



Sarasa
Nagase

Illustration
Mitsuya Fuji

6

The DO-OVER
DAMSEL
CONQUERS
the DRAGON
EMPEROR

Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Character Page](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: The Married Couple's Publicity Stunt](#)

[Chapter 2: The Dragon Consort and the Consorts](#)

[Chapter 3: The Dragon Emperor's Unclaimed Territory](#)

[Chapter 4: Conquering the Empress's Palace](#)

[Chapter 5: The Dragon Flower Crown Festival](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Other Series](#)

The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor Vol.6

Sarasa Nagase

Translation by piyo

Illustration by Mitsuya Fuji

Title Design by Arbash Mughal

Editing by Elijah Baldwin

Proofreading by A.M. Perrone and Charis Messier

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author’s imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

YARINAOSHI REIJO WA RYUTEIHEIKA O KORYAKU CHU Vol.6

©Sarasa Nagase 2023

First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation ©2024 Cross Infinite World

All rights reserved. In accordance with U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, email the publisher, addressed “Attention: Permissions Coordinator,” at the email below.

Cross Infinite World

contact@crossinfworld.com

www.crossinfworld.com Published in the United States of America

Visit us at www.crossinfworld.com

Facebook.com/crossinfworld

Twitter.com/crossinfworld

crossinfiniteworld.tumblr.com

Digital Edition ISBN: 979-8-88560-118-4

Print Edition ISBN: 979-8-88560-119-1



LUTIYA
TEOS RAVE

Hadis's younger brother and grand duke of Laika. Jill's former student.



MINERD
TEOS RAVE

Hadis's older brother and the Ambassador of Friendship of Kratos.



VISSEL
TEOS RAVE

Hadis's older brother and the crown prince of the Rave Empire.



GERALD
DER KRATOS

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



FRIDA
TEOS RAVE

Hadis's younger sister, and the youngest of the Rave siblings.



NATALIE
TEOS RAVE

Hadis's younger sister. Trying to marry Gerald.



FARIS
DER KRATOS

First princess of the Kratos Kingdom. Gerald's younger sister.



ZEKE

Knight of the Dragon Consort. Uses a greatsword.



CAMILA (REAL
NAME: CAMILO)

Knight of the Dragon Consort. Master archer.

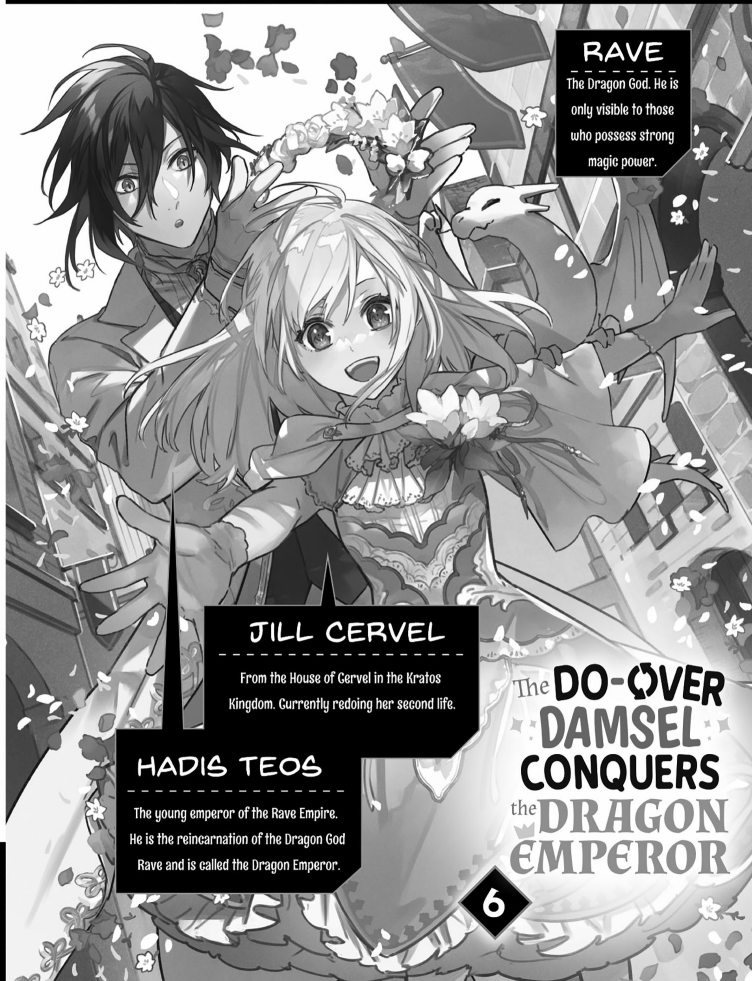
~THE LEGEND OF THE CONTINENT OF PLATY~

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

CHARACTERS

RAVE

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



JILL CERVEL

From the House of Cervel in the Kratos Kingdom. Currently redoing her second life.

HADIS TEOS

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

The DO-OVER
DAMSEL
CONQUERS
the DRAGON
EMPEROR

6

Prologue

SUNLIGHT spilled in from the small, barred window, causing the dust to glimmer in the air. There was no artificial light in the room, but it felt illuminated because the snow outside was reflecting the rays from the sun. Spring was just around the corner, but it was still a bit too early for the snow to completely melt away.

This tall and narrow storeroom existed in a corner of the Rave imperial palace that pierced the skies. Unlike the treasury, which was maintained daily, a broken clock, empty glass bottles of various sizes, an old, dirty lamp, and sun-damaged books were messily strewn about the wood shelves. A map eaten away by insects and a thick curtain were stuffed within a wooden box amid the disorderly mess.

“Please make your resolve already, Your Majesty,” a young girl’s voice echoed throughout the room. The tall ceiling carried her voice very well.

“B-But Jill, *here*? I c-can’t...”

“It’s gonna happen here because you keep running from me.”

She placed both hands on the floor and inched closer. Her husband scooted back from her at the same speed.

“See?! You’re running from me again!” Jill cried.

“I-I’m not,” her husband insisted. “I just think you’re a bit too close... *Ack!*”

He bumped the back of his head against one of the shelves that had been pulled out from a drawer and realized that he was backed into a literal corner. Jill slammed her hands down beside each side of his face, blocking his escape.

Her husband, Emperor Hadis Teos Rave, reluctantly directed his golden eyes toward her. The way he gazed up at her like a lost puppy was adorable, but she couldn’t let that distract her.

“J-Jill, let’s calm down and talk this out, okay? Come on!” Hadis pleaded.

“We did that yesterday and the day before yesterday,” Jill replied. “And every time, you try to play dumb or run away. If I leave things to you, it’ll never happen!”

“B-But my heart isn’t ready yet, and I’m in the middle of work. I can’t get in the mood,” Hadis countered in a fluster.

“Enough with your excuses! We have to do it! Come on! Let’s practice our wedding kiss!” She grabbed his face with both hands, causing Hadis to let out a girlish shriek.

“W-Wait, Jill, just wait. Let’s at least change locations, okay?!” he begged.

“It’ll be the same no matter where we do it! Come on, close your eyes!” she ordered.

“A-Are you the one initiating?! Wait! I-I’ll die! For real!”

“I’m no longer accepting your excuses,” Jill said. “You were dawdling all of yesterday and didn’t take a single step forward! I’m tired of just closing my eyes and waiting for you to man up!”

It was difficult to suppress Hadis, who was desperately flailing to escape Jill’s grip. She may have been in the midst of a do-over of her life, but she was still eleven. Her current body couldn’t compete with the physique of her twenty-year-old husband, but she had no plans of giving up here.

A year had passed since Emperor Hadis, the vessel of Dragon God Rave, chose Jill as his Dragon Consort. They were a married couple, but only in the dragon world. In the world of humans, she was still just his fiancée, but as the political situation had calmed, they were finally able to set an official wedding date.

Their long-awaited wedding ceremony was a mere six months from now.

The official wedding date would be publicly announced in the spring, and preparations would soon follow. It’d been three centuries since the last Dragon Emperor and Dragon Consort; when Jill had received a rough breakdown of the process, she grew dizzy by its complexity. It seemed more like a ritual than a wedding for her.

In truth, a Dragon Consort was whoever Dragon God Rave had selected—only his say was necessary in the matter. Unfortunately, that didn't fly in the realm of humans. This was a special occasion and required a special ceremony. It was a formality of sorts. Since the Dragon Consort received the Sacred Treasure of the Dragon Consort in the form of a ring from the Dragon God, the wedding couldn't host the exchange of rings, and a different process was necessary in its stead. As later generations kept adding on to that formality, a puzzling process had thus formed. Rave's memories were a bit fuzzy, but he'd seen through this process numerous times in the past. There was little reason to doubt his words.

Some processes couldn't be replicated, and some adjustments had to be made, shortening this weird wedding ritual, but the one thing that was clear was that the married couple couldn't just stand around in their wedding clothes. Jill, who was reaching her growth spurt, needed to have her clothes adjusted, and she needed to sew the gloves for the ceremony. The kiss was only the cherry on top of her anxiety sundae.

But it was something that she had to do. She had no intention of messing up her wedding vows.

The neighboring Kingdom of Kratos, Jill's homeland, was currently acting to place a queen on the throne—an unprecedented event. It'd been over a millennium since Goddess Kratos, the goddess of love and the earth, had split ways with the Dragon God Rave of logic and the skies. The Dragon Emperor, the vessel of the Dragon God and Jill's husband, became the primary target of the Goddess Kratos. And her vessel was currently ascending the throne in Kratos. Everyone was certain that some sort of incident was bound to occur.

Prince Risteard, the emperor's older brother, was currently in the floating city of Beilburg. Elentzia, Hadis's older sister, was patrolling the borders and strengthening their defenses; both were away from the imperial capital. Information was being gathered, but everyone was restlessly waiting for Kratos to make their move.

At the very least, Jill wanted to remove as many worries as possible so that she could handle anything coming her way accordingly. For example, she was eager to train the mind of her husband, who possessed a frail heart and body because of how powerful the Dragon God's magical energy was, so that he

wouldn't faint simply from being suggested the idea of practicing kissing for the wedding.

"Please don't resist anymore, Your Majesty!" she demanded. "Do you *really* think we can pull it off at the real thing without any practice?! Are you *sure* you can do it? There's no way you can!"

"I-I can!" Hadis insisted. "The atmosphere and all that will just whisk me away in the moment, I think..."

He was resisting with all his might from below her, but his words were unsteady and feeble. His cheeks grew flushed as he glanced around the room nervously. Indeed, he looked like an embarrassed maiden who had just been pushed down by the man she loved. Jill strongly believed that he couldn't possibly kiss her at the wedding in this state. Worst case, she'd be the bride forever waiting for a kiss from her fidgeting groom at the altar.

"It sure doesn't look that way!" she shouted. "Come on, close your eyes! Here I go! If we get used to it like the kisses we give in greeting, we should be fine, I think!"

"Th-This is totally different!" Hadis cried. "Calm your horses! Let's at least find a more romantic spot! I want to treasure you, you know!"

"Huh?!" Jill snorted. "You already stole my lips twice of your own accord! Stop acting so innocent and pure now! You're so irritating!"

"W-Well, I wanted you to fall in love with me, and I was anxious and a bit hasty about our relationship. I didn't have the mental capacity to care about your— Okay! I was wrong! It was all my fault! I'm sorry!"

"You're *sorry*?! Don't mess with me! Hurry up and close your damn eyes!"

"Stop! This is weird! Come on! Rave, help me! Don't ignore me!" Hadis called.

As Jill held him down, she slowly leaned down toward her resisting husband. Just before she could seal the deal, something fell on top of her head. With her distracted, Hadis used that opportunity to swiftly wriggle away from her grasp. Jill tried to call out to him, but it was too late.

"I-I've got work!" he said. "I finally get to have a meeting with the Three

Dukes, so I might be a bit late. I've already got your lunch prepared, though! See you tonight!"

Hadis left the room in a flash. As usual, he was quick to flee. Jill pouted and slumped her shoulders. She thought that it'd all work out if she pushed him down, but things weren't so easy.

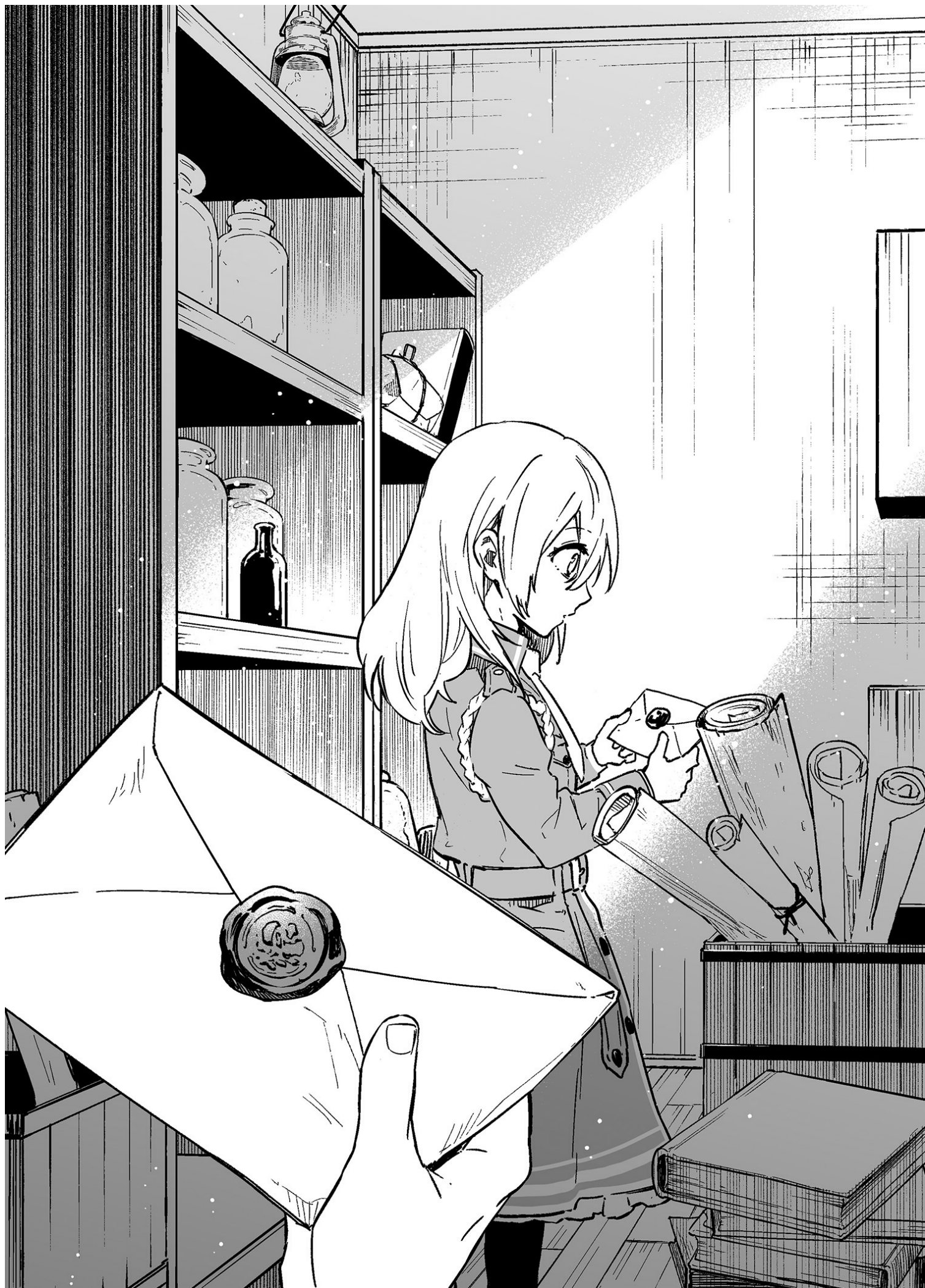
"You're a big dummy, Your Majesty..." Jill grumbled. As she went to push herself off the floor, her hand bumped into an envelope. "Huh?"

This letter must've fallen on my head earlier, Jill thought. She tilted her head to one side as she picked it up. The shelves lining the walls in front of her were low, and it was impossible for anything to have fallen from above. There was nothing else to her side. The tall shelves behind her formed a small corridor, and it was difficult for anything to have fallen onto her head unless it flew out energetically. Jill looked up. The only other place she could think of was the small window with sunlight spilling through that was high above her head.

Had someone thrown the letter inside? There was no sender. It likely hadn't been lost there either; the envelope was pristine and new. It didn't look sun-damaged, and it was properly sealed with some wax.

When she casually turned it over, she couldn't hide her shock at the words: *"To my beloved Dragon Consort."*

It was clear that another problem had just been added to her list before the wedding.



Chapter 1: The Married Couple's Publicity Stunt

HIS cheeks still felt warm, and even his sighs felt hot. It was all his wife's fault for being too cute.

"Jill's so aggressive these days..." Hadis muttered.

He wanted her to think about his position and feelings more. He had just been dragged into a storeroom as though they were having a secret lovers' rendezvous. The situation was embarrassing enough, and merely remembering it made him fidget. He was aware that Jill was annoyed by his dilly-dallying. *-B-B-But to practice kissing?! I know that practicing is important, but still!* Hadis thought, covering his red face with his hands.

Jill's face from the night prior, her eyes closed, patiently waiting for a kiss, filled his mind. He couldn't do it. His heart was beating a million times a second, and he forgot how to breathe. Cold sweat ran down his back and he wasn't sure what he could do in that situation. Had he reached for her...

"I'm not confident that I could stop myself!" Hadis cried.

"That's what you're worried about?!" Dragon God Rave roared, slapping the back of Hadis's head with his tail. A loud smack rang out, but no one else could hear it.

"Look, I know Missy's turning twelve in the spring, but she's still a child," Rave scolded. "If *you* can't keep yourself in check, who will?! I thought you've matured enough to tell right from wrong."

"Ack! You're right! We need to celebrate her birthday this year!" Hadis screamed.

"Listen to me, you numbskull! Wait, no, remember where you are right now! You're in the middle of a meeting! The people who've gathered are all looking at you with troubled faces!" Rave reminded him.

Hadis looked up and saw that everyone was staring straight at him. He was

seated at the emperor's seat, and no one else could see or hear Rave.

"Does Dragon God Rave have an opinion he'd like to share?" asked Chancellor Vissel, Hadis's older brother, in a clear voice. He was seated closest to the emperor, on the leftmost side of the rectangular meeting table.

Beside him, a middle-aged man with thin eyes chuckled. "A meeting where we get to hear the opinions of a god? Indeed, this is the real draw of being in an empire with a Dragon Emperor."

"Ah, so you *have* accepted the existence of a Dragon God and a Dragon Emperor, Duke Verrat?" Vissel replied sarcastically.

"Of course," Duke Morgan de Verrat replied kindly. "I always have from the start. Only my cousins have refused to accept this truth."

The cousins he was referring to were the previous emperor, Meruonis, and his younger brother, George. Duke Verrat had likely referred to the latter. Half of the people in the room looked astonished by his comment, but the duke was as calm as ever.

George had been the mastermind behind the Riot of the False Emperor. His late mother was Duke Verrat's aunt, and the duke's dispatch of his personal army when hunting for Hadis had made others suspicious of his possible revolt. Duke Verrat, however, had very easily cut George off from his family. His excuse was that he was overcome with a sense of duty to find and protect the Dragon Emperor as soon as possible, and there wasn't enough proof to deny those claims. In addition, he was the one who sheltered Vissel, who had been against George's dispatch of troops and was chased out of the imperial castle. When the duke insisted upon his loyalty, going so far as to shelter Vissel, there wasn't much others could say.

"It's unwise to dwell upon the past," a burly man said carefreely, his arms crossed in front of him. "If the point of gathering the Three Dukes in the imperial capital is to probe each other's intentions, I'd like to get back to training. Of course, I'm prepared to settle things with an arm-wrestling match."

The man had the intimidating face of a battle-hardened warrior. He was the uncle of Elentzia, Duke Bruno de Neutahl. Along with Elentzia siding with George during the Riot of the False Emperor, the previous Duke Neutahl had

also been indirectly responsible for restraining Risteard. Using old age as his reason, the previous duke retired and gave the title to his eldest son, Bruno. It hadn't yet been a year since he became a duke, but he looked undaunted. Duke Verrat, who sat in front of him, couldn't hide his scorn.

"Ah, I expect no less from Duke Neutrah!, " Verrat said cynically. "You're just as optimistic as your predecessor. Arm wrestling, you say?"

"Violence resolves a majority of matters, Mo," Bruno replied.

"Does that nickname come from your predecessor? I'm most displeased," Verrat said flatly. "I shall be leaving."

"Then I'll take that as a surrender, Mo," Bruno said.

"Why do you still call me by that name?!"

"To be more friendly. My predecessor has told me that the most effective ways of handling you are to use violence, neglect you and let you do as you please, or to call you by a nickname," Bruno explained.

"You Neutrahls are all muscle-brained idiots!" Verrat cried. "Then what did he say about Duke Lehrsatz?!"

"Violence, turn defiant and say that we don't have any money, or call him by the beloved nickname, Ig," Bruno replied.

"I cannot possibly understand how and why *you* are among our ranks as a descendant of the Dragon God, Duke Neutrah!!" Verrat spat.

"Calm down, Duke Verrat," a husky-voiced man said, stopping this rambunctious quarrel. "The same goes for you, Duke Neutrah!. We three dukes are all subjects of His Majesty, and we equally support him." His voice rang out clearly.

Across from Vissel and the duke seated closest to Hadis was Duke Igor de Lehrsatz, the grandfather of Risteard and Frida. Duke Lehrsatz didn't move a muscle during the Riot of the False Emperor. During the strife in Radia, he'd welcomed the King of South Kratos, scoped out the movements of Radia, and saved Risteard. The man was unlike Duke Verrat, who feigned loyalty on the outside, or Duke Neutrah!, who had no interest in the battle over power. Duke

Lehrsatz was the most cryptic of the three, and it was difficult to gauge his true intentions.

Even now, his cunning gaze was fixed on Hadis as he stroked his chin.

“To leave the room without permission from the Dragon Emperor is akin to a revolt, Duke Verrat,” Duke Lehrsatz said. “Duke Neutrah! has refrained from acting so thoughtlessly.”

“He’s right!” Duke Neutrah! chimed in.

“Don’t lie!” Duke Verrat countered. “As always, you’re devoted to the Dragon Emperor, Duke Lehrsatz.”

“Ohoho,” Duke Lehrsatz chuckled. “Perhaps you young’uns simply don’t understand, for you’ve had the gift of a sitting Dragon Emperor from early on. You’ve had it easy.” He turned to Hadis. “Now, Your Majesty, have you been listening to our words?”

Hadis was given a childlike question, and his reply was anything but eloquent. “Since the fall, the soil of the Rakia mountains has been unusual. The crops grown by the Lehrsatz and Neutrah! duchies at the base of the mountains haven’t been growing well. Some places have even experienced roots rotting away.”

Bruno slumped his shoulders. “Grape and apple harvests in Neutrah! have been halved compared to the previous year. Our steward has said that alcohol may only be served during the first toasts at parties and festivities. It’s a grave situation.”

“I agree with your steward,” Duke Verrat said. “The Neutrah! duchy consumes way too much alcohol. It’s bad for your health.”

“And I believe we can seize— I mean, have Verrat kindly part with some of his liquor for us,” Bruno countered.

“Please stop trying to resolve everything with violence!” Verrat hissed.

“The Lehrsatz duchy conducts most of their agricultural affairs on the plains, so we haven’t been faced with too many issues, but the rotting trees have caused a few landslides. I’m not sure if there’s a lack of food in the mountains,

but the number of wild animals making their way down has exponentially increased. There have even been reports of a group of dragons leaving the Rakia mountains. The residents are gossiping that the dragons are leaving because they sense danger. Would you have an inkling of the reason behind these incidents, Your Majesty?" Duke Lehrsatz asked.

The Three Dukes and the high-ranked officials all focused on Hadis as he pondered the question.

Rave had returned into his body and said, **"The soil's likely not producing good crops because of the Goddess. The shield of the Rakia mountains disappeared, after all."**

Jill had used the shield to fight against the Parrying Dagger of the Goddess. She was thus able to regain the Sacred Treasure of the Dragon Consort, a ring that the Goddess had stolen, and was able to fight back. However, this also caused the magical barrier, a shield that repelled the Goddess's powers, to disappear.

"Everyone is loudly wondering if it's the curse of Kratos from the myths at work," Morgan Verrat said.

"If that's true, the goddess has lost quite a bit of her powers," Hadis replied, laughing through his nose. The curse had once plagued the entire empire.

Morgan shrugged. "Indeed, the damage is currently contained midway through the Rakia mountains. The Verrat duchy is still safe from her clutches."

"However, there's no guarantee that the damage *won't* spread," Igor said firmly. "A Dragon Emperor hasn't appeared for three centuries, and people's faith in the god has already waned enough as it is. There are those ungrateful enough to doubt your power, Your Majesty. It's foolish to host a wedding in this state."

Hadis frowned. "Are you against it? At such a late stage?"

"I simply cannot agree to it as one of the Three Dukes. We were never able to have bountiful harvests in the Rakia mountains, and it's not as though we're in the midst of a famine as spoken of in the myths. But we've received news that the dragons had run wild in Laika. Much like the Heavenly Sword, controlling

the dragons is connected to your divine authority. Combined with the especially poor harvests in the Rakia mountains, we cannot ignore these issues.”

“It’s as though you’re saying that my incompetence is preventing me from hosting a wedding,” Hadis said.

“At the very least, something has gone wrong. Am I wrong?” Bruno cut in honestly.

He meant no ill will, but as Morgan gave a meaningful grin and Igor shifted his gaze to the floor, it was clear that they doubted Hadis’s true powers as the Dragon Emperor. They were unsure if he could fight against Kratos as equals.

“Unfortunately, I don’t trust you three,” Hadis said coldly. “If that’s all you have to say, you may leave.”

Bruno tried to retort, but a loud clap silenced him.

“It’s precisely as you say, Your Majesty,” Morgan said. “Before we talk, we require a trusting relationship. We’ve been through many, *many* things, haven’t we?”

“Your words are convincing,” Hadis spat. “You’re always hanging around with people who stand against me, after all.”

It was surprising that no one stood up to leave. Morgan smiled quietly. “Please, call me Morgan, Your Majesty. We should be friendlier with each other. Make no mistake, I’m here today because I’m jealous of you.” Hadis shot Morgan a dubious look, but the duke peered into him. “I admired George, you see. Since I was a child, he was always like a massive wall who walked in front of me. I was never enough when I compared myself to him. I’m sure many people of my generation can empathize. When he called himself the emperor, I admit that I thought he’d have a chance to claim the throne. When he lowered his head and requested my aid, I was excited like never before. I was also just as annoyed, so I didn’t give him my full cooperation.”

Hadis shuddered upon hearing the reason behind only a search party being dispatched for him when he fled.

Morgan continued, “But you destroyed his grand mission, and you even showed sympathy and benevolence, accepting the rebellious George as one of

your own—as part of the imperial family—during his funeral. You showed your mercy. You pitied our hero.”

Morgan faced down, chuckling with the back of his throat. Only Vissel and Igor seemed undaunted by it all. Bruno, who sat in front of Morgan, blinked quizzically, and the other high-ranking officials held their breaths. Even Hadis was tempted to end the meeting, but Morgan soon regained his composure and placed a hand over his chest.

“That’s when I knew,” the duke said. “My time is over. A new era is beginning. I have become the elderly person whom I used to mock as being dead weight.”

“So? What are you trying to say? I don’t understand,” Hadis said.

“As I’ve said before, I’m jealous. You’ve got youth and the power to carve out a new future—something that I no longer can do. I find myself rather skilled in self-analysis, and put simply, I am the dead-weight old man. In other words, I hold more power and influence than those younger than me. And so here I am at this meeting, hoping to laugh and mock an immature emperor who possesses both youth and power, yet completely lacks political influence and cannot move people as he pleases.”

Morgan’s softened gaze was filled with his twisted emotions.

“Huh? So, what? He’s jealous, so he wants to be the old man who bars your path?” Rave asked in confusion.

Probably, Hadis wearily thought in reply.

Morgan was also gazing at Hadis’s older brother, who was sitting beside him. “I was looking after Vissel too, but it seems he’s stopped using crafty methods and is helping build the foundation for your peaceful rule, Your Majesty. It’d be rather immature of me to get in your way. It’s much more fun to be looking down at him as he expresses his frustration while offering his reluctant support, wouldn’t you agree? A child who once only thought about removing me had lowered his head to ask for my aid. It made me just as excited as when George had done the same.”

“Oh, you’re a spectacular elderly obstacle indeed,” Vissel spat.

Hadis internally agreed with his older brother. Morgan smiled, possibly seeing

through the young men's irritation.

"And so, I'm telling you that you may trust me," he finished.

"Trust? How can you tell them that? Quite frankly, I'm taken aback by you," Bruno said. The man was reliable when it came to speaking his mind.

"Oh? Then why are *you* here? You've only just claimed your title, Duke Neutrah!, " Morgan shot back.

"Because I'd probably lose to the Dragon Emperor in an arm-wrestling contest! Probably!"

"It was my fault for ever asking you for a straight answer."

"I was told that I should just stay quiet and sit here. And I owe His Majesty for letting my niece get off with no punishments after betraying him."

Elentzia's temporary betrayal was kept vague, but Bruno had declared it so firmly that Hadis could only look off into the distance. Even Morgan looked exhausted by the admission.

"You really should just stay seated and be quiet," Morgan said.

"I shall!" Bruno replied.

"I..." Igor started quietly yet firmly, silencing the room. "Prince Risteard, my grandson, lectured me, saying that the Three Dukes dividing the empire against the Dragon Emperor is only harmful. If I had any dignity as Duke Lehrsatz, I should attend this meeting. He's all grown up; the little tyke's never even gone to Kratos before."

Igor deepened the wrinkles around his mouth and formed a smile as he squinted his eyes and let out a soft chuckle. He wasn't as creepy as Morgan, but he emanated a sort of pressure that overwhelmed the room. He wasn't using magic; this was the power he possessed as a veteran who had lived through numerous generations. Twenty-five years ago, the man expressed his rage at Meruonis, who was thinking of making peace with Kratos and had gathered the Three Dukes to invade the Kratos capital.

"When you allowed Prince Risteard to be in charge of Beilburg, I thought that my time had come and so I came at your behest," Igor said. "Do you think I've

decided to betray you now, after all this time?”

“Am I wrong?” the emperor countered.

“You’re naïve.” Igor tapped his staff on the floor, his sharp gaze piercing Hadis as he scoffed. “You’re terribly naïve, boy. Do you not understand what’s creating the present? Your choices are. You had Risteard side with you, forgave Elentzia, and convinced Vissel. Hence, you’re here with us right now. This is what your network and political influence can do. Certainly, it’s easy to get rid of those who don’t understand you. But that won’t continue for long, now, will it? Don’t you dare overly rely on the power of a god who could easily blind people with his glory.”

Igor had a point. His gaze softened on Hadis, who leaned back in his chair with his cheek resting against his propped-up hand.

“Perhaps I’ve been a bit intrusive,” Igor said. “Please ignore my words as the ramblings of an old man.”

“I see your point,” Hadis finally said. “You all agree that I’m the Dragon Emperor, but you’re unsure if I’m worthy of becoming one. Hence, the three of you have been watching over me. But when my older siblings lowered their heads, you all reluctantly decided to finally stand up and attend this meeting. In other words, all three of you are aware that you’re being useless for now.”

Bruno frowned while Morgan’s lips curled up. Hadis recrossed his legs, raised his chin, and smiled. “If you want my trust, you best work hard to earn it. Don’t get left behind by the changing times.”

“Then please answer me, Your Majesty,” Igor said as though he already knew the answer. “The poor harvest by the Rakia mountains is due to the Goddess, correct?”

Hadis nodded with uncertainty. “I believe so. But it hasn’t spread, meaning that the Goddess doesn’t have much power left.”

“I see. I’d like to say that that puts me at ease, but the Kratos Kingdom noticed our poor harvests rather quickly. They offered their aid. They claim that they will allow us to purchase food at half the normal price. A generous offer of treason indeed; they’ll be sending us a messenger regarding this soon.”

“Treason?! Was that their goal?” Bruno yelled. “I declined their kind aid because something felt off, and I’d been feeling guilty ever since.”

“Why don’t we dismiss Duke Neutrah from this meeting and have the more intelligent dukes talk this out?” Morgan chimed in.

“It’s easy for us to decline their support,” Igor continued, ignoring the suggestion. “But I’m certain that some will rely on Kratos out of anxiety. As a result, we’ll have more fools relying on the mercy of the Goddess and worshipping her. On the other hand, even if we claim that these are all the actions of the Goddess, we lack persuasion as they are offering us their aid. It’s a perfect storm where they’re trying to suffocate you with fine silk, Your Majesty. Declining the help of Kratos would only have the citizens turn against you. It’s a good way to stir the pot. This ploy isn’t what the King of South Kratos would do; I’ve heard that the new queen has an excellent strategist.”

“The queen’s brains is a boy called Lawrence Marton,” Morgan added, eagerly waiting for this chance. “He’s only sixteen. What an envious position to be in. He’s young, intelligent, and the queen’s right-hand man. It makes me jealous.”

“How’s his strength in arm wrestling?” Bruno asked.

“Why would I know that?” Morgan quipped. “Oh, but I’ve heard that he practically has no magical energy and used to serve Crown Prince Gerald. He’s got a beautiful and kind older sister as well. The siblings get along. I want you all to remember this well, even if I die one day. How to handle a guy like this will be on your test.”

“In any case, we’ve already got a poor harvest, and we can’t turn back time,” Igor said. “At the very least, then, we must swiftly act to destroy His Majesty’s weakness as soon as possible so that no shade will come upon his glory.”

Upon receiving a meaningful gaze, Hadis replied coldly, “Are you saying that the Dragon Consort is my weakness? That’s why you’re against the wedding?”

“I’m glad that you’re quick to understand. Good grief, I’d be most grateful if you didn’t glare at a feeble old man like me,” Igor tutted. “Do you truly believe that going through with this marriage by force is the best course of action for your beloved Dragon Consort? Surely, you’re aware of the rumors at the port.”

Morgan raised his voice in an exaggerated fashion and criticized his fellow duke. “Your phrasing is a bit too mean, Duke Lehrsatz. She’s only eleven; it’s only natural that she lacks in many departments. We must simply believe that the only way she has to go is up.”

“I heard that she doesn’t have a dragon of her own quite yet, despite being the Dragon Consort,” Bruno added.

In contrast to Morgan’s snide remarks, Bruno’s were honest, though he hit a sore spot.

“That’s ’cause Missy’s too strong. The dragons either fear her or try to challenge her,” Rave pointed out nonchalantly.

Shut up. It’s all because you haven’t disciplined them well enough, Hadis replied, tempted to grab the Dragon God’s tail and swing him around.

It wasn’t as though Jill and the dragons completely despised each other. The Dragon King, Raw, was glued to Jill’s side, and a red dragon had arrived to send her home from Laika to the imperial capital. Hadis had thought that this red dragon would become Jill’s steed, but it had lost in a one-on-one fight with the young Dragon Consort. It left to go training and vowed to return stronger than ever before, but Hadis wasn’t sure if he could trust those claims. He found Jill to be adorable as she eagerly waited for the dragon’s return while thinking of several potential names.

“Her own dragon is but a trivial matter,” Morgan said. “She’s taking advantage of the Dragon Emperor’s favor to do as she likes. She’s completely useless when it comes to public affairs. Calling her a witch in a little girl’s clothes, or a girl who used her magic to manipulate the imperial army are some of the more positive complaints. The funniest to me was the rumor that she ate so much, completely depleting our supplies, and had grown so rotund that she was unable to leave the room. She received the nickname, the Gluttonous Dragon Consort. Very impressive, isn’t it?”

Even Hadis couldn’t stop his cheek from twitching, but he tried to refute it anyway. “She has produced excellent results in Radia and Laika.”

“Very good. Then shall I show you the population distribution of the Rave Empire?”

What the smiling Morgan wanted to say was clear. Radia was a special case, as the city was under the Dragon Consort's control and had never been under a unified rule for long. It was the countryside; its only use was being a path for the Lehrsatz and Neutrahl duchies. The Grand Duchy of Laika was a nation under the Rave Empire's reign. While it might have been saved by Jill, the Rave citizens didn't feel any effects from it and weren't sure how to judge this result.

Above all, Jill had never officially presented herself in front of the citizens of Rahelm. No one could blame the citizens if they thought that she was ignoring them, who supported the heart of the Rave Empire, and was instead going around rural areas in hopes of currying favor.

"Because the Dragon Consort is monopolizing you, the Empress's Palace also lacks a successor, Your Majesty," Igor added with a bit of delight.

Morgan gently clapped his hands together. "Then let's have His Majesty take on a few consorts. That would resolve the issue without burdening the Dragon Consort."

"Are you going to try to squeeze in a few women under your control?" Hadis scoffed. "You've gotta be kidding me."

Morgan snorted with disappointment. "Then you must have the Dragon Consort resolve the matter of the Empress's Palace to show her power to the people. It's a dark place, so I'm unsure what will come out if you poke it."

"Perhaps that's a bit too much of a burden to bear for an eleven-year-old girl," Bruno said. "Above all, the Dragon Consort is not an empress; the former's role is to protect the Dragon Emperor."

Bruno meant to protect Jill, but the other two dukes nodded at each other as though they were waiting to hear those words.

"Precisely, Duke Neutrahl," Morgan agreed. "The Dragon Consort is the Dragon Emperor's shield. Her role doesn't require the support of the citizens or the trust of the subjects. Why don't we ignore these petty rumors, then? We don't want to waste our time."

"I see," Igor added. "So, the wedding is a parting gift of sorts, a mere formality. Oh, I'm so very sorry, Your Majesty. I suppose an old man like me

simply isn't as sharp as you are anymore; I hadn't thought that far ahead. Goodness gracious, I was under the impression that you truly *loved* the Dragon Consort. Mercy me, despite my age, I can really jump to conclusions at times. How embarrassing."

"What are you trying to make Jill do?" Hadis growled in a low voice.

It was infuriating that he was falling for their provocations, but he knew that Jill's future was accurately predicted by the Three Dukes. The dukes simply smiled back at him.

"Nothing difficult, of course," Igor replied. "Luckily, there's a famous legend that the Dragon Consort had created a powerful magical shield at the Rakia mountains, ridding the Goddess's curse of poor harvests. How about it? Can we ask the Dragon Consort to recreate this legend?"

"Are you telling her to create a barrier at the Rakia mountains?" Hadis hissed.

"Oh no, an invisible, quiet result will be useless, I would think. But when the barrier was created, the first Dragon Consort held a festival to celebrate. I believe we now call it the Dragon Flower Crown Festival."

This festival was hosted in the early spring. Though it wasn't anything grand, the custom that the first Dragon Consort had started held quite some history and was very popular. There was a legend that the Dragon Emperor had presented the Dragon Consort with a flower crown when he first saw her, leading to the custom where men would present flower crowns to unmarried women. The women who received them believed that they would gain the protection of the Dragon God and would lead a happy life. On the day of the festival, numerous flowers and flower crown designs were sold. The consorts of the Empress's Palace continued this tradition in the Dragon Consort's stead, for it raked in quite a bit of money.

"If we follow the annual schedule, the festival will be held in about a month," said Igor. "Why don't we have Her Highness, the Dragon Consort, host this year's Dragon Flower Crown Festival?"

"I agree with Duke Lehrsatz," Morgan added before Hadis could respond. "We were unable to host one last year because of the False Emperor debacle, and this is an excellent opportunity to present our first Dragon Consort in three

centuries. It'll also serve as excellent practice for the wedding."

"Festivities?" Bruno asked. "That means alcohol. All right, I'm in."

"Of course, if she can recreate that barrier, that would be excellent news for us. However, we request a result that we can observe. I'm sorry, but we're but ordinary people who are unable to see even the Dragon God," Igor chuckled as he glanced at Hadis. "If we're able to see a new legend with our own eyes, we Three Dukes shall swear that we will become your trustworthy subjects and serve you until the day we die."

Igor stood up, and Morgan and Bruno followed suit. The three kneeled and lowered their heads.

"Please guide us, Your Majesty," Igor said.

Hadis was almost tempted to laugh at their brazen demands. Indeed, these dukes couldn't be underestimated.

They were descendants of the families that swore their loyalty and had their daughters marry off the moment Dragon God Rave came down to the world. They were direct descendants of the Dragon God Rave, much like the Rave imperial family, with the only difference being whether they were able to produce the second Dragon Emperor or not.

For the Rave emperor, his first hurdle was being able to control the Three Dukes. As of late, the battle that occurred more than two decades ago was a prime example of this issue. The previous emperor found that the Three Dukes had invaded Kratos of their own accord, even stealing power. The impact of being unable to produce a Dragon Emperor for three centuries was big; at the very least, the dukes had decided that Meruonis was incapable of fighting Kratos.

Hadis couldn't blame the dukes for wanting to test him. The Dragon Emperor was trying to form peace with Kratos, after all.

Rave, have we got a chance? Is there a way to create the barrier again? Hadis asked internally.

"Probably difficult... I've lost quite a bit of power. It was a miracle that the barrier still existed even after the Goddess stole the Dragon Consort's power.

And if we wanted them to see it...probably an impossible task.”

However, humans placed their hope in Hadis—he was their Dragon Emperor.

“We must ask the Dragon Consort for her opinion as well,” Vissel said, trying to end this matter. “Surely, it’s impossible to come up with a decision right this instant.”

“A new legend, huh? What an interesting farce,” Hadis said, getting to his feet. “Very well. You’re on.”

It was angering to know that he was being tested, but it was logical. As long as Rave, who possessed his body, was invisible to the populace, it was Hadis’s role to show the deity’s glory and power.

