



Observation Records
of My Fiancée:
The Misadventures of a
Proclaimed Villainess

Self-

Written by Shiki
Illustrated by Wan Hachipisu

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Story By Shiki
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CHARACTER
INTRODUCTIONS

KURO

Bertia's pet black fox. It appears she is not just an ordinary fox.

MARQUIS NOCHES

Bertia's father. While troubled by his daughter's eccentric behavior, he dotes on her considerably.

HIRONIA

A baroness who is accompanied by a mysterious small bird. According to Bertia, she is the "heroine" of an "otome game" and tries various schemes to get close to Cecil and the other "capture targets."

COURTGAIN

A distant relative of Bertia. He is one of the "capture targets" in the "otome game" and also a candidate to be one of Cecil's close aides.

ZENO

Cecil's attendant. He is aware of his master's darker nature and tries desperately to advise him, though he is somewhat resigned to it.

BERTIA

Cecil's fiancée. She claims to be the "villainess" of an "otome game." Although she tries to act like a villainess, she's unfortunately not very convincing in the role.

CECIL

The crown prince of the Kingdom of Alphasia. According to Bertia, he is one of the "capture targets" in the game. With his handsome appearance and brilliant mind, he finds everything too easy and is often bored with everyday life.

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Chapter One: Bertia, Eight Years Old

Part One

My name is Cecil Glo Alphasta. I am the crown prince of the Kingdom of Alphasta, the eldest son destined to inherit the throne. In the winter of my tenth year, I had my first meeting with the girl who was to be my fiancée.

Her name was Bertia Ibil Noches. She was the sole daughter of Marquis Noches. Her father was serving as our prime minister, a position of great authority in the kingdom. Bertia had deep crimson hair and amber-colored eyes, with fair skin and a slightly plump figure. No, let me be frank. She had the round well-fed look of a snowman. That was the most notable characteristic of the piggy—my apologies, the young lady in question.

Chosen to strengthen the ties between the royal family of Alphasta and the influential nobility, she was my betrothed and two years my junior at the age of eight. On the day we first met, a modest introduction ceremony was held at the palace, presided over by my father, the king, and her father, the prime minister.

Right after the ceremony, as soon as we stepped out into the garden alone, Bertia blurted out, “Prince Cecil! I am the villainess!! My role is to tear apart your relationship with the heroine you meet after enrolling at Halm Academy and eventually be cast aside in disgrace with a loud ‘Gah!’”

She pointed squarely at my face.

Hmm. I’m utterly baffled.

The expressions of the maids accompanying Miss Bertia turned pale—or rather, let me correct that—it almost appeared they had anticipated she would do something like this. Their faces seemed to say, “Oh dear. She really went and

did it.” From the look of it, such brazen behavior must have been a daily occurrence for Miss Bertia.

The reactions of the maids to the young lady’s blunder seemed very practiced. Despite their strained smiles, they smoothly managed their responses.

The atmosphere they exuded—one of not being easily disturbed—couldn’t have possibly developed overnight, for better or worse. Unperturbed by those around her, Miss Bertia continued her declaration.

“However, even if it’s to deepen your relationship, displaying such disgraceful behavior goes against my principles as a marquis’s daughter. Therefore, I have decided. I will become a first-rate villainess! Please, Your Highness, become a gentleman so splendid that even if I end up disgraced with a loud ‘Gah!’ it would still be acceptable!”

What should I do? I truly don’t understand what she’s talking about. It didn’t seem to be just because I was a naive child.

Even my own attendants were gaping and blinking in disbelief. *Ah, but for now...*

“Miss Bertia, standing while talking like this isn’t ideal. Why don’t we sit and discuss this over some tea?” I said, offering a smile and my hand to her, hoping to guide her toward a table where the hot beverages were already prepared.

After all, even though I was still a child, I was someone who would one day bear the responsibility of the kingdom. I could not afford to be so easily flustered.

Let’s take a moment to gather my thoughts and organize the situation. My father always said that it was crucial to remain calm in times of trouble.

After a pause, Bertia replied while blinking rapidly, “Oh, yes, that sounds good.” Perhaps slightly deflated by my composed demeanor, she quietly accepted my escort to the tea table and immediately started devouring the cake in front of her.

“Isn’t Prince Cecil a bit too composed for his age? Could it be... Are you perhaps a reincarnated person?” After taking a sip of the fragrant tea, Miss

Bertia asked this, cream from the cake still smeared on her cheek as she scrutinized me with a probing gaze.

Could it be that she has forgotten that I am royalty?

Despite us never having been previously acquainted, she seemed a bit too relaxed around me. Well, it was more enjoyable and interesting than if she were awkwardly tense.

“I’m not quite sure what ‘reincarnated person’ means, but if I seem more composed than my age might suggest, it’s probably because I am royalty. We royal family members are taught from a young age to behave in such a manner. It’s only natural,” I replied with a constant smile. At this, Miss Bertia tilted her round face slightly.

“Is that how it is?”

Even though she asked, she seemed satisfied with my explanation. However, my personal attendant, Zeno, who was standing by, shook his head vigorously.

He often remarked things like, “Your Highness, even discounting the fact that you are royalty, you are too detached. You should engage in more childlike play! I believe it’s important to maintain charm befitting your age!”

Zeno’s hair was a calm moss green, and his eyes were a slightly brighter blue than mine, conjuring the image of a deep forest. His appearance wasn’t flashy, but he was decently handsome. All in all, he seemed like a mild-mannered, good-natured young man.

Always jittery, he gave the impression of someone who would be henpecked if he were married. Despite his generally timid nature, perhaps because of our long association, he occasionally made unnecessary comments like these.

I responded to Zeno’s reaction with a wry smile but decided not to dwell on his words. I often received similar reactions from the adults around me. Even if I lacked a certain childlike quality, my role was that of the crown prince. As long as I behaved appropriately for a crown prince, that should suffice.

Of course, when necessary, I too can muster a carefree, innocent smile or two.

“Now that we’ve taken a break, could you explain in a way that I can understand what you meant earlier by ‘villainess,’ ‘heroine,’ and this ‘Gah!’ you mentioned?” I asked her for clarification as Miss Bertia reached for her second piece of cake.

Though it might not matter, I wonder if Miss Bertia’s maids are neglecting her too much? Both in terms of manners in front of royalty and the amount of food she consumes.

“Yes, of course!! Your Highness must fully understand my story so that you can properly dismiss me when the time comes!!” Miss Bertia declared, gripping her fork tightly and looking at me in earnest.

No matter how serious her expression, it was hard to take her completely seriously with cream smeared around her mouth. She seemed completely oblivious to this.

It appeared that I had been overestimating my own comprehension until now. I hated to admit it, but I had always thought of myself as a relatively intelligent child, especially since I had already mastered the curriculum taught at the prestigious, royal Halm Academy.

As the oldest and most challenging school to enter in the Kingdom of Alphasta, Halm Academy attracted particularly brilliant nobles. The education quality was higher compared to other schools, and the emphasis on etiquette was strict.

Everything that was taught over six years at Halm Academy, starting when students were fourteen, was already lodged in my ten-year-old brain. *So, I thought I had a decent intellect... But what’s going on right now?*

Even accounting for Miss Bertia’s poor explanation skills, I was struggling to understand what she was talking about.

“Therefore, Your Highness, you will meet this ‘fated maiden,’ become intrigued by her radiant authenticity, and fall in love. Seeing this, I, as the villainess, will become a demon consumed by jealousy and torment her relentlessly. When you learn of this, Your Highness will be furious, call off the engagement, and in a domino effect, my family will fall into ruin!”

She seemed to be describing events that were yet to occur, claiming to have memories from a past life (or something like that). She suggested these memories were based on a novel with moving pictures—something called an “otome game”—that depicted our future.

A maiden of destiny?

A villainess?

Me, furious and breaking off an engagement?

What in the world is all this?

The very idea of me, who rarely clung to anything, being furious seemed farfetched already.

It seemed there were still many more intricate details to dissect, but today I decided to just get a broad understanding. In her past life, she was born and raised in a country called “Japan.” She didn’t remember when she died, but she clearly recalled loving something called “otome games” and playing them extensively.

