you fool. A husband’s duty is more than just clinging to their wife day and night.”

Claude goes silent. When Keith admonishes him, he only says, “I’ll think about it,” and lets it go in one ear and out the other. Hearing it from Baal must be far more humiliating because his eyes turn glassy.

Baal couldn’t care less, though. “In summary, your schedule is full. Hey, adviser, get him ready. Don’t keep us wait—”

“Your pardon, King Baal!”

There’s a loud bang, and this time the holy king’s guard appears. Baal’s eyes go wide. “Ares. You knew where we were? Impressive.”

“Have you forgotten? Dragging you back to your official duties while you ran around avoiding me used to be part of my daily routine.”

“Oh, be quiet; don’t rake up the past. We told you we were giving you time off.”

“Yes, from a foreign land, with a single piece of paper. What are you plotting?!”

Baal is scolded for the same reason that Claude was earlier. Ares keeps up the attack with phrases like “You’re always like this,” and “When you were a child...” Then Claude joins in, and things get completely out of hand.

“—And so, you three are on vacation.”

Elefas thinks sympathetically that those three must also have it rough while Keith gets the conversation back on topic.

“Is it really going to be okay?” Walt asks, sounding bewildered.

“It’s fine. You saw all that, didn’t you?”



“You mean, if the holy king is here, Master Claude will go out and enjoy himself with King Baal, and Ares will chase them around so they’ll both be protected?” Elefas asks.

Keith gives an emphatic nod. “That’s right. It makes things much easier on me as well.”

The holy king is a great man. Walt gives a wry smile.

“And his wife has him on a short leash, too. She’ll never let the holy king neglect his duties.”

“Very well. It’s clear that this isn’t a trick.”

“Still, it’s going to get ugly if Master Claude and the holy king *both* get out of control. Which is why you’ll take turns and enjoy five days off, starting with Elefas.”

“What, me? Is that all right?”

In terms of length of service, Elefas had been a retainer for the shortest time.

“There are going to be a lot of gatherings over the next week, so we’ll need to have Walt and Kyle present, even if they’re just for show. That means you’re first, Elefas. By the time the third person begins their vacation, the holy king will have gone home, so we may need a body double for Master Claude.”

In other words, they were asking him to take time off while his work taking care of the demon king was at its easiest, and to be here when it was hardest. Walt and Kyle send him pitying looks.

Sighing so deeply that his shoulders slump, Elefas nods. “In that case, shall I start tomorrow?”

“Yes. Oh, but there’s just one condition. I’d like you to return to your hometown.”

“I plan to, of course. Now that it’s finally been returned to us.”

When the new emperor was crowned two days ago, he granted two pardons: First, he gave permission for his younger half brother, Prince Cedric, to marry. And second, he granted the Levi tribe, Elefas’s people, permission to restore their grand duchy on what was almost the same territory they’d held

previously.

Of course, this has been settled only on paper, and they are currently threshing out the details, such as who to select as the grand duke. The tribe is wary by nature, and many of its members don't believe in the pardon, so Elefas has been looking for a chance to go back and explain the situation. This vacation is a good opportunity to do just that.

*Don't tell me... Is that what this is?*

Elefas gives Claude a look out of the corner of his eye. Claude is arguing with Baal about their schedule, but he pauses to glance back at Elefas. "You can go now if you like. In exchange, once your vacation is over, make sure you come back to me."

Hastily shoving down an odd emotion welling up inside him, Elefas nods. "I'll take you up on that, then. Er... By the way, when is Sir Keith's vacation?"

"Keith's vacation?" Claude cocks his head, looking mystified. Beside him, Keith pushes his glasses up and quietly looks away, gazing out the window.

Getting the message loud and clear, Elefas and the two guards shudder, say """"Thank you very much for the time off!!"""" and bow deeply.

Since Elefas can teleport, "home" is just a moment away, but he does need time to prepare.

On the first day of his restorative vacation, he cleans his room, takes care of routine business, and packs three days' worth of clothes and sundries into a travel bag. By the time he's finished, it's noon. He's so busy that it almost feels as if he's taking an actual trip.

*I suppose that's no surprise. I hardly ever go home.*

His entire family is dead. Their house is still standing, but with no one living there, it's falling further and further into disrepair. Back when he was serving Lara, the dowager empress, some of the tribe's members had disowned him, and they'd set fire to the place to harass him. Others who'd understood what Elefas was doing had put the fire out, so only a little of the structure had actually burned down, but the damage had never been repaired.

“I know. I’ll buy some souvenirs to take home as well,” he says, thinking of the children and women who still clean that tumbledown house once a month. Elefas leaves his room at the old castle in the forest.

In the corridor, he passes his colleague James, who also has a room there.

“Oh, a vacation? —You’re going home?”

“Yes. Do you get any time off, Master James?”

“I’m studying politics under Duke d’Autriche, so I can’t really take a break even if Master Claude tells me to. I would like to go and observe the duchy of Mirchetta someday, though.”

“Do you suppose they’ll send you when they transfer Auguste?”

“I’d imagine so... Oh, sorry. You’re off duty, aren’t you?”

They end up talking about work, like always, and Elefas smiles wryly. James starts to say something, then decides against it.

“What is it?”

“...Nothing. Take care on your way. There’s no need to worry about anything here. Ah, of course.” He extends his right hand. “Congratulations on the restoration of the grand duchy of Levi.”

Elefas blinks, looking at James’s face, then shakes his hand. “It doesn’t feel suitable for me to respond to the young lord of Mirchetta this way, but thank you very much.”

“What are you saying? You’re going to be the grand duke, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know if I’m quite cut out for it.”

Elefas means what he says. He smiles, and James backs down. “You should think about that while you’re away as well.”

“Ha-ha. There’s bound to be an argument about it, which already scares me.” Laughing, Elefas parts with James and leaves the old castle.

As he’s walking along with his travel bag, a white crow flies past overhead.

*“Elefas! Vacation! Send-off Dance!”*

*So they've even invented a dance like that?*

Flying in neat lines, the crows soar up through the blue sky, making straight for the sun. Then the formation splits cleanly down the middle, branching off to the left and right. Silhouetted against the light, it looks as if the sun has petals that are now falling to the ground.

"Incredible. That's lovely."

*"Leave to us! Have a good trip!"*

*"The demon king waits! Come back soon!"*

*"Bring back souvenirs!"*

"Yes, of course. And you all do your best not to let the holy king catch you."

*Being seen off means I have a place to come home to,* Elefas thinks. He heads to Alucato, the third layer of the capital city, to choose souvenirs.

For the women, he buys flowers. Since so many suddenly bloomed all at once, he's able to get a lot very cheaply.

For the children, he gets sweets from the Oberon Trading Firm. They give a large membership discount.

"All right, I suppose I'll go now."

With all his preparations complete, Elefas makes his way to a deserted space behind a building and closes his eyes.

When he opens them in a few moments, he'll be in his own damaged house, the one that always reminds him he has no place to return to.

Every time, Elefas has used that opportunity to renew his resolution to retake and protect his homeland.

*This time, at least, perhaps I'll take a little while to repair and clean the house,* Elefas thinks. Then he opens his eyes.

"...Hmm?"

The first thing he sees is a beautifully polished floor. When he looks up, the sound of crackling firewood makes him turn around. The hearth is lit.



*Is someone here? But why would they build a fire?*

When he crosses to the table to set down his armful of souvenirs, he realizes it's free of dust. The vase by the window has flowers in it.

Has he teleported to the wrong location? He looks around. The furniture and candlesticks and ornaments are all familiar, but they've been polished properly. The room looks unusually bright because the ragged wallpaper has been replaced. The once-dingy windowpanes are clouded over only because it's cold outside; all the grime has been cleaned away.

Nothing's dramatically odd. It isn't as if the structure of the building has been changed. It's simply clean. And warm. The scent of the rooms is different.

It's almost the way it was when his family was alive.

*I think I can even smell...food?*

He hears a doorknob turn. Someone really is here.

Bracing himself on reflex, Elefas yanks the door open with magic.

A young woman is standing there holding a tray. She looks startled by the sudden movement.

He doesn't recognize her. She isn't a member of the Levi tribe; not that there are many left. Of course, she could be a Levi who was taken captive and has now returned, but in that case, Elefas would have interviewed her on Claude's behalf.

*Actually, I'm not sure she's even from Ellmeyer...*

She has ink-black hair, a rarity in this region, and indigo eyes with a purple cast to them. More than anything, her clothing is different. She's wearing a gown that opens at the front made of spring-green fabric, ornamented with fine embroidery and a large quantity of jewels and lace. It's been fastened below her bosom to look like a dress, but the design and the cut aren't from the empire. She's dressed in the style of Ashmael.

"Welcome home," the woman tells him, still holding the tray. Her voice is stiff and tense. Her eyebrows are drawn together, and she seems to be glaring at Elefas. "If you were coming home, I wish you'd said so. You startled me," she

says accusingly.

Elefas blinks.

He doesn't sense any hostility. He's particularly sensitive to that sort of thing, so without resorting to magic, he watches to see what the woman does.

Looking prim, the woman enters the room, takes a bowl of stew from the tray, and sets it on the table. "Go ahead and start. I'll bring my own in a moment."

"...Um, may I ask who you are?" He puts on a diplomatic smile.

She gives him a startled look. "You weren't told?"

"...I wasn't."

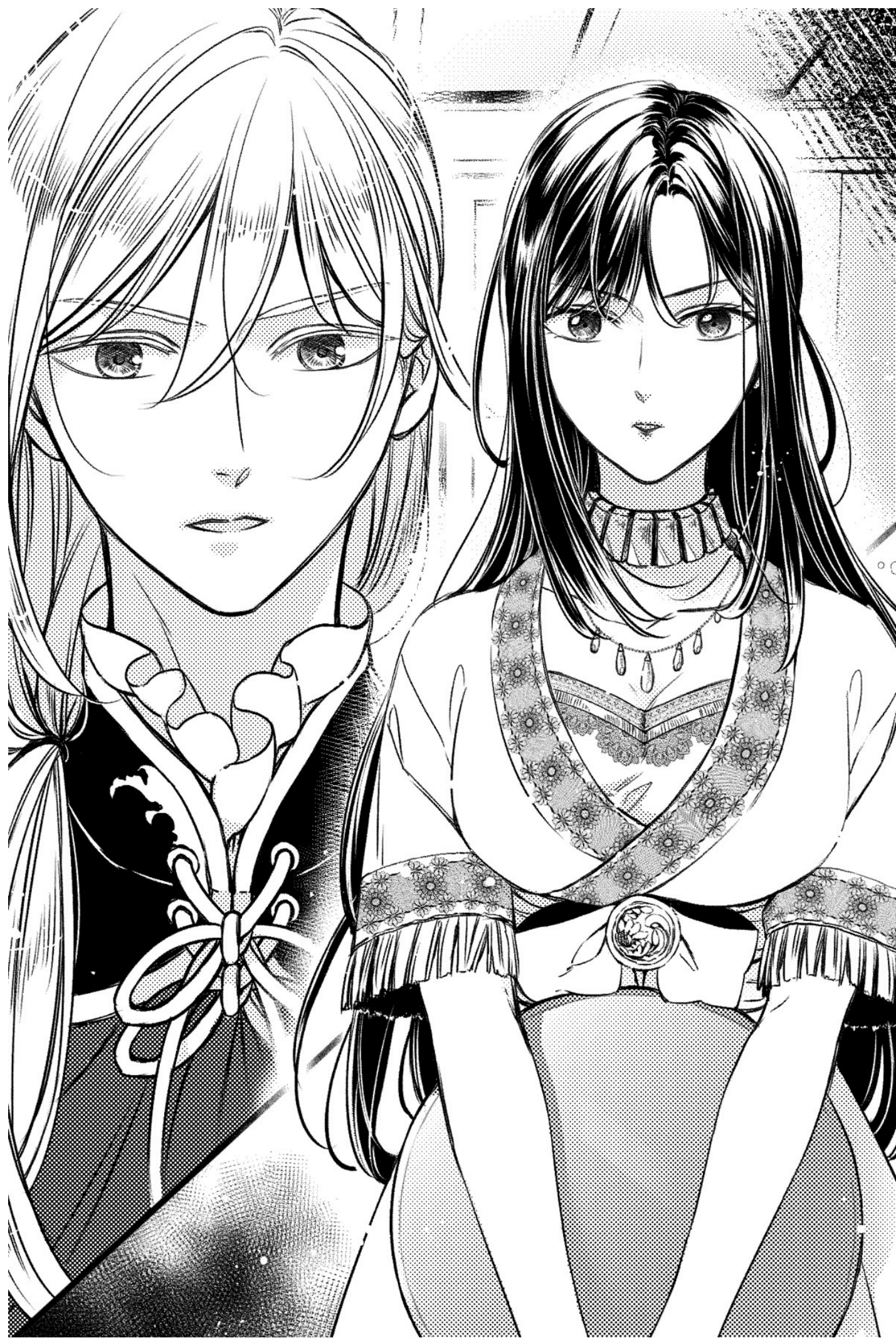
"I see," she murmurs brusquely. Shifting her grip on the tray, she turns to face Elefas again. Getting a proper look at her for the first time, he realizes she's incredibly beautiful.

Neither her well-kept, glossy hair nor her velvety skin could belong to an ordinary commoner. She's a noblewoman. What is someone like that doing here? Has she been sent to him for protection?

*No, I'm on vacation. If that were the case, they would have said something.*

Could a message have failed to reach him? Was he being rude here? As he's still wondering, the woman speaks. "Three days ago, I was sent here from Ashmael to marry. My name is Neifa."

Elefas cocks his head, perplexed. The woman continues calmly, "Until now, I served in Master Baal's harem in Ashmael, which makes this my second marriage."



“Second...marriage.”

To whom? Elefas’s brain doesn’t seem to want to work, so for now, he simply repeats what he heard.

Sighing, Neifa goes on. “No doubt you’re reluctant, but you can hardly refuse an order, can you? I don’t like doing things this way, either.”

“.....”

“However, this is a part of life. If you don’t believe me, here.” Taking two neatly folded pieces of parchment out of her bodice, Neifa holds them out to him.

“Marriage licenses from both His Majesty the emperor of Ellmeyer and His Majesty the holy king of Ash—”

Before she’s finished speaking, Elefas has teleported away.

Naturally, his destination is the demon king whom he’s just left.

The word *restraint* has vanished from Elefas’s vocabulary.

The demon king is right in front of him. The holy king is there as well, facing him from across a chessboard. If he cuts loose here with all his power, will it pose a problem? No, it will not.

It wouldn’t have been unusual for the recreation room to explode, but the windowpanes only rattle a bit. Even though a blast of wind roars through the room, not one of the cups on the table tips over.

Claude and Baal both look completely calm, sitting there with their game of chess. Only his colleagues are flustered.

“Elefas, what’s going on?! Didn’t you leave on vacation? Was it a trap after all?!”

“Y-you know we’ll be forced to deal with you if you attack Master Claude, so please calm yourself. If you have a complaint, I’ll listen.”

“Thank you, Walt and Kyle. However, first, I have something very important to discuss with you, Master Claude...!”

He glares at the demon king, but Claude plays innocent. “You’re back early.



Were you really that worried about me?”

“You know that isn’t what this is about!! What’s this ‘marriage’ business?!”

“Surprised you, didn’t it?”

He could swear he hears a vein burst in his temple. In that same moment, Elefas’s magic levitates the game board and pieces. However, Baal snaps his fingers, and in the blink of an eye, they’re all back in place.

“This mage is pretty strong.”

“Yes, he can even fill in for me.”

“That is not what we’re talking about! Explain the situation! What’s going on?! I returned to my family home to take my vacation, and a wife I’ve never met was waiting there! Why?!”

Walt and Kyle give Claude disbelieving looks.

“Elefas, you’ve got a wife? When did you get married?”

“No one told us. Don’t we owe you a present or—?”

“No one told me, either! I just heard!” Elefas bellows.

Putting his chess match on hold, Claude turns to face him. “I wanted you to be happy.”

“Look! Me! In! The! Eye! When you say that!”

“Quiet, you. What don’t you like about Neifa? She was one of the top five beauties in our harem,” Baal chimes in from the side. “The girl was brought to us by slave traders, but she was educated in preparation for joining the harem. She’s well read, she knows her etiquette, and she’s worked in the kitchen, so she can cook. She’s still young; twenty-three this year. That’s a year older than you, isn’t it? She should be a more than decent match.”

“...Was she really in the harem?”

“Hmm? Rest assured: She’s a virgin. We never laid a hand on her.”

“That isn’t what I’m asking! Why did you do this?!”

“I had your happiness in mind,” Claude says again, brazenly.

Coming to stand beside him, Elefas looks down at the demon king. “Look me in the eye and say that again.”

“.....”

“I haven’t forgotten that you shot down the floating palace while we were still in it.”

“.....”

“Why did you do this? What are you plotting?”

“...I thought you’d be mad if I told you.”

“I’d obviously be madder if you didn’t!!” Elefas shouts, and Claude shrugs.

“Even the way Elefas gets angry is starting to resemble Sir Keith,” Walt murmurs behind him.

“It’s probably because their duties frequently overlap...”

“...I’m told she can make sacred items,” Claude says reluctantly.

Elefas frowns, but all at once, the wheels in his head start turning.

Imperial Ellmeyer can’t make magic items from demon stones. Since Claude is the demon king, there has been a tendency to detest magic itself, and with the subjugation of the Levi tribe, both research and the development of new technologies has stalled completely.

Ashmael, on the other hand, has a long history of mining sacred stones and using them to create sacred items. Holy power and magic are opposing forces, yet the Queendom of Hausel combines demon stones and sacred stones to make divine items. With this proving certain theories correct, Elefas has been thinking that sacred-stone technologies could be applied to demon stones.

He also thought that bringing this knowledge to the Levi tribe would give them a future.

“So she’s the first step toward turning the grand duchy of Levi into a nation of demon-stone technology—a nation that makes magic items.”

“If we don’t, we’ll never move forward. Even people with no magic can use magic items. I thought that it would be best if you ensured your survival by

providing that value.”

Elefas has no complaints about this. In fact, the prospect has his wholehearted approval.

However...

“Why does that mean I must marry? We could just summon artisans from Ashmael, couldn’t we?!”

“The Levi tribe is very wary. If we were to do that, they wouldn’t even try to learn; it would just result in more friction. It might also cause trouble with neighboring areas. That is where you, my favorite retainer, come in.”

Having this said clearly, right to his face, takes the edge off Elefas’s temper.

“It wouldn’t be inappropriate for you to take a woman who had been in the holy king’s harem as your wife.”

“...In other words, you’re using her as a buffer. Did she consent to that?”

“She did indeed. In the first place, dismissing the consorts from our harem was essentially an act of selfishness on our part. As far as the consorts themselves are concerned, they’ve been summarily fired. We’ve made sure we understand her wishes.”

“Her wishes? Unfortunately, I have no rank, property, or authority,” Elefas reminds him. There’s self-deprecation in his tone, and it earns him a fed-up look from Baal.

“Neifa likes making sacred items and magic items. That’s how she caught our eye, and it is why we made her a high-ranking consort and let her continue her research. We wanted power that could oppose the fiend dragon.”

Elefas has heard that Baal added women with holy power to his harem in order to fight the dragon.

However, he’s currently emptying his harem of consorts. Apparently, those who can’t return to their family homes or who help care for the Holy Dragon Consort will remain, but since he’s now favoring his principal consort, Roxane, he’s doing his best to grant his other consorts’ wishes and give them the freedom to choose. Of the young women who entered the harem due to their

parents' circumstances, if the men they love render a service of some sort to the crown, they will be allowed to leave the harem and marry their beloved as a reward. Several consorts are waiting to be reclaimed in this fashion. Conversely, he's also heard of some men who have their eyes set on a woman in the harem working for the crown in the hopes that the holy king will free their beloved and allow them to marry.

Putting all of that information together—

"...You mean that, by becoming my wife, she's secured a position where she can do new research?" Grasping the situation, Elefas heaves a long sigh. "You should have just told me that was the case. I had no idea what was going on."

"If I'd explained it to you, you would have found a way to get yourself out of it. You're extremely fast at manipulating situations behind the scenes."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Elefas says, fixing the demon king with a cold stare.

Claude falls silent, looking sullen.

"This is a political marriage, then. In which case, if there's no political meaning to it, we're free to divorce, are we not?"

"You'd reject our consort? You, a lowly mage?"

"I'd feel sorry for her if I didn't. Not only is the Levi tribe staunchly isolationist, but my position in it is delicate. Surely she'd find it easier to maneuver if she visited with a group of technicians from Ashmael. I'll explain the situation to her and secure a divorce."

"But just the other day, you were saying you'd like to marry."

Even though Claude shot him down, he still has the nerve to remember that. Elefas sighs. "That's because I thought I was about to die. I'll find my own marriage partner."

"You...?"

"What's that look for? Do you think I can't? If it's likely to affect our relationship with Ashmael, I'll time the divorce with that in mind."

"...Hmph. Fine then. If you want to divorce, you may do so."

Claude blinks dramatically, looking at Baal. “He can?”

“Yes. We promise not to make it a diplomatic issue. Only if he has Neifa’s consent, though.”

“I’ll explain everything properly.”

*Good grief. The first day of my precious vacation, and I’ve wasted it.*

Elefas will explain the situation to Neifa, and then if she likes, she can observe the Levi tribe before she leaves. Once he confirms with Baal that she’ll be sent back to Ashmael without issue if he brings her to Alucato, Elefas teleports back.

“...Shouldn’t you have told Elefas about her feelings?”

“How could we? She told us not to.”

“Well, I’m against it. I didn’t want to make him marry. He’s my mage.”

“Give it up. The woman worked her way up to become a high-ranking consort in our harem. If she’s fallen for a man, he won’t get away.”

Shocked, Walt and Kyle start yelling.

“Huh?! You mean it’s *not* a political marriage?!”

“She’s in love with Elefas? Since when?!”

His guards liven up instantly, and Claude holds up a finger, shushing them. “That’s a secret. Don’t you tell him, either. This is entertaining.”



It’s quiet when Elefas returns to the living room of his family home. The bag he’d left there has been moved over against the wall, out of the way, but it doesn’t seem to have been meddled with otherwise.

First, they’ll talk things out. He’ll tell her she doesn’t have to marry him, that they already have permission to divorce, and that it won’t have any negative effects on her future.

With that in mind, he leaves the living room. There’s no dust in the hall,

either. People had been cleaning the place once a month before, but it must have been Neifa who's gotten it this clean.

She's taking care of it because she was marrying Elefas, and it was going to be her house—a thought that makes him feel bad. At the very least, she's cleaned this house for the past three days, and it'll be his fault that her hard work and feelings come to nothing.

*If she stays on as a technician, maybe I'll ask her to live here.*

The house has plenty of extra rooms anyway. Deciding this to be a fine idea, Elefas checks room after room, but the woman he's looking for isn't in any of them.

He goes outside, thinking that she may have done the same.

The town belonging to the Levi tribe is small enough that perhaps *village* would be a better word for it. They have territory, but no people to occupy it. That should also gradually change, though.

Hoping that will be the case, Elefas keeps walking until he spots a small crowd up ahead. As he's wondering what's going on, he starts to hear angry shouts.

"What are you playing at, girl?!"

"I'll say it again: That method is inefficient."

The cold, cutting voice carries well.

It's her. As Elefas hurries over, familiar faces clear a path for him. In the meantime, the clamor keeps getting louder.

"We have our own ways of—"

"Those ways don't work, which is why the Levi tribe's fallen so far."

"What was that?!"

"Just shut up and listen, outsider!"

"I am Elefas Levi's wife. The wife of the future grand duke. Do you know what it means not to follow my instructions?"

Where did she get off saying something like that? In spite of himself, Elefas *tsks* in irritation. That was the worst way to brandish authority, and even a little



thought would have shown her as much. At last, Elefas breaks through the wall of people.

*So she's the type who's only good at making things and can't handle politics, hmm? That's a problem.*

He will ask her to leave as soon as possible. However, this unfamiliar wife of his stands very straight, her head held high. "If you won't listen, then *you* should be the ones who leave. The Levi tribe doesn't need you. You must understand that it's people like you who have impoverished the tribe."

"How dare you...!"

"Aren't you ashamed? Ashamed to be called senile old fools? Ashamed to have grown too weak to adapt to change?"

She's facing off against a group of artisans who've just barely managed to keep demon-stone technology alive in the Levi tribe. However, even these demon-stone artisans possess magic.

Elefas looks up with a start—one person has already converted their anger into a spell.

A roaring wind swirls, turning into flames that make straight for the woman.

But her eyebrows merely twitch. Turning the ring she's wearing, she thrusts her hand out in front of her, and immediately the spell disperses.

"Wha...?!"

"Have you forgotten where I'm from already? I belonged to the harem of Holy King Baal Shah Ashmael, where I developed sacred items. I explained all this when we first met."

Magic vanishes in the face of holy power, meaning that there was no point trying to use it to drive her out.

"King Baal thought something like this might happen, so he gave me a sacred stone. Are you embarrassed that the holy king foresaw your narrow-mindedness? You should be."

A look of triumph flashes across her face, and Elefas grimaces. *She's proud. On top of that, she adores the holy king... This is going to be trouble.*

If she came here enthusiastically because the holy king had ordered it, she's probably burning with a sense of purpose. In which case, he couldn't expect anything resembling cooperation from her. It seems very likely that she'll cause nothing but trouble.

*I told them so*, Elefas thinks, and steps forward. "That's enough."

"Elefas."

Everyone looks at him as if they only just now noticed he's back. He gives them all a smile, and then Neifa abruptly glares at him.

"What is that expression supposed to be?"

"Hmm?"

"That lax, foolish smile. Look sharp, would you? Or are you a simpleton?"

Lived experience has told him he's particularly good at smiling. His smile managed to last through all of Dowager Empress Lara's abuse, after all, so he should be able to let anything this unknown woman says to him roll right off. But his smile seems to develop a slight crack.

The shock that he's married is probably still lingering in the depths of Elefas's heart, which is why he finds himself wondering, *Is that the attitude you take with a husband you've barely even met?*

"Where did you go anyway? You simply disappeared."

"...To the imperial capital."

"Oh, did you run crying to the demon king to complain that no one said anything about you being married?" She scoffs at him, which hurts. "So? What will you do? This man tried to harm me; will you punish him?"

"...He was the first to strike, but the way you spoke to him was also problematic."

"The way I *spoke to him*? Words won't kill anyone, although turning magic on them will."

"Wounded dignity can be fatal," Elefas retorts, and Neifa's eyes narrow. Then she sighs.

“Dignity that drives the tribe into decline? I don’t believe that’s ‘dignity,’ just selfishness.”

“Have you come to insult my tribe? ...Good timing; there’s something I want to discuss with you. I have secured firm promises from both Master Baal and Master Claude that you will suffer no negative consequences if we divorce. There’s no need for you to be here.”

“You’re saying you’d divorce me? I am one of the top five technicians in Ashmael.”

“This exchange should have been enough to show you: You aren’t suited to this place, and it won’t be able to accept you.”

The people behind Elefas nod in emphatic agreement.

They certainly don’t support Elefas, but now there’s a common enemy to band against. Elefas is half filled with exasperation, but he focuses on what’s in front of him. “Please go... I’ll compensate you later for cleaning my house.”

Neifa’s eyes bulge. She abruptly starts to chuckle deep in her throat and, before long, bursts out laughing.

Elefas and the others stand there stunned as she laughs. After a little while, she looks up at him, a bewitching smile across her face.

“...Let me give you my views on this tribe. Those in control are fools—behind the times, incapable of differentiating ‘tradition’ from ‘bad habit.’ They can’t comprehend their current situation and can’t accept the fact that they’re incompetent. They’re a pack of losers, whose only use is to be used as pawns. All they’re capable of are the little tricks known as ‘spells.’ I almost wonder whether they’re monkeys shaped like humans.”

“Why, you—!”

“What need is there for me to listen to the leader of this little troupe?”

In the center of the enraged group, Elefas’s cheeks go taut.

He’s used to not being treated as human, but this is the first time anyone has ever called him a monkey right to his face. He starts to feel as if being treated like garbage might even be preferable.

What's more, hearing it from a beautiful stranger who should be his equal cuts quite deep.

"Oh, how funny. A monkey, asking me for a divorce."

"...In that case, isn't it funny for a human and a monkey to be married in the first place?"

"If you want something from me, then at least become human before you ask," Neifa tells him flatly. She starts to turn away, then turns back. "That work you were doing. Finish it by tomorrow. If you don't, I'll assume the entire workshop is useless."

She glares at the group behind Elefas, then turns her back on them. And yet the dignity in her receding form makes her look genuinely impressive.

*...Yes, that divorce needs to happen soon,* Elefas vows firmly, for the sake of his own self-esteem. The smile is still on his face.

Elefas belatedly greets the tribe, then listens as they describe—or rather, complain about—the situation. By the time that's over, the sun is down. Pacifying the demon-stone artisans, particularly the bosses, took a lot of time. They seem to have a lot of pent-up resentment, and they told him the same story over and over.

*She's arrogant, constantly giving orders, and she even blew up a workshop that wasn't needed as "an example"...*?

The woman's even fiercer than he'd thought.

*My stomach hurts.*

He isn't looking forward to going home, but running away would make him feel just as bad, so Elefas peeks cautiously into the living room. Neifa seems to be writing something, and she raises her head. "Welcome home."

"Uh, yeah..."

"At least give me a proper response. How rude."

Would this be a good time to reiterate that he wants her to go? While he hesitates, Neifa moves the conversation right along. "Dinner is already made. Or would you prefer to bathe first?"



Is this that newlywed cliché of asking “Which would you like first, dinner or a bath?” She’s looking at him as if she thinks he’s a complete dunce, but he guesses that’s something he’s used to.

“...May I bathe first?”

“While you do, then, I’ll get dinner on the table. There’s a change of clothes in the bathroom cupboard. Towels, too.”

“Why would I have a change of clothes there?” He hasn’t unpacked his travel bag yet.

As Elefas is wondering whether she went into his bag without asking, Neifa responds mockingly, “You’ll figure it out when you see it. No doubt you already know how to use it.” Then she rises and heads toward the kitchen.

Unconvinced, Elefas walks in the direction of the bathroom. As he does, he remembers that the fire the arsonists set happened near that part of the house. Is the bath even usable?

But when he fearfully peeks into the bathroom, it’s been completely transformed.

“...What is this?”

The structure of the house hasn’t changed, of course, but... For starters, a changing area has been built. A new cupboard has been installed and stocked with towels and spare clothes. Beside the cupboard is a laundry basket for the clothes he’ll take off.

*She was right: It’s clear at a glance. Not only that, but everything is also in the most efficient location...*

Taking off his dusty clothes, he opens the frosted glass door that separates the changing area from the bath itself.

A steaming bathtub he’s never seen before comes into view. When he tests the water with his hand, it’s the perfect temperature. Below the water’s surface, the new tub has been set with something unfamiliar—a demon stone. It’s being used to keep the water warm.

Similar devices are used in Ellmeyer, but many of them are sustained by the

demon king's prodigious magic. The idea of something like this being used in an ordinary home...

"...So this is technology, is it?"

"If you turn it to the right, you'll get hot water. Turn to the left for cold."

"Agh!"

Neifa's sudden explanation makes him reflexively dive into the bath. The figure on the other side of the frosted glass door goes on without seeming the least bit flustered. "I'm reheating the stew. Is there anything you can't eat? And I'm not talking about things you just don't like."

"...Nuts make me itch sometimes."

"Tell me that sort of thing sooner."

She scolded him.

*But we only just met...*

He wants to point this out, but now doesn't seem like the right mood for it.

"Is there anything else?"

"...No, nothing."

"All right. Be careful not to overheat," she tells him, then leaves.

Dazed, Elefas just sits in the tub for a while. Then, he twists the faucet, just like she'd explained.

Right for hot, left for cold.

"...Incredible. I can use this to adjust the temperature of the bath."

This really is technology.

He finds himself idly thinking that if Denis knew about this, he'd get swept up in conversation.

*No, but we're divorcing... And there's that personality of hers...*

The warm water seems to relax all his nerves.

Tired of thinking, Elefas sinks down into the water until it's up to his nose.

Baal said that Neifa could cook, and he is right about that.

A little while after Elefas gets out of the bath, she brings dinner to him. It's nothing grand, just a perfectly normal household meal: reheated stew and bread that looks like it's had a few holes poked in it. Perhaps there was some kind of nut in it, like a walnut, that she's taken out?

He steals a glance at Neifa, who's eating in silence. *Somehow I thought she'd treat me worse than this.*

He'd had the feeling she might tell him to eat on his hands and knees on the floor. What sort of sketchy adult game would that have been?

They hardly talk at all during the meal. When they've finished, Elefas volunteers to clean up. "I'll take my bath, then," Neifa says, and heads briskly for the bathroom.

The sight of the kitchen startles him all over again. The fire now lights on its own, and most surprisingly of all, there's a cooled box—a container that keeps foodstuffs chilled, a necessity in Ashmael. Did she bring it from the kingdom or make it herself?

He washes the dishes, then returns to the living room. For no particular reason, he crosses to the sofa where Neifa was sitting earlier.

There's a long, narrow table in front of the sofa. It's covered in maps—no, blueprints—that show where various things are located in the Levi tribe's village and give suggestions for improvements. There's also a new design for the workshop people say she blew up.

*...These are really brilliant.*

Her claim to be among the top five technicians was apparently not an exaggeration.

Taking a seat on the sofa, Elefas tips his head back, gazing up at the ceiling.

Neifa has a bad reputation. She's particularly unpopular with the artisans who've been in charge of demon-stone processing.

However, earlier in the day, Elefas heard some of the younger artisans whispering that she was incredible. The women especially seem to think highly

of her.

Neifa had given prototypes of magic and sacred items she'd made to the women, asking them to use the new technologies for their chores. It's winter right now, so items like the one that's keeping his bath warm are incredibly useful. When an elderly woman complained of being cold all the time, Neifa gave her a blanket that grew warm when infused with magic.

Demon stones have always been difficult to mine, and the Levi tribe use them for war, first and foremost. Their artisans strive to create fantastic tools meant to bring Ellmeyer to its knees, such as enormous magical teleportation devices and communication equipment that can connect to anywhere. However, the things Neifa makes are meant for everyday life. The women are pleased with them, but the majority of the artisans are unable to give up their grand ambitions and accept her creations.

On top of that, there's her personality and attitude... There's no way this can go well.

He really will have to divorce her, then have Ashmael send technicians who are as personable as possible.

But at the very least, part of the Levi tribe has sensed that Neifa's technologies have value. That's a good enough first step.

"What do you think of those designs?"

She came up behind him before he noticed, and he nearly screams.

"Pretty good, aren't they?"

"Y-yes..."

"If I blow up two or three more space-wasting workshops, it should be even better."

"Can't you refrain from blowing them up?!"

"If you demonstrate that there's value in keeping them."

Elefas is just about to complain that this attitude of hers is a problem, when she leans over his shoulder, and his nose catches a sweet fragrance. Glancing back, he sees her bosom is right in front of him, veiled only by a thin piece of



fabric, and he hurriedly faces forward again.

It isn't clear whether Neifa noticed this, and she reaches over his shoulder, pointing at one of the blueprints. "We'll start with everyday tools that aren't yet common in Ellmeyer. Unless we do that, we'll lose out to imports from Ashmael. They can mass-produce them, but they'll also be subject to tariffs, so we should be able to compete with them on price."

"....."

"Mining demon stones comes first. Then, if the Levi tribe begins working on everything magic-related in general— Excuse me, are you listening?"

"Yes, I'm...listening, but..." None of it is sinking in.

As Elefas hesitates, Neifa speaks over him.

"Ah. You're looking at my breasts."

"I am not! I'm looking straight at these diagrams!"

"I'm not angry. You are my husband. And really, it's time I showed them to you."

"Huh?" Elefas involuntarily turns to look, and Neifa has seated herself on the back of the sofa and is deliberately toying with the laces of her bodice. She tilts her head. "Don't tell me you intend to embarrass me."

"...Huh? But, I mean, we're divorcing."

"I refused that."

Oh, right. In that case...was he really doing this?

*Huh? Is this really okay? No, no, no, that's not the point!*

"No, none of—that! Not without feeling behind it, never again! I don't do that sort of thing anymore!"

"I'll thank you not to talk like a virgin." She's balled up consideration and dignity and thrown them in the rubbish bin. As Elefas gapes, speechless, she sets a lovely finger on his chin. "Don't worry. I have no illusions that a bosom alone will be enough to conquer you."

"...Wha, what sort of trap is this?"

“Listen, husband.”

She looks as if she’s just out of the bath, but when she puts her face near his, he can tell that she’s wearing light makeup. Her curved lips are a vivid crimson, and just as they close in on him, Elefas squeezes his eyes shut, and— “...What are you doing here, guy?”

“.....”

*As one would expect, teleporting to and from the capital four times in a day is tiring*, Elefas thinks. He’s on his hands and knees on the floor. Granted, he does get the feeling this isn’t the actual cause of his weariness.

*That’s no good. It’s impossible. I can’t fight them on my own...!*

And so Elefas raises his head. He’s looking at the only person he can think of who’s likely to be capable of doing something about the demon king and the holy king.

“I heard you’d gone back to your hometown on vacation.”

“Help me, please. I’ll be crushed to death by a bosom.”

“Huhn?”

“If you won’t help, I’ll do everything in my power to seduce Rachel right now!!”

Hit with that merciless threat right off the bat, Isaac—who’s been working from home—frowns.

Since he’s arrived at night, their discussion will have to wait until the following morning. Elefas’s threat seems to have worked, though: Isaac doesn’t run him out with orders to go home. Instead, he puts him up for the night in an apartment he rents.

The next morning, after skillfully shuffling his work around to make some time, he calls in reinforcements.

Elefas senses that Isaac’s fierce determination to not to let his wife be seduced by him the primary motivation. Rachel is a force to be reckoned with.