“It’s been three centuries, but we’ll have the Dragon Consort hold the Dragon Flower Crown Festival,” Hadis said. “You’d best keep your eyes open so that you don’t lose sight of what little role you might play in this, you doddering, old obstacles.”

Hadis would never allow his parent to fade into obscurity. *Dragon God Rave* will *be seen*.

As the Dragon Emperor scowled at the trio of men, the self-proclaimed descendants of the Dragon God smiled back fearlessly.



NATALIE was the first to speak when she saw the letter splayed out on the table. “A love letter, huh? It looks like one, all right.”

Frida’s cheeks turned pink as she fidgeted around. “It’s because you’re so cool, Big Sister Jill... I’m so envious... So wonderful...”

As the three surrounded the table, Camila approached them from behind. “Ugh, I *love* heart-thumping situations like this. But isn’t it already known to the public that you’ll marry soon?”

Zeke, who was guarding the room by the door, realized that the question was pointed at him. “It’s not publicized yet. I think they’re trying to settle it with the Three Dukes right now. It’s a whole process.”

Jill turned expressionless and averted her gaze. “Preparations are starting,

and I've been doing stuff too. Namely embroidery, and embroidery, and, you know, embroidery..."

Lutiya, the master of this room, shouted, "Why are we doing this stuff in *my* room?!"

"Sorry, Lutiya," Jill apologized. "Raw's taking a nap, and the only place I could think of where it didn't seem unnatural for us to gather was your room."

The black dragon, who was sleeping in Jill's room with Sauté with Hadis Bear as his pillow, was the Dragon King. He had large, golden eyes and a heavy bottom that didn't allow him to fly just yet. He had the power to communicate with Rave and Hadis without verbally exchanging words. In other words, if Raw were to hear their conversation, Hadis would find out too.

"You get how troublesome it'd be if His Majesty catches wind of this!" Jill insisted.

"I-I do, but it doesn't have to be my room, does it?" Lutiya asked.

"You just don't like the fact that Jill got a love letter. You think you can just talk your way out of this, huh?" Natalie said with a glare, causing Lutiya's face to turn pink. She proceeded to place both hands over her mouth. "Oh dear, I'm so sorry. That was a slip of the tongue. But wouldn't you feel bad if the new younger brother was left out? I wish you'd be more grateful for our consideration."

"Oh, stuff your consideration! Just hurry up and leave, Natalie!" Lutiya snapped.

"I'm your older sister, and you'll refer to me with respect, brat!"

"Shut up! Like hell I will, ugly!"

"What did you just call me?!"

Sparks flew between the two glaring siblings. Located in the depths of the imperial castle, the palace where the imperial family—Hadis's siblings—lived, had become rather rowdy. Once Lutiya had received a room in the palace where Natalie and Frida lived, they started to get together more often.

Lutiya seemed uncomfortable at first with the large room and the ornate

furniture, but as Natalie and Frida constantly visited him, he was slowly getting accustomed to his surroundings. Lutiya wasn't the type to have many things. While he was wondering how to fill the empty shelves, Natalie brought in her tea set, and the dreary sofa and windowsills were decorated with flowers and bags of potpourri that Frida had chosen. Little by little, the minimalistic room was looking a little more lived in.

"Hey, Lutiya!" Natalie grumbled. "The baked snacks I left here are gone. Don't tell me you ate them all! I can't believe you! You're horrible."

"What's wrong with eating things in my room?" Lutiya countered. "If you don't want them to be eaten, don't bring them in here."

"The former emperor's younger sister is so strict. She says no to everything!" Natalie complained. "I was convinced that the ladies-in-waiting wouldn't find them if I brought them here!"

"Brother Lutiya..." Frida said. "You can eat...my candies too, okay?"

"Then you can open my tin of cookies over there. Let's trade!" Lutiya replied kindly.

"Hey! Why do you treat me so blatantly different from Frida?!" Natalie cried.

"You can only blame yourself," Lutiya retorted before he noticed his instructor. "Miss Jill..."

"Huh?" Jill gasped.

Everyone's eyes were on her. Jill had been taking in this wholesome scene, and having nothing else to do, she had reached for the mountain of cookies beside her. There wasn't a crumb left; beside the plate was an opened tin of cookies.

"Sorry! Were these yours, Lutiya?!" Jill cried. "They were out on a plate, and they were so delicious that I couldn't help myself..."

Jill was worried, but Lutiya waved his hand carefreely. "Nah, it's fine. I knew they'd be gone when I had them out on a plate. I can just ask Noyn for more."

"Noyn? You're in contact with him?!" Jill asked.

Lutiya looked like a deer caught in headlights. Noyn hailed from the same

nation as Lutiya and was temporarily studying abroad in a military academy within the imperial capital. He was Lutiya's classmate, and though the royal would likely deny this, Noyn was a capable rival and a friend. However, Lutiya was technically a hostage from Laika, despite being a part of the imperial family. He wasn't allowed to leave the castle without permission, and he usually required a guard detail if he were to ever venture outside. Such a fuss would've surely reached Jill's ears.

She glanced at Camila and Zeke, who shook their heads. If they weren't even aware of this, it was obvious that Lutiya had been sneaking out. He was a problematic child to the point where one could only be amazed by his antics; he was an expert when it came to tricking adults. As his former instructor, Jill knew that it was only natural that he could evade the flimsy defenses of the castle.

Lutiya pursed his lips awkwardly, but Jill reached out and patted his head. "I'll keep it a secret, Lutiya. Princess Frida, Princess Natalie, please keep it a secret as well."

Frida's eyes twinkled as she nodded eagerly, and Natalie seemed uninterested in the affair. The Knights of the Dragon Consort took her words as orders. As Jill tousled his hair, Lutiya pouted and looked up.

"You sure?" he asked.

"Yep," Jill replied. "You're my student. Of course you can sneak out just fine. But you better know what line not to cross, all right? Don't do anything dangerous. I guess I'm not one to talk, though."

She gently flicked his forehead and smiled. Lutiya's cheeks grew pink, and he puffed them out as he suddenly leaned forward.

"Th-Then why don't you come with me?" he offered.

"Me?" Jill asked.

"Noyn and the others who've arrived at the imperial capital wanna see you too! I can guide you there! You can tag along with me."

"Then I'll bring His Majesty with me too!" Jill announced.

"Seriously?" Lutiya felt the strength leave his shoulders.

Jill smiled. “Why don’t we do it sometime when we sneak out to go shopping? Oh, keep that a secret, all right? I don’t want anyone to know that His Majesty and I sneak out often. Prince Vissel will nag at us.”

“Uh... Okay.”

“It’d be a great opportunity for you to talk with His Majesty too. Speaking of, the letter!” Jill finally snapped back to her senses; now wasn’t the time for her to be happy with her future brother-in-law’s growth. “Lutiya, what do you think I should—”

“How should I know?”

Jill was stunned by how cold he suddenly became. *Have I said something insensitive?* she wondered. But Lutiya turned away and sat down by the windowsill, far away from her. Natalie, who’d brought some more snacks to the table and was relaxing, chuckled.

“Want me to console you?” she offered.

“Shut up!” Lutiya roared back angrily. “Why don’t you worry about your—”

Frida approached him and popped a piece of candy into his open mouth. “Brother Lutiya, does it taste good?”

The boy looked stunned for a moment before he frowned and nodded. Frida smiled and made her way back to offer Jill a piece of candy as well.

“Say ‘ahhh,’” Frida said.

Jill obediently did as she was told and had a sweet candy popped into her mouth. This was apparently the third princess’s way of mediating this conflict.

Natalie shrugged her shoulders and placed a cup of tea in front of Jill. “So? Who’s the sender?”

“Well, I haven’t a clue...” Jill confessed. “I looked around after I picked it up, but I didn’t see anyone.”

“Can I...read it?” Frida asked, reaching out.

Natalie swiftly snatched up the letter before her sister could. “No grammatical or spelling errors. The words are a little old-fashioned, but their handwriting is

neat too. A higher-ranked person must've written this. If I were to note something, it looks like a lady wrote this letter."

"There was a pleasant scent emanating from the envelope, so a lady could be involved," Jill added.

"Do you think someone's trying to tease you as the Dragon Consort who's monopolizing the Dragon Emperor's affection?" Camila giggled, having fun with this situation.

Jill shook her head. "This could be a real love letter, so I can't be sure."

"You're rather calm..." Camila noted. "Have you ever received a confession from a person of the same sex before?"

"I have."

When she was the daughter of the God of War, she'd received quite a few. For whatever reason, the men in the room were more shocked by her casual nod.

Lutiya buried his head in his hands. "You've gotta be kidding me... There're women after you too?"

"What are you so shocked about, Lutiya? You and I both know that this is a likely scenario for Jill," Natalie said before turning to the Dragon Consort. "Can I read the contents of the letter?"

Jill nodded.

Natalie cleared her throat. "'To my beloved Dragon Consort. I am currently drowning in my love for you and have lost sight of my path. Please save me from my pain and suffering. I await you forever in the Garden of Resting Dragons, for as long as it takes...'"

"Ugh, gross..." Lutiya grumbled.

Jill found these words to be rather poetic, but Lutiya vehemently disagreed. As she heard the letter read aloud, she glanced around the room.

"So, I'm thinking of going to the Garden of Resting Dragons..." she started.

"Like hell you will! You're not going anywhere!" Lutiya replied at supersonic

speed. Possibly a bit embarrassed by how strongly he'd come off, he hastily waved his hands while facing a wide-eyed Jill. "W-We don't know who we're up against, right? I know you're strong, Miss Jill, but it's still dangerous. And...you already know your reply, don't you...?"

"Yup! He's so right! Totally!" Camila jumped in brightly as Lutiya trailed off. She approached the boy and grabbed his shoulders. "This is our time to shine as knights, isn't it, old bear?"

"Well, there's no need for you to go," Zeke agreed. "We'll send a message that you'll reject her."

Jill mulled over her choices as Lutiya pushed Camila away. Camila offered her a strained smile. "Jill, I understand that you're a bit curious about who the sender is and that you're excited and that you want to face this confession seriously. But you can't. You're the Dragon Consort, so you have to be firm about stuff like this."

"I'm not excited, nor do I care about facing the confession," Jill replied.

"Wait, really?!"

"What's clear is that this person is His Majesty's enemy, right? Then I want to take care of them quickly." As the room froze at her blunt words, Jill looked around quizzically. "We don't know what Kratos is up to right now. It doesn't matter what this person's trying to do; if they're trying to split me apart from His Majesty, then they're an enemy, no? Whether this person is a man or a woman, the facts remain the same. In fact, we should be more alert should they turn out to be a lady—the Goddess can possess a girl under the age of fourteen."

The magical barrier that the first Dragon Consort had erected to keep the Goddess out was gone now. If Kratos was truly crowning a new queen, the Goddess would surely be busy with her vessel. Jill had thought that the Goddess of Love would face her head-on with the deity's dignity on the line, but she wasn't sure. The Dragon Consort was only going off instinct.

It was always possible that the Goddess would strike without caring about the methods that she'd use.

Camila sat beside Lutiya and crossed her legs. “You’re right... Even if the sender doesn’t have those intentions, it’s certainly possible.”

“Then should we stake out the Garden and find the identity of the sender?” Zeke suggested.

“No,” Natalie said firmly, returning the letter to the table. “I also think that the letter’s a trap. I’ve got a lot of reasons, but firstly, the phrasing is odd.”

“Is it?” Jill asked.

“The letter makes it sound like they’re already dating Miss Jill,” Lutiya chimed in, still turned away.

“Exactly,” Natalie agreed. “But there’s more. It’s the location. The Garden of Resting Dragons.”

“I wanted to ask about that too,” Jill replied. “Where is it? Camila and Zeke said they knew nothing about the place.”

“It’s where the Dragon Consort’s Palace—one of the Empress’s Palaces—is located. It’s been neglected for three centuries, so weeds and shrubs have been left to grow wild. The place actually has a secret meaning. It’s code for a rendezvous spot when you want to have an affair.”

Jill didn’t know how to react. Lutiya looked obviously disgruntled, and she wasn’t sure if Frida was allowed to hear this, but Natalie looked unbothered.

“The Garden is where dragons are laid to rest,” Natalie continued. “In other words, the meeting place is a metaphor—it’s where logic dies. I’ve heard that the place was originally built by the Dragon Consort as a memorial for the dragons who fought alongside her and died, but since it’s been neglected, it’s been used for secret meetings with lovers. Little by little, the Garden became a famous rendezvous spot and the Dragon Consort’s intent faded into obscurity.”

“It’s a...beautiful garden. White flowers...bloom year-round,” Frida said sadly.

While Natalie and Frida no longer lived in the Empress’s Palace, they used to live there with their mothers when they were younger. Their mothers were each one of the many consorts.

“No matter who’ll arrive, it’s bad news if an engaged woman so much as steps

into the Garden of Resting Dragons,” Natalie said. “And only a select few are allowed to enter the Empress’s Palace at all. In general, men aren’t allowed, and one requires permission beforehand.”

“Which means Zeke and Camila aren’t allowed,” Jill said. “Then I’ll be fine by myself.”

“As I said, it’s not that simple. It’s the Empress’s Palace. Without proper reason and following procedures, who knows how they’ll take advantage of you.”

“But I’m the Dragon Consort. Surely I can just enter and—”

“Someone...will probably die,” Frida said, shocking the room. As everyone froze in stunned silence, she counted down using her fingers. “Sister Jill goes to the garden. She meets with...a man who can enter the Empress’s Palace. The next day...word will spread that she’s having an affair.”

“If we capture whoever’s waiting in the Garden, we can suppress those rumors, no?” Zeke said roughly.

“Yeah, and that person will be a corpse before you know it,” Natalie replied nonchalantly. “In fact, that person might confess that they had an affair with the Dragon Consort and commit suicide. And that’s how you can create a Dragon Consort who’ll kill others without a second thought to protect her status.”

“That’s horrifying...” Lutiya muttered.

Even Jill shuddered at the thought.

“Brother Hadis will probably trust your words, Jill, but your reputation will plunge into the ground,” Natalie surmised. “And when that happens, we’d require a virtuous and modest princess who can be popular with the people. I’d say it’s a classic tactic.”

“Do they have other goals in mind?!” Jill yelled. “The Empress’s Palace is suddenly so active.”

“Well, of course. The Three Dukes are currently in the imperial capital. They view Brother Hadis as the emperor, and the women currently residing in the

Empress's Palace belong to the previous emperor. There's no benefit for them to side with Brother Hadis or you. If I were to hazard a guess, perhaps the Eighth Consort—Brother Risteard's mother—would be the only one to gain anything and would side with you."

The Eighth Consort was also Frida's mother. Jill glanced at the third princess, who nodded back.

"Mother...probably will, but she's strict..." Frida said.

"Even if you can't have them as allies, it's best not to make the Empress's Palace your enemy," Natalie finished.

"Y-You're awfully cautious of them..." Jill said.

Jill didn't want to create more enemies, but she simply couldn't understand why they were being so cautious.

Natalie mulled over her decision for a moment before finally saying, "To tell you the truth, my father's in the Empress's Palace."

"Y-Your father... You mean, the previous emperor?!" This was news to Jill.

Natalie nodded solemnly. "Right. After he abdicated the throne, he became frail and sickly... There were talks of the Three Dukes taking him in, but with the political turmoil, we couldn't do that. Brother Vissel said that this was the perfect opportunity and shoved Father into the Empress's Palace. The place is teeming with people dying to wait on him hand and foot, their minds filled with hopes and dreams."

"Hopes and dreams? Of what?" Jill asked.

"They're probably hoping that he'll become emperor once more or something. They're so stupid," Lutiya said indifferently. The previous emperor was his father as well, but the boy was sent off to Laika with his mother when he was a baby. The emperor was practically a stranger to Lutiya.

"But didn't the previous emperor abdicate the throne of his own will?" Jill asked.

"He did," Natalie said. "He's never left the Empress's Palace since, and I don't even know where he's living. I haven't met him for years now. Only the First

Consort is allowed to see him. I didn't even sense his presence during the Riot of the False Emperor. He's on bad terms with the Three Dukes and doesn't have much power or influence...but he's still the previous emperor."

Natalie paused for a moment and placed her hand over her chest, perhaps showing a bit of compassion toward her father. "But there's one thing I'll say, and this is a cautionary tale for myself too. It's hard to leave the imperial family of your own accord. It's only natural; we wear these lovely dresses and can live a lavish lifestyle so that we can take responsibility when the nation falls. All the more so if you're a Dragon Emperor."

She gave a strained smile. "Citizens can flee if they need to; in fact, they can even switch their masters if they desire. It's not easy, of course, but they can abandon a Dragon Emperor if they deem him useless and follow a queen instead."

Though everyone had their own struggles, Jill understood what Natalie was hinting at. "In other words, His Majesty will fall if he doesn't have many allies."

"That's right. Brother Hadis can't just quit being the Dragon Emperor. In a game with black and white pieces, he's the only one who absolutely cannot switch sides and colors." Natalie placed the letter back onto the table. "The Garden of Resting Dragons might be an act of provocation from the Empress's Palace. Without more information, it's best not to act. If you really, truly need to, take me or Frida...or Miss Sphere. She's survived even after being Hadis's friend at tea parties. We can rely on her, can't we, Frida?"

The third princess silently raised her eyebrow. She sat down, took a sip of her tea, and placed her cup back down before she finally spoke. "If we introduce her...as my private tutor, it shouldn't be a problem. She can act as an intermediary to my mother as well." Her icy tone was devoid of all emotion.

"Isn't Princess Frida oddly strict when it comes to Miss Sphere?" Camila whispered to Jill.

"In any case, you absolutely mustn't allow a man to enter the Empress's Palace," Natalie said firmly.

Camila raised both hands in the air. "Whoa... So our existence is just being totally denied right now."

“If you want to die an ‘honorable’ death while having ‘consensual’ sex with another and drag the Dragon Consort down, I won’t stop you,” Natalie replied.

Her threat was oddly specific, and Camila slumped her shoulders in surrender. Zeke also solemnly agreed with Natalie’s advice. Jill took a deep breath, returned the letter back into the envelope, and handed it to Camila.

“Hold on to this for me,” Jill said. “It’d be troublesome if His Majesty finds out.”

“Leave it to me. If you get any more of these, I’ll take them all,” Camila replied, pinching the envelope between her index and middle finger while closing one eye in a wink.

Zeke folded his arms. “If we get found out, we can just say that we haven’t given it to Captain yet.”

“Oooh! That’s not a bad plan for a bear like you! All right then, we’ve—”

“Jill!” a familiar voice called out. Hadis opened the door without warning.

“AAHHH!” the entire room shouted.

Camila dropped the letter in her haste. Zeke swiftly collected it and shoved his hand into his pocket. Natalie mysteriously stood in front of Jill as protection, and Frida was panicking because she spilled tea on the table. Only Lutiya was calm as he threw a pillow at Hadis.

“Don’t enter my room without knocking, you idiot brother!” Lutiya shouted.

“H-H-H-He’s right, Your Majesty!” Jill added. “Your...Majesty?”

Hadis paid no heed as he approached where Jill was seated, went down on both knees, and quietly clung onto her.

“Let’s elope. Right now,” he said.

“Huh?” Jill asked.

“If you love me, let’s elope!”

He looked up at her with tear-filled eyes. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief—he hadn’t noticed the letter.

“Did something bad happen?” Jill asked. “You won’t solve your problems by

running away, Your Majesty.”

“Who cares about sound arguments right now?” Hadis replied. “What’s important is whether you love me or not!”

“Yeah, yeah, I love you.”

“Don’t sound so offhanded! Come on! Put more of your feelings into it!”

“I told you that I love you. You’re always so persistent.”

“Don’t sound so fed up!”

He buried his face in her lap and started to weep and blubber. Jill ran her hands through his dark, silky hair as she petted him.

“What happened?” she asked. “I won’t know unless you tell me, Your Majesty.”

“Ah, there you are, Dragon Consort,” another man entered the open door. While Hadis was glued to Jill’s side, Vissel gave his command. “And I didn’t think everyone was gathered here. This’ll make things quicker. Rejoice. You’ve all got a job. We’ll be hosting a festival in one month’s time.”

Natalie, who was helping Frida clean the table, stopped her hands. “A festival? Do we have time with the wedding just around the corner?”

“It’ll be practice for the wedding, apparently. I felt like crying when I heard how *considerate* the Three Dukes are. If this goes well, they’ll happily cooperate with the wedding as well.”

Vissel was smiling, but his eyes remained dark—he was clearly angry. But Jill was able to put two and two together. Hadis was sulking because the dukes had likely criticized him for the wedding. *Well, I didn’t think things would go smoothly*, Jill thought.

Kratos was welcoming a queen, and though the plans had been foiled, there was the incident in Laika. She couldn’t blame them for thinking that now certainly wasn’t the time to hold a wedding.

“I don’t quite get what’s going on, but if the festival goes well, we can marry, correct?” Jill asked.

“Precisely,” Vissel answered. “This festival will also be the Dragon Consort’s public debut.”

“Wait, really?!”

Hadis tightened his grip on Jill.

“Their aim is you, Dragon Consort,” Vissel spat bitterly. “Those doddering obstacles hit a sore spot—we were lucky that they didn’t request for the magical barrier to be erected by the Rakia mountains, but this is still vexing. This useless Dragon Consort can’t possibly host a festival!”

“H-How rude! You won’t know unless I try!” Jill insisted.

“You don’t *have* to try for the outcome to be clear! There’s no way you can—”

“But I have to. I’m His Majesty’s wife.” Jill felt Hadis’s head twitch and she gently petted his hair. “Let’s do our best, Your Majesty. It’s not too late to elope after that, don’t you think?”

She had just been lectured about the importance of Hadis increasing his allies. The emperor gave in and raised his face. He didn’t look at all regal as he placed his chin on her knees, but he sounded calm.

“I...want you to organize the Dragon Flower Crown Festival,” he said. “It’s a festival that the first Dragon Consort started.”

In Kratos, it was customary to give a fourteen-year-old girl a flower crown as a symbol of her adulthood. Jill wondered if the customs of the Rave Empire were similar as well. Kratos Kingdom and the Rave Empire had been enemies since their founding; they had many similarities and differences.

“That sounds fun. What kind of festival is it specifically?” Jill asked.

“You design and sell flower crowns, and do a ritual that’s more akin to a play,” Hadis explained. “The past Dragon Consorts made flower crowns from dragon’s flowers and passed them around. Oh, dragon’s flowers grow in the Garden of Resting Dragons.”

Jill barely managed to stop herself from reacting. Zeke and Camila stood with their backs straight like knights, but she thought that she saw their eyes wander. Hadis had his back turned toward them and failed to notice.

“We need the cooperation of the Empress’s Palace too,” he said. “They were the ones organizing the festival until now, and the Garden of Resting Dragons is within that palace. It’s a pain to even enter that place, so it’s really troublesome to ask for their help.”

Jill discreetly glanced at Natalie. She gulped with Frida and slowly shook her head.

“I-I see... I had no idea,” Jill said, averting her gaze.

Hadis stood up and scooped her into his arms. “You totally sounded awkward just now! And what was with that weird pause?!”

“What? You’re imagining things! There was nothing like that at all!”

Hadis stared at her in silence.

“Wh-What? You think I’m hiding something?!” Jill accused. “Of course I’m not! And even if I *was*, it’s all for your sake because I love you so much, Your Majesty!”

“Y-You love me?” He widened his golden eyes, his cheeks turned pink, and he started to mumble. “I-I see... Then I guess it can’t be helped!”

“E-Exactly!” Jill raised her fist in the air, hoping to change the subject. “I got it, I’ll host this festival! Leave it to me! I’ll eat everything at the stalls!”

“You can’t! It’ll only lower your reputation even further!” he cried.

“Even further?”

Hadis gasped and covered his mouth as he averted his gaze. Jill wasn’t one to miss these signs, and the flimsy excuses that she’d used on him wouldn’t work on her; she wouldn’t be so easily fooled by her husband. Above all, Hadis had no snacks to offer in this trying time.



“**J-JILL**, are you all right? Are you still depressed? Why don’t I pour that for you?” Hadis said.

She shook her head. Hadis anxiously glanced at Jill, who was standing on a step stool in the kitchen, and returned to his seat. He continued this motion,

but Jill wasn't about to let him take her place.

She took the bubbling pot off the flames, poured the hot milk into some mugs, and placed them on a serving tray. When night came, Hadis would enjoy a mug of hot milk in his room and end the day. This was a recent routine that he followed, ever since Jill had learned to make hot milk. Rave would also show his consideration and leave the two lovebirds alone during this precious time. For Jill, this was an important task; it made her seem like a wife. Just because her reputation wasn't good in the imperial capital, she didn't want to throw in the towel. She was Hadis's—the Dragon Emperor's—wife, even if she was called the Gluttonous Dragon Consort.

"Here you are, Your Majesty. It's done," she said.

"Y-Yeah, thank you," Hadis replied. "Wh-Why don't you sit here?"

He patted the plush rug in front of the fireplace. Jill silently sat down.

"U-Umm, I love you very much, and I find you adorable," Hadis said. "It makes me happy to see you delightfully eating the food I make. So don't worry."

"I had no idea," Jill mumbled. "I didn't know such a weird rumor was going around..." Hadis held his breath while Jill gripped her mug with both hands. "I should've eaten everything until the food supply was depleted!"

"Th-That's what you're bothered about?"

"Of course! I still haven't eaten all the food in the imperial capital!"

"Honestly, I hope that day never comes... Ugh! This is bitter! J-Jill, you didn't add any honey but a ton of cinnamon!"

"Since I'm your wife, I held myself back in all sorts of ways."

Jill was aware that her age and her birthplace shackled Hadis in more ways than one. Her socializing skills and ladylike etiquette were barely scraping the average line, if not under it. She could only be proud of her ample magic and strength. Indeed, she was the polar opposite of what an empress or consort should be.

And so, she had done her best not to stand out in the imperial capital, but she didn't imagine that that would work to her disadvantage. If they went through

with the marriage right now, it would undoubtedly drag Hadis down. The Three Dukes, who were against their marriage, were undoubtedly thinking of Hadis's reputation.

Vissel hadn't fought back much because he saw that there was some truth to their words. But what could she do now? For the umpteenth time, she let out a sigh as she felt her husband poke her cheek.

"What?" she asked.

"No matter what anyone says, you're the best wife in the whole world," Hadis said. She could hardly tear her eyes away from his gentle smile, illuminated by the soft light from the fireplace. But she soon gave an even louder sigh and turned away.

"It's no use if you're the only one who thinks that way, Your Majesty..."

"That was a bit cold!"

"You don't have to tell me twice. I won't lose! I'll get back at them."

She crawled over to the small table on cabriole legs behind her and placed her mug down. She grabbed the blueprint of the Empress's Palace and unfurled it on the carpet in front of the fireplace.

Hadis looked at her in befuddlement. "Why a blueprint?"

"It's necessary," Jill reasoned. "The entire place is surrounded by walls and carefully divided from the others. We can enter from the front gates or the back gates, but both are carefully guarded, huh..."

"Wait, why're you looking that up? Are you planning on attacking the place?" Hadis gasped.

"I'm just confirming the routes of entry. I can probably destroy the walls anyway."

"Agreed. You can single-handedly destroy the— Wait, am I supposed to be relieved by that?"

"And this place is connected to its own corridor too."

The palaces, which served as the living quarters for the imperial family, were

grouped together behind the imperial castle. In the very front, in the center, was the palace where Jill and Hadis resided. To the northwest was the palace for the Rave imperial family, where Hadis's siblings lived. To the northeast was the Empress's Palace, where the consorts stayed. The three palaces formed the shape of an upside-down triangle that was connected by a special corridor.

Hadis peeked at it from over Jill's shoulder. "The emperor needs to have his own route, after all."

"Have you ever used the corridor, then?" Jill asked.

"Nope. It's the previous emperor's Empress's Palace. There's no reason for me to go."

He's right, but it's kind of suspicious how indifferent he is. Or maybe it's not that suspicious... Jill thought as she glanced at him dubiously. He picked her up and placed her on his lap with her back facing him.

"Dragon Consort, how will you face the Empress's Palace?" Hadis asked.

"Uh, first, to prevent any information from leaking, I'll keep it a secret!" Jill insisted. The letter flashed across her mind, but she needed to keep quiet. She had already discussed who would become the intermediary to enter the palace.

"A secret from me too? I'm worried."

"You should be more worried about yourself, Your Majesty. You can't let the Three Dukes take advantage of you. Be the cool emperor that you are! And you can't sulk by yourself while I'm working!"

"Yes, ma'am." Jill couldn't quite trust his words as he fiddled with a lock of her hair. "But be careful, Jill."

"That's my line. I heard that the Empress's Palace houses your father as well."

"Yeah, but I don't think he can do anything. If he could, he wouldn't have rubbed his face on the floor and begged for his life."

Hadis's voice sounded indifferent and emotionless. He'd been raised by Dragon God Rave after all; the young man's father had never been the previous emperor. Moreover, it was known that they held no blood relations either. Yet Hadis had returned from the frontiers to the imperial capital in hopes of

forming a familial bond with the previous emperor. She didn't want to cause him any more pain.

"But it's not good to underestimate him too much," Hadis added. "The Three Dukes seem alert and wary. Did you know that we had a war against Kratos twenty-five years ago? The previous emperor had secretly gone with Kratos to —"

"Your Majesty."

Jill's quiet voice caused Hadis to fall silent. His hand was over her stomach, and she used both of hers to envelope his.

"I'll protect you no matter what," she said. "Don't leave my side."

After a few moments of silence, Hadis suddenly jumped away from her. Jill quickly caught the mug he'd dropped. *And I just told you not to leave my side.*

"Y-You're saying stuff like that with a straight face again!" Hadis whined as he fled to a leather sofa. He buried his face in the cushion and wailed in agony while Jill placed the mug on the nearby table and stood in front of him.

"You just won't get used to me, will you...? I really think we should practice our wedding kiss," she said, striking an imposing pose.

"Wh-What?"

"Let's do this!"

She slammed her hands down on the sofa and thought that she had trapped her husband within her arms, but Hadis had managed to flee by rolling off to the side. Jill was certain that she'd caught him this time and could only be surprised by how nimble he moved.

As silence filled the room, Hadis kept knocking his index fingertips against each other and muttered, "R-Rave isn't here right now. M-Maybe we're moving too quickly."

Jill tried again, but Hadis dodged to the opposite side. She managed to see his afterimage and predicted his movements to block his path, but he placed his hands on the seat of the sofa and did a cartwheel to dodge her arms and sit on the furniture.

Damn, he's quick when he's serious. A different kind of irritation started to bubble up within her.

"Fine," she finally said.

The sofa was big enough to easily seat three people, but Jill quietly sat right next to Hadis.

"Do you understand, now?" he asked.

"The one who leaves the sofa first loses. The loser will listen to what the winner says. And go!"

"Why?! That was sudden!"

She sprung forward and pounced on him, but he easily dodged her and scooped her in his arms as he stood up.

"Since we both left at the same time, it's a tie," he declared. "You should return to your room and sleep."

"Enough of your quibbling! I'm not going to sleep yet!"

"Huh? But you'll be busy starting tomorrow, won't you? You have to greet the Empress's Palace and stuff."

"Exactly! I still have a ton of stuff to confirm! I can still make plenty of plans!" Jill raised her fist in the air.

Hadis readjusted her in his arms so he could face her. "But rest is just as important."

"I'm confident that I can pull three all-nighters in a row and win against the Empress's Palace's security!" she countered.

"Are you *sure* you're not trying to attack them? You need their cooperation for the Dragon Flower Crown Festival."

"I know that, of course! I'm very happy, you know. It's my first job as a Dragon Consort!"

Undoubtedly, the festival would be the first public duty that the Dragon Consort would be performing. She knew that it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows, but she felt like she was finally able to step closer to Hadis, who

seemed to always be a few steps ahead of her as a Dragon Emperor.

“I know that there are all sorts of rumors about me, but if this succeeds, I’ll be your wife that everyone will approve of!” Jill exclaimed. “I know that the poor harvests are a source of worry, but who cares if Princess Faris becomes queen! I won’t lose! So please support me, Your Majesty!”

She was so close to Hadis that their noses were practically touching as she smiled. He sank into the sofa as though his strength had left him.

“I really don’t hold a candle to you,” he said, laughing.

“Huh? Have you ever won against me, Your Majesty?” Jill asked.

There were times when she lost in individual situations, but even during battles, Jill practically had a landslide win every time.

Hadis immediately turned serious. “Wait, we should debate that on another day. My dignity as a husband is at stake.”

“You still had that dignity? You’re a stubborn one...”

“Don’t kill it! In any case, I know you’re all pumped up, but you need rest.”

“But I’m not sleepy. Ah, but you should rest, Your Majesty...”

He placed his index finger over her lips and silenced her. Hadis rearranged himself on the sofa and had her lie down. Her head was on his lap like a pillow.

“You can sleep like this, can’t you?” he asked.

“Of course I can’t. I’m not a child,” Jill resisted.

“Then you can just count to ten. Close your eyes,” he said, rhythmically patting her shoulder.

She knew that this was meaningless, but she reluctantly closed her eyes. All he requested was ten seconds.

“Good night, Jill,” he said.

I told you I’m not gonna sleep! Jill puffed out her cheeks as she started counting. *One... Two... Three...*

“I love you. I’m always relying on you, my beloved wife.”

His voice is pleasant to hear with my eyes closed. Six... Seven... Your Majesty, I love you too...



JILL slowly got up and blearily looked around the room. She was atop a fluffy bed. It was five minutes before her alarm. Nearby was a stuffed bear. Beside her large pillow, inside of a cage, was Sauté all curled up, and Raw, entangled in his blanket with his stomach out. Sunlight peeked in from between the curtains, hurting her eyes.

“Morning...” Jill mumbled.

Naturally, Hadis was no longer with her. She was in her room.

“I messed up!”

She gritted her teeth, realizing that she had been sleeping soundly. She must’ve fallen asleep on his lap and had been carried to her bed by Hadis. Ever since they slept in separate bedrooms, Hadis faithfully brought her back to bed as though he was fulfilling some sort of oath.

She was frustrated, but she couldn’t waste time on it. She had to prepare for the Dragon Flower Crown Festival starting today. Her first order of business was to visit the Empress’s Palace to request their aid.

She threw her blanket off and tried to open the curtains while stretching out a little when something caught her eye. She stared blankly at the vase by the window. Ever since she was given her own room, the servants of the imperial castle always filled the vase with seasonal flowers when they came in to clean.

Nestled under the vase was a letter. Now fully alert, she carefully pulled it out from underneath, only to find that her eerie premonition had come true.

“To my beloved Dragon Consort.”

Jill had received her second letter. As usual, the letter had a poetic flair, detailing the sender’s love for her, but that didn’t matter. Why was the letter here?

The sender had enough power and influence to sneak this into the private room of a Dragon Consort. Jill clenched her fist and squashed the letter within

her hand.

Chapter 2: The Dragon Consort and the Consorts

IN front of the Empress's Palace was a room reserved for special guests; this served as an audience room of sorts for the consorts. A slender woman bowed until she was at eye level with Jill, her soft locks resembling Frida's spilling over her shoulders.

"I'm the Eighth Consort, Fione. I've heard everything from Frida. You're looking for help to host the Dragon Flower Crown Festival, correct?"

"That's right," Jill replied nervously, trying to stand as tall and proud as she could. "May I ask for your aid? I've heard that the Dragon Flower Crown Festival was hosted by the consorts while a Dragon Consort wasn't present."

Fione's smile was so elegant that it was hard to believe that she had an adult child. "Most certainly. The Dragon Flower Crown Festival is important for the Empress's Palace as well. We shall make it a success, without fail."

She proceeded to skillfully plan their future steps. Jill breathed a sigh of relief. Natalie and Frida had constantly warned the Dragon Consort to never underestimate the Empress's Palace. Jill was a bit too nervous, it seemed. She could even sense her knights, Zeke and Camila, lowering their guards just a hair. *I'm so glad she seems nice*, Jill thought to herself.

The Dragon Flower Crown Festival wasn't so big a deal that it invited guests from other nations, but various stalls would line the imperial capital to sell their wares, and they were even to put on a parade. To top it all off, there was also a showcase of the ritual from the myths, where a young maiden played the role of a dragon and received a flower crown from a man acting as the Dragon Emperor. There was no end in sight to the tasks at hand. Jill had to permit certain stalls to join the festivities, gather a choir and dancers for the parade, prepare the flower crown and costumes, ensure that the streets were kept safe with guards, and guarantee that the festivities would go smoothly. Jill had to attend to a wide variety of tasks, and it was imperative to receive the help of the Empress's Palace, which boasted the knowledge and network to make it

happen.

Furthermore, this was the first festival in three centuries that was actually being hosted by a Dragon Consort. Combined with the fact that the festivities were canceled the year prior, heightened anticipation for this year's festival was an understatement. The moment the festival was announced, the empire was flooded with requests by shop owners to put up a stall on the big day. If Jill failed here, the Dragon Consort's reputation would plummet into the ground; this also meant that she'd be dragging Hadis down. Failure wasn't an option.

Also nagging Jill in the back of her mind were the shady letters that began with: *"To my beloved Dragon Consort."* She'd only received letters so far, and Zeke and Camila remained on alert, but as more people frequented the castle in preparation for the festival, it became even more difficult to pinpoint the sender. The contents of the letters remained the same, detailing the sender's love for Jill, but she'd find them sandwiched within random shelves or in other strange places. Just this morning, she found a folded card between the documents detailing the list of stalls and where they'd be arranged within the capital. She hastily shoved it into her pocket. She knew that she couldn't run forever; she had to face this problem one day.

However, she didn't expect the festival preparations to take such a toll on her.

"Jill, I just received word from General South about the parade, the venue, and where the guards will be placed!" Camila called.

"Could you leave it over there, Camila?" Jill responded. "I'll take a look at it when Zeke returns."

"Please don't move, Dragon Consort," a lady-in-waiting warned.

"I-I'm sorry!" Jill replied.

"The Dragon Consort is currently getting dressed," the lady-in-waiting said. "May I ask the rest of the room to leave?"

Camila, who was standing beyond the partition, received her scolding and replied with a "Yes, ma'am" before leaving. Jill regretted not giving out her next order before Camila departed, leaving the others with nothing to do but wait

around. There were no mirrors, and Jill had no idea how she looked. The seamstress and lady-in-waiting quietly made some temporary adjustments to the dress; both had been dispatched by the Empress's Palace, and Jill wasn't keen on striking up a conversation with people she barely knew.

I have a fitting session with His Majesty after this, a meeting with the girls who'll be holding my dress train, and I think the flower crown design will be brought here soon, Jill thought, making her mental checklist.

At the Dragon Flower Crown Festival, the Dragon Consort would be submitting her own design for sale along with the consorts. Fione claimed that this tradition had been kept for the last three centuries and she had provided some references for Jill to create her own custom design.

Jill had never experienced this festival before. There was a mountain of things for her to memorize, and there were countless preparations that she had to make. The sheer amount of work overwhelmed her.

"Kratos has a Flower Crown Festival too, but it's completely different..." Jill mumbled.

She felt the people around her twitch and freeze for a moment. As she blinked quizzically, the seamstress who had designed the dress looked up while placing a pair of shoes in front of Jill. For the first time, the two locked gazes.

"Does Kratos also have a Flower Crown Festival?" the seamstress asked.

"Um, yes," Jill replied. "It has nothing to do with the Dragon Consort, and it's more of a coming-of-age ceremony for girls who turn fourteen. The girls wear flower crowns and get baptized. Once the ceremony is over, they receive a basket of wine and fruit. Every town will keep a fire burning, and the festivities continue well into the night, so even if someone's daughter is out frolicking with her lover and comes home late at night, she gets a pass. It's held in the winter though, so you need quite a bit of tenacity to stay out until morning."

Jill gave a sheepish smile as she remembered her own experience when she turned fourteen during her prior life. The war had already begun, but internal strife had exploded within the Rave Empire, and there was a temporary cease-fire. Jill had returned home, but to ensure that she could react at a moment's notice, she didn't go to the royal capital. She stayed at House Cervel to receive

her baptism. *Prince Gerald showed up to greet me, though he left in mere moments!*

And he had an unnecessary excuse prepared: Faris had apparently told him to go.

Jill gave a sad chuckle as the seamstress helped her wear the shoes and nodded smugly.

“I’d expect no less from the nation of love,” the seamstress said. “Your festivals are rather extravagant, I see.”

As Jill found herself hung up on the woman’s odd phrasing, a gold-rimmed, full-length mirror was brought in.

“Please take a look.”

The Dragon Consort did as she was told and peered at herself in the mirror. She saw herself in a blue dress, decorated to the edge with frills and ribbons. Her shoulders were puffed up, and the collar behind her opened up like a fan. It took time for Jill to process her attire as she stared at the azure fabric.

“Wonderful,” the lady-in-waiting who had helped her get dressed said with a smile.

“It’s an old-fashioned, gorgeous design,” the seamstress added. “It’s quite dignified.”

“Perhaps we should tie her hair up. I’ll adjust it so that the flower crown can fit her head.”

“W-Wait!” Jill stammered. “Are we sure we’re fine with this color?!”

Blue was the color reserved for Kratos. It wasn’t forbidden to use in Rave, but many felt an aversion toward this hue, for legends stated that there weren’t any blue dragons. The fact new recruits of the Dragon Knights received a bright-blue armband and Laika had the Azure Dragons Class for dropouts was proof of this. The color wasn’t viewed in a favorable light.

The seamstress, however, replied casually, “We’re not in Kratos. It’s not a problem.”

“E-Even so, this seems a bit *too* old-fashioned...” Jill insisted. “And the cape

will only make it heavier...”