These games included a “route” where I and the “heroine” overcame various challenges and become united, resulting in Miss Bertia being disappointed, and me and the heroine finding happiness. However, she wouldn’t divulge the details, claiming, “It would be troublesome if telling you disrupts the scenario!!”

Thinking that it’d be intriguing to gradually learn about it, I decided not to press further. After all, it was hard to imagine myself getting caught up in romantic entanglements and jeopardizing a politically advantageous engagement. It was equally difficult to envision the lady before me turning into the demon of jealousy she mentioned. The whole thing felt unreal, and there were too many questionable points, which was quite confusing. But if I were to be bombarded with more information now, even I couldn’t handle it.

The tea time meant for our introduction as fiancés was drawing to a close. *Ah, but there’s one last thing I need to clarify.*

“Miss Bertia, may I ask you one question?”

“Please, ask as many as you like. Ever since I regained my memories at the age of five, I’ve been looking forward to discussing this with you!!” she replied, leaning forward eagerly, almost making me chuckle.

To be honest, whether she has a penchant for wild fantasies or claims to have prophetic abilities, it hardly matters to me. The real issue is...

“What exactly do you mean by ‘a top-tier villainess’?”

That’s the crucial part.

After all, as of today, she had officially become my fiancée.

Becoming my fiancée meant she was to be the future queen.

The existence known as the “heroine” was irrelevant. However, if what Bertia described as the “flower of evil” was unsuitable for a queen, I needed to promptly instigate... no, awaken her to the right path. *And if that proves impossible, I may need to consult with my father and make a decisive cut. After all, I am to be the future king.*

“Of course, I’ve already decided! To be strong, noble, and beautiful! An entity that forges ahead on its own path, regardless of what others say. Even if it leads to ruin, I will walk it without hesitation! That is the woman I intend to become!!”

“Strong, noble, beautiful...” I muttered, inadvertently glancing at Miss Bertia’s plump midsection.

I was curious about how she perceived her own appearance—not that I was fully conscious of it—but my intention was not to demean her by looking deliberately.

Realizing my gaze was inappropriate, I quickly met her eyes and smiled. *I must think of an excuse.*

But it was too late.

Miss Bertia had noticed my focus shifting and her face flushed crimson.

“It’s not like that! Lady Bertia Ibil Noches was originally meant to be a minor character, somewhat unremarkable in appearance,” she stammered.

“A minor character? That sounds quite sad. Are you really okay with that?”

“Not at all!! That’s the Bertia of the game talking. I am... I am... not just any Lady Bertia Ibil Noches! I am myself! I want the happiness of Prince Cecil, who was a support and comfort to me in my previous life, when I tended to shut myself away. Therefore, I aspire to be a more exalted... a pure and righteous flower of evil!!”

Is she flustered? “A pure and righteous flower of evil” seemed like a contradiction, but it appeared Miss Bertia hadn’t noticed the irony at all.

Blushing to the tips of her fingers, Miss Bertia abruptly stood up with a loud clatter.

“Then, Your Highness, I shall refine myself and return anew! I beg your leave. Farewell!” With that hurried goodbye, she dashed away before I could even attempt to stop her. Her maids, equally flustered, quickly bowed and hurried after their mistress.

I stood there, dumbfounded, watching them disappear.

“What was that all about?”

“Your Highness, what will you do?” Zeno inquired.

It seemed an important portion was missing from the end of his question, but surely he meant to add “about your engagement with her.”

Royal marriages were entangled with various interests, so it’s not something that could be hastily and lightly altered. However, discussing today’s events with my father might lead to the annulment of the engagement, although it would take time.

But...

“She’s interesting, isn’t she? And her straightforward, un noble-like character makes her easy to deal with. It seems like she wouldn’t cause much harm... It might be fun to observe her for a while.”

I felt genuinely amused, something that had been rare for me. *It’s not that I have fallen for her, but how should I put it... Is it that fools are endearing? Like*

discovering a new toy? I wasn't sure, but I was experiencing a level of excitement I'd never felt before.

For someone like me, who could usually accomplish anything with a single try, the world had always been a dull place. I'd rarely felt the joyful fulfillment of a hard-earned achievement, and the scenery had always seemed somewhat dreary. But after meeting her today, my world had definitely brightened. The uncertainty of what might happen next was exhilarating.

"Heh..." A smile naturally formed on my face, a rare occurrence since the expression had become something I usually had to consciously conjure.

"Your Highness, you seem to be enjoying yourself," Zeno noted with a look of exasperation. And, indeed, I was.

"Ah, I think this unpredictability isn't too bad."

He paused and then said, "That's fine, but can't you find a more childlike way to have fun?"

"Am I not enjoying this innocently enough?"

Zeno exaggeratedly shrugged his shoulders and sighed heavily.

"Indeed, Your Highness. You must have left your childlike innocence in the queen's womb. My apologies for asking the impossible."

"You always manage to say the most impertinent things, don't you? Well, it's fine. I'm in such a good mood today that I'll let it slide."

"Thank you," Zeno replied, his head bowed in mock defeat. My gaze wandered in the direction Miss Bertia had left.

How much amusement will my new fiancée provide me, I wonder?

"You won't disappoint me, will you?" I whispered softly, then looked up at the sky and closed my eyes, contemplating the unexpected thrill Bertia had introduced into my life.

Chapter Two: Bertia, Nine Years Old

Part One

It was a full year after our initial meeting before I saw Miss Bertia again. Despite being my fiancée, attempts to deepen our acquaintance through several invitations for tea had been thwarted by her ongoing “medical recuperation,” during which she secluded herself in her estate in Noches territory.

I even inquired about her condition from her father, Marquis Douglas Ibil Noches, who served as prime minister at the palace. Each time, he would force a smile, as if swallowing a hundred bitter bugs, and say, “My daughter actually suffers from an incurable disease.” I’d mastered the art of lipreading, and I could clearly see him mouth *called stupidity after disease*.

If it truly were an incurable illness, continuing the engagement would be challenging. *I am capable of making such assessments as a member of the royal family, you know?*

Her withdrawal made me wonder if somehow it was my fault, prompting concern on my part. To better understand what was happening in her territory, I had someone—whom I called “errand runner”—investigate the situation.

The reports from my errand runner quickly became the highlight of my otherwise mundane days. Thus, I learned that Miss Bertia, dressed like a boy, had been running around her estate morning and night. *Surely, a lady in medical recuperation couldn’t possibly be out sprinting and shouting, “Just two more kilometers!” drenched in sweat, right?*

Finally, the day came when she appeared before me once again.

“It has been a while, Prince Cecil! Don’t recognize me? I am Bertia Ibil Noches, your fiancée!”

The day before my eleventh birthday, I arrived at the designated meeting room in the palace that I often used for such occasions. Waiting for me inside was Miss Bertia, accompanied by Marquis Noches, her father. As soon as she saw me, she greeted me with a beaming smile—perhaps one that was a bit too exuberant for a noble lady, especially one betrothed to the crown prince.

How she had changed. The Miss Bertia I reunited with after a year was no longer the round, snowman-like figure I remembered, but had slimmed down to a slender and elegant appearance.

“Can you even recognize me? You must be surprised, right? Ow! What are you doing, Father?!”

“Prince Cecil, I apologize for my foolish daughter’s behavior. We will revisit her education,” her father said as he lightly reprimanded her with a rap of a knuckle on her head, causing her to tear up a bit. I couldn’t help but smile wryly.

It was problematic that the marquis resorted to physical admonishment, but I lacked the courage to point this out to him, especially with his imposing full-beam smile.

Yet I couldn’t let her be dragged back into seclusion again, especially not when she was my fiancée, and one I hadn’t seen for a year at that.

“Please don’t worry, Marquis Noches. It’s rather childlike and cute, isn’t it?”

“Prince Cecil, as usual, you are the one who is not childlike,” the marquis retorted without reserve, but I remained unfazed.

“That is often said about me.”

I tried to smile in as youthful a manner as possible, which even prompted the marquis to grin.