“A royal consort from Ashmael, hmm? I’d heard a rumor that one of them

might marry a commoner, but I had no idea you'd been singled out."

Lester had come to Isaac's apartment, complaining "This is so outmoded," and "Why me?" the whole time. These two had once teamed up to take out the demon king, and they are still in regular contact. —Although this isn't news to Elefas, the demon king's spy.

"It's probably a preparatory step for making you Grand Duke Levi. He's convinced that no one but you can control the tribe."

"The problem's grown bigger than that. What should I do?!" Elefas brings his fists down hard on the square table they're seated around, rattling their mugs.

"The demon king and the holy king set this up, right? There's probably not much to be done."

"Make the impossible possible, please. I'll fight this with everything I have, appearances be damned."

"You can't destroy yourself in the process. That's not even a plan."

"Then what am I supposed to do?! At this rate, she's sure to devour me! With her bosom!"

Elefas's virtue is in crisis, but both Isaac and Lester look unamused.

"I wouldn't say I envy you, but it can't be worth all this desperation. If she was in Ashmael's harem, she must be quite the beauty."

"I prefer cute girls, like Rachel! She's the complete opposite! Although her bosom does fit my preferences!"

"Quit casually sending stray bullets my way. How to get divorced, huh...? If she's being like that, I bet you'll have to get her to suggest it if it's going to happen."

"She told me I needed to 'become human' before I made any requests." Has there ever been provocation like that? It's even starting to make him smile, in a weird way. "Oh yes, I'm used to that sort of treatment. However, that's because I was in a unique environment; it's never happened right to my face before. What must I do to become human?"

"Don't turn your darkness on us. Well...you could try *that*. Rather than talking

about divorce, why not point her toward a better match than you? Like this guy, maybe.” Isaac glances at Lester.

Lester frowns. “Don’t tell me that’s why you called me... Not that I’d be entirely against it.”

“Really?! Are you insane?!”

“I’d gladly welcome a mistress. Granted, if she was given to you by His Imperial Majesty as a reward, that won’t do,” Lester says, sounding like a typical noble. “The woman would prove useful to my family. However, I can’t imagine the emperor allowing it. The d’Autriche duchy, either.”

“...Even though she’d only be a mistress?”

“She’s an artisan, you know. His Majesty isn’t generous enough to let my house take the initiative in developing demon-stone technologies.”

*Ah, I see.* That made sense to Elefas.

In a word, she is Ashmael’s technology incarnate, making this a technological exchange in the shape of a marriage.

“I do think it’s a good proposal as far as the Levi tribe is concerned. However, with that attitude of hers, I can’t imagine that it will go well... Oh, honestly, why did they send her to me, of all people?”

“Good point... James would have done just as well,” Isaac murmurs.

Elefas looks up, and Lester puts a hand to his chin. “The cambion duke, hmm? That’s quite true... His Majesty probably doesn’t want to let the Levi tribe to monopolize the technology. Besides, if the duke of Mirchetta had the support of the holy king, it would make it easier to control any resistance based on the fact that he is half demon. The Levi tribe is skilled with spells, but that’s all; Mirchetta is doubtless richer in capital.”

“Now that you mention it... I haven’t heard of Master James being betrothed. Master Claude merely wants to attend his retainers’ weddings; he’s not actually in favor of them getting married.”

“Right. James would have been able to hold a wedding ceremony,” Isaac murmurs.



As the other two frown, Lester looks mystified. “The demon king won’t allow his retainers to marry? Whyever not?”

“That’s the sort of man he is. Don’t think about it; just feel it.”

“I wouldn’t know how to begin to ‘feel it.’”

“I wonder why the demon king didn’t marry her to James. The holy king would have gotten a better deal that way, too.” Isaac gazes into the distance, thinking.

Lester takes a sip of coffee, then grimaces. It must be bitter. “If you think about it logically, it was probably her own decision.”

“Yeah, that.”

They both look at Elefas, and he blinks. “You mean she *chose* us? ...Because she thought she’d be able to control us?”

James is brilliant. He’s scheduled to return to the duchy of Mirchetta in the spring, and Mirchetta is fundamentally different from the Levi tribe, even if it’s currently being rebuilt. The idea that she chose the Levi tribe because she wouldn’t have been able to throw her weight around in Mirchetta makes Elefas scowl.

Resting his elbows on the table, Isaac sloshes more bitter coffee into their mugs from the pot. “I’m not denying that possibility. From what you’ve said, though, she doesn’t sound like the type who can change her attitude depending on who she’s with, so I bet that’s not it.”

“That’s... Well, all right. Then why?”

“If I recall, you were involved in the joint demolition work on Hausel’s floating palace with Ashmael, correct?” Lester opens his bag. As Elefas nods, the man takes out a thick sheaf of materials and begins flipping through it. “What is the woman’s name?”

“...Miss Neifa.”

“Neifa. Going by Ashmael’s spelling system, that would be... Ah, here she is.” With a heavy *thump*, Lester sends the documents his way. The header reads *List of Participants in the Floating Palace Demolition and Survey*.

“...Materials on the demolition? Why do you have these?”

“Don’t concern yourself with that.”

“You heard him. Don’t worry about it.”

“I hear the divine items and some of the other valuables are going to be put up for auction...”

They’re planning on rigging the bids. Realizing what Lester and Isaac wanted to discuss, Elefas is already starting to feel tired. It seemed just like Isaac not to talk about this with James.

“...Well, that’s fine. I’m on vacation, so we’ll say I didn’t see this. What was it we were talking about?”

“You’ve met her before, haven’t you? During the survey?”

“I have? I don’t remember,” Elefas says, so Isaac rephrases.

“It might be more accurate to say that there’s a possibility *she* knows *you*. That could be why she came to marry you.”

“Hmm... Yes, I suppose she would prefer someone whose face she knew, at least.”

“Are you an idiot? Or have you suddenly developed a fondness for masochism? She could have met Duke Mirchetta, too, you know; the holy king would have given her all the opportunities she wanted.”

“That’s true.” Elefas nods awkwardly. He’s getting a vague inkling of what they’re telling him, but his mind can’t seem to process it. Or rather, he doesn’t want to recognize it. “So you’re saying she targeted me? ...Do I seem that easy to control?”

“I’m not denying that either as a possibility, but...”

“What we’re trying to say is that maybe marrying you was the goal, and the technology and logic behind it were just the means. Quit playing dumb.”

Isaac gives it to him straight, and Elefas’s face tenses up.

In other words, he’s saying—

“...No way, it sounded like she adores the holy king.”

“If she adored him, she would have stayed in the harem. As far as Ashmael’s concerned, she’s valuable.”

“That’s... Uh, huh...?”

“Why not ask her if she’s there because she fell in love with you?” Isaac congratulates him, looking triumphant.

Elefas gets the feeling he’s been indirectly ordered not to cause any more pointless trouble.

“What sort of person is Lady Neifa?” Aileen asks.

Roxane, who’s spreading jam on a scone, blinks at her. As always, the holy king’s principal consort is as quiet and beautiful as the stars. If Neifa was in competition with her in the harem, she must also be quite stunning.

Setting her scone on her plate in an elegant motion, Roxane falls to thinking. “Let me see... She’s a very beautiful woman, and strong as well. Back when my position was still weak, she didn’t attempt to curry favor with Lady Sahra, nor with Master Baal. She simply threw herself into her work. That said, she did once wear an outfit completely in red, a color forbidden to all but the principal consort, and perpetrate other trivial forms of harassment.”

Aileen had seen that one happen.

“She wouldn’t listen to anyone and wore her work clothes all the time.”

“...So she didn’t defend you, Lady Roxane?”

“No, she didn’t. Her eyes seemed to say that if I needed that sort of thing, I should resign from the position of principal consort.”

The woman sounds quite insolent. However, Aileen doesn’t dislike women like that.

Roxane takes a sip of tea, then lowers her eyes. “I did think that she might become Master Baal’s favorite. As a matter of fact, Master Baal came to appreciate her quick wits and technologies, and both her pride and that harsh yet clear way of speaking she has pleased him. On top of that, her figure... She has something neither I nor Lady Sahra possess. What must one do to become like that...?”

“L-Lady Roxane?”

“It’s nothing... She is strict, but she also has a warm heart. During the Hausel incident, she was among those who gave false testimony so that Master Baal could go to take care of the floating palace. She alone gained nothing by doing so. Which is why, this being a favor she asked for, neither I nor Master Baal could refuse.”

It does seem like a favorable arrangement, but the fact that it involves Elefas matters to Aileen. “I do hope it goes well, but...Master Claude is restless with worry. He fears his favorite mage may be devoured by a wicked woman. Do you not think he’s being a bit too overprotective?”

“Master Baal is concerned as well. Every time he mentions it, I think to myself, *Thank goodness.*”

Aileen’s eyes widen, and Roxane gives her a quiet smile. “She told me that if I failed to bear Master Baal an heir with strong sacred power, then she would be next. I didn’t deny it. If that had happened, no doubt Master Baal would have asked for my consent. I thought she would be better than the alternatives—you see, in terms of rank, she would be no threat to me, and she understood that.”

“.....”

“With full knowledge of my intentions, she made a proposal to me: She would leave the harem, but in exchange, she wanted to be married off to the man she loved... I’m glad it was not a difficult match to achieve.”

Roxane gives Aileen a sudden smile. She’s grown noticeably more expressive.

It’s probably thanks to Baal.

“Do you scorn me?”

“No, I like that sort of thing. I’m hardly unrelated in this affair, as well.”

“We both have our hardships, don’t we.”

“We really do.”

“Miss Roxane! We made reservations at the parfait shop! ...Oh.”

Sahra has burst in on the two of them giggling together, and she looks

puzzled.

Rachel, who's waiting on the table, feigns ignorance and refills their teacups.



Women have fallen for Elefas before.

Unlike a certain demon king, he doesn't have the sort of looks that would let him skate through life on appearance alone; however, he does have rather sweet features, and apparently, he looks kind when he smiles. As a result, he's had quite a bit of experience: from dominatrix types who wanted to treat him as a pet, to starry-eyed young girls. Although, in most cases, the relationships were far from equal.

*Come to think of it, I get the feeling I've never been the object of a decent woman's affections.*

The only women he's fallen for were Lilia and Aileen. Both times, his feelings started out as vague and fuzzy, and it was over before he knew it. He thinks Rachel is cute, but she is simply his type. And besides, there is no man employed at the old castle who isn't attracted to Rachel.

All in all, doesn't that mean he has no proper romantic experience whatsoever?

"Come on, no, that can't be true."

Having been chased out of Isaac's apartment, Elefas sits on a bench in a park in the capital shaking his head. But the next moment he slumps over. "Here I finally get a vacation, and it's no vacation at all..."

"Oh, I thought that was you, Elefas."

A face abruptly peeks into his.

Elefas recoils, clinging to the bench. Ever since last night, it's been one scream-inducing event after another. "L-L-L-Lady Lilia? Wh-what are you doing here?!"

“Hee-hee-hee! Taking a stroll.”

“B-b-but you’re currently under guard— I mean, I’m on vacation now, so it’s fine, but...”

He decides to pretend this never happened. The demon king definitely knows anyway. No doubt he only thinks of it as material to use to bully his younger brother.

Lilia straightens up. There’s no telling where she got it, but she’s holding a paper-wrapped pie. She’s wearing a simple dress that looks right at home in these surroundings; she must have procured that from who knows where as well. Even so, her sweet face naturally attracts glances from passersby.

“It’s been a long time, hasn’t it? How have you been? I’ve seen you several times, but I don’t think we’ve spoken alone since... Yes, it must be when we spoke about the Levi tribe’s rebellion.”

Lilia gives an adorable little chuckle. That’s right, she told him about a prophetic dream she’d had. Thanks to that, Elefas halted the Levi tribe’s rebellion and came up with a strategy to steal the demon king’s magic and memories.

“I’m sorry about that. Do you hate me for it?”

“No... I think it was probably just fortune being fickle.”

She almost certainly tricked him, but strangely, he isn’t angry about it. He doesn’t feel bitter, either. If he has to say, what he feels is shame. He ended up getting himself extremely carried away—no, *emotionally cornered* might be a better way to put it.

*No doubt I was intoxicated.*

Drunk on a love that could never be.

Once that realization had set in, he felt genuinely embarrassed.

“So is it true that you got married?”

“...Where did you hear that?”

“Lady Aileen. She told me not to meddle. That was rude, wasn’t it. I’m already



a married woman myself,” Lilia says sulkily.

Elefas gives her an apathetic response but inwardly grinds his teeth. *So Lady Aileen’s in on it, too. That leaves Master Claude with no weaknesses... I’m pretty much out of moves.* He sighs.

Lilia sits down next to him. “Say, is it true that your wife was in Ashmael’s harem? Is she beautiful?”

“Ah... Well, yes, she is that.”

“Hmm. A beautiful mob character... Oh—does she have black hair? A sharp-edged personality and a bombshell figure? She laughed at Sahra for being flat!”

He can imagine her scoffing and saying that, but he doesn’t know if it was really her or not.

However, Lilia seems to have read Elefas’s response in his expression. Swinging her dangling feet, she peeks at him from the side. “Do you think you’ll end up falling for her?”

Averting his gaze from hers, he gives a dry, evasive smile.

She returns his smile with a suggestive one of her own. “That’s right. You always fall for girls who are absorbed in other things or interested in other people.”

“—What?”

“Hadn’t you noticed? Goodness, don’t make me talk like I’m in the game now, after all this time. ‘The truth is that you’re scared of being loved,’ and whatnot.”

For just a moment, he feels as if he’s gone back in time to when he was giddy over her, following her with his eyes as she toyed with him.

However, the smile she’s wearing in the dappled light under the trees is a cruel one.

*...Oh, I see. I’m—*

She seemed to see everything yet took no notice of him, which was a relief.

He was also relieved when Aileen offered up an enviable amount of love to another man.

Elefas was reassured by the fact that strength, that love, those lovely fragments of the world, were in a place with no connection to him.

“Am I...a pessimist?”

“I’d say so. You were definitely that sort of character, at least.”

“Erm... I mean, I’m aware that I have a tendency to be self-deprecating, but...I did that consciously, so it’s...” He’s apparently been harboring a fundamental misunderstanding, though. “...No, come on, even before that, how could I deal with a partner who doesn’t treat me as human?! Being told out of nowhere that she loves me— What am I supposed to do with that?! Anyone would be bewildered!!”

“Really? If someone told me they liked me, I’d fall for them.”

Is it okay to be that casual about it? Elefas is astounded.

Beside him, Lilia is busily munching on her pie. Somehow, the pie reminds him of himself and other men this woman has snacked on, and his feelings start becoming very complicated.

“No, I did have a vague inkling of it. Thinking *She’d never notice someone like me* is just easier, and... Agh, I’m practically a caricature of a worthless man.”

“In the game, you said hilarious stuff like, ‘I don’t have the right to be happy.’”

“Who exactly are you talking about? I mean, I am a little like that, but I do want to be happy.”

“Then you’ll need stop thinking so little of yourself, won’t you.”

“But it’s complicated, you know. There’s my hometown’s situation, for example. Plus, we’re just not compatible; we’d never get along.”

“It’s unusual for you to avoid things for petty reasons like that. You tend to just let everything roll right off you as if it doesn’t matter.”

She’s right. Elefas feels as if he’s been confronted with his own insincerity, and his tone grows weaker.

“...But I’m not broad-minded enough to be able to respond with nothing more than ‘Yes, I understand’ when I’m suddenly told I’ve got a wife.”

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it? The you in the game might just have shrugged and accepted it.”

“Just shrugged and— It’s a marriage!! Is it all right to be casual about marriages?!”

“Oh, if it doesn’t work out, you can just divorce. I wonder if there’s such a thing as a divorce event.” Lilia laughs out loud; she couldn’t sound more casual if she tried, and Elefas begins to feel as if he’s the one who’s wrong here.

Why is he talking about this with Lilia, of all people, in the first place? Elefas hangs his head.

“Still, you’ve got a point. I think I’d be happy if you kept defending the ‘All Ages’ rating, too. Want me to support you?”

“I have an extremely bad feeling about that, so no thank you!” he says, rejecting her with all his might, and Lilia laughs again. Instinct born of long years of experience tells Elefas that any more of this would be dangerous.

*For now, I’ll just have to try talking it over with her.*

Why has she married into the Levi tribe? There are things he can concede and things he can’t, but unless they talk, they won’t be able to move forward, divorce or otherwise.

“Thank you for listening to my grievances. I’ll be going now.”

“You’re sure you don’t need to arrest me?”

“As I said earlier, I’m on vacation, so I’d rather not get involved— Huh?!”

As soon as Elefas rises to his feet, Lilia embraces him from behind. He freezes up, suspecting some sort of trap, and can feel her sigh near his neck. She must be standing on her tiptoes to reach so far.

“You showed me something entertaining, so I’m thanking you.”

“Huh?”

“You aren’t rubbish. Nothing like it. You’re a proper human being.”

The remark sounds significant, and it makes him wonder what’s coming next. He braces himself, but Lilia simply releases him, and as Elefas turns fearfully

around, she takes a step back. “You didn’t react. I didn’t think you would; everyone gets like that once Lady Aileen’s tamed them.”

“Someone told me to become human just the other day, so I did think that was kind of you.”

“I see. That’s a good thing, though. It means they’re really looking at you.” Smiling at him in a way that seems a bit lonely, Lilia waves. “What was the mob character’s name? Neifa? Tell her I said hello, and that if she entertains me, I’ll give you to her.”

“Um, give me to her? Since when do I belong to you?!”

“In my mind, I inherited you from Dowager Empress Lara, avenger Elefas Levi.”

He freezes up, unable to argue with that.

However, Lilia’s said as much as she wants to, and she walks softly away to continue her stroll through the park without a backward glance.

Rubbing the back of his prickling neck, Elefas watches her go. “What was that about...?”

Feeling rather deflated, he moves to a different location. Having someone see him teleport could get tiresome.

He figures he’ll return home before night falls, worried that he’d be at a disadvantage once it gets dark.

*...But what will I do? Should I ask her? To her face?*

If he asks Neifa whether she’s in love with him, Elefas gets the distinct impression she may punch him. On its own, getting punched wouldn’t be so bad, but he also thinks she might look at him as if he’s garbage, then step on him...with those lovely feet.

“No-no-no, not that!! I need to stop tormenting myself and fix this habit. Now, while I still can.”

Elefas draws a deep breath.

It’s the second day of his vacation—he doesn’t have much time left.

Elefas hesitates for quite a while before deciding to buy a single flower, and by the time he teleports, it's evening.

He doesn't even teleport into the house, but to a spot outside the front door.

"I'm more of a wuss than I imagined..." The setting sun stings his eyes, and even he thinks it's funny.

That said, he's tired of stressing out about this, so he goes inside at once; he seems to get desperate when cornered. Elefas opens the front door, careful not to lose his momentum. The house is silent.

"...Is she not here?"

The sun's just begun to set. Wondering if she's gone out, he steps into the living room—the room he hasn't had the courage to teleport into directly.

Immediately, he realizes that something's wrong.

The carpet has been trampled. There are shards from a shattered vase of flowers and water soaking into the floor. A chair is knocked over; one of table legs is broken. The curtains have been slashed, and the wallpaper has scorch marks—the residue of magic.

The ash-filled fireplace holds the burned remnants of Neifa's designs.

The flower falls from his fingers.

"Ne— Miss Neifa?! Where are you?!"

Turning on his heel, Elefas berates himself. She has a sacred item, she's intelligent, and she can make things, but that's it: In all other respects, she's an ordinary human. The advantage of tools is that they can be used by anyone, but in exchange, they're eventually used up.

On top of that, this is the Levi tribe's village. Magic-users are common here.

From what he saw of the uproar yesterday, Neifa incurred quite a lot of ill will. Even with her sacred item, if the others used their resources to restrain her, she wouldn't have had a chance on her own.

The tribe's vision has been so narrow, and their future so nonexistent, that they tried to launch what would have amounted to a suicide attack on the

demon king. Even now that Claude is emperor, there are many who are still wary of him. They can't trust those in power. Their trauma runs deep. He understands that.

However, if something happens to Neifa and they incur the holy king's wrath, the resulting situation might be too much even for Elefas to handle.

*Blast that overbearing personality of hers...!*

This was a situation he could have seen coming. He should have warned Neifa more firmly not to put too much confidence in her sacred item, and not to underestimate the Levi tribe.

"Big Brother Elefas! Oh, good, you're here!"

The moment he steps outside, a child he knows comes running up to him. The boy's pallor confirms Elefas's fears.

"Was it the artisans?!"

"Y-yeah. They said they were going to drive your wife off, and they took her away...!"

"Where?!"

"To an unused workshop! The one on the outskirts of the village over there, the biggest one."

Just as Elefas looks in that direction, there's an explosion.

Wind whips up, sending dust and dead leaves into the sky. Then there's a second, even larger blast, and a mushroom cloud rises into the air. The boy stares up at it, mouth hanging open.

Maybe he should have worried about Neifa.

However, Elefas has been trained by the likes of Aileen and Lilia, and his perspective is different.

"—The villagers may be in danger!!"

"...Y-yeah. I get that feeling, too..."

The boy, who had once seen Aileen wield the sacred sword and subjugate the village, nods in agreement.



Neifa had first seen Elefas above the desert.

The technologies of the Queendom of Hausel were shrouded in mystery, and the floating palace was packed with information about them. Since the work was taking place near the kingdom's national border with Ellmeyer, and since Ellmeyer had had war declared upon it, the demolition work—which was really a hunt for treasure—was being conducted jointly by the two nations.

“We’ll let you participate; just don’t cheat on us. We’d have to try you for adultery.” Baal laughed. Even though Neifa was a harem consort, he arranged for her to help with the investigation.

The ruined interior of Hausel’s palace was fraught with danger. Sacred power was specifically designed to protect against magic, and it wasn’t all that useful otherwise. Minor collapses happened all the time, and when they did, Elefas was the one they roped in to help.

He was the demon king’s favored retainer, and the highest official present on the Ellmeyer side—someone the Ashmael team had to be nervous around. Elefas was gentle with others, though, and oddly timid on top of that.

Fights broke out easily on a work site that lasted several months, and whenever Elefas stepped in to mediate, he seemed to have no presence. While he did gradually open up to everyone, they came to underestimate him.

Right about then, a large number of articles they had excavated began to go missing. Technological artifacts from the Queendom were likely to sell for a good price, and countless people in power would want them. This was not an unforeseen situation; Neifa knew that Baal had had it in mind and sent her as a spy of sorts. There were many people who were less careful about what they said when they were dealing with a woman.

Neifa had been on the alert for theft all along, and she had an idea of who the culprits were, but there were problems.



First, those culprits were from both Ashmael and Ellmeyer. Depending on how she reported it, it might cause an international incident. And no matter how she thought about it, the one who was giving instructions and coordinating things among those culprits was Elefas.

She thought the situation might be too much for her to handle, but just as she began to think she should ask for Baal's decision, it happened.

One day out of nowhere, guards from Ashmael and Ellmeyer showed up together and arrested the culprits as they worked, giving them no time to argue.

As everyone stood there, stunned, the culprits denounced Elefas, saying he was one of them.

Elefas had dismissed this with a laugh, saying they had no proof.

"I am the demon king's mage. Have you forgotten?"

The cold, mocking smile he'd worn then is still branded onto Neifa's retinas.

In other words, that man had played the part of a subservient, timid, easily led manager, infiltrated the group of culprits, and then rounded up the lot of them. Impressively enough, he'd even been the one with custody of all the stolen items.

She'd thought she'd like to talk to him.

At that point, though, something occurred to her: She was acutely aware of her position as a consort—even if the harem was scheduled to be dissolved—yet here she was, taking an interest in a man who wasn't Baal. Wasn't that cheating?

As soon as the doubt occurred to her, she realized it was probably true.

It's human nature that forbidding a desire makes it grow. The next thing she knew, her eyes had naturally begun to follow Elefas, and she'd become able to pick out his voice from others.

In particular, the self-deprecating way he spoke stood out. She'd frequently considered complaining to him: Here she was, attracted to him, and yet the man persisted in having such a low opinion of himself. He didn't even notice

her. It was so humiliating. She'd wanted to lecture him on the spot many, many times, and is proud of herself for fighting the urge.

Once she returned to the harem, Neifa petitioned Baal to let her leave.

Now that the Holy Dragon Consort had moved in and Roxane had Baal's favor, she knew the harem would have no use for her. If there was any at all, it would be as Roxane's backup if she proved unable to bear children.

Baal was a good man, and a fine king as well. Even if she didn't love him, she'd thought that bearing his child and raising the next king wouldn't be a bad life.

However, she'd found a man she wanted to hold more than she wanted to be held, so that was that.

The world calls that sort of absurdity "love."

Which was why it had depressed her a bit when her husband fled from her on their first night together—a night she'd long been looking forward to. Neifa began to plan out her next course of action, but failed to keep a watchful eye on her surroundings, and those imbecile demon-stone artisans had stolen the march on her.

*Even I think that was foolish of me.*

Neifa sighs. She's been tied up. The chains wrapped around both her arms are infused with magic, and her wrists have been bound tightly in front of her. She's trussed up so thoroughly that even sitting takes a lot of effort and feels uncomfortable, and they've taken the precaution of chaining her to the railing in front of the workshop's smelting furnace.

The artisans must have realized that Neifa's ring is what enables her to use the sacred stone; the first thing they did was take it away from her. However, they didn't strip her naked and conduct a thorough search. Is that idiotic of them or endearing? When she bends over and searches her bodice, a small demon stone rolls out.

"—which is why I'm telling you, we've taken this too far! She's from Ashmael, remember?!"

"She married Elefas, so she's one of us now! If we punish her, they've got no

right to complain!”

What’s more, this is apparently the work of a single faction that has gotten out of control, and now they are having a belated argument over what to do with their captive.

*Are they stupid?* Neifa thinks, unamused. At the same time, she thinks of the trouble her husband’s been through.

Stupidity isn’t a crime, though. As long as they learn, they’ll be fine. With humans, what’s important is their environment.

In the first place, it was Imperial Ellmeyer that had made the Levi tribe this dumb. Claude Jean Ellmeyer is currently trying to take responsibility for that.

Now is their chance. She’s sure she and her husband are the only ones who understand that.

The idea is rather pleasant.

Keeping an eye on her surroundings, Neifa uses her fingertips to hitch up her skirt, bit by bit. She chose her outfit with the intent of being modest—at least initially—and it’s made of heavy fabric. She chastises herself for thinking something so unlike her.

“They’re planning to take our demon-stone technologies from us! Just how hard do they think we worked to complete that teleportation device?”

“I hear they’re already widely in use within the Queendom, though.”

“How could anybody know that?!”

“It’s true,” Neifa says, cutting in.

They only realize that Neifa has regained consciousness when she speaks up. “The Queendom’s technology is phenomenal. If things like that were popularized, it would change the world.”

“...Then we should be the ones to do it!”

“That’s why the demon king is trying to give you the power to do so, and why he’s simultaneously wary of you. Why don’t you understand that?”

Silence falls.

They howl, “We can do it,” “We’ve got this,” and “Don’t sell us short,” but not a single one of them has managed to comprehend their own value. Neifa can scarcely believe it. “You have a future in which you can change the world. Why don’t you believe that? My husband tends to be like that as well, but still...”

“Wh-what now? You’ve told us up and down that Ashmael’s technology is more advanced...”

“Of course it is; the kingdom’s put a lot of effort into it. I’ve also done a lot of study. And so, starting now, we’ll overtake them. Oh... I see. Is that what you don’t like? Competition?”

That’s how inveterate losers think. It’s basically in their nature, so there’s no sense in complaining about it.

With a derisive snort, Neifa puts one knee up, exposing her snow-white leg. The entire group looks shocked. They’re all so naive.

They haven’t even noticed the device in her garter.

“However, even people like you will stand up and take action if you lose everything, won’t you?”

What they’ve been making in this worn-out workshop is their lifelong dream. The whole time they were building their teleportation device, they thought, *Someday, we’ll strike back for sure. Even if it destroys the tribe, we’ll be satisfied.*

They’re still thinking that now, when there’s no longer any need for the tribe to be destroyed.

“I thought we wouldn’t need this shop anymore, so it’s rigged to explode.”

“Huh?”

“Just so you know, this here is the detonator.”

*Go on, burn.*

Do that and their eyes and bodies might finally realize that a new age has dawned.

Although Neifa is still bound, her fingertips push the demon stone in without

hesitation.

Even with explosions, there's a proper sequence that should be followed if one wants to wipe something off the map completely. As Neifa had planned, the detached studio blows up first, and the group screams.

"If you want me to stop, return my ri—"

There's a second explosion behind her, and the group of kidnappers take to their heels at once. Neifa tilts her head, puzzled. *Did I get the order wrong? That can't be... Can it have set off some sort of chain reaction with the teleportation device? My, my. If so, they must have been making something pretty impressive.*

She planned for this building to blow up last, so this is awkward. Unsure whether to be impressed or to panic, Neifa briefly considers her own situation.

She clearly won't be able to run for it. There's already no one else around.

Left with no choice, she shakes her leg, kicking off her sandal, and flips it over. There's a stone embedded in the sole.

It's a sacred stone that can summon the holy king. She remembers the appalled look on Baal's face: *Where do you think you're putting that?* She didn't want to use it, as it would make them look down on her husband.

At this point, though, her only option is to have Baal save her.

"Nei— Miss Neifa!!"

Just as her fingertips are about to touch the sacred stone, a voice echoes above her head, and Neifa freezes, startled.

It's Elefas. He must have teleported in. Flustered, he drops down in front of her.

"Thank goodness! You're all right!"

There's a light *crack*, and Neifa's chains fall apart and vanish.

That's the demon king's favorite retainer, all right. The demon king's mage.

Meanwhile, the building on the right blows up, rocking the workshop. Elefas looks anxious, so Neifa tells him, "This one will explode last, so we're still all right."

“Nothing about this is ‘all right’! So you really were planning on blowing this one up as well?! I swear—come on, we’re going.”

“Ah, wai—”

Before she can grab her sandal, he’s pulled her into his arms. “What? We’ll talk later!”

If she leaves her sandal, the sacred stone Baal gave her will be ruined. However, Elefas seems angry, and when she sees that, Neifa wraps her arms around his neck. “Impatient, aren’t you? This wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t been late coming to my rescue.”

“Listen, it was you who set up these explosions, remember?!”

It’s the first time she’s been teleported by magic.

Smiling, Neifa shuts her eyes and leaves everything to her husband.

In the end, Neifa doesn’t ask for anyone to be punished over the incident, and it’s tidied away as a sort of family dispute among the tribe.

Many are deeply impressed by her stance, and the artisans who had been stubbornly hostile toward Neifa are rebuked harshly by the others—in a way that is very familial indeed—and so the incident comes to a close.

No one will try to lay a hand on Neifa after this. It’s all thanks to the power of that destroyed workshop, which is now just an empty plot of land. Neifa has threatened that group of artisans, saying that if she feels like it, she can just do the same thing all over again, which paralyzes them with fear.

Elefas’s job is to be plied with the carrot and the stick at the same time: He’s watching her place the flower he bought for her in a vase, all the while needling him about the fact that she was about to call the holy king.

“I had no idea the Levi tribe was this foolish. I was impressed.”

“I really am sorry...”

“What are you apologizing for? They’re your tribe. That makes them my tribe. Honestly, it’s such a headache.” Neifa sighs.

Elefas is massaging her shoulders. When he pauses for a moment, she

promptly glares at him. “You aren’t finished yet. Keep going until the hourglass is empty.”

“Oh yes, excuse me, Nei...Miss Neifa.”

“What is that wishy-washy way of addressing me?”

“Um... How should I address you, then?”

“You can’t even make that decision on your own? I don’t recall having a husband who was so indecisive.”

Groaning inwardly, Elefas thinks.

In the living room fireplace, a piece of firewood breaks with a *snap*. His hesitation lasts only as long as that sound.

“In that case... ‘Miss Neifa.’”

She snorts at him derisively.

She can’t be implying she’d prefer it if he simply used her name, can she? No, if he had, he suspects she would have mocked him for getting ahead of himself.

Neifa has just finished reapplying her makeup after her bath, and she checks it in the mirror. Suddenly, her brows draw together into a frown. “What is that pathetically foolish expression supposed to be? Is that how your face normally looks? If it is, then fix it.”

“If it were, I imagine it can’t be fixed...”

“Try, please. It would be a shame to let a handsome face go to waste... And now we trade places.”

*Huh?* he thinks, but Neifa’s already risen from the sofa. She shoos him out of his spot, making him move to the place she’s just vacated.

Neifa turns the hourglass over on the table. The stream of sand begins to sift down again.

“What? Don’t tell me you’re going to massage my shoulders now.”

“Consider yourself fortunate.”

Her slim fingers stroke the back of his neck, and he sits up straighter.



However, almost as soon as she begins to knead his shoulders, Neifa's eyes narrow. "You're far too stiff. I can't press in at all."

"A-am I? I can't tell."

"I see. That's quite like you. You don't pay attention to yourself."

There's a hint of a smile in her response, and for some reason, it makes the depths of his stomach stir restlessly.

The fire illuminates them from behind, accompanied by a soft light from the candelabra on the table. Is he getting caught up in the atmosphere? The words he'd been trying to find the right time to say slip out before he even thinks about it. "...Um, have I met you somewhere before?"

Unusually, Neifa doesn't answer immediately. An odd anxiety spurs him on. "I mean, why has a woman like you come to marry into... To be my wife? Surely you would have been allowed to remain in the holy king's harem. In fact, you had a sacred stone that would have summoned him. That shows how much King Baal favors you, doesn't it?"

Neifa doesn't respond. She simply keeps massaging his shoulders.

"Making sacred items would have been easier in the harem than it will be with us. Even if you meant to marry out anyway, there must have been other, better matches for you to choose from."

"....."

"...What I mean to say is that it seems as if you intentionally chose me. It isn't as if I'm particularly eligible, though. I don't intend to become grand duke, and even if I did, neither my rank nor my authority would compare to the holy king's."

"....."

"On top of that... Um, please don't be angry. Someone has presented me with the frightful notion that, taken all together, this may mean you're in love with me..."

"....."

"I'm sorry, but would you please say something?! This is extremely

awkward!!” Elefas pleads, giving up.

Neifa gives him a merciless, mocking smile. “It was an amusing story, so I was doing you the favor of listening quietly.”

“So it’s amusing, yes, I see!! I’m glad to hear it... No, that’s enough. What is going on?”

“It serves you right. At first, you said you didn’t need me and that I wouldn’t be of use to the tribe, and you wouldn’t even look at me. That was only yesterday.”

It as if she’s calling him a pushover, and he starts to feel even more depressed.

However, her hands fall still, and then she slips them over his shoulders, twining them around his arms. He feels something soft against the back of his head, but he doesn’t dare think about what it is.

“I don’t suppose you’d refrain from running away tonight?”

“Oh no, wait just one moment! I haven’t fallen for you yet, you see, and—”

“That doesn’t matter one bit. Don’t be so stubborn.”

“I think it does matter!! Listen, even I would like to have a proper romance!!”

He said it, and he’s proud of himself for saying it.

However, the shame that wells up inside him makes him turn red. Covering his face with his hands, Elefas continues, “And so, if you’d give me a little time...! I’ll assume that it will be with you!”

“How tedious.”

“Quit balling up my dreams and tossing them away! ...I really haven’t done anything decent so far.”

That’s why he’s only ever watched.

Couples who love each other so intensely, in such a straightforward way. People who are able to live like that.

“...Which is why it’s something I’ve always dreamed of having. Is that not allowed? Is it not all right for me to want to build a proper relationship with

you, and you alone?”

Sighing, Neifa whispers in his ear, “How old are you again?”

“Please stop. What I’m saying is already so embarrassing, I want to die...”

“As far as I’m concerned, marrying the man I love and becoming one with him is the most proper way there is.”

His eyes widen. Forgetting his embarrassment, Elefas raises his face from his hands.

Neifa smiles at him. “Very well. I’ll allow you to court me. I’d intended to make you human, but it wouldn’t be bad to wait until you are one.”

“.....”

“There will be no cheating. Is that clear?”

“...Oh yes.”

“Once your vacation ends, I assume you’ll go back to the capital. You’ll return home on the weekends?”

*Ngh.* A different sort of embarrassment works its way up inside him. He can’t look Neifa in the eyes, and yet he finds himself wanting to touch the hands she’s set on his shoulders. “Yes... I’ll return on weekdays as well, as often as I’m able. I can teleport, after all.”

“Please do.”

“...O-or would you rather come to the capital? I’m currently staying at the demon king’s old castle, but...I could rent an apartment.”

“What are you planning to do if we live together? If I respect your wishes, we’ll be sleeping separately.”

“.....Please don’t say things that will undermine my reasoning like that.”

“You said it yourself. I had nothing to do with it.”

She’s entirely correct.

As he’s writhing in the space between his ideals and his worldly desires, he hears Neifa laugh. Slightly irked by that, Elefas pulls on the hands still resting on

his shoulders. “I am a man, technically, so being dominated from start to finish is rather...”

“My, my.”

The fact that she doesn’t even flinch is because there’s love and forgiveness there.

When he thinks that, he feels strangely sure of himself. He doesn’t even think it’s fast. Not even in terms of trying to build a proper relationship.

*But if I try something with her, I might not be able to stop.*

Even as the thought occurs to him, his eyes close...but just as their sighs mingle, something abruptly yanks him back by the scruff of his neck.

Startled, Elefas opens his eyes. Given the nice atmosphere they were just enjoying, he was sure this was going to work.

“...What is this?”

“Huh? Just a—”

She’s pulling on the collar of his shirt so hard that she’s practically choking him. The light in Neifa’s eyes is sharp, and one look at her face makes him shut his mouth.

From experience, he’s well aware that an ill-chosen remark at this point could end his life.

Neifa murmurs in a low voice that’s almost a growl, “...Lip rouge.”