This time around, Jill would be playing the role of the dragon maiden, and would receive a crown from Hadis, playing the role of the Dragon Emperor for the ritual. She’d been told that she’d wear a cape during the event, and the number of people holding her dress train had been strictly limited to three. While the color of the dress wasn’t set, there were certain rules when it came to the cape. In other words, the cape held a traditional meaning that couldn’t be removed from the ceremony. Jill’s current dress had puffed shoulders, and her collar was on full display like a peacock showing off its feathers. This would clearly get in the way when wearing the cape. Of course, she had no complaints if this really *was* the traditional attire.

“I’ve heard that the cape is unnecessary this time around,” the seamstress stated firmly.

Jill widened her eyes in shock. “Huh? I-I haven’t heard of this. Um, who told you that?”

“Her Majesty, the Sixth Consort has told me so. I’m her seamstress.”

Didn’t Fione provide the seamstress for me? Jill was completely confused by the situation when she heard the door open.

“Miss Jill, I’m coming in,” Lutiya called. “Why’re the knights waiting outside?”

This was perfect timing.

“She’s currently in the midst of changing,” the lady-in-waiting immediately called. “Please wait outside.”

“Wait, is she changing right now?” Lutiya asked.

“N-No, I’m fine! I’m done! What’s up, Lutiya?” Jill asked.

Even the lady-in-waiting couldn’t easily chase out the younger brother of the emperor. As Lutiya froze by the partition, Jill swiftly appeared, hoping that he’d stay.

“D-Don’t pop out!” Lutiya shouted in shock. “I-I thought you were changi—Huh?”

“H-How do I look?” Jill asked. “I just had the dress for the Dragon Flower

Crown Festival fitted.”

Lutiya likely noticed how unsure Jill looked. He had his back against the wall and blinked several times before he answered seriously, “I think blue isn’t a good color for an official ceremony...”

“R-Right?”

“Wait, you’re saying they *made* that for you?” Lutiya asked. “They’re clearly trying to harass you, then. It looks hideous. Who ordered that?”

“A-Anyway, what’s up?” Jill hastily cut in. She knew that people were listening in on them.

Lutiya narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean, what’s up? I’m here to pick you up because you weren’t there for the fitting session with Hadis.”

“Isn’t that coming up soon?”

The prince clicked his tongue and looked down before he spat, “According to my brother’s schedule, it was an hour ago.”

Jill felt the color drain from her face. “I-I’m late?! Where’s His Majesty? Is he still waiting for me?!”

“He has a meeting to attend, so he left for that. I came to relay the message that the schedule needs to be adjusted later.”

Jill could only nod; she knew that Hadis was just as busy as her. “Got it. Apologize to His Majesty for me, please.” She looked glum, realizing that she’d caused trouble.

“Where’s Natalie or Frida?” Lutiya whispered. “I don’t see Miss Sphere either.”

Sphere served as Jill’s private tutor, but she was recently teaching Frida and Lutiya etiquette as well. Though Jill didn’t mind if others heard, she lowered her voice as well.

“Princess Natalie and Princess Frida are out checking the outfits for the parade and screening the dancers we’d need. Sphere isn’t here yet. Apparently, there was some trouble with the bazaar that Marquess Beil was going to host for the festival.”

“Aren’t they doing this on purpose, then? The fitting session and this situation, all of it.” When she locked eyes with him, he stared straight at her. “Should I call for Brother Hadis?”

“His Majesty’s in a meeting right now, isn’t he?”

“If you call for him, he’ll fly right on over. He’s probably causing a fuss as we speak because he doesn’t like working.”

“This was just a miscommunication, Lutiya. We shouldn’t jump to conclusions,” Jill said. “Look after His Majesty so that he doesn’t run, all right? I’m counting on you.” She smiled and patted his back.

Lutiya frowned. “I’m free anyway. Call me if something happens.”

“Dragon Consort, are you here?” Fione called, showing up. “We have the prototypes for the flower crown... Oh dear.”

Lutiya glared at Fione and silently turned on his heels to leave. Fione looked puzzled for a few moments before facing Jill.

“Have I interrupted something?” she asked.

“No, you’re fine,” Jill assured. “Um, about this dress... This is no good, is it?”

Fione sized Jill up before she gave a look of defeat. “Quite right.” She turned to the seamstress. “Did you come here on the orders of the Sixth Consort?”

“That’s correct. I’ve done exactly as requested. If you’ve got anything to say, please relay them to the Sixth Consort.”

“Very well. You may leave.”

The seamstress nodded, cleaned up her tools, and left the room.

Fione looked a tad troubled. “I’m sorry, Dragon Consort. The Sixth Consort has ties to Neutrah, but she admires the First Consort very much. She’s a straightforward woman and perhaps a bit too frank...”

“So, I *was* being harassed?” Jill asked. “Did they think I wouldn’t notice the blue because I’m from Kratos?”

“But I don’t think blue is an issue.” Jill was flabbergasted as Fione smiled and continued, “It’s not a forbidden color in Rave, and it shows that you aren’t

hiding your origin of birth. It displays your pride, and I think that's quite nice."

Is she an airhead? Jill quickly shook her head. "It's not nice at all! I'm certain that it'd leave a bad impression! And it doesn't match the cape either."

"Ah yes, speaking of, the three girls who were hired to hold your train have resigned. They apparently received threatening letters at home." Fione spoke as though this was *good* news, causing a delay in Jill's reactions.

"Wh-Who did it?!" Jill cried. "Do we have any suspects?!"

"I wonder... There are far too many. I think it'd be a waste of time to look into it. And so, I think it'd be fine without a cape. I'm sure this is the will of the Dragon God."

Like hell! There's no way that's true! But Jill couldn't remain prickly in front of a smiling Fione.

"I've brought the prototypes of the flower crown," the Eighth Consort said, calling for her lady-in-waiting. "Bring them in."

The woman brought in a few objects wrapped in cloth and laid them out on the table that was used to dress Jill just moments before.

"This is the flower crown that we'll be presenting under your name," Fione said, personally unveiling the cloth to reveal a thin crown with green leaves. "It's a simple design and sturdy, and cheap so that it can reach more people, as you've requested. I believe it's made from weaving sweet potato vines with leaves. We'd also added a few dead leaves to provide some variation in color."

"Th-Thank you," Jill said. "But, um, I don't think this is a *flower* crown, is it?"

Indeed, it looked simple, sturdy, and cheap, but it had no flair. This didn't seem like a product that was fit to be for sale.

Fione gave a troubled nod. "I would've liked to add the dragon's flowers, but I'm unsure just how many we'll have... But I think this is an avant-garde design that portrays you quite well. Should we add some fruits to it? I've heard that you like strawberries; perhaps we can add those."

"Wouldn't that make it look weirder?!" Jill yelped. "U-Um, aren't there other flower crown designs?"

“Ah, I suppose you would be curious about them. Then please pardon my insolence, but I’d like to show them to you.”

Fione removed the cloth from the edge, revealing a cute flower crown decorated with many small, white flowers. White clovers were a classic design, but it was decorated with colorful berries and four-leaf clovers. In addition, a dark green ribbon similar in color could be weaved through the stems.

“It’s nothing revolutionary, which is a bit embarrassing,” Fione said. “But when you talk about reasonable prices, this is what I came up with.”

“Th-This is very well done and quite intricate,” Jill managed to utter. “And you can even adjust its size...”

“Thank you for your kind words, but I’m afraid it pales in comparison to the work of the other consorts. Have a look at the Sixth Consort’s piece.”

Shown next was a large flower crown decorated with flowers of all sizes and all the colors of the rainbow. Upon closer inspection, some fabric crocheted into the crown peeked through, and it was made like a headdress so that the crown wouldn’t lose its shape.

“Th-This looks...splendid,” Jill said.

“I agree,” Fione replied. “I’m sure she received help from the other consorts; there are flowers from various regions in the mix. Hehe, she said that she was no longer active and wouldn’t participate in making flower crowns, but she’s as shrewd as ever.”

“It’s like a flower crown that the Empress’s Palace worked together to create...”

“But I find that the First Consort is the most impressive. Take a look.”

Fione removed the final cloth that was beside Jill’s prototype crown. Jill had braced herself, but she couldn’t help letting out a gasp. White roses with faint pink centers and pale lavender roses surrounded the delicate flowers in the center. A thin strip of lace and a thick ribbon garland were entangled in the mix, creating an elegant flower crown. In the very back, where the crown was knotted, was a large flower adorned with lace that had intricate embroidery. The crown was so beautiful and was embellished with lace that was fitting for a

bride.

“It’s rather expensive, of course, but whoever wears this crown will be envied by all the other ladies,” Fione remarked.

“I-I agree...” Jill replied.

“However, I’m certain that everyone will wear yours. It’s inexpensive and sturdy.”

Jill foresaw a future where everyone envied the crowns made by the First Consort and the other consorts while sulking that they were only able to wear this cheap one designed by the Dragon Consort.

This is bad... Really bad. She was certain that her ill reputation as a Dragon Consort would turn into an omen of unhappiness at the rate.

“Is it possible to change the design at this stage?” Jill asked.

“Now?” Fione replied. “It takes quite a few people to make flower crowns, and I’m not sure if anyone would be up for the task. My connections won’t be enough.”

“Please, I’m begging you!”

“Then why don’t you ask the Three Dukes for their help?” Jill stared back blankly while Fione smiled and continued, “Those in the Empress’s Palace are generally receiving support from one of the Three Dukes. The consorts cannot ignore the dukes’ commands, and if they hear that the Dragon Emperor and his consort are in need of support, I’m sure that they’ll help you.”

“Are you telling me to make His Majesty lower his head to the Three Dukes?” Jill asked.

The smile faded from Fione’s face. While she was able to mask her thoughts well, any fool could tell that she wasn’t just a cute, airheaded consort. She met Jill’s gaze.

“What do you want to request of His Majesty in exchange for helping me?” Jill asked. “Do you want to remain at the Empress’s Palace? Do you want to shove someone else in there? I’ll *never* offer His Majesty to you all. Never.”

Her surroundings grew quiet, but Fione gave an adorable giggle, breaking the

silence.

“I have nothing so grand in mind,” the consort said. “My son and daughter can make do, and once the Empress’s Palace is disassembled as customary, I’ll have more than enough money to live the rest of my life in luxury. In fact, I won’t even know where and how to spend my money.”

Jill was a little shocked by the news that Fione’s wealth had been guaranteed. “I see... I know nothing of that palace. I apologize for my rude remarks.”

“Oh, I don’t mind. While Kratos has a king, I’ve learned that your home kingdom practices monogamy. They’re not allowed multiple consorts or mistresses.”

“That’s right. We can only have one queen, and any other women hold no power.”

“Goodness, the Goddess of Love is quite devoted. How adorable. In fact, I’m a little envious.” Fione’s words sounded more meaningful than usual, but she soon smiled to mask her emotions. “Do you understand now? I just want you to become a wonderful Dragon Consort, Lady Jill. I’m personally offering you my aid as well.”

“Err... Um, thank you?”

“Is it difficult to trust me? Then why don’t I give you another solution? You simply need the First Consort on your side.” Fione quietly took Jill’s flowerless crown and turned toward her.

“The First Consort, Lady Cassandra, was it?” Jill asked. “I believe she’s Duke Verrat’s older sister.”

“That’s right. She’s currently the lady of the palace and is like an older sister to me as well. I’m quite indebted to her. Should she simply ask the palace to assist the Dragon Consort, every single soul will gladly obey her orders. However, I don’t think she’d meet you, even under the Dragon Emperor’s orders.”

“She won’t even listen to His Majesty? Why not?” Jill asked.

“Because she’s the paragon of consorts and the first wife of the previous

emperor.” Fione looked pained as she gazed at Jill’s crown.

“But you have a plan, don’t you, Lady Fione? What do you want in exchange for your assistance?” Jill asked.

“Dragon Consort, you’re a lot more mature than you look,” Fione replied with a small chuckle. She placed the flowerless crown on Jill’s head. “As I’ve said before, please become a splendid Dragon Consort.”

“I planned to become one from the start...”

“Then you can also grasp the First Consort’s weakness, can’t you?”

For a second, Jill thought that she’d misheard, but Fione retained her composure and calm tone.

“Since we’ve got the opportunity, why don’t we take a little break and stroll around the Empress’s Palace?”

Jill knew that this was anything but a leisurely walk. Fione, assuming that the Dragon Consort had no reason to refuse, left without waiting for an answer and told her lady-in-waiting to get Jill changed out of her attire.

Jill had used a room meant for outsiders when she was trying on her dress. It wasn’t within the grounds of the Empress’s Palace. She walked through the carpeted halls and came out to a clearing with a fountain. She made her way through the corridor that surrounded it and found a large, circular entrance waiting for her on the opposite end. There was a metal bar above her and she assumed that it was lowered at night. When she stepped inside, she saw a guard shack at the palace gates, and the soldiers lowered their heads upon seeing Fione.

“Once you step through those gates, you will be within the Empress’s Palace,” Fione said. “I believe this is your first time here, Lady Jill. Are you anxious without your guards?”

When Camila and Zeke offered to tag along, Fione stopped them with a roundabout threat, saying, “We’re just going on a stroll. Do you think I wish to harm the Dragon Consort?” And so, the two knights were left behind. There was plenty of work for them to do, such as confirming guard positions during the festival, so Jill had them tend to those tasks.

“No, I actually wanted to enter and confirm the layout of this place, so this is a good opportunity,” Jill answered.

“As expected, you’re very reliable,” Fione said, walking through the gates.

They must’ve been inside the walls surrounding the palace as the dark, stoned corridors went on for a while until light finally spilled through. Jill stepped out onto a garden blooming wildly with white flowers. It wasn’t at all elegant and gorgeous as she’d imagined. The garden wasn’t maintained, and the lone lopsided arbor hinted that there was a half-buried stone path leading to it. She guessed that this place used to be a front garden, but it was now covered in snow-white flowers and looked abandoned.

“Is this...the Empress’s Palace?” Jill asked.

“It’s the Garden of Resting Dragons,” Fione replied.

“Th-This is *that* garden?! Really?!”

Fione gave an allusive smile as Jill was unable to hide her shock. “Did you perhaps make a promise with someone?” Fione asked.

“A-Absolutely not!” Jill stammered. “But why is the garden here?”

“Because this is the Dragon Consort’s Palace.”

Fione used her slender finger to point to the left. There was a simple manor with no unnecessary décor, practically buried among the flowers.

“The Dragon Consort’s Palace...” Jill mulled. “So is that my palace, abandoned for three centuries?”

“That’s right,” Fione replied. “We live over there.”

She pointed beyond the garden. An iron fence served as the divider; beyond the arch was a neat garden with hedges and a large building. The black roof looked brand new, and the place looked well-maintained. They could only view it from the side, but it was easy to tell that it was an enormous manor.

“You guys are completely separated from the Dragon Consort...” Jill murmured.

“The other consorts cannot step into the Dragon Consort’s estate. Though a

Dragon Consort may be one of the consorts, the inverse isn't true. An emperor cannot use the Dragon Consort's Palace if he is not the Dragon Emperor. The previous emperor used the front entrance and never approached this area. As you can see, the Dragon Consort is special."

It sounded nice, but this meant that the Dragon Consort was completely isolated from the rest. The scenery in front of Jill looked anything but special; it had been abandoned and cast aside.

"It's especially unwise to frequent this place," Fione continued. "Three centuries ago, the Dragon Consort herself had used it to have an affair."

Jill was unable to hide her astonishment at the news.

Fione smiled. "I even heard that she became pregnant. The Dragon Emperor himself had cut her down."

The details matched what Jill had seen before, when she delved into the memories of the previous Dragon Consort.

"I-I didn't know such records existed..." she managed to say.

"It doesn't," Fione replied. "Three hundred years ago, the Dragon Emperor burned anything pertaining to the Dragon Consort. But the Empress's Palace is isolated from the outside world—time passes a little more slowly here. Oftentimes, these stories remain from word of mouth. I heard that the previous Dragon Consort had an affair with the Dragon Emperor's younger brother. Do be careful, Lady Jill."

"Huh? Why do I... Wait, you don't mean..." Jill floundered.

Is she suspicious of Lutiya? Jill wondered. But Fione only smiled, choosing to neither affirm nor deny those words. Jill was growing tired of this farce—she wasn't sure if she was being warned or mocked.

"If you'd like to harass me, I ask that you be frank," she said. "I'm the type who doesn't really listen—"

Fione placed an index finger in front of her lips and crouched down as though to whisper a secret in Jill's ear. "I've heard rumors that Lady Cassandra frequents the Garden of Resting Dragons."

“Huh?!”

The garden was rumored to be a popular spot for lovers’ rendezvous. If the First Consort was frequenting the spot, it only meant bad news. Jill was stunned as Fione continued quietly.

“As the Dragon Consort, you can freely enter this place, Lady Jill. In other words, you can lie in wait for Lady Cassandra.”

“A-Are you telling me to stake out the place?!”

“A brilliant plan, wouldn’t you agree?” Fione’s eyes twinkled as she looked for agreement. “People tend to keep their weaknesses concealed. And the trick to becoming friends with others is to share a secret. If you can take hold of the First Consort’s secret, I’m certain that you can become friends with her.”

“You’re just telling me to grab her weakness and threaten her!” Jill cried.

“Oh dear, I never said anything *that* barbaric.”

Fione’s offended tone made Jill’s cheeks twitch. The Dragon Consort was finally starting to understand the Eighth Consort’s methods. She never made direct claims and used implications to manipulate others.

“What’s your goal?” Jill demanded.

“I want you to become a splendid Dragon Consort,” Fione immediately replied with a smile. She was so good at hiding her emotions that Jill slumped her shoulders.

“Argh, fine! I’ll do it!” Jill shouted. “That’s what you want to hear, don’t you?! But in exchange, I’ll have you change the designs of the dress and flower crown!”

If Jill was unable to change these designs, she wouldn’t be able to call the festival a success. Worst case, she’d just be used and abused.

“I like how you go all out,” Fione replied. “It gives me energy just looking at you.”

“You’re not praising me, are you? You’re just telling me that I can’t act befitting of the Empress’s Palace.”

“But of course. A Dragon Consort *mustn’t* act the same as the other consorts. You’re not like us—we’re simply requested to give birth to a new Dragon Emperor. That’s all we’re for.”

Jill whirled around upon hearing the sharp retort. Fione immediately plastered a smile on her face and hid her emotions.

“While only a single person manages the Dragon Consort’s Palace, I find it best if we keep your arrival here a secret,” Fione said. “Should Lady Cassandra catch wind of this, she’d surely avoid using this place.”

“Ah, true. You’re right,” Jill replied.

“Then please excuse me. If I stay here for too long, I’d be accused of adultery.”

Jill thought that she’d also be just as accused as the Dragon Consort, but Fione had disappeared before she was able to voice her thoughts. *I-I feel like I’ve just been manipulated...* She reached into her pocket and took out the card that she’d hastily hidden just this morning.

This was convenient for her. It was a good opportunity for her to investigate the letters that continued to beg Jill to come to the Garden of Resting Dragons. With renewed determination, Jill stepped into the garden. She walked along the buried path and stood in front of the Dragon Consort’s Palace.

She looked up at the building. The faded walls and iron double doors felt awfully large and intimidating. *It feels more like a fort... Huh, it’s unlocked.* When she opened the door, she scrunched her face as the mustiness of the room hit her nose. The lights were off, the space only dimly illuminated by the natural lighting. The sun’s rays that trickled in from the windows looked faint, attesting to the dirtiness of the glass. The marble floor was filthy as well. It wasn’t so bad as it had been abandoned for three centuries, but Fione had stated that someone managed the place.

“Excuse me...” Jill called out, gingerly stepping inside.

She saw dust dancing in the air and tried not to breathe any in as she proceeded deeper into the manor. With an eerie creak, the rustic door closed shut before the floor below her suddenly opened wide.

Jill was shocked, but she instinctively grabbed the side of the open tile and prevented herself from falling. She looked below her and saw spears and swords, their blades pointed up and ready to skewer her. She shuddered when she saw something white—a previous victim perhaps—and the dark-red edges of a cloth, as she used her strength to pull herself back up.

Just then, she felt an arrow graze the top of her head.

“Wh-What now?!” she shrieked.

“Who the hell are ye, lass?!” a loud voice boomed throughout the entrance, causing the room to shudder.

On a platform above the stairs, Jill spotted a small elderly man pulling his bow back. Dressed in faded colors and simple attire, he was wearing a long vest to protect him against the cold. He glared as hard as he could, deepening the wrinkles around his eyes and pointed his arrow at her.

“Er, are you perhaps the one managing this place?” Jill asked.

“What are ye here for?! Out! Get out!” he roared, firing another volley of arrows.

Jill was forced to jump back. “W-Wait, I’m— Good lord, you’ve got awful aim! You can’t hit me at all!”

“Shut up! I’ve only got a little more to go!”

“Huh?!”

The moment the question left her lips, she stepped on something, causing the floor to glow. A magical net formed a cage around her from all sides. *A restraining barrier! The arrows were a diversion!*

The man gave a guttural laugh. “Showed you! My plans got me that win—”

Jill punched above her, blowing a hole through the magical cage. The magic circle dispersed, and the man stopped laughing. Silence filled the room.

“U-Um, you’re managing the Dragon Consort’s Palace, aren’t you?” Jill asked. “I’m the Dragon Consort...”

“...The Dragon Consort?” the old man asked.

“Yeah. My name is Jill Cervel.”

“And my name is I don’t give a damn!” he roared as he stood proudly. “I’m livin’ here! Get out!”

“H-Huh?! Isn’t this the Dragon Consort’s Palace?! It is, isn’t it?!”

“No idea what you’re talking about! Besides, a puny lass like youse can’t possibly be the Dragon Consort!”

Jill’s mouth twitched.

“A Dragon Consort, you see, needs more yeehaws on her chest and behind, if youse catch my drift! *That’s* the Dragon Consort that *I’m* lookin’ for! I ain’t ever approvin’ of no puny Dragon Consort! The only thing you can yeehaw is your magical energy!”

As he stuck out his tongue, Jill felt one of her blood vessels about to burst. *Who made this guy the caretaker of this place?* She was used to being underestimated, but she’d never been faced with such a stupid reason. It was oddly refreshingly idiotic as Jill cracked her knuckles.

“Yeah? Then I’ll *pound* the fact that I’m a Dragon Consort into your brain!” Jill shouted.

“Come at me if ye dare, flatso!”

“Who’re you calling flatso?!”

She roared and pounced on this mysterious elderly man as he aimed an arrow above, causing an iron ball to fall down.



“What happened, Jill?” Hadis asked, crouching down.

The rugs were a mess, and the chandelier was leaning on its side. Part of the windows were blown away, and the furniture was completely destroyed. The room looked as though someone had ransacked the place as Jill hugged her knees in the corner, underneath a small desk.

“Why are you here, Your Majesty?” Jill asked. “How’d you know that I was here?”

“How could I not?” Hadis replied. “There were loud booms and the bright crackles of magical energy. The imperial castle was in an uproar. I’ve got Zeke and Camila waiting outside. I brought them here.”

This meant that everyone knew that Jill was at the Dragon Consort’s Palace. The First Consort might never use this place again—Jill felt like she failed in more ways than one.

“I’m reflecting on my actions,” Jill said.

“You’ve got a habit of hiding in small spaces when you’re reflecting,” Hadis observed. “But is there anything you have to reflect upon?”

“Today was full of failures. The consorts of the Empress’s Palace underestimate me, Lady Fione is manipulating me expertly, and I couldn’t do a fitting session with you, Your Majesty.”

“Ah... But you don’t need to worry about that. They’re known to harass people all the time.”

“But Prince Vissel must surely be gloating over the fact that I couldn’t handle them well!” Hadis gave a strained smile as Jill clutched her knees even tighter. “Above all... I let him escape! How could I!”

“Escape?”

“The caretaker of the Dragon Consort’s Palace!”

She slammed her fist on the floor in frustration. Perhaps the earlier fight had blown up enough dust; nothing fluttered in the air when she made contact with the ground.

“I’m fine with the Empress’s Palace,” Jill said. “I didn’t expect things to go smoothly. But how could I lose in a battle of strength?! I feel humiliated!”

She couldn’t deny that she was a little conceited. She was against an old man who didn’t even possess much magical energy. In the corner of her mind, she tried to maintain her composure and hold back.

And yet, she couldn’t capture him. The old man used every trap that he could within the hall, disturbing Jill’s thoughts and movements. He used that to flee skillfully. She searched throughout the palace, but he couldn’t be found—Jill guessed that he was hiding in some secret room. She couldn’t even catch his name, but he was undoubtedly the caretaker of this palace.

“What’s going on here?!” Jill cried. “It’s not normal! Even House Cervel isn’t like this!”

“I-Is this place that dangerous?!” Hadis yelped.

“I think the traps in the grand hall have all been used up, but this is a major blow to my confidence. I thought that, if nothing else, I was good at handling stuff like this!”

Her loss here implied that she really was just a child. Her frustrations reached a breaking point.

“I know I’m a flatso!” she cried. “You think that too, don’t you, Your Majesty?!”

“I-I-I-I feel like I just heard a shocking term, but I hope I’m just hearing things!”

“You treat me like a child! You always run when I want to practice kissing you...”

She trailed off and pouted, tapping the tips of her shoes on the ground. She couldn’t see what expression the red-faced Hadis was making, but he would always act mature when it counted.

“You’re hungry, aren’t you?” he asked.

As she’d expected, he was calm and held out a basket in front of her nose. It was often used for picnics and filled with delicious dishes—it was like a treasure

chest to Jill.

“You worked hard today too, well into the night,” Hadis said. “Let’s eat together.”

“I will... But you should return to your room first, Your Majesty,” Jill replied. She would usually jump at the mention of food with twinkling eyes, but she couldn’t be so happy when she felt like a child being soothed. She could only say words that made her not cute. “This place is a mess... And I haven’t reflected on my actions enough.”

“You can’t do that. You can’t chase away an emperor who came to visit you at night.”

Jill froze and thought for a moment. Hadis had just referred to himself visiting the Empress’s Palace. And it was already nighttime. *Ah...* When she looked up, she met Hadis’s golden eyes, shining with a mischievous glimmer.

“We should practice these visits too, shouldn’t we?” he suggested.

Jill knew that this was all just pretend, but she couldn’t suppress the nervous beats of her heart.

“R-Right,” Jill replied. “Don’t worry. I won’t chase you away, Your Majesty. U-Um, I spotted a kitchen earlier, so let’s eat there!”

She jumped out from under the desk and led him by the hand. The room was messy, and it didn’t at all create a romantic mood, but Jill no longer felt humiliated. She knew that she had to clean this place up, one day. One day, it wouldn’t be practice.

“What’s tonight’s dinner?” she asked.

“It’s a surprise until you open it,” Hadis replied.

“All right then! And let’s call in Zeke and Camila! I need to discuss our future steps. They’re waiting outside, aren’t they?”

“Whaaat? We aren’t going to enjoy this place alone, just the two of us?” Hadis puffed his cheeks out, disappointed.

“We can later! Work first,” Jill replied calmly. Hadis scooped her up with one arm. “Ack! Your Majesty! I keep telling you to stop carrying me already!”

Hadis frowned as he met her glare. “I’m glad to see you energetic, but my wife’s so cold to me. I wish you’d be nice.”

“But we’ve got so many important topics to discuss. We need Camila and Zeke’s help. I was told that the First Consort is apparently having a secret affair in the Garden of Resting Dragons! This is our chance!”

Hadis widened his eyes as Jill counted with her fingers. “First, we’ll seize her weakness. Then I’ll secretly leak that Lady Fione had given me that information, which will divide the Empress’s Palace! Then I’ll use my fists to mediate! The palace bows down to me, and we can make the festival a success!”

“You lost me at the ‘using your fists’ part. And it sounds like you aren’t fully trusting Brother Ristead’s mother. You said that she seemed nice.”

He poked her cheek as she puffed out her chest. “I never said she wasn’t. This is how the Empress’s Palace—women—fight it out!”

How weird. A few seconds ago, Jill had been fed up with her powerlessness and her unfamiliar methods, but they all seemed trivial now.

“I’m terrified,” Hadis said. “I feel like I’ll be dancing in the palm of your—huh?!”

She stretched his cheeks, hoping to break his composure.

“You won’t be able to laugh for long,” Jill warned.

She couldn’t help but feel happy at the mention of him visiting her at night. She’d fallen for him, and that was her weakness. Such a beautiful man couldn’t possibly be caught so easily by her small hands. She knew that all too well. She would grab on with all her might and never let go.

“I’ll do my best and make sure I can find a pretty dress and flower crown for when I play my role as the dragon maiden,” Jill said.

“Don’t do that,” Hadis replied. “You’ll make my heart stop.”

“Shall we kiss as practice?”

Hadis turned bright red as he averted his gaze. “No,” he whispered.

Zeke and Camila had lived with Hadis before, when the emperor had been

chased out of the imperial capital and hid in a home within the Neutrahl duchy. The knights didn't resist the idea of eating at the same table as the emperor.

"Awww, it's been a while since I had your warm soup, Your Majesty," Camila said with a smile after she took a sip. "It's so delicious!"

They were eating at the table in the kitchen. Zeke sat next to her and quietly took a bite of his bread.

"We were able to use the kitchen, so that was good," Hadis replied. "I'm glad we could warm it up, and we were even able to add more ingredients. But don't you find it a bit lacking? I mean, this was originally just meant for a small picnic."

"Not at all!" Jill said happily. "It's delicious! And it reminds me of Neutrahl."

"Oh, totally!" Camila agreed. "That takes me back. The Dragon Consort's Palace is pretty big. You think we can hunt on the grounds?"

"There was a waterfall and a river in the back," Zeke answered. "We might be able to do some fishing."

The two knights talked enthusiastically as they reminisced about their joyful time in Neutrahl.

"We're still within the Empress's Palace grounds," Jill scolded. "You can't start trying to make a living through hunting."

"But it's not like we have anything here," Camila replied. "Why don't we make a small garden or field or something?"

"We might be able to reuse some broken things we find around the house," Zeke said. "How about an oven?"

"We'd be able to make pizza," Hadis answered.

"Then we *need* an oven!" Jill declared instantly.

Hadis smiled. "We've got the Dragon Consort's permission. I heard that dragons also used to frequent this palace, so the grounds are pretty large. Rave even said that there were quarters that the Knights of the Dragon Consort could stay in."

“Rave? Speaking of, where is he?” Jill asked.

“He’s wandering around, indulging in his nostalgia. It’s been a while since he came here,” Hadis replied.

Jill found a chunk of meat in her soup and popped it into her mouth. “That reminds me, Rave doesn’t really talk about the past, does he?”

“His memory’s a bit fuzzy, but he said that he was being careful so that it wouldn’t affect me. Just because I’m a vessel, it apparently goes against logic to make me into a person just like him. He said that it was the same as turning back time; it shouldn’t be done.”

Jill jolted while trying to tear off a piece of bread. It wasn’t her decision, but it was likely that time had been turned back for her. She’d ignored it until now, thinking it as the antics of the Goddess, but she had never thought that it would go against logic.

“He tells me necessary things, though,” Hadis said. “This place used to be built like a fort, and there were way more Knights of the Dragon Consort. It became a military post of sorts.”

“Huh?” Camila asked. “Wait, does that mean that we *can* live here?”

“Yup,” Hadis answered with a nod.

Camila snapped her fingers with delight while Zeke whistled enthusiastically.

“Great,” Zeke said. “Since we’ll be making an oven anyway, why don’t we live here?”

“Agreed!” Camila cried. “Let’s live here from today onward!”

“I thought you two were renting a place in the imperial capital,” Jill said.

“Jill, I *really* don’t want to say this, but...” Camila began with a straight face, her voice unusually low. “The Knights of the Dragon Consort is an honorary post. We don’t make much money.”

“Wait, really?!” Jill turned to Hadis.

“They might make a bit more than apprentice knights,” he replied with a strained smile. “It’s not like they *can’t* make do, but... I heard that three

centuries ago, you were given free lodging and food, so I guess they thought that evens out. Oh, but you get great bereavement benefits!”

“That doesn’t make me happy at all,” Zeke pointed out.

“It’s important, though,” Camila laughed. “Still, you’d barely be able to support your wife and kids until then.”

Jill couldn’t laugh at all at this news. “I-If that’s the case, then please feel free to live here. I can’t let that caretaker do as he pleases either.”

“I met him outside earlier,” Zeke reported. “He escaped, though.”

Camila took a bite of her bread and laughed. “He got you good too, huh? He pushed you into a hole, you klutz.”

“Shut up. He came up from behind me, and I didn’t even sense his presence. Who the hell is that old codger?”

“If memory serves, he’s a relative of Duke Lehrsatz,” Hadis explained. “What was his name again? Um, if you don’t like him, Jill, we can fire him.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” Jill replied.

Everyone stared at her, likely not expecting this answer.

“Currently, he’s the most knowledgeable about this place,” she reasoned. “We should have him as an ally. And I think that old man created those traps. If this palace used to be a military post for knights, I doubt it would’ve been ridden with all these devices. Oh, but my family house used to have them, so maybe they *were* used for training...”

“They weren’t,” Hadis said firmly. “We should set House Cervel standards aside for now.”

“Then as I’d thought, he isn’t your regular person. He made all those traps, set them up, used them against me, and fled from my grasp.” As she calmly assessed her opponent, it was likely that the elderly man was better than her when she had underestimated him. “I didn’t sense much magic from him, but I’m guessing that he primarily uses it to hide his presence or to fool others.”

“Seems like a pain to capture,” Camila noted.

“But I think it’s worth it,” Jill insisted. “He might know a thing or two about the First Consort’s affair.”

“No complaints from me,” Zeke said, smiling as though he’d found his prey. “I’ll definitely catch that geezer.”

Camila placed her utensils down and put a hand over her chest. “Your wish is my command, Dragon Consort. We wouldn’t want you to frequent this place, since it might cause unnecessary rumors. People will think that you’re visiting the Garden of Resting Dragons.”

“Huh? Is that bad?” Hadis asked with a blank stare.

Jill and her knights exchanged a glance. *Right... Rave doesn’t know since this was caused by the Dragon Consort from three centuries ago.* Hadis likely hadn’t heard the rumors either because he’d never stepped into the Empress’s Palace. It was also possible that others had blocked out any stories that could’ve humiliated the Dragon God. Camila showed her consideration by briefly telling Hadis the story that she’d heard from Natalie.

The emperor widened his eyes and smiled. “Let’s burn that garden to the ground.”

“No!” Jill insisted. “You’d ruin the plan to catch the First Consort and her affair! And I want to use those flowers for the flower crown.”

“But if I hear rumors of you having an affair, I wouldn’t be able to live!” Hadis whined.

“Don’t die because of a rumor,” Jill said. “It’s unforgivable for a Dragon Emperor to burn the flowers related to dragons!”

“The lass is right. Those flowers are unique in Rave—they bloom with magical energy,” a voice said from Jill’s side.

The Dragon Consort froze in place.

“Rave rejected the blessings of the soil from that Goddess, and those flowers were allowed to bloom with magic. They go against logic, youse see. Their existence is precious, and ye wanna burn ’em down because of that squirt’s reputation? May God have mercy on ye because you’d be damned fer life.”

Hadis, Camila, and Zeke didn't move a muscle as Jill slowly turned toward the voice. There the caretaker was, confidently sitting on one of the chairs at the table as he grabbed a loaf of bread from the basket. He ladled the remaining soup into a bowl and was gulping it down with gusto.

"There're a ton of ways to deal with this. Good grief, so this's our Dragon Emperor, eh? Man, this soup's good."

"G—" Jill started.

"No one has the right to decide my actions. Can't believe you folks can discuss matters like youse got the final say in everything. Hmm? This ain't bad when ye dip the bread in the soup..."

"Get him!" Jill ordered.

Right on cue, Zeke and Camila pounced. The old man looked up and gasped.

"Gah, it's been a while since I smelled somethin' this good, so I couldn't help myself!" he cried. "Cheaters!"

"*You're* the one who came uninvited to steal our food!" Jill roared.

The old man managed to dodge Zeke's arm, but Camila kicked his seat from under him, making him lose his balance. Jill jumped on top of him.

The old man lifted his head and muttered, "Is Barry Cervel still alive?"

Jill froze at the mention of her grandfather's name and faltered for a moment. That was all the old man needed to roll away, dodge Jill, and throw his spoon at the wall. The light on the ceiling immediately went out and enveloped the room in darkness.

"Bwa ha ha ha!" the man's laugh rumbled throughout the room. "Youse think I'm gonna get caught?! This is *my* turf!"

"Huh?! Where?! Light! Get the lights!" Jill shouted.

"Listen, lass. That meal was good, so lemme tell ye somethin' good. Around this hour, a guest'll arrive at the garden soon. Keep watch, hmm?"

When Camila finally managed to light the candles, the kitchen was empty aside from them.

“He escaped...” Zeke huffed. “That geezer’s really slippery.”

“Mm-hm,” Camila said. “It throws me off guard when he uses traps or tries to talk his way out of it.”

“Who’s Barry Cervel?” Hadis asked, pulling the spoon out of the wall.

The light instantly went back on; it seemed the spoon had temporarily shut off the magic pathway that was used for light. The caretaker was quite skilled.

“My grandfather,” Jill replied. “He was the previous lord of House Cervel, but he passed away a while ago. Does that man know my grandfather?”

“Maybe he just blurted stuff out to confuse you, Captain,” Zeke said.

It was possible, but something didn’t feel right. Jill placed a finger between her brows. “I think we need to capture him, after all... He said something important too.”

“A guest at the garden... Do you think he’s talking about the First Consort?” Camila asked.

“Hadis! Come outside!” the Dragon God shouted, suddenly descending from above, looking panicked.

Hadis narrowed his eyes. “What’s wrong? Did the Goddess finally appear?”

“No, it’s a dragon. Someone’s riding one. I think they’re planning on landing here. Head out right now, or you might let them escape.”

“What’s wrong, Jill?” Camila asked.

“Rave is telling us to go outside,” Jill replied. “Someone riding on a dragon is coming this way.”

A guest usually arrived at this hour, apparently. Camila and Zeke turned serious as they grabbed their weapons to head outside. Jill looked up at Hadis, who nodded and left the kitchen. Rave was flying beside them.

“Who’s riding the dragon?” Hadis asked.

“No clue,” Rave replied. “The dragon won’t reply.”

“A dragon won’t reply to *your* orders?” Hadis said in a low, strained voice.

The corridor was dimly lit, only given the bare minimum of light.

“Yeah, it’s as though the dragon can’t hear me,” Rave said. “Couldn’t sense its presence either. I only noticed because I happened to look outside. That dragon’s acting weird.”

Naturally, whoever was riding the dragon was not an average person either. Camila stood in front of them and opened the door to step outside. Zeke walked in front of her, grabbing the hilt of his greatsword and staring ahead. Jill also stepped in front of Hadis as the dragon descended, creating a circular indentation in the garden foliage.

White petals danced in the air, tossed around by the evening breeze and the flapping of the dragon’s wings. There was barely any light near the Dragon Consort’s Palace. Only the entrance where Jill was standing had a torch, its flames roaring and casting light on the evening garden.

A tall person jumped down from the dragon and stepped onto the flower garden before immediately noticing the presence of Jill and her crew.

“Oh? I didn’t expect guests to be here before me,” the man said. “I’d thought the Dragon Consort’s Palace was still unused. I’m rather unlucky...or lucky, perhaps?”

Jill was all too familiar with his smile, illuminated by the lantern hung on the dragon’s saddle.

This was the man who approached Kratos in a different timeline, using his younger sister’s death as a shield, to insist his claim to the empire’s throne. This was the man who recently had the Draco Flute created in Laika to instigate a revolt before quickly disappearing. He possessed little magical energy and wasn’t particularly skilled in martial arts either. In Jill’s previous timeline, he had been flattered for a while before he disappeared without a trace. Even now, the revolt in Laika failed and the Draco Flute was unusable. He had accomplished nothing.

However, he was menacing enough to never miss an opportunity if provided. When Rave raised his voice, the dragon flew up and melted away into the night.

“You must be His Majesty, the Dragon Emperor, and the Dragon Consort,

correct?” the man said without glancing back at the dragon.

His polite question was filled with certainty. Hadis didn't answer.

“And who might you be?” Camila answered instead.

“Pardon my manners. My name is MinerD Teos Rave.”

MinerD stepped forward, placed a hand over his chest, and kneeled in front of them. His androgynous face, coupled with his slender frame, made him seem elegant and refined.

“This isn't as planned, but I'm very delighted to meet you, Dragon Emperor and Consort,” he said. “I have arrived upon receiving the role as the Ambassador of Friendship from Kratos.”

“An ambassador? You?” Hadis asked incredulously.

“Please have a look. This is my letter of appointment.”

He swiftly removed a letter from his pocket, revealing a piece of paper that was often used in the Kratos Kingdom. It'd been signed by Faris der Kratos.

“When I was traveling abroad, I was graciously given the opportunity to meet the princess and was requested to be the gap that bridged the two nations,” MinerD said. “Though perhaps a bit audacious, I carry the name of the Rave imperial family, even if I am on the bottom of the ladder. I happily accepted this role in hopes of attaining peace.” His eloquent words and beautiful voice all seemed fake, as though he were in a play. “If you will allow, I'd love to reminisce about the past...as a family.”

Amid this farce, only his blue eyes hidden behind his pale blond bangs glimmered brightly.



NATALIE had been busy recently. She could hardly believe the ominous days of worrying over the hectic political situation while talking with her half-sister Frida were a thing of the past. She was running around for the Dragon Flower Crown Festival, doing everything she could to support the clumsy Dragon Consort. She was carefully selecting the dancers for the parade, being sure to keep the various factions and honor of the aristocrats in mind. Her keen eye

gave her insight that a majority of the dancers were unmarried ladies living within the imperial capital with some aristocratic ladies in the mix.

At the end of the parade, five ladies called the Dragon Flowers danced in a flowerlike formation. There were always arguments about who should be chosen. Bribing the dance instructor was just the tip of the iceberg; outfits were sometimes torn to shreds and the dancers were sent threatening letters to encourage them to forfeit the role.