Miss Bertia, still holding her head, blushed and stared dazedly at my face. I wasn’t boasting, but I often received similar gazes from girls. Family members and my father’s advisors worried about me becoming a womanizer in the future

or called me cunning, while others said they looked forward to my reign as king for the same reasons.

“Your Highness, could you please repeat what you said?” Miss Bertia suddenly asked, fidgeting.

The meaning of her words eluded me, prompting me to tilt my head in confusion. Then, with a shy expression, she opened her mouth to speak.

“You said... *c-cute*...”

Do compliments like “childlike and cute,” when spoken by peers, hold special meaning for her? Perhaps she interpreted these comments through a unique filter.

Yet, as she blushed and fidgeted, avoiding direct eye contact while looking up at me... Well, she could be considered cute in the general sense of being a girl.

“Bertia. You needn’t ask the prince. Doesn’t your father say it enough?” The marquis interjected, visibly startled by Bertia’s request, quickly stepping in to mediate.

Indeed, begging a royal to compliment one’s cuteness might be seen as unseemly for a noble lady.

Then again, if her father often called her “cute,” why should she resign herself to not hearing it from her fiancé? *That feels a bit unreasonable, doesn’t it?*

Marquis Noches turned to Bertia and added words of caution. “Do not be deceived by appearances. Though the prince always smiles, his eyes do not. He does not possess the emotions to truly appreciate what is cute; he is a cold person. Even if he says *cute*, it is nothing more than a polite platitude. My *cute* carries far more affection. So, be content with that.”

Does the marquis realize just how rude he is being, perhaps even more so than Miss Bertia herself?

“But, Father, you always prepend it with ‘stupid kids are more’... It’s not really pleasant. And... it’s completely different when said by someone handsome!”

“Bertia...” The marquis looked at her with eyes that seemed to lament his daughter’s naivete.

As I watched this exchange, a look of pity for this unfortunate pair nearly slipped through... but I managed to maintain a smile instead.

Truly, “stupid kids are more cute” is hardly a compliment, Marquis. Certainly, less of one than “childlike and cute.” If said directly, it could easily be taken as an insult.

“Your Highness, it appears that my daughter indeed needs reeducation and a serious talking-to, so we will be leaving now...”

“It’s fine, Marquis Noches. That’s part of her charm, isn’t it? She’s adorable, don’t you think?” I quickly shook my head, interrupting the marquis’s attempt to remove her from the room.

I didn’t want to be separated from my fiancée under the guise of her needing “reeducation.” Whether the marquis was trying to prevent his daughter from embarrassing herself in front of the crown prince or if it was a typical fatherly reaction of not wanting his daughter to fail, I wasn’t about to let it happen.

I’ve been feeling quite bored... and lonely not being able to see my fiancée often. Moreover, I need to ascertain whether she truly is suitable to be my future queen.

“Your Highness...” Both Bertia and the marquis called out my name simultaneously.

Their tones contrasted starkly. One was somewhat dreamy and distant. The other, although apologetic, seemed on the verge of a frustrated sigh. It appeared the marquis, while competent as a prime minister, could not hide his simple, transparent nature very well in private. *Or perhaps he isn’t trying to hide it at all?*

“Marquis Noches, you were scheduled to meet with my father later, weren’t you? May I invite Bertia for tea in the meantime?”

“No, that wouldn’t be...”

“Yes, I’d love to!” Bertia cut in before the marquis could finish his reflexive rejection.

Marquis Noches... Even though you're maintaining a smile, I definitely heard that sigh just now.

"Thank you. And let's also plan for tomorrow's meeting," I said, ignoring the marquis's muttered disapproval. By mentioning "tomorrow's meeting," I made it difficult for the marquis to refuse.

In this way, I ensured an opportunity to spend more time with Bertia, subtly weaving in commitments that the marquis couldn't easily back out of. This interaction not only helped gauge her suitability as a future queen but also allowed me to see how much influence she could exert, even in small matters.

Tomorrow, my birthday party would be held; a formal occasion where nobles from across the kingdom would gather. Up until now, Miss Bertia and I had not made our social debut, attending parties and festivals only as appendants to our parents. However, after debuting as the crown prince, I'd need to start appearing publicly with a partner.

The plan was for her to accompany me as my fiancée for tomorrow's event as a practice run of sorts. While it was an official party with many nobles present, we were still children. Minor missteps were expected to be overlooked at this stage, allowing us to get accustomed to attending such events together.

In essence, it was a rehearsal for conducting ourselves as members of the royal family.

According to reports from the "errand runner," Miss Bertia seemed to have mastered the basics of public comportment reasonably well. Yet, this would be her first time attending an official event.

It was crucial we had a meeting beforehand to ensure I could support her adequately. Suggesting this meeting under the guise of an invitation for tea prevented the marquis from easily declining, given the royal favor involved.

"We shall take our leave now," I announced, readying to depart.

"As you are well aware, my daughter is unrefined," he said, repeating *unrefined* a few more times for good measure, "but we kindly ask for your patience. She may exhibit many faults, and given her young age, please, I beg of you, show leniency."

His words essentially meant, “You know she’s not perfect, right? You agreed to this knowing full well, so if she acts foolishly, please overlook it as childish antics, okay?”

Well, as long as it’s entertaining, it’s fine by me.

“Of course. She is my fiancée, after all. Should anything happen, rest assured, I will provide the necessary support, so please do not worry.”

With a smile, I made sure to convey my understanding of his concerns, locking eyes with the marquis and nodding firmly, ensuring he knew I took his request seriously.

After a moment of visible unease, it seemed the marquis finally understood my intentions from the gaze we shared. He sighed lightly, as if letting go of a burden, and said, “It is reassuring to hear this from a prince as talented and renowned as you... Miss Bertia, while Prince Cecil has promised this, you must still be cautious on your own.”

“Yes! Of course, Father!” Miss Bertia replied with unnecessary vigor. The marquis looked on with a mix of worry and affection before bowing deeply and departing.

Once the marquis had left, I turned to Miss Bertia. “Shall we go for tea then? Everything is ready this way.”

“Yes. Thank you, Your Highness!” she responded, and I offered a warm smile and extended my hand to escort her. She placed her hand on mine with a radiant expression.

Though she knew the proper conduct expected of a lady, she was still overwhelmingly spirited. I recalled her aspiration to become “a pure, strong, and beautiful flower of evil.” Indeed, she had slimmed down and was closer to what one might call beautiful, but her personality and behavior seemed to be moving in a direction quite opposite to that of a “flower of evil.” *Is she really okay with that?*

Pondering this, I led Miss Bertia to the guest tea room.

As we entered, Zeno, who had prepared the tea, noticed us and smiled warmly. “Please have a seat here,” he said, pulling out a chair for Miss Bertia.

She sat down, and I took the seat opposite her.

Zeno began to pour the tea as we settled in. Miss Bertia looked at the tea and sweets placed before her with sparkling eyes, like a dog waiting on permission from its owner to begin.

One of Miss Bertia's maids cleared her throat gently but intentionally.

Miss Bertia snapped out of her reverie and muttered, "My diet..." Her expression drooped like that of a dejected puppy. I couldn't help but let out a wry smile at the sight.

In these moments, the contrast between Miss Bertia's vibrant enthusiasm and her aspirations of regal composure created a charming dissonance. As we enjoyed our tea, I considered how best to guide her energy in a way that might help her achieve the elegance required of a future queen while still preserving the unique spark that made her so endearing.

"This cake is low in sugar. I'm not much for sweets, so I had it specially made," I said, signaling to a maid, who then moved one of the cakes in front of me toward Miss Bertia. It was made to be less sweet, therefore relatively low in calories.

"Low sugar! Cake!" Miss Bertia's eyes sparkled again at the sight of the dessert placed before her. If I didn't know better, I'd swear her ears perked up and her tail wagged vigorously... A vivid illusion, indeed.

Miss Bertia... I understand you're delighted, but let's refrain from regressing into childlike glee, shall we? It's charming now, but once you become the queen, such behavior might not be appropriate. Others might take advantage of that.

Of course, if it was just in front of me, I found it amusing and had no complaints.