*Don’t tell me—Lilia’s? From that time in the park?*

Before he can make excuses, Neifa grabs the front of his shirt. “And whose might that be?”

“I...I think it may have been some sort of prank...”

“For a prank, the outline of the lips is very clear, isn’t it.”

“.....”

Lilia is the Maid of the Sacred Sword, but she’s also a criminal and the wife of the second prince of Ellmeyer. She’s a difficult person to even try to explain.

So Elefas just smiles. “It’s nothing you need to worry about.”

“My, what a fine smile. May I ask the rest of your body, husband?”

Neifa slips in close to him and sets her fingers on the top button of his shirt.

It’s the second night of his vacation.

With his virtue in crisis once again, Elefas doesn’t run, but focuses all of his middle management skills on placating his wife.

When Elefas returns to his room in the old castle in the afternoon of his fourth day off, he looks haggard, even though he’s still on vacation.

“Listen, whatever you do, don’t start any trouble. The holy king may be one thing, but the demon king is here as well!”

“I wouldn’t cause problems for you at your workplace, husband. Never mind that, hurry and show me around.”

“I swear, I have nothing but bad feelings about this...”

It’s better than having her barge in on him while he’s working, though.

Now that the workshops for making magic and sacred items are firmly under her control, Neifa has decided that their long-term research will be conducted on the development of teleportation devices. For the veteran artisans who were left completely despondent by the demolitions, this is a delightful decision. They still haven’t fully accepted her, but their resistance has dwindled to merely stubbornness and discontent.

From flat denial to acceptance. *The carrot and the stick, huh...*, Elefas thinks, but he refrains from saying it aloud.

“Huh? Elefas? You’re back alre— Whoa, who’s the knockout?!”

As they round a corner in the corridor, they run into Walt and Kyle.

Guessing this means the demon king is off playing with either the holy king or Aileen, Elefas checks with them. “I’m sorry, I’m in a hurry. Where is King Baal?”

“With Master Claude, in his office. They’re just having lunch, so Sir Ares relieved us.”

“Hey, don’t tell me... Is this that rumored wife of yours?”

“W-we’ll talk about that later— Ow!”

Behind him, Neifa has pulled his hair.

“Why are you being evasive, husband?”

“I, I’m sorry. Um, this is Nei— Miss Neifa. She’s agreed to come and marry me.”

“...Elefas, guy, c’mere a minute.”

“Wh-what?”

Grabbing his shoulder, Walt drags him into a corner of the corridor. “What’s going on here? What’s the story with that beauty?”

“Sh-she was in the holy king’s harem, so of course she’s beautiful...”

“What the heck?! Color me jealous! And check out that chest!”

“Where exactly are you looking?!”

“Excuse me. You, over there.” Ignoring their completely audible conversation, Neifa speaks to Kyle. “I have a matter to discuss with King Baal. Where might I find him?”

“I’m sorry, but King Baal is an honored guest. For security reasons, I must not reveal his whereabouts to anyone I’m not familiar with. Please understand, madam,” Kyle responds properly.

He’s expecting her to get angry, but Neifa nods to him. “Quite so. I apologize. Are you my husband’s colleague? May I ask your name?”

“Kyle Elford. Indeed, Elefas and I work together. Are you his wife?”

“Yes. I’m Neifa. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure’s mine. Elefas’s situation is difficult in many ways, but he’s a good fellow.”

This proper greeting leaves Elefas deeply moved.

Neifa smiles. “I’m relieved to know he has a colleague like you. —You over there as well.”

“Uh, yes?! Oh... I’m Walt Lizanis.”

“If you’re going to look, at least be furtive about it. It’s only polite.”

Laying a hand on the generous cleavage exposed by her dress, Neifa gives him a gentle smile. Walt seems as if he has experience with women, yet even he stands there slack-jawed and stunned.

“Now then, husband, let us go.”

“Uh, yes. Excuse me, we’ll talk later.”

Summoned, Elefas slips free of Walt’s arm, which has gone limp.

Once they’ve rounded the corner, they hear shouting behind them.

“Did you see her?! Gorgeous! Think he’d trade places with me?! I want a wife like that!!”

“Didn’t she just warn you about that attitude?”

“Yes, and the way she did it was phenomenal!! I’m way too jealous! I’m definitely going to strangle Elefas later!”

*What did I do to deserve that?* he thinks, but Neifa, the cause of the commotion, remains cool and composed.

“They’re adorable.”

“Hmm... You’re quite mature about it, Miss Neifa.”

“You can’t possibly be jealous.”

“.....”

“You’re the one who made an ascetic monk of yourself, you know.”

“Yes, that’s absolutely true!!” He agrees with her rather desperately, but it doesn’t help one bit.

Still, the bosom Neifa has so liberally exposed and her bewitching limbs all belong to him. He has to think like that; otherwise, he won’t last long.

Especially now that she’s told him to let her see her former husband.

“Neifa. What, you miss us already?”

“Goodness, Master Baal, listen to you.”



The moment the office door opens, the holy king gives an easy smile, which Neifa returns with a very soft one of her own. Elefas's eyes skate away from the two of them, and he bows to his liege lord instead. "Master Claude, I apologize for interrupting your conversation."

"That's fine. What's the matter, though? Your vacation isn't over yet."

"Ah, well, my wife asked a favor of me..."

"The sacred stone we gave you broke. What happened?"

"So you did know about that. It's been an eventful few days."

The conversation behind him seems oddly loud, and the smile freezes on Elefas's face.

Claude grins at him. "I see. So you're sweet on your wife, too, hmm?"

"It isn't like that at all. I was just thinking there was a decision I might rethink."

"I'm on your side."

"Please don't, Master Claude. I almost felt my heart skip a beat there, which is depressing."

"It's all right. My mage won't lose to the holy king."

When Elefas hears that, he gulps just a little.

Recrossing his legs, Claude props his chin on his hand and looks at Baal. Or maybe he's looking at Neifa. "Do you feel like becoming grand duke now?"

"...I've begun to feel as if I probably won't have a choice."

"In that case, as far as wives for you go, she's a success."

"A success...? She subjected me to a storm of abuse, saying things like, 'You'd refuse? That's so irresponsible! Are you a fool?! How much of an eternal underdog can you possibly be?'"

*"Who besides you could fill that position?"*

He couldn't deny that, when she'd said those words to him full of confidence, he'd thought she was probably right.

“There could be no Grand Duke Levi other than you. As long as you’ve realized that, there’s no longer any need for her.” Claude’s mischievous eyes turn back to him.

Elefas thinks for a little while, then sighs. “Having the holy king as her former husband makes life very hard...”

“It’s all right; you’ll win this. Mostly by doing something shady.”

“That definitely wasn’t a compliment! —And don’t you think you’re getting too close over there?! Miss Neifa, why are you on his lap?!”

He’d turned around without thinking, which put Neifa and Baal in his line of sight.

Neifa toys with Baal’s necklace, and she lets out a quiet laugh. “My, you finally noticed, husband?”

“You’re far too slow. Come and stop Neifa *before* she seats herself on our lap.”

“Very well, I’ll go call your principal consort.”

“Hmph. Don’t imagine Roxane would get jealous over something like this!!” Baal declares firmly, before burying his face in the sofa’s armrest, apparently having managed to wound himself with his own words.

Leaving his lap, Neifa giggles. “You’re always such an innocent babe when it comes to the principal consort. It makes my heart ache.”

“Don’t give us that. You’re the one who asked for a divorce. We favored you.”

“Gracious, don’t tell me you miss me?”

“You’re a good woman.”

“Wha—? Why are you getting closer again? Surely that’s not necessary!”

“In that case, Master Baal, sell the Levi tribe sacred stones at bargain prices.” Drawing a document from her bodice, Neifa dangles it in front of Baal’s face. The holy king freezes up. “Give me a set of old equipment as well. Enough to outfit a magic item workshop.”

“...Woman... This contract— You’re practically asking to buy it at cost...”

“I’m in distress, you see. Please consider it my dowry. You simply need to sign here. If you don’t, I may end up discussing all sorts of things with Lady Roxane... including that one night.”

Neifa’s suggestive remark makes Baal’s face stiffen. Rising to her feet, she looks down at him, slowly waving the document.

“...We’ll sign. We’ll sign, so wipe that from your memory. Understand?”

“You’ve made me very happy.”

“Wait a second, ‘that one night’? What’s that about?!” Elefas shouts.

“Once you’ve finished your ascetic training, I shall tell you.”

“Argh, enough, I want to quit!!”

“Wait one moment, Master Baal!”

The office door suddenly opens to reveal Roxane. Out in the hall, Ares sighs, looking exasperated; he restrained Sahra when she tried to follow Roxane in, and he seems to be telling her not to get involved.

Roxane strides toward them. Unusually, she’s smiling. “It’s been a long time, Lady Neifa. I’m pleased to see you in good health.”

“My, Lady Roxane. This is a delicate time for you. Shouldn’t you be resting quietly?”

“Thank you for your concern. What are you attempting to make Master Baal sign?”

“A contract. In his kindness, His Majesty has agreed to sell us sacred stones very cheaply. I’ve just been exiled from the harem, you see, and I have no money.”

Roxane picks up the contract Baal is about to sign, and Baal hastily makes excuses. “Uh, Roxane. This isn’t just because she blackmailed us.”

“...The term will be two years. If this is meant to last until the Levi tribe has found its feet again, then that seems appropriate. However, we can’t agree to the contract as it stands.”

“Goodness. What about it dissatisfies you, Principal Consort?”

“For the same two-year term, you will also sell us the demon stones you excavate at a price close to cost.”

Invisible sparks fly between Neifa and Roxane. Baal quietly moves to the edge of the sofa; Elefas knows how he feels.

Just to be sure, Elefas asks Claude, “Um, Master Claude... How should we mediate this?”

“It’s nothing to do with me. The Levi tribe is a grand duchy at this point. You have the right to govern yourselves, so you’ll just have to roll up your sleeves here.”

“Did you just shove all this onto me?! Technically, we’re a vassal state of Ellmeyer, remember?! Honestly... Miss Neifa, that’s quite enough.” She glares at him, and Elefas gives her a thin smile in return. “Your consideration makes me happy, but it’s all right. I’ll handle it.”

Neifa’s eyes widen. Then, she gives a meaningful smile. “I see. In that case, husband, I’ll leave it to you. Let’s say this entire conversation never happened.”

“Master Baal, let’s sign this at once. Their next attempt will put us at an even greater disadvantage.”

“Wha—? Roxane, if you pull on us like that, we can’t sign—”

“What happened ‘that one night’?”

“Listen to— Ow, ow-ow-ow-ow, are you trying to break our fingers?!”

The contract is hardly even a factor at this point; the holy king and his principal consort are simply fooling around. Granted, it does look pretty painful...

Claude seems to have gotten lonely, since he asks Keith—who’s finishing clearing the remains of their lunch away—where Aileen is. Sensing that it’s time to take their leave, Elefas turns to Neifa. “Is that enough?”

“Yes. Now Master Baal won’t worry anymore, either.”

Neifa wraps her arms around one of Elefas’s, as if it’s the natural thing to do. She doesn’t look the slightest bit ashamed of herself, and it makes him feel like sulking just a little. “Are you sure? It’s not too late. You could still return to

Ashm— *Ouch!* Ow, ow, you're treading on my foot!"

"Don't talk nonsense. Let's hurry to the next item on the agenda, please."

"Um, of course..."

"Neifa." Baal has reclaimed his fingers from the principal consort, and he signs the contract without looking their way. "We're sorry. We caused you nothing but trouble. Make sure you find happiness."

"Lady Roxane is behind you, glaring. Oh, I'm scared."

Naturally, he's the one who should really be scared.

They can collect the contract later. Elefas doesn't actually mind if it vanishes. The most important thing is to leave before any more trouble breaks out, so he puts an arm around Neifa's waist and promptly teleports them away.

At the end of his vacation, Neifa made two requests of Elefas. The first was to let her say hello to Baal and give him a report.

This was the second.

"Seriously, enough. Give me a break... My stomach hurts."

"My, how awful. I'll make tonight's dinner something that's good for digestion."

"Urgh, thank you very much...", Elefas responds weakly. He's leaning against the castle wall a short distance from the imperial castle.

The weather is clear and sunny, but it's midwinter. When the wind blows, it makes him shiver. Elefas is wearing an insulated cloak, so it could be worse, but Neifa's clothes look very chilly indeed.

...And yet Neifa seems unfazed as she looks beyond the castle wall. Is she carrying some sort of magic item that keeps her warm? He doesn't ask. Instead, he quietly opens his cloak wider and embraces her in it from behind.

"I'm not cold."

"...I'm cold just looking at you."

"What about your ascetic training? Or were you quitting?"

His hand has gone and traced the line of her slim waist, most likely what she's referring to.

Elefas mumbles what sounds like an excuse. "It's basically in men's nature, you know... I mean... How could I not touch this?!"

"Are you sure you just haven't trained enough?"

"That's it exactly, yes."

He slumps, burying his face in her shoulder, and she laughs at him. Pathetic.

"I want to stop training...and I hate that I'm thinking that. I'm such a pushover."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. You've had me right in front of you for four days; I'm impressed you've lasted this long."

"Would you not say things that'll make me start going in circles again?!"

"You're just having guilty fantasies all on your own."

"Dammit, I haven't trained enough...and yet I want to stop... Why was I training in the first place anyway?"

"Many gentlemen mistake denying themselves for sincerity."

*Oh, I see,* Elefas thinks, convinced.

At the same time, he starts to feel as if he's doing something incredibly pointless.

"Just do what you like until you're satisfied; I'm fine either way. You'll return to work tomorrow, and it would be kinder on your body if you refrained from doing things that would make it too difficult to part."

"You really are good at scrambling my reasoning, aren't you?!"

"I was a harem consort, you know."

*So these are feminine wiles, hmm?* Nuzzling the back of Neifa's neck with his forehead, Elefas confesses with a groan, "...I got a bit jealous."

"A bit?"

"I'm sorry, quite jealous! ...And yes, it startled me. The other man is the holy

king. Generally, he's not the type I could even begin to match, so I'm rather appalled that I managed to be jealous."

"I see. I think it's quite human. Isn't that a good thing?"

"...Would it be human of me to end my training this evening, for example?"

Abruptly, Neifa looks as if she understands. "You're touching my leg."

"I'm sorry, my hand just— My inexperienced hand just acted on its own!"

"Do as you please. This is your problem, after all... Are those two Lady Lilia and Lady Aileen?"





Elefas looks in the direction Neifa is pointing.

The knights' brigade is training in front of an audience. Since the entertainment is geared toward young ladies from good families, Aileen is hosting it in Claude's place. It's a demonstration of Imperial Ellmeyer's military might. Or it sounds good when described that way, but it's basically an event where young ladies are shown handsome knights and allowed to squeal over them. It's a bit of an experiment; apparently the way Sahra's eyes shone at the mention of knights gave them the idea. It also serves to keep other nations in check, so Lilia, the wife of the second prince, has also been put to work. She's grabbed the opportunity to cling to Aileen, and Aileen's expression looks rather strained.

Even in this cold air, they're bursting with energy. He can hear cheerful cries all the way over here.

"That's right. The one in the deep blue dress is Her Majesty the empress, and the one clinging to her is her sister-in-law, Lady Lilia."

"I see," Neifa says simply. Elefas blinks at her.

*I brought her here because she said she wanted to see them...*

In the end, Neifa forced Elefas to tell her everything about the culprit who had marked him so heavily with lip rouge. And in order to explain Lilia to her, he also told her about Aileen.

Considering her personality, he avoided saying anything like *Lilia was my first love*, or *Aileen was actually the second woman I fell for*, and tried hard not to let her catch on—but could she have figured it out after all? Her instincts for that sort of thing seem terribly sharp.

The silence begins to frighten him.

At the same time, he feels strangely restless.

If Neifa's concerning herself with them, it probably means she's jealous.

*Of course, it isn't as if I can afford to have her picking fights with Lady Aileen or Lady Lilia!!*

Still, what should he do? Was he actually happy about this?

His feelings naturally lead to action: He embraces Neifa's slender body tightly. From how fearsome she normally is, one would never believe she was this soft and delicate.

He doesn't want to let her go.

The moment that thought goes through his mind, it seems like any more training would be pointless.

Neifa is still staring at Aileen and Lilia. He wants her to look at him instead. "... Um, Nei—Miss Neifa?"

"What is it?"

"Would you mind if I quit my training...?" he asks timidly.

She turns to face him, looking up at him mischievously. "Am I to understand that you're prepared for the consequences of this decision?"

"Y-yes. But, um, I won't do this by inches, so... I'll do my best tonight."

It's an incoherent answer, but she pats him on the head. The fact that it makes him happy is frustrating.

"Shall we go home, then?"

"...Are you sure?" he asks.

Neifa smiles. It's a very lovely smile. "Yes. Their figures are obviously meant for an 'All Ages' rating, so they're no match for me."

"Whatever you do, please don't say that to Lady Aileen or Lady Lilia, all right?!"

Elefas holds out his hand, and Neifa takes it immediately.

*If we're doing this properly, we'll need wedding rings.*

On that completely natural thought, Elefas squeezes her hand.

## ◆ Second Act ◆

### The Guards' Engagements

Setting Elefas's marriage certificate right in the center of his work desk, the demon king turns to Walt and Kyle. "What about you two? Do you have anyone like that?"

His red eyes are steady, and Walt exchanges a glance with his partner before answering. "I'd really like one, to be honest."

"At this point, my work keeps me fully occupied."

"No doubt you'll marry someday, though. Then you'll leave me, like Elefas."

The demon king hasn't signed his subordinate's marriage certificate yet and seems conflicted. When Walt swiftly glances at the cause of all this, the demon king's mage gives a tranquil smile. "You sold me off, remember?"

"But you let her win you over. I believed you'd stay loyal to me until the end."

"That's a lie. You used me in a political maneuver. It's no use playing the victim."

"You really are starting to sound like Keith. You used to humor me more."

"I'll consider that a compliment. Oh, my wife is working on the prototype for a new camera, and she's incorporated your feedback into the design, Master Claude. I'll bring it by soon."

"I see. I'll be looking forward to that. Aileen gets embarrassed when I take her photo, and it's adorable."

Not only has Elefas dodged Claude's unfair criticism, he's even improved his mood. He really has begun to resemble the demon king's adviser, who's making tea behind them.

"And what about you two? You aren't seeing any women behind my back, are you?"

The conversation returns to its previous topic, and Walt replies in an

exhausted tone.

“We wouldn’t do anything that scary...”

“That’s right. It’d just make more work for us.”

“So there’s no one?”

““No. No one.””

They speak in perfect unison—a skill they picked up since becoming the demon king’s guards. Then Walt adds, “I told you; I’d really like one. All I did during my vacation was sleep... Oh, I’m starting to tear up.”

“I see. That’s good, then. Here’s your personal history, Walt.”

“Hmm?” The topic of conversation has taken a strange turn, and Walt’s smile freezes.

His personal history. That was the résumé-type document people sent before marriage interviews.

“...Uh, did I hear that wrong?”

“I didn’t misspeak if that’s what you’re asking. I was always planning on giving you an arbitrary noble title and arbitrarily marrying you off to an arbitrary woman at an arbitrary time.”

“Would you quit saying ‘arbitrary’ over and over? How arbitrary can you get?!”

“Why are you angry? It means the same thing as ‘appropriate.’”

“No, it does not; it means you don’t care much.”

“Enough word games. Just go for now. Arbitrarily.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! Hang on a minute! Just me?! What about Kyle?!”  
He points at Kyle, who’s standing next to him, eyes wide.

Claude frowns. “You may both be my guards, but sharing a wife doesn’t seem like a good idea.”

“That is absolutely not what I meant! I’m asking if he gets a marriage interview, too.”

“I want at least one of you to ask me for permission to marry.”

When Walt hears that, he's sure of it. He leans over the work desk, the corners of his lips curving up. “You're playing with us, huh, Master Claude.”

“Well, Elefas didn't even last a week.”

He sends a pointed glare at Elefas, who feigns ignorance. The man's been increasingly brazen lately. It can't be because marriage has helped him settle down, can it?

“I doubt I'll need to worry about you, but don't make any careless mistakes with her. And don't forget about tonight's soiree, either.”

“Listen, I haven't actually agreed to this yet.”

“Even though I've gone to the trouble of setting it up for you?”

“I'll listen to sweet Ailey when she tilts her head and asks me for favors, but she's the only one!”

“Aileen tells me you're particularly good at playing the lover.”

Walt flinches, stiffening before Claude's bracing smile. The budding flowers in the vase are still closed, proof that his smile isn't genuine. It's the sort of smile that will whip up a window-shattering gale if he gives the wrong answer.

“I'm telling you to go. Is that clear?”

There's only one possible answer. “Yes, sir, gladly!”

“Serves you right,” his partner tells him with a sigh. Walt tries to stomp on his foot, but Kyle evades neatly.

“That's right. One other note about the marriage interview: You aren't Walt Lizanis.”

“Huh?”

“You're not my guard, either. You're the third son of some noble. Isaac Lombard or something.”

“Huhn?!” Walt shouts.

“So he's a standin? But why?” Kyle asks with a frown.

“Report what you learn about the girl to Keith and me, but tell no one else. You mustn’t speak of it unless absolutely necessary, not even to Kyle or Elefas. Or to Aileen, of course. Ultimately, I’ll decide your engagement. That’s not to say that I’m taking the rumor she’s selling demon snuff at face value, however...”

He isn’t just a standin, then. Kyle has picked up on the same thing, and he shuts his mouth. Walt lets out a heavy sigh.

*An undercover investigation.*

“It is still a marriage interview, though, so it’s a good opportunity for you. Be a gentleman and get along with her without marring your dignity as my guard.”

“Leave it to me. I’m particularly good at making friends with girls.”

Claude hands him the page detailing his personal history, and Walt accepts it with a smile.

Attend a marriage interview to get information out of a prospective partner. Kyle is well aware that Walt is better than him at undercover missions like these —no doubt the reason why Claude chose him. He doesn’t get worked up, or feel any other sorts of childish emotions after all this time.

“...Listen, are you really okay with this?”

However, he still sticks his oar in. Maybe it’s habit.

“What, hmm? Do you want a marriage interview, too?”

“That’s not what I mean... What sort of girl is she?”

“That’s clas-si-fied. You heard Master Claude tell me not to talk about it unless necessary.”

“Yes, ‘necessary.’”

Claude is flexible about that sort of thing, but Walt only snorts.

“It’ll be fine, so you just focus on guarding him. You’ll have to protect Master Claude well enough for the both of us while I’m gone.”

Which makes Kyle look at the person he’s supposed to be guarding.

Beneath the glittering chandeliers, the emperor and empress are dancing the

first dance of the soiree. The empress glances up at the emperor, blushing; she's still in the flower of her youth and looks lovely. It's hard to believe that this is the same individual who not only dressed as a boy but ran around the academy in a full-body duck costume, pretending to be security.

*...Marriage, huh?*

He's always thought it isn't for him. Nameless Priests live only to twenty-five or so, and it isn't unusual for them to die before twenty.

However, the demon king did something to him, and as he turned twenty, Kyle gained a life that was completely different from the one he'd anticipated. Once he got used to it, it changed the way he thought about things. Elefas's recent marriage is also a major factor as to why Kyle has begun to think, in a vague way, that marriage and family are no longer just for other people.

At the very least, he knows that something like a political marriage is a possibility for him.

*If I don't find someone who'll make a suitable spouse for the emperor's bodyguard—someone Master Claude will approve of—then I'll probably end up with an arranged marriage as well...*

That thought shifts his focus to Walt again. "...Who'd have thought Master Claude would make you do something like this?"

"Y'know, you've really been messing with me tonight. It's because I'm good at this stuff. What's your problem?"

"You being good at this stuff *is* my problem. Unless you're conscious of the fact that things aren't the way they used to be, someday you'll forget where the boundary is."

Just for a moment, Walt's face goes blank, but he quickly hides behind his usual indecent smile. "I don't want to hear it from a guy whose first love was sweet Ailey."

"Wha—?!"

"Worry about your own feelings before you worry about me. Whatever Master Claude says, you know he's soft on us. If you keep thinking you need to

find a partner who's suitable for the emperor's bodyguard, you're gonna be single for life."

Walt's read his mind. Fighting back an irritated *tsk*, Kyle gives him a sidelong glare. "That goes for you as well."

"Hey, I'm confident I can find somebody on my own. Someone older, if possible. I'll tell you what, though, I'm seriously jealous of Elefas."

"...Enough. This isn't the place to argue."

"I'm with you on that."

They're currently guarding the emperor. They must be the very image of handsome bodyguards who'll refuse any young noblewoman who speaks to them by telling her *We're on duty*. It also goes without saying that they mustn't let themselves be seen arguing.

"I'll go outside and patrol," he says, planning to reset his mood, and Walt gives him a light wave of acknowledgment.

Taking care not to walk too quickly, Kyle turns away from the ballroom, where the guests are applauding the imperial couple's dance, and goes out onto the terrace.

The soiree is being hosted by the d'Autriche family at their estate. Although he knows the imperial castle better, they have been given a certain amount of information regarding the venue and been briefed on the security arrangements in advance. Most of all, since Duke d'Autriche is the empress's father, there is almost no possibility that he'll try to harm the emperor, meaning that this "patrol" won't be much more than a stroll.

*I do tend to find myself in all sorts of unsavory situations. Not that I enjoy them...*

Normally, Walt would have gone out on patrol with the goal of slacking off, while Kyle would have been the one to stay in the venue—but he feels an odd sort of irritation. Walt's probably tense about his mission as well. The term *demon snuff* is a vivid reminder of the place where they grew up.

That said, the church has since aligned itself with Claude, and while the sale of



demon snuff was formerly run by organized crime, the majority of dealers these days tend to be amateurs. There won't be much danger.

He won't let the past haunt him. Time to get his head in the game.

However, the moment he goes to straighten up, he hears a suspicious noise.

Kyle glances to the side and sees some thick bushes that are easily taller than he is; voices are coming from behind them.

If he remembers right, the only thing past here is an old square gazebo. In other words, it's a perfect place for a secret meeting.

Is it a lovers' tryst, or someone plotting something more sinister? From experience, he knows the former is more common. The thought makes him tired, but since he is on guard duty, he has to listen in. He can't make out the words, but... Is that an irritated man's voice, and the faint sound of a woman crying?

*Is something wrong?*

As he narrows his eyes, he hears something fall with a metallic crash. *Don't tell me he's getting violent.* Kyle quickly scans the area. He would have to go all the way back to the entrance of the garden to circumvent the bushes, which would take time. *Tsking* in irritation, he backs up, then launches himself off the stone-flagged path.

As he easily clears the bushes, he sees a woman in a gown. She's seated on the lawn with her head drooping, and she's much closer than he expected. Not only that, but she peers up and locks eyes with him while he's still in midair.

Those eyes are a lovely deep green. Since she's crouched down, her skirts are pooled around her like the petals of a flower. Is it the tears in her eyes that make them seem to shine? She looks like a fairy who's quietly appeared in the light of the full moon.

Kyle gazes at her, unable even to blink, and comes to his senses only after he's landed.

For some reason, there's a cupcake and whipped cream plastered to the girl's soft golden hair, and large stains—probably wine, from the color and smell—on

her beige dress. There's an overturned tray on the lawn, with a dessert stand and shards from broken glasses. Sweets are scattered all over the place. That must have been what he'd heard earlier. He doesn't see any other people.

*I thought someone else was here. Was it just my imagination?*



Kyle has seen something similar, albeit in a different situation, when a maid slips and falls while carrying food.

However, this girl is wearing a gown, even if it is rather old, and he can't imagine she's a maid.

“.....”

While he's struggling to interpret the situation, she seems to recollect herself.

“...I-I'm terribly sorry! Please pretend you never saw me...!”

The girl jumps to her feet and turns to go, but her high heel slips on the tray.

“Ah—”

“Look out!”

She reels over backward, and he hurriedly puts a hand against her back, catching her and landing on his rear in the grass. The lawn cushions his fall, but as he puts his other hand down to catch himself, a small, sharp pain runs up his palm. He's cut it on a piece of glass.

“I-I'm so sorry; this is all my fault! A-are you hurt?!”

“Ah, no.”

But she's already seen his palm. Watching the color drain from her face, Kyle gets flustered. “It's only a scratch. Please don't concern yourself.”

Besides, it would probably heal up in a few seconds. Seeing him do something inhuman like that would probably frighten her, so he tries to hide it, but she takes his hand with unexpected firmness. “W-wait, please. I fall down quite often, so I carry this with me.” Still with the cupcake on her head, the girl searches her bodice, then offers him a handkerchief with a look of relief. “Oh, it's clean!” she quickly adds.

“I—I see...”

He doesn't really understand why she felt the need to say that it was clean, but Kyle responds automatically, and the distraction makes him forget. By the time he remembers, she's gazing at his palm, eyes wide, as the cut vanishes.

Kyle looks away, trying to hide his hand behind his back. Before he manages,

though, she speaks gently. “Goodness... I’ve never seen magic before.”

“Huh?”

“Might you be a magician? Come to think of it, you did fly here, didn’t you.”

Far from being repulsed, the girl gives a musical laugh. Telling him that since she got it out, she might as well use it, the girl covers the now-nonexistent wound on his palm with her handkerchief. She’s acting just as she would with a normal, injured human.

“Thank you for saving me, Sir Magician.”

“Oh... No.” Kyle’s response is delayed, as he’s been staring transfixed at the soft handkerchief wrapped around his palm.

The girl rises to her feet. “I—I don’t know much about places like this. To whom should I speak about tidying up?”

“Oh, erm... I’ll let someone from the mansion know. You should hurry and get changed.”

“Thank you very much. Um... I’m embarrassed, so please forget about tonight,” she tells him quietly and blushes. Kyle simply nods. “All right. Please excuse me, then.”

“Oh—”

With the cupcake still perched on her head, and before he can ask who she is, the girl has plucked up her skirts and run off with light footsteps. She really does seem like a fairy.

He would be able to catch her if he chased after her at full speed, but Kyle can’t bring himself to do it.

“What are you doing?”

“Huh?”

As a matter of fact, he doesn’t even realize he’s left the scene of the spilled sweets and wine and returned to the ballroom until Walt speaks to him.

“What’s this on your coattail? Wine stains? Where did you pick those up? Go change; you’ve got a spare set of clothes in the dressing room. Sweet Ailey’s

going to rip you a new one for looking like that.”

“...Yes, I’ll be back.”

“Hang on, where did the handkerchief come from?”

“Oh,” Kyle says, and even he thinks it sounds vague. He unties the handkerchief. It’s neither lace nor silk, but a simple cotton one, though it is spotless. He can tell it’s been washed and used many times. There’s a bit of frayed embroidery on it: a name.

“Lira Revanche?” Walt mutters, peeking at the handkerchief. “But she’s...”

“A fairy.”

“Huh?”

Kyle gazes at the handkerchief, and Walt looks from him to it and back again, perplexed. Still unable to put it into words properly, Kyle quietly murmurs to himself.

“I met a fairy...”

His partner’s gone off the rails.

The guy is always so conscientious and meticulous that Walt gets fed up with him, and yet for some reason he’s gazing off into empty space in a daze. He’s been like this for three days already and shows no sign of getting better.

Walt’s been very worried that this inattentiveness might incur Claude’s displeasure. However, even Claude seems to have been put off by Kyle’s murmurings of, “So fairies really exist...,” and has decided this is a matter he should simply keep watch over. The demon king is surprisingly good at crisis management.

*He hasn’t messed up on the job, and that’s good, but I hope he’ll be okay... No, I guess that’s not the problem here.*

The story is spotty in more than a few places, but piecing together what Kyle said, apparently a fairy gave him a handkerchief during last week’s soiree. *Fairy* is most likely an invention of Kyle’s addled brain. He’s probably just taken a fancy to a girl.

Walt's personal theory is that there are no fairylike women, only women who cunningly disguise themselves as fairies. Not that he's tactless enough to say this to Kyle when the guy is head over heels.

That's not even the only reason he can't say it. Walt sighs. "Master Claude is definitely enjoying this..."

Going from that handkerchief, the name of the woman Kyle's infatuated with is Lira Revanche.

That's also the name of the woman Walt is just about to meet for his marriage interview as Isaac Lombard's standin.

*How is this happening again?*

He mentally organizes what he knows while waiting in the tidy parlor.

First, Lira Revanche is a count's daughter, and she's suspected of selling demon snuff.

The rumor was started by her very own relative: her uncle, who became Count Revanche in her parents' place when they passed away a few years earlier.

He wanted his niece to marry and settle down quickly, partly because of what happened to the girl's parents, and Claude had heard that the man had been terribly concerned about this at a soiree. There was a reason the emperor was concerned with a mere count, of course.

Several years ago, the previous Count and Countess Revanche, Lira's parents, had needed money. They formed a secret connection with the church and began selling demon snuff. The uncle had reported them, but before the truth of the matter could be determined, Lira's parents and older sister died in an accident. Walt suspects the church got rid of them.

Either way, the count, countess, and their daughter died. Since their illicit trade routes were never discovered, the suspicion was never confirmed. However, the former count Revanche did have a strong motive for using demon snuff to acquire capital: While the Revanche family was old, distinguished, and noble, their territory's harvests had recently failed, plunging them into desperate poverty.

Once the uncle who had informed on them inherited the title, the family gradually found its feet again. The new Count Revanche remained a bachelor, and he raised Lira as his own daughter. He said that even if his older brother and sister-in-law had been selling demon snuff, his niece hadn't known anything about it. Up to that point, it was a fine story.

More recently, having turned sixteen, Lira made her society debut at a ball hosted by the emperor and empress. The young woman had avoided the public eye growing up, and people were hoping for an inspirational story about how Count Revanche had raised a reliable, practical young lady.

Whether or not she knew about all the attention focused on her, Lira came to the ball in a magnificent dress made of the very finest silk and adorned with a multitude of jewels, any one of which could have purchased a mansion.

Had the frugal Count Revanche gone all out for his niece's debut? Some might have seen it that way.

However, her gown was purple, a color only the imperial family was permitted to wear.

Turning deathly pale at the sight of it, Count Revanche groveled before the imperial couple, begging their forgiveness. As the emperor, Claude couldn't grant forgiveness easily. He was coldly sarcastic, wondering whether the girl had been raised wrong, and Empress Aileen interceded on behalf of the pair. Clearly dividing their roles, she tried to settle the matter—but then Lira herself dropped another bomb.

"If the emperor falls in love at first sight, then the object of his favor is a member of the imperial family. That is why I wore purple. Is there a problem? I wore my very best perfume as well. Come, Your Majesty, there's no need to hesitate. Come to me."

There was no way to excuse his niece's indiscretion now, and even the ordinarily mild-mannered Count Revanche looked menacing as he dragged Lira from the ballroom.

They left the assembly in an uproar. Thinking quickly, the empress sulked, saying, "I'm sure receiving advances from such an adorable young thing hasn't genuinely displeased you at all, Your Majesty." Claude pacified her—and so the



incident was put to rest.

Walt and Kyle were off duty that day, with Beelzebuth and Elefas guarding Claude. That means all of this is hearsay to Walt.

However, Lira's unexplained display of wealth and her arrogance couldn't be explained away as the consequences of sheltered naivete or an ill-considered attempt to stand out. Count Revanche kept apologizing and apologizing, garnering some sympathy, but the suspicion of dealing demon snuff has surfaced again.

Lira's parents were already under suspicion so, by extension, it seems only natural for many to suspect the daughter. Lira was ten years old when her parents' accident had orphaned her, but she is sixteen now. If she inherited her parents' connections, she is quite old enough to make contact with a demon snuff dealer.

Not only that, but there is also the *“very best perfume”* she mentioned.

Lira had actually worn a sweet fragrance, but its scent was so faint that even Beelzebuth wasn't able to tell for sure whether it was demon snuff. That probably meant it wasn't, but people still can't help but suspect her.

*Her excuse sounds way too contrived. I wasn't there, so I can't really say, though.*

Claude seems to have sensed something's off as well, as he's decided to look into the matter carefully.

However, his niece's bad reputation appears to have made Count Revanche anxious. Even though Lira only just made her social debut, he's offered an enormous dowry and is trying to rush her into marriage. He's issued a barrage of proposals in the hopes that one will stick, which is how the offer of a marriage interview reached Isaac, the third son of Count Lombard.

Both Isaac's and Rachel's families had been against their own marriage, so the couple essentially chose to elope. This means their marriage hasn't been made public, so when Count Lombard received an offer for a marriage interview, he accepted.

Count Lombard is impressively brazen, but when Isaac learned that the

marriage interview was being arranged without his consent, he brought the matter up as a way to put Claude in his debt—an act worthy of his father. Isaac plans to make the emperor owe him, half demolish his own family's reputation, then force them to approve his marriage to Rachel. Either that, or he's hoping to ensure that they never meddle with the two of them again. It's a self-orchestrated carrot-and-stick maneuver.

In short, it doesn't matter to Isaac whether the house of Revanche is guilty or innocent. By simply participating in the investigation by letting them use his name, he's ensured that the emperor will neatly resolve the issue of the marriage interview at no real cost to himself.

As a result, Claude is using the interview as an excuse to begin his investigation, and Walt is the one who's been singled out for it.

*I'm getting kind of irritated. But it's a shame to waste this opportunity; maybe I'll give him a really bad rep. Bad enough to make things uncomfortable between him and Rachel.*

Walt suspects Claude might even have meant for that to happen when he chose him. *Yeah, that's what I'll do,* he thinks as the parlor door finally opens.

While both families are countships, the house of Lombard is an upstart family that bought its title recently. On the other hand, the house of Revanche is old and distinguished, but its reputation is rather tattered due to the suspicion cast on the previous count and countess.

Should he behave as if they're equals or act like her social superior? Is Lira as odious as rumor would have it, or could she possibly be the fairy that Kyle's been dreaming about?

He glances at the clock; it's already fifteen minutes past the appointed time. *If she's a fairy, no one could fault her for being late,* he muses, rising to greet her.