Natalie was prepared for this year, knowing it'd be worse than usual. Her older brother, the real Dragon Emperor, would be taking the stage to present the dragon maiden with a flower crown. Much like the ladies who were appointed to hold the dress train, women in these roles were bound to stand out, giving them more opportunities to catch the attention of the emperor. It wasn't unusual for a lady who caught the eye of the emperor in the Dragon Flower Crown Festival to eventually join the Empress's Palace.

With all these concerns piling up, the one saving grace was that Jill would take the role of the dragon maiden, the climax of the entire festival. Had it been anyone but her, there was bound to be a kidnapping or a murder. It wasn't that people would be deterred from kidnapping or trying to kill Jill, but the Dragon Consort was so strong that Natalie would almost pity the unfortunate assailant. Natalie's mind was at ease, and the imperial army even oddly suggested that they'd immediately evacuate the residents if there was anyone stupid enough to challenge the Dragon Consort. The consort in question replied with a, "You're right. I'll leave it to you." Should anything occur, people would applaud the assailant for their recklessness.

The biggest issue for Jill was likely handling the Empress's Palace. The women who supported the emperor from the shadows had a fighting style that Jill was unfamiliar with. The princess knew that *this* was where her help was needed.

"Consort Fione, what's the meaning of this?" Natalie demanded.

"S-Sister Natalie, calm down!" Frida cried, hugging her from behind.

Natalie had thought that she was calm enough. She hadn't raised her voice, though she didn't knock before entering the room either. Fione was lightly dressed in a gown as she gracefully sat on a bench. It seemed she was about to

head to bed. A lady-in-waiting was tending to her feet. The smell of nail polish hit Natalie's nose.

"Your Highness Natalie, to what do I owe this pleasure at such a late hour?" Fione asked. "You promised me that you wouldn't enter the Empress's Palace, didn't you?"

"I did indeed. In exchange for me not ordering around the palace, you said that you would cooperate with the Dragon Consort. You're the one who broke her promise first."

"Me? Goodness, but I'm lending her my full support."

"Don't play dumb!" Perhaps Natalie wasn't *that* calm as she'd raised her voice. "I heard from Lutiya about the dress. You were the one who stopped Lady Sphere, who was supposed to be by the Dragon Consort's side, by nitpicking about the bazaar. And the train holders resigned? How *are* you supporting her?"

"S-Sister, calm down..." Frida said. "Mother's—"

"You're to blame too, Frida! How could you leave Jill alone?" Natalie accused.

"Ah, so you're saying that the Dragon Consort can't even handle a single consort without someone by her side," Fione mused.

Natalie couldn't retort. Once Fione had finished her pedicure, she had her lady-in-waiting leave and elegantly rested her feet in front of her.

She smiled gently. "I simply cannot believe that you find it proper to barge in at such a late hour without prior notice into a room of a consort who isn't even your mother. I suppose I should expect no less from the daughter of a fortune-telling maniac who lacks common sense."

At once, Natalie went cold and Frida turned red with anger as she clung to her.

"Mother!" Frida yelled.

"I suppose you're trying your best not to be called that, but you're just running in circles," Fione continued. "Frida, be sure to scold Princess Natalie. The Dragon Consort doesn't want this either. She's a very strong person."

Frida gripped Natalie's cold hands, calming her down.

"I ask that you leave, Princess— Oh, but you're officially the splendid younger sister of the emperor, aren't you?" Fione asked. "Your job is to seduce the crown prince of Kratos. You have no work to do in the Empress's Palace."

"You say it like it's a piece of cake to pull off," Natalie replied. "He's a stubborn guy who would gladly become a martyr for the Goddess."

"Rather timid, aren't you? The crowning of a queen is the perfect opportunity. Claim that you'll make him king and divide the kingdom in half."

How wonderful it would've been if manipulating Gerald was that easy. Natalie buried her anger and maintained her composure.

"I'm not here to argue," she said. "I can trust you regarding the Dragon Consort, then?"

"Of course," Fione replied. "But I give no promises when it comes to Lady Sphere. It's only natural for me to be worried as Risteard's mother."

Did she pick on Lady Sphere to test her? Or maybe she's got an ulterior motive. Everyone in the Empress's Palace has so many motives, Natalie lamented.

"The Empress's Palace tests a person on what they would die for," Fione said, seeing through Natalie's hesitation. "In that regard, the Dragon Consort is a powerful lady. I'd like to trust her and say there's no need for concern, but perhaps the same doesn't go for you, Your Highness."

Her taunt was mixed with a warning. Fione was the consort who looked after Natalie after she had been abandoned by her biological mother and brother. Natalie knew that she was simply thought of as a pawn—it was useful to have a princess on one's side, but she still had some sympathy. Fione wasn't like the impulsive Sixth Consort who made situations worse, or the other vain consorts who had zero interest in political affairs. She could sympathize and carried herself well; she was a lady who couldn't be underestimated.

"I suppose someone like me wouldn't have stood a chance against Lehrsatz, filled with foxes as it is," Natalie finally said.

The Lehrsatz duchy was known as being a habitat for foxes. Her banal words

also poked fun at the Lehrsatz family, known to be crafting and cunning for generations.

Fione smiled. "I'm honored that you understand. It's getting late. Please leave."

"Then give it back..." Frida suddenly said, causing both Natalie and Fione to tilt their heads quizzically. "You took a letter meant for Sister Jill, didn't you, mother? I saw one in the room... If you took it to be mean to Sister Natalie and Sister Jill...please give it back."

Natalie looked shocked, but Fione turned expressionless before smiling broadly.

"Wouldn't you want to get rid of a dangerous letter, Frida?" Fione asked. "Do you not trust me? You're making your mother sad."

Frida shook her head. "You'll never make brother look bad. Never. But if you're doing something dangerous—"

"Frida." Fione's icy tone caused Frida to freeze. The consort's gentle air was long gone as her voice became hard and firm. As Natalie gulped nervously, she heard footsteps behind her.

Guards of the Empress's Palace entered, pushing Natalie and Frida aside as they surrounded the room.

"What is it at this hour?" Fione asked, silently standing up. She didn't seem at all troubled—it looked like she expected them.

"You know, don't you, Fione?" a consort accused, entering after the guards.

Fione still remained calm while Natalie grabbed Frida and stepped back with a curt bow. It was as though the habit had been ingrained into Natalie as she backed away.

First Consort Cassandra, the lady of the Empress's Palace, was the one making accusations. She was the mother of the entirety of the Rave imperial family, who had lost their biological mothers. Within the imperial palace, only the Dragon Consort could possibly become this woman's equal. Fione gave a respectful bow.

“I find it rather audacious to find you visiting me at such a late hour, First Consort Cassandra,” Fione said.

Cassandra had her guard up as usual and glanced at Natalie and Frida before turning back to the Eighth Consort. “There’s something we must talk about, Fione.”

“Couldn’t we do it tomorrow?”

“Hmph, how shameless.”

“Are you talking about yourself, perhaps? What are my sins?”

For every sin committed, the consort in charge of the Empress’s Palace would determine the punishment—currently, this role fell upon Cassandra.

“You’re trying to create needless confusion within the Empress’s Palace,” Cassandra replied.

“Do elaborate, please.”

“You invited the Dragon Consort to the Empress’s Palace without my permission.”

“Goodness, I told the Dragon Consort to keep it a secret. But perhaps that reason isn’t good enough for a person of your caliber, Lady Cassandra. Surely the Dragon Consort has the right to enter the Dragon Consort’s Palace.”

“And I’ve been told that you’ve been rather rude to her.”

“Me? Quite the flimsy excuse. We must catch the Sixth Consort as well, then.”

“You’re the one responsible, no? Hence, Princess Natalie is here to file her complaints.”

Natalie tried to step forward to refute, but Frida grabbed onto her. When Natalie turned to look at her sister, Frida was shaking her head while trembling. It was clear that the princess’s anger had been used against Fione, and this prediction soon proved true.

“I’ll hear your excuses later,” Cassandra said. “Practice self-restraint for a while.”

The guards surrounded Fione and grabbed her arms. Cassandra’s words

sounded mild, but Fione was being tied up like a criminal.

“Wait! Stop!” Natalie shouted. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Quiet!” Fione said sharply. “I’d bring shame to the consorts to be protected by a child like you within the Empress’s Palace!”

Natalie flinched, and even the guards restraining Fione hesitated for a moment. Only Cassandra maintained her composure.

“Your words may be laudable, but the result shall not change,” the First Consort said. “Take her away.”

“Goodness... How horrible, Lady Cassandra,” Fione replied. “I’m on your side, you know.”

“I didn’t know you could talk so brazenly, you vixen consort.”

“I’ve only done what you’ve taught me. When I first came here and could only cry, you were the one who told me to push my older sister aside and become this way.”

“Then are you claiming that your actions were fitting for His Majesty Meruonis?” Cassandra replied icily.

“But of course,” Fione replied with confidence. “If you could kindly take me away so that I could be by his side, I couldn’t be happier. He hasn’t responded to my letters recently...”

“Don’t let her speak any further! Take her away!” For the first time, Cassandra raised her voice, prompting the soldiers to reach for Fione.

“Don’t you dare touch me, you insolent guard!” Fione shouted back. “I can walk by myself.”

She gave a graceful smile before walking forward. She had her head held high and didn’t even glance Natalie and Frida’s way as she stepped out of the room that was surrounded by guards.

“Princess Natalie, Princess Frida, I ask that you leave,” Cassandra ordered.

“What will you do with Lady Fione?” Natalie asked.

“That’s a problem of the Empress’s Palace. I ask the younger sisters of the

emperor not to meddle in our affairs.”

“B-But Sister Jill needs help for the festival...” Frida stammered.

“Then I shall take Fione’s place and offer my aid,” Cassandra replied.

Frida pursed her lips and looked down with frustration. Natalie had felt the same frustration, but neither princess could refute Cassandra’s words. Had this all been planned beforehand? Cassandra proceeded to search the room; Natalie knew that they didn’t have the power to stop her. If there was one thing she could request, it’d be...

“May I please meet my father?” Natalie asked.

Cassandra’s eyebrows twitched. The princess was uncertain, but she believed that this was her opportunity.

“I’d like to tell him about Lady Fione’s incident,” Natalie said. “Lead me to him.”

“I haven’t permitted you to enter the Empress’s Palace,” Cassandra replied. “Who in the world allowed you to pass through?”

“No one! Don’t change the topic! Even you have no right to stop me from meeting my father,” Natalie insisted.

“There should’ve been guards watching the gates.” Natalie drew in her breath as she understood Cassandra’s implication, but the First Consort continued brusquely, “It doesn’t matter if you try to protect them. I can easily look it all up.”

“I-I shook them off! The gatekeeper isn’t to blame!” Natalie shouted.

“Then please leave.” Cassandra added indifferently, “You’re so naïve that you can’t even abandon a guard. I suggest that you don’t meddle in the affairs of the Empress’s Palace.”

Her voice made it clear that she knew she could get Natalie and Frida to back off. The First Consort pointed her chin at the princesses and gave her order.

“Please escort Her Highnesses Natalie and Frida back to their rooms.”

The guards surrounded the two girls and escorted them out of Fione’s room.

They were forced to walk toward the exit of the Empress's Palace.

"Mother...will be fine," Frida whispered as though she was reassuring herself. "She'll be fine... So we have to think...about what she was trying to do."

Natalie squeezed Frida's hand. The little girl was right. All they could do now was think about what Fione had said.

Just then, the guard behind them fell onto the ground, followed by the guards to their sides.

"Who are— Gah!"

"Run, Sister Natalie!" Frida said, pushing her away.

The little girl fell, dragged down by a guard who'd been knocked toward her. As Natalie gave a small cry, the mysterious assailant dressed as a guard blocked her path. She saw a dagger dripping with blood in front of her and gulped nervously.

"Your Highness Natalie, I've come for you," a voice said.

"For me?" Natalie gasped.

For better or for worse, the ones currently gathering attention were the Dragon Consort and the women selected for the Dragon Flower Crown Festival. Natalie couldn't understand why she'd been targeted. If any sister of the emperor would do, Frida, who was currently buried under a guard, would've also been just fine. But the assailant didn't look away from Natalie, who'd fallen onto the ground on her butt.

"You've got nothing to fear. If you can just come with me..." the assailant started.

"Chiiirp!"

A loud birdlike cry cut the person off. A white entity shot through the air like a bullet above Natalie's head, kicking the assailant's face and toppling them to the ground. Frida, who managed to crawl out from underneath, beamed with hope.

"Sauté!"

The Dragon Consort's game fowl stomped on the attacker and outstretched its wings proudly.

"Princess Natalie! Princess Frida! Are you two all right?!" a familiar voice called.

"Jill!" Natalie said.

She almost burst out crying upon hearing the voice behind her. More guards appeared from the front, lured by the bird's cries. As Natalie breathed a sigh of relief, the assailant who'd been stepped on by Sauté coughed up blood. Frida shrieked. The attacker had ingested poison.

A small, empty bottle rolled onto the ground. Jill approached Natalie's side and picked it up.

"Are you all right? Do you have any injuries?" Jill asked calmly.

Natalie remained strong as she gave a firm nod. "I-I-I'm fine. What's going on? I thought you were in the Dragon Consort's Palace..."

This may have been a trivial question, but Natalie could hardly keep up with her surroundings. Jill, who helped Natalie get back on her feet, remained silent.

"Something happened, didn't it?" Natalie asked, her stomach in knots.

Hesitation was written all over Jill's face as she struggled to speak. But the small Dragon Consort made her decision and looked into Natalie's eyes. "His Highness Minerd arrived as the Ambassador of Friendship from Kratos," Jill reported.

Natalie was so shocked that she didn't know how to respond. It'd been a while since she heard her older brother's name. Frida, who was being helped up by Sauté, froze.

"His Majesty has called for the Three Dukes to gather information," Jill continued. "A face-to-face meeting will probably happen tomorrow, but Prince Minerd was hoping to meet you, so I was wondering what to..."

Natalie listened to Jill's words, but her mind could hardly process any of it. For whatever reason, the princess thought back to the beautiful flower crown that she had received from her older brother when she was dying to take the role of

the dragon maiden.

Where had that flower crown gone?

Chapter 3: The Dragon Emperor's Unclaimed Territory

JILL tightened her necktie and amped herself up. By her side was a splendid game fowl, staring into the mirror and primping itself.

"Sauté, I leave Princess Natalie and the others to you," Jill said.

"Chirp!"

Wearing a bag with a stuffed animal bear on its back, Sauté flew out of the terrace with gusto.

"Raw, you good with staying behind again today?" Jill asked.

"Rawr." Raw poked his sleepy head out from the blankets and blinked his golden eyes sluggishly.

Raw loved to be the center of attention, but he hated crowds. He didn't want to be with Jill, who was associating herself with numerous people in preparation for the Dragon Flower Crown Festival. He spent these days quietly within Jill's room—she thought he was maturing, but she also knew that the Dragon King received nutrients from the Dragon Emperor's heart. If Hadis's emotions were affecting Raw's reclusive actions, Jill couldn't let her guard down.

"Sauté won't be here today either. You sure you'll be okay?" Jill asked.

"Rar."

While she wasn't sure how to take his response, the baby dragon snuggled back into the blankets. Clearly, he was still sleepy. After telling him to be good one last time, Jill left the room. Just as she was locking the doors, she bumped into Hadis, who was just about to leave too. The two widened their eyes at this unexpected coincidence before they broke out into a shared smile. It'd been a hectic morning, and they didn't even get to eat breakfast together; Jill was happy that she still got to see him.

"Morning. I gave your lunch to Camila," Hadis said. "Are you leaving already?"

“Yep. I must greet Lady Cassandra and speak with her,” Jill replied. “You’ll be having tea with His Highness Minerd and the others, right? You look pale. Were you able to sleep?”

“Yeah, just when the sun started to rise. I hope you slept earlier than that.”

“I did! I slept like a baby after I escorted the princesses to their rooms. I need to eat and sleep well during times like these!” Jill proclaimed.

Being sleep-deprived only dulled one’s senses and mind. It was especially vital to take care of one’s mind and body during times of anxiety, so that one could act at a moment’s notice.

“If anything happens, feel free to come to me at any time!” Jill insisted. “I’m bursting with energy!”

Hadis thought for a moment before he finally crouched down and outstretched his arms. “Could you hug me?”

“Of course! Here’s a big one!”

She eagerly jumped toward his neck to give him a hug. Hadis stood up and twirled around with her arms firmly around his neck. Jill laughed loudly at the fun she was having, and the emperor also broke into laughter. He staggered just a little and leaned onto the wall with her still in his arms.

“With you by my side, I feel so energetic,” Hadis said. “I feel like I can do anything.”

“That’s right!” Jill replied. “I’m your source of energy like you are to me!”

“I see.” He hugged her back. It was a little hard to breathe, and it made Jill’s heart skip a beat. “I heard that Consort Fione was restrained. The Empress’s Palace is a tough opponent. Even I can’t carelessly meddle in their affairs. Will you be all right?”

“Leave it to me! I have to rethink my strategy, though.”

“Ah, you’re right. It figures you would...”

Jill had already received a report about the prior night from Natalie. She wasn’t sure what caused these events or who the enemy was; it was a confusing mess. But with Hadis by her side, Jill felt undaunted.

“You should go, Your Majesty,” Jill said.

He was running out of time, but Hadis protested by rubbing his forehead into her shoulder. There was only one way to fight back: Jill placed her hands under his armpits and started to tickle him.

“Ah ha ha! S-Stop it, Jill! All right, I’ll work! I will!” Hadis cried through his fits of laughter.

“Good,” Jill replied. “Then let’s work hard today too, Your Majesty.”

“Then tell me that you love me first.”

In lieu of a response, Jill kissed his forehead. Hadis turned beet red as he clutched the wall and stepped away from her to flee. Jill, who was now released from his grasp, landed on the ground and saluted.

“I’ll be off, Your Majesty!”

“Y-You’ve *really* gotten stronger these days. M-M-My heart...” Hadis gasped, trying to catch his breath as he leaned against the wall.

She knew that Rave would look after him, and she walked away, leaving Hadis behind. She also felt bad for making Camila and Zeke quietly wait for her.

“How was it?” Jill asked curtly.

Camila shook her head, and Zeke followed suit.

Jill thought long and hard. “When it was at its worst, I received three or four letters in the morning, but now I haven’t received a single one. Is this a coincidence?”

“It’s still too early to tell,” Zeke said. “We might see one in the afternoon.”

“They went through so much just yesterday, so Princess Natalie and Princess Frida said that they were taking today off,” Camila added.

“I assigned Sauté to guard them,” Jill said. “They won’t attend the tea party with Prince Miner, and future meetings are still to be determined.”

“The only saving grace is that they can’t complain, I suppose...” Camila gave a sarcastic smile.

Zeke took out some papers from his pocket. “We received a report from the

Empress's Palace regarding last night's attack. It's the work of a thief, apparently. The intruder disguised themselves as a merchant to infiltrate the palace, stole clothes from a guard, and blended in with the crowd. They utilized the fuss caused by restraining the Eighth Consort to hide, take a princess as a hostage, and flee. Or so it states."

"Would a thief drink poison and die?" Jill asked rhetorically.

"I agree it's a stretch," Zeke said. "But there's nothing much we can do. The people involved have all been dealt with."

"Whoa, and it hasn't even been a full day yet," Camila remarked. "They're so quick that they're terrifying. You think you can win, Jill?"

"That's why I'm trying to think of a plan," the Dragon Consort replied.

They stopped in front of the room for special guests, where Jill had met Fione many times before. Zeke opened the door, and a different lady was waiting inside, gazing out the window.

She was tall and dressed plainly in muted colors. However, it was easy to tell that the fabric used for the dress was of high quality and decorated with intricate embroidery. When First Consort Cassandra turned around, she placed her hands in front of her stomach and bowed.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Dragon Consort," Cassandra said.

She didn't bend her knees to bow like Fione had done—this move implied that she was of equal rank to the Dragon Consort and was the highest-ranking consort to the previous emperor. Cassandra's mannerisms were more than enough for Jill, who was only a Dragon Consort.

"The pleasure is all mine," Jill replied. "I've heard that you will personally offer your aid to me for the Dragon Flower Crown Festival in lieu of Consort Fione."

"Quite right," Cassandra replied. "I've heard that there have been quite a few problems. It's all due to my lack of guidance. On behalf of the Empress's Palace, I deeply apologize for the inconvenience. I shall happily redesign your flower crown and dress."

A single glance from her was all it took for her lady-in-waiting to swiftly lay

out the flower crowns on the center of the table.

“I’ve also had the other consorts remake their flower crowns,” Cassandra added.

The crowns that were lined up were similar to the prototypes that Jill had been shown yesterday. However, the bright flowers had been removed, leaving only a single one, and the colors had become uniform. The silk ribbons had been replaced with boring string, and all the charm from the previous crowns had been wiped away. Fione’s crown had naturally been removed completely.

“I’ll have the flowers that the other consorts gathered be used for your crown instead,” Cassandra said without batting an eye. “That should make yours the loveliest.”

“Why did you go so far as to change the designs of the other consorts?” Jill asked. “They were all so beautiful.”

“Unfortunately, that would make your crown pale in comparison.”

“Still, there’s no need to hold back. That doesn’t make me happy, and it won’t be doing the festival any favors either. You put out a wonderful crown at first, too,” Jill reminded her.

“I apologize for my lack of consideration. I’d assumed that Fione would be teaching you well.”



Cassandra didn't lend an ear to Jill's biting remarks and bowed deeply. There were no openings that Jill could take advantage of. She'd been growing tired of Fione's antics, but they were starting to seem kind in comparison. *Maybe Lady Fione was trying to offer me guidance. Find the First Consort's weakness and threaten her, was it? No, it was to share the secret and become friendlier with her.* Jill took a deep breath.

"Indeed, Lady Fione troubled me," she said. "She would always speak in a roundabout manner."

For a split second, as Cassandra raised her head, her eyes widened. It was the first hint of emotion that Jill could glean from the consort's dark eyes.

"I understand," Jill said. "Perhaps I can trust you to help with the preparations for the Dragon Flower Crown Festival, Lady Cassandra."

"Are you certain?" Cassandra asked.

"Of course. I doubt you'd listen to anything I'd say here. I understand *very* well that I'm being vastly underestimated." Cassandra stared quietly as Jill continued, "Lady Fione has told me that the Dragon Consort is rather different from the other consorts. If that's the case, I'll fight my own way. Would you kindly proceed with the preparations? I don't have much time, you see."

"What are you planning on doing?"

"Oh, I believe that's none of your concern, *Consort*."

Cassandra, who never seemed to be at a loss for words, closed her mouth. She soon replied in a calmer tone. "You're right. Please forgive me for my careless words. However..."

"I know. You don't want me to enter or meddle with the affairs of the Empress's Palace, right? But please, I implore you not to anger me any further."

Cassandra fell quiet.

"I shall leave the rest to you," Jill replied with a smile.

"Very well," Cassandra replied. "Would you please arrive after lunch for a fitting session?"

“Oh, and one more thing,” Jill said. “I ask that you rest well. I’m sure last night was a rather hectic affair.”

The First Consort wasn’t sure how to respond and furrowed her brows, deepening the wrinkles on her face. This actually softened her rigid exterior.

“I want the consorts of the Empress’s Palace to remain beautiful!” Jill explained. “Please don’t faint before the festival. I need your help.”

“I’m well aware of that,” Cassandra replied.

“*Proper* help.”

Jill turned on her heel and left without looking at Cassandra’s face.

Once Jill’s entourage left, Camila cautiously spoke from behind her. “So, what’re we gonna do, Jill?”

“We’re gonna catch that old bat at the Dragon Consort’s Palace,” Jill said. “I’m certain that he knows something.”

“Oh yeah, right,” Zeke said. “I almost forgot because of last night’s commotion.”

“But I thought you promised not to enter the Empress’s Palace,” Camila pointed out.

“Right. We’ll be entering the *Dragon Consort’s Palace*,” Jill answered. “It’s separate from the Empress’s Palace, so she can’t complain.”

“Oh my!” Camila giggled. “Sophism?! Why, Jill, you can maneuver yourself quite well!”

“I’ve been tossed around enough by Lady Fione. I’ll at least get my word in. Above all...” She knew that Hadis’s tea party was starting soon. She used her small legs to walk forward in the largest strides that she could. “Like *hell* the Dragon Consort’s gonna keep losing to the other consorts!”



MINERD gave a gentle smile as he took in the guests sitting around the round table.

“I thought that it was weird that I wasn’t led to the throne room, but I see...”

he muttered.

“Were you not the one who claimed to be a part of the Rave imperial family, *Brother Miner*d?” Vissel said coldly, sipping on some tea. The crown prince sat diagonally in front of Miner d as he motioned with his chin. “The throne room will be far too stuffy for us. As siblings, we should have a pleasant conversation without anyone getting in our way.”

“Ah, so you claim that it’s better that I’m treated as a sibling than the Ambassador of Friendship,” Miner d replied. “That sounds like Duke Verrat’s excuse to buy time. I’m sure you all must have your hands full, what with the Three Dukes confirming the situation with Kratos while also determining the route I took here and other affairs. Or perhaps the dukes will come to me, finding me to be easier to associate with than the Dragon Emperor. Which do you think it’ll be, Your Highness Vissel?”

“Why don’t you sit?” Lutiya said roughly, sitting next to Hadis and munching on some cookies. “We’re talking as siblings without any outside interference, right?”

Lutiya was young but bright. He was aware of what this occasion was for and could act the part.

“You’re right, Lutiya,” Miner d said. “Then I won’t hold back.”

He gracefully glided across the room and took the seat directly across from Hadis. When he drew his seat back himself and tucked his long hair behind his ear as he sat down, he looked like an actor playing a part in a play. No one could deny how beautiful he was. As he enjoyed his cup of tea, he looked to be playing the role of a prince.

“This is delicious,” Miner d said. “It must be from Lehrsatz.”

No one replied. The sound of Lutiya crunching down on cookies and Vissel returning his cup to his saucer with a gentle clatter echoed throughout the quiet drawing room. Even the gentle crackles of the wood in the fireplace sounded deafening.

“So, what did you want to ask me?” Miner d prompted.

Hadis thought he saw the shadow of a bird fly by and gazed out the window.

It was a beautiful day. *I wonder if Jill's okay*, he thought.

“You just gotta believe in her there,” Rave replied, gliding from his shoulder onto the table to stuff his cheeks with some snacks.

Vissel started to take out a book to read.

“...It'd make me happy if someone would talk,” MinerD said.

There was no reply.

“I've heard that the opposite of love is apathy, but this is troubling...” He placed both elbows on the table, locked his hands together, and rested his chin on top. MinerD let out a sigh before he finally spoke. “Fine, I'll tell you. I came here from Kratos as the Ambassador of Friendship to offer support for the poor harvests and to confirm the safety of Prince Gerald. I plan on requesting to meet him during an official audience in the throne room. The latter is clearly the more troublesome of the two.”

“These snacks are delicious, Brother MinerD,” Vissel offered. “Please stuff your mouth with these.”

“I know that you guys will decline. That's all within my calculations. But we've got idiots hoping for support from Kratos because of the poor harvests; they're not even aware that they're committing treason as they're scoping out Kratos's decisions. It's also quite unreasonable to insist that the prince is studying abroad and maintains amicable relations with the empire without allowing him to observe the Dragon Flower Crown Festival.

“Have him sit with the Rave Imperial Family and at least make it look like he's doing something. You can tell me to enjoy the festivities as well and have me seated far from Prince Gerald but at a distance where I can still observe him. How does that sound as a compromise?”



This was a reasonable request. Hadis turned to face Miner, who smiled happily.

“It’s been fifteen years, hasn’t it, Hadis?” Miner said. “You’ve grown. Do you remember me?”

“Shall we fill your mouth with snacks until you gag, dear brother?” Vissel cut in sharply.

“As usual, you’re overprotective, Vissel. But I suppose you’ve matured when compared to your youth; you would cry as you punched anyone in range, shouting that your younger brother could see the Dragon God and that you weren’t lying. How many times had I pushed you into a hole? Every time you were tricked, you holed yourself up in the library. You were cute back then.”

Vissel snapped his book shut. He shot a murderous glare at Miner. “You’ve trained me quite well. I’m grateful that you taught me every trick and ill will that hides within the palace.”

“I see. Well, I’m glad to hear that. I thought you’d understand one day. It’s much too dangerous to run around and honestly claim that your younger brother is the Dragon Emperor. How do you feel now?”

“I want to stuff your nostrils with snacks too,” Vissel replied.

“Ah, and I’ve also received an official announcement regarding the ascension of a queen in Kratos.” Miner was skilled at judging the flow of the conversation. Everyone knew that they had to play dumb, but they couldn’t help but listen to his words. “So, could I ask you to have an official audience with me? It can just be a formality of sorts. Or else, I’ll need to rush back to Kratos and report that Prince Gerald is imprisoned in the Rave Empire, and I wasn’t even allowed to meet him.”

That would be an unnecessary way to fan the flames. Depending on how she carried herself, a young queen trying to take back her older brother taken as a hostage would look attractive in the eyes of the people—the perfect excuse for a war.

“It’d be great if you could let me stay a while,” Miner continued. “Sister Elentzia is guarding the borders while Risteard’s in Beilburg, I believe? Where

are Natalie and Frida?”

“Natalie and Frida were attacked by someone last night,” Vissel reported.

Hadis carefully watched Miner. The prince’s worried face was undoubtedly for show, but for a split second, his fingers tightened around his teacup’s handle and he sucked in a breath. These slight tells seemed to express his real feelings.

“We’re letting them take a break from public duties for today and tomorrow,” Vissel said. “If you’d like to meet them, it’d have to be after that. Your face is especially not welcome for Natalie, I’d imagine.”

“I see... No wonder she’s not here,” Miner muttered. “Are they both safe? If you’re both here, I suppose there’s nothing to worry about.”

“You know a thing or two about the culprit, don’t you?” Lutiya interjected.

Vissel frowned, but Hadis quietly watched on.

“Me?” Miner asked with an exaggerated look of grief. “Are you perhaps thinking that *I’m* behind all this? I arrived in Rahelm just yesterday.”

“But you arrived at the Garden of Resting Dragons, didn’t you?” Lutiya replied. “That’s the Empress’s Palace, where Natalie got attacked. That can’t be a coincidence.”

“Unfortunately, it’s nothing more than a coincidence,” Miner said dismissively. “...I see, so Natalie was in the Empress’s Palace.”

“Why’d you decide to land there anyway?” Lutiya asked. “Since you’re the Ambassador of Friendship and all, maybe you were supposed to meet with someone.”

“Wrong. Think about the late hour. I simply thought being there wouldn’t cause a fuss.”

“That kind of excuse won’t fly!” Lutiya snapped. “If Miss Jill wasn’t there, Natalie and Frida might’ve gotten hurt! Be honest and—”

“Is it the dragon you were riding?” Hadis cut in.

Miner looked at him in shock; the emperor guessed that he was truly caught off guard there.

“You didn’t want people to see your dragon, so you descended there, no?” Hadis asked.

Hadis knew that he’d made a mistake in not chasing after that dragon—he was too surprised by the sudden appearance of Miner. When Rave went to look, the beast was gone. None of the dragons near the capital had seen it either.

Paradoxically, it was unlikely that the dragon had gone far, but it was creepy to know that the beast could vanish without a trace. Rave’s lack of an answer reminded Hadis of the Draco Flute and the dragons running wild in Laika.

Dragons that didn’t obey the Dragon God and Dragon Emperor went against logic. This would ultimately affect Rave’s divinity.

“That dragon? I hadn’t thought of it at all. I know nothing,” Miner replied. Upon receiving glares from all sides, he raised his hands in surrender. “I’m telling the truth. Kratos prepared it for me to come here, and I happily took it. Dragons are messengers of the Dragon God. I don’t think there are many crazy enough to challenge a god.”

“You think a guy who tried to build the Draco Flute is convincing?” Lutiya interjected.

Miner couldn’t refute that accusation and bowed his head as though he’d been scolded. “Good grief... All right. Okay, then why don’t we make it so that I was actually meeting someone? I can’t tell you who, though.”

Was he trying to hide the dragon? Or was he really meeting with someone? His words were suspicious—he truly was skilled at muddying the waters.

“I suppose I’ll take my leave soon. I’m tired from traveling to Laika, Kratos, then Rahelm. Oh, don’t worry. I’ll stay quiet in my room,” Miner said with a smile, gliding his finger across the rim of his empty teacup. “Please let me know when you decide on the date to have an audience with me. If you’ll allow me to meet with Prince Gerald, I’ll happily accept. I can only tell him about our new queen, though. Has he heard about the news, by the way?”

The room fell silent.

“Then I’ll tell him what I can,” Miner said, standing up.

“Why did the Grand Duke of Laika—my grandfather—die?” Lutiya asked. Minerd stared down at the boy as he continued, “Did you kill him? I’ve heard that Natalie’s mother—former Consort Cornelia—is missing too. Did you do something to both of them?”

Minerd’s lips quirked up in a mocking smile. “I’m surprised. It sounds like you’re willing to believe me if I claim my innocence.”

“That’s not an answer!”

“It *was* me.”

Lutiya fell silent, unable to hide his shock. The boy was still rather innocent. Hadis let out a small sigh.

“Are you satisfied?” Minerd said. “If you need anything else, feel free to reach out.”

“But Brother Rudgar doesn’t believe it,” Lutiya countered, making Minerd go quiet. “He claimed that you weren’t the type to completely ruin the goals of... Brother Arnold, was it?”

“As always, he’s a hopeless idiot,” Minerd spat angrily. “That’s why he can abdicate his claim to the throne without hesitation.”

As Minerd turned on his heel to leave, Vissel spoke from across the table. “Please make yourself at home. I’d love to see just what kind of face you’ll make when you greet Risteard.”

“What a coincidence,” Minerd said with a smile as he grabbed the door’s handle. “I’m also eager to see how he’ll react when I tell him that I offer my condolences and deepest sympathies.” He left, his long flair fluttering behind him.

Lutiya stood up. “I’ll escort him to his room.”

“Guards from Neutrah are keeping watch,” Vissel warned. “Don’t do anything unnecessary.”

“But we might be able to glean something.”

The crown prince didn’t stop his youngest brother as he chased after Minerd. Hadis reached for his now-cold cup of tea.

“He’s smart,” the emperor remarked. “He knows how we’ll act.”

“But his personality is horrid,” Vissel replied. “He was once said to be one of the wings of the Rave Empire.”

It was likely that Arnold was supposed to be the other wing to this pair.

“If he comes to our side, will it help you out, Vissel?” Hadis asked.

“You don’t have to do anything unnecessary,” Vissel replied. “He’s a poisonous man. Don’t get close to him.” His tone was icier than usual as he cut MinerD off.

Hadis sighed, his strength leaving his body. Hadis had a few compromises he was willing to make in terms of dealing with Kratos and reporting about the queen’s ascension to Gerald. MinerD had practically been spot on with all of them, and it was enough to glean that he wasn’t here from Kratos to start a full-blown war.

I guess I have to set the dragon aside for now.

“Seems like it,” Rave replied. “I’ll tell Raw to be careful, and the other dragons are on guard too.”

As there were fewer people in the room, Rave was shamelessly eating cake straight from the plate. There were still a ton of problems they had to face: MinerD’s visit, the mysteries within the Empress’s Palace, and the upcoming Dragon Flower Crown Festival. Rave seemed a bit too laidback.

“And I’ve got Jill’s reputation to think about...” Hadis mumbled. “Is there a method to just solve all of this?”

“The Dragon Consort’s reputation is up to her,” Vissel replied. “If we can’t solve anything, we can just push all the blame on her.”

“The rumors of Jill emptying out our food supplies is half your fault, isn’t it?” Hadis accused. “You let her do as she pleased on purpose.”

Vissel smiled and turned to his brother. “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire. Now then, we must prepare for the meeting. I’ll tell the Three Dukes about what we just discussed. Then we’ll have lunch, a fitting session, and confirm the process of the parade.”

“A fitting session? Will Jill be there with us in the afternoon?” Hadis asked.

The prior harassment she’d faced came to mind. Hadis was worried that she’d miss the session again.

Vissel’s lips curled up. “Let’s hope so. We’ll have to see how the Dragon Consort handles it.” He looked like an in-law who loved to harass the bride.

Perhaps this fitting session would end without Jill and Hadis ever meeting.



“**WAIT,**” Lutiya called, causing his half-brother, surrounded by knights, to stop and turn around.

“Oh?” Minerd replied with an obviously fake smile. “Lutiya, if you associate yourself with me any further, Vissel will scold you.”

“*He* was the one who called me there to use me. I don’t care.”

“I’m glad to see you doing so well.” Minerd waited for Lutiya to fall in step beside him before walking once more. “You were never the type to rely on people older than you in Laika. And you’re allowed to do as you please because Vissel trusts you. He’s a timid man, so he tries to get rid of anything he finds scary before it has a chance to hurt him. It’s a bad habit of his.”

“...Isn’t that because *you* bullied him?”

“That sounds a bit misleading. I just taught him how to determine scary affairs.”

Lutiya knew that he had to say what was on his mind before he was swept up by Minerd’s superb conversation skills. He took a deep breath.

“About the Grand Duke of Laika—my grandfather—I don’t resent you,” Lutiya said. Minerd glanced at him as the boy stepped upon the luxurious carpet that his grandfather had never been able to touch and continued, “My grandfather was beyond saving. He was obsessed with the idea of getting back at the Rave Empire, and if he continued on his path, he would’ve caused a riot, involving more people in Laika.”

“Are you expressing your gratitude, then?” Minerd asked.

“No, I think I’m making excuses. I was tired of my grandfather’s antics. Somewhere inside me, I hoped that he’d die. I know that saying this only makes me an awful person...” Lutiya smiled bitterly as he knew that he couldn’t tell Jill about this. He’d only make her sad.

“Then perhaps I’ve saved the grand duke. Dying by the hands of his grandson would’ve been a fitting end for him,” MinerD remarked.

“I wondered if you ended him for me so I wouldn’t have to sully my hands,” Lutiya said. Only then did he realize that he was being uncharacteristically good-natured and smiled. “I can’t say it well. But when I learned of my grandfather’s death, I felt a tinge of sadness.”

“I’m glad to hear that. A child eagerly living for the day when he could kill his parents brings nothing but unhappiness.”

“Precisely because you know that, I wondered if you were of the same ilk.” MinerD stopped as Lutiya went on, “If something’s going on, let me know. I’ll pay back what I owe for being sent to the military academy.”

Indeed, MinerD had been the one who sent Lutiya to a place outside of the grand duke’s scope of surveillance. Lutiya was grateful for this, even if it was a calculated move.

“Then I’ll take you up on that kind offer,” MinerD replied. “I’d like to meet the Dragon Consort. What kind of person is she?”

“Huh? Didn’t you see her in Laika at the academy competition?” Lutiya asked.

“Ah, so she *was* the real deal. This...is going to be tough.” He frowned as Lutiya couldn’t hide his befuddlement.

“What, do you not like her type? But Miss Jill saved Natalie and Frida, so—”

MinerD pushed him away before he could finish speaking. As Lutiya toppled back, he tried to voice his anger, but his eyes widened in surprise when he saw MinerD place a foot on an open window. The ambassador was trying to jump outside.

“I’ll leave you to handle the scolding you’ll get from Vissel,” MinerD said.

They were on the third floor, but MinerD skillfully used a nearby tree and

leaped down to the ground. The knights who'd been left behind turned pale and rushed to get outside.

My kind offer? Lutiya thought as he placed his elbows on the windowsill and rested his chin on top of his hands before turning his head to look away.

"Brother Hadis'll be the one who will get angry if you approach Miss Jill..."



POWDER danced in the air of the small room. As she'd expected, the dust explosion she'd caused with her magic had been blocked by a barrier. But when the white powder settled and gave a clear view, the old man was gone.

"Dammit!" Jill cursed. "He's fled! Zeke, go outside!"

"Roger!" Zeke shouted.

"Argh, what's with that geezer?!" Camila yelled, throwing a tantrum. She was covered in flour from head to toe. "I'll freakin' kill him!"

Jill stepped outside and checked her surroundings as Zeke, who had left before her, returned.

"No good," he said. "We lost him. Where'd he run off to this time?"

"Uh, Jill... Where's your lunch?" Camila asked.

"Huh?!" Jill cried, immediately returning inside.

The lunch she'd left on top of a sheet was gone, basket and all.

Zeke caught up with her and groaned, "This is probably what he was after..."

Jill and her knights had been exploring the Dragon Consort's Palace while cleaning up the place, and they had just decided to eat lunch in the garden with a good view. It was then that they caught a glimpse of the old caretaker. They'd been lured into this small shed and Jill had had her food stolen.

This was too much of a sacrifice for her as she collapsed onto the ground. "M-My lunch... I-If I could kill him, this would've been over already!"

"Calm down, Captain," Zeke soothed. "I'll go get something from the kitchen."

"That geezer's clearly not normal..." Camila muttered.

“Very astute,” a voice said, cutting into the trio’s conversation. A tall man suddenly appeared, his pale-colored hair fluttering in the wind, looking almost translucent under the sun’s rays. He placed a finger on his chin. “Without a plan, I fear that you won’t be able to catch him even after the sun sets.”

“Y-You’re...Prince Minerdl!” Jill stammered. She hadn’t sensed him at all.

The man smiled. “Why, hello. I’m honored that you remember my name, Dragon Consort.”

Zeke and Camila immediately grabbed their weapons.

Minerdl gave a forced laugh. “I’m hurt that you treat me this way. I’m unarmed.”

“You’re...” Jill growled before she took on a politer tone. “Uh, I mean...”

“Oh, no need to force yourself to treat me as part of the imperial family.”