"Please, enjoy," I urged, and she happily stuffed a piece of cake into her mouth, savoring it as if it contained her happiest memories. It looked so delicious that I tried a bit myself, curious if there was something special about today's dessert, but it tasted the same as usual.

After washing down the cake with some tea, I decided to ask about something that had been on my mind.

“By the way, Miss Bertia, you’re wearing a rather unusual scarf today, aren’t you?”

It was a sleek black fox scarf. While wearing such an accessory indoors was questionable, what intrigued me more was that if my eyes were not deceiving me, the “scarf” wasn’t just the fur—it seemed to be an actual, living fox.

“Your Highness has an eye for quality. It’s a lovely fur, isn’t it?” She looked up from her cake, a satisfied smile on her face.

Indeed, the pelt was magnificent, but that wasn’t really the point. *How is it that this fox, which should by no means fit on her small shoulders, seems to be floating around her neck?*

Unaware of its oddity, she appeared clueless to the bizarreness of the situation.

Zeno, maintaining his usual calm demeanor, was visibly struggling to suppress a twitch at the corners of his mouth.

“Indeed, the fur is magnificent. However, it seems to me that it has been subtly moving ever since I first noticed it?”

“Ah, you caught that? That’s strange. My father and the others didn’t notice at all,” Miss Bertia replied, a bit puzzled.

Her attendant maids seemed confused by our conversation, tilting their heads in bewilderment. However, the head maid quickly averted her eyes. Clearly, she was aware of the situation.

She then reluctantly shifted her gaze back to me, her eyes conveying an apology and seemingly leaving the matter in my hands.

“Well, it’s interesting, so let’s leave it at that for now. But please, do not bring it to tomorrow’s birthday party like this. Some might not appreciate seeing a fur scarf, especially indoors. I’ll talk to my father and get permission for you to bring it as a ‘fox’ next time, not as a scarf,” I suggested lightly.

“Indeed, wearing it indoors is odd, isn’t it? Understood! And... I’m actually relieved to hear that I can bring it as a pet. I found this little one, and it has

refused to leave my side ever since... I couldn't bear to leave it at home today, so I disguised it as a scarf to bring along."

Disguised? Hardly seems disguised at all, really.

"You found a fox? Where exactly? Does Marquis Noches know about this? What did he say?"

"I found it in a forest near our estate. There was this oddly shaped stone, almost like a Shinto shrine gate, that I passed during my daily runs... err, walks. The fox would always sit there, watching me, and it looked a bit like an Inari deity because of its shape. Remembering my past life, I decided to make some Inari sushi to see if it liked it, and it did, so it followed me home."

A Shinto shrine gate stone?

Inari deity?

And Inari sushi?

According to Miss Bertia's story, in her past life, there was a deity called "Inari" that took the form of a fox, and a "sanctuary" akin to a temple near her home had been where this deity was worshipped.

"As a child, whenever I was about to get scolded by my mother, I often fled to the sanctuary. But somehow, I was always found quickly..."

"Well, if you always hid in the same place, it's no wonder you were found so easily," I pointed out.

"Since I hid there repeatedly, I became friends with the sanctuary keeper, an elderly man, and his wife. While hiding, they would often treat me to leftover Inari sushi they had prepared for offerings. Sometimes I even helped them make it."

So, it wasn't so much hiding as it was just hanging out at the sanctuary?

"Interestingly, that sanctuary was known for a peculiar rumor. It was said that a 'zashiki-warashi' that brought offerings of Inari sushi to the Inari deity sometimes appeared, and seeing it was considered a good omen. I often helped with the offerings, hoping to see them, but I never did." Miss Bertia seemed nostalgic as she recalled her past.

“But I’m curious, Miss Bertia. When you were making these offerings in your past life, did anyone around you act unusually?”

“Act unusually? Not really... Oh, now that you mention it, strangers would approach me with big smiles, give me sweets, or even give me a thumbs-up.”

“Interesting...” It seemed my fiancée might not only have the role of a “villainess” but also seemed to mimic what sounded like a “zashiki-warashi.”

While I wasn’t entirely sure what a “zashiki-warashi” entailed, it seemed to function as a sort of lucky charm or benevolent spirit in folklore.

If seeing her with the fox indeed brought good luck, it might be interesting to witness her feeding the creature next time. It would be a fun way to test whether the old superstitions of her past life held any truth.

“So, you became nostalgic about those times, made Inari sushi for the fox, and it grew fond of you?” I asked.

“Yes! It ate my offering so happily.” Miss Bertia nodded with a beaming smile.

“I initially thought about turning it into a fur scarf as befits a villainess, but it was so cute and gentle... It even licked my wounds when I fell on the way home. I accidentally named it, and I just couldn’t help growing attached. I thought it would be warmer to keep it wrapped around me, and that would be all right. By the way, its name is Kuro!” she explained while gently stroking the fluffy black tail wrapped around her neck and sighed contentedly.

Hmm... Why did she think “that would be all right” at that point? A living animal and a fur scarf are entirely different things, right?

“I showed it to my father and asked if I could keep it. He turned pale and angrily told me to take it back to where I found it... But after I told him how it had licked my wounds, and that I had already named it, he allowed me to keep it. Since then, he’s been constantly reminding me to take good care of it. I wonder if Father thinks I’ll neglect a pet?”

Naming it after it had licked her wounds—with blood involved—might have left Marquis Noches with no other choice. From the sounds of it, the only option the marquis could give was to advise her to “take good care of it.”

Putting together all the pieces of the story, this black fox, Kuro, was no ordinary animal. Observing my fiancée, who seemed completely unaware of the implications of her actions, and the fox, which appeared to understand everything yet feigned ignorance, presented an intriguing contrast.

Miss Bertia just kept smiling sweetly, seemingly oblivious to the deeper layers of what she had gotten herself into.

Kuro, the black fox, seemed to pick up on the reproach in my smile. It wagged its tail dramatically, almost as if to say, “What, you got a problem with this?”

Honestly, if Kuro itself wasn’t inclined to reveal any secrets, I felt comfortable to just watch and see what happened. Chances were, Miss Bertia would continue to do amusing things if left to her own devices. Perhaps I should go along with Kuro’s antics and enjoy the situation a bit more.

“That’s good to hear. I think it’s wise to take care of it... for the future,” I remarked.

“Yes! I will take great care of it!!” Miss Bertia responded with a carefree smile, and I returned it with one laden with meaning.

Zeno muttered from behind me, “Please take care, Your Highness,” but I chose to ignore him. *Everyone has their own way of being careful, Zeno.*

“Now that we’ve cleared up any doubts, let’s talk about tomorrow.”

“I will do my utmost to perform my role as a partner befitting a top-class villainess with nobility!!” Miss Bertia confidently declared, puffing out her chest.

Why do I feel more apprehensive even though she sounds reliable?

I decided to drive the point home, just to be safe.

“That’s reassuring to hear.” I paused in thought, then said, “However, going forward, I think it would be best if the matters regarding this ‘villainess’ persona and your memories of a ‘past life’ remain just between us. Keeping such unique circumstances under wraps is wise.”

“Why is that?” She blinked, her large eyes flicking up in surprise, looking for an answer.

“The social circles we are about to enter can be unforgiving, and you never know what could turn into a weapon against you. If you truly want to be a splendid ‘flower of evil,’ it’s best to conceal these particular details. After all, a villainess full of vulnerabilities doesn’t exactly scream strength, does it?” I explained.

Miss Bertia’s enthusiasm, though slightly misplaced, was infectious. She nodded vigorously. “Indeed! The best never show their weaknesses and strategically bring down their opponents. Speaking carelessly and digging one’s own grave is definitely third rate.”

After a moment, she continued, “Right... I understand. Unlike the Miss Bertia from the games, I’ll be a beautiful and pure ‘flower of evil.’ I’ll just smile meaningfully and say less.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your understanding,” I said, though I still felt she might be missing the subtlety of the strategy slightly. Well, if anything happened, I could always step in, and for now, observing might be interesting.

“By the way, have you been briefed by Marquis Noches about tomorrow’s schedule?”

“Yes, I’ve been informed. I will make my entrance with Your Highness and have the honor of being your partner for the first dance, correct?”