The girl who enters—without a word of apology—is a young beauty with delicate features and a cloud of golden hair. At first glance, her loveliness does make her seem a bit like a fairy.

However, the sharpness of her jade-colored eyes makes a deep impression. The fabric of her dress looks as if it would be pleasant to the touch, but its color

is a questionable sensuous red. The color gradually fades from the bust downward, so that the hem of the skirt is white. No ordinary artisan could have dyed that. The design of the fine black lace around the sleeves is elaborate and beautiful. It's an opulent gown, even though this isn't a soiree. The large diamond brooch that shines on her bosom, in particular, speaks eloquently of prosperity.

*Except...it's kind of mismatched. It looks like she spent a lot of money, and that's it.*

Perhaps as a threat, her makeup is quite dramatic. A fay prettiness would have suited her much better; she seems to have taken the completely wrong approach. On top of that, the light in her appraising eyes is intense, and yet there's still a childishness to her face that matches her sixteen years. It's hard to form a solid opinion of her.

*It's almost like...she's a rural young lady who got enthusiastic going in fifteen different directions and ended up making herself look peculiar.*

Even if she got rid of that makeup, though, the intensity of her gaze is the real thing.

This is no fairy. Apparently, he was right: His naive partner's eye for beauty can't be trusted.

Mentally shrugging it off, Walt bows first, as the third son of a count should. The girl is technically the only daughter of a distinguished count.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Lira. I'm Isaac Lombard. Thank you very much for your invi—"

"I have no recollection of inviting you. From the length of the wait, surely you've realized by now that you're an unwelcome guest. What a foolish man you are. I was fifteen whole minutes late, you know. Fifteen minutes."

Her scornful smile is clearly condescending, but the fact that she has a proper grasp of the time seems oddly conscientious. And why has she repeated it as if she's boasting?

*I mean, sure, being fifteen minutes late is rude, but...*

What should he make of the fact that she knows she's being rude? As Walt hesitates, not sure how to respond, the girl continues on without pause, lifting her chin haughtily, "I have no intention of marrying an upstart aristocrat. After all, I am a daughter of Count Revanche. In my position, even marrying His Majesty the emperor is no mere dream. I'd never marry a third son with no hope of advancement."

"...I hear you made quite an impression at your debutante ball," he says, casually sounding her out and adding a good measure of sarcasm. However, for some reason, she responds with a sort of gloating challenge.

"I certainly did. And yet, to my dismay, my uncle decided to take it upon himself to set up this marriage interview. You may tell them I rejected you; just go home, won't you? This is a nuisance. You'd prefer that, too, wouldn't you? I recommend seeking a girl who suits you, rather than aiming too high."

She gestures dismissively, shooing him away as if she were chasing off a dog, but Walt is here on a mission. He can't just say "I see" and withdraw.

"That's...a problem."

"Huh?"

Why has that startled her? The girl seems to have realized it's odd as well, and she continues in a fluster, "Buh, b-b-b-but Her Majesty the empress thinks well of you, doesn't she? Even if I turn you down, surely it won't hurt your standing. Will it?"

"No. That isn't what I meant. It's, uh...the way I feel..."

The girl blinks at him a few times. It makes her look quite young.

*Both her looks and her thoughts are all flowers-and-butterflies, and she's bad at subtle maneuvering. In other words—she's just a dumb kid.*

...And she's hiding something. Walt gives her an elegant, mature smile. "No doubt you won't believe me, but the moment I saw you, I thought, *She's the one*. Don't tell me to go. At least give me a chance, won't you?"

When Claude's nearby, it makes him feel as if he's just average, but Walt is confident in his looks. There are no women who aren't delighted when he gives

them a honeyed smile.

...Well, other than the demon king's wife, and other exceptions.

"Wha...? Huh?! What—are, you...?" Sure enough, Lira turns bright red, her mouth gaping uselessly. Her gaze darts here and there as if she doesn't know where to look. "D-don't toy with me, please. Th-that can't be— N-nothing could be that convenient for me!"

"Convenient?"

"N-no! It's nothi— Y-yes. I said as much, didn't I? I—I have no intention of marrying the third son of an upstart count. We aren't a good match!"

Her eyes are darting all over the place. Whether or not she genuinely means what she's saying, it's clear that she's shaken. It's charming, really. Walt continues melodramatically, "True. We may both be descended from counts, but you outrank me. As a result, I had intended to refuse this interview for the same reasons you've just given."

"...Y-yes, of course. Of course, that's the ordinary thing to do. You'd have to be out of your right mind to do anything else."

"You're right; I must have been out of my mind. At this point, I can't believe I ever thought anything of the sort."

"Wh-what?! What are you saying?!"

He mustn't tell her what she wants to hear at this point.

The girl is being quite genuine; her entire body is radiating wariness and expectation. Wearing a tranquil smile, Walt sets a hand over his heart, bows very slightly, and asks a favor. "Please, milady. At least give me time to be sure of these feelings."

The girl starts to say something, then flushes bright red and falls silent.

She may glare at him, but he checkmated her.

Without giving her a chance to refuse, he swiftly sets the date and time of their next meeting and tells the girl he'll see her then, before managing to make his exit while her eyes are still spinning. He doesn't forget to drop a chivalrous kiss on the back of her hand.

*Well, that should do it.*

The servant who's come to see Walt out hands him his hat and cane. He'll never get used to how awkward formal clothes feel.

He leaves the mansion, then turns to look back at it. It's old but well maintained. The ornaments and carpets inside were tidy and the servants properly dressed. It didn't have any of the showiness one would expect from a distinguished family, but they're still able to keep up the appearances of aristocrats. The rumor that the current count has managed to turn their fortunes around must be true.

And then there's that young woman, with her gaudy clothes and her glaringly weak mind.

There's a definite mismatch between the dependability he senses from the mansion and the girl's showiness, especially since the count is famous for his simplicity and frugality. No wonder people have ended up gossiping over that young girl.

"Maybe she was fed up with her uncle's nagging and living frugally despite being from a distinguished family, and got herself involved in something naughty."

Is this just a garden-variety rebellious stage? If she's gotten involved with demon snuff, though, that's no laughing matter.

Either way, when a girl has managed to attain a flashy lifestyle, the next thing she wants is a handsome man—the sort who'll make an accessory she can boast about. On the other hand, at that age it's probably hard for her to let go of her sweet romantic fantasies.

Selling dreams to starry-eyed girls is Walt's particular forte. If he keeps pushing, it won't be long before she confesses a secret to him that she can't tell anyone.

All he's done is look a little besotted for her. *This'll be easy*, he thinks, with a wry, rather scornful smile.

In the first place, any young lady who'd turn to demon snuff can't be all that clever. He isn't denying there are exceptions, but they genuinely are rare.

*“Unless you’re conscious of the fact that things aren’t the way they used to be, someday you’ll forget where the boundary is.”*

His partner’s warning comes back to him out of nowhere. He doesn’t feel any guilt about this, though, so it’s wasted worry as far as he’s concerned. Personally, he’s more worried about Kyle’s eyes. How has he managed to mistake an extremely ordinary girl like that for a fairy?

*Man oh man. Now I just have to figure out how to snap Kyle out of it...*

Walt twirls his walking stick, thinking that’s going to be more work than this.

The day after the marriage interview, two letters arrive. One is from Lira, saying she intends to turn him down after all; the other is from Count Revanche, urging him to continue courting his niece.

The girl and her uncle are saying completely opposite things.

“So I’m planning to act on the uncle’s letter and court Miss Lira.”

Walt has waited until he’s alone in the office with Claude to give his report.

Claude sighs. “When she’s already turned you down... What’s your take on it?”

“Well, let’s see. I do think there’s something there. You haven’t found proof yet, though, have you? It’s too well done for a rebellious girl who’s let herself get carried away and gotten into mischief. Also, the girl herself is a poor actress, so something doesn’t add up.”

“I see. So you got the same impression,” Claude murmurs.

“Oh,” Walt says. “Right. She hit on you at the ball, Master Claude. Do you remember anything about it?”

“Do you think I’d remember every little thing like that?” his master says brazenly.

For just a moment, Walt feels seriously irritated. “You really should pay attention to details, even when they’re not about sweet Ailey...or were you bragging just now? Argh, that’s annoying.”

“That’s not it. Aileen said her dress was peculiar.”

“Well, yeah. Anybody who’d wear forbidden purple to a ball hosted by the emperor definitely needs their head examined.”

“That wasn’t it. She said she wasn’t showing much skin.”

Walt didn’t attend that particular ball. However, he remembers what she looked like on the day of the marriage interview.

*Actually, yes... The color of the dress and her accessories were flashy, but she was thoroughly covered up...I think.*

He’d been distracted by how expensive the dress looked, and he didn’t notice.

“Maybe she was...cold? You’re sure that wasn’t it?”

“The nights have been rather warm lately, and the ball was indoors.”

*That’s true,* Walt thinks with a nod.

“She wore a dress in the forbidden color, decked herself out with gaudy jewelry, and made a sudden advance on the emperor. That suggests a lot of confidence in her appearance, and yet the dress she wore had lace that covered not only her bosom but her arms. Aileen said that was strange.”

“...The lace itself was fairly expensive, right? Could she have been flaunting it?”

“Gowns are weapons meant to make women look beautiful, and on top of that, if she’d come to woo the emperor, she would have had the dress tailored to make her appear as stunning as possible. In fact, even Aileen was impressed by its design. What’s more...apparently it’s public knowledge that I prefer dresses that show more skin...”

Claude’s words have turned evasive, and there’s a distant look in his eyes. Walt knows how he feels to some extent but can’t sympathize: The dresses Aileen wears make his preferences obvious at a glance, so it’s his own fault.

“If she weren’t confident in her figure, it would have made sense, but apparently that wasn’t the case, either.”

“Yeah, if I had to say, it was better than I thought it’d be.”

“If she’d been the sort of mature woman who tries to make men look forward



to undressing them, her attitude wouldn't have been so direct. Conversely, if she'd been attempting to catch my attention by being more modest—Aileen's complete opposite—color aside, the dress's design would have been about right. Again, though, her demeanor was off. In other words, according to my wife, her appearance and personality clashed."

"Ah, I see. I did think her makeup didn't match the rest of her, but that's about it..." Walt's impressed by this unexpectedly analytical female viewpoint, but then a chill runs down his spine. "...Do women always put this much thought into their gown selections?"

"Stop it, you're frightening me. Rachel and that bureaucrat, Serena, also joined in on that conversation. What's more, they were discussing how they would polish her to make her my type... I prefer Aileen, just as she is."

"Uh, no, that's a lie."

"The one who reflects my preferences is Aileen, just as she is, isn't she?"

Hearing the emperor openly boast about his beloved was just embarrassing.

"All right, I understand. I'll give more attention to things like that... If we don't overthink it, could there be some sort of reason? Maybe she deliberately behaved senselessly because she didn't want to get married or something."

"She could have been genuinely naive and simply wanted to stand out, but... Well, I doubt you'll misread her. I leave it in your hands."

"Oh-ho. That's what I like to hear, Master Claude. In that case, I have a request: In a little while, would you help me out during a date?" Walt holds his clasped hands against one cheek, begging.

Claude gives him a reproachful look. "Is this another indecent scheme you're plotting?"

"That's why you chose me, right? I'm a human weapon who'd murder babies without breaking a sweat and lure sweet, rebellious young girls into honey traps."

"What are you saying? No human weapon could be as kindhearted as you are."

That response takes Walt by surprise and leaves him speechless. Claude hands back the letters from Count Revanche and Lira. “If it’s necessary for your investigation, I’ll arrange it. If I ask Keith, he’ll put it on my schedule.”

“Okaaay, I’ll give it my best. If you find anything, fill me in, too, all right?”

“Yes... Actually, we’ve run into a bit of trouble. You’ve seen the state Kyle’s in...” Claude settles back in his chair, looking glum.

This other problem makes Walt scratch his cheek in embarrassment. “Is that idiot still talking about fairies?”

“Yes. I have to be careful not to mention Count Revanche’s name. It’s scary.”

“Did you tell him about the ball?”

Kyle is a painfully serious man, so Walt can’t see him accepting a young woman who was discourteous to his master.

“I did tell him, in a roundabout way. He shrugged it off, saying it must have been somebody else.”

Apparently, what he wasn’t able to accept was reality. Love is blind indeed. Understandably, Walt curses. “That idiot... Argh, fine. In that case, let’s make him find his fairy and shove reality in his face.”

“And what if he clashes with you, and you end up with an extremely nasty scene on your hands?”

That could happen. Visualizing it in spite of himself, Walt tilts his head back, gazing at the ceiling.

“Of course, as Kyle says, there’s a possibility that this fairy of his is someone else entirely who just happened to have Lira’s handkerchief. However, even if we wanted to get to the bottom of this, Kyle has no intention of searching for her.”

“Huhn? So the wimp’s denying reality, *and* he won’t go look for her?”

“He says fairies don’t appear in the human world that frequently.”

There’s a moment of dead silence. Claude folds his hands on his work desk and smiles. “Not only that, he also told me that since he’s affiliated with the

demons, even the light of her wings is too dazzling for him. It made me think I still have a long way to go.”

“Please don’t compete with that, all right?!”

“It made me a little sad, too. That Kyle thinks he can’t meet his fairy because he’s with me...”

“Look, fairies don’t exist in the first place. Don’t you go off in a weird direction, too, Master Claude.”

“Kyle says fairies exist. They probably do. By that, I mean that my fairy is Aileen... So as the demon king, do I not have the right to meet my wife?”

“You’ve been married for over a year; what are you babbling about? Please don’t make this conversation more complicated than it already is!”

“I can hear you outside. What are you being so noisy about, Walt?”

Walt almost screams. Clapping a hand over his mouth to stop himself, he turns around. “Kyle... Don’t scare me like that. Did you knock?”

“Yes. You were the one who didn’t answer. Master Claude, it’s almost time for your meeting.”

“Oh, already? Wait a moment; I’ll go right after I finish this up.” Claude picks up his quill pen and turns to his desk.

Nodding, Kyle comes over to stand beside Walt. “Giving a report on *that* matter?”

“Yes, that’s about the size of it. I had a favor to ask, too.”

“Don’t cause trouble for Master Claude.”

Irked, Walt glares at Kyle coldly. “That goes double for you: Don’t get all giddy over a fairy and neglect your work.”

“And risk harming the fairy’s reputation? I wouldn’t do anything so foolish,” he says, looking sharp and professional.

Walt cringes a little, but he’s sure no one could blame him.

Even Claude, who’s been listening in, gives a sigh that sounds terribly worn out. “You know, it would be wonderful if you let the fairy distract you too much

to keep a close eye on me...”

“Did you say something, Maser Claude? In any case, until an extremely unlikely miracle allows me to meet the fairy on the night of another full moon, I have no choice but to live properly.”

“Agh, you took that in a tiresome direction!”

“What about it is tiresome? It’s just that all I can do is pray and dream of the day I’ll be able to see her again.”

“You’re right. And all I can do is pray and dream of the day when Aileen and I can go out on the night of a full moon...”

“In that case, join me in striving to do good, Master Claude. Work comes first.”

Claude has set down his quill, preparing to pray, but Kyle mercilessly marches him off. Walt watches them go, his face rigid. *It’s fine. I just won’t talk about the fairy to him.*

It doesn’t seem like it’ll negatively affect his work, but he does get strangely excited and sweeps up other people along with him.

He’ll have their master shoulder the burden of Kyle’s earnest, exacting eye. After all, he is the demon king.

He pens two responses, one to Count Revanche, the other to Lira. In the first, he says that of course he’d like to continue courting his niece with marriage in mind. In the second, he outlines his reluctance to give up. In both, he arbitrarily sets a day and time for a date. It’s one of those “I’ll wait until you show up” situations.

A certain someone had once waited for ten hours, and although the guy in question had probably just trusted the girl to meet him, it was an extremely effective strategy: It capitalized on the other person’s guilt and sense of superiority.

*First, I’ll sway her heart.*

However, the one who appears at the park he designated as their meeting spot at the appointed time is Count Revanche. The man wipes his sweaty face

with a handkerchief. “I’m terribly sorry, I’m having her get ready at the mansion right now! Please don’t be angry!”

“Oh, no, don’t worry about it. It’s not as if anyone asked me to wait.”

He’d written the time of their date in the uncle’s letter as well because he hoped the man might drag Lira out to meet him, but he didn’t expect the uncle to come running in person.

Sighing, Count Revanche raises his head. “I may have spoiled her too much. The child’s terribly unreasonable... I’ve told her again and again that matches this good are extremely rare. I had no idea she’d shut herself up in her room on the day of your date.”

“It’s only natural that I’d pale in comparison to His Majesty.”

“I’m so ashamed. The sheer impudence. Even for marriage interviews, all I ask is for people to simply meet her once and speak with her, and still they refuse one after another... It’s humiliating for me as well.”

That’s generally what happens to anyone who publicly disrespects the imperial couple.

“I understand your concern. However, personally, I’m grateful. It means I’ll be able to court her at my leisure.”

“I can’t thank you enough for saying that.” Count Revanche gives an exaggerated sigh of relief. Then he beams at Walt. “Someone from the house will bring her, so please wait just a little longer.”

“...If she’s that reluctant, I don’t mind trying again some other day. This was something I’d proposed without consulting her anyway.”

Certainly, he’ll make more progress on his assignment if she does come, but having her dragged out here is likely to sour her image of him.

Count Revanche’s eyes widen, and he shakes his head. “No, no, you mustn’t indulge her like that! My niece is in the wrong here. Besides, you’re a real ladies’ man who’s fallen for her at first sight. That would delight any girl.”

“I’m...honored to hear it.”

“I’ve given her a stern lecture, and she’s repentant as well. She’ll come

quietly. And I won't even be angry if she doesn't return home this evening."

Count Revanche laughs. Walt tries to follow suit, but his cheeks feel stiff.

The man's probably joking; he knows that. Still, it irritates him.

*Maybe that was a bad move. I only needed Count Revanche to put in a few good words for me... I had no idea he'd be this enthusiastic.*

If the uncle gets carried away before he's managed to get any information out of Lira, they'll have trouble on their hands.

"I'm not going to take advantage of her. I want to build a relationship with Miss Lira in good faith."

His disapproval must have gotten through, because Count Revanche looks flustered. "Ah, I don't mean to rush you. It's only the thought that my niece has perpetrated another blunder has made me very anxious..."

"You're worried, I take it."

"Yes. It's rather embarrassing, but in spite of my age, I have plans to wed as well."

This is news to Walt.

"Well... Congratulations. But then what will become of the title?"

"Oh, don't worry. It won't happen until after Lira's married. No doubt I'll act as an adviser for a while, but the title will go to Lira's husband."

"Ah, that wasn't what I was concerned about."

This man had set the family back on its feet, and yet he wasn't thinking of keeping the title for himself? Walt gives him a dubious look.

Count Revanche shakes his head. "Unless this sort of thing is done properly, it will cause trouble in the future. Could you find it in yourself to trust me?"

"Of course; I'll be counting on you. In any case, your reputation as an honorable man is renowned."

When the suspicion of selling demon snuff had reared its head, no one had seriously entertained the idea that Count Revanche could be involved.

“Ha-ha. I’m honored to hear that. I would also like to count on you, though. You see, it sounds as if strange men have been hanging around my niece recently, and I’ve been wondering what to do about it.”

Are they from the church? Either way, there’s a good possibility that they’re somehow connected to the demon snuff.

“What sort of people are they?” Walt asks quickly.

Looking startled, Count Revanche waves a hand dismissively. “Oh, I have no proof of anything. As a rule, Lira doesn’t set foot outside the mansion. However, the servants have reported seeing men hanging around...and it really looks as if...”

“As if they’re connected to Miss Lira?”

“Yes. If my niece says or does anything odd, could you confer with me about it first? The survival of the family may hang in the balance,” Count Revanche says, lowering his voice. He looks worried about his niece.

Walt nods. “Very well. Miss Lira is a guileless young lady, so by incurring the emperor and empress’s displeasure, she may have attracted attention from strange quarters.”

“Yes, yes, that’s right. She is of a certain age, and she really is naive, with a tendency to dream. It may be because I kept her out of the public eye— Ah, I believe that’s her.”

A carriage bearing the crest of the house of Revanche has stopped on the broad street, and the count smiles. “Seeing me would sour her mood, so I’ll slip away now.”

“...Having a teenage niece must be hard.”

“No, no. All right, thank you very much for your help.”

Count Revanche hurries away, avoiding the carriage. He’s probably a good uncle; it’s hard to see him as anything else.

*Still, little things keep tugging at me. I keep thinking, “His niece must be in the way, so why is he so kind to her?” ...I sure am warped, aren’t I.*

Scratching his cheek in embarrassment, Walt waits where he is until Lira

finally steps out of the carriage. *Come to think of it, how is she dressed?* He looks carefully, and then he notices it.

The girl, whom he hasn't seen in a week, is wearing a dress with adorable puffed short sleeves.

It's a bit of a letdown, really.

*Well, sweet Ailey's instincts are bound to be off sometimes. It's not as if the dress is a good choice for the occasion anyway; she may just have bad fashion sense.*

It was probably just a coincidence. There's a distinct possibility they've been overthinking it.

When a woman has to hide her skin, the reasons are seldom good.

"Thank you very much for coming, Miss Lira."

"What are you talking about? They forced me to come!" Under her parasol, Lira looks frustrated. He couldn't really expect anything else. Walt thinks it wasn't the best move, either.

"My apologies. Count Revanche didn't scold you, did he?"

Startled, Lira looks up. Walt asked the question casually, but she looks so young in that moment that he finds himself similarly surprised. "Oh, um, you see... I told the count as well, so if that's what made him compel you, I'm very sorry..."

"....."

"Um. From now on, I'll only contact you about these things. That way Count Revanche won't be angry with you."

Lira looks glum, and when she doesn't respond, an odd anxiety wells up inside him. *This is bad. Did he really bawl her out?*

Lira looks at the ground. Then, finally, she responds. "...Is that how it works?"

"Pardon?"

"You aren't going to report everything?"

"...To Count Revanche, you mean?"



She doesn't react, but she also doesn't correct him, which makes the answer obvious.

More than anything, Walt's instincts are telling him that this is an opportunity. He speaks even more gently, although he's careful not to sound shady. "I'm proposing marriage to you, so I'm on your side. If anything happens, you can always talk to me."

"...Do you like my clothes today?"

"Huh?"

Walt hadn't anticipated a question from that angle, and his attempt to establish an intimate mood falters.

Glaring at him with murder in her eyes, Lira shouts, "I'm asking whether you like my clothes today!"

"They suit you. You look adorable," he answers, without even taking a proper look at them. Any womanizer can give that answer as easily as breathing; it's basically a reflex.

However, Lira blushes red, then ducks under her parasol as if to hide it. "I—I see."

"....."

"Wh-what? If there's something you want to say, then say it!"

She'd been quiet and withdrawn of her own accord, and now she comes out swinging just as arbitrarily. Her face is still red, though.

Abruptly, his expression turns serious. "You're adorable."

"Y-you said that already. As clothes go, they aren't much. You don't really have an eye for these things."

"No, not your clothes. I meant your reaction."

Walt can practically see a magnificent cloud of steam rise from her head as she backs away. "Y-you're making fun of me, aren't you?! You think I don't know anything, that I'm naive. That's not true, all right?!"

"...I, um, I don't think you should work yourself up like that..."

Even her voice sounds rattled. When he gives her a pitying look, she gives him another fantastic reaction.

“E-even I can do it if I try!”

“Do what?”

“Take a turn around the park, at the very least!” She makes that bold declaration with tears in her eyes, and it completely finishes him.

As Walt claps a hand over his mouth, desperately fighting back laughter, Lira gets even angrier. “What?! Did you have a destination you’d prefer in mind?! Tell me then!”

“N-no... That sounds plenty entertai— I mean, just walking is enough for me.”

“Do whatever you want!!”

She’s even a poor loser. Perfect. Turning away in a huff, Lira starts down the park’s footpath. Walt follows her, one hand still over his mouth. *H-her reactions are too honest...! Really, it’s been a while since I’ve seen someone be this candid.*

It makes him feel nice and superior when a woman swoons over him or builds elaborate fantasies around him, and it’s stimulating trying to size up each other’s hidden motives. Both cases have their own pleasures.

However, blushing when he compliments her, getting angry when he teases her— Interactions that ordinary are novel in their own way.

“If I’ve offended you, I apologize.”

“Don’t apologize when you don’t feel the least bit bad about it!”

*She’s got that right,* Walt thinks with a wry smile. *She’s probably not a bad kid. Not that that makes it okay to let her off the hook.*

The same goes for him: Just because someone’s doing something bad, that doesn’t make it okay to trick them.

Once that thought goes through his mind, he says what he’s really feeling: “I’m sorry.” Lira stops in her tracks, then looks back at him. “I am on your side, though, Miss Lira.”

He lies confidently, and those earnest eyes of hers bore into him. But Walt

doesn't look away.

After all, this is work.

"...Don't speak so politely."

"What do you mean?"

"You were being yourself a minute ago, weren't you."

His eyes widen very slightly. She's picked up on the fact that the apology he let slip a moment ago was genuine. She has good instincts.

"And don't call me 'Miss Lira.' It makes me feel like you're mocking me."

"...You say that, but..."

"Just 'Lira' is fine. Be grateful, would you?" The blunt way she speaks is both arrogant and refreshing.

Walt responds with a wry smile. "In that case, Lira, I'll take you up on your offer. In addition to a stroll around the park, I'd like you to come shopping with me."

"Shopping? Where?"

"The Oberon Trading Firm."

Walt is currently Isaac Lombard. His plan is to preempt any doubts she might have; with this sort of thing, an accumulation of subtle details is important.

In addition, the Oberon Trading Firm—originally proposed by the empress and now presided over by Isaac Lombard—is an object of adoration for women across a wide range of ages and social backgrounds. If "Isaac Lombard" genuinely intended to woo a girl, it would be only natural for him to take her there.

*Although the reality is completely different. Aah, poor Rachel. Although to her, I guess that shop is Isaac and sweet Ailey's, huh... Yikes, that's complicated.*

However, none of that has anything to do with Lira, and she blushes and starts to fidget restlessly just like an ordinary young noblewoman. "The Oberon Trading Firm...? What are you buying?"

"If you have proof that our date went well, Count Revanche is less likely to get

mad at you.”

“S-so you’re telling me to just go with you quietly and accept it?”

Walt revises his opinion of her: She’s actually pretty sharp.

*Well, I guess she would be. Those instant responses mean she’s got good instincts.*

The flip side to having good mental reflexes is not thinking things through. If it works against her, she’ll wear dresses in the forbidden color; if it works in her favor, she’ll see straight through to the truth.

Walt is passing himself off as somebody else. Thinking he should probably avoid underestimating Lira, he redoubles his efforts.

“You will come with me, won’t you?”

“—So I want you to give me some rare cosmetics; something that’s still in development.”

“You barge in on the guy you’re impersonating with no warning and immediately make shameless demands—is that something the church teaches? Or is it the demon king’s policy?”

“Both,” Walt jokes, flashing two fingers in a “V” sign.

Isaac, who’s been working in the president’s room on the top floor of the Oberon Trading Firm’s flagship store, sets down some documents and sighs.

“You’re the one who brought this incident to the emperor and empress, so there’s no way you won’t cooperate. Right?”

“Sure, but who brings their marriage interview partner here out of nowhere? What are you gonna do if she figures it out?”

“The empress only officially transferred the position of president to Isaac Lombard recently. As a matter of fact, a lot of the employees don’t know what you look like, do they? If I tell her we’re here for a secret inspection and to act like a customer so nobody catches on, there won’t be any problems. Girls her age like that sort of thing anyway.”

Isaac props his chin on his hand, his expression sour. “...What if she gets

carried away, buys a product, and wants us to put it on her tab?”

“Well, that’s a necessary expense. Like I said earlier, you were the one who pitched this idea to us.”

“Say things turn sour once this is all over, and she barges her way into the store demanding to see me. What then?”

“Maybe I could console Rachel with ‘Yikes, I hear Isaac was cheating on you. You poor thing.’ And then Serena will scream at her to get divorced ASAP, but that’d probably be about it.”

Isaac’s eyebrows rise slightly.

Walt raises both hands, joking with him. “It’s not like I want to do this. It’s a job.”

“Oh yeah? Wasn’t it dumb to leave her alone and let the staff handle it?”

“Mm, she’s stubborn. I told her they’d give her special treatment if she said she was my fiancée. Naturally, she said she’d never do a thing like that. Girls like her have a hard time taking stuff back once they’ve said it, so we’ll be safe for a while.”

“So you’ve already steered everything where you want it to go, huh? That’s nasty.”

Walt decides to take Isaac’s disgusted expression as a compliment. Isaac pulls a bundle of keys out of the desk drawer, gets up, and heads over to a safe in the corner of the room.

Watching him gratefully, Walt keeps talking, almost griping. “Actually, I wish she’d pitch a fit and start shouting, ‘I’m Isaac Lombard’s fiancée!’ That would make this go much faster.”

“She doesn’t trust you, huh? So the demon king’s guard isn’t much of a Casanova after all.”

“The girl’s clever, although she does seem unskilled at subtle maneuvering.”

When Isaac hears Walt’s assessment, he pauses in the act of rummaging through the safe. “From what I’ve heard, I really doubt that.”

“Were you at that ball, Isaac?”

“Of course I wasn’t. If there was a risk I’d already run into her, I couldn’t have loaned my name for this. —Yeah, I knew it: Most of the stuff’s at the old castle. About all I’ve got here are lip rouges in the trial phase.”

“If they’re not being sold yet, that’s good enough.”

Closing up the safe, Isaac shows him two tubes of lip rouge. “They’re different colors. Which one are you gonna take?”

“How a guy like you managed to get married is a mystery.”

“Huh?” Isaac scowls.

Walt snatches both tubes from his hand. “With things like this, you take both of them, put the rouge on her yourself, compare the two, then put some serious thought into which one’s better. The only person who’s allowed to get away with some lazy line like ‘Everything looks good on you’ is the demon king, and that’s because his face is a universal pardon.”

“.....”

“They don’t feel like luxury items, though, if they’re just like this. Got anything to make them look extra-special?”

“We’ve got trays for showing products to customers, but...”

“Nah, that would be going overboard. If I want it to feel like we’re lovers, it’s best to have something that can be done quietly in a corner... Oh, can I borrow this handkerchief?”

Walt’s sharp eyes have spotted a handkerchief made of lustrous silk; it’s probably used to bring out the Oberon Trading Firm’s high-end products.

Isaac shrugs. “Be my guest.”

“This’ll do. Okay, I’ll get lost now. —Ah, I might buy some other stuff, too; send the bill to my master.”

“If some woman stabs you someday, you’re not gonna be able to complain.”

Walt has given him a casual wave and turned to go, but that remark makes him stop. He looks back at Isaac’s appalled face and smiles. “And if you get too

obsessed with work and your wife decides she's had it with you, you won't be able to complain, either."

"Argh, just shut up and get out!"

Walt quietly calls Lira to a corner of the shop, puts his finger to his lips, and reveals the new products that aren't being offered yet, telling her it's a secret. The strategy seems to be going well.

If she hasn't been planning on this, he suspects she will run for dear life when he tilts her chin up and offers to apply the lip rouge for her. At least for Walt, this is all according to plan.

However, he didn't expect Lira to begin by taking a long, close look at the rouges.

"Both colors are lovely, aren't they? This pink has a shimmer to it; it's cute, but elegant. Like a fairy."

The word *fairy* makes him grimace a little, but she doesn't notice.

"This other one... It does have a shade of pink, but it seems more orange. This really is a new color. The idea of mass-producing a thing like this... I've never seen anything like it."

"Want to try it on?"

"What are you saying? If it's a prototype, there can't be that many of them. It would be a waste to casually test it like that. I wonder what sort of materials went into making this...and which customer demographic they're targeting..." Lira's eyes are serious.

*So she's not just pouncing on it.*

This strikes him as unexpected, but then again, maybe it isn't. She's sitting next to him on a sofa in the lounge area in one corner of the shop, and he turns to her. "But if you don't try them on, you won't know which one suits you best."

"The orange. It looks as if it would be convenient for everyday use, and I think pink is a little too cute for me. Most of all, it's a new color. I'd like to try it."

She's decided for herself before Walt can say anything. Apparently, she's not the type to ask others for their opinions but has very clear ideas about what she

likes and dislikes.

“Are you sure, though? These may be trial products, but they’re company secrets, aren’t they?”

“No, they just haven’t been put on the market yet.”

If they were really something that couldn’t be removed from the shop, Isaac probably wouldn’t have handed them over, and they wouldn’t have been keeping them in the store safe. They’d have the demons guarding them at the old castle.

Convinced, Lira recaps the lip rouge. “So you really are Isaac Lombard,” she murmurs.

“Huh?! Wait, did I do something to make you doubt me?”

He had no idea she’d been suspicious of him. The idea startles him so much that he asked his question reflexively, but that’s probably the normal reaction. It doesn’t seem to bother Lira.

“You’re one of the empress’s favorites, you know. Even if we do have a long shared history, I wondered if you’d really accept a marriage interview with my family just because you wanted our name.”

“Oh... Oh, but that’s... I mean, yes, I did have that sort of thing in mind at first, but now...”

“Th-that’s as far as this goes, though, okay?! I don’t intend to let you court me, so don’t get the wrong idea!” Maybe it’s because he’d gotten flustered and slipped into speaking casually, but Lila’s gotten wary even faster than when he tried to sweet-talk her. “Listen. Don’t misinterpret this. I’m only accepting the rouge because I need it to make my uncle shut up.”

“...That’s quite clear.”

“Why are you saying it like that?”

“No, no reason. It may be a trial product, but it’s still a present; I’ll have them wrap it for you.”

Walt isn’t Isaac Lombard, but he really is close enough to the Oberon Trading Firm that his face is enough to give him the run of the place. If he whispers his



name to an employee, they'll at least wrap a gift for him.

"Yes. I wouldn't want my uncle to suspect anything odd..."

"This was the color you wanted, right? Just stay here and I'll—"

"Oh, wait!"

Walt's taken the lip rouge and started for the counter, but Lira grabs his arm. He turns back, only to see her pick up the other lip rouge. "...Make it this one after all."

She holds the pink one out to him. Walt frowns; he's still holding the orange lip rouge. "But you said you liked this color best."

"Y-yes, I did. But...I think I can use this one, too!"

"Didn't you say this one seemed more useful for everyday wear?"

"I—I remembered I'm having a new dress made. Pink will match it better; besides, it's a standard color. Th-the new color might not suit me."

Her reasoning sounds logical, but the sheer amount of times she's blinking makes it obvious that she's trying to cover something up.

He has no idea why she suddenly changed her mind, though.

"So not that one, please. I like this one better." She seems set in her decision. After this, she clams up, as if to say there's no reason at all behind her abrupt change of heart.

Walt sighs, and the girl looks down, aware of how she must seem. "How about this, then? I'll give you both."

"What?" Lira looks up.

Walt smiles at her. "Would you like that?"

"U-um, but..."

"That was the original plan anyway. It's just that you went and chose one, and I didn't want to force you to take something you didn't want. I'll go have these wrapped."

When he takes the other lip rouge from Lira's hand, she releases his arm.

As he heads toward the counter, he hears her mumble, “Th...thank y—,” but pretends he doesn’t.

Was it mere caprice or selfishness? Saying it was either doesn’t feel right.

*If she were really selfish, she would have asked for both right from the start instead of choosing.*

That option didn’t even seem to have occurred to her until Walt suggested it. A moment ago, she’d clearly weighed up something and had been about to give up the new color she actually wanted.

“...Why would she go out of her way to choose a color that didn’t suit her?”

Was she planning to do her makeup in a way that wouldn’t look good on her? Why? —Well, that was obvious: to pass herself off as someone else.

As a girl like a fairy, for example.

*...I’m overthinking it. Makeup does change a woman, but there’s no way it’d ever make her look like a fairy. Even sweet Ailey didn’t when she dressed up.*

He was the one who realized Aileen was a girl when she was dressed as a boy. There aren’t too many moments when it’s possible to mistake a woman for something else. That is, unless you have knotholes for eyes, like Kyle.

Walt has the lip rouges wrapped and packed into an elegant paper bag, along with some chocolates he’s been told are new. When he returns to the lounge area, he blinks: Lira’s gone.

Scanning the area, he promptly finds her again.

“Thank you, miss.”

“Don’t worry about it. It looks as if the employees are all busy with other customers.”

She’s opened the shop door for an elderly gentleman who’s carrying a large package, and she’s now helping him down the stairs.

*...She really is just a good, decent kid.*

That’s the only impression he gets from the scene, but he can’t just stand and watch. Walt hurries outside and calls to the gentleman, who’s just reached the

bottom of the stairs. “Do you need a carriage to take you home?”

“Y-you can go—”

“I plan to hail one, so please don’t trouble yourself.”

“In that case, allow me to carry your package until then. It’ll be easier to flag down a carriage on the main avenue, so let’s head over there.”

He plucks the package from the man’s arms; it’s not heavy, but it is bulky and awkward to hold. Lira looks as if she wants to say something, but she must have decided the old gentleman is more important, because she comes along quietly, lending the man her hand for support.

They manage to quickly flag down a carriage, and after they’ve seen the elderly gentleman and his package off, Walt involuntarily murmurs something to her. “You’re a good kid, aren’t you?”

“Wh-what? If there’s something you want to say, then— Oh!”

Lira cries out, and Walt looks up, following her gaze. The reason is obvious.

There’s water falling from the sky. One of the residents of the building’s higher floors has emptied something like a vase out the window without checking to see if anyone’s below. There’s no hostile intent; it’s just an accident. Lunging a little will take him out of its path easily. There aren’t any obstacles in that direction. After arriving at that conclusion, albeit far more slowly than a normal person, Walt is just about to jump when something shoves him in the chest. He staggers.

*Huh?*

Lira’s pushed him out of the way, and the water douses her with a resounding splash.

“Are... Are you, okay?”