Receiving his consideration, she managed to calm down, albeit still a little perplexed.

“Why are you here?” she asked. “Shouldn’t you be having tea with His Majesty?”

“The tea party ended amicably,” Minerdl replied. “I managed to escape from the guards, but I’m just one person against many. I fled into the Empress’s Palace where the soldiers couldn’t enter, and I saw you wrapped up in an interesting affair. I’m here to watch.”

“Zeke, Camila, kindly escort Prince Minerdl back to his guestroom,” Jill ordered.

“I haven’t exactly lied, but perhaps the small talk ends here,” Minerdl said. “I’m here to meet you, Dragon Consort. I’ve been told that you saved Natalie.” He placed a hand over his chest and respectfully lowered his head—a perfectly beautiful bow. “Thank you. I just wanted to express my gratitude.”

His earnest tone was unexpected. In the future that Jill knew, his voice was beyond suspicious when he nonchalantly spoke about his sister’s death, but the words he’d just uttered sounded like they came from the heart.

“It was just a coincidence,” Jill replied. “I bumped into her when I went to tell

her about your arrival.”

“Then I suppose it was worth it to get caught by you,” he said.

Nah, he’s shady as hell, Jill thought. She hadn’t associated with him much in her first life, but he was a questionable person. He was suspected of instigating the riots in Laika.

Still wary, Jill added, “We’ve got guards accompanying Her Highnesses Natalie and Frida. Please be at ease.”

Her words implicitly suggested that MinerD should back off and remain obedient. He was certainly sharp enough to catch her drift. But MinerD raised his head and looked moved, his eyes twinkling.

“Then why don’t I help you capture that elderly man?” he offered.

“Huh? Why would you?” Jill asked.

“As a way of expressing my gratitude.”

Jill knew this was a lie. She fell silent and glared at him.

MinerD gave an exaggerated slump of his shoulders. “It seems you can’t trust me one bit. Do I seem that dubious?”

“So you’re aware of it yourself,” she replied.

“Very well, then I shall tell you the truth. There’s something I’d like to ask him.”

“Is he a friend of yours?”

“Oh, we’re not that close. However, I do know where he’s from. He likely has the information I want, and he seems to be the only one who’d be willing to tell me.”

“...What do you want to know?”

Jill didn’t expect him to reply, but MinerD gazed at her and opened his thin lips. “The location of the previous emperor.”

She couldn’t have predicted this answer. Even Zeke and Camila exchanged a glance.

“You’re not completely *uninvolved* with this, Dragon Consort,” MinerD said. “I found this lying on the ground.”

He pulled out an envelope pinched between his fingertips. “*To my beloved Dragon Consort*,” the envelope read. Zeke was shocked as he checked his now-empty back pocket.

“You stole it!” he accused.

“I just picked it up,” MinerD insisted.

“What a shameless liar!” Camila shouted before turning to Zeke. “And why’d you keep it in your back pocket?! Come on, you know what’ll happen if His Majesty finds out!”

“Camila!” Jill scolded.

“Oops...”

MinerD’s smile stretched across his face. “It’s wonderful to see that the Dragon Emperor and the Dragon Consort get along so well. I didn’t think a mere letter would cause such a stir.”

“Fine, you can help us!” Jill conceded. “So give that back!”

She grabbed the letter that MinerD mockingly fluttered in front of her.

“You’ve got quite the fortitude,” MinerD chuckled. “Or is this the heart of a maiden? A letter like this is obviously a trap. The Dragon Emperor won’t believe something this silly. I’m sure I’d be a more troublesome opponent.”

“Don’t be so conceited. His Majesty is far more troublesome than you ever will be,” Jill said. As MinerD raised an eyebrow at her, she snorted. “It’s easy to silence you. Worst case, I just need to snap your neck.”

“Is this a joke of yours?” he asked.

“Does it sound like I’m joking?”

“No, I understand very well. Both you and the Dragon Emperor are relentless.”

“Were you able to have a conversation with His Majesty?” Jill asked.

Though they had a tea party together, Hadis was the type to have his guard

up at all times and refused to get involved in anything he disliked. Vissel and Lutiya should've handled most of the talking.

"He must be seeing something completely different from me," MinerD confessed. "He kept touching upon sore topics."

Jill felt a little proud to hear this, but she tried to act indifferent and hid her emotions. "And? How will we capture that old goat?"

"If we keep chasing him, we'll simply be toyed with. Why don't we trap him?" he suggested.

"We don't even know where he is!" Camila replied.

"Well, it seems like he was lured out by the food earlier," MinerD remarked. "Why don't we set up a trap there?"

"Ah..." Jill said, putting her hands together.

"He came out during our meal last time too, grumbling about not burning the Garden of Resting Dragons," Zeke pointed out.

"Then we need His Majesty's food!" Jill realized. "Ugh, then we've got to try again tomorrow..."

"His schedule's packed," Camila said.

"But I don't want to use his food as bait," Jill groaned, silencing Zeke and Camila.

After a short while, MinerD asked, "Was he against burning the Garden of Resting Dragons?"

"Yes," Jill replied. "He said we didn't understand how precious it was... Wait, are you planning on burning it down?!"

"He's a person who values these flowers, which means he's someone who likes historical artifacts. Surely you can prepare some bait that'll make the flowers pale in comparison, Dragon Consort."

As Jill blinked, MinerD raised his index finger and continued, "For example, a gold-eyed, black dragon. A Dragon King will undoubtedly be rather coveted."



THE day after the attack in the Empress's Palace. Natalie's older brothers showed no consideration for the fear she must've felt from the assault the night prior and the mental strain she must've felt from meeting her biological brother, who was suspected of being a traitor.

"...Do you want to tour the Dragon Flower Crown Festival with me?" Natalie asked awkwardly, realizing too late that this sounded like an invitation for a date. She hastily added, "Y-You haven't stepped out of here since you arrived. I think you can at least watch a bit of the festivities—"

"I'll decline," Crown Prince Gerald of Kratos replied coldly. He didn't even care to close the book he was reading, deigning to let Natalie only look upon his profile.

"I-It's the first festival in three centuries that a real Dragon Consort will host. Aren't you the least bit interested?" Natalie pressed.

"If you insist, you can tie me up and throw me by your side."

"I'm not interested in doing that!"

"Did someone from Kratos arrive to meet me? But perhaps you don't want me to meet this messenger. And so, you struck a compromise—to have that person see me from afar before sending them on their merry way."

No doubt, Natalie hated people who were this smart and bright.

"I'll accept that meeting," Gerald said. "I'll decide whether I'll tour the festival or not after."

"Are you sure you're fine with being restrained and forced to be by my side?" Natalie asked.

"Of course. It's a great opportunity to show off our friendly relationship which benefits your empire."

"Jill will be watching."

"...I don't care." The prince had lied, as his fingers flipping the pages faltered for a moment. Natalie felt like all her efforts were in vain.

"Fine, okay," she finally said. "I'll relay that to my brothers. But if you get dragged into an attack on my life while being restrained, don't blame me. It's

your fault for dying such an unsightly death.”

“Attack? Targeting you?”

“Yeah, it seems like I’m being targeted.” Natalie found no reason to keep it a secret. In fact, speaking about it so casually helped keep her mind off things. “The last assailant died, but there could certainly be more attempts. If you’re going to be tied up beside me, you’d best be prepared,” she said.

“I can’t find a reason for you to be targeted. The Dragon Consort should be the highlight of the Dragon Flower Crown Festival. There’s no value in harming you.”

“Excuse *me* for being a worthless princess! Are you picking a fight with me?”

“Is it because you declared that you’d be engaged to me?” Natalie was caught by surprise, but Gerald continued with a serious expression. “Someone out there doesn’t want to make you the crown princess of Kratos. I can’t think of any other reason.”

“Are you saying that the attack came from Kratos?” she asked.

“No, I’m guessing it came from within Rave. I doubt our engagement became widespread news in Kratos, and Rave would be the one to take it more seriously.”

Currently, Kratos was trying to put a new queen on the throne. In other words, even if Natalie married Gerald, she’d be unable to become the crown princess. It was unlikely that someone from Kratos would infiltrate the imperial castle to harm Natalie during such an important and unstable period.

“Is it someone who doesn’t want to make peace with Kratos?” Natalie mulled.

“Still, it’s odd. We haven’t done anything official, and killing you wouldn’t change the situation whatsoever. I’d still be studying abroad here...” Gerald placed a hand on his chin and pondered for a while before he closed his book. “I’d like to tour the Dragon Flower Crown Festival.”

“What’s with the sudden change of heart?”

“You’re the one who suggested it.”

It’d be odd for Natalie *not* to be wary due to the flow of the conversation. She

stared at him dubiously. Gerald finally turned to face her.

“Or do you have a hobby of tying me up?” he asked.

She quickly shook her head. “A-Are you sure? You won’t be restrained, but there will probably be guards on watch. We’d be preparing your clothes, so you won’t be able to plot anything.”

“You don’t have to keep checking with me. I know that much. Do as you like.”

“You can’t go to Jill! You’ll be next to me, all right?!” Natalie said, her voice rising more than she’d like.

Gerald stared at her wearily. “Obviously. I accepted your offer with that assumption.”

She took a step back from the bars separating them. “Th-Then I’ll tell my brothers that...”

“Feel free,” he replied indifferently before turning back to his book. These actions were usually infuriating for Natalie, but she was grateful for them today.

She put a hand over her mouth and quickly left the room, praying that he didn’t notice anything. There were many things that the crown prince shouldn’t know about, including the crowning of a new queen and Natalie’s joyful footsteps that she couldn’t stop. *Wh-What do I do? What do I start with? First, we need his outfit*, Natalie thought.

His attractive appearance prevented him from wearing anything normal. He’d need clothes tailored to him, and if this was a way to show off the two nations’ friendliness, he should have a little something that made him pair with Natalie. The mere thought made her panic as though she was dancing on fire. *This is necessary! It’s a political ploy!*

“Sister, are you done...with work?” Frida asked. She’d been waiting in a separate room with Sauté while clutching onto a stuffed bear. It’d only been a night since the attack, and the two princesses were told to stay together as much as possible until the Empress’s Palace acted.

“I-I’m sorry to make you wait, Frida,” Natalie replied.

“Did something nice happen?” Frida asked after a pause.

“N-Nothing really. Let’s return and report back to Brother Vissel.”

Frida, always quick to catch on, nodded obediently and stuck her hand out toward Natalie. The second princess grabbed her sister’s warm hand and walked forward, trying to act as calm as she could.



“**ALL** right, listen up,” Jill said, placing her elbows on the flower garden.

Raw used his big eyes to look up at her. He’d been given a matching yarn hat and gown from Frida, making him look puffy and adorable. Dragons were good at adjusting their body temperature and were strong against both the heat and the cold, but Raw loved being a fashionable dragon. Recently, he was particular about his hat and scarf when heading outside.

“Can you be a good boy and read a book here, Raw?” Jill asked.

“Rawr.” He responded reliably, but Jill was unsure if he truly understood his situation.

“You’re bait,” Jill said. “I want you to quietly stay here. Don’t call for dragons unless you feel like you’re truly in danger.”

“Rar.”

“If anything happens, I promise that I’ll absolutely, *without fail*, come for you. You don’t have to worry about a thing.”

“Raaaaawr!” He growled happily while wagging his tail.

It seemed being saved by her was more important than acting as bait. Though Jill was the one to suggest this to him, she wondered if he could really be so simple-minded. *I pray that Rare doesn’t find out*, Jill thought as she placed him down and silently left his side.

He was placed in the center of the Garden of Resting Dragons. A gold-eyed, black dragon wrapped in a fluffy throw blanket was snuggled inside a basket placed on top of a picnic blanket while reading a picture book. Beside him was some fudge and a glass of milk courtesy of the castle kitchen. This clearly looked weird.

“This seems a little too obvious...” Jill said doubtfully, returning to the arbor

with a weary look as she turned to the person who suggested this plan. “Are you sure he’ll get lured out with this?”

“It’s better because it’s obvious,” Minerd replied. “It’s a battle of strength anyway.”

“If something happens to Raw, I don’t know what the dragons will do,” Jill said.

“I’ve already thought that out,” Minerd said. “If the old man tries to abduct the Dragon King, we can chase after the dragons. Putting the Dragon King in danger might cause the Dragon Consort’s Palace to be completely destroyed. A person who values this garden wouldn’t take such a risk. I’m sure the gold-eyed, black dragon knows that as well.”

Jill agreed and sat a short distance away from Minerd. Tea and some snacks were on the table inside the arbor, and Jill was unexpectedly having tea with Minerd. Zeke and Camila were on watch elsewhere, so they were alone. Minerd poured a drink from his canteen into a cup and placed it in front of Jill.

“Herbal tea,” he offered. “It warms you up. Even if you’re wearing clothes weaved with magic that protects you against the cold, it’s quite chilly right now, isn’t it?”

“Th-Thank you,” she replied. “Did you make this tea?”

“That’s right. Since I was a child, I’ve always been rather fond of poisonous items.”

Jill spit out the tea she was sipping.

“I’m kidding,” Minerd laughed. “There isn’t anything poisonous in this drink.”

“Obviously!” Jill coughed. “You were aiming for this to happen, weren’t you?!”

“Dragon’s flowers are rather poisonous, you know.”

The white flowers were encroaching upon the arbor through the cracks. Minerd tore one off.

“It’s not too toxic, so it’s not very well known,” he said. “But consuming vast amounts of the flower will suddenly make you run out of magical energy. There

are legends that these flowers bloomed from the corpse of dragons, and it might be related to the fire of the dragons that can burn away magic.”

“So...you’re saying that I can’t eat dragons?” Jill asked.

“Were you planning on doing so? You’re the Dragon Consort.”

As MinerD stared at her wide-eyed, Jill averted her gaze.

“U-Um, if they were edible, I wanted to try it out once,” she stammered. “And His Majesty said that they were edible.”

“I see... Oh, I’m just a little surprised is all. I like that adventurous spirit of yours.”

“Ah, so can you understand my urge?”

“Of course. It’s a sacrilegious act and rather tempting.”

For a moment, Jill thought that he might be a good person, but quickly reconsidered. *But still, he’s different from my prior impression of him.*

She was still wary of him because of the incident in Laika, but she was curious about his motives in his past timeline. What compelled him to declare that he was the Rave Emperor and start a war?

“Prince MinerD, do you have any ambition to become the emperor?” Jill asked.

She didn’t expect an honest response. MinerD once again looked astonished by the question.

“Of course not. It’d be a huge pain. I just want to always be in the way of the emperor.” He smiled as he said something rather troublesome. “Do you know of Arnold, Dragon Consort?”

“He’s the late older brother of Prince Ristard and Princess Frida, correct?” Jill replied.

“That’s right. I’m two months older than him.” Jill was bothered by this familiar phrase, but he continued casually, “I was often compared to him. My mother was a war trophy taken back by the previous Duke Verrat twenty-five years ago. She was a lady-in-waiting for the King of South Kratos, who was still a

crown prince at the time, and she became a prisoner when the Kratos castle fell. She became the adopted daughter of a noble affiliated with Duke Verrat, but as a person from Kratos, she was of low standing and was a consort in an awkward position. Her striking beauty more than supplemented that, however.”

Minerd flicked his long hair behind him. It only enhanced his beauty, but he was hinting that he resembled his mother.

“She was pushed into the Empress’s Palace of the previous emperor as a form of harassment by Duke Verrat,” he continued. “The previous monarch was biased toward Kratos and had sought peace in name only while secretly looking to betray his empire. The Three Dukes resisted this idea and quickly destroyed the Kratos capital before the two nations could form an agreement.”

“Was that how that battle started?!” Jill asked in surprise.

Minerd smiled awkwardly. “It happened before I was born, so I’ve only heard about it from my mother and the people around me. But looking at the previous emperor, I don’t think these stories are too far off the mark. He’s an obstinate man who refused to approve of the Dragon Emperor that we’d all been waiting for.”

“It wasn’t because they weren’t biologically related?” Jill asked.

“He must’ve feared the Dragon Emperor, who was born after this battle. The previous emperor likely thought that the boy was born to punish him for favoring Kratos.”

And so, a father groveling while begging for his life was born.

“I feel so bad for His Majesty,” Jill said. “He was estranged from his father for a reason that’s not his fault.”

“Then let’s be glad that the previous emperor isn’t his real father,” Minerd said.

“That might be true, but still! His Majesty returned to the imperial capital to get along with his family.”

“He had such a naïve reason? Is he an idiot?”

“Can’t you be a *little* more delicate with your phrasing?!”

The prince wasn’t wrong, but his exaggerated expressions grated on Jill’s nerves.

Minerd gave a bitter laugh in response. “In any case, I hope you understand. I may be a part of the imperial family, but I’m a prince who doesn’t even have a budding hope of becoming emperor. Especially so since I was in the same era as Prince Arnold, a stunning man who not only excelled in both the sword and the pen, but was also a respectable prince with good conduct. It didn’t matter how many crown princes died; I couldn’t possibly become the emperor. I don’t like aiming for the impossible, so I never intended to claim the throne.”

“But you never abdicated your claim to it,” Jill pointed out.

“Ah, well, my mother loves to dream.” He nibbled on a cookie, cutting off the conversation. He either had no intention of explaining himself or simply didn’t want to.

Jill chose to touch on a sensitive topic. “I thought you’d claim your right to the throne and receive Kratos’s help to pick a fight with the Rave Empire.”

This was what Minerd had done in the previous timeline. What would be his response to this suggestion?

“Well, I *could* do just that,” he replied. “I’d be a good excuse to start the war, and Princess Faris had suggested as much to me when we spoke.”

“Did you decline?” Jill asked.

“It’s impossible, isn’t it? I might be able to take advantage of the situation should someone of the Rave imperial family be cruelly executed or a tragic conspiracy be brewing in the shadows.”

That matched too closely to the trigger she knew of.

“Th-Then you *would* do it if there *was* a situation you could take advantage of?” she asked.

“I keep telling you I’m not interested in the throne,” Minerd insisted. “I’d rather avoid dying a pointless death by becoming an easily disposed of pawn.”

“Th-Then, what if—and this is a big *if*—you were to someday act to become

the Rave emperor with the help of Kratos, what would your reason be?”

He made a funny face, but Jill stared back earnestly. She seemed to wear him down, because he sighed and answered her.

“Well, my goal would probably be to get manipulated by Kratos, I suppose.”

“Manipulated? So you don’t want to do anything?”

“For example, I’d do some research in Kratos. While I’m being manipulated, it means my safety and power is assured in Kratos so long as I’m worth the trouble. And the moment that happens, war will be declared. I’m sure both nations would become a confused mess, which would make it easier for me to move around.”

It was then that the epiphany hit Jill. “You came to look into Princess Natalie’s incident...”

In her previous timelines, Natalie’s status was unknown. Kratos and Rave were busy shifting the blame onto each other. If MinerD was furious about that...

“Did something happen to Natalie?” MinerD asked, concerned.

“No, not at all!”

Jill swiftly shook her head and took a sip of the cooled tea. MinerD looked at her, but he remained quiet as he poured himself a cup from his canteen and took a sip.

That was close. But maybe he’s a good older brother who cares about his sister. Still, it seems like he’ll choose any method he can take... Laika was almost torn apart.

“Dragon Consort, can you see the future?” MinerD suddenly asked.

Jill almost dropped her cup. “O-O-O-O-Of course not! That’s absurd!”

“I was only half-joking, but you’re very unusual. I don’t know just how much and how far ahead you’re seeing.”

He chuckled, making it seem like he was plotting something. However, it also seemed like a warning—he was telling her to never trust him and always doubt

his actions.

“I almost told you about unnecessary things,” MinerD said. “I suppose you’re easy to talk to. Arnold was the same.”

“I don’t know him personally,” Jill replied.

“That’s precisely why. You won’t think that it would’ve been better if I’d died.”

Jill gasped, but MinerD remained calm and collected—clearly, he’d been used to being told these exact words.

“It’s your first Dragon Flower Crown Festival, isn’t it?” he said. “You have no one supporting you, meaning that you cannot receive the support of the Empress’s Palace. I’m sure that the First Consort is being an obstacle for you.”

“How did you know?”

“I was born and raised in the Empress’s Palace. How about it? Why don’t we work together and reveal the conspiracies wriggling within that place?” MinerD suggested.

“That’s a nice way of saying you want to use me,” Jill replied.

“Good grief,” he said with an exaggerated sigh, staring up. “I’m always misunderstood.”

“Then can I ask why you want to know the previous emperor’s location?” Jill questioned.

“It’s been a while, so I wanted some father-son bonding time... Please don’t clench your fists. I’m just joking.”

“Does the previous emperor still have ties to Kratos?”

MinerD looked astonished as he muttered in awe, “You’re a lot more astute than I expected, Dragon Consort...”

“You’re making fun of me! You’re not even hiding it! Obviously, an Ambassador of Friendship from Kratos visiting an emperor who favored that kingdom is suspicious!”

“Unfortunately, it’s actually the inverse. I became the ambassador so that I

could meet the previous emperor. Surely you understand that Kratos hasn't forgotten about his existence. I've come here on a personal mission. My mother's letter concerned me."

"A letter? You were communicating even after leaving the palace?"

Jill had heard that MinerD had fled in the middle of the night and had assumed that he had become independent of the imperial family, Natalie and all.

"Ah, and this is where our conversation must come to an end," MinerD said. "He's come."

Jill whirled back toward Raw. The dragon had grown tired of the book and was collecting the flowers around him. A shadow appeared in and out of view, creeping forward as he crawled on the ground. The old man had not only coordinated his clothes, but even dyed his hair to blend in with the garden.

"D-Does he need to go that far to catch a glimpse of Raw?" Jill asked.

"It's a gold-eyed, black dragon," MinerD replied. "Are you ready, Dragon Consort? I'll send a signal to your knights."

"Of course. And are you?"

"A silly question to ask." MinerD adjusted his white gloves and smiled faintly.

The mysterious old man jumped for Raw's back as the dragon was busily placing flowers into the basket. Camila threw a small stone from afar to lock him in place as Zeke pounced. He threw a small bottle at the old caretaker before he could regain his composure.

The caretaker furrowed his brows. "What's going on—"

Just before the small bottle hit the ground, Jill swooped in between the man's arms and grabbed Raw before jumping away.

"Raaawr!" Raw cried happily, clinging to her as though he was waiting for this.

The old man looked at Jill skeptically, for she hadn't tried to capture him at all, but it was too late. The small bottle cracked on the ground, and smoke spilled out of it. The old man turned pale.

“Crap... Tear gas!” he cried.

The smoke quickly dispersed as they were outdoors, but the old man had caught a faceful of it, temporarily blinding him. He staggered as a thin needle jabbed his calves, causing him to fall to the ground.

“Unlike magical energy, toxins have no presence,” MinerD explained. “If you’re too wary of the Dragon Consort’s magic, it’ll be easier to catch you in a simple trap like this one... But I suppose it’s boorish of me to tell you that.”

“Y-You’re...the lad with poisonous plants!” the man spluttered.

“Oh? I didn’t think you’d remember me.”

Zeke picked the man up and removed the needle while Camila tied him up with rope.

“Try treatin’ me better!” the man barked. “I’m a frail, old man here!”

“Frail? You? You’re still energetic even after being poisoned!” Zeke pointed out.

“He’s decomposing the toxin with his magic,” MinerD explained. “I didn’t use anything too strong either. If he struggles any further, be sure to let him sniff this too.”

Zeke received a small bottle and handkerchief from MinerD. The old caretaker clicked his tongue.

“This is why I hate young’uns these days! No respect for their elders, no sir!” the man grumbled. “Deplorable!”

“Sure grandpa, let’s get you to your seat,” Camila said. “We need to talk.”

The old man’s hands were also restrained, and he was forced to sit on the picnic blanket where Raw had been just moments before.

“Damn youse kids!” the old man spat. “I knew it was a trap! But I had to know if it was a bona fide gold-eyed, black dragon!”

“He’s real,” Jill said, approaching him while carrying Raw.

The man’s eyes sparkled upon seeing a fluffy Raw in her arms, but quickly turned away.

“Youse think I can believe that the little squirt in all that razzle-dazzle’s a gold-eyed, black dragon?!” he spat. “If ye want me to trust your words, I need a better look at him! Give him ’ere!”

“You don’t have to trust my words if you don’t want to,” Jill replied.

“What’d youse say?! He’s a gold-eyed, black dragon, for cryin’ out loud! It’s been three centuries, lass! If ye can’t understand how precious he is, he’s wasted on you! Give him ’ere! C’mon!”

“So you *are* aware that he’s the real deal... What’s your name?” Jill asked.

“I forgot!” The man was good at talking back, yet he never answered the important questions.

“Can’t you at least tell me your name? I’d like to ask you a few things.”

“I’ve got nothing to give, flatso!” He turned away.

“Jill! Jill!” Camila hastily cried. “Calm down! You can kill him after we get all the information we need!”

“Please tell me where the previous emperor is,” MinerD requested. “You know his location, don’t you?”

The old man glanced at him. “Hmm? Here to kill your dad?”

Jill widened her eyes in surprise as she looked up at MinerD beside her. He was expressionless for a moment, but he soon plastered his usual smile on his face.

“Of course not,” he demurred. “I’ve no reason to do anything of the sort.”

“Ha!” the old man scoffed, turning his chin up. “There’s no need for ye to worry, lad. He can’t do anything. The First Consort’ll take care of him, so leave him alone, you hear?”

“The First Consort... Ah, Lady Cassandra. So there *is* something going on. Is it true that she’s been having an affair with someone here?” Jill asked.

“An affair? I wouldn’t call it that—it’s just a married couple takin’ a walk.”

No one expected this response. This meant that Cassandra was in the Garden of Resting Dragons, spending time with...

“That’s why I said that there’s nothing to worry about, puny Dragon Consort,” the old man said, glaring at her. “Some things in the world are better left unknown. A matter that could end peacefully won’t if kids like you stir things up. Else, some people might have to die ’cause of it.”

He was inquiring if Jill had the resolve to shoulder that responsibility. He wasn’t threatening her, but his aura was overwhelming.

“Princess Natalie has already been attacked by someone,” Jill countered. “It’s already put lives in danger.”

“But she’s safe, ain’t she?” the old man replied simply. “Whatever the goal may be, don’t youse think that the kidnapping plan was a bit too shoddy?”

Only one person had been dispatched to attack Natalie and Frida. The success of this attack was due in no small part to catching everyone off guard—in short, the person was very lucky. Even if Jill hadn’t arrived, the guards would’ve surely saved the princesses. In all likelihood, the kidnapping would’ve ended in failure.

This logic also applied to the assailant’s safety. Had they been captured alive, Jill and the others would only have received a similar report as this matter pertained to the Empress’s Palace.

“The plan would’ve never worked unless a person with a lotta power could help out while knowing that they were screwing themselves over,” the man continued. “That’s all. There’s nothin’ dangerous. Or what? Will youse go around killin’ everyone who might be dangerous?”

“Of course not,” Jill replied. “But if I don’t know what’s going on, I can’t make decisions either.”

The elderly man sat cross-legged on the ground and glared. “Sure, that could apply to you, lass, but what about the Dragon Emperor? He’s grown up mistrusting people, hmm? ’Cause he’s strong, I wouldn’t be surprised if he became a timid dictator.”

“Don’t you *dare* insult His Majesty,” Jill growled, glaring down at him as she took a step closer. “Above all, I won’t let him turn into a person like that.”

He narrowed his eyes and spat, “Anyone can talk the talk. Youse all are just a married couple of greenhorns. It’s safer to let the First Consort handle it.”

“I can’t allow that,” Jill asserted. “I have to be a Dragon Consort and live up to my title. I can’t continue to be underestimated by the consorts of the previous emperor.”

The man huffed angrily and said nothing more.

“I’ve come to understand one thing,” Minerd said, chiming in. “There’s really only one crime that might cause many to die if it’s discovered here—regicide.”

Camila and Zeke gasped. Still held in their grasp, the old caretaker replied in a low voice, “There’s no proof, lad. It hasn’t happened.”

“Oh, but we can just make something up, can’t we? That’s how the palace does things.”

“You...!”

“Why don’t we report it to His Majesty, Dragon Consort? We can storm into the Empress’s Palace and finish off those consorts in one fell swoop. The Dragon Flower Crown Festival will go as you wish—” Minerd spoke smoothly but froze upon turning toward Jill. Even the old man who was glaring at Minerd fell silent when he followed his gaze to Jill. Zeke and Camila were averting their gazes.

Jill took a deep breath and said, “Good heavens, you’re all...” She suppressed her urge to laugh as she turned to her knights. “Zeke, Camila, keep this man restrained. I’ll leave Raw in your care too.”

She threw the Dragon King and Camila caught him. Raw was clearly displeased. Jill placated him with a half smile.

“Be good, okay, Raw?” she said. “I’ll go talk with His Majesty.”

“Hold up, lass,” the man said. “Are youse gonna give the Dragon Emperor a word of advice? If you do that...”

“Silence,” Jill said sharply. “I’ll be the one calling the shots, Rolf de Lehrsatz.”

The old man closed his mouth in astonishment. Jill had taken a shot in the dark, but it seemed she was correct.

“Prince Minerd, will you please come with me?” Jill asked. “But please don’t say anything unnecessary.”

“You’re being rather forceful,” MinerD replied. “I’m here as an Ambassador of Friendship from Kratos, I’ll have you know.”

“So? I thought we make stuff up and make do. That *is* how the palace does things, isn’t it?”

Jill gave him an icy gaze, and MinerD pulled his chin back while placing a hand over his chest. “Then please show me what you can do, Dragon Consort.”

“Do you know where His Majesty might be right now?”

“Ack!” Camila gasped, her voice not quite matching the tense atmosphere. Jill cocked her head while everyone gazed at Camila. “Uh... Don’t you think it’s about time for his fitting session with you, Jill? You know, before you’re both supposed to check on the parade stuff together?”

“What time is it?!” Jill cried.

MinerD took out his pocket watch and told her the time—it was past their promised hour. Jill hastily grabbed the prince by the scruff of his neck and ran ahead, the voices of her knights sending her off quickly fading into the distance. *Crap, crap, crap! His Majesty’s gonna sulk!*

The parade’s inspection was scheduled within the inner courtyard. She ran full speed ahead. MinerD burst out laughing.

“What?!” Jill roared. “I’m in a bit of a hurry here!”

“Oh, I just thought that you can change your demeanor at the drop of a hat,” MinerD replied. “I’m surprised you figured his identity out.”

“I went by instinct! There aren’t a lot of people who knew my grandfather and could run around that well. Besides, His Majesty is apparently related to Duke Lehrsatz.”

“Still, it’s impressive that you found him out with that little information. Good instincts can’t be underestimated. Perhaps, then, you might know who’s planning this regicide, Dragon Consort.”

Jill kept her eyes ahead and continued running as she replied curtly, “Nothing has happened yet.”

“Quite so. Then why don’t I also pray that things remain that way?”

“Is it true that you’re planning on assassinating the previous emperor?”

“...I’m a timid man, you see.” His vague response sounded like he was affirming her question.

“Please tell me your reasons later,” she said.

“I refuse.”

Once Jill stepped onto the grass of the inner courtyard, she threw MinerD. He gracefully landed much to her annoyance, and she glanced around in search of Hadis. Only then did the hectic cries and angry shouts reach her ears. It was quite loud, as though there’d been an accident. *Did something happen?*

MinerD ran ahead as Jill gulped, watching the scene in front of her. “It’s poison!” someone had cried.

The voice sounded far away as though it was somebody else’s business.



“**MISSY’S** not coming...” Rave muttered.

No one was around to hear the grumbles of a Dragon God. Hadis had finished fitting into his outfit for the Dragon Flower Crown Festival and Vissel stood next to him with a victorious smile.

“I suppose I should’ve expected no less from the Dragon Consort,” the crown prince said. “To think she would miss the fitting session not once, but twice! How many times must she be fooled? Is she unable to learn?”

“N-Now, now, Brother,” Hadis said. “Jill’s trying her best...”

“First Consort Cassandra has arrived,” a guard said, notifying them that the one behind it all had appeared.

Vissel allowed her entrance. A tall lady quietly entered and deeply bowed in front of Hadis. They were practically meeting for the first time as the First Consort almost never stepped outside of the Empress’s Palace. The two hadn’t seen each other since the previous emperor chose to live there. She bowed so deeply that it was difficult to see her face, but it looked as though she hadn’t aged a day.

“Is the Dragon Consort here?” she asked in a monotone.

Vissel and Hadis exchanged glances before the crown prince spoke. “As you can see, we’re alone. What’s the meaning of this, Consort Cassandra? Is she not with you?”

“No. The Dragon Consort had left after declaring that she’d leave matters to me, and I haven’t seen her since. I made an appointment with her after lunch...”

Vissel cast a dubious glare at first, but Cassandra seemed genuinely confused. In other words, Jill had forgotten about Hadis.

The crown prince groaned as though he was cursing her. “She wasn’t harassed nor was there a schedule conflict. How could that idiot of a Dragon Consort actually just ditch this meeting?!”

Hadis laughed, knowing that he had to be strong in front of Cassandra. “Maybe Jill’s wrapped up in something. That’s so like her.”

“The smile isn’t reaching your eyes,” Rave pointed out, irritating Hadis.

Cassandra slumped her shoulders. “I shall go look for her. I hope for your patience.”

“Oh, no need,” Hadis replied. “We don’t have much time, so let’s go inspect the parade. Jill will be cute whatever she wears, even if she wears a blue dress or has no one to hold her train.” He grabbed the paper illustrating design changes to her dress and waved it in front of him.

“Do you have any complaints about the Dragon Consort’s attire?” Cassandra asked brusquely. “I’ll happily listen to your requests.”

“None at all,” Hadis replied. “Jill’s the one who decides. She said she was fine with this, right?”

“She’s stated that she’d leave it to me.”

Cassandra passively avoided responsibility as Hadis derisively laughed.

“Then I’ll trust Jill who left it all to you,” he said. “I don’t trust you one bit, but I’m a man who kneels before his wife.”

“You seem to trust the Dragon Consort quite a bit,” the consort pointed out.

“It’s because of love. Remember that well.”

Hadis smiled, trying to keep her in check. Cassandra stood tall and turned to face him.

“There’s a saying in the Empress’s Palace: receive love from the Dragon Consort, and logic from the other consorts,” she said. “It’s apparently what the Dragon Emperor of past generations had requested from the consorts. It seems you’re no exception to this rule, Your Majesty.”

Had Hadis touched a nerve? Cassandra’s monotonic voice was unusually colder than usual. Even Vissel gazed at her in surprise.

“I thought it best to confirm with the Dragon Consort first, but if you trust her that much, I suppose it’s not a problem,” she said. “Please take a look at this.”

A lady-in-waiting stood behind the First Consort and stepped forward upon her mistress’s signal. A letter was offered to the emperor and the crown prince. Before Vissel could reach for it, Hadis grabbed the letter, opened it, and scanned its contents. Rave peeked out and started to read.

“To my beloved Dragon Consort?” the Dragon God read aloud in shock. “Is this a love letter to Missy?!”

“I found it last night in Fione’s room,” Cassandra said. “There were quite a few more hidden away.”

“By whom? Since when?” Hadis asked, his face turning ice cold.

A faint smile formed on Cassandra’s lips. “Ah, so you didn’t know.”

He crushed the letter in his fist without answering.

“Has this been making its rounds?” Vissel asked stiffly.

“I’m carefully keeping it locked away, so there’s no need to worry about that,” she replied softly. “But I suppose this was unnecessary. His Majesty’s bond with the Dragon Consort is so strong that I doubt something this silly would put a crack in it.” She elegantly smiled—this was the woman who stood at the top of the Empress’s Palace. “It seems the Dragon Consort has kept a mere letter a secret from her husband without being able to handle it herself. What an adorable young lady.”

Hadis knew he'd lost this battle the moment he was unable to refute her words.

"We'll talk later," Vissel said, changing the subject. "We've got our next appointment scheduled."

"Confirming the parade, was it?" Cassandra asked. "I shall happily guide you. Every lady is eagerly awaiting to hear you speak, Your Majesty."

This was a roundabout way of offering another lady in Jill's stead. Satisfied with her thorny remarks, Cassandra looked indifferent as she turned to leave, her skirts fluttering behind her. Receiving a glance from Vissel, Hadis burned the letter, envelope and all, before walking forward.

Rave slipped into Hadis's body. **"Hey, you know that this is a trap, don't you?"**

I know, Hadis thought. I know that Jill hid it for my sake.

With the marriage preparations underway, a love letter only shackled Jill. This was clearly a trap aimed at Hadis. *I don't know who did this, but she probably left this be to let the culprit do as they pleased for now. I didn't receive any reports because there was nothing to report.*

"Uh, she probably thought it'd be a pain to handle you when you were shown the letter—"

Did you say something?

"If you understand why she did it, why are you so angry?"

That woman feels victorious now, is why. She's underestimating Jill.

Along with the Three Dukes, it was annoying to be on the receiving end of these obvious provocations, even if he saw them coming. *Hmph, all of them have to obey if I order them anyway.*

It was possible for him to forcibly disband the Empress's Palace and ignore the Three Dukes. Hadis didn't do it because Jill was stopping him. Were they all aware of this fact? *No, they do, that's why they're using her as a shield. Jill's my weakness. The Three Dukes who guessed as much are right, in a way. And that makes me the most annoyed.*

The parade preparations were conducted in the inner courtyard. As Hadis emerged from the hallway, women wearing colorful attire squealed with delight. Coincidentally, the Three Dukes were present as well.

Bruno was confirming the security while Igor was a short distance away, greeting the aristocrats—parents and guardians of the women participating in the parade. Morgan was the first to notice Hadis and Vissel. He raised a hand in greeting.

“Vissel! Perfect timing,” the duke called. “Come here and confirm your schedule.”

The crown prince hesitated for a moment, but Hadis said, “Go on, Brother. I’ll be here.”

The emperor pointed to a nearby small round table and chair in the shade. It was probably meant as a place to take a break—similar furniture was scattered throughout the courtyard. Vissel nodded and swiftly headed toward Morgan. Cassandra, who was left behind, glanced around.

“I shall call for the ladies holding the train,” she said. “Please wait here, Your Majesty.”

Hadis nodded and sat on a chair with a thud. He gazed up at the sky. A page immediately arrived, placing drinks and fruit on the table before leaving with a bow. Dragons were soaring through the skies, reminding Hadis that the dragon issue hadn’t been solved just yet.

There’s also the Empress’s Palace, the Dragon Flower Crown Festival, the Ambassador of Friendship...and what else? Right, a legend that rivals the magical barrier of the Rakia mountains. I thought a Dragon Consort only needed to protect me.

“Well, Missy is the strongest when she’s protecting you,” Rave said.

Hearing that made Hadis a bit embarrassed and giddy. To calm himself down, he reached for the cup the page had left. When he tried to bring it to his lips, an odd scent hit his nose and he froze.

Rave, who slipped out of Hadis’s body to grab some fruit, turned around. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s something in this,” the emperor replied.

Was it poison? The scent obviously gave it away. It was no secret that many had tried and failed to poison the emperor. The worst that would happen was that he’d fall ill before Rave cured him. Lacing something with poison was a foolish plan if one wanted to truly aim for Hadis’s life.

Could this have been some kind of mistake, or was it a new form of harassment? Hadis carefully studied his surroundings. He spotted Cassandra, standing a short distance away as she stopped the page who had just brought out the cups.

“Rave, you can decompose toxins, can’t you?” Hadis asked.

“Huh? Sure, I can, but...” Rave froze. “Are you gonna drink that?! But why?”

Cassandra paled as she turned toward Hadis. He made his decision in a second—this was *her* mistake.

The emperor downed the cup in one go. The liquid tasted bitter, but he couldn’t tell anything else as his tongue started to grow numb. He was lucky that he couldn’t taste anything. Screams pierced the air.

“You idiot!” Rave shouted, entering Hadis’s body.

As the emperor’s vision started to blur, he saw the color drain from Vissel’s face. The Three Dukes also hastily ran to his side, but it was too late—Hadis lost his sense of balance and fell to the ground.

If I’m that precious to you, you should’ve been more honest and treated me better from the start. But there was a reason that they couldn’t be so open in their affection for him—everyone had to treasure and protect far too many things. Jill had taught him that.

“Hadis! Hadis!” Vissel shouted. “Someone fetch a doctor!”

“Move, Vissel! Get me some water! We’ll have him cough it all up!” a duke said.

“Your Majesty! Your Majesty! Hang in there! What in the world happened?!” shouted a familiar voice—it was his wife.

Ah, then I’ll be fine now. Reassured, Hadis let his consciousness slip. No longer

did he need to act strong. *When my wife protects me, she's the strongest and coolest in the world.*

Chapter 4: Conquering the Empress's Palace

“COULD I be left alone with him for a while?” Jill had asked.

Frida and Natalie obediently picked up their candlestands to leave the room.

“We’ll be right next door, so call us if you need anything,” Natalie said before shutting the door.

The room seemed to fill with darkness after they left. Hadis’s bedroom was spacious; though the fireplace had been roaring away, any light near him had been dimmed so that his sleep wouldn’t be disturbed. His bed had a canopy and curtains—only the pale moonlight managed to spill onto his bed from the windows. Jill sat down on the side of Hadis’s bed. The commotion from earlier that day felt like a dream.

“Rave, are you there?” Jill asked.

“Hmm?” Rave replied, slipping out of the sleeping emperor’s body.

“Is His Majesty all right?”

“Yeah, I’ve finished detoxing him, so he should wake up tomorrow.”

“Do you know what’s been going on?” Jill asked.

“I’ve seen and heard what happened,” Rave replied.

The emperor had been poisoned. The Three Dukes immediately suspected Miner, who rushed to the scene. However, Miner’s quick thinking and treatment allowed Hadis to recover. Miner had been locked in the guest room so that judgment could be cast on him later.