“That’s right. That’s the main idea. Just keep that in mind, and you’ll be fine. Oh, and if you ever feel unsure or confused about anything, make sure you ask me, okay? Don’t decide on your own. All right?”

“Will you be there to support me then?” Miss Bertia looked at me with hopeful eyes.

“Of course. I am your fiancé, after all. I intend to do everything I can to support you.”

“Fiancé... That has a nice ring to it. Oh, but I understand, you know? I’ll properly fulfill my role! I’ll make sure I’m properly ‘gah’-ed!” Her mood briefly dipped before she clenched her fists, rallying herself.

“It’s a big responsibility as a fiancée, but I know you’ll do your best.”

“Yes, I will do my best!!”

Her understanding still seemed a bit off, but her idiosyncrasies were part of what made her intriguing. I decided not to correct her further and simply responded with a smile.

“I’m happy to celebrate my eleventh birthday with you.”

“I’m also happy to celebrate your eleventh birthday—Wait, eleven? Your Highness, you’re turning eleven?”

Miss Bertia suddenly looked puzzled.

“Yes, that’s right. Didn’t you know?” I asked, surprised by her reaction.

“No, I knew... It’s just that, if you’re turning eleven tomorrow... and I’ve just turned nine not long ago. That means, by my next birthday, I will be ten...”

As Miss Bertia murmured to herself, her face gradually paled, and tears started pooling in her amber eyes.

“Because, Your Highness, my mother—”

Tears spilled over her waterline, and she began to sob uncontrollably.

Why? Is this somehow my fault? But she mentioned her mother.

What does that mean? I’m lost.

Seeing Miss Bertia suddenly break down, even her maids started to panic. They tried to comfort her with a handkerchief, but then, placing it gently on the table, they retreated, casting a “we’re counting on you” glance my way.

Could you not, please? I’m only ten... well, nearly eleven, but I’m still a child and certainly not omnipotent. Besides, she’s your charge, right? Supporting her is part of your job... Fine, I get it. Don’t look at me with those pleading eyes. I’ll do what I can.

Losing the silent standoff, I reluctantly addressed Miss Bertia.

“What’s wrong? Can you tell me about it? I’ll help however I can if it’s within my power.”

“My mother—” She cried even harder upon hearing my words, beginning to speak between sobs.

Listening intently to her difficult-to-decipher explanation, I was struck with disbelief.

According to Miss Bertia, in the “game scenario,” her mother was supposed to die just before she turned ten, and tragically, the cause was a contagious disease that started spreading through the capital three months prior to her mother’s death.

The disease Miss Bertia mentioned was a new variant or, more precisely, an evolution of an existing contagious disease. It took a month to find a treatment because one of the required herbs had been difficult to acquire. It was not only challenging to cultivate due to its rarity and minimal usage, resulting in low production, but it also bloomed only in spring. Since the outbreak happened in the summer, none had been available locally, and importing it from other countries had taken time, resulting in the disease claiming many lives.

“When my mother fell ill, my father desperately searched for Ruona Grass but couldn’t find it... He even asked the king to share some from the royal stores, but it couldn’t be spared. With so many of the king’s subjects suffering, he couldn’t show favoritism to just one. Plus, Your Highness’s brother was ill with the same disease, so, considering the what-ifs, they couldn’t give us any. My mother passed away. I understand the king’s position; with many others ill, he couldn’t prioritize one person over others, especially when considering the royal family’s own vulnerabilities.”

Though still tearful, Miss Bertia seemed slightly more composed as she continued, “After my mother’s death, my father changed. Even though he understood it was unavoidable, he couldn’t fully accept it. Some took advantage of his grief, leading him down a darker path.”

Hearing her story made me think. *If Miss Bertia’s next birthday, late next autumn, is still a year away, why not prepare the herb in advance?* If the disease’s spread and the herb’s unavailability were known factors, gathering it beforehand could save not only her mother but many others as well. If, of course, the future she spoke of was to be believed.

“Listen, Miss Bertia. You’re talking about the future, right? If so, can’t we prepare the medicine in advance to save your mother?”

“But, Your Highness, that would change the scenario...”

“‘Scenario’? Which is more important to you, the ‘scenario’ or your mother?”

“Of course, my mother is the most important! But... but...” Miss Bertia seemed caught between realities, muttering about “compulsory events” and concerns that the “scenario” would be disrupted in ways that were hard to grasp.

“If we run into trouble, we’ll figure it out together,” I reassured her, trying to soothe her distress with gentle persuasion.

She looked uncertain but seemed to recognize that crying wouldn’t change the situation. After nodding vigorously, she dried her tears and started to eat her cake again. Silently, she pondered deeply while nibbling on the dessert.

I chose to watch quietly without interrupting her thoughts until Marquis Noches returned to retrieve her.

“Thank you for keeping Bertia company, Your Highness. Come now, Bertia, it’s time to go home,” he said, slightly out of breath, probably having rushed back. *Is he that worried about Miss Bertia?*

Seeing the marquis by her side, Miss Bertia clenched her fists as if making a resolution.

“Your Highness, I apologize. I cannot compromise on my mother’s well-being, even if it means our family’s downfall. If changing this scenario causes any issues, I’m sorry. I’ll try to make adjustments, so please forgive me.”

Why is she so fixated on this “scenario”? With the sudden mention of downfall, the marquis looked utterly bewildered.

Well, it sounded intriguing enough to let it play out.

“It’s all right. I’ll help too,” I offered with a reassuring smile, which made her smile slightly and bow her head in gratitude.

“Thank you very much.”

As she stood to leave, the marquis lingered, firing off questions. “What do you mean by ‘downfall’? You’re not implying the prince will assist in our downfall,

are you? Right?" I just smiled back, choosing to leave my response open to interpretation.

As the marquis awkwardly hurried after Miss Bertia, who had already left the room, I considered my own next steps.

"Perhaps I should go see my father too?"

"To His Majesty's quarters?" Zeno asked, standing by my side.

"Yes. Tomorrow's my birthday, after all. This time of year, Father always says he doesn't know what to do because I don't ask for much. Maybe I'll use this opportunity to ask for permission to use the greenhouse and request some Ruona Grass seedlings." If Miss Bertia's predictions were accurate, it would be best to be prepared.

While it was unclear if her visions of the future would come to pass, engaging with her story and attempting to cultivate a difficult herb could be intriguing. Plus, if it ended up saving lives, that would be a win as the crown prince.

Even if the predicted future never materializes... Well, I can consider it birthday entertainment.

As I smiled at this thought, Zeno spoke up. "Isn't His Majesty already preparing a gift for you?"

"He has a few options lined up, but he hasn't decided yet. He wants to surprise me this year, so he's struggling to choose without being able to ask my opinion."

"A surprise, yet you know so much about it already," Zeno lamented.

"Hm? What are you implying?"

"Nothing, Your Highness."

"All right then, good."

I tilted my head with a grin, and Zeno muttered, "This crafty prince, I swear," as he held his head in exasperation.

Ignoring his dismay, I felt a surge of enthusiasm as I made my way to my father's quarters.

“Let’s go, Zeno.”

If I expressed interest in botany, Father would likely facilitate whatever I needed without suspicion. There was something exciting about having so many plans—a feeling I hadn’t experienced since I first met Miss Bertia. I owed her for this refreshing change. It was time to show some gratitude.

Chapter Three: Bertia, Ten Years Old

Part One

“It’s been a while, Prince Cecil. Welcome, and thank you for coming.”

“It has indeed been a while, Miss Bertia. Thank you for inviting me.”

Today marked Miss Bertia’s tenth birthday.

A party was scheduled, gathering only her family and very close acquaintances. As her fiancé, I had taken it upon myself to escort her and thus arrived at the Noches residence a bit earlier than the start of the party.

The maid who was always with Miss Bertia came to greet us and escorted Zeno and me to the drawing room. Miss Bertia was already prepared, sitting on the sofa, waiting. Unusually for me, I had been so busy that it had been three months since our last meeting.

Seeing Miss Bertia after such a long time... She seemed somewhat haggard.

“What’s wrong? Are you feeling unwell?”