Protecting Walt has left Lira soaking wet, but she’s the one who asks the question.

*H-her reflexes are way too good. Did she just move on instinct?*

It might be because he’s a little stunned, but that’s the first thought that

occurs to him. The next one is something quite different. *She protected me without thinking? —Me?*

“Um, excuse me? I’m asking if you’re all right.”

“Y-yes.”

Walt nods. Her shove moved him out of the way enough that he’s been hit with only some of the spray. Lira brushes her long, wet hair back over her shoulders with both hands, shakes her head like a puppy, then looks up.

The water droplets sparkle as they reflect the sun, adorning her pale blond hair, long eyelashes, round cheeks, and full, smiling lips.

“I see. That’s good.”

*There really can’t be too many moments when it’s possible to mistake a woman for something else.*

The next thing Walt knows, he’s banging his forehead against the brick wall behind him.

“Wha—? What are you doing?!”

“I think there may be something wrong with my eyes.”

“I’m the one who got splashed with water. Why are *you* acting so strange?”

That jolts him back to his senses. She’s soaking wet; he should lend her his handkerchief, and then...

“You’re all red. This is already wet, so that’s perfect.”



Lira's gotten her handkerchief out first. Standing on tiptoe, she presses it to his forehead, smiling at him as if she's proud of herself. This time, Walt really is left speechless.

Somebody overhead finally shouts down an apology, but Walt finds himself unable to respond.

Although his partner should be busy with his other job, scandalously, the man is lying face-down on a couch in the corner of their master's office. Kyle, who came to the office to retrieve something Claude has forgotten, frowns at him.

*Is he slacking off?*

He walks deliberately over to the couch, making sure his footsteps are audible, then frowns for a different reason.

"...What's the matter?"

Walt has flung his arms and legs out across the couch, and they lie there limp, as if he has no energy left in his body. "Kill me, please..."

What's more, his response makes no sense. At the very least, it's clear that he isn't just slacking, so Kyle folds his arms and rephrases his question. "What is it? What's the matter? Did you mess up somehow?"

"...Listen. You said you met a fairy, right?"

Kyle blinks. Then he nods, flushing slightly. "Yes. It was in a garden on a moonlit night. Come to think of it, she may have been a fairy of sweets..."

"Nobody cares. What I want to know is exactly when you thought that. At what point."

"Right from the start."

"I'm asking you what made you fall for her!"

"Wha—? M-my feelings are nothing that impure!" The way Walt puts it is so commonplace that it leaves Kyle at a loss for words.

However, as if in response to the heat in Kyle's cheeks, Walt's gaze gets colder and colder. "After you spouted all that moony nonsense? Don't mess with me."

"Who's messing with who?! I don't see her that way; I just want her to have

all the happiness in the world.”

“Argh, you should get over those sorts of dreams and fantasies when you’re in your teens, idiot! Come on, there must have been something. The moment you mistook her for a fairy.”

“I didn’t mistake her for—”

“Shut up! I’m seriously irritated right—now!”

Even though Walt was limp and listless just a moment ago, he gets behind Kyle in a weirdly agile motion, loops an arm around his neck, and starts to choke him.

“Hey! Wha—? Are you serious...?!”

“Forget that, just answer my question! What was it that clinched it for you?!”

“What *clinched* it...for me? There was, nothing, like...”

*Right from the start, she was...* Kyle thinks about it, but in between his increasingly rapid breaths, he suddenly remembers. “—I, got, hurt.”

Walt’s arm eases up. Kyle keeps going, remembering as he speaks. “I cut my hand on some glass. It was just a scratch, so it healed up in no time, but... She saw it happen. And she wasn’t repulsed. Even so, she said it would be better to treat it...and she wrapped that handkerchief around it...”

A soft warmth spreads throughout his chest, and Walt sinks back, collapsing onto the couch. “I see... Yeah, I get it... Ha-ha-ha. That makes sense... We’re weak to that sort of thing. Of course we are. Nobody ever treated us like people, after all. It’s so simple, I wish I was dead...!”

They may not always get along or understand each other, but Kyle is understandably becoming concerned about Walt’s bizarre attitude. “What’s the matter with you? You’re acting strange.”

“Leave me alone... Argh, I hate this... Being the same as you makes me want to die—but it’s still just a possibility in my case! She hasn’t reached *fairy* yet!”

“Wh-what, what’s this now?”

Walt’s intensity makes Kyle draw back. All of a sudden, a potential answer

occurs to him. Walt is currently investigating Lira Revanche, a count's daughter who's suspected of selling demon snuff—the name that was embroidered on the handkerchief Kyle's fairy gave him.

“Did something happen with Miss Lira?”

“Nothing, absolutely nothing, there's no way in hell I'd let anything happen, so no, it's nothing,” Walt says, without even taking a breath for air.

He probably means, *Don't ask*. Sighing, Kyle sits down on the edge of the couch. “You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. Master Claude's put a gag order on you anyway.”

“.....What did your fairy look like?”

*More questions?* he thinks, but Walt's voice is weak, and he can't bring himself to refuse when he doesn't really have to. “She had long, pale blond hair as soft and light as candy floss.”

“Were her eyes green? Deep green?”

“Yes, like jewels. —What about it?”

“Aren't you curious about whether your fairy is Miss Lira or not?”

“If this has anything to do with the disrespect shown toward Master Claude, I heard about it, but can't imagine she'd do anything of the sort. She was ethereal and seemed as if she might disappear. I think it must have been someone else.”

“...At this point, I'd really like to think your eyes aren't knotholes.” Walt lifts his head, then sits on the floor, kicking his legs out carelessly, and leans back against the couch, looking up at the ceiling.

Kyle looks down at him. “Are you all right? ...Do you want me to swap with you?”

“Huhn? You know you couldn't handle a job like this, Mister Dull-as-Ditchwater.”

“You're not suited to it, either. You get too emotionally invested.”

Walt is very sensitive. It's what enables him to intuit what other people want



and act accordingly, even when it's a job.

When they want him to hold out his hand, he offers it. When they want to be consoled, he comforts them. Hearing someone scoff and say that was calculated and fake would make Kyle feel like hitting them. "Can you do that?" he'd ask. "Can you understand it?"

Could they focus that much emotion on someone else when it meant stifling themselves?

"I think you've got the wrong idea about me."

"No, I don't. You've been like that since we were Nameless Priests."

So much so that seeing their companions die off one after another had pained him, and prompted him to suggest running away, trying to grant a wish Kyle didn't even know he had.

*...I told him so. I said he'd forget someday.*

Was he doing this for work, or was he serious about it? Walt would lose sight of that boundary and cross it by accident. He'd go for wool and come home shorn.

"About what you said earlier. I'm really not dreaming of anything with her."

"Are you sane? I heard you weren't planning to look for her; are you seriously that out of touch with how you feel?"

"No, I'm aware of it. It's probably love or romance, that sort of thing."

"Watching you say that with a straight face is funny. Yes, go on, continue."

"Listen, seriously... I think this is true for you as well. Don't you think just having had that experience is enough for us?"

Walt's gaze shifts from the ceiling to Kyle. "I'm not a big fan of that mindset. But I do get it."

Under normal circumstances, both of them would have died a long time ago, but here they are, blessed with companions, living like ordinary humans. Adding love to the mix would be almost too much of a luxury.

Which is why the first thing that he and Walt both did when offered that

luxury was hesitate.

“Why don’t you look for her properly? That fairy of yours.”

...And yet, seeing his partner—who’s so much like himself—hesitate makes Walt want to spur him on.

“If I see her again, I’ll ask her name.”

“Why are you so passive about it? You’d feel better if you got everything sorted out.”

“As if you have any right to talk... I don’t know what’s troubling you right now, but both Master Claude and I are on your side, and you have a slew of other allies to boot. It isn’t like it used to be. If it gets to a point where lying hurts, then say so; that’s what I mean when I say things have changed.”

Walt gives him a stunned look, then slowly breaks into a smile. “I don’t plan to sink that low. This is work.”

“I’m not making light of your skills or your pride. It’s just, if logic can’t get you through this, I think that’s probably how it will have to go.”

“I don’t waaaant to.”

“We managed to be rational with Ailey.”

Learning that Aileen was the demon king’s fiancée had shocked everyone, and although it had been more intense for some than for others, pain had run through all their hearts. Kyle thinks that had probably been the same type of emotion.

However, everyone had been so uniformly rational about it that it was funny now.

When they were told she would one day be the demon king’s wife, they’d resigned themselves to the fact she was out of their reach. They wanted her to stay the strong, proud woman who loved the demon king. They’d been able to support her, and even to give her their blessing.

You couldn’t call that romantic love. It was adoration.

“So if you can’t be rational about it the way you were with Ailey, you should

prepare yourself for the worst.”

Rising to his feet, Kyle takes the forgotten documents from the work desk, but he turns back when one of the sheets of paper reminds him of something important. Of course, he finds Walt face-down on the couch again.

“What do you want to do about guard duty at the opera house? You asked Sir Keith to put that into the schedule, didn’t you?”

“Oh... I was so rattled, I forgot to ask her to that... Hold off on that for a bit.”

“Well, hurry up. The emperor and empress will be attending the opera, so if you won’t be there, we’ll have to change the security arrangements,” Kyle scolds him. He sets a hand on the office door—then adds one more remark.

“If I meet the fairy again, I’ll report in as well.”

He must have seen wrong. When he thought he’d seen her as something else, he’d just been seeing things.

*Right. There’s no way I’d be blind enough to mistake her for a fairy. Not me, no way. I’ll calm down and take a good, clear-eyed look at her. Okay, time for work!*

Smacking his cheeks to fire himself up, he looks at Count Revanche’s distant mansion. He’s making an unscheduled visit because he wants to catch her by surprise and hopefully learn something new from her reaction. It’s definitely not because he wants to see her look startled, or just to see her, period. He’s walked around checking the mansion’s perimeter because he thought he might find the men who are supposedly hanging around Lira and get information on demon snuff trafficking out of them, not because he’s worried she might be in danger. Granted, it’s true he can’t afford to have anything happen to her now, but that’s because she’s under investigation for selling demon snuff, not because— *“Hey, human.”*

“Oh, shut up, it’s not like that!”

His shout makes the white crow flinch and freeze in midair. *Crud.* Walt hastily covers for himself. “Sorry, Sugar. I was just thinking about something.”

“.....”

“I wasn’t mad at you, okay? Uh, um, here, have a candy.”

Long ago, this white crow demon had been held captive by humans and lost the ability to fly, so in sharp contrast to her usual insolent attitude, she’s actually quite sensitive. The crow trembles. —But then her strong legs kick out and send him flying. *“What do you mean ‘shut up,’ you lackey?!”*

“Um, sor— I beg your pardon. Uh, candy! Look, I’ve even got a strawberry-flavored one.”

Sugar keeps kicking Walt as he talks, and now her eyes widen ferociously. *“That won’t be enough!”*

“I-I’ll buy you sugar cookies on my way home!”

Snorting, Sugar lands on Walt’s shoulder and folds up her wings. *“I’ll allow it.”*

“Thank you very much...”

*“Candy.”*

“Right.”

When he obediently offers the candy, the white crow accepts it. Walt’s relieved that Sugar has cheered up. After all, this is the great second-in-command of the demon king’s air force: There’s no telling how much trouble he’d have on his hands if she were in a bad mood.

Walt is a human who works for the demon king, and as a rule, his position is weaker than the demons’. He’s probably stronger than they are physically, but that’s how things stand. The demon king’s mage is also in the same position; however, his thoughts on the matter are a breezy “Huh? We’re just scum, aren’t we?”

*If we’re talking about strong humans on the demon king’s side... James is half demon... Oh. There’s also Sir Keith, huh?*

He’s a pure-blooded human, and probably weaker than any of the other humans who are allied with the demon king, but he’s stronger than any demon—no, stronger even than the demon king.

*“Hey. Strawberry candy.”*

“Oh yes, coming... No, wait, report in first. How did it go? Did you see anyone suspicious?”

He'd almost given it the strawberry-flavored candy, but pulls it away to ask the question.

“*You*,” Sugar tells him.

“Wow, thanks for pointing that out. You nailed me right in the heart.”

Cleverly snatching the candy from a dejected Walt's hand, Sugar crunches it up, then adds, “*The master went out. The servants were maintaining the garden. I didn't see the girl.*”

“So Count Revanche isn't here, and the servants are just tidying up the grounds. If you didn't see Miss Lira, she's probably inside. Oh, did you see any vendors coming or going?”

Sugar thinks, rolling her round eyes. “*Two men in black with big bags visited together.*”

“Was that after Count Revanche left?”

Sugar nods. “*They didn't stay long.*”

“Do you know who let them in and saw them off?”

“*Servant.*”

Were they just ordinary vendors who visited the mansion regularly, then?

Sugar went on while attempting to search inside Walt's coat. “*Those were evil minions. My subordinates are following them.*”

“Huh?! That's incredible work!”

“*Who do you think I am?!*”

“Oh—the great blue-bow-tied Sugar, second-in-command of the demon king's air force!”

“*As long as you know.*”

Sugar gives an exaggerated nod. Partly in thanks, Walt gets another candy out of his coat. Apparently, Sugar doesn't intend to eat it there; she takes it with

one of its feet, spreads her wings, and flaps. *“Work hard.”*

“Thanks, I will.”

*“If you need anything, call me.”*

That’s a reassuring remark. After he sees Sugar off, Walt adjusts his collar, heads to the mansion’s front entrance, and rings the bell.

*I’m not troubled at all. I’ll just get this cleared up fast.*

It’s only been ten days since his marriage interview with Lira. If he were doing this as himself, then that would be one thing, but the fact that he’s using Isaac’s name means the longer this lasts, the more dangerous it will become.

For now, the marriage interview and two coerced dates should have cemented the image he’s trying to create of “a suitor who’s fallen for Lira at first sight and is trying to woo her even if it means being a bit forward about it.” Coming to see her without sending advance notice shouldn’t seem unnatural at all.

*That means it’s fine—calm down, heart. It’s not natural for it to race like this... No, it is natural. Which is it?*

Just as his pulse and his confusion both begin to accelerate, the door opens. On instinct, he stands straighter. The person who answers the door is a servant, who he vaguely remembers from when he came for the marriage interview. Walt tells him he’d like to see Lira. *It’s fine; I almost bit my tongue a little, but that’s just natural nerves. “Natural nerves”? What is that?*

“Miss Lira is unwell.”

“Huh...?”

He wasn’t expecting that. All of his internal confusion disperses, and he makes a foolish noise.

“I’m told she was doused with water.”

“Oh... Ohh...” *That makes sense*, he thinks, before recollecting himself. “I-is she feeling very ill?”

“It’s nothing serious, just a slight cold. She’s only taking care to rest in case it

gets worse... If you'll wait a moment, I can go and inform her of your presence."

"N-no. I'm the one who barged in on her unannounced; I wouldn't want her to overwork herself."

He knows this development is only to be expected, but Walt still feels a little discouraged and lowers his eyes.

"If there's something you'd like to tell her, I can take a message."

"Oh, in that case..."

His eyes have gone to the opera tickets in his hand. He starts to hold them up, then thinks better of it and shakes his head.

The servant, who's picked up on the gesture and holds out a hand for the tickets, looks perplexed.

"Actually, I'd like to give them to Miss Lira myself."

The opera is the day after tomorrow. Even if Lira still has her cold, if Count Revanche finds out about the opera, he may drag his niece to it, which wouldn't be good.

Not from a professional or a personal standpoint.

"But..."

"I'll call on her again."

When he bows and turns on his heel, the servant looks troubled but closes the door.

*Argh... I guess I'll have to pin my hopes on the men Sugar's having tailed.*

He'll get this job done, no matter what. After all, he isn't in a place that makes him want to run away anymore. Walt had gotten himself all fired up because of that new lease on life, and yet he's got nothing to show for it today. The energy drains from his legs, and his walk slows to a crawl when— "Wait!"

The faint voice makes him blink. When he looks back, he sees a woman dash out the front door.

It's Lira. The sight alone makes his heart leap, and he turns to face her.

Walt spies that cloud of pale golden hair and those mysterious jade-green eyes whose hue changes with the light. She's dressed in nothing but a nightgown, with a shawl thrown around her shoulders. As she runs toward him, even before he can think about making himself look right for her, his pulse slows unexpectedly.

*Hmm? She seems...normal? I mean, that's fine, but...*

She's smiling at him happily. Her expression is exactly the same as what he saw in the midst of those water droplets, but she doesn't seem to sparkle like she did back then... Whatever was intense enough to make him see her as someone else is gone.

That alone is enough to make him feel suddenly very exhausted.

*I really must have been seeing things! What the heck?! All that worry for nothing!*

He wants to clap his hands to his forehead and crouch down on the spot, but he manages to control himself. He's on the job, and his target is right there.

Lira looks perplexed. "Wh-what's wrong?"

"No, it's just... I didn't think I'd get to see you, so I was wondering if this was a dream..."

He actually had felt as if he'd been dreaming before. Now, though, Walt is calm. He's taken another good look at her, straight on, and she isn't shining anymore.

Maybe his eyes had been playing tricks on him, or maybe it was the magic of that scattered water. Thinking of it that way seems to put all the words in the world at his command. "Your smile has been so dazzling lately."

He expected Lira to flush red and get angry, but instead she puffs out her cheeks and pouts. The gesture brings her soft lips to his attention.

She must have gotten ready in a hurry. She's only put on lip rouge.

It's the cute pink color she'd claimed wouldn't suit her. The one she said made her look like a fairy.

*Oh, come on, it does suit—*



“You always say such glib things.”

“—Who are you?”

He asked the question reflexively, and after it's out, he claps a hand over his mouth. Lira watches him, startled.

“Oh no, I mean... I'm sorry. I didn't expect you to make that face, and it was so adorable, I hardly recognized...you...”

As Walt makes excuses, the girl's eyes stay fixed on him. Then she breaks into a smile. “What about you, hmm? Who are you?”

Walt gulps. She goes on in a voice that's so soft, only he can hear it. “I had no idea Master Isaac Lombard was such a ladies' man.”

“Y-you're...”

She puts a finger to Walt's lips. Her fleeting, gentle smile washes away the words that were on the tip of his tongue. “Thank you very much. I'll give her the ticket.”

The voice remains the same, but her tone has changed.

The opera ticket is still in the pocket of Walt's jacket, and the girl with Lira's face takes it from him. Walt doesn't resist. The idea doesn't even occur to him.

“Will you save her?”

Stiffly, almost as if he's under a spell, Walt nods.

The smile she gives him looks truly happy.

It's as ethereal as a fairy.

“I'm glad. Please do.”

“—Just one question!”

The girl has turned on her heel, about to run off, but she looks back. Swallowing hard, Walt continues, “Have you ever been a fairy of sweets in a moonlit garden?”

The girl's eyes widen. Walt sees it happen clearly.

However, quicker than a blink, both the agitation and the light in her eyes

vanish.

“I don’t remember,” she says in a singsong voice, smiling. Then she disappears into the mansion with light footsteps, and the door closes, separating the two of them.

*What... What is going on?*

Walt finally manages to exhale. He catches himself as he’s about to fall, then realizes that his coat pocket feels heavier than it should.

It’s the pocket the ticket was in. When he gingerly slips his hand inside, his fingertips find a small bottle. Swallowing hard, Walt starts walking, hastily putting as much distance between himself and the mansion as possible.

His heart is pounding, but not from romantic excitement. He has a very, very bad feeling about this.

Ducking into a nearby alley, he draws a deep breath, then takes the object out of his pocket.

He recognizes it the second he sees it, and his face contorts into a grimace.

The small, special bottle has a tight seal to ensure its contents won’t evaporate.

Inside, a familiar liquid ripples gently.

“Demon snuff...”

It’s undeniable proof that the girl is involved in the demon snuff trade.

When he dashes into the records vault to make sure his memory’s accurate, Elefas is already there, looking something up.

“Perfect timing! Help me out!”

“Huh? I have a job, too, you know. A tiresome one: confirming the minutes of a meeting.”

“Forget that! Mine’s an emergency, so give me a hand! I need the report from Count and Countess Revanche’s accident six years ago!”

“Oh, that’s in here.”

With one flick of Elefas's finger, a wooden box deep in the stacks slowly rises into the air and floats over to them. Magic sure is handy.

"What about the church's files?"

"Those are in there as well. I had them sent over on Master Claude's orders. That said, it's only a basic statement that says they were buried."

*Figures.*

Tsking in irritation, he roughly upends the box, then scrabbles through its contents. Elefas winces, but he doesn't have any attention to spare for Walt right now.

*Information on the daughter who died in the accident... There!*

Viola Revanche. That was the name of the girl who'd died with the previous count and countess. The state of the scene of the accident—stuff like that doesn't matter. The important thing is the date of her birth, and he finds it in Viola's brief history.

He lines that birthdate up with Lira Revanche's.

"Twins..."

He'd suspected that might be it, and now he's sure. Walt heaves a long sigh, and Elefas, who's seen it, too, speaks up. "Well, well. So the sisters were twins, were they?"

"These are the papers the church sent about the burial, right?"

"Yes. Count and Countess Revanche and Miss Viola were cremated, not interred, so they seem to have gone out of their way to record it."

In other words, Viola, the older sister, is believed to be dead. At the very least, she's not among the living as far as society's concerned.

"So 'fairy' wasn't entirely wrong, huh...?"

"Hmm? Have you begun seeing fairies, too, Walt?" Elefas apparently knows about Kyle's talk of fairies, and he backs away slightly.

Walt grabs him by the shirtfront and pulls him closer again. "I need to see Isaac next. I don't know where he is, and tracking him down will be a hassle, so

teleport me to him.”

“I told you, I’m working.”

“Do it, or I’ll make it so you can’t go home on the weekend! You won’t get to see that gorgeous wife of yours... You’re okay with that?!”

“What is wrong with you?!” Elefas shouts back at him, but he does teleport them. He must really want to get back to see his wife; the woman’s so voluptuous that the feelings she provokes spike past plain envy to vivid green jealousy.

Walt also suspects the man is concerned about him. No matter what he may say, the demon king’s mage is sensitive to human subtleties and doesn’t slack on his intelligence gathering.

He recognizes the place where they manifest. It’s the conference room in the Oberon Trading Firm’s demon branch office—in other words, the old castle.

The members of the Oberon Trading Firm are seated around the oval table, and they all look up at once.

“Wh-what’s this? The mage and half of the guards; that’s a combo you don’t see much,” Jasper muses.

“Oh, Elefas and Walt. Hello!” Denis also calls out a greeting.

“What is the meaning of this? Failing to knock is bad enough, but teleporting?” Luc demands.

“Excuse us for interrupting your meeting. Walt says he has some urgent business.”

“Isaac! You’re positive you’ve never met Count Revanche or his family?!” The moment Walt’s feet hit the floor, he closes in on Isaac.

Isaac frowns. “Not that I remember. What happened?”

“Miss Lira acted as if she knew what ‘Isaac Lombard’ looked like, so I came to make sure.”

The members of the Oberon Trading Firm have been told that Walt is passing himself off as Isaac to investigate an incident involving demon snuff, and they

all listen in silence without asking any unnecessary questions.

“It might not have been Lira... The fairy?”

“Fairies.”

“Are fairies in style these days?”

They’ve apparently heard about Kyle. Isaac’s expression is wooden, while Denis sounds intrigued.

“No, this wasn’t the same one as Kyle’s. Argh, for the love of... Let’s see...”

“For now, have a seat and calm down a little. You too, Elefas,” Luc prompts them. Taciturn, Quartz gets up and makes them tea, and Denis brings over some chairs.

Sitting down gratefully, Walt drinks the tea Quartz gives him, then explains what’s happened so far.

“In other words, Lira Revanche had a twin sister who ostensibly died in an accident, but you suspect she may be alive. That one is Kyle’s fairy, and she may be switching places with Lira, whom you are currently courting as Isaac Lombard. Is that correct?” Elefas summarizes.

Walt nods, then holds out the little bottle. “And then the fairy gave me something that looks a whole lot like undiluted demon snuff—this. I’m almost positive that’s what it is.”

“It does appear to be the case.” Luc takes the bottle, then passes it on to Quartz.

“...I’ll look into it.”

“Please do. So...Isaac.”

“I don’t remember anything like that. Maybe I could’ve run into Count Revanche somewhere, but the girls switching places and the rest of it—I wouldn’t have even had the opportunity. I’m only at one or two soirees a year, and Count Revanche’s niece basically didn’t leave the mansion until her debut the other day.”

“The Oberon Trading Firm and Count Revanche haven’t done any business to

“speak of, either. I checked up on that,” Jasper puts in, scratching his head.

Luc folds his arms, thinking hard. “Exhuming the bodies would be the most efficient way to confirm this, but if they were cremated, that won’t be possible.”

“...It’s pretty hard to prove that someone’s *not* dead, in the first place.”

“Hey, it’s Sugar!”

Denis leaps out of his chair and runs over to open the window. By the time Walt looks up, Sugar has already flown in.

*“Hey, lackey! How dare you make me look for you!”*

“Oh—right. Sorry, Sugar.”

*“We tracked the dealers!”* Landing on the table, Sugar puffs out her chest. *“They were selling small, suspicious-looking bottles!”*

“What’s this about?” Elefas asks, and Walt fills him in.

“Sugar has been trailing two shady men who visited Count Revanche’s mansion. I’d heard from the count that suspicious men were hanging around his niece, so when they showed up in his absence...”

“...You struck gold,” Elefas concludes.

Walt has no response for that, and Sugar swaggers about looking up at him. *“Sing my praises! I won’t let any who defy the demon king escape!”*

“.....”

*“What’s wrong, lackey?”* The crow demon cocks her head at him, eyes wide, and Walt comes to his senses with a jolt.

“N-no, it’s nothing. Thanks, that’s a huge help...”

*“What are you unhappy about?”* Sugar gazes at him steadily.

He can’t answer the question.

Jasper speaks up. “Uh, okay, let’s assume demon snuff is being sold here. Do you want to go over all of this again, starting with the report of the previous Count Revanche’s accident? I’ll dig deeper into when young Master Isaac and

Miss Lira or the fairy could have connected, too.”

“There’s no need to go that far. Don’t make this more complicated than it already is.” Bracing one arm on the back of his chair, Isaac looks straight at Walt. “It’s simple: Whether or not her twin is alive, Lira Revanche is involved in dealing demon snuff. We know that for a fact.”

Isaac’s come to the same conclusion as he has, and Walt closes his eyes, pressing his fists to his forehead.

Denis cocks his head. “But she might be switching places with her twin, right?”

“Doesn’t matter. If the twin is actually alive and switching places with her, she’d need her sister’s cooperation to pull it off. After all, the ‘fairy’ Walt saw came out of Count Revanche’s mansion.”

“Oh, so they’re living together! It’s not someone else doing it without their knowledge, then.” Denis drops a fist into his palm, as if it all makes sense to him now.

Jasper puts a finger to his forehead, right between his eyebrows. “If they’re switching intentionally, they must both be keeping tabs on what the other’s doing. If they didn’t, the switching would get obvious pretty quickly... So why would they keep doing it, even if it means having to pretend one twin is dead?”

“The most likely answer is that they’re doing it to sell demon snuff. When their parents died in that accident, the girls’ tender age meant they were exempt from suspicion, which they took advantage of. If they had connections from the time their parents died, it’s well within the realms of possibility,” Luc says, glancing at the bottle on the table.

Denis crosses his arms, tilting his head to the other side this time. “But weren’t they ten at the time? Could they really have done something like that?”

“Right. If it’s true they’re switching places, then the current Count Revanche must be involved,” Isaac says firmly, lowering his voice. There was no way a ten-year-old girl could hide her supposedly dead sister in the mansion and evade discovery. It might not even just be Count Revanche; all the mansion’s servants could be involved.

Isaac hammers home his point, adding, “Lira Revanche is undeniably the mastermind, though. Whether she and her sister are switching places or not. Right?” He points his fountain pen straight at Walt, almost as if he’s accusing him: *I know you know this*. “On top of that, Sugar’s seen the pair that visited Count Revanche in the act of selling demon snuff.”

Sugar has been swiveling her head this way and that, following the conversation. She nods hastily and follows this up with an uneasy look toward Walt.

“That settles it, then. If we bring in Lira, she’ll lead us to the rest. Case closed.”

Silence falls, and Walt exhales slowly. *He’s right. That’s how it’ll go.*

Whether or not she’s switching out with someone, Lira is involved with demon snuff. And even if she isn’t changing places, the only one who’ll be cleared of suspicion is Count Revanche.

Why? How? —Thinking about those sorts of things is foolish. No matter her reasons, she’s a criminal.

“...What am I supposed to tell Kyle?” he murmurs, forcing a smile. “Well, I suppose that’s just how it is.”

“Walt...,” Dennis murmurs.

“Sorry to take up your time. It’s like Isaac says: Even if they’re switching places, it doesn’t change the outcome. Nor my job.”

He gets to his feet. His body seems terribly heavy, but a deep breath is all it takes to get him through it.

This is how he’s always worked. There’s no reason he can’t keep doing it.

He brought the bottle of demon snuff along only because he wanted to be sure. That’s all.

“So Isaac’s still a meanie, even now that he’s married,” Denis says suddenly.

Luc, who’s sitting across from him, shrugs. “I’d imagine it’s payback for that public proposal.”



“...The mage set that up.”

“Huh? Don’t tell me you’re making this my fault.”

“Now, now. It just means that’s firmly behind us, right?” Jasper cuts in, smiling.

Isaac looks embarrassed. “What d’you mean ‘right’? Huh?”

“Well, it’s weird, isn’t it? Why would she voluntarily give Walt demon snuff and confess?”

“...Not only that, she knew he was an impostor who was *just* acting like her fiancé when she did it,” Quartz says, and Walt blinks.

Isaac presses his point. “That doesn’t change the fact that she’s selling demon snuff.”

“So your childishness hasn’t changed, either, even now that you’re married, Master Isaac.”

“Then did getting married make you a grown-up, you shady mage?”

“All right, all right, quit bickering. Let’s start by interviewing Count Revanche and the people who live near the mansion. I’ll do background checks on all the servants, too. You’d really be helping out your uncle Jasper if you gave him a day to do it.”

“Huh? No, but, um...” Walt’s first reaction to Jasper’s request is bewilderment.

Luc raises his hand without waiting for Walt to catch up. “We’ll analyze the contents of that bottle, then. Won’t we, Quartz?”

“...Let’s boost production of the cure, too, just in case something happens.”

“In that case, I’ll handle the regular work. Let me know if anything comes up. The rest of you, give it your all. Come on, Isaac, what about you?”

Isaac, who’s been sullenly silent, lets out a heavy sigh. “...If nothing else, it’s possible that this is all a trap. It’s way too blatant.”

“True. I think so, too,” Elefas agrees easily. Walt glances at him, startled. “At this point, it might be best to suspect her odd behavior at the ball as well. It’s as

if she did it specifically to make us doubt her.”

In which case...

*“Will you save her?”*

Could those words have meant...

“It’s too early to draw conclusions, Walt. We’ll help you, so dig a little bit deeper!” Denis says to reassure him.

“...That’s why you came here, isn’t it?” Quartz asks.

“No, I wasn’t really—”

*“Do you want to save that girl?”* Sugar asks bluntly, and Walt’s words desert him.

That’s it.

What are her reasons? Why is she doing this? He asks himself these questions, struggling for answers, because he doesn’t want to believe the alternative. Because he thinks there might be something more behind it.

“It’ll be better for you to admit it. After all, the hard part is only just beginning.”

Elefas thumps him on the back, and the breath he’s been holding escapes him as a laugh. “Yeah... You’re right. It does seem like a pretty complicated case.”

“That as well, but we have a more formidable enemy. Have you forgotten about the gag order?”

Walt tries to laugh again but ends up gasping instead.

“I mean, I was concerned about you as well, so I thought Master Claude would probably overlook it if we helped you get your thoughts in order, but...”

“W-wait, Elefas, hang on. You mean—”

“You have my deepest sympathies, but we appear to be out of time. Our secret meeting has been noticed.”

“Cut that out; you’re handing me a death sentence!”

As if Walt’s shout is the signal, the meeting room doors burst open, pushed by

magic. Walt's master stands smiling on the other side, enveloped in an ominous wind.

"How sad. You're having this secret meeting without me?"

"M-Master Claude. This is, uh..." As Walt tries to make excuses, those bloodred eyes smile at him bewitchingly.

"Aren't I the first person you should contact, give reports to, or discuss anything with, Walt?"

"Best of luck," Elefas whispers to him. Then he has the unmitigated gall to start moving over to stand by Claude's side, so Walt grabs him by the neck and chokes him.

This must be how a man feels when he learns his lawfully wedded wife has cheated on him.

"And? You're telling me to let Miss Lira go?"

"If, um... If you could, that would make me really happy..."

"Why should I go to such lengths for her?" Claude asks coldly, seated at his work desk. Walt has been instantaneously snatched from the meeting room and dumped in Claude's office, and he has nowhere to run; Kyle's standing at the door, while Keith makes tea beside Claude. Elefas is also there in one corner of the room, holding Sugar and sighing.

"From what you've told me, the girl is guilty of selling demon snuff."

"That's... Yes. But—"

"Even if she's switching places with someone, or doing anything else for that matter, she's guilty. And you want me to let her go? Demon snuff is dangerous to demons. I trust you know that perfectly well."

"I do know that! Really, I do."

"Didn't I put you under a gag order in the first place? You violated my orders, and now you're asking this of me for no good reason? Know your place."

Truly, there's nothing left to say.

*He's right. This was way too basic of a mistake to make. It's not as if I forgot*

*Master Claude's order, though...*

Considering what Walt had done, he couldn't blame Claude for assuming he had. The demon king's eyes grow even frostier. "What? You don't even have an excuse to give me?"

"I'm sorry..."

"Fine, that's enough. —Keith, Miss Lira is your responsibility from now on."

"Understood, milord."

Walt feels the blood drain from his face.

No matter what his public position may be, Keith is the retainer in whom Claude places the most trust. If he felt like it, Keith could have Lira thrown in jail before the day was out.

"Kyle. You're free as well, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Kyle, you—!"

After what Walt said to him, Kyle must have realized that his fairy actually exists. However, his partner is good at being practical about these things, and he's prioritizing Claude's orders.

"That is all. Walt, you switch with Kyle. I'll have you guard me."

"Please wait, Master Claude!"

"What?" Claude asks coldly, and the words stick in his throat. Claude is soft on his subordinates, but not so soft that he'd pretend a basic mistake like this never happened.

*What are you doing, you idiot?! Think! You're good at getting out of stuff like this!*

He's not as quick-witted as Isaac, or as well prepared as Elefas. He doesn't understand Claude as well as Keith does, and he can't be as practical as Kyle.

However, he's pretty sure he's the best at talking his way out of things.

That's how he's survived this long. When would he use that skill, if not now?

“Master Claude, I can’t let you do something that would disgrace you!” Walt insists, striking the desk for emphasis. Claude’s eyes turn his way. “Listen to me: Miss Lira is as guilty as sin! She’s so guilty, it’s actually suspicious. Don’t you think we’re being manipulated here? If you just play along without question, it will mean someone has deceived the demon king! Would that be acceptable? Of course not!”

“Arresting Miss Lira will make everything clear, won’t it?”

“You’ll only hear what she wants you to hear! Besides, if she really is switching places with her sister, then either way you’ll only get one side of the story.”

*“Will you save her?”*

He needs to take a good, thorough look into what she meant by that.

“Listen, someone’s already messed this up once. When her parents died, the case was tidied away as if that accident had settled everything, and this new incident is the result. I can’t let you make the same mistake!”

“All of this sounds very practical, but you just don’t want her arrested, do you? I suspect your personal feelings about this outweigh your loyalty to me.”

“What sort of nonsense is that? If she really was your enemy, I’d—”

At that point, for the first time, it hits him. He understands why Kyle hasn’t been resisting Claude’s orders.

“No woman who intended you harm would interest me, Master Claude.”

*Let there be some sort of reason,* he’d wished.

However, if there isn’t any reason like that, he’ll simply be disillusioned with her, tell himself his eyes were knotholes after all, and laugh it off.

Straightforward Kyle doesn’t even harbor that doubt. He doesn’t think the fairy is Claude’s enemy, and if she is, then she’s no fairy.

They have that sort of cruelty in common.

“I may be an ingrate, but I’m not so bad I’d forget who made me human. Betraying you is the one thing I could never do.”

Claude watches Walt, his eyes narrowed. Walt doesn't look away.

"And based on that assertion, I'm telling you: She has some sort of reason for doing this. I have my suspicions... Wearing that dress to the ball, for example. Why would Miss Lira do a thing like that?"

"You're asking if it could've been the fairy? You weren't at that ball, were you?"

"I'm sure that was Lira. If it had been the fairy, she could have just scattered demon snuff there, the way she handed some to me... But Lira didn't. It's probably because she didn't have any. That's why she wore a dress in a color she knew was forbidden and hinted that demon snuff might exist; she isn't in a position where she can get her hands on the stuff whenever she likes. I also suspect that she and the fairy have different objectives and ideas about how to get there."

The fairy who gave Walt demon snuff is trying to save Lira.

So what had Lira been trying to accomplish by wearing that forbidden gown to the ball and behaving so bizarrely?

"I think she wanted you to save the fairy, Master Claude."

She knew that the emperor would be at the ball and that he would be eager to crack down on demon snuff to protect the demons.

And of course, she knew he dotes on his empress.

Walt was sure her line of thinking went something like: *If I wear a purple dress and act as if I'm picking a fight with the empress, he's sure to pay attention. He'll investigate the incident.*

"If she wanted me to save something, couldn't she just have asked?"

"I'm telling you there must be a reason she can't! You're just going to arrest her without knowing what that is and call it a day? Is that the sort of emperor you want to be? The last thing I want is for you to end up looking incompetent when someone's come to you for help." Walt thumps the desk again, then looks Claude straight in the eye. "So? What about my words or actions displeases you?"