The next suspect was Cassandra. The page who’d carried the poisoned drink to Hadis was a servant of the Empress’s Palace. Many witnesses claimed to have seen this servant associating with the First Consort before the incident occurred. However, Cassandra had retired to the Empress’s Palace during the uproar and refused to come out. The moment Hadis had fallen to the ground, the page laughed triumphantly. The servant had been restrained but managed

to ingest some poison and had died—this series of events mirrored what had occurred when Natalie was attacked.

Vissel had confessed bitterly that both incidents lacked definitive proof. If investigations continued without the emperor, who was supposed to have the final say in these matters, the Three Dukes might just find a convenient “mastermind.”

Prince Minerd would likely become their target then, Jill thought. If the Ambassador of Friendship from Kratos tried to assassinate the emperor, it wouldn’t be a problem to lop off his head and send it back to Kratos. The Rave Empire could also decline troublesome requests such as allowing a meeting with Prince Gerald—it was a convenient solution. Or perhaps the Three Dukes knew who the real mastermind was and were just trying to hide it.

“His Majesty drank it on purpose, didn’t he?” Jill asked.

Jill had been shown the cup that Hadis had drank from, and she noticed a lingering foul odor. The emperor was a man who had decided to cook his own food because he was tired of being poisoned all his life—there was little chance that he *didn’t* notice it.

“Probably,” Rave replied. “Are you...angry?”

“Is there any reason for me not to be?” Jill replied with a clenched fist and vengeful smile.

The Dragon God outstretched his wings and let out a dry laugh. “I figured as much! You were quiet, Missy, so I just wanted to be sure.”

“When you become truly angry, you tend to just go quiet. Kind of like a volcano waiting to erupt,” Jill explained.

“Well, I’d be grateful if you extinguished that anger. Uh, just to kinda take his side, I think he wanted to leave things to you,” Rave said.

“I know. Even so, there must’ve been a better way.” Jill threw her shoes off and hugged her knees on top of the bed. “He made my blood run cold.”

Rave was by Hadis’s side. Jill knew that the emperor wouldn’t die from the poison and had tried to remain calm, but she couldn’t forget her dread when

she saw his pale face hit the ground. She continued to stay by his side because she was afraid of being apart from him.

“I said something unnecessary, Missy. I told Hadis that you were the strongest when you’re protecting him,” Rave said, popping out beside her with a grin. “And I trust you too. I know that you’re entangled in some complicated matters, but I know that you won’t make him sad.”

“You’re overestimating me,” Jill replied.

“Don’t say that. When he gets better, you can punch and kick him all you like.”

“That’s not enough.”

Jill glared at Rave before inching toward Hadis’s pillow. Color had returned to the emperor’s face, and his breathing was steady. Minerda had been surprised by his condition when he was giving him first aid too. If no one had known about the poison, it looked as though Hadis had simply fallen asleep.

Jill gently touched his smooth cheek. His long eyelashes didn’t flutter, proving that he was in a deep slumber. The emperor was clearly exhausted—his warm breath escaped from his thin lips, but it was faint and feeble.

“It’s not enough at all,” Jill whispered.

She could tell from the shadows that Rave had turned away, and she almost burst into a fit of giggles. Jill didn’t mind if someone was watching, but this was a peaceful, moonlit night. It was best if her shadow was lost in Hadis’s, so that no one could tell what she was doing.

“It’s your fault, Your Majesty, for sleeping so defenselessly.”

To hide her embarrassment, she gave him a gentle peck before moving away.



“You done?” Rave asked, turning back.

“Yep! I showed him!” Jill replied. “Ah, but keep it a secret, please.”

“Of course. If he knew about this, he’d scream and die. Poison won’t be what takes him out.”

Jill was happy to hear that. She chuckled faintly as she started to put her shoes back on. “I’ll leave His Majesty to you, Rave. Leave everything else to me!”

“Sure. Go get ’em. But uh, be sure to hold back.”

“What are you being so timid for?! I’ll always go all-out for His Majesty!”

Jill punched the air toward the ceiling and set off. She peeked into the adjoining room and saw Natalie and Frida raise their heads.

“Could I leave His Majesty in both of your hands?” Jill asked. “I’ll head out for a bit.”

“S-Sure, but where to?” Natalie asked. “Are you all right with not being by Brother Hadis’s side?”

“His Majesty has got Rave too. I’ll teach him a lesson!” Jill declared, fists clenched.

“What lesson?” Natalie asked.

“That’s a secret between husband and wife!” Jill smiled and placed an index finger to her lips.

Natalie gave a weary look as the strength seemed to leave her shoulders. “U-Um, Jill, about Brother Minerd...”

“I know he’s not the culprit,” Jill replied firmly.

“Sister Jill, about my mother...” Frida started.

“I know. She’ll be fine.” Jill meant to imply that she’d solve everything, but Frida shook her head.

“No... Um, I...might’ve misunderstood...about your letter.”

“My letter? Oh yeah, those...”

“Mother wasn’t stealing it...she could’ve been trying to deliver it to you...” Jill turned to Frida in shock as the princess earnestly continued, “Maybe...my mother got in trouble because she delivered...something that she wasn’t supposed to. I’m not certain...about it, though.”

“No, I’m blown away,” Jill replied. “I think you hit the bull’s eye, Your Highness.”

“R-Really?”

“If so, Lady Fione’s words and actions make sense. She wanted me to save her.”

The Eighth Consort had repeatedly told Jill to become a splendid Dragon Consort. It appeared there was truth in those words, albeit rather difficult to parse. Clearly, it was imperative to read between the lines within the Empress’s Palace.

“May I confirm one thing, Princess Natalie?” Jill asked. “If someone was planning a regicide within the Empress’s Palace, how would they be punished?”

“Huh? Well, it depends on the scale of the operation, but everyone from the bottom would be sliced up, and that’ll be the end of it. Wait...did someone from the Empress’s Palace try to poison Brother Hadis?”

As Natalie turned pale, Jill put an index finger to her lips to silence her. She’d learned enough. If the people from the bottom would be killed to end the affair, the consorts and the Empress’s Palace would surely be considered the bottom of the ladder in this debacle.

“They’ll be fine,” Jill repeated, promising the princesses. “Have you forgotten? My goal is to make the Dragon Flower Crown Festival a huge success! I can’t have the Empress’s Palace crumble on me right now. And Prince Minerd isn’t a bad person—he gave His Majesty first aid.”

Natalie sulked and muttered, “He’s definitely a bad person. I’m sure of it.”

“But surely that doesn’t warrant him taking the blame for a crime he didn’t commit so that he may be killed,” Jill replied sternly.

Minerd was a shady man, but if he died, the truth died with him. After being

tossed into this mess and toyed with, Jill didn't want everything to end conveniently for the Three Dukes. If that happened, there was little meaning in Hadis ingesting poison and entrusting everything to her. If the Dragon Flower Crown Festival ended as a success, she'd be a splendid Dragon Consort that everyone would approve of. Her goal hadn't changed.

"Do you know where Prince Vissel and the Three Dukes are? They must still be in the imperial castle," Jill said.

It was the night of the poisoning incident. They should've been in the castle somewhere.

"They should be at the Empress's Palace asking for details, though I doubt any of them could enter..." Natalie replied.

"I want you two to stay in His Majesty's rooms, please. Rave will protect you. Princess Frida, may I please ask for His Majesty Bear back for a short while?"

Frida handed Jill Hadis Bear. The plushie had been serving as the princess's bodyguard. With the plush bear under her armpit, Jill called out to the game fowl by her feet.

"Let's go, Sauté. It's time to rumble," she said.

The bird ruffled its feathers and gave a reliable chirp.



THE front gates of the Empress's Palace were closed with a tall, sturdy door. It was a part of a rampart-like wall and couldn't be easily destroyed. The guards there belonged to the Empress's Palace, not the imperial army.

Lutiya had thought that this felt like a siege. The iron gates were firmly shut, and guards stood out front without budging an inch. Even when they were told about suspicions swirling around the emperor being poisoned, the palace insisted on their innocence and remained closed. A palace filled with only women may have been a different world from the rest.

"I cannot let you pass," a guard said.

"Then call out Consort Cassandra," Vissel demanded.

"Lady Cassandra has already retired for the night."

The guard repeated the same lines ad nauseam. Vissel clicked his tongue in irritation. The Three Dukes standing behind the crown prince gave their shoulders a resigned shrug.

“We must give up for now, Prince Vissel. There’s a certain process required for men to enter the Empress’s Palace. They’ve got the upper hand. We need to think about our next step.”

“It’s easy to barge right in, but unwise. Our reputations would plummet.”

“Perhaps we should question Prince Minerda first.”

The Three Dukes should’ve been allies, but their words dragged Vissel down and shackled him. Even Lutiya couldn’t help but feel bad for the crown prince. Vissel was annoying and high-strung as an older brother, but the younger brother he adored had fainted right in front of his eyes. Lutiya was shocked when he heard the news and had rushed to Hadis’s room. He had been told that the emperor was recovering just fine, but Lutiya couldn’t be at ease until he saw Hadis’s face. If he was this worried, Vissel must’ve been exponentially more distressed about it. But the crown prince said not a word and immediately ran around to clean up this mess once he heard that Hadis’s condition had stabilized.

This was all to prevent the Three Dukes from doing as they pleased once the emperor, who had the final say in matters, was gone.

“If we wait until tomorrow, all the evidence will be disposed of,” Vissel insisted. “Now’s our chance to corner the Empress’s Palace.”

“Surely it should be the fault of the Dragon Emperor and Dragon Consort for neglecting the Empress’s Palace until it’d become like this,” one of the dukes said.

Lutiya couldn’t hide his irritation at this phrasing. “You doddering old obstacles prevented anyone from touching the place,” he hissed.

“Oh? That sounds like a word of praise.”

“We can just leave it all to Miss Ji—the Dragon Consort.”

The Three Dukes all turned to face the young boy.

“You’re quite cruel, Prince Lutiya,” Morgan said. “The reliable Dragon Emperor just fainted.”

“She needs time to calm down. I’d also like to leave her be,” said Bruno.

“Above all, there’s little sense in talking about a person who isn’t present,” Lehrsatz added.

“Stop trying to corner my younger brother,” Vissel said, unexpectedly protecting Lutiya from the Three Dukes closing in on him like wolves cornering prey. He spat wearily, “I understand. It’s like a game of Old Maid to find the suspect.”

“Are you dissatisfied with Minerd picking the maid?” a duke asked casually.

“I just don’t like seeing you three doing as you please while Hadis is gone,” Vissel said coldly. “I’d much rather have the Dragon Consort handle it all.”

“Then want me to go call for Miss Jill?” Lutiya asked.

“Stop that! I find it most unpleasant to have her take the initiative and handle this all!” Vissel said sharply with a straight face.

Lutiya felt foolish for sympathizing at all. “C’mon, you gotta compromise somewhere...”

“Say what you like. I’ll struggle until my dying breath!” Vissel shouted. “I feel like we’ve lost ever since Hadis fainted, but I won’t give up! I should deploy the imperial army...”

“There’s no need for that,” a voice cut in, followed by quiet footsteps.

Lutiya’s cheek froze in a half smile when he saw Mr. Bear under the girl’s arm and Instructor Sauté by her feet.

“This is an issue for the Empress’s Palace. I ask that you all leave,” she said.

Jill quietly walked forward, her footsteps reverberating in the air. A man blocked her path, outstretching both arms in an exaggerated manner.

“Ah, Dragon Consort! This is our first conversation, I believe. I’m Morgan de Verrat, also known as Duke Verrat. I’m pleased to meet you.”

“I’m Duke Neutrah!, Bruno de Neutrah! My niece is indebted to you,” the

duke greeted loudly.

As Jill stopped walking, the third duke slowly appeared by her side.

“I’m Igor de Lehrsatz. My grandson has been in your care, Dragon Consort.”

Jill stared at the three men for a while before she lowered her head. “His Majesty has been greatly indebted to you three.”

The dukes looked shocked, not expecting her response.

“I’m in a bit of a hurry, you see,” Jill continued. “I must be off, but please let me greet you all properly on a different date. Good day.”

“You won’t be able to enter the Empress’s Palace,” Bruno said with a troubled look.

Morgan smiled faintly and advised, “My older sister, Cassandra, is quite a stubborn lady. She won’t even listen to me. I doubt you can get her to even open the doors, Dragon Consort.”

Only then did Lutiya realize that Morgan didn’t want his sister to be captured for treason as she controlled the Empress’s Palace. The other two dukes also had some sort of affiliation with the palace, causing them to hesitate to enter this isolated structure and cause all sorts of issues to arise for them and their allies.

“I’m also quite worried about the safety of my daughter, Fione,” Igor said. “To be honest, I also don’t wish to shake a hornet’s nest.”

“I fear you’re all misunderstanding something,” Jill said. “*I’m* the one in charge of the Empress’s Palace.”

The Three Dukes looked down at the small Dragon Consort. Lutiya also thought that her back looked impossibly small.

“Move. You’re in my way,” she ordered.

And yet, she didn’t back down before these three grown men. She had more reason to push forward now that Hadis was out of commission. Jill walked forward once more, and Morgan backed away as though he’d been pushed aside and was silently supporting her. Bruno also made way, and Igor silently watched her back.

After making her way through the Three Dukes, she stood in front of a guard who was spouting the same phrase over and over again, requesting everyone to leave.

“Lady Cassandra won’t meet with anyone tonight,” he said.

Jill placed her stuffed bear on Sauté’s back and turned to the young prince. “Lutiya, I leave His Majesty and everyone in your care.” Her beaming smile was terrifying, but Lutiya stood tall and nodded furiously. She glanced at the crown prince next. “Your Highness Vissel, I leave the rest to you.”

“I don’t care what you do. It’s none of my concern, Dragon Consort,” Vissel replied.

“That’s fine by me. The Empress’s Palace is under my jurisdiction.”

She whirled around, found an opening between the guards, and punched with all her might. There was a loud rumble, and the iron gates burst open a moment later.

Lutiya’s cheeks twitched as he felt the wind from the blast of magic. He knew this was going to happen, and Vissel looked on with a thousand-yard stare.

“I have to speak with Lady Cassandra,” Jill announced. Amid the screams, roars, and falling debris, she raised her voice loud and clear. “Tell her that the Dragon Consort has arrived! If anyone has any complaints, I’ll take you on! This’ll be great training for your security!”

She jumped inside, snapped the guards’ spears, and threw them outside of the gates.

“Training?!” Morgan gasped, pale-faced. “That excuse won’t work here!”

“Oh, it will,” Vissel said coldly. “The Dragon Consort is currently the *only* consort to the reigning emperor. The Empress’s Palace thus falls under her sole jurisdiction.”

Morgan clicked his tongue. “Bruno, stop the Dragon Consort!”

“Certainly,” Duke Neutrahl replied. “But I’ll be destroying the Empress’s Palace in the process, if that’s not a problem.”

“Of course it is! Dammit, you muscleheads are all so...!”

“Just give it up already,” Lutiya said icily to the Three Dukes. “You guys can’t stop the Dragon Consort, only the Dragon Emperor can.”

The moment Hadis went down, there was no one who could stop Jill.

Igor laughed heartily. “I suppose that’s only natural for the Dragon Consort! Then let’s see what she has to offer.”

Morgan wearily shook his head while Bruno laughed.

“How will she control the Empress’s Palace? How will she silence us? It’s all up to her now,” Igor said, a smile forming on his lips.

He turned his back toward the Empress’s Palace, implying that he would be retiring for the night. Vissel offered to escort him back. As everyone started to leave, Lutiya turned back to the palace, reluctant to put it behind him.

A pandemonium broke out in the Empress’s Palace as he saw the glow of the Sacred Treasure of the Dragon Consort. His teacher wielding her golden weapon to protect her Dragon Emperor must’ve been a dazzling and beautiful sight. Lutiya was so proud, but just a tiny bit frustrated.



DUST and debris crumbled from above the dimly lit underground passage. A battle must’ve started above. Camila and Zeke stopped for a moment, but they soon ran ahead.

“You better be leading us the right way, geezer,” Zeke said, tired of the passages that all looked the same, illuminated by light equidistant from each other. He was carrying Rolf, the caretaker who managed the Dragon Consort’s Palace, on his back.

“Enough chitchat! Right here!” Rolf ordered. “Take the next right, then the third left, the fourth right, and spin thrice and go left!”

“I can’t remember all that!” Zeke snapped. “And that last bit doesn’t even sound like a direction!”

“We’ve come all this way, Grandpa Rolf,” Camila said. “Don’t run from us now. If we get lost in here, I’m not confident that I can find my way out. Why is it so complicated anyway?” She’d expected hidden corridors or rooms, but not

this complex labyrinth on such a grand scale.

Rolf huffed. “The Dragon Consorts of the past created this place to cover the entire Empress’s Palace. Your average guy can’t get through ’ere. Some paths require magic to see through, and it’s riddled with traps.”

“Wait, why’d the Dragon Consorts make such a thing?”

“Why, to keep tabs on the consorts being *friendly* with the Dragon Emperor, toots! Every time a new consort appeared, the Dragon Consort added on, makin’ it into this complex maze.”

The two knights fell silent, afraid of the Dragon Consorts. Rolf belted out a mocking laugh. “Scared, are ye? The Knights of the Dragon Consort are involved in its creation too. This is your job. Left ’ere!”

“How much longer until the previous emperor’s place?” Zeke asked.

“A bit more. C’mon, lad, run! We better make it in time! Timing’s important for stuff like this!” Rolf slapped Zeke’s head as he ran, and Camila followed from behind.

“Why’d you decide to cooperate with us all of a sudden?” she asked gingerly.

“The unexpected occurred, yeah? I’m ’ere to settle the score,” Rolf replied.

“His Majesty’s poisoning incident,” Zeke mullied.

“That’s right. Whoever was behind it aside, it was a plan that shoulda *never* succeeded. I was tricked by that little Dragon Emperor, I was.”

Camila cocked her head while Zeke slowed down quizzically.

“Pay no heed! Keep runnin’!” Rolf scolded. “That emperor drank it knowin’ it was poison, I bet.”

“Huh?! He wouldn’t do something so stupid!” Camila said before catching herself. “No, he would... He really would...”

Hadis could’ve ingested the poison simply to catch Jill’s attention. Even Zeke was gazing into the distance with exasperation.

“He probably discovered something that bothered him again...” he muttered.

“The Dragon Emperor coulda thrown it away or pretended it never

happened,” Rolf explained. “He coulda prevented this fuss! Youse see, I love trickin’ people, but I hate being tricked!”

As he opened his eyes wide angrily, the two knights could only shrug and nod.

“All I can do now is entrust it all to the Dragon Consort!” Rolf continued. “Why’d youse think I’m revealing the previous emperor’s location? If Minerd killed ’im now, it’ll only complicate this kerfuffle! My quiet life’ll go down the drain! I wanna stay holed up for ten more years, at least!”

“Prince Minerd should be under close watch, but I wouldn’t put escaping past him,” Zeke mused.

“And the Dragon Consort’s currently causing a mess in the Empress’s Palace! He can sneak right in! That’s why I’m tellin’ youse to hurry! Don’t complain about my plans! The Dragon Consort told you so, didn’t she?!”

“Stop hitting me! I’m not a horse, you shitty geezer!” Zeke complained.

“Who’re you callin’ a shitty geezer?! I’m Rolf!”

“Stop shouting in my ear! You’re so loud!”

“No, *you’re* the loud one, lad!”

Their exchange echoed within the underground passages. *In any case, who is this old man?* Camila thought. *He’s sharp, just like the Raccoon Boy that we fought with in the past.* Jill also seemed to trust Rolf’s plans wholeheartedly, and the elderly man was familiar with her grandfather.

Jill’s grandfather was probably active...two to three decades ago. I feel like I’ve heard of a strategist in House Lehrsatz, who managed to toy with even House Cervel and prevented them from ever joining battles...

“Stop. Right ’ere. Hidden door,” Rolf instructed.

Zeke screeched to a stop as Rolf jumped down and felt his way along the stone wall.

“Wait... He’s underground?!” Camila asked. “Is he imprisoned?”

“He chose to lock himself up, fearin’ the Dragon Emperor,” Rolf replied. “He believes that he’d be killed otherwise. He’s the greatest enemy and threat to

the Dragon Emperor, ain't he?"

Zeke frowned. "Greatest enemy? I've never heard His Majesty mention his father, so that seems a bit exaggerated."

"That's because he wouldn't be able to keep it together." Rolf's hands stopped as he seemed to have found an opening. He turned to the two knights and spoke in a dignified voice. "Don't say anything unnecessary. Leave the decisions to the Dragon Consort. You knights can handle that, I hope?"

His eyes were quiet and intelligent as he questioned their trust in the Dragon Consort. Zeke and Camila nodded in reply.

"I understand," Camila replied. "I swear it on the name of our Dragon Consort."

"I'll shut up and follow you. Captain's orders," Zeke added.

"Then I shall trust both you knights and the Dragon Consort," Rolf said. "Strategies, you see, succeed based on the amount of trust you place in each other. Hence, the Dragon Emperor ingested poison—he placed his trust in the Dragon Consort."

Rolf's palm started to glow as he stroked the wall. A sliver of light ran through the stone, creating a rectangle large enough for a person to pass through.

A door silently revolved, revealing a room so bright that it didn't seem like they were underground. There was a bed with a canopy, a sofa for guests, a desk, and numerous shelves. The furniture looked well-polished and glistened, implying that it was of the highest quality. The room was spacious enough to house it all and still have an open area. There were two doors, likely leading to connecting rooms.

Once the trio stepped inside, the door silently swung forward, transforming into a wall. Rolf was staring at a figure beyond the bed. A man was sitting there alone, his back facing them. Engrossed in his reading, he failed to notice his three guests.

"Emperor Meruonis," Rolf called.

The man jumped up and whirled around. A golden crown was atop his white-

haired head, and he was wearing a long, heavy cape. He looked grand, fitting for the splendid room that he was in, and would've suited sitting on a throne. However, his sunken eyes and timid demeanor of glancing around the room made him seem like he was in peril.

"Wh-Where did you come in from?" the previous emperor demanded, his croaking voice emanating an air of intensity and authority.

Rolf confidently strode forward and knelt in front of the former emperor. Camila and Zeke quickly followed.

"I've come for you regarding Emperor Hadis being poisoned," Rolf said.

The knights couldn't hide their shock, unsure if Rolf could make such a bold claim, but a loud voice cut through the confusion.

"Ah, so he's finally dead!" Meruonis crowed. "And so, you're here to fetch me!"

The previous emperor's voice was filled with delight. Camila had some thoughts of her own about his gleeful reaction, but she did her best to keep her head down and stay quiet.

"Cassandra told me that it couldn't be done, but see me now!" Meruonis gloated. "My plans are perfect! He was betrayed by the Dragon Consort, I take it? I knew that those sweet words of love would strike a chord with a young girl like her! Did he suffer? He deserves it! He threatened me and became the emperor!"

Camila clenched her fists, letting the pain of her nails digging into her skin keep her in check.

"Finally, my era has truly begun," Meruonis continued victoriously. "I don't mind placing the Dragon Consort in the Empress's Palace should she be pliant to doing my bidding. What about the Three Dukes who caused an end to my peaceful reign? I'm sure they're panicking!"

"Unfortunately, I don't have much time to explain," Rolf said. "Would you please follow me?"

"Very well. You'll take me back to my throne, I take it? Lead the way!"

Rolf had stated that the previous emperor couldn't do anything—these words proved to be true. Jill had never taken those immature letters seriously, and the previous emperor's words were closer to delusion than anything else. He was only clinging to false hope.

It was difficult for the Knights of the Dragon Consort to watch Meruonis's reaction. There was little explanation given, yet he jumped with joy and excitedly followed them out like a fool with a childish look of triumph on his face. He was horribly naïve. Unless Hadis had willingly drunk the poison, this infantile man's plans required a divine miracle to succeed.

He was the cause of this entire debacle, yet the consorts of the Empress's Palace, who were associated with him, had to obey his every stupid word. If they didn't do so, it would greatly affect the emperor's dignity.

Oof... I feel so bad for Jill. For a moment, Camila entertained the thought of ending Meruonis's life here to cover everything up, but she shook herself free of this idea. They were the Knights of the Dragon Consort, and their role was to trust the Dragon Consort and deliver this disgrace of an emperor to her.



JILL had thought that the Empress's Palace was teeming with guards, but she soon realized that there were quite a few soldiers as well. There were enough barring her path for an aristocrat to make their own private army out of them.

Sauté kicked a soldier who was turning a corner and threw Hadis Bear at them. The plushie started to move and punched any enemy that entered his view.

"Don't kill them, Sauté!" Jill warned. "We're just *training* them!"

Sauté gave a proud cry as Jill ran ahead, entrusting her back to Hadis Bear and her trusty bird.

Jill was supposed to meet with the First Consort in the inner courtyard. When she arrived at a clearing, spears rained down on her. When she dodged the attack, the ground beneath her started to crack.

"Visiting so late at night is quite rude, Dragon Consort," a lady said in her nightgown, twirling a spear and pointing it at Jill.

That movement was more than enough to indicate that she was different from the other soldiers.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m the Sixth Consort—”

“Thank you for the splendid dress!” Jill shouted, interrupting the consort and pouncing on her with her fists.

The consort managed to parry the attack with her spear. She was clearly no normal fighter. *If memory serves, she was from Neutrah!* Jill thought.

“Hey, at least let me tell you my name!” the consort protested.

“Unfortunately, I’m quite short on time right now!” Jill replied. “Where’s Lady Cassandra?”

The Sixth Consort puffed out her cheeks, making her look like a child. Needless to say, the power and magic she wielded were leagues above anything a child could do.

“She’s resting!” she replied. “I ask that you leave! Everyone, get her!”

The women surrounding her pounced upon hearing her order. Jill wasn’t sure if these ladies were employed in the Empress’s Palace or soldiers—either way, their refined movements made it clear that they were from Neutrah!. If that was the case, there would be no need to hold back.

Jill poured her magic into her right hand, causing the Sacred Treasure of the Dragon Consort to appear. With a loud crack of her whip, Jill blew her surroundings away with a deafening boom.

“The Sacred Treasure?! That’s not fair!” the Sixth Consort cried while dodging the attack.

As Jill closed the gap between them, she said coldly, “Fair? This is my power.”

The Dragon Consort planted a kick in the Sixth Consort’s stomach, smashing her into the manor’s wall. The consort slid down onto the grass with a look of frustration. Jill slammed her foot next to the lady while looking down at her.

“Where’s Lady Cassandra? Spit it out,” Jill demanded.

“I-I won’t tell you,” the Sixth Consort replied.

“Can’t you tell that I went easy on you? I won’t hold back.”

Though the consort had been somewhat trained to fight, she was still just an aristocratic lady with a bit more magic than others. She could act strong, but she couldn’t hide the fear flickering within her gaze. Just as Jill was cracking her knuckles, thinking of a way to get the consort to squeal, a voice rang out to stop her.

“Stop this, Dragon Consort. I’m right here.”

“Lady Cassandra!” the Sixth Consort screamed.

When Jill turned around, her eyes went wide with shock. Cassandra went down on her knees and prostrated herself on the ground.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Jill demanded.

“I was the one who tried to poison His Majesty,” Cassandra insisted in a monotone.

“No...” the Sixth Consort started before she was silenced by Cassandra’s glare.

“Those of the Empress’s Palace simply listened to my orders. The fault lies solely in me,” Cassandra said. “I beg for your mercy.”

“You’re the mastermind?” Jill said. “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“It’s the truth,” Cassandra stated, sitting straight up. She was so resolute that it was almost frustrating.

“Your motive?”

“Revenge. I lost both my son and my daughter to this curse. I was a fool. Doing so would never bring my children back.” Even an actor reading straight from a script would put more emotion into their words.

“You know, I thought you’d say something like that,” Jill said dryly.

Jill hadn’t known Cassandra for long, but this lady was the First Consort. She was the final wall of defense, the protector of the former emperor and his Empress’s Palace.

Cassandra would fulfill her role until the end.

“You have no intentions of giving up the previous emperor, I see,” Jill

concluded.

“He’s completely innocent,” Cassandra insisted.

“I’ve got the love letters addressed to me,” Jill said. “The previous emperor wrote them, didn’t he? I’m not sure if he wanted to cause discord between His Majesty and me, but either way, it’s clear that he means harm toward His Majesty.”

“If these letters go public, it’d damage your reputation as well, Dragon Consort. You’ve stepped off the path of love and drowned in your desire to harm His Majesty.”

“It’s unwise to anger me further. My subordinates have already escorted the previous emperor out from the Empress’s Palace.” Seeing the shock on Cassandra’s beautiful face, Jill continued, “Did you really think I came to attack this place out of pure rage? Please don’t underestimate me.” Jill laughed through her nose and faced the First Consort once more. “I’ll have you admit your defeat.”

“Dragon Consort, I beg you to reconsider,” Cassandra replied in a scolding tone. “If the truth comes to light and that man is punished, no one will gain a thing. That goes for the Dragon Emperor as well.”

Annoyed by her tone, Jill silently shot daggers at the consort. “Don’t speak as though you know His Majesty.”

“I understand your anger, but this is for His Majesty’s sake as well—”

“How could I say it?! How could I possibly tell him that his *father* tried to kill him?!”

Cassandra was at a loss for words.

“His Majesty will laugh it off and say that he’s fine!” Jill yelled. “But he’s a liar. He’s a liar who believes in a pipe dream that he can get along with his family—where no one’s at fault. Of course he’ll feel hurt when he discovers the man he once considered his father hates him to this degree!” With a frosty gaze, Jill approached Cassandra. “And you’re still misunderstanding something. *I’m* the one who calls the shots here.”

“Dragon Consort, I...”

“I’ll save you,” Jill said with a smile.

Some real hint of emotion wavered in Cassandra’s eyes for the first time.

“Please think about this carefully,” Jill said. “Let’s say we punished you. Then what? The consorts who admire you would feel less compelled to work with me. The Dragon Flower Crown Festival would end in a bust, plummeting His Majesty’s reputation. That’s the complete opposite of what I want.”

“I-I’ll be sure to tell everyone, once I do what I can...”

“I won’t let you go,” Jill asserted.

Cassandra’s eyes were trembling like a frail maiden. Jill found it rude for this lady to fear her when she was being so kind. The Dragon Consort wouldn’t allow anyone to go against her, however.

“Listen to my orders,” Jill said. “If you do, I’ll take care of reporting to His Majesty and help you, the other consorts, and the previous emperor.”

“I-I can’t do that,” Cassandra replied. “There are the Three Dukes, and—”

“Ah, Cassandra! There you are! What is going on here?!” a voice suddenly cut through the conversation.

The First and Sixth Consort gasped as they whirled toward the man’s voice. Jill also glanced at the four approaching figures.

“I’ve brought him here,” Rolf said, approaching Jill and clasping her shoulder. “You can do as you wish with him.” He stepped back and crossed his arms.

The man, who was glancing around in befuddlement while being guided by Zeke and Camila, looked nothing like Hadis.

Cassandra turned pale and ran to his side. Jill let her go. “Emperor Meruonis, why are you here? I asked you to stay in your room until your safety is assured.”

“Well, these people came to pick me up,” Meruonis replied. “Are the Three Dukes attacking this palace? Insolent! But never fear, we’ve got the women soldiers from Neutrah! on our side!”

Cassandra didn’t know what to say to the man who completely lacked

awareness. The Sixth Consort also looked at him awkwardly, and even Jill looked exasperated as the man completely underestimated the situation.

Whether it be the imperial army or the Three Dukes, if an army was dispatched here, they hold no chance of winning. Jill was surprised that a man this naïve was ever emperor. Were the Three Dukes skillfully holding the reins the entire time? The bitter looks on Camila and Zeke's faces hinted at their exhaustion from dealing with him.

"Where's Hadis's corpse?" Meruonis demanded. "I want to see how he suffered and died. Did he apologize to his father? I know, let's decapitate him and hold his head up for everyone to see! It'll signal the birth of a new Dragon Emperor!" He continued to spill the beans on his plan, and Jill started to feel bad for Cassandra and the other consorts who tried to stop him.

"Are you the previous emperor—Emperor Meruonis?" Jill asked.

Meruonis whirled around excitedly. "That's right. You're a small lady—could you be the Dragon Consort?"

"Correct. I apologize for my belated greeting."

"You're forgiven. If you're here, that must mean that my letters made your heart flutter—"

Jill delivered a punch to his gut. Meruonis had the wind knocked out of him, but she held herself back. He let out a disgusting groan and vomited as he writhed on the grass. He was still moving.

"No one will be happy to receive such a creepy love letter," Jill said. "Never send me one again."

"Blargh... Ulp... Y-You, how dare you..." Meruonis grunted.

Jill stomped the ground by his face. He tried to get up but let out a shriek and covered his head with his hands as he visibly shrank. It seemed Jill didn't need to step on him at all; there were some things she just didn't want to touch.

"Unfortunately for you, His Majesty is still alive," Jill said. "There's no way a worm like you can assassinate him."

"How dare you!" Meruonis protested. "I'm the emperor."

“And I’m the Dragon Consort.” She gently kicked him to roll him over to face her. She stared down at his face, contorted with humiliation, as she continued to disparage the man. “Pathetic. You really *are* like an insect. Were you truly the previous emperor?”



“Y-You! How dare...!”

“I’m truly glad that you aren’t biologically related to His Majesty.” Jill peered into Meruonis’s eyes, expressing her hostility and ensuring that it’d never be forgotten, etched forever in his memory. “*Never* approach His Majesty *ever* again. Don’t act like a father. The next time you do it, I’ll kill you.” She turned to her knights. “Take out the trash for me.”

“As you wish, Dragon Consort,” Camila and Zeke replied with a bow. They proceeded to sit Meruonis up.

“Y-You guys were working for the Dragon Consort?! You tricked me!” Meruonis wailed.

“All I can say is that you should’ve realized it sooner,” Camila replied.

“Silence him. His voice disgusts me,” Jill ordered.

Without another word, Zeke punched the man once more in the gut. Meruonis’s eyes rolled back into his head as he lost consciousness.

“You sure you don’t need to kill him?” Rolf asked, gazing at the previous emperor who was being tied up.

“He’s not worth it,” Jill scoffed.

“Then how’ll ye clean this mess, lass?” Rolf asked. “Since the emperor’s been poisoned, *someone* needs to take the blame to end it all. The Three Dukes’ll need a name.”

“I’ve got an idea...as long as Lady Cassandra agrees to it,” Jill said.

She turned around and approached Cassandra, who was watching this series of events in astonishment. The First Consort blinked blankly.

“If I had known what kind of scum he was, I would have given you this ultimatum from the start,” Jill said. “If you don’t want that trash killed, obey me.”

Cassandra slowly took shallow breaths at first as though to breathe life back into her body, before she let out a loud laugh. The Sixth Consort inched away.

“L-Lady Cassandra...laughed!” she gasped.

“Oh, how very silly this is. It’s been a while since I’ve laughed so much. Despite your cute appearance, you’re quite wicked, Dragon Consort. Your threats are very good.”

Cassandra turned to face the Dragon Consort, her skirts fluttering behind her. She stood straight up and gazed down at Jill.

“By ‘save,’ I hope you mean that you’ll make it so that Emperor Meruonis’s plans never happened,” Cassandra said. “Are we clear?”

“That was my plan from the start,” Jill replied.

“I’m sure the Dragon Emperor wanted you to punish us. I pity him.” Her strained smile didn’t express an ounce of sympathy toward Hadis.

“I’ll ask you one thing. You have no plans of turning in the previous emperor, correct?” Jill asked.

“Of course. I’m the First Consort and his wife. He was a calm and kind man, but the Dragon Emperor made him unstable.” She gave a faint smile upon noticing Jill’s stare. “Will you laugh at me and call me a fool? I don’t blame you. Fione also chose to abandon him and me.”

“No, I like stuff like that,” Jill said. “And Lady Fione didn’t abandon you—she came to me so that I could save you, Lady Cassandra. She’s safe, isn’t she?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t know what would occur if I killed a Lehrsatz vixen. But for now, I suppose I must thank Fione for betting on you.”

Cassandra elegantly bent her knees, offering the highest respect she could give to a person above her. The Sixth Consort, the ladies-in-waiting, and the guards all kneeled in front of the Dragon Consort as Cassandra went on her knees.

“Please save us, Dragon Consort,” the First Consort said. “You may do with me as you please.”

Was it the angle or her expression? When she looked up, she seemed charming and adorable in Jill’s eyes. Perhaps this was the power that a consort held; Jill turned away, feeling a little embarrassed.

“I-I don’t know what to say when a consort of the Empress’s Palace allows me

to do with her as I please..." Jill stammered.

"If you desire, I shall teach you *anything* you wish," Cassandra replied.

If Jill's husband heard those words, he would've surely fainted. The Dragon Consort gulped and gazed at Cassandra with hopeful eyes as the First Consort gracefully smiled back.



HE woke up as usual. He was crazy busy lately, so he felt a lot better than normal.

"Ah, you're awake. Then I'll sleep..." the Dragon God said.

Wait, Rave. Explain. What's going on? Hadis thought.

"I'm tired from using my powers to heal you... Ask Missy. She's...right there..."

Rave's sleepy words soon faded into him falling straight asleep. Finding his adoptive father was useless, Hadis tried to sit up, when he noticed something on his bed. He was in his usual room and bed, but there was a lump beside him. He pulled the covers back.

"Jill?!" he cried in shock. "Wh-Wh-Wh-Why are you... D-Did I carry you here?! Huh?! I don't remember a single thing!"

"Mmm?" Jill mumbled sleepily. She looked and sounded adorable.

In her pajamas, she immediately jumped up and sat on a shocked Hadis's lap. She peered into his face.

"Are you awake, Your Majesty?!" she asked.

"Y-Y-Y-Yeah. You are too, it seems..." Hadis replied.

"How do you feel? Do you still feel ill?"

She gently knocked her forehead against his and closed her eyes. After a thoughtful cry, she opened her eyes and smiled.

"You don't have a fever," she said. "I'm glad..."

Hadis felt like his face was on fire. He covered his face with his hands and

groaned. Everything about that was cute. Jill was impossibly adorable.

“What’s wrong, Your Majesty?!” Jill cried. “Maybe you should sleep a bit more.”

“I-I’m fine... My wife’s just so, so cute!”

“Oh, so the usual attacks you’ve been having? Take a deep breath...and exhale.”

“Why are you here anyway?!”

Jill had been rubbing his back but stopped and blinked at him. Hadis pouted; it looked as though he was the one overreacting.

“Y-You said you’d sleep in my room once we married,” Hadis insisted. “I think it’s unfair for you to be here without my consent!”

“What nonsense are you on about during this emergency? You were poisoned, Your Majesty. Of course I’m here to guard you.”

Her serious retort made him feel weak. Hadis’s strong and adorable wife had always been clueless when it came to romance. She was refreshingly consistent, at least, but he wished that she could empathize a bit more or be a tad more emotional.

“Right, poison. I...” Hadis trailed off, about to admit that he had drunk it of his own accord. He was poisoned; he couldn’t make that mistake.

He finally realized that he had lacked prudence. In Jill’s eyes, he had been poisoned and had almost died. Guarding him in his sleep was a natural choice of action for her. *I wonder what happened after. I’m sure the culprit behind it has been found.* Hadis collected himself and smiled at Jill, sitting on his lap.

“My memory’s a bit fuzzy,” he said. “I’m sorry. But I’m better now. I guess that tea was poisoned.”

“Hmm... Sure.”

Hadis’s words were supposed to put Jill at ease, but her response was curt.

“Um, it’s not like I’m troubled because you’re my guard!” he added. “I was just honestly surprised that you were next to me when I woke up.”

“What’s with you? We were just sleeping next to each other. We’ve done so much more than that.” Jill let out a loud sigh. As Hadis tried to think of his next words, she got off his bed, turned around, and gave a mischievous grin. “You’re still a child it seems, Your Majesty.” She placed an index finger over her meaningfully smiling lips.

She was undoubtedly adorable. She was so cute, but...

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” Hadis cried. “Did you do something while I was sleeping?!”

“Hmm? Well, that’s a secret. It’s your fault, Your Majesty. You didn’t wake up.”

“Wait. Jill, come here and explain yourself. Or else, I won’t make your meals anymore!”

“Huh? Are you sure you want me to tell you?”

Jill found a glass of milk on his bedside table. She placed a hand on her hips and chugged it down as Hadis got out of bed and followed her.

“Maybe not,” he said after a short while. “I feel like I might die. I’ll be killed by you instead of the poison.”

“If you can talk that much, it seems you really are fine,” Jill said, placing her empty glass back on the table to face him. “I’ve got something to report to you.”

“Yeah.” Hadis smiled. His wife never let him down.

“I’d like to give the full account to the Three Dukes and His Highness Vissel as well. Could you please get ready, Your Majesty?”

“Of course. It’s a bit late, but how long have I been sleeping?”

“About half a day.”

“I see. So you solved it all within a night.”

“How could I let anyone targeting you run free?”

His wife puffed out her chest proudly. She was so reliable, cute, and precious to him that he didn’t know what to do. When he picked her up, she hugged him

back.

“I’ll protect you, Your Majesty,” she said.

Her actions gave it away; she’d been through quite a bit.

“I know,” Hadis replied. “For breakfast, I’ll serve scones with your favorite strawberry jam.” She must’ve done her best for him.

“Really?!” Jill cried with twinkling eyes.

She was always on his side. There was a part of him that was starting to believe that unconditionally. Just when he thought that she was about to show off her coolness that always made his heart nearly kill him...

“This wasn’t an attempted murder,” Jill declared with a smile in the room reserved for nobles. It resembled an audience room within the castle. “It was an accident.”

Hadis, Vissel, and the Three Dukes looked astonished as Jill slumped her shoulders.

“If I were to pin a suspect, it’d be me,” she said. “I apologize for the fuss.”