She was dressed in a subdued golden dress that seemed too mature for a ten-year-old girl. The color resembled the hue of my hair often likened to milk tea.

Miss Bertia, despite her elegant attire, had a gloomy expression and exuded an air of fatigue. Yet her eyes were sharp and gleaming, glaring at me with a resentful look.

“Your Highness, this is cruel!!”

“Hm?”

Her words of reproach took me by surprise.

After all, I was the crown prince. Such impertinent remarks would typically turn the adults around us pale with shock... but her maids, accustomed to such scenes, did not even twitch an eyebrow as they prepared the tea.

The little black fox curled up on Miss Bertia's lap, slowly swaying its tail from side to side.

I took a seat on the sofa opposite her.

Tilting my head, I asked, "Miss Bertia, did I do something to cause that lovely face of yours to distort so?"

She screamed, "Enough! Enough! Enough!" and began slamming a cushion with both hands onto the sofa. It was a very clear and harmless way to vent her frustrations... although it seemed to be quite an annoyance for the little black fox.

I waited for her passion to subside and sipped my tea. She calmed down after just about thirty seconds.

Clearing her throat, she said, "My apologies." Then she awkwardly put the cushion to its original spot and turned back to face me.

"But, Your Highness, you are also at fault. I have kept to our agreement not to speak of my past life to anyone but you. So, the matter of my mother, which I shared before, can only be discussed with you! Yet, we haven't met for three months!! And today is my tenth birthday, no less! My mother would have passed away by now in the original timeline! I wrote you so many letters, but you always just replied with 'It's okay,' and 'I don't know what to do...'"

Eventually, she began to cry softly. Even I was slightly panicked by this. I carefully set my tea cup back on the table, moved to sit next to her, and gently placed my hand on her back. Although it might seem a bit intimate for an unmarried man and woman, we were betrothed, so it should be acceptable. More importantly, comforting her was my priority now.

I signaled with my eyes for Zeno and Bertia's maids to leave the room. The maids hesitated briefly, but, reading the situation, they moved to the adjacent servants' waiting room. Since it was improper to leave an unmarried couple

alone in a room, they left the door open, but it was private enough for us to talk comfortably.

“Miss Bertia, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were feeling so overwhelmed. I truly thought everything was fine; that’s why I wrote as much in my letters. Perhaps my words were insufficient. I’ve been quite busy with damage control, devising uses for by-products, and covering up certain things. Also, preparing your birthday present took more time than I anticipated...”

The issues she raised in her letters were ones I had already resolved, so I had no choice but to reply, “It’s okay.” But... given her current state, it seemed I’d caused her significant worry.

Even though I reassured her that everything was okay, there had been several occasions where this same behavior had inadvertently caused others anxiety.

Although I could see a future where everything was okay, others did not have the same vision, which seemed to cause these misunderstandings.

I, who always had a clear understanding of the situation, tended to omit explanations, perhaps too often. I assumed that if one were to combine the pieces of information available, it would be easy to understand... but it appeared that wasn’t always the case with everyone.

This seems to be a bad habit of mine.

I need to be more careful.

“What do you mean, ‘It’s okay’?! I tried to save as many people as possible by changing the scenario and gathered as much Ruona Grass as I could. But the amount is still far from enough! And many of the herbs could not be preserved properly and are unusable... On the other hand, the disease isn’t spreading as expected, and my mother, who was supposed to have passed away by now, is still perfectly healthy. I just don’t know what’s what anymore... I don’t know what to do!!” Miss Bertia pleaded while tears overflowed.

“Ah, look, Miss Bertia, please don’t cry so much. It really is okay.”

“It’s not okay at all!!”

“It is okay. The epidemic did occur, just as you said.” I paused, finding the words. “But because you gave us the information ahead of time, we were able to avoid serious cases and deaths. We used the information you provided to identify the disease and create a medicine for it. We could predict when and where the disease would break out, so we isolated the patients right when it started spreading and treated them immediately.”

“So, the disease did spread... You made medicine, isolated the patients, and treated them? That doesn’t sound okay at all... Wait, medicine? Isolation at the onset? Treatment?” Miss Bertia looked bewildered.

“Yes, that’s right. So, the epidemic has been contained, and the likelihood of your mother contracting it is low now. Ah, here’s the medicine. I brought it just in case something happens.” Saying this, I placed a small bottle in her hands.

“Medicine? Wait, what? I’m a bit lost here...”

“That’s why I’ve been saying it’s okay. With this, there won’t be an epidemic, nor will your mother pass away.”

Her eyes wide with tears overflowing, Miss Bertia cried out in astonishment, “What? Whaaaaat?!”

“Hold on, Your Highness! What do you mean? Please explain!” She grabbed my shoulders, shaking me back and forth in a mix of surprise and urgency.

This was the first time I’d been treated quite like this. It was dizzying and, frankly, not the most pleasant experience.

“Let’s calm down first, shall we?” I said, grabbing her wrists, and I smiled to make her stop.

“How can I remain calm?! Please explain quickly!”

As she pressed me with the intensity of her remark, I sighed internally and began to explain everything.

After hearing about the epidemic from Miss Bertia, I asked my father for permission to use the greenhouse and obtained seeds for Ruona Grass. It was a challenge, given its notoriously difficult cultivation.

I started by reading books on the growth conditions, characteristics, and cultivation methods of Ruona Grass to gather basic information. Then, thinking, *Maybe this might work better*, I made some adjustments... and surprisingly, it flourished.

Since the cultivation was almost effortlessly successful, I decided to try making the medicine next. I asked my father to hire professors of pharmacology and medicine, and while attending their classes, I scoured the royal library for relevant books.

To improve the accuracy of our predictions, I had Miss Bertia share everything she knew: the course of her mother's illness, the characteristics of the disease, and more. The epidemic turned out to be an evolved form of an existing disease.

It seemed that Bertia had only asked for advice on "what to do," not expecting me to launch into such comprehensive action. I had to consider various factors—the symptoms of the disease she described, historical patterns of similar epidemics, and this year's climate—to deduce which specific contagious disease we were dealing with. Assuming it was a new strain evolved from known diseases, I recognized Ruona Grass was essential and set out to experiment with creating medication.

The limited conditions simplified the task, allowing me to arrive at a conclusion without much effort. However, the true validity of my solution could only be confirmed in the event of an outbreak.

Up until that point, everything had proceeded smoothly, but this was all based on the major premise of taking Bertia's recount as absolute truth. My actions were driven by curiosity, and I approached the situation with the mindset that even if it proved unhelpful, it was still worth the attempt. Nevertheless, if we were to genuinely prepare for an epidemic, it would be crucial to involve the adult authorities. Given that I couldn't discuss Bertia's knowledge of her past life, I had limited material to persuade them, and any rationale I could present would be too weak.

In response, I crafted a scenario to fabricate a coincidence: I expressed a "spontaneous" interest in a particular disease and invited a doctor who

specialized in it to the palace as my mentor. We engaged in discussions about the disease, “coincidentally” exploring the possibility of it mutating into a new form and devising potential responses to such a scenario. Concurrently, I took up an intense interest in cultivating Ruona Grass, discussing its potential benefits and applications with fervor. This script was meticulously followed to ensure everything unfolded as planned, relying on the expertise of the physician, who was an authority on the disease that might cause the feared epidemic.

Due to my position as the crown prince, the doctor listened to me with great interest and offered various opinions. However, the process did not progress as smoothly as I had hoped. Guiding him to connect the treatment methods with the application of Ruona Grass, assuming the outbreak of a new contagious disease, proved unexpectedly challenging. The difficulty of subtly directing someone toward a particular line of thought without their awareness became frustratingly evident to me. *Why can't he see something so simple?* I often wondered, feeling restless.

Despite the difficulties, through repeated interactions with the doctor, he eventually uncovered the necessary information to recognize the outbreak of the disease and to create the medicine. Now, all that was left was for him to notice the disease's onset at an early stage, when it actually occurred. Even if there were some discrepancies in the symptoms, he would likely identify it as a new strain once he saw the patients in person.