“.....” Claude gives a long sigh. Then he recrosses his legs, leaning back in his chair. “You really are a smooth talker.”

“Thank you for the compliment.”

“You forgot my orders and got out of control just because you wanted to save Miss Lira. And yet, when you say all that, it makes me think you might have done it for me. That’s a problem. —What do you think, Keith?”

“A mistake is a mistake. You cannot simply put the matter back in his hands.” Keith’s smiling, but he speaks firmly. He’s already served Claude his tea.

Walt turns pale. “Sir Keith, I—”

“However, as Walt has been courting Miss Lira, he is the one who knows her best. No doubt he’s established some level of rapport. Therefore, Walt should continue his role in this investigation but under my command. How does that sound?”

“That would be no different from the situation we have now. I’m not saying you need to punish him, but what’s to prevent this from happening again?”

“It’s fine. Walt isn’t reckless enough to ignore my orders... Are you?” Keith smiles at Walt.

Walt instantly stands as tall as he can. “No, of course not! It’s absolutely going to be fine! I’ll do anything you say!”

“Hang on. So he’ll forget my orders but not yours? That doesn’t seem right.”

“Also dock his salary for six months, with no vacation time.”

Walt chokes, but if that’s the worst he gets, he’s been incredibly lucky.

They’ve ignored Claude’s question, and he frowns. “Why won’t anybody answer me? I’m asking how much my orders are worth.”

“Now then, as far as I’m—no, as far as we’re concerned, we must avoid any outcome that would mar our master’s reputation. We must not let the culprit escape us, of course. We also can’t have them getting desperate and scattering demon snuff about. We’re not having a repeat of Misha Academy.”

Auguste had felt awful that he’d essentially abandoned Serena.

Nobody could have considered him responsible for that. Some facets of Serena's circumstances should have provoked sympathy, but that was it—or at least that's what Walt had thought at the time. Now he understands how Auguste felt.

Auguste had simply wanted to help Serena anyway. Granted, Serena probably would have said it was too little too late.

*I'm a cautious type, though. Before I help her, I want to know.*

Had that moment been real, when he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him?

"First, we'll waste no time in nabbing the traders Sugar tailed for us. Elefas, I want you and Sugar to arrest them before the day is out. Kyle and Walt, you guard Master Claude and Lady Aileen, and stay vigilant. They may be targeted in some way."

"How do you mean?" Claude asks.

Walt responds solemnly. "You mean at the opera two days from now, don't you?"

Walt has secured seats for the opera to see how Lira reacts to the emperor and empress. The imperial couple happen to be free on that day, so they've agreed to make an appearance.

"Count Revanche may come in the girl's place to apologize on her behalf, or the young lady may feign ignorance and come to find out what we know. There's no telling which it will be. However, if it's right after the traders have been arrested, and if they know the emperor and empress will be in attendance, someone's bound to come, both to make excuses and to see where things stand. Walt, I want you to put on an act and sound them out."

"So it'll be my job to let them know they're under suspicion."

"Yes. Tell them you'll help, and trick them to draw out information. I won't let you tell me you can't."

"Of course I can. It's what I'm best at."

For Claude's sake, he'll deceive Lira.



Reminding himself firmly of who he is and what he must do, Walt nods.

“What do you think, Master Claude?”

“I’ll leave it in your hands, but where’s my answer regarding why your orders carry more weight than mine?”

“That’s obvious. They all count on you to go easy on them, Master Claude. However, I don’t tolerate that sort of behavior from anyone. Do I?” He turns his gaze on Walt, to find not just him but Kyle, Elefas, and even Sugar nodding repeatedly.

This seems to both satisfy Claude and cheer him up; apparently no one is allowed to defy the demon king’s adviser. In this workplace, that unwritten law is absolute.

The day after Elefas and the demons quietly arrest the traders, Walt sends advance notice of his visit to Count Revanche’s mansion, then arrives an hour earlier than he originally claimed.

This is the second time he’s been inside. When Walt is admitted to the entry hall, he removes his hat and takes a careful look at his surroundings. Nothing’s changed since his first visit.

That said, the amount of information he has is different.

Both the butler who answered when he rang the visitors’ bell and the maid who’s leading Walt to the parlor are the same as before. The mansion doesn’t have many servants, so that isn’t unusual.

It would have seemed less suspicious if he hadn’t heard that not a single servant has left or been replaced ever since the current count came into power.

According to Jasper, there hasn’t been a single new hire in all that time. It’s plausible that the count wouldn’t hire someone new while he’s busy trying to get the fiefdom’s finances in order, and it’s also possible that the servants were too devoted to abandon the county.

*Still, not one in six years seems abnormal.*

The maid who’s taking him to the parlor is probably in her late twenties. The pay can’t be that good, so it’s unusual for her to be unmarried and still working

at this age.

As an experiment, he asks her a question as he follows behind her. “Miss Lira is just getting over her illness, isn’t she? If she’d prefer it, I could visit her room instead.”

“The young mistress is quite well now, so she’ll meet you in the parlor.”

“Oh, I’m glad to hear that. Have you worked here long?”

“.....About ten years, sir.”

“That business with the previous count and countess must have been awful. What with the demon snuff suspicions and all the rest of it, I mean.”

“That’s all in the past.” The maid doesn’t flinch, which actually seems stranger. “Wait here a moment, please.”

“Right. Thanks for bringing me—here.”

The maid has opened the door to the parlor and shown Walt in, but just as she turns to leave, he sets a hand on the door and closes it, shutting her in with him. She looks up at him, perplexed. “...What is it?”

“You smell quite nice.”

The maid’s face has so far been as blank as a mask, but for the first time, she looks unsettled. His right hand runs from the maid’s lower back to her leg, while his left catches her arm, which he moves behind her back. *Is this...a handkerchief? She doesn’t seem to have much on her.*

If she had a key, he would’ve wanted it, but it turns out she doesn’t. He feels a little let down, and then— “Wh-what are you doing?!” Lira’s cry echoes from the door on the opposite side of the rectangular parlor.

Immediately releasing the maid, Walt turns, smiling brightly. “Hello there, Lira. How’s your cold?”

Lira’s face is bright red. This is the one Walt knows; he can tell at a glance. That alone threatens to make his gaze drift uncertainly, but he keeps his eyes on her, reminding himself that this is work.

She’s shown up in a high-collared dress today. No nightgown this time.

“Forget about my cold! What was that just now?!”

“Her ribbon was coming undone; I fixed it for her, that’s all. Right?”

The maid nods, looking frightened, and makes a hasty exit. As if taking her place, Lira closes in on him. “What’s going on here? Explain yourself!”

“I just did. That’s all it was.”

“That’s no explanation! You’re courting me, aren’t you?! That was cheating, you worm!”

“Does this mean we’re engaged, then?” he jokes.

Clenched fists trembling, Lira shouts at him, “Who’d want to marry a suspicious character like you?!”

“A suspicious character, hmm? That’s pretty clever,” Walt retorts, and Lira compresses her lips into a thin line.

*It looks like the fairy’s told her I’m not Isaac Lombard.*

What must he look like to her now? Still, having those strong, unwavering eyes fixed on him is starting to entertain him.

She’s a straightforward girl with a quick wit who’s bad at subtle maneuvering. But is that really all there is to her?

“Where’s Count Revanche?”

“...He should be home soon. He’s busy running all over the place.”

“Ah. Maybe it’s about the traders who come and go in the mansion here getting arrested for selling demon snuff.”

“So you do know about that.”

“I am Isaac Lombard, Her Majesty the empress’s favorite, after all.” Walt’s implying that he’s going to keep playing the part, something he’s sure Lira must have picked up on. “I came because I thought I might be able to help somehow. You can talk to me about anything.”

If she’d looked relieved, reeled off excuses and begged him to save her, or if she’d foolishly tried to sweep the matter under the rug, then in that moment, Walt probably would have thought, *I suppose I really was wrong about what I*

saw, and lost interest in her.

But she doesn't do any of that.

Looking as if she may burst into tears, Lira smiles with a beauty that makes her childish gestures seem like a lie, and a firmness that makes her look like someone else entirely. "I've told you all along that I won't marry you. I came today to remind you of that."

"...You're sure that's what you want?"

Even he thinks that's a dimwitted response. It's probably because he's a bit flustered.

"I won't go to the opera, either. I wouldn't be a suitable match for you. —And I'm returning this."

Her hand has been closed around something since she arrived, and now her fingers open to reveal a tube of lip rouge. Wordlessly, he takes it from her and opens it. It's the orange one.

It hasn't been used. It's as if this is the greatest gesture of sincerity she can manage.

"I can't return the chocolates; I ate them. They were delicious, thank you."

"....."

"I'll tell my uncle about my decision. So just go."

She pushes his chest with both hands. Walt doesn't budge, but he understands that this is her answer.

"Farewell... Thank you for this dream."

He can't move. This isn't like him. Scolding himself, Walt follows Lira's receding back with his eyes.

*Don't let yourself be distracted; this is work. Figure something out.*

He is the demon king's bodyguard.

*Stop feeling hurt. There must be a clue there, somewhere—* By the time he realizes what he's doing, Walt's already caught her arm.

“Wh-what?”

“Your leg. What’s wrong with it?”

Something about her gait and the way her skirt moves seems odd to him. But the biggest clue of all is the way all the blood has drained from Lira’s face.

“You’re clearly trying to avoid putting too much weight on it.”

“I-it’s nothing. It’s just a little bit—”

“There are marks of some sort on your neck, too.”

Her complexion is growing paler and paler, and Walt doesn’t even want to delay long enough to hear her answer. He pushes Lira down onto the soft couch.

“Wait—just a— Don’t, it’s nothi— I fell, I slipped, that’s all!”

Lira flails around, trying to resist, but she’s an amateur, and her attempts don’t give him any trouble. As nimbly as if he’s restraining a criminal, Walt holds her arms together and pins them down with one hand. Then, without batting an eyelash, he undoes the buttons running down her back and lifts the hem of her skirt.

“Stop! Don’t look, you deviant!”

Red, raw, ropelike lines ring her ankles, and fresh bruises mark her calves. The raised welts on her back are a mixture of new and partially healed wounds, and there are bruises in the shape of fingers on her neck, like someone has choked her.

There is no way she got hurt like that from a fall.

Walt’s hand has gone slack, and Lira wriggles free and hides behind the sofa, her face a mask of abject fear.

She’s almost acting like a criminal whose crimes have been discovered.

*...Yes, there really was no decent reason why she was hiding that much skin.*

Walt grits his teeth, then exhales. He walks up to Lira, who’s desperately trying to fasten the buttons on the back of her dress by herself.

“I’m sorry.”

Lira flinches.

Carefully doing up the buttons, one at a time, Walt murmurs to her, “If you can’t talk about it, you don’t have to say anything.”

“.....”

“I swear I’ll save you.”

Before he leaves, he scoops Lira up into his arms and sets her down on the couch. Kneeling in front of her, Walt reaffirms his vow: “I will save you.”

The words sound cheap. It’s probably okay for them to sound this forced, though.

After all, he is deceiving her.

*I swear, this really is a troublesome job.*

It’s making him forget where the boundary is.

That’s why he picks up the dropped lip rouge and puts it in his pocket.

“All right. I’ll be back.”

“...It’s fine.”

Walt has gotten to his feet, but he pauses in the act of turning away.

“I’m fine. Don’t save me.”

“.....”

“Please, if you really are—”

“Are you still here, Isaac?!”

Count Revanche knocks roughly on the door twice, then walks in without waiting for an answer. Lira gasps, turning pale, and falls silent.

However, that tells Walt plenty all by itself.

“Good, good. That startled me; you arrived earlier than I expected you.”

“I’m sorry. My schedule opened up in a rather unusual way.”

“No, don’t worry about it. We’ve been rushing about here as well. I imagine you’ve already heard, Isaac: the demon snuff trading incident...” The man gives

him a searching look.

Putting on a frown, Walt nods. "Yes. They say the merchants who were arrested visited here regularly."

"It must weigh on your mind. In fact, my niece told me she would like to call off your marriage interview, to keep you from being dragged into this." Count Revanche seats himself next to Lira. His expression is a careworn mixture of unease and concern for his niece. Lira stiffens and looks down, lips pressed together tightly. "Perhaps she's already told you?"

*Come to think of it, this is the first time I've seen these two together,* Walt thinks. He nods. "We were just discussing that very thing. Personally, I'd tell you not to trouble yourselves about it, but...I wonder what Her Majesty will say..."

His evasiveness seems to make Count Revanche anxious. "It's a false accusation! My household has nothing to do with it."

"Of course, I believe you. However, I do have my position to think of. As the empress's retainer, I must not consort with a young woman who is not worthy of Her Majesty's trust."

For just a moment, he sees Lira squeeze her hands resting in her lap into fists, but she doesn't argue. In stark contrast, Count Revanche lets out a grief-stricken cry. "No...! Do you intend to discard my niece over a mere suspicion?!"

"This isn't something I can just smooth over with the empress, you know. I plan to meet her at the opera tomorrow, and I really have no idea how I'm going to explain this."

"At the opera...? Yes, I had heard that there was a widely acclaimed performance scheduled for tomorrow, but... You say Her Majesty will be there?"

"Yes, she and the emperor will be attending for a change of pace from their usual routine. It sounds as if the tickets are already sold out."

"In that case, do allow me to accompany you. I'll get a ticket somehow; I have an idea of where to find one," Count Revanche tells him without hesitating. He doesn't know that his niece already has a ticket.

Why? That's obvious.

*Because Count Revanche isn't someone she wants to give information to.*

Now that he's thinking about it, it's been true right from the beginning.

"I pray you won't be disappointed by the result," Walt tells him, donning his hat to hide his self-mockery.

"I take it you won't be our ally, then," Count Revanche says in a low voice.

Walt responds with a silent nod, then turns on his heel. At this point, he should keep the man anxious.

Which is why he doesn't look to see Lira's expression. —That may have been unwise.

A pungent, cloying smell makes his eyes widen. Before Walt can turn around, someone shoves him.

"—!"

As the liquid that's spreading over the nearby carpet evaporates, the smell tells him he's narrowly escaped being doused with demon snuff.

Lira is the one who pushed him, and she's fallen to the floor. "Don't breathe it in," she shouts. "Hurry, run—"

Something slams into the back of his head.

*Wha—?*

He'd gotten careless, but Walt's still surprised to see that Count Revanche has managed to get behind him. As he looks back to make sure, another blow hits him in the side. Walt rolls away, and as he sucks in air, he gets a lungful of the demon snuff—a fatal mistake.

In the blink of an eye, a numbness far more intense than what he'd anticipated sweeps through his entire body.

*What is this...?*

It isn't just ordinary demon snuff; the fumes leave him completely unable to move, and several pairs of feet surround his prone form. In no time at all, the servants have entered the room. Lira struggles, but he sees the servants grab



her and strike her.

*Argh, dammit. I blew it. So the whole mansion really is in on it.*

He'd picked up on that earlier, and yet...

The demon snuff seeps into his body, the smell of it clouding his awareness and vision. Then someone kicks him in the stomach, and he blacks out.

Walt hasn't returned.

"He's perennially late anyway. This could just be the usual."

"At a time like this, when he's under orders from Sir Keith? That's not even funny."

Kyle looks around Walt's room in the old castle. He's dragged Elefas out of bed to accompany him, and the other man shrugs. "I'm with you there... Is it possible that he never came home last night? When did you last see him, Kyle?"

"Yesterday evening, before he left for Count Revanche's residence."

"After that, he was scheduled to keep watch of Count Revanche until Sugar took over for him in the morning. He was going to nap until noon, then go to the opera."

"Sugar came to tell me that Walt wasn't in the spot where they'd planned to switch."

Elefas sighs, closing the door to the empty room. "So that means he's been missing since yesterday evening? No one's seen him? What about the demons?"

"Walt was the one who'd suggested keeping watch, and he volunteered to do it. Sugar and the others were told to stay out of the immediate vicinity of the mansion."

Since the matter involved demon snuff, they couldn't let the demons get too close. Walt had wanted an opportunity to redeem himself, so Claude had allowed it.

"To begin with, let's report this to Master Claude... No, to Sir Keith. Master Claude may not be awake yet. It might be best to check his office first and see

whether there are any notes regarding the matter,” Elefas says.

If Walt’s been discussing this with Claude or Keith without Kyle or Elefas’s knowledge, then something may still be there.

Kyle nods, and they set off for the office.

*All he’s done is blunder lately. What is he playing at?*

It annoys him, but the bad feeling Kyle has about this was strong enough to make him postpone his breakfast. It’s probably the same for Elefas.

When they find Claude already awake and in his office, that only cements their feelings of foreboding. Keith is serving him coffee.

Luc and Quartz are standing in front of his desk.

Something’s happened; Keith looks at Kyle and Elefas as if to indicate this. Picking up on the fact that their business will have to wait, Kyle and Elefas take up positions by the wall.

Claude leans on the armrest of his chair, chin in his hand, looking a bit drained. “I apologize for the interruption. Go on. You were saying that the demon snuff the fairy gave us differs from the conventional variety.”

At the word *fairy*, Kyle blinks. Luc turns to face Claude again. “Yes. Our analysis suggests that it’s far more potent than even the purest demon snuff we’ve collected from the church so far. It may work twice as rapidly and be twice as effective as the conventional type.”

“...We’ll need to analyze it a bit more to understand the subtle differences, though,” Quartz adds, flipping through some documents.

Luc nods. “At the very least, it’s clear this isn’t like the demon snuff we’ve handled before. We thought we should warn you to be careful when making arrests, which is why we’re here so early in the morning, it’s practically harassment,” he says quite openly. He knows Claude isn’t a morning person.

Claude heaves a deep sigh. The listlessness in his gestures may be because he’s sleepy.

A little apologetically, Quartz places a small bag on the desk. “...It’s an herb to help you wake up.”

“I appreciate your consideration. So what did you need, Kyle?”

“Walt hasn’t come back,” the guard says briefly.

Claude takes a swallow of the coffee Keith’s made for him. “I heard. Sugar asked me to meet about that first thing this morning...”

“And when he was barely half awake, Luc petitioned him for an audience ‘Before they let Lady Aileen know,’ so I roused him out of bed.”

“...And Aileen?”

“She’s fine. Milord told her there was urgent business, and she was worried he might not be alert enough to work. Once his job’s finished, they’ll have breakfast together,” Keith says, neatly summarizing the situation for them.

“It sounds as if the demons haven’t seen Walt, either... Good grief.”

“Can’t you trace him, Master Claude?” Kyle asks.

“No...,” Claude tells him, blinking dazedly. He seems to be struggling against his drowsiness. “It’s all because I didn’t cast a spell on you two that would let me know where you were and contact you at all times.”

“I’m sorry, but please don’t do that. So where does that leave us?”

“At the very least, he’s not dead. He’s under my protection, so if the magic cut off, I’d definitely notice.” Claude massages the spot between his eyes, trying to wake up. Keith refills his coffee.

“Um.” Elefas speaks up. “I feel like I’m the one who’s always tasked with drawing the short straw, so I’m going to ask: Is there any chance that Walt has eloped with Count Revanche’s niece?”

“That’s—”

“No.” Before Kyle can argue, Claude flatly rejects the idea. “Walt would never betray me. If he were going to elope with somebody, it would be me.”

Apparently, he’s still half asleep. Luc seems exasperated by the casual atmosphere. “I would imagine he’d be happier if he ran off with a sweet young noblewoman than a demon king like you.”

“If he did that to me, I’d pursue him to the ends of the earth.”

“Um, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked in the first place. Please don’t be scary, Master Claude. Well, in all likelihood, he simply isn’t able to come back. Are you positive Walt was leaving for Count Revanche’s mansion when you last saw him?”

Kyle nods.

Quartz murmurs the conclusion they’ve all come to. “...Then he’s probably still there.”

“I wonder if he’s fallen victim to the new demon snuff.”

“A Nameless Priest?” Kyle asks.

A tolerance for demon snuff is what gives Nameless Priests superhuman abilities; they have quite a high resistance to it. If they didn’t, they’d never reach a level worth calling “human weapons.”

Luc looks serious. “You and Walt are able to tolerate far more of it than ordinary people. However, if they used this substance on him, he might be temporarily incapacitated. Still, there’s no telling how long it would last.”

“...Then mightn’t he have found himself in a situation where we need to go help him?” Elefas suggests rather seriously.

Kyle steps forward. “I’ll go to Count Revanche. All we need to do is arrest Miss Lira for trading demon snuff.”

“You mustn’t. If we don’t take precautions, you could end up in the same situation as Walt,” Keith responds immediately.

Elefas agrees. “Indeed. In any case, that would ruin Walt’s plan. We don’t want to let the mastermind escape by pinning the blame on someone else. Besides, there’s no knowing what might happen to the fairy.”

“If it’s come to this, then that changes things completely.”

“Calm down, please. Walt doesn’t want something bad to happen to your fairy, either; that’s why he talked Master Claude around. Do you mean to let his concern come to nothing, all thanks to your impatience?”

That thought didn’t even occur to Kyle. He blinks, and Luc shrugs his shoulders. “He’s more kindhearted than he looks.”

“Do you have a plan then, Elefas?” Keith asks.

The mage folds his arms. “Well... According to Master Claude, Walt isn’t dead yet. They must be holding him prisoner, but they haven’t issued any demands to us... I would imagine that means the enemy doesn’t yet know who Walt actually is. They may even still be under the impression that he’s Isaac Lombard.”

“That sounds plausible.”

“Which means that we can drag Isaac into this. No doubt he’ll work it out for us somehow; I think it was questionable of him to shove it onto us in the first place,” Elefas declares briskly.

Quartz sighs, and Luc laughs. “Very nice. I’ll contact him and tell him to come here.”

“If he puts up a fight, just tell him you think Walt is more important to Master Claude than he is, and that should do the trick.”

It’s a clear threat. Before Kyle can ask if that’s really all right, Keith applauds lightly. “Just what I expected from you, Elefas. I think that’s a good plan as well. The demons may not be able to enter Count Revanche’s mansion, but they can keep an eye on it from a distance, so for now, let’s wait until the opera.”

“But if Walt’s...”

Kyle’s worried. What if his partner is at death’s door at this very moment?

All of a sudden, Claude opens his eyes. “I won’t give Walt’s life to some other woman.”

Kyle thinks he might still be talking in his sleep, but those eyes are dead serious.

It’s extraordinarily cold. Walt tries to pull the blankets closer around him, then realizes his arms won’t move.

They’re bound behind him.

*Oh, right. I was...*

The first thing his blurry eyes make out is a stone floor. Next are the legs of a

table by a wall, a neat and tidy bookshelf, and a long, untidy desk that's strewn with documents and writing implements. There's a cupboard overflowing with bottles of liquids in suspicious colors, laboratory equipment, and flasks. Walt is lying on top of what seems to be a long chest. Above him, he sees an iron grate.

It's a dimly lit laboratory, surrounded by iron bars and stone walls.

"There, that will do. Really, Lira, you're so reckless. Defying them like that..."

He hears voices from the other side of the grate. Carefully, he looks toward them, moving only his eyes. It isn't a cell, but a room of sorts. It's quite large, and Walt spots even more bookshelves, plus a wardrobe. There's a round table with cabriole legs and matching chairs sitting on a carpet, and the lamplight casts two overlapping shadows onto it.

When he sees that, he realizes the room has no windows. Are they underground?

"You've been careful about what you say and do lately so you wouldn't get hurt. You said if you were injured, you wouldn't be able to wear fancy clothes when you met 'him.'"

"That's not it! That wasn't why— Ow..."

"Come on, don't just shout immediately. Your cheek is swollen. You've cut your lip, too."

Closing what appears to be a first aid kit, the women rise to their feet. Silhouetted against the lamplight, the outlines of the two figures are identical, and Walt bites his lip.

"Listen... Do you think he'll be all right? The antidote is working, isn't it?"

"According to my calculations, it should." They turn their eyes toward him, and Walt realizes he's the one they're talking about. "We've never injected it into a human before, though, so we mustn't get careless. I doubt he'll regain consciousness for a while yet."

"I'll watch him. You need to start getting ready, Sister."

"...True. It's time. In your place..."

Lira puts out her hand, and the girl who looks exactly like her holds out a

brooch with a shining crystal embedded in the center. The light coming from it makes Walt narrow his eyes.

*That's a demon stone.*

The moment Lira pins the brooch on, the floor shines briefly. There's a metallic rattle, and Walt sees a chain fasten around her ankle. Conversely, the chain that was locked around the other girl's ankle vanishes.





It's some sort of binding spell. It switches back and forth between the two of them, with the brooch acting as a medium.

"Farewell, Sister... Be careful."

"I will. Wait for me, Lira."

"You don't have to come back, you know." Lira laughs, then her tone changes. "You really don't. You can leave me here, pretend you've lost your memories, and live as Viola Revanche...or someone entirely different. Lira Revanche is the one who sold demon snuff—me."

"The same goes for you. What's the matter? Why bring this up now, after all this time?"

"Because this is bound to be your last chance. I'm sure I'll be killed, like Father and Mother!" Lira shrieks, covering her face with her hands. "He's even struck the empress's man. There's no way to excuse that. But people think you're dead. If you run now, I'm sure you'll make it. I told you where the money we've saved up is hidden, remember? Take that with you and start a new life."

"Lira."

"Please, Sister, leave me and go. I wish you'd done it earlier! If I hadn't stubbornly clung to that dream of the two of us running away together and being free, this never would have— I even knew how he worked! I knew he'd let us hold on to our hope of leaving together and bind us!"

"I can't. You know I could never do that."

The two embrace, their faces mirror images of each other.

"Then let me say the same to you: Give me back the brooch, leave me here, and run. I'm the one who can make demon snuff, so I'm the one he wants. Plus, I'm the reason you soiled your hands by making you sell it. I've told you so over and over, yet here you are, saying this sort of thing to me?"

"But, Sister, if nothing changes—"

"I know. Getting him involved in this has made you uneasy, hasn't it."

In her sister's arms, Lira gives a little nod. "I knew I should have refused that

marriage interview right from the start. It's not as if we never considered the possibility that he might be disposed of right along with me."

"But he's the empress's man. They won't be so quick to harm him. Besides, the empress might have noticed something and sent him to us herself. I was the one who convinced you to wait and watch how things played out. You only helped me with my scheme; none of this is your fault."

"No, that's not all it was. I went along with it because you said that, Sister. I thought I could go on normal dates with him, just for a little while. I was such a fool!"

Walt grits his teeth, fighting the urge to sit up and tell her everything will be all right.

"It's all right, Lira. I have a good idea. Trust me and wait, won't you?" The girl strokes her sister's hair.

Lira looks up. "What do you plan to do?"

"I'm sure that man is a magician. He'll save you."

As Viola points at Walt, their eyes meet squarely. She's realized he's awake. That mischievous smile makes her look like a fairy through and through, and it makes him want to click his tongue in irritation.

*Argh. Seriously, Kyle's eyes really are knotholes.*

What an ill-natured fairy.

"After all, he's the same as the magician I met. His wounds healed up right away."

"That was just from the demon snuff antidote."

"Do you think so? Still, I'm sure it's destiny. That's a much nicer thing to believe, isn't it?" With a remark that sounds very much like something a fairy would say, Viola gently kisses Lira's cheek. "It's going to be fine. Depending on the effect Uncle's appeal to the empress at the opera has, there's still hope." She smiles.

Timidly, Lira nods. "That...that's true. So if we can just manage to save this man, we may yet..."

“Once he wakes, talk it over with him.”

“Uncle doesn’t know about the antidote, so my plan is to tell him to pretend he’s become addicted to demon snuff, then run away.”

This time, Viola nods firmly. “That’s good. There may be a duplicate key to that grate; I’ll try to search the mansion for it.”

“Be very careful, Sister. Don’t let the servants notice.”

The pair exchange smiles, putting on a brave front, and then they part.

For a little while, Lira watches the door her sister has disappeared through in silence. Slowly, trying not to startle her, Walt sits up. “So that was your older sister...Viola Revanche?”

Shocked, Lira turns toward him, and the chain clanks. Pretending he hasn’t heard it, Walt forces a smile. “Acting on Count Revanche’s orders, your sister made demon snuff, you sold it, and the whole mansion’s been covering it up. Do I have that right?”

“.....”

“Did Count Revanche give you those wounds?”

Looking down and away, Lira answers shortly, “If you overheard us, you already know everything.”

“I don’t know about your parents’ deaths yet, though.”

Lira’s eyes widen. The hope and despair he sees in them make Walt want to embrace her, but he can’t. His wrists are still bound, for one thing. For another, he’s the demon king’s guard, and he can’t do anything like that until the whole matter is resolved.

“Do you think you could tell me everything? Start to finish?”

How old was Viola Revanche when she learned that demon snuff was evil?

It was a game at first. Her kind uncle had always brought enough sweet treats and toys for both her and her sister, and he’d shown her a recipe, saying it was a secret. Smiling, he’d told her it was a very difficult thing and couldn’t be made...so she decided to surprise him. That was all.

Viola's memory was good, if she did say so herself, and she was very interested in the pharmaceutical sciences. She'd had only a brief glimpse of the recipe, but she memorized it, and although she wasn't familiar with most of the ingredients, she and her twin thought of potential substitutes, which they searched for. After much trial and error, they secretly took what they'd made to show their uncle.

They'd never dreamt that childish game would be the beginning of their hell.

The Revanche fief had always been hard-pressed for money. Their good-natured parents weren't skilled at arithmetic, and they never doubted anyone. In hindsight, Viola's uncle had also probably exacerbated the situation. Since crops had been poor for several harvests, they lowered taxes on their people and then coughed up their own savings. Lira was clever, and she'd pulled out the accounting books and pointed out various errors to help her parents, but they refused to listen to a child. So when their uncle offered financial assistance, they left everything in his hands, and the county slid into poverty before their very eyes.

"It doesn't matter what happens, as long as everyone's happy." Viola loved her parents, but those words sounded like nothing but an excuse to her. Her uncle, on the other hand, would tell her, "Let's sell that medicine to save everyone," which seemed far more practical.

Yes, she'd thought it was medicine. A medicine that gave people energy when they inhaled it.

Clever Lira gave all manner of suggestions to help them sell it: It had to be easy to carry; they needed to start with a diluted version because it was dangerous in higher concentrations; and they'd tailor large quantities to match specific users. She knew about costs and sales rates. Their parents wouldn't listen even if they talked to them about it, so they relied on their uncle to establish trafficking routes.

How had their parents felt when they learned their daughters were involved in the demon snuff trade?

"I should have realized it as well. I simply sold what Viola made as Lira asked me to. They're only children; if we appeal on their behalf, they should be

forgiven,” her brazen uncle had told her parents.

The former count and countess were earnest people. Feeling that their children’s deeds might as well be their own, they took her uncle’s words at face value... Or perhaps they simply weren’t able to speak up—by that point, they owed him quite a lot of money. They took Viola—the one who made the demon snuff—in their carriage and set off to explain the situation to the emperor.

That was when they were killed: The carriage was sent over a cliff with their corpses still inside.

Viola watched the whole thing while the people her uncle had hired—men from the church—took her prisoner.

It was clear she’d been spared so that she could continue making demon snuff. The reason Lira wasn’t killed was clear as well: She and Viola would be used to bind each other.

Their uncle was a clever man. So much so that Lira sarcastically called him “a hustler.”

The underground room the church helped to build was designed so that if either Lira or Viola was chained up and wearing the brooch, the door would open and the other twin could leave. However, they weren’t granted this halfhearted freedom out of mercy.

The first reason was because it allowed their uncle to play the part of an upstanding gentleman who was raising his deceased brother’s beloved daughter and restoring his house, putting himself above suspicion. Second, by keeping them in an environment where anything could happen to their twin if one of them ran away, he prevented them from committing suicide. He also gave them meals and a decent place to live. One of them—either one—could live as “Lira Revanche.”

In this way, he tried to bury Viola and Lira alive.

Viola sometimes thought it would be best to just give in and keep making demon snuff. But not Lira. Lira never gave up.

When their uncle hit her, she fought back by telling him: “If I’m injured, they’ll suspect you’re abusing me.” When he tried to drag Viola into bed with him, Lira

protected her with threats: “If you do anything to my sister, I’ll die in an extremely obvious way.” Lira and Viola’s faces were identical, but Lira was far from meek and quiet, and apparently she wasn’t the type her uncle preferred. He’d been left impotent by a poison Viola had stealthily dosed him with, but he still pawed her all over; she was only able to bear it because she had Lira. Viola was determined not to let anything like that happen to her twin sister, and took pride in being able to protect her.

Lira gave her a dream: Their uncle’s misdeeds were bound to be come to light someday, and then the two of them would atone for their crimes and live as the daughters of the house of Revanche.

...But they had nowhere to run. Their uncle had already won over the mansion’s servants; every one of them was addicted to demon snuff, and they either had very little will of their own or simply obeyed the count to get their next fix. While the twins were locked away in the mansion, their uncle’s reputation only kept climbing. At this point, it was obvious that a little girl who spoke out against him would be considered rash and inappropriate.

When a new emperor ascended the throne and the power of the church waned, a newfound hope sparked inside them. But their uncle just laughed and said that the current emperor would never tolerate demon snuff, since it was harmful to demons. If anything happened, the two of them would be executed and that would be that. What could they have done to him?

That was when Lira gave up on exposing their uncle’s misdeeds and starting new lives as the daughters of the house of Revanche. Instead, she said the two of them should run away together, and she had come up with a plan. Viola would make high-quality demon snuff, and Lira would sell it personally to secure the money they’d need for their escape. They turned to crime, not on their uncle’s orders, but of their own volition this time. They would survive quietly, in places where the sun’s rays wouldn’t find them by taking advantage of the fact that their uncle’s reach didn’t extend as far as it had when the church was stronger.

Viola understood that this was the practical thing to do.

But she just couldn’t bring herself to allow it. She refused to let Lira fall

alongside her.

Viola was the one who suggested Lira be presented to polite society and married off, but Lira was against it. If she were to marry and move away, she'd never get another opportunity to escape with Viola, and if Lira became a liability, her in-laws would be disposed of along with her. Her concerns were perfectly reasonable. The truth was that their uncle actually wanted to get rid of Lira now that she'd grown skilled at selling demon snuff, so he agreed to Viola's suggestion.

It was a dangerous gamble. However, Viola talked to Lira until she came around.

*"This is our last chance. Someone who believes you instead of Uncle may appear and help you. We'd be able to turn over a new leaf together."*

Lira shifted toward fleeing, and Viola capitalized on her hesitation to urge that thought on. Besides, if they managed to place all the blame of selling demon snuff on their uncle, it might force what went on in the mansion into the public eye.

As part of the escape plan, Lira steeled herself to deliberately provoke displeasure by attending a ball wearing a gown in the forbidden color. Their uncle would have simply fled if she mentioned demon snuff there, so she chose to stand out for the wrong reasons instead.

Their uncle was furious with Lira for doing something so dangerous, and he beat her as soon as they got home. As a rule, when she had obvious injuries, Viola took her place. Their uncle told Viola to apologize to the empress by sneaking into one of the d'Autriche duchy's soirees, but it didn't go well, and he lost his temper. After that, there was no knowing when Lira might be summoned to explain herself to the empress; not to mention that if she secured a marriage interview, her suitor would see her frequently. Their uncle realized it would be dangerous to do anything that would leave visible marks on Lira's arms or back, let alone her face. That did mean Viola was dragged into his bedchamber more often, but if it meant he couldn't strike Lira, she considered it a blessing.

Once Isaac Lombard accepted the marriage interview, the violence ceased

entirely. After all, the man was close enough to Her Majesty to be considered her confidant, so their uncle couldn't afford to attract his suspicion. And, as Viola anticipated, his surveillance of them lessened as well.

Lira grumbled, but she seemed to be enjoying herself. She said he gave her lip rouge, and she brought some home for Viola as well. "So what if he's the empress's confidant?" she blustered. "If he's too incompetent to see through Uncle, I'll just use him." ...And yet she suggested that maybe he might come to investigate.

Anyone her little sister spoke about that way was worth meeting.

Then, for the first time, there was a moment when Fate took her side: The man could tell her and Lira apart by sight, something neither the servants nor their uncle was able to do.

When she asked him a leading question, she wasn't sure whether he was Isaac Lombard or not, but it turned out her hunch was correct.

The important thing now is that he is not, in fact, the person he claims to be. If someone sent an impostor, it means they're under suspicion, and yet they are being allowed to do as they please: proof someone intended to thoroughly investigate the situation.

Their uncle knows nothing of this. He's apparently planning to make a direct appeal to the emperor at the opera house, while Viola has been assigned the role of claiming that "Master Isaac never showed up at the arranged time" in Lira's place.

What a farce.

Putting on a red dress, she applies her lip rouge. Lira is always the one who is beaten, so Viola's skin is unblemished and beautiful. She doesn't think she's anything but putrid on the inside, though; if it showed on the outside, she's sure she'd smell rotten.

Smiling brightly, she pockets a fruit knife. The servants don't notice; their minds are hazy with demon snuff. Following her uncle's orders, they put her into a carriage bound for the opera.

Her uncle will be arrested. As Lira has wished, his wicked deeds will be



exposed. And Viola, who has kept making demon snuff all this time, will probably be executed.

Everything Lira has done has been to protect others: her parents, Viola...

If the world punishes her kind, clever sister and those noble feelings, then it must be the world that is in the wrong.

But her uncle still has that silver tongue of his.

“—You say all this was orchestrated by your niece?”

*There, you see? He’s trying to wriggle his way out of it.*

She can’t let him get away here. Her rouged lips curve.

*Please, gods, don’t make me see the black magician I met in that moonlit garden. Anyone but him.* Reflected in his eyes, she’d been lovely beyond belief. That isn’t her. She’s already discarded the part of herself that did nothing but cry over her wretched inability to resist her uncle’s tyrannical behavior. The part of herself that asked others for help.

“—So you wore a gown in the forbidden color and picked a fight with Her Majesty to attract attention?”