“Huh? Wait. Wait one sec. That’s impossible,” Bruno said, stepping forward. He sat to the right of a lavish chair—a throne where Hadis was sitting.

“Why do you say that?” Jill asked, perplexed.

“‘Why,’ you ask?! It’s impossible. It is...right? Wait, is it not?”

As Morgan received a glance from Bruno, he clicked his tongue in annoyance. “Don’t hesitate now, idiot. In any case, Dragon Consort, we require an explanation.”

“Well, you see, I was secretly trying to concoct an energy drink for His Majesty!” Jill replied earnestly. The room stared at her in shock. “His Majesty is frail, so I grilled geckos and vipers before grounding them into a powder. I even added nourishing tonics and mixed them with honey and milk to make it easier to drink. I added some herbs and other leaves to give it a nice aroma, hoping to make an energy drink that tastes like tea. I planned on sprinkling in some alcohol as a disinfectant and have His Majesty ingest the drink.”

She gave an exaggerated pause before she continued. “But I didn’t fully remove the viper’s venom and accidentally brought it out! Since dragons and snakes are similar, I thought maybe the venom would work to His Majesty’s advantage, but as you can see, that wasn’t the case. I’m so glad that His Majesty is safe. Thank you for listening!”

Jill bowed before quickly continuing, “And, I’ve got something to tell you all.”

“Wait! Wait! Stop right there! A story that absurd can’t be possible! Wait...can it?” Bruno asked, turning to Morgan.

“Of course not!” Duke Verrat roared angrily. “Dragon Consort, we can’t accept such an absurd story! Such a horrible story will tarnish our reputation if we let it slide! I haven’t forgotten the uproar you caused in the Empress’s Palace! I need a proper explanation!”

“Huh?” Jill asked innocently. “I told you that it was training, wasn’t it? It was good exercise. The security of the Empress’s Palace isn’t bad at all! The ladies of Neutrah were rather skilled, just as I’d thought!”

“That’s right! A good exercise, no doubt,” Bruno replied proudly.

“Quiet, you brawns-for-brains duke!” Morgan bellowed. “Dragon Consort, I ask that you stop underestimating us!”

“Duke Verrat, I was wondering if you could shelter the previous emperor,” Jill said. The energetic Morgan froze. “The consorts have told me that they’d like to retire once the Dragon Flower Crown Festival is over.”

“Even my sister—I mean, the First Consort?”

“Quite right. Lady Cassandra said that she wanted to relax soon. If so, the previous emperor would require a new place to live. Since his mother was from House Verrat, I heard that you have close ties with him. I think it’d help him relax. What do you think?”

Morgan stopped for a moment, doing a million calculations a minute in his head. Jill smiled. Until now, a majority of the people who were trying to revolt against Hadis had ties to Duke Verrat. The duke had skillfully avoided the blame until now, but he likely wanted to prevent any troublesome situations. Including the Empress’s Palace, those with close ties to the previous emperor were

concentrated in the Verrat duchy. To further investigate who these people were connected to, it was best to keep them close and take care of them.

“Of course, if there are any issues, I’ll ask Duke Lehrsatz or Duke Neutrahl to take him in,” Jill added.

“I’ll happily welcome the previous emperor,” Morgan said quickly. He knew that handing Meruonis over to the other two would only complicate affairs.

“Thank you!” Jill cried. “I’ll have Lady Cassandra become my head lady-in-waiting, so I won’t be able to return her for a while.”

“My sister will serve you? My, my, I’m honored and humbled that my sister’s been given such a delightful opportunity.” He forced his contorting lips into a smile and lowered his head. “Please tell her to serve you wholeheartedly. You’re wise beyond your years, Dragon Consort, but you’re still quite young. Hence, you played a cute prank on His Majesty that caused us to suspect a poisoning incident.”

“It’s not a prank. I did it out of love,” Jill insisted.

“Indeed. Pardon my words. You two are so intimate; perhaps this is youth. I’m rather envious.”

One duke was cleared away. As Jill and Morgan gazed at each other in understanding, Bruno cocked his head in befuddlement.

“So, what? It was all an accident? But...” Bruno started.

“Duke Neutrahl, I want to make the Dragon Flower Crown Festival a success,” Jill explained. “If this fuss drags on, it’d be difficult for me to focus on the preparations. Do you know what would happen as a result?”

“No, not really.”

“We won’t be able to host an arm-wrestling tournament!” she lamented.

Bruno’s eyes glittered. “All right! Let’s settle this with an arm wrestle! I don’t care about the rest!” He laughed boisterously.

The elderly Igor chuckled softly. “You’re settling matters with lightning speed. And what reward will you give this old man here? Perhaps you’re willing to acquit Fione of all her charges?”

“Is that not enough?” Jill asked.

“She has her own thoughts and acted on her own. Frida and Risteard also take responsibility for their own actions—that’s how they were raised. Don’t you dare take House Lehrsatz lightly, young lady.”

Igor smiled fearlessly. Cassandra had said that the Dukes of Lehrsatz had been extremely loyal to the Dragon Emperor. It was difficult to convince him. But what was important was to accurately offer what the opposing party wanted.

“Then why don’t you invest in our future?” Jill suggested.

Igor narrowed his eyes and placed a hand on his chin. “Eloquent phrasing. But if there’s nothing to invest in, I cannot take that gamble.”

“I had the caretaker of the Dragon Consort’s Palace cooperate this time around,” she said.

“Oh?” Igor placed his hands together with interest. “You caught him? Not bad. Is my younger brother doing well?”

“I want him to continue managing the palace along with being my strategist,” Jill said.

“Oho...” Igor nodded while stroking his chin. “A lazy man like him wouldn’t have given his name. I’m surprised you found out his identity. I suppose it’s because you’re from House Cervel. It feels like fate.”

Everyone was familiar with the name of Rolf de Lehrsatz. Twenty-five years ago, Kratos’s capital had been attacked as part of an extremely elaborate and unconventional plan. The Rave Empire hadn’t used the Rakia mountains and had instead used warships to secretly carry dragons and attack the kingdom from the ocean, destroying the capital. When House Cervel had realized that the soldiers in the Rakia mountains were bait, they hastily headed for the royal capital to assist the Kratos citizens, but by then, a majority of the Rave army had left. The Rave Empire had marched right through House Cervel’s domain, now empty as they had all headed for the capital and used the Rakia mountains to head home.

Since then, the royal capital of Basileia, which had originally been by the sea, was transferred farther inland, and anti-flight magic circles had been placed by

the ocean's border.

"My grandfather had told me quite a bit about him," Jill replied. "So, what do you say? Doesn't it sound interesting?"

"Do elaborate," Igor replied.

"A beloved daughter of House Cervel and the strategist of House Lehrsatz will be joining hands. Instead of speaking of a fairy tale about an invisible magical barrier, I think this deal will give birth to a new, better legend," Jill elaborated.

Igor's eyes twinkled as he laughed. He slapped his knees and grinned ominously. "I'm in! How could I say no to your resolve? You'll be joining hands with a man who cornered your household into a predicament!"

"Though I must confess that Lord Rolf is still evading my capture."

"He's lazy and indolent, a rare type within House Lehrsatz. But I believe that *you* can extract his seriousness. He'd often grumbled that he wanted House Cervel. Very well, I shall gamble upon this future."

With the Three Dukes in agreement, Jill breathed a sigh of relief.

"And what about you, Prince Vissel?" Igor asked.

"What about me?" Vissel replied. "I follow His Majesty's orders."

"I see. Then Dragon Emperor..."

This was where the real fight began. Igor stopped talking, Bruno braced himself, and Morgan took a step back.

"What's the meaning of this, Jill?" Hadis asked.

The Three Dukes were child's play compared to the beautifully smiling Dragon Emperor.

"You? The culprit? Do you really think I'd believe a story that ridiculous?" As his voice echoed through the room, the air seemed to tremble. Jill hadn't replied to him yet, but her mouth grew dry from nervousness.

"Are...you angry, Your Majesty?" she managed to ask.

"Of course I am. Are you trying to make a fool out of me? The Three Dukes have done just that, but will you follow suit?" Hadis's tone was kind, but the

gaze and expression he pointed toward Jill was so cold that it chilled her to the bone. “I can understand the Three Dukes. I didn’t expect much from them anyway; they just need to stay out of my way. But you’re different, aren’t you?”

The Three Dukes were petrified and silent as a tomb. They had likely never seen Hadis like this and hadn’t expected a man who doted over his Dragon Consort to take such a frosty attitude with her. None of them could hide their shock. Jill internally mocked the dukes just a little for underestimating her husband. Hadis was born a Dragon Emperor—he loved and spoiled Jill, but he would never forgive a Dragon Consort who mistook her role.

“Who are you protecting?” he asked, his jeering, golden gaze observing Jill’s every move closely. “I’m not truly angry just yet, so I’d like for you to be honest with me. Or...” He widened his eyes and smiled, his lips curling up like a crescent moon as he sneered, “Will you choose that person over me?”

These words irritated Jill. “I prioritize protecting you above all, Your Majesty.”

“Then spill it. Who tried to harm me?”

“I beg your pardon, Your Majesty, but I had assumed that you forced yourself to down the energy drink that I made for you,” Jill said.

Hadis raised an eyebrow. Just remembering that humorous story almost made him laugh.

“That drink clearly had a foul odor,” Jill reasoned. “Anyone would notice it before they took a sip. I’d argue that there’s almost no way *you’d* miss it, Your Majesty—you go so far as to make your own meals for fear of being poisoned. But if you didn’t drink it for *my* sake, well...that’d mean that you drank the poison of your own accord.”

Hadis turned expressionless as he uncrossed his legs.

“Oh dear, that’s certainly absurd, isn’t it?” Jill asked, taking a step forward while tilting her head, perplexed. Hadis didn’t falter, but he silently averted only his gaze. “If you truly *did* drink that poison, surely you know just how worried and angry I’d be, don’t you, Your Majesty?”

When Jill took another step forward and cocked her head to meet his gaze, he looked in the opposite direction.

“But if you insist, I’ll let you decide, Your Majesty,” she said, standing proudly in front of her husband, who stubbornly refused to meet her gaze. “You either drank what I made for you or drank poison of your own accord. Feel free to choose. But depending on your answer, don’t think I’ll let you sleep tonight.”

“Th-That phrasing’s a little...” Hadis started.

With a loud thud, Jill kicked Hadis’s chair from under him, causing the emperor to slide down and fall to the ground. She gazed down at his trembling body and cracked her knuckles menacingly.

“And your answer?” she demanded.

“I-I don’t think it’s right to use violence to solve problems...”

“And just *who* is always at the root of trouble?!” Jill shouted, throwing a punch.

Hadis managed to dodge her fist and cower behind a chair, using it as a shield. “S-S-S-Stop, Jill. Let’s talk it out. I understand very well that you’re angry with me. And everyone’s watching—hey! Where do you think you guys are going?!”

“For an elderly man like me, who has already lost his wife, the sight of a newly married couple is too bright for my eyes,” Igor said.

“I must clean up after this mess,” Morgan reasoned.

“And I’ll find an arena to host the arm-wrestling tournament!” Bruno declared.

“Brother! Brother Vissel! Say something!” Hadis cried.

“Your actions are always correct,” Vissel said. Hadis beamed with hope, happy to have found an ally, but the crown prince added with a smile, “So I truly believe that a brother as adorable as you would never drink poison without consulting others first.”

“Brother!”

“...Everyone was worried,” Jill mumbled, facing the ground. She felt frustrated and powerless, realizing that Hadis simply didn’t understand. “His Highness Vissel turned pale the moment you fainted, and Lutiya barged into the room where you were brought in. Princesses Natalie and Frida were nursing you back

to health while fighting back tears, and even Prince Minerd lost his cool, treating you without a care about his sullied clothes. Even the Three Dukes looked worried until your condition stabilized.”

For the first time, Hadis looked away awkwardly.

“And I was so, so anxious...” Jill finished, gritting her teeth and glaring at him.

She would’ve rather died than cried in front of him, but she was unable to hide the emotions that welled up in the corner of her eyes. A panic-stricken Hadis knelt down and stretched his arms toward her.

“I-I’m sorry, Jill,” he said. “Don’t cry.”

“I’m not crying! You just downed my energy drink! That’s all!” She took a step back and took a deep breath before gazing back at him. “In exchange for making me worry, let me eat the food at the stalls of the Dragon Flower Crown Festival. I’ll go to every stall!”

“I-I owe you that?”

“Of course! Or else, I’ll never forgive you!” Jill puffed out her chest confidently.

Hadis slumped his shoulders. After a few moments, he sighed and mumbled, “All right. How could I say no to your energy drink? But I’m just looking the other way.”

As Jill wiped her tears away with the back of her hands, Hadis stood up and spoke loudly, his voice echoing throughout the room as though he was talking to an audience. “Do your best and work together to deceive me. However, if I *ever* catch wind of it, I won’t hold back. And now, you all are indebted to me. It seems you’ve got no complaints regarding the Dragon Consort’s capabilities either.”

Jill whirled around and saw the Three Dukes kneeling to them by the door.

“I’m moved by the Dragon Consort’s decision for this incident,” Morgan said. “My sister must also be pleased.”

“Her strength is exactly as rumored,” Bruno added.

“My elderly body can only admire your keen judgment about the Dragon

Consort, Dragon Emperor,” Igor said last. Kneeling in the center, he smiled and looked up. “We Three Dukes shall risk our lives to serve you.”

“You should’ve said so from the start. It would’ve made things easier,” Hadis replied grumpily. He grabbed his chair and placed it where it was before taking a seat. “Get to work. This is the first real Dragon Flower Crown Festival in three centuries. Failure isn’t an option.”

“Your wish is our command,” the Three Dukes said.

As they left respectfully, Vissel followed suit. When Hadis and Jill were left alone together, she finally realized that the Empress’s Palace and the Three Dukes were on her side. She jumped on top of Hadis.

“We did it, Your Majesty!” Jill squealed.

“Yeah. Since this is my desired result, I’ll stay quiet.” He crossed his legs, rested his face on his hand, and turned away.

“Why do you look so angry?”

“Because you’re hiding things from me. Like receiving love letters.”

“Huh? I never have.”

Hadis looked at Jill dubiously, but it was the truth. She’d never received love letters, only shady, mysterious documents resembling a letter.

“You liar,” Hadis mumbled with a frown.

His eyes conveying his displeasure were so adorable that she giggled.

“What?” he asked. “I fainted from drinking my beloved’s energy drink. It’s not poisoning, but a rather unfortunate accident. Since the Three Dukes agree, everyone will roll with that, and I won’t ask any questions. That’s what you want, right?”

“That’s right. You’re a naughty emperor for trying to uncover a woman’s secret.”

“Huh?”

Hadis turned to Jill, who smiled as maturely as she could. She used the consorts in the Empress’s Palace as an example.

“Be a good boy and endure it, okay?” she requested, poking his lips with her finger.

After a few seconds, smoke rose from Hadis’s embarrassed face. “Wh-Where do you keep learning stuff like that?!”

“Lady Cassandra taught me! I’ve still got a lot to learn!”

“I’ve gotta crush the Empress’s Palace right now! They’re a bad influence!”

“I trust that the meeting is over?” a voice cut in.

The doors of the room slammed open as Cassandra, the bad influence, strutted right in with the other ladies-in-waiting in tow.

“We must have a fitting session right now,” she insisted. “We don’t have time. Dragon Emperor, if you would change as well...”

“Huh? Me too?” Hadis asked.

“The outfit I saw you in is just a hand-me-down and lacks taste and elegance. We shall create a new outfit for you, along with the Dragon Consort’s.”

While Hadis was still confused, the excellent ladies-in-waiting brought in screen partitions and tables where they lined up colorful fabrics and glittering accessories. Several seamstresses marched right in with tape measures in their hands. Among them was a familiar face—a seamstress who served the Sixth Consort.

“But of course, we cannot ignore tradition,” Cassandra declared. “We shall incorporate some of that while ensuring the newest, trendiest fashion. There will be no compromises, only the best. Dragon Emperor, Dragon Consort, prepare yourselves.” Her sharp gaze made her seem like an instructor, overwhelming Hadis.

“Um, but I still have work...” he started feebly.

“And you can let the Three Dukes handle that. What else are they for?”

“Y-You’re so fired up suddenly that it’s terrifying!” Hadis cried.

“Of course. The dignity of a new Empress’s Palace created by the Dragon Consort is on the line.”

After the festival, a vast majority of the women in the Empress's Palace would receive pension as customary and leave. However, some of them would stay to serve Jill. The people who came for this fitting session must've all been planning on staying; their determination was breathtaking.

"We'll aim to end this by nightfall," Cassandra said. "Work hard, everyone!"

"Jill, I only just recovered!" Hadis whined. "Stop her!"

"I'll do my best too!" Jill replied energetically. "Let's work hard, Your Majesty!"

The Dragon Consort was excited to see how this would turn out. She couldn't contain her eagerness as a pale-faced Hadis slumped over in his chair.

Chapter 5: The Dragon Flower Crown Festival

A large plate was slammed onto the table with a loud thud. As the deafening sound of the gong echoed, the host grabbed the victor's arm and raised it in the air.

"A-And the winner of the eating competition finals is this mysterious masked girl!" he announced.

The crowd cheered in awe as the girl, who polished off dishes that were larger than her, energetically waved to the audience.

"Jill...won..." Camila murmured.

"I felt like she would..." Hadis muttered, gazing wearily into the distance.

Camila clasped his shoulder in consolation as Zeke munched on a skewer and turned toward the mountain of food he was holding moments ago.

"I bought it all because I was told to go to every stall, but what'll we do now?" he asked. "These foods won't last for long."

"A portion of them will be souvenirs and some could be our dinner..." Hadis replied. "I won't let her eat all of this."

"Do you think Jill will listen?" Camila asked.

"I'll make her!" Hadis declared. "You were watching just now, weren't you?! How many grilled birds did she wolf down in the preliminaries? And then she easily gulped down a whole roasted pig! Meat isn't a drink! You can't just swallow it whole!"

"Your Majesty, I did it! I won!" his wife cried happily, jumping into his chest.

Had she forgotten why she was wearing that mask? The crowd averted their gazes out of consideration.

"The grand prize is a year's worth of flour! Woo-hoo! I told them to deliver it to the castle!" Jill shouted. The mask really served no meaning. "I just saved the

imperial castle's food stores with that, yeah? I won't let people say that I'm eating the empire out of food!"

"I feel like you're putting the cart before the horse, Jill..." Camila said.

"Zeke, did you buy food from all the stalls?" Jill asked.

"You're eating too much at once, aren't you?" Zeke replied, skillfully stopping her before Hadis could. "Take a breather."

Jill agreed and dropped the hands she held out to receive his purchases. "You're right. It might be better to exercise a little first. Let's go to the next one!"

She happily grabbed Hadis's hand and pulled him along. She was in high spirits today. He followed her awkwardly along with her knights.

It was the day before the Dragon Flower Crown Festival. Stalls lined up before noon in the imperial capital, hoping to set up their shop in the best shape, and were calling in customers. Even the Three Dukes had no idea how to stop Jill, who was dying to see everything on foot.

It seemed they were all in agreement that it would be troublesome if she went on a rampage. Vissel was colder than usual, possibly because of the poisoning incident. He sent Jill off, logically claiming that this was a perfect opportunity for her to greet the citizens.

Tomorrow, Jill and Hadis had a packed schedule from morning until midnight; the emperor was happy that he had time to walk around with her, but she was so engrossed in eating that he was feeling a bit lonely.

"Aw, come on," Rave reasoned with a carefree laugh. **"Let her blow off some steam. Missy's been working so hard as a Dragon Consort these days."**

Hadis frowned and thought, *We're just walking around and eating.*

"Yeah... I get that. Make sure not to overeat."

When Hadis glanced around, he noticed Jill craning her neck amid the crowd of adults. She wanted to see the stage, but she was too short to catch a glimpse. She impatiently started jumping up and down, but with no luck. She was so adorable that it was frustrating. Hadis sighed, picked up Jill from behind,

and placed her on his shoulders.

“Can you see now?” he asked.

“I can!” she cried. “They’re doing a magic show, Your Majesty!”

He found it odd how he was able to let it all slide when he heard her excited cries. Magic, other shows, and stalls lined the street. Grilled meat, dried fruit with plenty of sugar, freshly baked pies, and other delectable dishes were being offered, but that wasn’t all. Many stalls were selling items as well, displaying little trinkets and handmade tchotchkes. By far, the most popular item was fresh flowers.

Flower crowns were on sale, but if people didn’t want to buy them premade, they had to make their own. Jill viewed the festivities while sitting atop Hadis’s shoulders.

“I see that a lot of men are buying the flowers,” she remarked.

“It’s to give them to a person they’re interested in,” Hadis replied. “They have to make it today to make it in time for tomorrow.”

“You’re already prepared, aren’t you? What crown will you give me tomorrow?”

Hadis chuckled at Jill’s energetic voice. He assumed that she had her hands full with designing a crown under the Dragon Consort’s name, but it seemed she remembered that she’d be the one receiving a crown from Hadis.

“That’s a secret,” he replied. “You’ll see it at tomorrow’s big stage.”

“I’ll have my hopes up! It’s so lively, Your Majesty. They’re still making preparations for tomorrow, too.” She suddenly took on a mature tone, and Hadis glanced up. Jill peered down at his face with a smile. “I’m glad everyone’s having fun,” she said.

The shift wasn’t sudden at all. She was certainly turning into an adult. She was gazing at the city as a Dragon Consort, much like how Hadis was viewing the scene.

“It’s because you worked really hard,” he said.

“Hmm, but I’m still a bit anxious about tomorrow’s ceremony.”

“You’ll be just fine.”

After they walked through the crowd, Hadis lowered Jill from his shoulders and held her hand. She shyly took his hand and squeezed it back. *Wait, this is the right mood, right?* It was just then that Hadis heard a voice behind him, causing him to frown. Trouble was heading his way.

“Ah, why if it isn’t the Dragon Emperor!” Bruno boomed, his stature matching his loud voice.

Hadis wondered why Duke Neutrah! was here, but he soon remembered that Bruno was in charge of security—it wasn’t odd for him to inspect the streets where the festivities would take place.

“Please don’t call his name so loudly,” Jill said sternly. “We’re here in secret.”

Hadis and the Knights of the Dragon Consort shifted around awkwardly at this sound scolding, but Bruno nodded in agreement.

“I see, in secret... No wonder you’re wearing a mask,” he said. “Then this is perfect. Please look over there.”

Bruno solemnly pointed to a corner of a clearing beyond the street. There was a desk and a chair standing isolated with a banner that read, *“Arm-wrestling Tournament. Come one, come all, challengers!”* Hadis had a *very* bad feeling about this. The color drained from his face, and even the knights turned pale.

“I’ve even prepared a luxurious prize for challengers—Neutrah!’s secret muscle-enhancing serum,” Bruno said.

“Sounds great,” Jill replied.

“I’d like to ask for a match. If you’re not officially out here as the Dragon Consort, I don’t want you to hold back.”

“You’re on.”

The pair of muscleheads, the root of this ominous feeling, silently headed for the clearing. Hadis sighed, his shoulders drooping.

“Rave, barrier,” he asked.

“Right on. You owe me a crepe later,” the Dragon God replied.

Perhaps it was a small price to pay if she was willing to remain a child for a bit longer. A bell solemnly rang from the imperial castle, signaling the start of the festival. For the first time in three centuries, a Dragon Flower Crown Festival hosted by the Dragon Consort had begun.



ON the day of the festival, the castle hosting the parade was rather quiet. Everyone was dispatched outside, and Jill had no time to relax.

Hadis had finished the last bit of his work before departing for the parade, and Jill was busily making her way through the place. When she turned the corner of a wide corridor, she bumped into MinerD. He looked surprised for a moment, but quickly smiled and greeted her.

“Ah, good day, Dragon Consort.”

“Wait, was the work His Majesty was talking about referring to having an audience with you?” she asked.

“Quite right. I didn’t think it’d be delayed until the day of the festival. Goodness, I suppose your energy drink had affected him greatly.”

Hadis’s poor health was the reason that the ambassador’s official requests regarding aiding poor harvests, meeting Gerald, and reporting about Queen Faris’s coronation had been put off until today. Jill pitied MinerD just a bit; he was under house arrest until today.

“But you can tour the festival today, can’t you?” she asked.

If he couldn’t, he would be unable to see Gerald beside Natalie. MinerD nodded and glanced at the soldiers behind him.

“I’m under close watch—I mean, I was given a guard detail to tour the festivities,” he said. “I would’ve liked to see the city as well; I heard that some interesting things have been going on. A small masked girl was going around devouring all the food apparently, and had even won the eating competition. It was big news.”

“Huh, I see...” Jill replied.

“And that girl even defeated Duke Neutrahl in an arm-wrestling tournament.”

“Wow, amazing,” Jill said in a deadpan.

“You’ve got a long way to go with hiding your tells, Dragon Consort. You’re speaking in a monotone and you’re averting your gaze.”

She couldn’t refute it. She didn’t mind if she was found out, but it was vexing to know she was seen right through. As payback, she decided to tell him what she’d been meaning to for a while.

“Prince Miner, I’d like to thank you,” she said. “Thank you for returning that night without a fight.”

When Jill had launched her assault on the Empress’s Palace, Miner was hiding in the inner courtyard. But the prince coolly cocked his head to one side.

“Whatever are you on about?” he asked. “Thanks to you, I’ve been able to spend my days in peace. I must return to Kratos, so I’m grateful that I was able to relax for a while.”

“...Are you going back?”

“I am. I don’t think Kratos expects much from me, but I’d only be a nuisance if I stayed here,” Miner admitted.

“You haven’t met with Princess Natalie yet, have you?”

Jill had received a report that Miner hadn’t left his room during the house arrest, but he was doing so of his own accord. Lutiya often visited his room to talk, and Frida arrived to provide some gifts and treats multiple times. Even Vissel had met Miner on several occasions for work—the crown prince had expressed his gratitude toward Miner for treating Hadis during the poisoning incident. When Miner was offered a reward in return, he shook his head with a smile, claiming that he didn’t need anything.

“I’ve spoken with her a few times through the door,” Miner said.

“Princess Natalie looked sad. She claimed that you wouldn’t talk to her properly,” Jill told him.

“That’s how it goes. I don’t know how I can face her.”

Miner smiled faintly. Jill could empathize, for he’d left with his mother and abandoned Natalie. A reunion of the siblings would be an awkward affair, but

this situation still didn't sit right with Jill.

Minerd expressed no hostility. In fact, he seemed more like an ally, but the prince refused to clearly state his position. In the end, she had no idea why he plotted to assassinate the previous emperor. Perhaps Natalie would know, but she was busy preparing to tour the festival with Gerald, and Jill didn't want to burden her.

"But...you won't abdicate your claim to the throne," Jill said cautiously.

Minerd gave an amused nod. "Indeed. It's one of my weapons."

"If you return to Kratos, you might be killed as a way to provoke the empire," Jill warned.

"I don't think that princess would do such a thing. I believe she truly sympathizes with me as I fret over my younger sister's safety. I've heard that the previous emperor will leave the Empress's Palace tomorrow."

"I haven't a clue," Jill replied. "I don't know the details myself."

In truth, Meruonis was set to leave today.

Minerd stared at Jill and sighed. "You're very good at muddying the waters when it comes to strategies. Is that the boon of House Cervel's education, I wonder?"

"I'm honored to receive such praise," Jill curtsied.

"I'm grateful that you resolved this incident amicably, I'll have you know. Killing the previous emperor is more important to me than dying in Kratos."

Though Meruonis had already abdicated the throne, he was the former emperor of Rave. If he were to be killed by Kratos's Ambassador of Friendship, surely reparations from Kratos or retaliations were in order to protect the dignity of the empire. The citizens wouldn't be happy otherwise. It could very well trigger the start of a war.

"Won't you quit being the ambassador?" Jill asked. "I'm sure everyone wants you to return home."

"You're very generous, Dragon Consort," Minerd replied. "I'm also suspected of murdering the previous Grand Duke of Laika and hurting my own mother."

“Lutiya and Princess Natalie don’t seem to be seeking revenge for now. If you’re not trying to harm His Majesty, I don’t mind.”

“Very clear-cut and simple. I expect no less from the wife of a Dragon Emperor who protects logic.”

“I feel like you want to atone for what you’ve done,” Jill stated.

Minerd’s eyes softened for a moment before he smiled awkwardly. “You’re right. Being in debt goes against my principles. If the seeds that my mother had sown don’t bud, I’ll consider the offer positively.”

“Your mother? She was a consort, right?”

“Perhaps I’ve talked too much. Please excuse me.”

Minerd walked past her. After Jill watched his back grow smaller, she quickly turned around and headed where she needed to. *His mother... Will Lady Cassandra know a thing or two?* Jill wondered.

Rolf may also have been able to provide some insight, but Jill felt exhausted when she remembered Zeke and Camila desperately chasing after him earlier that day. An elderly man who managed to flee from even House Cervel was a tough nut to crack.

She arrived at the room where Hadis was changing, announced her arrival, and had the door opened for her. Her husband, dressed in a smooth, glossy outfit, turned around. The attire, meant to resemble a military uniform, was embroidered with silver thread on his shoulders, and glimmered every time he moved. A snow-white cape hung over his left shoulder—a trendy look that had made its rounds since the first Dragon Flower Crown Festival. It may have been traditional, but it looked avant-garde and charming.

“Your Majesty, you look so cool!” Jill gasped.

“Huh? Really?” Hadis asked. “Do I look good? Do I look cool?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Cassandra said, popping out next to him. “Now, Your Majesty, I ask that you leave. We shall begin dressing Lady Jill.”

As the servants scrambled to make preparations for the Dragon Consort,

Hadis sulked. Jill also pouted.

“I want to get a good look at him for a bit longer,” Jill whined. “His Majesty looks so cool.”

“Yeah!” Hadis agreed. “And I haven’t seen Jill’s outfit yet.”

“You’ll just have to wait and see, won’t you?” Cassandra replied.

Jill didn’t have a rebuttal to that. Hadis reluctantly allowed himself to be dragged away by Vissel. She thought that they were being expertly manipulated and looked up at Cassandra, who was busily giving out orders.

“Um, may I ask something about the old Empress’s Palace?” Jill asked.

“Certainly,” Cassandra replied before ordering, “Put the mirror farther back; it’ll get in the way. The same goes for the partition.”

“Prince Minerd told me something that bothered me,” Jill began. “He mentioned his mother sowing some seeds. Would you know anything about it?”

Cassandra, who was pointing to the location where the partition should be moved, lowered her arm and gazed at Jill. After a few moments of thought, the First Consort nonchalantly stepped closer to Jill.

“May we discuss this later?” Cassandra whispered. “We don’t have time right now, and it’s rather scandalous. I find it unwise to discuss it in front of many people.”

Jill immediately gave a nod of agreement. She was curious, but a scandal shouldn’t be talked about in front of a crowd of outsiders.

“Please focus on your role for now,” Cassandra said. “We don’t have much time until the parade.”

Jill was gently pushed toward the other ladies-in-waiting—they were ready with combs and makeup supplies in hand. She gulped nervously. The dragon maiden would head to the stage from the opposite direction of the Dragon Emperor, who would be giving the maiden a flower crown. The two parades would meet in the middle for the big finale. In other words, people could only view one of the parades. A small crowd for the Dragon Consort’s parade would directly insinuate her lack of popularity.

Cassandra and the other ladies busily rubbed Jill's face with skin toner and scented oils as she grew more nervous by the minute.

"U-Um, will there be people to watch my parade?" Jill asked anxiously.

"Please be at ease," Cassandra replied. "I've already hired some actors in the audience to help out."

"That doesn't ease me at all!" Jill cried.

"As you may already know, the day before the festivities, a mysterious girl in a mask ran around eating all the food in the stalls, won the eating competition, and even came out victorious in an arm-wrestling match against Duke Neutahl. There have been rumors that this girl could well be the Dragon Consort."

When Jill jolted, she was quickly scolded for moving around.

"Coupled with the rumors that you're a terrifying wife for brewing an energy drink that almost killed the Dragon Emperor, you've been given another nickname aside from the Gluttonous Dragon Consort—the Dreaded Dragon Consort," Cassandra added.

"It's gotten worse!" Jill yelped. "Th-Th-Then the flower crown's popularity..."

As initially planned, there were a total of four types of flower crowns for sale: three from the former consorts and one from Jill. The consorts' crowns, which had been toned down, reverted to their former splendor at Jill's request, and Jill had gathered the opinions of others for her own. She decided to add the buds of dragon's flowers to give her crown a new flair.

"Completely sold out," Cassandra announced.

When Jill tried to blink, she was asked to keep her eyes closed, and a brush glided over her eyelids.

"Small and energetic, victorious against Duke Neutahl in terms of brute strength, and capable of leading the Dragon Emperor around by the nose, you struck a chord with the children," Cassandra said. "Parents have also bought your crown in hopes of their children eating well, growing up healthy, and blooming into a beautiful flower like the buds on your crown."

Jill tried to ask a question, but her jaw was grabbed and locked into place.

Lipstick was slowly painting her lips.

“Everyone’s looking forward to seeing you,” Cassandra said. “I’m sure they’d be surprised to see such a cute little lady. There’s nothing more exciting than a maiden who’s just about to bloom. Now, please open your eyes.”

Their work was finished. Jill obediently opened her eyes and stared at herself in the mirror. She gulped nervously, but Cassandra and the other ladies respectfully bowed.

“You’ve got nothing to fear,” Cassandra assured. “Be confident, stand up straight, and smile. You’re our Dragon Consort, after all.”

With that, Jill was guided to a luxurious bi-level carriage where the dragon maiden would be standing. Behind her were the three ladies who’d be holding her train: Cassandra, Fione, and Sixth Consort Delia. The three, who had controlled the Empress’s Palace of the previous emperor until the very end, stood proudly. Jill felt like she didn’t hold a candle to them. The three consorts, however, had volunteered to hold Jill’s hems as their last task as consorts. It would signal a new era and a new Empress’s Palace that Jill would create. It was the Dragon Consort’s responsibility to answer those expectations.

A trumpet from the band sounded in front, and the carriage started to slowly move. When it made its way out of the dimly lit castle walls, Jill saw the smiles of the citizens wearing flower crowns and waving the empire’s flag under the bright, sunny skies. The dancers threw colorful flowers from their baskets into the air. As though to provide an example for a confused Jill, Cassandra smiled faintly and nodded to the crowd, Fione smiled wide and waved her hand, and Delia proudly yelled back in response to the cheers. They were each doing what suited them. Jill gained some confidence and stepped forward.

“How are you all doing?!” she yelled as loudly as she could.

Cassandra furrowed her brows, Fione placed a hand over her mouth, and Delia burst out laughing. After a brief moment of silence, laughter and cheering erupted from the crowd.

“Doing well!” the people shouted back energetically.

The young Dragon Consort, happy to receive a reply, enthusiastically waved

both hands in the air, and the cheering only grew louder.



WHEN Natalie arrived in a tailor-made dress, the Kratos prince was readjusting his glasses. The prince of integrity was clad in a white and blue attire with an open stand collar. He was so handsome that Natalie was secretly satisfied, happy to know that she had a good eye.

“How is it?” Natalie asked with a smile. “Does it fit right?”

“It’s fine,” Gerald replied. “Are these threads weaved with a spell that limits my magic?”

It seemed the prince, who hailed from a kingdom of magic, was well aware of what he was wearing.

“I don’t know the details,” Natalie replied curtly. “I don’t have any magic.”

“The effects last around six hours,” Gerald guessed. “The festivities take less than two, but I guess you’re all rather cautious of me.”

Gerald left his iron prison. Tension ran through the soldiers on guard. It’d been a while since Natalie had been so close to the prince, and she pursed her lips. The prince in question casually glanced around.

“Escort me,” he requested.

A soldier stood tall and encouraged the royal to follow. It was clear that Gerald was used to giving out orders, fitting for a prince. Natalie, however, was disappointed as she stayed where she stood, causing Gerald to turn around and cast her a dubious look.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I suppose Kratos Kingdom knows nothing about escorting a lady,” Natalie said.

Gerald gave a mocking laugh through his nose for only a moment. He immediately turned expressionless once more and politely offered his arm.

“Your hand, my lady,” he said.

“Thank you,” Natalie replied, wrapping her hand around his arm.

As the two walked together, Gerald's escort was perfect—he matched her stride, and she gave a look of triumph. He didn't smile, nor did he try to strike up a conversation with her, but she didn't mind for now. What was important was to take control of this situation. The prince would eventually have to be returned to his gilded birdcage.



TODAY was an important day. They were going to see their master's big moment, and they had no idea why they were running around during such a special occasion.

"Argh! We won't make it in time!" Camila wailed. "We'll miss the parade and the ceremony and everything!"

"Where'd that geezer go?" Zeke grumbled with a glare, looking around like a predator in search of prey.

Camila was ready to pack it up and call it a day. Recently, the Knights of the Dragon Consort had been tasked with capturing Rolf, the caretaker of the Dragon Consort's Palace, so that he'd become Jill's third knight. Rolf, possibly intuiting this, ran around and evaded his capture.

Today, he'd unusually shown himself leaving through the back entrance of the palace on horseback. If he left the Empress's Palace, there was nothing Zeke and Camila could do. They had no time to explain as they hastily borrowed horses and chased after him. Before they knew it, they had left the imperial castle—in fact, they were a good distance away from the imperial capital.

"Where are we? The mountains, right?" Camila asked.

The knights had been on the paved city streets after leaving the Empress's Palace, but midway through their chase, they entered a mountain that barely had any footing. They found Rolf's horse tied in place and jumped off theirs. They marked a few trees so that they wouldn't get lost, but as they ventured deeper inside the woods, they were unsure if they could make it back.

"What business does that geezer have here?" Zeke muttered. "This isn't the season for mountain climbing."

Patches of snow could still be found in the shade, and the temperature was

chilly.

“Maybe he’s got a secret house like His Majesty,” Camila suggested.

“Hey! Over ’ere!” a voice called out from behind them.

“Aaahhh!” Camila shrieked, hiding behind Zeke.

He also froze in place, but Rolf appeared upside-down, his legs hooked over a branch.

“Here? Were you guiding us here?” Zeke asked.

“Quit yer yappin’ and follow me. Since youse came all the way here, I’ll get all the help I can get,” Rolf replied.

Camila and Zeke exchanged glances, but Rolf hopped down and walked forward without turning around. Left with no other choice, the knights prepared themselves for the worst and quietly followed.

As they made their way through the thickets, they were met with a clearing. They were at quite a high elevation, on a steep cliff. Below were the meandering city streets that continued to the back of the Empress’s Palace gates.

“It’ll come soon. Sit back and wait,” Rolf ordered.

“Uh... Are we waiting for the carriage transporting the previous emperor?” Camila asked.

To prevent it from catching any attention, a carriage was scheduled to arrive behind the Empress’s Palace at around the start of the parade to lead Meruonis out. It would arrive at any moment now.

While the parade and the festivities required personnel to guard the streets and escort important guests, there was a low chance of Meruonis being targeted. The man had been abandoned by the Empress’s Palace and the Three Dukes; he wielded no power. Even Kratos or those against the Dragon Emperor would find Prince Gerald, who was touring the jubilee, a far more valuable target. Thus, it was decided to leave Meruonis with the fewest guards possible so that he’d quietly leave without causing a stir.

“Is there a reason that he’d be targeted?” Camila asked. “Will Duke Verrat

fake an accident and kill him off?”

“I hope that’ll happen; it’d take a load off my shoulders,” Rolf replied. “Duke Verrat can’t be underestimated. I’m guessing the story’ll be that Meruonis turns sickly out of anxiety and will die due to illness in a year or so. A pity, but he gets what he deserves.”

“Then why’re we keeping watch?” Zeke asked.

Rolf sat on the ground with a thud. “Youse remember the dragon that MinerD rode on? It ain’t a normal dragon. It didn’t greet the Dragon Emperor, and it flew around this place.” He was astute for noticing at all.

Zeke frowned. “Are we gonna find that dragon? What does that have anything to do with the previous emperor?”

“Remember the Draco Flute in Laika? MinerD entered Kratos with that flute as a souvenir and became the Ambassador of Friendship. Smells mighty fishy, if ye ask me,” Rolf said.

“But I heard that Dragon God Rave personally saw to it that the flute becomes useless,” Camila chimed in. “I heard it’s unusable now.”

“Ah, but who knows if it’s in the hands of Goddess Kratos. Even if it don’t got the exact same effects as the previous one...” Rolf muttered.

The Goddess was capable of creating the exact same miracles as the Dragon God. The knights grew tense.

“So, you think that dragon was created by the goddess?” Zeke asked.

“Dragons are the messengers of the Dragon God,” Rolf replied. “Even the Goddess can’t create one so easily. But I won’t be surprised if there was a lad or a lass out there trying to toe that line. I’ve been thinkin’ about it myself, youse see, about the borders of love and logic—about the boundaries that the deities can push.”

At once, Camila and Zeke thought of a certain shrewd boy, who’d been affectionately nicknamed “Raccoon Boy.”

“Kratos’s magic and Rave’s dragons that can burn magic are rival powers,” Rolf explained. “Tryin’ to fiddle with dragons will break that balance. MinerD’s

beast is just a diversion. Kratos doesn't really expect that thing to cause any destruction."

"Then why did Kratos make Prince Minerd the Ambassador of Friendship?" Camila asked.

"My guess is that they're tryin' to take our attention away from the dragon. Minerd didn't seem to realize it himself, either. In other words, the moment he rode that beast and descended upon the imperial capital, Kratos's plans were completed, regardless of the lad's actions."

It wasn't just the temperature that chilled the knights to the bone.