I had “accidentally” found an abandoned house in the region where the new disease was likely to emerge and asked my father to turn it into a royal clinic. Of course, the doctor I had invited was the one to work there. I prepared everything before the expected epidemic season and then simply observed the situation unfold. Despite all the preparations, I must confess that at that time, I only believed about twenty percent in the future that Miss Bertia had predicted. However, if there was a chance that a terrible epidemic could spread, it seemed wise to be prepared. Besides, this whole affair had taught me a lot, and I was quite satisfied with that alone.

So, when I visited the clinic incognito and found a patient who appeared to be in the initial stages of that disease, I was genuinely surprised. *Can such things*

really happen? I marveled. Nevertheless, everything was already in place, so there was no need to panic. The doctor had indeed done an excellent job of noticing the new contagious disease. And, of course, I “happily” provided a large quantity of Ruona Grass that I had been growing as a “hobby.”

Thus, everything proceeded exactly as I had scripted. This all happened about two or three months ago.

As I finished explaining, Miss Bertia clutched her head and exclaimed, “Hold on, hold on just a moment, please! There are several things that are quite wrong here!”

“Really? What exactly is wrong with that?”

I thought everything had gone according to my plan, and there wasn’t anything particularly off about it.

Ah, by the way, it was a secret that I didn’t really believe Bertia’s story about the epidemic until it actually happened. There was no need to honestly reveal that and lower my standing in her eyes.

“Why would Your Highness do such a thing?!”

“Didn’t I say I would help you?”

“You did, Your Highness. But...”

It seemed she hadn’t anticipated things would turn out this way.

“I have no intention of ignoring my fiancée when she is anxious. Moreover, I could not overlook the possibility of my future mother-in-law passing away. If I can make a difference with just a bit of effort, then all the more reason to act.”

“That’s definitely not ‘just a bit’ of effort. No ordinary eleven-year-old could manage what you’ve done.”

Miss Bertia looked at me with a complex expression, unsure whether she should be pleased.

“Hm? I’ll be twelve soon, you know?”

“Even at twelve, Your Highness!”

“Well, it might be impossible for a normal twelve-year-old. But, look, I am the crown prince. I have received the appropriate education, have special access to the royal library, and can call upon skilled experts with my father’s permission.”

This time, the sequence of “coincidences” might have been too much, and my father had become somewhat suspicious. However, when I insisted it was all just “coincidental” with a smile, he looked a bit tired but didn’t pursue it further, so I suppose that was settled.

Miss Bertia seemed half-convinced and half-doubtful.

“Is that so?”

For now, I simply offered her a reassuring smile.

Behind me, Zeno was energetically shaking his head and muttering, “A normal crown prince couldn’t possibly manage this,” but I decided not to pay any mind to that. Meanwhile, Miss Bertia held her chin in her hand, mumbling to herself as she began to ponder.

“Is such convenience even permissible? Surely not! It can’t be... But then again, maybe for someone as renowned as the ‘Android Prince,’ it is possible? But still...”

What exactly is “Android”? Today, as usual, I found her remarks baffling.

“Well, don’t sweat the small stuff, okay? Marquise Noches is safe, and the citizens have suffered minimal damage. That’s what matters, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s true! Mother and the people of the capital have escaped the clutches of the epidemic. It’s indeed a relief.”

Overwhelmed by the barrage of information, Miss Bertia seemed to abandon any further thought on the matter. Honestly, that made things easier for me. If asked how I managed to do all this, my only answer would be, “I tried, and somehow it worked.”

“Actually, Miss Bertia, while I plan to give you your official birthday present at the party, I have something else for you as well...” I took out a small box covered in velvet and offered it to her. She still seemed slightly apprehensive.

“What is this?”

Looking as if she had something stuck between her teeth, Miss Bertia eyed the box I presented with suspicion, possibly anticipating another surprise.

“This is a personal birthday gift from me. It’s homemade, so it’s nothing much,” I said as I opened the box to show her the contents.

“Oh my! It’s beautiful!!”

Inside was a necklace with a heart-shaped stone of deep midnight blue, resembling the clear night sky. It was entwined with delicate silver in the pattern of an ivy vine. The design was refined and elegant, perfectly complementing the mysterious aura of the stone.

In fact, what I presented as a “stone” was no stone at all but a glass bottle filled with a deep midnight blue liquid.

“This is a by-product of the treatment we developed for the recent epidemic.”

“A by-product of the medicine...?” Miss Bertia tilted her head in confusion, struggling to grasp the concept.

“Yes, actually, this is a universal antidote. While researching Ruona Grass, I discovered it can enhance the effects of other medicines. The treatment for the epidemic was perfected by maximizing the effects of another herb with Ruona Grass,” I explained, and she nodded, though it was unclear if she fully understood.

“Unfortunately, it seems that not all medicines are compatible with Ruona Grass; only specific herbs can have their effects enhanced by it. I thought it would be great if it could be used more broadly, so I rummaged through the royal library. There, I found an interesting book that described a method to purify the components of Ruona Grass into a special drug that could enhance the effects of all medicines. Using that method, I crafted this universal antidote.”

I had found that book in a hidden room that seemed to house forbidden texts. Due to the odd structure of the library, I’d discovered a concealed door while searching for places that felt out of place. The door had an unusual lock that practically screamed “Do not open!” so naturally, I opened it. *Humans, especially “children” like me, want to do what we’re told not to, right?*

It had a combination lock, where you aligned the numbers on a dial to form a specific sequence, which happened to be my mother's birthday. I suppose my father set it to that, thinking he'd never forget the birthday of his beloved queen. *However, using the queen's widely known birthday as a lock combination seems like an unsuitable choice, doesn't it? Not only I would think that, right?*

While I was reminiscing, Miss Bertia made a bewildered face and said, "Huh? A universal antidote?"

"Yes, that's right. This deep blue liquid in the glass bottle is the medicine. I extracted only the detoxifying components from several herbs, mixed them, and then enhanced their effects with purified Ruona Grass. I guarantee its effectiveness."

As the crown prince, I'd been building up a tolerance to poisons by regularly ingesting small amounts. When I tried this universal antidote, it worked effectively. Even when I secretly increased the dosage of poison to test it, the antidote's effectiveness was outstanding. Of course, I couldn't openly talk about such experiments—I'd definitely get scolded for that.

"As the woman who will be my wife, you might be targeted, so I made this as a talisman to ensure I never lose you. You'll accept it, won't you?"

I smiled warmly as the puzzled Miss Bertia took the necklace from the box and gently placed it around her delicate neck. Her cheeks flushed red in an instant.

"Yes, it suits you well."

"Th-Thank you very much," she stuttered, her face as red as an apple, while she gently touched the necklace on her neck. Seeing her like that, I felt immensely satisfied.

Actually, the antidote had been quite a troublesome creation. After preparing for the new epidemic, I started making it out of curiosity, and it turned out to be more enjoyable than expected. The extraction liquid from the purified Ruona Grass, now free from the limitation of its compatibility with other herbs, had both good and bad sides. The good side, of course, was that it could enhance the effects of any medication it was mixed with.

The bad side... When mixed with poisons or narcotics, it could create the most dangerous toxins, depending on the substance. If used properly, it could be a powerful lifesaver, but if misused, it could become a terrible weapon.

Weighing the pros and cons, I decided not to bring this medicine into the limelight. Instead, I made it a birthday present for Miss Bertia, who as my future queen might face assassination risks.

I hope this medicine serves as a shield for my precious fiancée (toy).

“Miss Bertia, let’s keep this necklace just between the two of us, okay?” I said, looking intently into her eyes to make a point to ensure her discretion. If the existence of this medicine were to become known, it would surely lead to complications... and my father might even find out I had entered that hidden room.

Moreover, it could potentially be used to harm her if it fell into the wrong hands.

“I promise you, I will!” she exclaimed, though her speech seemed a bit rushed.

Miss Bertia clutched the necklace I had given her with both hands. Her face was flushed as she trembled, looking down at it. Then, almost immediately, she looked up abruptly.

“Prince Cecil!” She called out my name with a strong resolve in her eyes.

“I, Bertia Ibil Noches, will vow upon this necklace given to me by Your Highness! In gratitude for this favor, I will diligently correct the scenario and prove myself a formidable villainess!”