“I wasn’t expecting much. You should’ve seen his face, though.” Lira is wearing a confident smile, but she’s pressing gauze to her cheek, and the corner of her mouth is cut. It pains him to see it, and it’s hard for Walt not to look away.

Lira seems to sense this. Rising to her feet, she sets a hand on the metal grate he’s trapped behind. “Don’t pity me.”

“.....”

“You’re the last person I ever want pity from.”

Now that she’s told him that, he can’t take his eyes off her.

“Besides, my sister has it much worse than I do.”

Lira’s remark is cryptic, but Walt doesn’t even contemplate asking for an explanation. The sorts of things that happen in situations like these are dismally predictable.

As if Lira's mentally switched gears, she raises her head. "If you spare her, I'll give you the recipes for demon snuff and the antidote."

"Huh?"

"Your people are researching demon snuff as well, aren't you? My sister's a genuine genius—that has to be better than killing her. All else aside, she's already dead. Let her live as someone else." Lira sets a hand on her chest. "I'll take the blame for both her crimes and my own. That will do, won't it? It isn't a bad deal."

"....."

"If you refuse, I won't tell you how to find my sister's research. I'm the only one who knows. She's careless about things like that."

Lira's a shrewd negotiator, and in spite of himself, Walt is impressed. "You love your sister, don't you."

"Are you mocking me?"

"...Yeah, I guess so. Unfortunately, though, I'm not authorized to make the final decision about things like that," he tells her honestly.

Lira frowns. "But you belong to the Oberon Trading Firm, don't you? Not only that, they're letting you independently investigate demon snuff. You're not an underling. You must have decent standing."

She apparently thinks that, even if he isn't Isaac Lombard, Walt must be part of the Oberon Trading Firm since he's been borrowing the Lombard name.

*Hmm. So she thinks I'm Isaac's subordinate.*

He can easily picture Claude trying to crush both Isaac and the whole Oberon Trading Firm if he ever catches wind of that, so it's a misunderstanding he'd like to correct, but... What's the best move here? Lira isn't an ally yet, so it's too soon to tell her he's one of the demon king's top retainers.

"I'm just cooperating with the firm. I belonged to the church once, way back when, which makes me the ideal person for a job like this."

That startles Lira, but she quickly buys his story. "I see. Using one of the church's men in a demon snuff investigation makes sense... And it also means

you can't disclose your identity. After all, keeping that hidden is important when working undercover."

It's really helpful that she's so quick.

"In that case, just get us to the negotiating table."

"And you won't save me if I don't?"

"What are you talking about? None of this can happen unless you return home alive. They'd just get rid of both of us, and that would be the end of it. I'm talking about later on. I already fully intend for you to escape," Lira tells him firmly, displaying a sharp intellect. In other words, she intends to save Walt whether or not he accepts her proposal.

*Oh, I'm done for. I'm seriously weak when people put themselves at risk to help me...*

It's probably because he's too used to being treated as a human weapon and disposable shield. Sighing inwardly, Walt comes to a decision, then rips through the rope binding his wrists.

It takes Lira a second to register what's happened, then she looks shocked. "Huh?! Y-you just—"

"Well, anybody who trains can manage that much."

"Anybody who trains can tear rope apart?!"

*I'm a human weapon* isn't an easy thing to say, so he smiles and sidesteps the question. "Do you have a thin piece of wire or a pin or something?"

"W-wait a minute." Lira goes to her dressing table, rummages through a drawer, then returns with a plain hairpin. "What are you going to do?"

"This is an old design, so I think I can probably get it, but— There we go, it's open."

He tosses the lock to the floor with a *clank* and steps through the door, which is only about half his height. Dazed, Lira looks from Walt to the metal grate and back. "...Are you really just an investigator?"

"Honestly, when you're an investigator, this is really basic stuff. Now let's see

yours.”

Walt steps around behind Lira and kneels on the floor. The chain that stretches from her ankle is embedded in the stone flooring. It’s magic; when Lira moves, it grows just as much as she needs. He picks it up and pulls on it, sending a burst of pain through his palm. Panicked, Lira crouches down and grabs his wrist to stop him. “Don’t try to pull it out. See, you’re hurt—”

The magic-inflicted scrape vanishes before her eyes. *Well, that does it*, Walt thinks. He gives her a foolish smile. “It’s fine. I’m sort of a not-quite-human investigator.”

Lira’s been staring, but then she scowls just like always. “What a stupid thing to say. Just because it heals up right away doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt!”

This time, Walt’s eyes widen. Then he groans, looking up at the ceiling. “Look, could you not say stuff that hits me so hard?”

“Huh?”

“Nothing, it’s fine... The church cast this binding spell, didn’t they?”

Lira nods. “That’s what I’ve heard. It’s tied to the brooch. If either I or my sister are chained in this underground room, the door opens. It won’t open if neither of us is wearing the brooch... There’s a way to release it, though. Some key that isn’t the brooch.”

Walt glances at her, signaling for her to elaborate, and she continues. “We tried barricading ourselves in here once. We brought in provisions and water, and neither of us wore the brooch. While we were sleeping, though, our uncle opened the door and came in with the servants...”

Lira trails off, biting her lip. It obviously hadn’t ended well. Walt takes a coolheaded look at the door to the room, which includes a laboratory behind a metal grate.

“I’m not seeing a keyhole.”

“It isn’t a regular key, apparently. My sister seems to have some idea of what it is, though.”

“The thing is, magic’s not my forte, either.”

Having his demon gun would have helped, but he didn't bring it along. Kyle's constant nagging to be on the alert at all times pops into his head, which irks him. "I know a guy who can do something about that even without a key, though."

Elefas could, for one thing. Spells are his specialty, and he can borrow the demon king's magic. The demon king's power has also made the demon guns into something that's kind of hilarious, and if Walt had his, he could break this no problem. Either way, it comes down to the strength of the demon king.

In any case, he's going to need to call for backup; this is too much for him to handle on his own. And to do that, he'll have to leave Lira here.

"It's fine. You escape," Lira tells him cheerfully, before he can say a word. "Hurry and go. Oh, but the servants are standing guard, so—"

"Shh."

He heard a noise in the depths of the corridor. At his warning, Lira falls silent as well.

Several sets of footsteps approach, then the door abruptly swings open. Three men are standing there, faces he's never seen before.

Even seeing Walt doesn't seem to disturb them. Their eyes are vacant; it's clear they aren't in their right minds. With steady unflinching gazes like an eerie band of martyrs, they ready the lamps they're carrying. Without a word, they scatter oil around as casually as if they're cleaning, then pitch the lamps in.

"Huh?! Wait just a— Hey!"

By the time Walt shouts, the lit lamps have already touched off the thick, long-pile carpet, and the fire's begun to spread.

Stunned, he and Lira gaze at the blazing door. Pointlessly shielding the girl behind him, Walt clenches his fists.

While he can run, unless he releases the binding spell Lira's uncle and the church have placed on her, she won't be able to leave the room.

Claude's mood grows worse and worse, and Kyle watches, his insides a bundle of nerves. His master's beauty outshines even the glittering chandeliers of the

opera house, and it's at its most impressive when he's angry. Aileen is beside him, and although she must have noticed it as well, her smile doesn't waver. He'd like to learn from her composure.

That said, outwardly, Kyle's wearing the mask of a coolheaded guard. His face probably makes Claude's smile look merciful by comparison.

"You say your niece, Miss Lira, has been threatening you all this time."

"That's right. She used demon snuff to win over everyone in the mansion. She meant to make herself Your Majesty's wife someday!"

Aileen opens her fan and uses it to hide her lips. She's probably concealing a smile.

The entrance hall of the opera house teems with operagoers. The imperial couple are on the landing of a velvet-carpeted stairway, and the poor count kneels below them, supposedly confessing the truth of the matter. It's quite a spectacle. It may even be more entertaining than tonight's opera: Audience members watch from a distance, whispering in the corridor upstairs and the hall down below, and none of them show any sign of entering the theater and taking their seats.

"I'm really terribly sorry. It's partly my fault for not noticing sooner. However, I thought it was fine for her to dream, provided that was all she did. I had no idea she would dare to strike Master Isaac Lombard when he realized she was selling demon snuff!"

Elefas is standing next to Kyle, and the man's dramatic remark makes him cover his mouth, struggling not to burst out laughing.

"I-Isaac's been attacked..."

"You found that funny? What's wrong with you?" Isaac sounds rather indignant.

Kyle and Elefas's current mission is to guard Isaac and keep an eye on things. They've blended in with the crowd and are intently listening to Count Revanche's story.

"Master Isaac is being held prisoner in my mansion," the count insists.

“Isaac Lombard, captive...”

“Listen, like I said, what’s so funny about that, you shady mage?” Isaac demands.

“My niece ordered me to come here and plead her innocence. She’ll be here soon, and she’ll seem very worried that Master Isaac has not come to pick her up, even though he promised to do so. After that, she plans to secretly do away with him.”

“Isaac Lombard, murdered...” Elefas can barely keep it together.

“Listen, you... Enough. Whatever.”

“Yes, I see. In other words, you’re saying you knew nothing of your niece’s demon snuff trading.”

Count Revanche hangs his head. “I don’t intend to make excuses. I failed to stop my niece, just as I failed with my older brother. The responsibility hangs on my head. Punish me in any way you see fit.”

He presents himself as a martyr, and it draws admiring sighs and sympathetic murmurs from the surrounding spectators. “He’s good,” Isaac mutters. “If the emperor passes judgment on him now, everyone will think he’s ruthless.”

“However, would you save Master Isaac first? He trusted me enough to confess that he feared for his life. If he hasn’t returned, it may be my niece’s doing.”

If they didn’t know better, Count Revanche’s story might pass for the truth. That’s how good his reputation is and how adept he is at working the crowd.

“Isaac Lombard confided in you? And now you say he’s being held captive?”

“Yes. If we don’t act quickly, there’s no telling what may happen.” Count Revanche raises his head.

Deliberately, Claude sets a long finger against his chin. “There seems to have been some kind of misunderstanding. What do you think, Aileen?” He gives his wife a troubled look.

Aileen, who’s still elegantly hiding the lower half of her face with her fan, glances their way. “Go on,” Elefas urges in a voice trembling with suppressed

laughter as he gives Isaac a little push. Isaac, who's dressed in his finest, smacks his hand away crossly.

He's bad at making this sort of entrance.

"Yes, there must be. After all, my confidant Isaac Lombard is here with us now."

Isaac was frustrated just listening to his new wife fret as she dressed him: "What?! Dress him up for an impressive entrance? Yes, just leave it to m— But if I dress him up too much, he'll get popular..." Now he steps out of the crowd and walks down the stairs to the landing where the imperial couple wait.

"A good evening to you, Your Majesty."

"Yes, Isaac, to you as well. You haven't changed a bit."

Watching the empress and the real Isaac exchange amicable greetings, the count clambers to his feet, turning pale. "Th-that can't be! Then— Who on earth is that man?"

"Who do you think?" For the first time, Claude lowers his voice. He must be nearing his limit; leaving his wife on the landing, he descends the stairs to the count. "Now then, tell us once more, Count Revanche. Who was it that spoke to you about your niece and felt his life was in danger?"

"Wh-what...?"

"Would he have gone to anyone else before coming to me? Is that possible? I'm extremely curious."

"Master Claude is really holding on to that grudge," Elefas says calmly, and Kyle sighs and nods. Even so, he feels anxious. *He is all right, isn't he?*

Claude probably feels the same way. His red eyes are fixed mercilessly on Count Revanche.

"I—I know nothing!"

Claude frowns.

Elefas narrows his eyes. "He's stubborn. He still hasn't shown his true colors."

Kyle almost lets out a *tsk* of irritation, but then he notices an unusual



movement downstairs. While the crowd's attention is riveted on the imperial couple and Count Revanche, someone is threading their way through, making for the spot everyone is focused on.

At the foot of the stairs, where the count is standing...

*That's—*

His eyes widen. He could never mistake that figure for anyone else.

"That's right— My niece! Ask my niece. She'll be here soon anyway."

"Then you claim your niece was the one who engineered all this?"

"That's right! I know nothing."

Kyle isn't listening to the farce at the base of the stairs. All he can see is the girl.

As Count Revanche's excuses hold everyone's attention, she creeps closer. There's a smile on her lips, and in her hand, she's holding a...

"If that Isaac Lombard is an impostor, then he's another one of those demon snuff traders and he deceived me—"

"This is for my mother and father!"

The blade reflects the bright lights of the chandeliers. Just before it falls, Kyle kicks Count Revanche out of the way and catches the girl's thin wrist, stopping it.

Her eyes are the same color as the ones he saw in that moonlit garden. They widen in shock, then waver as if she's about to burst into tears.

*It's her.* For some reason, he's sure of it.

However, before he can ask, her face hardens.

"Unhand me, please. This is demon snuff. —If you come near me, I'll scatter it."

She holds a small bottle right in front of his eyes, and Kyle shuts his mouth.

His heart is in turmoil, but his mind is calm. Elefas is here, too; it would be easy to take that bottle away from her. Since there's no telling what might

agitate her, though, they can't make any careless moves.

"All right."

Releasing her wrist, he steps back, shielding Claude. The girl immediately points her knife at the count, who's lying at her feet. "The key to the underground room. Give it to me."

"G-girl, do you think you can do a...a thing like this and escape without—?"

"Isn't this where you're supposed to play the victim and beg His Majesty for forgiveness?"

Kyle can practically hear Count Revanche grinding his teeth as he glares at his niece, but she seems to know that her uncle can't defy her. Right as she's about to riffle through his pockets— "*Demon king! Emergency, emergency!*"

*"Fire! Count Revanche's mansion is burning!"*

A murder of crows swoops in through the main entrance, and more screams go up. There's a sound of scrambling footsteps; people have started to flee. Taking advantage of the confusion, Count Revanche makes a break for it, running deeper into the opera house.

Everyone's eyes follow him. In that moment, the girl bites her lip, then turns on her heel and dashes for the door. It all happens in an instant, just as it did in that moonlit garden.

Elefas descends at a leisurely pace, landing with a light step beside Claude. "Master Claude, what should we do?"

Claude shrugs. "Kyle. Go after her."

"A-are you sure?"

"She made a public attempt to kill her uncle, so she must be pretty desperate. She probably knows something about Walt as well. I don't know where she went or what she plans to do there, but do her a favor and stop her. The way you just did."

Startled, Kyle stands straighter.

Claude goes on impassively. "A fire at Count Revanche's mansion, hmm?"

They're destroying evidence. If demon snuff is burning, we can't send the demons. Elefas, you work with Keith and get that fire put out. Search for Count Revanche as well."

"Understood, sire. I'll return to the castle to report the situation to Sir Keith."

Elefas vanishes. Returning to the landing, Claude gently takes his wife's hand. Nothing about the situation has rattled her. "Let me send you home. We'll have to postpone the opera. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all. Besides, I got to see something unusual. So she's your fairy, Kyle?"

Kyle looks up. Aileen is wearing a mischievous smile. Beside her, Claude blinks. "She is? That wasn't Lira?"

"No. She looks just like her, but I'm fairly certain... Do go save her, won't you?"

Kyle hastily bows to Aileen, then takes off running. The crows continue circling near the ceiling as a white shape leaves their ranks and flies down to him.

"Sugar, where did she go?!"

*"The girl boarded a carriage!"*

*"This way! This way!"*

Leaping from the teeming crush of people to the roof, Kyle scans for the carriage, guided by Sugar and the others.

He's searching for the girl he'd never considered searching for.

*I'm...*

Unexpectedly, regret wells up inside him.

If only he'd looked for her sooner... He can't get the thought out of his mind. The image of the knife she tried to bring down is still burned onto his retinas. She'd never do such a thing—even if he can believe that, he doesn't know for sure.

How did it come to this? What sort of life has she endured up till now? What happened in that moonlit garden? Why had she been crying? He doesn't even

know her real name.

At this point, he understands how Walt feels. Walt had tried desperately to learn about the girl because he'd wanted to help her. He'd believed she was someone worth saving.

*She's a fairy; as long as she's happy, that's enough.* Kyle had prayed for that, but it was all he'd done. He'd been running away. Compared to him, Walt had been far more sincere.

*"There! That's it, lackey!"*

A carriage is racing through town, spurred on by a constantly lashing whip. By the time Kyle catches up to it, he can see smoke ahead. *Count Revanche's mansion? Is she planning to go back?*

Why would she return to a blazing mansion? At this point, he remembers Walt's theory.

If this really is the "deceased" sister, and she has a twin...

Avoiding the crowd, the carriage stops at the rear entrance. The girl practically tumbles out, grabs a hose that's meant for watering the garden, turns on the tap, and douses herself.

It's clear what she's about to do.

"Wait—!"

A gust of wind whips up the flames, and the noise drowns out Kyle's shout. With no hesitation, the girl plunges into the inferno.

Luckily, they'd been able to put out the flames in the underground room quickly. However, the fleeing servants had apparently scattered oil everywhere to keep anyone from pursuing them, and when Walt reaches the entry hall, what awaits him is a sea of fire.

The blaze is far too large to extinguish.

"The wind's blowing the fire toward the building in the other direction, but it'll be back this way before long," he tells Lira, once he's returned to the underground room.

“Why did you come back?! Are you a fool?! Hurry up and escape!” she shouts at him.

Walt responds as calmly as possible. “I can’t let you get away now. This is work.”

“You needn’t worry; I won’t be going anywhere. And ‘work’? If you’re dead, there’s no point! Besides, I’ve already told you everything. Value your life over your job!”

“I can’t do that. You’re an important witness.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out. You’ll have my sister. If you need evidence, take those notes over there and whatever else you want!”

“I’m telling you I can’t let you die! Get that through your skull!” he yells.

He’s startled Lira, and the look on her face brings Walt back to his senses. “... Sorry.” He rubs at a sooty cheek, not exactly sure what he’s apologizing for. Unbidden, his hand reaches for Lira’s chest.

His fingers brush the brooch that’s holding her here. It’s an important piece of evidence.

“Even this is valuable evidence, you know.”

Lira looks down. Walt thinks she might be crying, and the sight makes him a little flustered. “I-it’s all right. I’ve always been weirdly lucky.”

“...Luck? How can you talk about luck at a time like this?”

“Mm, well, it’s true—”

“Lira!”

The sudden shout makes Lira’s eyes widen. Walt turns.

“Sister!”

“Thank goodness you’re safe! Come, swap places with me. If you go now, you can still escape. Give me the brooch...”

Lira turns pale. Covering her chest, she hides behind Walt.

Viola is covered in a layer of soot, and her soft, beautiful hair is singed here

and there. She must have run through the burning mansion to get here. Walt doesn't bother asking why she came back: It's obvious.

She wants to get her sister safely away before the flames trap them—and plans to stay here in her place.

Wearing the face of a troubled older sister, Viola pleads with Lira. “Hurry, there's no time. Give me the brooch.”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“Do you want this man to die with you?”

With a gasp, Lira looks up at him. Walt pretends not to notice. Under the circumstances, he doesn't want to hear her answer.

So there's just one question he does ask.

“Did you meet a prince in a moonlit garden?”

Viola blinks at him. Walt's realized she isn't dressed the same way she was when she left the room. The fragrance of her perfume has burned away, but she's wearing a magnificent red gown, and although it's coming off, she's wearing makeup and lip rouge. She's most certainly dressed for the opera.

He doesn't actually know where she's been or what she did there, but her response to his question matters more.

“What...are you saying?” She's obviously shaken, and that makes the answer clear.

Walt shrugs. “In that case, it's fine. If we just wait it out, we'll all survive.”

“—Relying purely on others isn't the best plan, Walt.”

Viola's eyes widen; she didn't notice she was being tailed. Frightened, she backs away, and Lira's gaze sharpens.

The only one who smiles is Walt. “Hey. Thanks for coming to pick me up.”

“Who'd come for you? I just...followed her here, on Master Claude's orders.”

There's nothing wrong with that: His partner can pursue his fairy now. Walt raises a hand, and Kyle sullenly tosses him a demon gun. There's no way Kyle wouldn't notice he forgot to bring his along.

The guns seem to frighten the two girls. He feels bad about that but doesn't have time to explain.

Wordlessly, Walt levels his gun, aiming at the magic chain that binds Lira's leg, and pulls the trigger.

When they reach the first floor, the paths to both the rear door and the front entrance are already an impenetrable sea of flames. "Listen, you," Walt shouts. "Did you charge into a burning building without letting someone know first? Are you an idiot?!"

"I don't want to hear it from you! You must have had any number of chances to escape, and still—"

"Argh, just can it already! Watch what'll happen if that fiend of a mage ends up having to rescue us. We'll get stuck with no time off for six months!" Walt threatens.

Kyle looks incredulous. "As if you can talk. You've already lost yours due to that blunder the other day. —Anyway, what do we do now?"

"Are there any other doors?"

Lira and Viola have been huddling close to each other, watching them bicker in stunned silence, but now they exchange looks. "Th-they're already burning..."

"Any stairs that go up?"

"O-over there. What are you going to do?"

"Jump out a window. If you'll excuse me..." Walt scoops Lira into his arms, putting her over his shoulder before her surprise wears off. He's already taken off his coat and draped it over her.

"Wh-what?"

"It'll keep the sparks off you. Don't talk; this way's faster."

When he glances at Kyle, the other man hastily takes off his coat, drapes it over Viola's head, and picks her up. She doesn't seem surprised; she simply lets him do it.

*Actually, have those two even said a word to each other?*

It tugs at him a little, but that can wait.

The stairway is a narrow one meant for the servants. Taking the stairs three at a time, Walt races up it to the third floor. The stairs deposit him right at a corner of the corridor. Flames are erupting from a room whose door has collapsed; they're in his way, but if he gets past three rooms or so, there's a big bay window that overlooks the back garden.

"I'm going to charge through, so keep your eyes, ears, and mouth covered, and hold your breath. Here we go."

Once he's seen Lira pull the coat tightly over her head, Walt launches himself into a run. Holding his breath but keeping his eyes open, he sprints past the rooms. Kyle follows suit.

Now all they have to do is break the window and get outside. Working in sync, he and Kyle smash the glass using one hand each—and a black shadow falls over them.

"?!"

"Kyle!"

It's just a matter of where they're standing: Walt manages to avoid the attack by ducking back into the corridor with Lira, but Kyle and Viola are flung out through the broken window.

"Sister!" Lira tries to lean out, but Walt holds her back, then makes her take cover behind him. A hand and arm so thick they don't seem human grab Viola's slim body and pull her back.

"...You ingrates. How dare you."

A grotesque shadow stands right where Kyle and Walt were a moment ago, blocking their way. A bitter smile creeps onto Walt's face. "Count Revanche..."

The figure turns toward him, and the left half is unmistakably that of the count. His right half, however, has degraded into something ugly and warped, and he stands there with Viola in his grip.

"This is your fault. You've ruined everything," the count says. His voice is strangely warped. Even as he speaks, his muscles swell and contract with



unsettling, distorted noises.

Viola must have fainted for a moment. Opening her eyes with a gasp, she looks around, probably searching for Kyle. Then she sees the monster that's caught her, and her face turns white. "U-un...cle..."

"It's your fault, both of you! Everything's ruined!"

"Your servants set the mansion on fire to destroy evidence on your orders, and you're blaming it on them? I mean, I think you might have a *little* bit of trouble convincing people of that, don't you?"

Walt speaks in an intentionally cheery voice, trying to draw the man's focus to him. When humans are enhanced—or corrupted, really—by demon snuff, they tend to think very simplistically. Just as he anticipated, the man's eyes, which were darting in every direction, turn to glare at him. "Y-you... That's right. You tricked me, so the emperor—"

However, Walt has Lira there with him. She seems to be keeping it together, but she's clutching Walt's coat, and her hand is trembling. "Sister... A-and the, the other one, that man... He fell...out of the window..."

"He's fine," Walt says briefly. Figuring out how to get Lira and Viola safely away takes priority.

"Fine? But my uncle— He's no longer...human..."

"Lira, get out of here! Please, run!" Viola screams. The second half of that plea is probably directed at Walt.

Apparently only just now remembering that Viola's also there, Count Revanche yells. "Shut up, shut up, shut up! I told you I'd make you my wife, and yet you— You shameless little—"

"Who'd marry you?! If that's my only option, I'll bite through my tongue and die right here!"

"Sister, don't!" Lira tries to lunge at them, but Walt grabs her by the waist and backs up to a part of the corridor that hasn't caught fire yet. At the same time, Count Revanche takes a blow from above and falls to the floor with a tremendous crash.

Viola is nearly flung out into empty space again, but Kyle deftly catches her, then flies back into the corridor through the broken window. “I can’t have you marrying him or biting your tongue off.”

Walt has scooped Lira into his arms. After launching Count Revanche down the blazing corridor with a kick, he leaps through the bay window, switching places with Kyle. “Never mind that, it’s time to go!”

Having Lira and Viola there puts them at a disadvantage in combat. Kyle promptly shifts Viola into a more secure position, then jumps from the third floor, following Walt. Both Lira and Viola have gone pale, but there’s no time to be solicitous: No sooner have they touched down in the rear garden than a grotesque shape bursts through the wall of the mansion and plummets toward them.

“Give them back, they’re mine!”

“Who’d—?”

“Kyle, don’t talk back to him, getting to safety comes first!”

“L-leave... Leave us here!” Lira shrieks.

Even though Viola’s face is white, she calls to them as well. “W-we’ll be fine, so please, leave us and go. The two of us can escape together.”

“Walt, here he comes!”

An enormous fist swings down, smashing into the ground. As they evade it, Lira shouts again, “H-he’s after us, isn’t he?! If you leave us and go—”

“What are you talking about?! You’re shaking!”

“Shall I help you?” a sudden voice says behind them. Lira gasps, but Walt *tsks* in irritation.

That fiend of a mage has arrived.

“You sure know how to show up right when it means we’ll owe you.”

“Don’t talk like that. I was getting ready to help put the fire out, and I just happened to see the two of you hard at work over here.”

“Elefas, take care of her,” Kyle calls over. He’s just kicked Count Revanche

flying again, putting some distance between them. Viola looks completely taken by surprise at the sight of the mage, who's still floating in midair.

Landing lightly beside Kyle, Elefas smiles. "Of course; leave it to me. I wish Walt could also admit that he needs my help as well."

"Yeah, yeah, say whatever you want. You're more crooked loan shark than mage. —She's all yours."

"Is that any way to ask a favor? Oh, very well."

"U-um...?"

Walt sets Lira down on the lawn, and she eyes the mage uneasily. Elefas gives her an incredibly dubious smile. "Now then, young ladies, if you'd follow me."

"But..."

"It's all right. I think those two will score a stunning victory. Unlike myself, they're outstanding in actual combat. Aren't you—? Whoops."

Before Walt can respond to his taunts, tremors shake the ground. Count Revanche is growing bigger and bigger, and he crushes a flower bed as he gets to his feet. "I won't, let you, get away."

Lira and Viola cling to each other, white-faced. It's probably how they've lived for the past several years.

"You are mine. Who'd give you to complete nobodies like—?"

"Complete nobodies? That's rude."

"You said it."

Walt and Kyle stand in his way. Peering down at them, Count Revanche laughs. "You think you can win against me? Mere humans, when I've been strengthened by demon snuff! Even the demon king would be no match for—"

"Hey, whoa, stop. Don't say careless stuff like that, okay? He'll actually show up."

"We can't let him do that. This is our job."

"Exactly. And we're not complete nobodies. We're the demon king's guards."

They cock their demon guns. This is what they're here for.

"Kyle Elford. In the name of our lord."

"Walt Lizanis. We swear on our pride."

They stand side by side, mirror images of each other, and the muzzles of their guns spit silver bullets.

Walt Lizanis. That's his real name.

Lira engraves the name she's finally learned on her heart. At the same time, the reality of his position sinks in. *He's one of His Majesty's closest retainers...!*

An investigator for the Oberon Trading Firm doesn't even come close. He's even higher up the ladder than Isaac Lombard, who's renowned as the empress's confidant.

Lira has hardly ever left the mansion, but she's heard that the current emperor is the demon king, and that since he's been disinherited once, he chooses his retainers very carefully. This is particularly the case for his guards, since they're always at his side, and apparently even having Prime Minister d'Autriche put in a word for someone doesn't help.

She hears that they call themselves "the demon king's guards" because they've pledged their loyalty personally to Claude Jean Ellmeyer. They aren't even nobles, but the things they say and do can't be ignored: They are the emperor's eyes, ears, hands, and feet.

"Come this way, you two," the blond, mild-looking young man prompts them, and Lira recovers her senses with a start.

"Um, but... Are you sure they'll be all right...?!"

Their uncle is now twice his former height, and he really doesn't seem human anymore. It must be due to the power of Viola's demon snuff. Viola looks pale as well. "That demon snuff is potent. Its effects will last much longer...and the antidote has burned up..."

"Is this any time to be worrying about them? You two are suspects. At this point, I'm your only opponent. Haven't you considered attempting to flee?"

The question sounds mischievous, but Lira picks up on the accusation deep in

his eyes. “It’s the other way around!” she shouts. “If you’d only arrested me straightaway, this never would have happened! You noticed the demon snuff, but you left me to struggle futilely on my own, didn’t you?”

“No, I’m the one who can make demon snuff, so I’m the one our uncle’s after, not Lira! Give me to him. That will buy you time to figure out a real plan and muster soldiers.”

“I see,” the young man says carelessly. Then his smile vanishes. “In other words, you think our emperor is a fool who could be manipulated by two little girls?”

When he responds to their impassioned cries with a chilling gaze, shivers run down Lira and Viola’s spines. However, after a moment, his gentle smile returns. “If you’re worried, would you like to stay here and watch? As long as I protect you, they shouldn’t be angry about it.”



“M-may we...?” Lira asks timidly.

No matter how she thinks about it, it’s clear they’ll be in the way, but the young man nods. “Yes, go ahead. They’re strong, you know, the demon king’s guards. However, it may be a bit overstimulating.”

“What do you mean by—?”

Before she can finish the question, a severed arm falls right in front of her. It’s been torn from her uncle’s shoulder, and something unidentifiable—nerves? muscles?—squirms in the open wound.

Lira immediately clings to her sister, too shocked to even scream. Viola is holding her breath, a deathly shade of white.

The man watches them with a smile, obviously enjoying the moment. “Young ladies. If you’d like to escape the demon king’s clutches, this is your final chance.”

“We won’t run!” Lira answers reflexively, then bites her lip.

Viola squeezes her hand. She keeps her eyes on the battle, but her trembling lips move. “Th-this...this is something we have to do...!”

“That’s good to hear.” The spiteful young man’s smile has a hint of challenge in it.

Their opponent easily dodges the bullets. How far demon snuff spikes human athletic abilities greatly depends on the individual, but Count Revanche is sturdy enough to land a jump from the third floor without getting injured and fast enough to dodge bullets. All things considered, he must have an impressively high tolerance.

Even with Walt and Kyle attacking as a team, he’s evading without trouble.

“Wow. He might have made a better Nameless Priest than a count, huh.”

“Compatibility matters, but the fact that Revanche county’s demon snuff is more powerful than the conventional type is a big part of it.”

“That’s news to me. So Viola must really have a talent for that sort of thing—Whoops.”

Count Revanche had uprooted one of the garden trees and hurled it at them. When they nimbly evade it, he *tsks* in frustration. “Viola—is—mine.”

His body has ballooned to twice its size, but he’s still intelligent and rational enough to talk.

*Most people would be reduced to howling and shrieking by now.*

“That woman—will be—my wife.” Count Revanche is even wearing a vulgar leer. “Lira is mine, too. I played with them, by turns, every night. I trained them.”

His attempts to provoke them are incredibly transparent. *Yes, this new demon snuff is pretty awful.* “Don’t let him get to you,” he warns Kyle.

“What would I get angry about?”

Kyle’s eyes are steady, and his tone icy. In fact, Walt’s own thoughts are terribly cold and calculating, and he feels as if he might turn into a weapon powered entirely by an irresistible need to kill this man.

“Are you jealous? Do you envy me? My nieces are beauties, after all! If it was just for one night, I wouldn’t mind loaning them out to you!”

“The pathetic delusions of a middle-aged man. There’s no point even listening.”

It’s exactly as his partner says.

They launch themselves off the ground in the exact same moment, heading straight for their enemy. As if mocking them, Count Revanche leaps with a power that seems impossible for something his size, then clings to the wall of the blazing mansion. Walt’s bullet follows him, but he catches it bare-handed.

“I’ve heard of you before. The demon king’s guards. Nameless Priests. But that means nothing. You’re no match for me now!”

The crushed bullet falls from the count’s hand: demon guns won’t be enough. He roars with laughter. “Did you really think obsolete pieces of trash like you could defeat me?!”

*Get a load of this guy.* Smiling quietly, Walt takes aim with his gun again. “I wouldn’t get too full of yourself.”



“What are you—?” A shadow falls over Count Revanche’s smile. Kyle has reached down and grabbed his arm; he twists it in an impossible direction and easily rips it off. As the limb flies away, Count Revanche screams. “Muh, my, my aaaaarm!”

“Don’t lose your head over a little thing like being dismembered. You can shut off your sense of pain,” Kyle says coolly. Then he lands a roundhouse kick squarely on the man’s neck. “Go pick up your arm yourself.”

“What are you doing, training the new guy?” Walt laughs. Count Revanche is flying straight at him. Once he’s in range, Walt grabs the man’s remaining arm, ripping it off and slamming the count into the ground.

Now armless and lying on his back, the count can’t even get up. Planting a foot on his chest, Walt shoves the muzzle of his gun into his mouth. “Don’t worry, this isn’t gonna hurt.”

“Zdop, zdop id—”

“I mean, you’ll still die, but whatever. —Bang!”

He pretends to pull the trigger, and Count Revanche promptly passes out, his eyes rolling back in his head.

Walt straightens up, shaking spit off the barrel of his gun. Rejoining him, Kyle looks disappointed. “He fainted? That didn’t take much.”

“He’s an amateur who went up against two pros. You’re being too hard on him.”

“Too hard? On a man who boasted that he could fight the demon king? He should learn how to regenerate before saying things like that.”

After that harsh evaluation, Kyle turns on his heel, notices Viola, and immediately freezes up.

They’d acted before considering whether such a violent spectacle would be too hair-raising for sheltered young noblewomen.

It would be perfectly understandable if the girls found them terrifying. This is their job, and this is how strong they are.

Walt, who’s already mentally prepared himself for this a bit more than Kyle

has, goes out of his way to give Lira a cheerful wave. “Hi there. I’m glad you’re safe.”

“S-safe... Y-yes. And you, um... You’re also...safe?”

Her voice is trembling, but she’s showing concern for Walt’s well-being. He didn’t expect that, and it stops him in his tracks.

Beside the pallid Lira, Viola nods over and over again, despite the fact that she’s also shaking. Her face is even paler than her sister’s. “I’m...glad, I’m so glad...you’re safe... You’re...” Viola swoons, and Lira hurries to support her. Then the twins crouch down, holding each other’s hands and huddling close, as if they’re praying.

“I’m so glad...”

They’re too scared to stand. But above it all, they’re happy Walt and Kyle are safe. Elefas, who’s been watching over the girls from a short distance away, shrugs. “They said they wouldn’t go anywhere. This isn’t my fault.”

“...You let them watch on purpose, didn’t you?” Kyle glares at him.

Elefas smiles back. “When you put it that way, it sounds as if I’m a terrible person.”

“Are you saying you’re not? I swear...”

Both girls are completely unable to stand. Just when Walt thinks they’ll have to carry them if they want to get moving anytime soon—Count Revanche’s severed arm suddenly moves.

Lira and Viola start to shake uncontrollably, and Elefas’s eyes narrow. On reflex, Walt and Kyle turn back, leveling their guns.

Count Revanche has reconnected his arms using something resembling tentacles, and now he gets to his feet, swaying. His arms are still broken, and the motion looks uncanny.

“Now look what you did! You taught him how to regenerate!”

“I didn’t teach him anything!”

The man’s eyes roll this way and that, the whites showing. Then they flip back

to focus on Walt and Kyle. The corners of his foaming mouth rise in a smirk. “Y, y-y-y-yOu, ObSOlete, anTIQuEs—!”

He’s already doubled in size and keeps expanding as if trying to match the size of his reattached arms. The effects of the demon snuff have started to get out of control. Clicking his tongue in irritation at the growing shape, Walt yells over his shoulder, “Elefas, take those two and go!”

“Seal the perimeter; we’ll keep him pinned down!”

*“Haaah.* I could, I suppose, but...”

“Why are you acting so laid-back?!”

“Well, look.” Elefas jerks his chin up.

Walt, who’s just about ready to rip the mage a new one, peers upward, and both he and Kyle freeze.

Count Revanche’s swollen figure is now the same height as the mansion’s second story.

Yet even higher than that, a shadow floats above the man’s head.

“I’ll kill you! Anyone who gets in my way! Even if it’s the demon king!”

“Is that right? Well, I for one am getting tired of this.”

The man’s eyes roll to look above him, but by then, it’s already over.

The toes of the demon king’s shoes come down on his head, and Count Revanche’s enormous body sinks to the ground. When Claude’s cloak swirls, the figure vanishes. He’s probably sent it away somewhere.

“You were taking too long,” Claude says, with an expression that makes it seem like he’s simply floated down to open ground without anything in his way. The terror has disappeared so completely, it almost seems like it was an illusion all along. Both Lira and Viola just stand there, stunned and gaping after seeing firsthand that true terror can’t even be perceived.

Will Count Revanche become the demons’ plaything, or has he been imprisoned somewhere? It all depends on the demon king’s mood.

If that isn’t terror, what is?

Of course, the treatment Walt, Kyle, and the rest of them will receive is also subject to the whims of the smiling demon king.

“So? Where are the women who’ve led my precious Walt and Kyle astray?”

They’ve reached their limit. Before the demon king’s eyes can find them, without so much as a scream, Lira and Viola faint.

“You really are identical,” the emperor says the moment Lira and Viola enter the parlor. He sounds impressed.