"Any buffoon can cook up a reason to start a war," Rolf reasoned. "The previous emperor was troubled by the fact that there wasn't a Dragon Emperor for three centuries and turned to Kratos for help since they constantly possessed a Goddess's vessel. He did some ass-kissin' toward the Kratos royal family and tried to form a contract that was practically treason, sparking the war twenty-five years ago. And I said no, but that fool pushed me to the frontlines to be a strategist! Bah! He said that he was fine if the third son turned up dead!"

Rolf suddenly opened his eyes wide and complained to the skies. "I'm through with that, ye hear? I don't wanna be put in that situation again! House Cervel, especially, chased after me like their lives depended on it! Good grief! They were so annoying, I tell youse! I hate her gaze! It's like she believes she can catch up to me if she never gives up! Ain't no way that's possible! She needs to catch a hint! Also, I don't wanna ride dragons!"

"Oh, I agree with you on that end..." Camila replied.

"Then pray nothing happens!" Rolf cried before he paused. "They're here."

Camila and Zeke looked up as Rolf stood, his sharp gaze chasing after the fast-approaching carriage.



THE parade itself was a simple process. Jill would depart from the west gates of the castle, while Hadis would leave from the east. They'd travel along the outer edges of the imperial capital and finally cut through the central main

street, arriving on the opposite ends of the stage, which was set in the grand city square in front of the castle.

Jill waved her hands energetically before retreating to the wings of the stage. Hadis was scheduled to arrive a bit later on the opposite end. While the dancers took the stage and enchanted the audience, final preparations were underway. Jill's makeup was touched up, and she wore a thin, hooded cape that was made from lace. It was decorated with pearls and translucent, allowing one to see her faintly pink dress underneath. She looked divine. The layered fabric and lace resembled flower petals.

When redesigning the dress, the consorts declared that there was no need to look mature, and the ladies-in-waiting and seamstresses agreed. The dress ended just around Jill's knees, which made her look the most adorable, and the warm, lovely colors accentuated her cuteness. Careful makeup made her skin glow, and her hair was loosely tied but kept down.

The theme of this outfit was: a fairy who wandered into a garden. The lace cape resembled a pair of airy wings, and the hood made her look a little secretive, like a flower bud. Jill's face was difficult to see for dramatic effect. She'd do the big reveal when she received the flower crown at the end.

"Why don't we talk for a few moments?" Fione suggested. "Being so nervous before the stage will only tire you out."

Jill, who was taking deep breaths, gave a small nod of agreement. "Lady Fione, will you be returning to the Lehrsatz duchy after leaving the Empress's Palace?"

"Not quite. I was thinking of owning an estate in Beilburg. I've wanted to try being a mother-in-law at least once in my life."

"Huh? A-Are you planning on doing something to Miss Sphere?" Jill asked.

"I've met her once regarding the bazaar. She was a lovely lady."

Jill had no intention of taking the consort's words at face value. She stared at a smiling Fione dubiously.

"I simply asked why she's hesitating to marry Ristead," Fione said.

“Th-That was rather straightforward of you...” Jill replied.

A teary-eyed, trembling Sphere flashed across Jill’s mind. Fione wasn’t a good match for the lady.

“She gave an excellent reply,” Fione said. “She said that Risteard may die young.”

Jill jolted, but Fione continued happily, “She knows my son very well. Because of his strong convictions, he’ll spout unnecessary words and make enemies all over the place. She accurately assumed that he may die early. I don’t blame her hesitation, for she wishes to rebuild the house of Marquess Beilburg. I laughed so loudly.”

“Sh-Should you be laughing?” Jill asked. “Miss Sphere will never accept his proposal.”

“Oh, she knows that she can’t refuse, but she just can’t make up her mind. I understand why Frida’s annoyed, and so I gave her a piece of advice: to go around and apologize in his stead. She’ll be a good stopper for Risteard. I thought that she’d look displeased, but she happily stated that she was good at apologizing. I couldn’t stop laughing.” Fione turned away and giggled at the memory. “I assume that they’ll officially become engaged in the near future. I’m counting on you when that time comes; I heard that His Majesty may be against it.”

“Of course. I’m on Miss Sphere’s side, but...”

Fione would undoubtedly be a tough mother-in-law, though Sphere’s carefree kindness and strength that she occasionally showed might pull her through.

“His Majesty is ready,” Cassandra and Delia announced, returning from their final confirmations.

“Understood. This way please, Dragon Consort.”

“O-Okay,” Jill replied. Her nervousness caused her to almost trip over herself, but Delia immediately supported the girl while Cassandra swiftly smoothed out the wrinkles before cupping Jill’s cheeks in her hands.

“You don’t have to overthink it,” Cassandra assured. “Just think about His

Majesty.”

“A-About His Majesty?” Jill asked.

“Indeed. Please take him to a beautiful garden of flowers.”

That seemed possible for Jill. She nodded, took a deep breath, and stepped forward, carefully avoiding the lace cape that fluttered behind her. The dress, cape, and flower crown were all part of a ceremony to signal her beginning. Flowers decorated the stage like a garden, but the ladies-in-waiting groaned that it simply wasn't enough.

And so, Jill suggested an idea of hers, and the ladies scrambled around to make it happen. It was important to convey more eloquently than simple words that a real Dragon Consort was here, and the Dragon Emperor would reign over the empire.

As Jill stepped onto the stage, seeds were being discreetly sown, away from the eyes of the audience. The Three Dukes had wished for a new legend, but no doubt that the citizens had also shared the same feelings. Even Hadis did too. It had been three hundred years. Because the people's faith in the Dragon God was waning, this was necessary more than ever before. Jill needed something visible and tangible, different from the barrier that the first Dragon Consort had erected.

Bloom! Jill thought. Within the Rave Empire, there was only one type of flower that would bloom with magic. The sown seeds, reacting to Jill's magical energy, started to sprout. With every step she took, the dragon's flowers glimmered and turned into buds. They covered the simple, man-made stage with their roots, and the stem and leaves, plump with magical energy, grew taller and larger. It was as though the stage was being transformed into a flower garden.

“What's going on?!” a person from the crowd shouted.

“These are dragon's flowers. Every time the Dragon Consort takes a step, the flowers are blooming!” cried another.

The moment Jill stepped toward the center, she emanated her magic from her feet, causing the flowers to all bloom at once. In a flash, the stage was

covered in white flowers as the blooming petals spread farther out.

“Dad! The buds on my crown are blooming! It’s glittering!” a girl cried happily, wearing a crown of Jill’s design.

“It looks like the Garden of Resting Dragons...” the father murmured.

And he was right—this was the garden where dragons were laid to rest, and where the Dragon Emperor fell in love with the Dragon Consort. A moment later, Hadis appeared from the opposite end. His presence was overwhelming even in the magical garden. In fact, his silent figure accentuated the flowers further. Jill knew that a child like herself was no match for him—in fact, the three hem holders behind her didn’t hold a candle either. But for now, there was no need for her to think about anything unnecessary. She just needed to focus on Hadis, and nothing else. All she needed to do was smile at his arrival.

Hadis looked a bit surprised but smiled back and approached her. There was no need for any words. He quietly reached out with both arms; atop his palm, his magic glimmered a shimmering silver. The crowd gulped and watched on, forgetting to blink, and even Jill was entranced by the sight in front of her.

The flowers that she bloomed were guided toward the silver light and gathered on Hadis’s palm. The two melted into each other and were tied together with silver before emitting a rainbow glow. He was making a flower crown—it was being woven right in front of her eyes using the dragon’s flowers as it shimmered in all the colors of the rainbow.

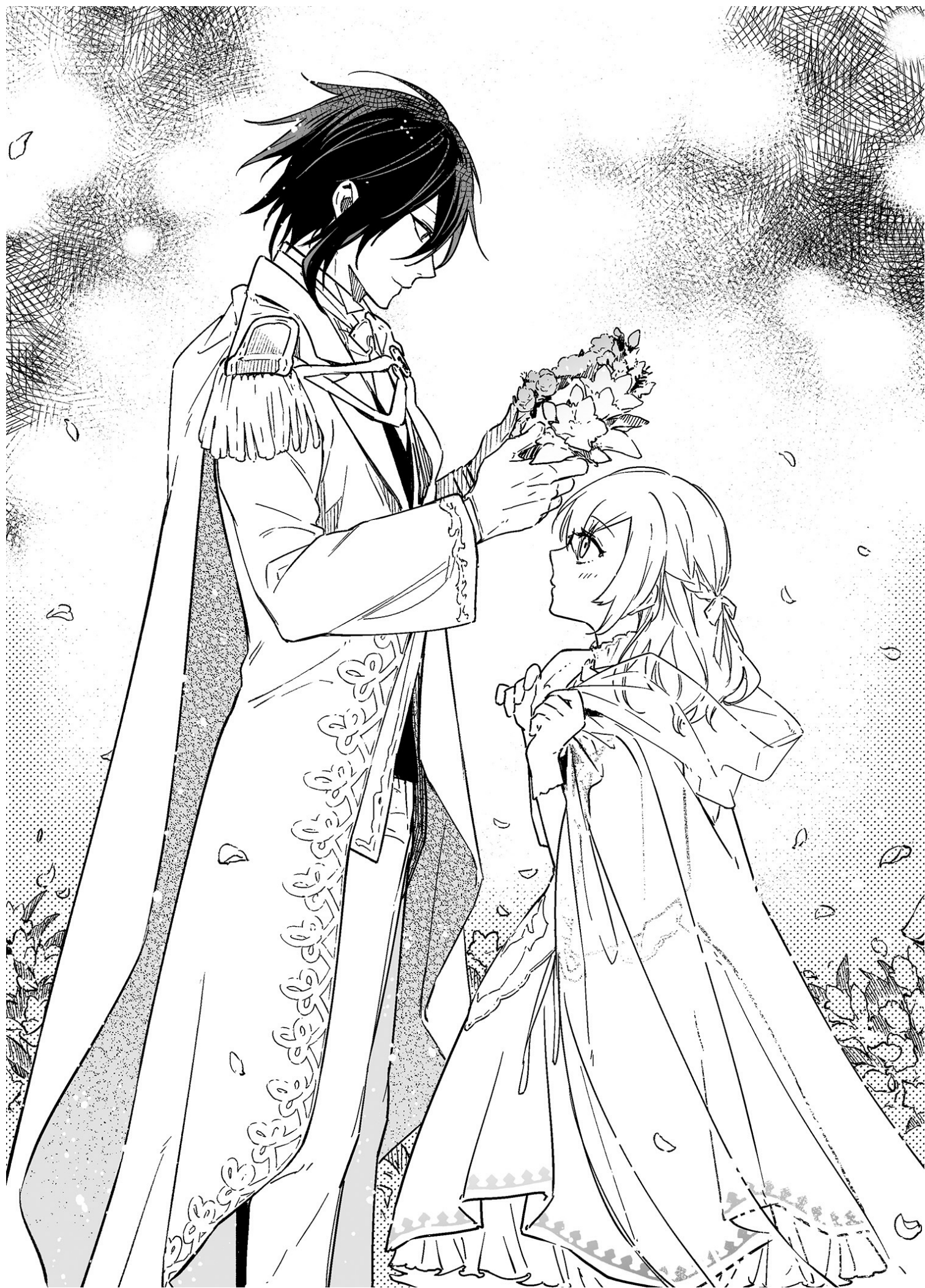
“Apparently, this is what was done because she can’t weave a crown in her dragon form,” Hadis said.

“Huh?” Jill asked.

In the next moment, a blinding light flashed in front, and a crown of dragon’s flowers appeared in front of her with a silver shimmer. Under the light, it glittered rainbow—there was only one crown like this in the world. Hadis lifted it in the air, and Jill removed her hood. There was no need for her to kneel because of the height difference, and the Dragon Emperor laughed, claiming that he’d always be the one to kneel to his wife.

The moment the crown was placed atop her head, the magic splashed forth,

raining silver specks upon the crowd. As applause slowly broke out, cheering followed soon after.



Hadis reached out, and Jill placed her hand over his. She was guided forward when a strong gust of wind blew over the stage, causing a storm of petals to dance in the air. A massive shadow loomed over the arena—a flight of dragons. They were flying in the air, above the skies of the imperial castle, expertly weaving through the petals. Jill looked up in shock.

“Since we’ve got the real Dragon Emperor and Dragon Consort, we shouldn’t hold back on the theatrics, don’t you think?” Hadis said with a smile.

A dragon descended in front of the stage, causing the crowd to panic. He was a black dragon with gold eyes.

“Y-Your Majesty, is he...” Jill started.

“Come on,” Hadis said, scooping her up.

Her cape, which had been caught on something, was blown away by the wind. It looked as though the fairy had turned into a human. *Th-This isn’t what was planned.*

Cassandra frowned, Fione smiled, and Delia looked shocked, but no one stopped Hadis as he gracefully jumped on top of his black dragon. Cheers erupted from the crowd, honoring their Dragon Emperor.

“Y-Your Majesty, we need to distribute the flowers!” Jill cried.

“We’ll have flowers rain down on them from the dragon,” Hadis replied. “It’s more fitting, isn’t it?”

The moment Hadis grabbed the reins, the black dragon outstretched his wings and took to the skies. A basket was dangling from his saddle, stuffed with dragon’s flowers. The other dragons carried a similar basket, as some playfully ascended and descended while others cut through the air in a circular arc, raining flowers onto the crowd—a flurry of petals fell upon the imperial capital.

Wherever the dragons flew, white petals were below, covering the capital in a sheet of white.



AS the clattering wheels of the carriage came close enough to hear, Zeke muttered, “Hey, did you hear something weird just now?”

“Weird? Uh, I don’t think so...” Camila replied, her eyes glued to the approaching carriage below.

Rolf closed his eyes and cupped his ears. “The lad’s right. I hear somethin’. Is this...a melody of magic? The same melody’s repeating over and over again. You can only hear bits and pieces if you’ve got magic...”

“Wait, music?” Camila asked. “You mean—”

Before she could mention the Draco Flute, a loud roar echoed, shaking the ground. A large shadow launched out from the forest and headed straight for Meruonis’s carriage. At first, it looked as though the beast had black scales, but it had simply emerged from dark mist.

“Crap! Let’s head back to the castle!” Rolf yelped.

“Wait, aren’t we gonna help the carriage?!” Camila asked.

“Yeah? Can *youse* defeat a dragon?”

She couldn’t. The dragon’s talons attacked the carriage. If she jumped in there, she’d die a meaningless death. As she fled, her back heard the panicked neigh of a horse as the carriage fell with a deafening thud.

Rolf didn’t hesitate as he made a beeline for his steed and kicked its sides. Camila and Zeke soon followed suit.

“Wait, so did the previous emperor have the Draco Flute?!” Camila asked.

“No idea!” Rolf replied. “He would’ve been patted down before ridin’, but that melody sounded like a spell. Like an aria that Kratos uses to call out monsters.”

“Huh?! So that dragon *was* made by Goddess Kratos, then?!”

“I don’t think even the Goddess could create dragons!” Rolf shouted. “Dammit! Somethin’ else must be goin’ on!”

As the trio’s horses galloped on, a dragon approached—both parties were headed for the imperial castle. Camila and her group were closing in on the castle, but the dragon was close behind. When they finally saw the back gates, the beast finally overtook them, but she didn’t miss the person who was riding the dragon.

“The previous emperor was on it!” Camila cried.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!” Zeke bellowed. “What’s he gonna do back at the capital?!”

“We need to tell Jill about this! Hurry!” Camila shouted.

The moment they reached the gates, the knights jumped off their horses.

“Hold it!” Rolf yelled. “Let ’em pop some fireworks! I don’t care if they’re celebratory!”

“Huh?! Why?!” Zeke shouted back.

A ton of fireworks were scheduled to be set off for this festival, but this event was scheduled at night. It was completely unsuited for this current situation, but Rolf remained as serious as ever.

“We’ve gotta cover this up!” he claimed. “We needa make it look like a celebration and prevent this from being exposed! Imagine a mysterious dragon ruinin’ the festival, lad! The Dragon Emperor’s dignity’ll hit rock bottom!”

Camila turned pale and nodded along with Zeke.

Rolf was out of breath as he dismounted his horse.

“Hurry up and get better! Think of another plan, gramps!” Camila shouted as she left.

“Just go!” Rolf roared. “Ugh... I hate this... I’ve got motion sickness...”

Luckily, the fireworks were kept safe within the inner courtyard of the destroyed Empress’s Palace. When the knights stepped into the courtyard, Duke Neutahl was there, inspecting the items. He casually raised his hand upon seeing Camila and Zeke.

“Whatever’s the matter, Knights of the Dragon Consort?” he asked.

“Light the fireworks right now!” Zeke ordered.

“Huh? It’s the middle of the day and dragons are flying in the skies. We’ll scare them.”

“No, we’ve got an enemy dragon—just do it!” Camila yelled. “I don’t care if it’s celebratory! Grandpa Rolf’s orders!”

She cared little for the consequences and shouted as loud as she could. The duke grew serious and quickly gave his order. “Light them up immediately. Duke Lehrsatz shall take responsibility!” He turned back to the knights. “What’s going on here?”

It seemed Rolf’s name made quite an impact on this generation. As Camila gave a sigh of relief and started to explain, a loud noise interrupted her.



HE’D never seen flowers rain down on him like this before. The petals that fell into his hand were glittering beautifully, as though they were made of magic.

“Snow flowers...” Gerald murmured beside Natalie.

Natalie glanced at his side profile. They were currently seated above the outer walls of the castle, where they could look down at the stage. The castle walls weren’t a comfortable seating area, but there were plush seats for the honored guests, and rugs lined the ground.

“These aren’t snow flowers. They’re dragon’s flowers,” Natalie insisted.

“They’re the same thing. In Kratos, they’re called snow flowers,” Gerald replied, staring at the petal on his palm. “In our kingdom, it’s the only flower that doesn’t bloom with magic. You must give it ample water, sunshine, and fertilizer, or it’ll wilt. And it only blooms in the winter. It’s like a plant of Rave. The legend goes that it must’ve fled from the skies, and was given the name snow flower. It’s rarely seen in Kratos, but it was my mother’s favorite flower.”

The mention of a mother made Natalie wonder which mother he was referring to. She cheerfully changed topics to hide her thoughts. “It seems like Rave and Kratos have a lot of stuff like that. They were created equally, but they were originally the same thing.”

“How silly.”

He crushed the white flower in his hand and stood up. Natalie hastily got up and chased after him.

“Hey! Where are you going?!” she asked.

“Back. That’s not an issue, is it? I don’t know who the Ambassador of

Friendship is, but I'm sure they were able to confirm my existence."

"True..."

A good distance away from Natalie, but in a location where they could be seen from, was her older brother. He was likely watching them, though he refused to meet her eye. She nodded to Frida, who looked worried from a short distance away, and jogged after Gerald, who was swiftly walking ahead. The crown prince had memorized the path he had taken only once and didn't hesitate. Natalie was anxious, but Rave was able to skillfully maneuver around Kratos's requests. Still, this didn't improve her situation. The flower that Gerald had crushed was seared into her mind.

Why am I acting so dejected? Of course things won't go so easily, she thought. The two nations had been at odds for centuries. There had been several skirmishes with Kratos before she was even born. She felt blessed that they were able to lie about Gerald studying abroad at all. But how much time did they have left?

Gerald was still suppressed, but Kratos was busily working toward crowning his younger sister as the new queen. When Rave received the official notice, it was safe to assume that Kratos already had their bases covered. Perhaps the crown prince would never be allowed back to Kratos.

What would Gerald do then? Would he be freed from his sister, his kingdom, and the Goddess? Was this a good thing? Natalie didn't hold any of the answers.

A breeze blew behind her as though to encourage her decision. The tower where he was locked up in was connected to a wall by a bridge. It was high in the air, and the dragon soaring through the sky seemed closer to her.

"U-Um, I...received something from your father," Natalie started. Gerald, who had swiftly walked toward the iron gates of the tower entrance, stopped and turned around. "If you'd like, together we can..."

But a looming shadow obstructed her resolve. She quizzically looked up and was stunned to see a dragon. The sun was shining behind the beast, and the dark mist made it difficult to make out the dragon's color. Its eyes were pitch-black and bumbled around awkwardly. Clearly, this was no normal dragon, but

Natalie was more taken aback by the rider.

“I found you, Natalie,” a man said.

“Father?! How?!” she gasped.

The dragon let out a deafening roar and stomped on the bridge, causing it to crumble from the middle. The strong wind made Natalie stagger into the corridor toward the tower. She immediately looked up to confirm Gerald’s position—the crown prince was on the same side as her, in front of the tower entrance and crouching low. His glare of suspicion was pointed toward her father, former emperor Meruonis, who was descending from the dragon. She determined that this wasn’t Gerald’s plot and quickly shifted her gaze back to Meruonis.

She couldn’t see the other side of the split bridge, barred by the dragon’s back.

“As long as I’ve got you, I’ve still got a bud,” Meruonis said gleefully.

It’d been years since Natalie saw her father. The smiling man had lost weight, and his vacant eyes made her shudder. *Why is he here? Why is he after me?*

A myriad of questions swirled around in her mind, but now clearly wasn’t the time to be carefreely asking these questions. Gerald was with her. If the crown prince decided to use this opportunity to flee, she couldn’t stop him.

“Th-The crown prince of Kratos is with me right now,” Natalie said. “If you’d like to talk, we can do so later—”

“Crown prince? Hah! Princess Faris will be queen soon!” Meruonis scoffed.

She thought she felt Gerald hold his breath—this was the worst scenario. When Natalie turned around, Gerald had already taken a sword from a soldier who was blown back by the dragon’s attack. He pointed his blade at the soldiers who arrived when they heard the fuss. He could barely use any magic, but he was ready to flee.

“Wait, don’t go!” Natalie pleaded. “I’ll explain, so please—”

Her father grabbed her hair, effectively restraining her. She glared over her shoulder at her father.

“Father, stop doing—”

“Don’t worry. A war won’t occur,” Meruonis assured. “The Rave imperial family and the Kratos royal family will become one.”

As he stroked Natalie’s stomach from behind, the princess stopped thinking and shivered.

“You see, I’m not your father,” he said. “Your father is actually *my* father. Do you know what this means?”

Gerald had parried the final soldier’s sword and delivered a kick as he jumped toward the wall of the bridge. Natalie didn’t want to listen to her father’s words and wanted to at least shout as loud as she could, notifying the others of Gerald’s attempt to escape. However, her throat grew tight, and she couldn’t utter a sound.

“This is a secret plan that your mother concocted,” Meruonis continued. “Because Hadis returned and kicked me out of the castle before you turned fourteen, I went through quite a bit of trouble. The other consorts kept getting in my way out of jealousy.”

It was then that Natalie intuited that something awful was about to befall her, and for some reason, fireworks popped into the air as though to signal the beginning of this tragedy.

“You and I are half-siblings, Natalie!” Meruonis declared. “Now, I can get my hands on that Heavenly Sword! Just like how when an older brother desecrates his younger sister and plants his seed inside of her gets the Parrying Dagger, I can finally get the Heavenly Sword! It’s all mine! I’ll receive proof of being the Dragon Emperor!”

Natalie was grabbed by her neck and pushed into the corridor. She knew she had to fight back, but she couldn’t put strength into her trembling body. The words that entered one ear came out through the other.

“Offer the Heavenly Sword to me, Natalie, my sister,” Meruonis said lecherously.

Natalie knew about the secret of the Kratos royal family. Their family tree was created through the union of an older brother and younger sister. The current

Kratos king laughed about it, claiming it to be a curse from the Dragon God. What was she supposed to feel? Even while she was about to commit this forbidden act against her will, she couldn't think of an answer.

"Use your body to make me the Dragon Emperor, like Goddess Kratos had done!" Meruonis shrieked.

One thing was clear: she'd never get to meet Gerald again. So, when she saw a shadow looming over Meruonis, she had no idea who it was for a moment.

"You mangy cur!"

Another set of fireworks popped into the afternoon sky as Gerald's sword pierced through Meruonis, who was trying to force himself on Natalie.





JILL raised her head when she heard a dull sound of something breaking.

“Did you hear something just now?” she asked.

“I think so, but where from?” Hadis answered quizzically, tilting his head.

As cheers continued to shower the happy couple, they could see no signs of an accident, but as they honed their senses, they heard a sharp sound of something hurtling through the air—fireworks. Smoke rose in the bright, afternoon sky as a firework burst forth and disappeared. Needless to say, it wasn’t a pretty sight.

They were scheduled to be set off at night, and yet, fireworks continued to pop. Some claimed that these must’ve been celebratory, and they certainly could’ve looked so.

“Maybe there was some kind of mistake,” Jill wondered.

“But that first sound didn’t sound like a firework...” Hadis muttered. “Jill, are all your flowers gone?”

“Just this bit left.”

“Could you scatter them? I think the sound came from the imperial castle. We should go take a look.” Hadis turned to his black dragon. “Hey, don’t say you’re tired. Come on, just a bit more.”

He gripped the reins and the dragon obediently turned toward the imperial castle. Jill tipped her basket over and scattered the petals as cheers arose from the crowd. It didn’t look like they flew away because of some kind of accident.

They disguised themselves with the other dragons, which had sensed the end of the ceremony, and were flying in all directions. Jill and Hadis arrived at the side of the castle when they saw soldiers busily shouting at each other as they arrived at the bridge connecting the wall and the tower. It was near where Gerald was being confined.

That wasn’t all. When Hadis increased their speed, Rave slipped out and shouted, “Hadis! Look! The dragon from before!”

A dragon was defending itself from the arrows that flew toward it, but the moment it saw the Dragon Emperor, it crumbled and vanished like a puff of smoke. The shocked black dragon that Hadis and Jill were riding upon froze.

“It disappeared...” Hadis muttered with a frown. “No, did it die?”

“Hey, stop freaking out!” Rave scolded Raw. “Aren’t you the Dragon King?!”

“Your Majesty, look!” Jill cried.

The bridge, which had been obstructed from view because of the mysterious dragon, was split in half. The moment Jill jumped down, she flinched as the smell of blood hit her nose. As she stepped on the trickling river of red, she left bloody footprints in her wake.

In front of her was a harrowing sight—a blood-soaked Natalie was dissociating from reality as she sat on the ground, and a blade was plunged through Meruonis’s back, blood spilling from the injury.

“Father...” Hadis muttered awkwardly.

Anyone could tell at a glance that Meruonis was dead, his eyes wide and vacant.

“What...happened?” Rave asked with furrowed brows, glancing around.

Hadis closed his mouth and Jill pursed her lips as she slowly approached the bloody princess. She gently shook Natalie’s shoulders.

“Princess Natalie. Princess Natalie, can you hear me?” Jill asked.

“...Jill?” Natalie asked vacantly.

“I’m here. Can you talk? Could you tell us what happened?”

Natalie tried to open her lips, caked with dried blood, but she couldn’t. It looked like she only suffered from a few minor scratches, but something had clearly occurred. A few soldiers had been knocked unconscious by the tower entrance. Jill quietly approached Hadis and looked up at him.

“We should move Princess Natalie to a safe place,” she said. “We can hear her out later.”

“Yeah,” Hadis replied. “Crown Prince Gerald’s gone. Was my father...”

Jill gasped and glanced around. Natalie's head shot up.

"No!" she cried, clinging onto a shocked Hadis's legs, her face twisted with desperation. "No! You've got it all wrong, Brother Hadis! He... He saved me."

"Saved you?" Hadis repeated.

"I'm sorry," she said, large beads of tears welling up in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Brother Hadis. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I wanted to do this well, but I wasn't good enough. I'm sorry for dragging you down! I'm sorry!" Her shoulders shook as she sniffled and wailed.

Hadis glanced at Jill, and the Dragon Consort grabbed the princess by her shoulders to take her away. All the while, Natalie continued to apologize.



1312, the year of the divine calendar. Previous Emperor Meruonis passed away.

It had been three years since Emperor Hadis had ascended the throne when the long-forgotten Meruonis had been attacked and killed by someone. Kratos's Crown Prince Gerald had been dragged into the attack and had gone missing.

As the excitement of the festival still lingered, the imperial capital immediately prepared for a funeral. Confusion about this incident had been kept to a minimum due in no small part to the Three Dukes and Dragon Emperor, who swiftly controlled the information, and the cooperation of the Empress's Palace, which had ties to the previous emperor.

Who killed Meruonis? There were various suspects, including the Three Dukes, who were on bad terms with him, and the Empress's Palace, but the primary suspect was Crown Prince Gerald, who disappeared during the attack.

And so, a search commenced throughout Rave for Gerald. Thanks to the Three Dukes' assistance, the search was on a grand scale like never before.

The citizens continued to gossip in hushed whispers: it might be the start of a war.

Epilogue

“HELLO, Princess Natalie, I’ve brought some snacks from His Majesty,” Jill said, popping into the princess’s room.

“Brother Hadis too?” Natalie replied wearily, closing her book atop her bed.

Jill was confused, but when she approached the bed, she soon realized the reason for the princess’s exasperation. A mountain of items was stacked on the sofa for guests in the corner of her room—all were gifts that wished her well. Fruits, snacks from famous stores, flowers, and even accessories were stacked high.

“Who is this all from?” Jill asked.

“Potential suitors that Brother Vissel chose for me,” Natalie replied. As the Dragon Consort gave a look of shock, Natalie frowned. “What? I’m quite popular, I’ll have you know.”

“I understand that, but are you okay with this?” Jill asked.

“What say do I have in it?” Natalie responded. “Help me out too. Lutiya finds faults with everyone, and Frida’s also against all the suitors.”

“But...isn’t it aggravating to become engaged to a person that Prince Vissel chose for you?” Jill asked.

“You’re right...” Natalie said pensively and thought for a few moments before raising her head. “I’m planning on attending some evening parties. It’s been a while since I’ve socialized, so it might be best if I practiced dancing again.”

“I’ll help you out! I’m planning on increasing my number of evening parties too!”

“It’s difficult to feel reassured at the idea of borrowing your help for such matters...”

“How rude!” Jill said, puffing out her cheeks.

Natalie giggled. She still hadn't regained her former vigor, but she looked a lot better than before.

"I'm fine," she said. "I'm the Dragon Emperor's younger sister."

Jill nodded—it was all she could do.

After Meruonis was killed and Gerald fled, Natalie broke out in a fever and had been in bed for a while. When piecing together the fragments of the story that the princess had managed to eke out, it was clear that Gerald had killed Meruonis. However, if it became known that the Kratos prince had murdered the previous emperor, it would only fan the flames of the radical anti-Kratos faction. Kratos wouldn't stay quiet about this either, so the best course of action was to pin him as a mere suspect.

Above all, Miner's words upon hearing Natalie's incident affected Hadis's decision. The scandal that Cassandra had also lent credence to couldn't be publicized so easily. The Empress's Palace was full of dark secrets, but this was an issue that was on a different scale from Hadis's birth.

Miner and Natalie's mother had witnessed the moment the king was bestowed the Parrying Dagger—the false Heavenly Sword—within Kratos's palace. She'd been feeding Meruonis all sorts of theories. If the older brother and younger sister of the Kratos royal family formed a union that gave the older brother the Parrying Dagger, continuing the Kratos royals' lineage, then surely the same could occur for the Rave imperial family. A union between two siblings of the Rave imperial family would surely bestow the older brother with the Heavenly Sword.

Meruonis was reluctant to believe this, but he'd gone insane when Hadis was born. He'd sent Natalie's mother into his then-alive father's bedroom, and thus Princess Natalie was born. Cassandra claimed that the numbers simply didn't add up, but the truth mattered little here. The issue was that Meruonis truly believed that he was Natalie's half-sibling and bet on his chances. This was also why she'd been targeted at the Empress's Palace.

Her mother, who'd been enchanted by the Parrying Dagger, had repeatedly told Miner to do the deed should Meruonis fail. Miner had the possibility of carrying the blood of an emperor of two generations ago. The prince, however,

found this to be a trivial matter and had willingly become Rave's messenger to Kratos, putting himself in danger.

In other words, his role was to go to Kratos and say something along the lines of, "Your crown prince apparently killed our previous emperor, but has he returned to your kingdom? If he has, please hand him over. If he hasn't, we'll find and get rid of him. Have a nice day." If MinerD played his cards wrong, he'd be killed.

He agreed to do this as a way of expressing his gratitude; Natalie being at the scene of Meruonis's murder had been concealed.

"Find Gerald as soon as possible and capture him to take the initiative," MinerD had said before he left on a dragon provided by the imperial family, guarded under Duke Neutrah's careful watch.

"Brother MinerD should be in Kratos by now," Natalie muttered, gazing outside the opened terrace. "I caused so much trouble... I hope everyone's okay..."

Even Jill, who was inexperienced when it came to love, could take a hint. She placed Hadis's cookies firmly in Natalie's hands.

"He'll be fine," Jill assured. "He's smart and strong. At the very least, he isn't pathetic enough to die before getting to Kratos."

Natalie gasped and faced the Dragon Consort.

Jill purposefully made an angry face. "But I can't forgive him for making you cry. I'll capture him and have him apologize for running. So...don't give up. A prince of our theoretical enemy nation *should* be a tough opponent. His Majesty has caused me so much trouble as well."

Natalie's eyes wavered. She wasn't ready just yet. Hence, she ended up accepting gifts from potential suitors. Until recently, she had spurned these requests, declaring that she'd become the crown princess of Kratos and had no need for such things.

When she was deciding on Gerald's outfit, it looked like she was having so much fun. It was an adorable sight—she looked like a maiden in love.

“If I was you, would you think I would’ve been able to stop him?” Natalie asked.

“Nope. Not one bit,” Jill replied.

Natalie knitted her brows in bemusement, but Jill was confident. If the legend was true—if the Parrying Dagger was bestowed upon the Kratos royal family from a union between a brother and a sister, Kratos would’ve been cornered the moment Jill spotted Gerald and Faris having an affair. There was a good chance that Gerald tried to attain the Parrying Dagger to stop Dragon Emperor Hadis, who was massacring and destroying anyone in his path, and to protect his kingdom. If so, this wasn’t an affair.

However, Gerald didn’t justify himself and had cut Jill off. She, in turn, couldn’t trust him and marched ahead. Whatever excuses they had, that was reality.

“He tends to prioritize his kingdom and little sister, doesn’t he?” Jill remarked. “So, I was a bit surprised that he killed the previous emperor. He must’ve known that it was a foolish move for Kratos. Yet, he chose to save you, Princess Natalie.”

Natalie slowly blinked as though she had realized something.

“If you truly are interested, please tell me,” Jill continued. “I’ll help you out, and I’m sure Lutiya and Princess Frida feel the same. I’m certain His Majesty does too, and probably Prince Vissel as well. Everyone just wants you to get better. Oh, I can’t speak for Prince Miner, though—he might find fault with any man who approaches you, Your Highness.”

What Natalie needed for now was some time to organize her feelings. Jill didn’t wait for a reply and stepped away from her bed.

“I’ll come again,” Jill finally said. “If you’d like to practice dancing, I’ll be sure to tell Miss Sphere about it. She’s also finally willing to answer Prince Ristard’s proposal, so I’m sure she has a lot on her mind. Just talking with her will make you feel better, I’m sure.”

“You’ve become awfully skilled at being considerate,” Natalie replied. “Is this thanks to Lady Cassandra, perhaps?”

“Ah, can you tell?”

Jill stuck out her tongue playfully and Natalie giggled. The Dragon Consort gave a small wave and left the room; Hadis was waiting for her in the hallway.

“Did Natalie accept them?” he asked anxiously.

“Yes, of course,” Jill replied. “I think you can visit her room too, Your Majesty.”

“Hmm... I’ll wait until she feels better. I wouldn’t want her to apologize to me like that again...”

As Jill thought back to a desperate Natalie, practically begging for forgiveness as she apologized over and over again, she couldn’t press the issue. Natalie had her pride as the younger sister of the emperor—she could act normally in front of Jill, but perhaps she held her reservations in front of Hadis and Vissel.

“Are you all right, Your Majesty?” Jill asked. “Are you down or tired?”

“I’m fine,” Hadis replied.

Her eyes suddenly glimmered—she’d just learned about this. “Lady Cassandra taught me that guys sometimes act tough even when they’re feeling down, so I should be careful! You can’t fool me!”

“The Empress’s Palace fills your mind with unnecessary ideas...”

“Come on! You can act spoiled toward me! I know how to deal with you!”

“Never! I refuse! You’re planning on reporting back about my reactions, aren’t you?!”

“Oh?!” Jill gasped in surprise. “How’d you know? You’re amazing!”

“That doesn’t sound like praise at all! Weren’t you taught to feign innocence during times like that?!”

“Aw, crap, you’re right!”

“Don’t give me that! Good grief... I’m fine. Come on, we should head out, or we’ll be late. Let’s go.”

Hadis extended his arm toward her. Jill stared at it for a while before she grabbed his sleeve, causing him to look at her quizzically. *Uh... Where do I go*

from here again? Right, downcast eyes and a soft voice where he can only barely hear me.

“I-It’s embarrassing...in front of others, so why don’t we do it where people aren’t watching?” Jill said, growing embarrassed as her cheeks turned warm. She whispered the last bit and sheepishly looked up.

All of her attempts thus far had ended in failure; she was determined to succeed at least once. Hadis widened his eyes in astonishment. Just as Jill had thought that this attempt was also unsuccessful, his face turned red as he clutched his heart and staggered.

“Wh-Where did you learn that?!” he gasped. “I’ll crush the Empress’s Palace!”

Jill beamed, knowing that her mannerisms had worked on him.

“Did your heart skip a beat?!” she asked Hadis, throwing her arms around his waist. “Tell me, Your Majesty!”

“No! It hasn’t! I said no! There’s no way it has!” the emperor cried.

“You’re lying! I’m sure your heart’s beating loudly! And your face is so red—”

“Brides who love to play pranks on me like that get punished!” He scooped her up and placed her on his shoulders.

“Huh?!”

Jill was unable to see his face. She pouted grumpily, but quickly smiled when she saw Hadis staggering more than usual. He was clearly flustered.

“What?” Hadis asked.

“I just think that you’re so cute,” Jill replied. “Oh, this has got nothing to do with the Empress’s Palace. Lady Cassandra warned me to think of it, but never to vocalize it.”

“I don’t need that kind of information.”

“Don’t be mad. I’m learning so much, so of course I want to test it out on you. Or do you want me to test it on a different man?”

Hadis sighed as he adjusted his hold on Jill and stopped. They’d arrived at their destination—a room where they’d have a meal with the Three Dukes. His

beautiful face glared at Jill.

“Of course not,” he said firmly.

“Exactly!” Jill replied.

“Don’t look so triumphant! Ugh, I can’t let my guard down now... Fine. Just do it to me, all right? It’s a promise.”

“I promise! Leave it to me!”

“I don’t think I trust those words these days...”

As Hadis frowned, their arrival was announced. Hadis once again adjusted Jill in his arms.

“Aren’t you going to tell me to let you down?” he asked.

“It’s proof that you’re head over heels for me! And I was told that you were safest while holding me, so I should let you do as you like.”

Hadis smiled. “Huh, I guess the Empress’s Palace has its uses.”

The door in front of them opened, and the Three Dukes stood up to lower their heads. As Jill stared at her husband’s profile, his visage transforming into an emperor, she took a deep breath. She was placed onto a seat, and she sat as tall as she could, politely waiting. Vissel was no longer here—he claimed that they should be able to handle themselves.

The meal, which consisted of simply eating snacks and dishes that each region was proud of, proceeded smoothly. It was as though Gerald’s disappearance and the creepy, vanishing dragon were trivial matters.

“Dragon Consort, how do they taste?” a duke asked.

“They’re all very delicious!” Jill replied.

“Then which one shall we bring as a souvenir for our meeting with Kratos?”

This was a roundabout method of asking for her opinion, but Jill smiled and pointed at the snack that she thought was best.

This was where the next battlefield would be—the location where Kratos would be called out.

They had to decide on how to deal with Crown Prince Gerald, who was suspected of murdering previous emperor Meruonis and fleeing, after all.

Afterword

HELLO, Sarasa Nagase here. Thank you for picking up the sixth volume! This volume contains a lot of tweaks and additions from the original web version, including the Dragon Flower Crown Festival and the Empress's Palace! I'd be delighted if you enjoyed it all, ominous aura included!

Now for some acknowledgments. As always, thank you to Mitsuya Fuji for the beautiful illustrations and designs despite your busy schedule. Thank you to Anko Yuzu for the wonderful manga version. I cannot thank you both enough. I'd also like to deeply thank my editors and their department, the designers, proofreaders, and everyone involved in the making of this book.

Above all, thank you to those who decided to pick up this volume. Thank you so much for continuing to support Jill. I'll do my best so that you can continue to enjoy this series.

I hope we can meet again.



Rising from Ashes: My Dear Emperor, You're Putty in My Hands!

By Makino Maebaru Illustration by Yoko Matsuoka

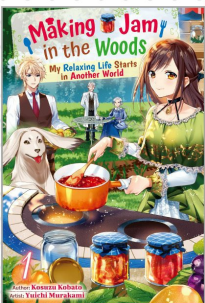
When Sai reincarnates into an otome game as an NPC destined to die, she's saved by the winged Orient Emperor who shares a similar fate! How'll they rewrite their story?



I Guess This Dragon Who Lost Her Egg to Disaster Is My Mom Now

By Suzume Kirisaki Illustration by Cosmic

A gender bender fantasy series about a betrayed adventurer who ends up not only turning into a girl, but being raised by a powerful dragon too!



Making Jam in the Woods: My Relaxing Life Starts in Another World

By Kosuzu Kobato Illustration by Yuichi Murakami

What Awaits Her In Another World Is Delicious Food And A Relaxing Life Surrounded By Spirits!

Margaret's life is cut short when she gets into a fatal accident at her workplace, except instead of the afterlife, she finds herself in another world!



APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA
-WORLD CONQUEST STARTS WITH THE CIVILIZATION OF RUIN-

Author: Fehu Kazuno

Illustration by Jun

06



URL <https://crossinfworld.com/>

Twitter [@CrossInfWorld](https://twitter.com/CrossInfWorld)



Cross Infinite World