The empress is sitting beside him on the sofa. With a smile, she gestures to the seats opposite them. “Please have a seat, both of you. This isn’t an official audience, so be at ease. There’s no need for formal greetings, either. Did the dresses fit you properly?”

“Y-yes. Thank you very much.”

The empress’s gentle gaze doesn’t waver; it had been the same when Lira was rude to her at the ball. However, a glance at those eyes makes it clear that that isn’t all there is to her. They can’t afford to be careless.

*I must protect my sister.*

Lira and Viola slept for a full day. When they awoke at the imperial castle, they were promptly given a meal, medical treatment, and a hot bath. The empress’s ladies-in-waiting tossed them both into a spacious tub, then washed them until they glowed. They knew the ladies-in-waiting were outstanding from their skill, and from the fact that the sight of Lira’s scars didn’t so much as slow them down.

Around the time the women started applying moisturizing toner and lotion, the sisters realized they were being treated as guests instead of criminals and began to feel bewildered.

However, Lira suspected she knew why.

It was the demon snuff and antidote her sister made. The mansion had burned to the ground, so the only recipes that remained were the ones in her sister’s head and the copies Lira hid outside the mansion.

Even without talking it over, she knew her sister was probably thinking the

same thing.

When she saw the dresses and accessories that were provided for them, she was sure of it: They were being prepared for an audience with the emperor.

They had no right to refuse, of course. Not that they had any reason to, either. They might not be free, but their uncle was no longer a threat, and they were being treated as guests— Even if nobody said so, they knew that they were being cared for as special guests.

Still, since they didn't know what the emperor was thinking or what he planned to do with them, it was only natural for them to prepare for the worst. Lira knew nothing about the present situation, not even what had really happened to their uncle.

If Walt were here, she might not have felt quite so nervous, but she knew she didn't have the right to expect that from him: He wasn't here, and that was that. And why would he be? Once the suspicions against her had been confirmed and she'd been arrested, his job was over. Next to her, Viola glances around the room, then lowers her eyes. However, she quickly raises her head and stands tall. "Where would you like us to begin?"

"I don't particularly care," the emperor says shortly.

Lira and Viola blink at him, and the empress looks exasperated. "Master Claude. Don't be spiteful."

"I meant every word."



“I’m sorry, he’s sulking.”

*Not “He’s angry”?* Lira almost responds with a bemused “Huh?” but hastily bites it back.

This may not be an official audience, but they’re in the presence of the emperor and empress.

“There’s no need for you to worry. We’ve heard most of the particulars from Walt and Kyle. It would be best if we could get Count Revanche’s testimony as well, but you saw the state he’s in. We’ll keep him in custody for the time being.”

“—If you’ll allow it, I’ll make the antidote.”

“Thank you. You do understand that we can’t just take your propositions at face value, though, don’t you?”

Viola nods. Lira also accepts the statement in silence.

“If I had to say, what’s giving us the most trouble at this point is the question of what to do with you two. We called you here because we wanted to hear your side of the story.”

“If you mean the fact that I’m considered dead, it can stay that way. I’ll be able to serve you just as well.”

“Sister!”

“So please, have mercy on Lira.” Viola bows her head.

Hastily, Lira pleads with them. “No, Your Majesty. My sister can be useful to you. Please grant her a new life. Lira Revanche will take responsibility for all of our crimes. That shouldn’t pose a problem.”

“Lira.”

“Calm down, both of you. We—”

“What do Walt and Kyle see in these women?”

The cold remark makes Lira and Viola freeze up, and the empress sighs. The emperor recrosses his long legs, narrowing his eyes at them in a mocking look. “You’re both the same, always thinking about yourselves. If you’re so intent on

saving just one of you, why don't we draw lots to decide?"

The preposterous idea leaves Lira and Viola speechless. The emperor's attitude is far closer to "demon king" than "emperor."

Looking troubled, his wife lays a hand on his. "Master Claude. Bringing that up now will confuse them."

"It's not my problem. Which one of you gave the demon snuff to Walt?"

Lira frowns; she hadn't done that. Next to her, Viola gives a small nod. "...I did."

"Sister, when did you—?"

"It was when you had that cold. I thought he'd act if he had definite proof."

"He did. Thanks to you, my guard went against my orders."

Both girls look shocked. "Wh-why would he do a thing like that?" Lira asks.

"Probably because he believed in you two— In 'Lira Revanche.' He didn't think she was a bad person. I have no idea how you conned him."

Ordinarily, Lira would have insisted it was a false accusation, but all she can do is listen in stunned silence.

Viola is the one who grows desperate. "I—I got him involved in this. Lira did nothing."

"Right. And then you tried to stab your uncle at the opera. In front of Kyle." Lira looks startled, and Viola falls silent as if he's slapped her. "If Count Revanche had died there, as my guard, Kyle would have taken blame he doesn't deserve for allowing a blade to come so near the emperor. Do you fail to realize the significance of that, even now?"

"....."

"You didn't consider how much running around my guards had to do, or how hard they worked. Every time you open your mouths, it's 'Save Viola. Save Lira.' It's obnoxious."

Viola hangs her head. Lira's shoulders slump, and she bites her lip.

Walt had definitely approached her to investigate their selling of demon



snuff. No doubt he'd used the name of Isaac Lombard, a man their uncle had invited to a marriage interview, to get them to let their guard down. Then, during his investigation, Viola handed him demon snuff, at which point he must have been certain that Lira was involved with it somehow.

...Yet he didn't arrest her. From the way the emperor is talking, it's clear it wasn't out of negligence.

He'd gone to great lengths for her, convinced there had to be some other sort of extenuating circumstances, and tried to bring their uncle's misdeeds to light, something Lira had given up on.

"Master Claude, that's going too far. I think they merely made the best choices they could, in a situation that gave them very little to work with. Besides, they're aware that they've committed a crime. Don't you think it's only natural that they'd worry about each other first and foremost?" the empress admonishes him.

The emperor shrugs. "They won't realize it unless I spell it out for them."

"Even so. Consider their circumstances properly before you speak. If you don't, a certain new bureaucrat might organize her people and go on strike."

The emperor frowns, his eyes gazing out into the distance. "That sounds like a pain..."

"Allow me to apologize for Master Claude, you two," the empress says, turning toward the twins. Her smile is beautiful, but it doesn't reach her eyes. "However, I will say this: Those who can't save themselves can't save anyone else."

"That's... What do you mean?"

"I mean that your explanation of the incident will decide how we choose to deal with you...as well as Walt and Kyle."

The blood drains from Viola's face, and Lira's mind goes blank. They take each other's hands, but it isn't enough to give them comfort.

"No..."

"Th-those two did their jobs properly! I—"

“You’re not in your office! What is this, harassment?!”

“Master Claude, you tricked us!”

Without warning, the door bursts open, accompanied by angry yells. Lira’s never seen Walt dressed like this, and she blinks. He isn’t in his usual gentleman’s clothes. Instead, he’s wearing a formal uniform that has a military flair to it.

“What’s this about?! You said you’d hear our reports in your office, didn’t you?!”

“Who gave the audience away? Was it Elefas?”

“Sir Keith. He asked us, very helpfully, why we believed you.”

“.....”

For some reason, that shuts the emperor right up. The two guards menacingly stalk up to him. “And?! What’s going on in here?!”

“You haven’t said anything inappropriate, have you? I sincerely hope you haven’t made things even more complicated than they already are!”

“He’s been talking about deciding which of them to spare via lottery.”

“And why is that?! Did you even read my report?!”

“Master Claude, I gave you a report as well. Where did you put it?”

They’re being far too fearless, and Lira starts to feel very worried. Even the usually imperturbable Viola is visibly alarmed.

“They were too thick. Reading them seemed like a pain.”

“Then why did you make us write them?! More harassment?!”

“Walt’s is one thing, but why would you leave mine unread, too?!”

“I read Elefas’s.”

““Fine, I see how it is.””

It’s not clear what they’ve determined exactly, but they say the exact same words in unison, and Kyle kneels. “I’ll deliver mine first, then. Orally! It will take roughly three hours!”

“Are you serious...?”

“In that case, I’ll be brief and give you just my conclusion. It’ll only take a moment. Master Claude, those girls are—”

“W-wait!”

The word comes out before she realizes she’s spoken. Walt and Kyle turn back, and the emperor gives her a weary look. She nearly flinches but manages to stand firm. “M-may I speak, Your Majesty?”

“Go ahead. If it’s more interesting than Walt and Kyle’s sermons, I’ll listen.”

Walt and Kyle exchange hesitant looks. That’s enough to tell her what they were planning to report.

*Think. You can’t keep letting other people protect you. This won’t end if you just keep being saved.*

What does the emperor want? If he’s suggested deciding by lottery as if it’s nothing, he can’t have much interest in her sister’s abilities. And she’s probably worth even less to him.

*What would sway his heart? What is it that angered him the most about this whole incident?*

She squeezes her sister’s hand firmly, just once, and Viola squeezes back. They’re already aware that it isn’t enough.

For that reason, they both let go, swallow hard, and face forward.

“We can be useful to you.”

“How, exactly?”

“First, as you know, my sister is able to make demon snuff. It’s only natural that you would think of it as a toxic substance, Your Majesty. However, she can also make an antidote, proof that, in the right hands, poisons can also serve as medicines.”

“I only need the recipe.”

“No. The most useful thing here is not the medicine but my sister who created it. You must know that losing her skills would be a grievous loss indeed.”

The emperor's face has turned toward her very slightly, but his eyes are still as cold as ice.

*Don't flinch. Negotiations are all about bluffing.* Telling herself that just simply catching his interest is already an achievement, Lira holds her head high. "Our uncle exploited us ruthlessly for years. If you'll promise us new lives, both I and my sister will pledge our loyalty to you. My sister has no higher ambitions: As long as she's allowed to entertain herself by making medicines, she'll be happy."

"I see. Then what use are you to me?"

Her sister starts to say something, but Lira stops her. The emperor doesn't value Viola, so both his earlier response and the question just now are perfectly understandable.

That's what makes the rest of this exchange Lira's battle.

"I'll be useful as well, of course. I'm the one who established my uncle's demon snuff business. I've memorized all the brokers and clients, people who aren't on the books. Naturally, there are high-ranking aristocrats on that list as well." The emperor narrows his eyes, and Lira continues, "More than anything, letting me live will simplify the issue of what to do with the Revanche fiefdom."

"What do you mean?"

"Both I and my sister had intended to flee to the Revanche domain if to the opportunity ever arose. I have been making certain preparations in anticipation of that."

She'd even hidden it from her sister, just in case. The emperor recrosses his legs, and Lira gives him her most elegant smile. "Our uncle may have been considered a good-natured count here, but far away in his domain, he was a hated tyrant; he squandered money like water yet all the while kept collecting taxes to supposedly rebuild the domain. His land has been left to wither away, and its people are on the verge of starvation. They're all convinced it was our uncle who killed our parents. In your wisdom, Your Majesty, you must understand what that means."

"...So the citizens of your domain support you and your sister—or rather, they

support *you*, hmm? If I punish you carelessly, I'll have a revolt on my hands."

"The people don't trust the imperial family to begin with. After all, the imperial family believed our uncle six years ago when he claimed an accident killed our parents. While we're on the subject, it would be a great help if you'd use your imagination to reason out where the sole recipe for my sister's demon snuff might be."

Her tone is cold, but the emperor doesn't raise so much as an eyebrow. He simply listens, resting his chin on his hand and his elbow on the sofa armrest.

"However, I don't intend to reveal all my secrets to Your Majesty."

"Oh-ho? And why is that?"

"Because I don't trust the imperial family, either. They've been the church's puppets, and they've never spared us a glance."

The emperor blinks. Walt and Kyle turn pale. Seeing that gives Lira a modicum of satisfaction.

"You've got courage, I'll give you that. Then what should I do with a dangerous element like you?" The corners of the emperor's lips curve up, apparently enjoying himself. Next to him, the empress's elegant smile doesn't even flicker. That's what these two are like.

Knowing what she has to do, Lira boldly steps up to the negotiation table. "However, Master Walt Lizanis saved me. If it's to him..." What the emperor actually wants is an achievement for his favored retainers. "...I'll confess everything. The whereabouts of the demon snuff recipe, the names of the nobles who were involved in the trafficking... Everything."

She'll give him all the cards she's been holding, for both her sister's sake and her own.

"...What can you get Kyle, then?"

"The fame of a knight who rescued a tragic young noblewoman from her uncle's wicked clutches."

Kyle looks stunned, then speaks up hurriedly. "M-me, Master Claude? I don't really—"

“Stand down, Kyle. Miss Viola made a public attempt to stab Count Revanche. I really doubt anyone will see her as some tragic heroine.”

“I, Lira Revanche, was the one who did that. My name’s already tarnished anyway, so use it in any way you can.”

“Admirable. What will your sister say to this, though?”

With a gasp, Lira looks at Viola. Although her sister’s face could easily be a reflection of her own, she’s smiling even more gracefully than Lira. She always does.

“She really is amazing, isn’t she? Lira is my pride and joy. I’m sure she’ll be useful to you. Yes, far more use than I, who can only make medicines.”

“Then you’re telling me to spare your sister?”

“By the way, Your Majesty, I am aware that I am a rarity: a female pharmacist. Isn’t Her Majesty likely to need one of those in the future?”

The emperor blinks. A wry smile rises to the empress’s lips. “That’s true. At this point, I have neither a female pharmacist nor a female doctor.”

“Her health is of the utmost importance, not least because she will be the one to bear your children. Out of your deep love for her, Your Majesty, won’t you overlook a trifle or two?”

“I see. That’s a very good point.” Uncrossing his legs, the emperor gets to his feet. “Very well. I’ll work you both hard as a way of settling this affair.”

Walt overreacts to this. “Master Claude, wait. They’re just sixteen!”

“Exactly, what they need first and foremost is protection!”

“That’s fine by me. I signed away any chance of a decent life when I began selling demon snuff.”

“As did I. I haven’t had much hope for anything since I first made that substance.”

Walt and Kyle fall silent, looking as if they’ve been forced to swallow something bitter. Their faces make the girls’ hearts ache terribly, both with regret and with happiness.

It's important to avoid doing evil. Why? Because it will sadden the people who love you.

*Even the sight of me humbling myself must wound you.*

"Thank you very much for sparing us."

"I thank you as well, Your Majesty. If my strength can be of use to you, use it freely."

Viola bows her head as well. Although it seems overdue, Lira is happy that they're able to do this.

She's sure they're both seeing the same thing: a person besides themselves who has been kind enough to want to save them.

"You two have never received the protection of an adult. It should have been yours by right, yet you never used its absence as an excuse."

He speaks with the voice of an adult, and Lira looks up. The emperor is smiling, and he looks kinder than any of the grown-ups she's ever seen.

"You've done your best. I won't mistreat you. You are citizens of the empire, and I owe you my protection."

*So this is the lord to whom Walt has pledged his loyalty.*

That fact makes her chest tighten, and she and Viola bow their heads once more.

The weather is bright and clear; it's a good day for departures. There's still a chill in the air, but the sea and sky are an intense blue all the way to the horizon.

The passenger ship that's transporting the exchange students is a fairly large vessel. Passengers have begun boarding, and farewells and words of encouragement go up all around them. It's beginning to make Kyle feel as if he were only coming to see someone off. However, he promptly spots the person he's supposed to be watching; she's wearing a broad-brimmed hat.

Viola is unsteadily lugging a large travel bag, and—not for the first time—her sister is inspecting her belongings.

“Good. You haven’t forgotten anything.”

“It’s going to be fine. Honestly, Lira, you worry too much.”

“Well, this is you, Sister! Will you really be able to carry out research by yourself in a country where you don’t know a soul? Honestly?”

“I’ll be fine.” The older sister gives a ladylike smile, and the practical little sister scowls—then, overcome by emotion, Lira throws her arms around Viola. “Don’t get so absorbed in mixing medicines that you forget to eat. Make sure you go to bed and get up at a decent time.”

“I wouldn’t be that careless.”

“Take care not to trip and fall.”

“You’re even worried about little things like that?”

“Of course I am. We’ve never been apart for long, not since we were born.”

“I’ll be fine. I believe in you. I’m sure it will only be a few years.” Even as Viola soothes her little sister, something glistens in the corners of her eyes.

These two really are close. Watching them part is difficult, even for Kyle.

This is the path they chose, though. The new lives Claude has given them.

For days on end, the newspapers were filled with Lira Revanche’s allegations and the existence of Viola Revanche, who had been presumed dead. Was what the twins said really true? Had Count Revanche’s excuses all been a lie? The general public buzzed with unnecessary conjecture and speculation. In the midst of it all, Viola drew particular notice as a dangerous young girl who’d been held captive by her uncle and spent years making demon snuff.

However, to take responsibility for the uproar, she’d returned her right to inherit the Revanche fiefdom to Ellmeyer’s imperial family, then vanished. This would last until her younger sister had safely restored the county, reclaimed her family’s honor, and recovered her twin sister—at least that was the scenario Isaac had written.

The truth of the matter is that Viola is bound for the neighboring Kingdom of Ashmael to research pharmaceutical sciences as an exchange student at one of their universities. Ashmael has no knowledge of demon snuff, so on the surface,



this is being done to benefit the kingdom; however, it's actually compensation for the knowledge of sacred items Ellmeyer gained through Elefas's marriage.

Kyle didn't really understand why this roundabout approach was necessary. Why was she "vanishing from Ellmeyer" instead of simply going on exchange in the usual way? But Isaac told him, "If she disappears on her own, they're less likely to suspect she's dangerous when she gets back. Most of all, though, the demon king is hoping you'll fall out of love with her, which will quiet him down." At that, Kyle withdrew his objection. It was true that the public's distrust of Viola was growing worse by the day, and more than anything, it was important not to incur Claude's anger.

After all, Claude had taken to muttering, "Both Elefas and Walt betrayed me. If Kyle does, too, things are going to get very unpleasant around here." Kyle wants to believe he's not serious, but there's no telling what the demon king may decide to pull, so it's best to tread carefully.

"I think I'm actually going to enjoy this. I'll get to make all sorts of medicines."

"...True. This is you we're talking about, after all. I imagine you'll even forget to write."

Viola Revanche will disappear, which means the two of them won't be able to contact each other directly until they're reunited. Even their letters will have to go through a third party.

"That's right. Besides, I may return before you come to fetch me, Lira."

Claude has set down one other condition under which Viola is allowed to return: She must bring back a notable discovery that will benefit Ellmeyer. Viola may be able to return home under her own power, without waiting for her sister.

"The race is on, then."

"Yes, it's a contest."

Will Lira be able to restore the Revanche fiefdom according to Claude's wishes, or will Viola bring back a discovery that will benefit the empire? If either one of them achieves her goal, the twins will be able to live together again.

As if on some sort of signal, the sisters lean together, forehead to forehead, and close their eyes. With each believing in their shared future, they're sure to be able to move forward.

Before Kyle can mention that it's time for the ship to set sail, they step away from one another.

"I'll be back, Lira."

"Safe travels, Sister."

"I'll carry your bag for you."

It's hard to watch her try to lug that travel bag around with those slim arms of hers. When Kyle picks it up, Viola gives him a wry, rather troubled smile. It's the expression she wears whenever she looks at him.

"Thank you very much. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

"Don't worry about it; it's my job. It seems as if most people have trouble telling you and Miss Lira apart."

That's why Kyle is the one who's been sent to make sure Viola boards the ship instead of making a break for it. When she hears him speak so matter-of-factly, the wry edge to her smile grows more pronounced.

Lira looks as if she's fighting a headache. "Your first proper conversation, and that's it? Isn't there anything else you want to say?"

"Lira."

"I mean, this is the magician you said you met in that garden, isn't it?"

"If you can spare a moment, may I talk to you about what comes next?" Kyle asks abruptly.

He's been waiting because he didn't want to get in the way of Lira and Viola's farewells. Lira blinks at the interruption, and Viola's face tenses. "Of course. What is it? Is it a message from His Majesty?"

"No, it's from me." Reaching into his breast pocket, Kyle holds a small, square box out to her. Viola blinks once, and then her lovely fingers gently reach for it.

"Would you marry me?"

Her fingers stop in midair. Viola's frozen up. Beside her, Lira stares, wide-eyed.

Their faces may be identical, but Kyle has no idea why no one can tell them apart when their expressions are so different.

"The first time I met you, I thought you were a fairy."

"....."

"The next time we met, you were human."

"...I'm sorry, I don't really...understand..."

"It made me regret not trying to learn more about you simply because you were a fairy, a being forever out of reach. I regretted being unable to save you.—It was Walt who saved you this time."

Viola's eyes shift from the box to Kyle.

"Next time, would you let me protect you?"

Her fingers don't move. Even so, he doesn't feel anxious.

She gives a soft, troubled smile, but for some reason, he doesn't feel disappointed. "...Even though we've never introduced ourselves?"

"Oh." Kyle accepts this meekly. Come to think of it, he meant to ask her name the next time they met. "I got ahead of myself. Please excuse me. My name is Kyle Elford. And you are?"

"I am Viola Revanche." She proudly introduces herself using the name she's reclaimed, then gives a graceful, perfect curtsy. She accepts the box wearing the same sweet smile he saw that night in the garden, with the same fingers she used to tie that handkerchief.

"I'll gladly be your wife, Master Kyle."

Two years later, Viola Revanche, daughter of Count Revanche, will return to Imperial Ellmeyer.

The girl, who at one time soiled her hands with demon snuff, will become a saint whose skill in healing rivals Ashmael's Daughter of God, and she'll have been successfully courted by one of the emperor's closest retainers, who'll win

permission for her to come home. When she returns, she will bring that romance with her.

“How did this happen...?” the demon king mutters, sounding stunned.

It’s a question everyone in his office shares.

Only the man they’re talking about doesn’t seem to understand their confusion. He cocks his head, a serious expression across his face. “I cannot say myself. However, that is how the situation stands, so please allow me to marry.”

“Well, I did say I wanted someone to ask me that, but...” Still half in shock, Claude seems to make up his mind. “Have you proposed?”

“Yes. She accepted the ring.”

“And this isn’t some sort of scam?”

“She isn’t the sort of women who’d do a thing like that. I wouldn’t, either.”

“How many times have you spoken with Miss Viola to date?”

“That was the second time.”

The demon king leans back in his chair weakly, his face pale. Understandably concerned, Keith adjusts his cushion. “Milord. Pull yourself together.”

“...It’s no good, Keith, I don’t understand this. I can’t seem to accept reality.”

“Who would have thought Kyle would be the one to go off on such a peculiar tangent?” Elefas murmurs. He looks impressed and appalled at the same time.

Walt shrugs. “He’s an extreme guy.”

“Why do you put it like that? All I did was propose properly and receive a proper answer.”

“Yes, it’s what came before that that’s weird. And it seriously went well?”

“Well...erm. Miss Lira was fiercely opposed to the idea.”

Apparently, she’d said, *“I don’t believe this. Even political marriages are given a bit more thought than that. All else aside, no, you can’t, I won’t allow it, don’t play these games with me,”* et cetera, et cetera. It did sound like the sort of

thing she'd say.

"I'm taking Miss Lira's side," Claude murmurs, the color returning to his face. When Walt hears that, he decides to clear out.

At a time like this, one should take advantage of the confusion to escape. After all, Claude's assumption that Kyle's romance would fade out naturally is why he's overlooked Walt's so far.

"I've got work. This is your fault; fix it," he whispers in his partner's ear.

"R-right." Kyle nods in response, honest to the point of stupidity.

*This is probably the only time we'll manage to outwit Master Claude.*

Even he thought Kyle might let the girl go without saying anything, so he can't laugh at the others for being stunned.

Slipping out of the office, Walt makes for the old castle's small reception room; since this is an unofficial meeting, he'd named the old castle as the venue. Having demons loitering around hasn't scared her, has it?

*No, better watch that. You can't go easy on her right from the start.*

It's his job to keep an eye on the twin who's staying in Ellmeyer until she's managed to restore the Revanche county. Straightening his collar, he knocks on the reception room door and hears a slightly stiff response from inside. Even that strong-willed young lady gets nervous, apparently.

When Walt peeks in, she looks relieved, then tries to camouflage it with anger. "Listen, what's wrong with that partner of yours?! He proposed to my sister out of nowhere! Who does he think he is?!"

"Oh well, Viola did accept and all."

"Yes, there's something wrong with her, too! She gets that way sometimes!" Her face takes on a look of despair as she criticizes her sister, then Lira puts a hand to her forehead and starts agonizing. "Oh, honestly... I really wonder whether she'll be all right. She won't fall overboard because she's gazing at the ring, will she?"

"You're really that worried?"

“My sister just might do it! After all, it’s her first voyage, and she’s traveling by herself,” she says, sounding agitated. Then Lira falls silent, as if she’s struggling to hold something in.

She can’t have her big sister depending on her forever. Quietly, Walt tells her, “Your sister’s fine now. They may be technically holding her as a hostage, but as far as Ashmael is concerned, she’s the demon king’s guest. The holy king’s generally a good person. If Kyle’s serious, she won’t even pick up any undesirable suitors.”

“That’s...true. I should worry about myself first, shouldn’t I.” Lira squeezes her hands into fists. Then she looks straight at Walt. “So? Where is he? Introduce me quickly, please.”

“To whom?”

“The person they’ve assigned to guard me and my fiancé-in-name-only.”

“Oh, that would be me.” He can’t wait to see her reaction, and the thought alone brings a smile to his face.

Lira looks stunned. Then her gaze wanders as if she’s flustered, and she turns bright red and shouts. “Wh-what’s this about?! Don’t talk nonsense!”

“You’re the one who said you wouldn’t talk to anyone but me. In terms of efficiency, this is the best approach.”

“Th-that’s... But, I mean, f-fiancé?”

“Sorry, but unlike Kyle, I’m the type who prefers to get everything squared away beforehand.”

A little while ago, Aileen had taught him something: Catch them first. Romance comes later.

That’s what love is.

Clever as she is, Lira must have realized that there’s nowhere to run. Her mouth opens and shuts wordlessly, and her eyes tear up a bit. He feels a bit bad for her.

It’s such a normal reaction that Walt smiles. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Walt Lizanis.”

Laying a hand over his heart, he makes the most chivalrous bow he ever has.

“Lira Revanche, daughter of Count Revanche. Would you give me time to be sure of these feelings?”

*All right: We'll have a normal, proper romance: No giving up. No running away.*

*Then we'll have a wedding ceremony that's overflowing with love and invite the demon king.*

## ◆ Third Act ◆

### The Couple's Holiday

As Aileen makes for the imperial couple's bedchamber, she's startled to see Keith emerge from it. She blinks. "It can't be. Has Master Claude already retired?"

"Yes, he has. He's waiting for you, Lady Aileen."

"He's early. I wonder if something's happened."

Claude has been swamped with work since ascending to the throne, and he usually returns to their bedchamber later than Aileen.

Keith responds to her concern with a smile. "Oh, you know: First Elefas, now Keith and Walt."

"Oh, of course." That makes sense to Aileen, although she isn't sure it should. Without another word, Keith bows his head and leaves, as if to say the rest is in her hands.

That's Keith for you. He'll already have gotten Claude ready for bed, or rather, made sure he'll behave himself and sleep. Dismissing the servants, Aileen enters the bedchamber.

Claude is sitting listlessly on a sofa near the terrace. There's a wine bottle on a low cabriole-legged table that matches the sofa. He makes quite the picture, sitting there sighing, with his long eyelashes lowered and a wineglass in one hand. Even for Aileen, who's grown fairly accustomed to his beauty, he's devastatingly seductive.

In company like this, her nightgown seems flimsy and inadequate. However, as his wife, she mustn't tremble. Aileen softly steps forward and seats herself beside Claude. "Are you sulking because your subordinates are getting engaged one after another?"

"...Not especially."

His response is brusque. From his tone, he's definitely sulking. Aileen smiles



wryly, a hint of exasperation in her expression.

It had taken Claude a long time to secure any human retainers besides Keith, and he treasures each of them so intensely that it startles even Aileen, the one who found them for him.

It's easy to say that all he needs is one attendant he can trust. However, Claude was disinherited and left without anyone to support him, so he must still feel unfulfilled on some level.

"Just because they have families now, that doesn't mean they'll neglect you, Master Claude. Those are two separate things."

"I'm not so sure about that. Wives are powerful. You know they'll prioritize their wives' birthdays over work and ask for those days off."

"Are you speaking from personal experience?"

Instead of answering, Claude sips from his wineglass.

Taking this attitude in the presence of his wife is a problem, but Aileen is the one who wished for her husband to be happy in all manner of ways.

"Still, now you'll be able to attend your retainers' weddings as their superior."

"...Maybe I'll kidnap the grooms at those weddings."

"That sounds entertaining, and I'd quite like to see it, but get them wedding and engagement presents first."

"Keith can do that, or you can. It's not my problem."

Perhaps it's from the wine, but Claude's ear is a little flushed, and Aileen puts her lips close to it. "Since we have the chance, why don't we slip out of the castle and go buy them together?"

Her husband's eyes widen. Picking up on what she's plotting, he turns to face her.

He's a troublesome person. He's adorable as well, though. She's sure he feels the same way about her.

That day marks the beginning of "Operation: Couple's Holiday."

"While we're at it, I'd like to have a secret rendezvous somewhere, Master

Claude. The way lovers do.”

“Very nice; that sounds like fun. I can teleport, so the problem will be how to get you there.”

“Rachel does keep a strict watch... Perhaps we could use Isaac as bait.”

“Suggesting they take a honeymoon would probably just make them suspect us. Is there some sort of social function that the president of the Oberon Trading Firm would have to attend with his wife? If there isn’t, we could always create one.”

“Nice idea! Let’s make that the day we act.”

The date has been set.

“The day before, I’ll visit my family home and make my preparations there. That way, Rachel will relax and take the day off. And if we say I’ll return to the imperial castle the following day, Sir Keith and the others will assume you’ll behave and wait there for me, and they’ll grow careless.”

“True. The problem will be if we have pursuers.”

“The demons will be on our side, won’t they. However, Elefas can teleport, while Walt and Kyle have good instincts and are constantly training... And how shall we outwit Sir Keith? The day after will be frightening as well, especially considering both my father and older brother are at the imperial castle now.”

“Wouldn’t those two think it entertaining and let us be? There’s no need to worry about Keith, either; I have a way to get him to forgive us. I can use it once a year or so.”

“Goodness, what way is that?”

“I give him a written pledge to do anything he tells me to, just once.”

Plotting together as husband and wife has shown Aileen that there are still things she doesn’t know about him.

“Can you gather money and what you’ll take with you on the day, Master Claude? And plan what you’ll wear?”

“That should be fine. I’ll have Almond hold on to my belongings for me.”

“...Show me what you intend to take beforehand. We won’t be able to afford any missteps.”

“I know. I’ve read a book on errands very carefully.”

“Not a book on dates?”

“I thought it would be best to learn about outings beginning with the fundamentals. On the day, I’d like to try riding one of those ‘bicycle’ contraptions.”

“Maybe a bicycle built for two? I’ve never done that, either. How marvelous.”

Having something to look forward to makes even busy days feel fulfilling.

“Bad news, Aileen. Keith’s suspicious. He asked if I was plotting something; he’d noticed the demons acting restless. That book on errands seems to have been a bad idea, too.”

“I had a feeling this would happen. It’s all right, though: Rachel has asked me to give you a firm reminder not to slip out of the castle while I’m visiting my family.”

“Ah. Then it’s actually better if I’m the one they suspect.”

“Yes. You mustn’t leave here until I’ve left my parents’ home, Master Claude.”

“Right. Not until they send word that you’ve left the house.”

Exchanging secret smiles in bed, they begin their operation.

After being away from one another for a little while, it’s sure to be a sunny day when they reunite.

Aileen feels a bit apologetic toward Rachel, but she’s used to slipping out of Duke d’Autriche’s mansion. Her three older brothers were also free spirits, and the d’Autriche servants had overlooked their behavior. They won’t have been expecting her to sneak out now that she’s empress, but today Aileen is simply playing the role of a young noblewoman, so she hopes they’ll kindly ignore her.

Aileen leaves the d’Autriche mansion and sneaks partway back to the imperial castle. They’ve arranged for Claude to make his escape once he receives word that Aileen has left the d’Autriche residence.

She's wearing an elegant new dress with a navy-blue bow and delicate lace accents, plus her favorite pair of pumps. A broad-brimmed hat with a ribbon screens both the soft spring sunlight and the glances she steals at her surroundings.

*I wonder if Master Claude's arrived yet. Was he able to slip away without any trouble?*

Even if he's managed that, he hasn't gotten lost, has he? They're meeting in the third layer, at the central district of Alucato, and it's crowded. There's a stylish brick café behind her and a brand-new accessories shop next door. The street bustles with horse-drawn carts, and a department store stands on the other side. They chose this spot because a lively place would be best both for shopping and for hiding.

However, Aileen is a young noblewoman at heart: She's never waited for a man in front of a café by herself before, and it's making her fidgety and uneasy.

Her restlessness may be showing through her attitude.

"Are you alone, miss?"

A large shadow falls over her, and she looks up. Two young men are standing there, hemming her in. They don't seem to be aristocrats, but they're wearing rather nice suits in a careless way—students probably.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. It seemed like you might be in trouble or something."

"You can tell us about it if you want. Oh, and hey, I know a shop that has good cake."

She gets the impression they're blocking her view a bit too much for people who are simply being kind. Could this be one of those "pickups" she's heard about?

*Goodness.* Aileen puts a hand to her cheek, batting her eyelashes. This has never happened to her before. For a moment, she wonders whether they've failed to see her wedding ring, but it's true that she isn't dressed as the empress or a married woman. She's disguised herself as a young noblewoman and come

here for fun, so they can't be blamed for getting the wrong idea.

"I'm sorry. I'm waiting for someone."

"Who? A friend?"

She doesn't really want to say *My husband*; she'd decided to forget about emperors and empresses today and simply have fun.

That's also true of the individual who's just come into view behind the two young men.

"Your friend can just come with."

"Yes, I'd love to."

Startled, the young men look back. From the sharp sounds of the man's leather shoes on the stone paving and his deliberate gait, he certainly doesn't seem like a commoner.

"In any case, I believe I'm the one she's waiting for. Who are you two?"

When a tall man with red eyes and an inhumanly beautiful face gazes down at them and issues threats in a bone-chilling voice, ordinary humans will take to their heels before anything about demon kings or emperors even occurs to them.

Sure enough, the young men run without making any attempt to argue. As she watches them go, Aileen lets out a deep sigh. "Poor things..."

"Why are you sympathizing with them?"

"Because even dressed like that, you're in a completely different league."

Claude grimaces. He probably intended to look like a normal nobleman's son today; he's tied his unadorned hair back in a loose ponytail, the lines of his suit cut a striking figure, and his collar is embroidered, but that's all, and the simplicity of his appearance strikes her as novel.

"You don't think it suits me? I worked very hard to pick this out."

"Gracious, by yourself? How splendid."

The way his hair's been bound back is a bit messy, and his outfit could use some work, but that's part of the charm. She'd normally make a few

adjustments for him, but today she doesn't even do that. After all, she isn't supposed to be his wife today.

Besides, when he casually holds out his arm to Aileen, the gesture is polished and absolutely perfect.

"How did it go?"

"You vanished, I'm gone, and the information is probably getting more and more muddled as we speak. I've told all the demons to hide. That should buy us some time, but we can't be careless."

"Hee-hee. In that case, let's hurry. We'll go shopping first. It would be nice if we could have a bite to eat after that."

"And after dinner?"

She'd planned to return by then, no matter what, so Aileen hadn't thought that far ahead. Claude gives her a mischievous smile. "Tell me what lovers should do when they're together until nighttime, my lady. Should I send you home, or would it be best not to?"

"Goodness... My, my."

A smile escapes her. At the same time, she feels a sweet ache deep in her heart. This is her first taste of romance in a long while—a feeling that's begun to transform into a steadier love since their marriage. Her cheeks flush red. "I really wouldn't know. Please don't ask such a mean question, Master Claude."

"You're right. No gentleman would make a lady say such things."

"There, you see? You always tease me."

"Yes, because you're adorable. I'm sure you always will be. Even marriage and children won't change that."

She almost gets upset with him, and this time, it isn't an act. "You bad man."



“Say anything you like. Now, shall we go, my dear lady?”

“Until nighttime?”

Having him win all their exchanges is frustrating, so she needles him back. However, Claude always has the upper hand in these matters.

“I won’t let you go home until sunrise.”

Having realized they’d been played, Aileen’s subordinates joined forces with Claude’s highly skilled retainers and apprehended the pair before sunset. The capital was sealed off, its citizens sometimes helping the fleeing imperial couple and sometimes chasing them, and the entire incident came to be remembered with great affection. In time, this story would be passed down and spread throughout the empire, where it would be known as “The Couple’s Holiday.”



## Afterword

Hello, this is Sarasa Nagase.

Thank you very much for picking up Volume 9. This volume contains two side stories previously published online and one that's brand new. I have the feeling I mentioned something about the series being over in the afterword to Volume 8, but I was hallucinating.

Mai Murasaki drew a beautiful cover that ties into the final short story. Thank you so much. I also received help from my supervising editor, the designer, the proofreader, and many, many other people.

I'd also like to thank the readers who continued to support me even after the series' (illusory) end, and Anko Yuzu, who's treated Aileen and the rest with kindness even after the end of the manga adaptation. Most of all, I want to thank everyone who picked up this book from the bottom of my heart. I'll continue to do my very best so that readers will enjoy it along with my current series, *The Second-Chance Young Noblewoman Is Romancing His Majesty the Dragon Emperor*.

Now then, I hope we'll meet again.

*Sarasa Nagase*

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# Table of Contents

- 1. [Cover](#)
- 2. [Title Page](#)
- 3. [Copyright](#)
- 4. [First Act: The Marriage of Elefas Levi](#)
- 5. [Second Act: The Guards’ Engagements](#)
- 6. [Third Act: The Couple’s Holiday](#)
- 7. [Afterword](#)
- 8. [Yen Newsletter](#)