“Hmm?”

“To begin with, I shall turn my father, who was originally supposed to follow the path of evil, into a formidable villain for all to see!”

“No, that might not be necessary.” Marquis Noches was quite capable as a prime minister, and it would be better for the country if he continued to serve the kingdom rather than walk the path of evil.

“Please, do not hold back! It’s all for the happy ending of Your Highness and the heroine! I will devote myself fully to being the villainess!”

“Well, I’m not holding back, really.”

“Just watch. Our House of Noches will splendidly walk the path to downfall!”

I couldn’t reply.

Right, she wasn’t really listening to what I was saying anyway. This was problematic. But, well, it was unlikely that Marquis Noches would easily fall for her schemes, and it might be best to just leave it be. It did sound intriguing, after all. *If things start to go awry, I can always step in then, right?*

After she made this baffling vow, she looked at me with sparkling eyes, and I simply smiled and let it pass.

Chapter Four: Bertia, Eleven Years Old

Part One

“Your Highness, the day has finally come!”

Miss Bertia, adorned in a pure white dress with her deep crimson hair accented by pale yellow roses, clenched her fists in front of her chest. The deep blue necklace I had given her last year sparkled at her clavicle, complemented by several ornate chains studded with jewels. Having just celebrated her eleventh birthday, she looked more beautiful than ever, dressed to the nines for today’s occasion.

To welcome the young newcomers to the social scene there would be a royal party. By attending, we too would officially join the ranks of society’s elite. It was just the two of us in the waiting room—well, strictly speaking, her maids and Zeno were also present, standing discreetly in a corner, but they were making themselves so unnoticeable that it felt like we were alone.

“That dress suits you very well. You look absolutely lovely,” I complimented.

“Thank you very much. Your Highness, you look marvelous in your white knight’s attire as well! So, that’s your formal wear!” She paused, then said, “I dressed up specially too, but next to you, I fear I might just serve as a mere backdrop.”

Her smile in response to my compliment had been joyful, but upon comparing herself to me, she quickly seemed disheartened. There was no need for her to worry; she’d turned out quite charmingly.

Come to think of it, I wonder when I started being able to sincerely say she’s “lovely” or “cute”? At our first meeting, any compliments of cuteness were admittedly mixed with a good dose of politeness. The second time we’d met,

she had indeed changed remarkably, but I still hadn't felt she was as "beautiful" as I did now.

Her skin, as pristine as porcelain, her hair gleaming with a deep crimson shine, and her body, gradually taking on the grace of womanhood—all of these were the fruits of her effort, which I was well aware of.

"You've become beautiful," I murmured, repeating my earlier compliment unconsciously as I gazed at her anew, truly struck by how much she had changed.

"What do you mean by that?! Is it that you have a favor to ask of me, Your Highness? But now is not the time! I am about to enter society and meet with the unscrupulous nobles, to undertake the 'Evil Father Project' as my revenge! Even if it's a request from you, I simply cannot afford to divert my attention at such a crucial moment!"

Correction: her lack of self-awareness hasn't changed much.

Typically, noble children entered society between the ages of thirteen and twenty. The variability in age was due to the different amounts of preparation required by each family and individual academic commitments. In my case, being royalty and fairly capable, and with my enrollment at Halm Academy set for the next year, it was expected that I entered society beforehand.

The issue that arose concerned Miss Bertia. Once I joined society, attending parties would inevitably become part of my official duties, necessitating a partner. And since we were engaged, it was preferable that this partner be Miss Bertia.

To avoid future complications, this was crucial. However, she was only eleven—somewhat young for entering society. Thus, my plan was to wait until she was thirteen, the year I would turn fifteen.

That plan changed when Miss Bertia herself declared she was ready to dive in immediately.

If Miss Bertia were to enter society at eleven, not only would I need to support her, but it would also be particularly challenging for her.

Supporting her in society was hardly a burden for me, and the ability to engage in official duties without restrictions once we were part of the social world certainly presented far greater advantages. Therefore, if Miss Bertia felt ready, there was no reason for me to object.

Even if she does engage in some amusing schemes.

“Watch me, Your Highness! While the ‘Evil Father Project’ has somehow failed completely up until now, I’ll make a comeback and show you!”

I couldn’t help but chuckle as she pumped her fist in the air, her expression full of determination. What came to mind was the series of efforts she had made since declaring her intent to turn her father, Marquis Noches, onto a path of villainy. While I felt slightly sorry for the marquis, it had been quite entertaining.

“By the way, I once read a book you wrote titled *The Virtues of Villainy: Starting from Zero on the Path to Villainhood*. It was quite well done.”

“What, really?! My father showed that to you, Your Highness?! When did he...? Oh, how embarrassing.”

She gasped, then covered her flushed face with her hands and looked down. Watching her reaction reminded me of the time when Zeno had hidden a fascinating book in his room, which I had accidentally found and, mischievously, left on his bed.

“The maid who cleaned my room ended up seeing it!!” he complained later, his face bright red.

Back then, I was still just a child, so it was a minor mischievous act... or rather, it was “accidental,” but looking back, I felt a bit guilty for what I did. However, I think Zeno was also to blame for carelessly leaving it where it could easily be found.

Placing it in a hidden safe under the bed floor was just asking for it to be discovered. And carving out a book on a bookshelf to stash a key was far too cliché. It was practically begging to be found.

After reminiscing about those days, I explained how I came to see the book Miss Bertia had created.

“Marquis Noches and I have been tea-drinking buddies for about a year. He occasionally stops by my room to chat and share stories. One time, he mentioned it was a gift from you and showed me the book.”

Technically, the marquis visited to discuss concerns about Miss Bertia, but I hadn't lied—just omitted some details.

Part Two

About a year ago, a few weeks after Miss Bertia began her attempts to lure Marquis Noches down the path of villainy, I received an invitation for tea from said future father-in-law. With no particular reason to decline, I accepted eagerly.

The tea took place in the royal palace's courtyard with just the two of us. After a long silence, the gaunt Marquis spoke with a heavy heart, “Prince Cecil, I find myself at a loss understanding the feelings of young ladies these days.”

Behind me, I sensed Zeno stifling a chuckle, but I maintained my composure and asked, “What seems to be the problem?”

In summary, his troubles stemmed from his “foolish daughter,” who was encouraging him toward acts of villainy. I nearly blurted out, “I have heard about this from her, and I am also informed by reports from my errand runner,” but I restrained myself and just nodded along. “Uh-huh, I see, and then?”

Given that I had advised Miss Bertia not to share her past life stories with others, and considering that the “errands” were carried out discreetly and efficiently by a trusted individual, I couldn't divulge these details to the marquis.

“Prince Cecil, I believe it is a disgrace for any member of my house to become a criminal. However, my daughter seems to think otherwise... She insists on leading schemes of fraud, oppression through abuse of power, and if it's not punishable by death, she encourages it enthusiastically. Just the other day, she even prepared these materials...” the marquis said as he handed me a book.

“Ah, the content may not be praiseworthy, but the structure is excellent. It’s well organized and very clear. It even includes illustrations, making it an interesting read. Although...”

The book, beautifully written in elegant, feminine script, was titled *The Virtues of Villainy: Starting from Zero on the Path to Villainhood*.

“May I take a look?” I asked, and after receiving a nod, I flipped through it. Inside, there were tables comparing the monthly salary of a prime minister who worked honestly against the income from abusing that position for corruption, along with anecdotal accounts from individuals who had engaged in oppression and fraud.

It also illustrated ways to commit crimes and the benefits thereof. These were explained by a character drawn in a unique style, resembling Miss Bertia, making it a very creatively crafted book.

“It’s a bit of a waste of talent, really. If she produced a tourist guide for the capital using this format, it would probably sell well.”

“Ah, that is certainly a good idea. It’s an unusual compilation, but the drawings have a certain charm and cuteness to them, which would surely be popular.”

Marquis Noches, for all his words, clearly doted on his daughter. When he spoke of her, his face lit up with joy. I asked, “Shall I suggest to my father that he considers this as part of a national project?”

“That would be most appreciated. Lately, when I boast of my daughter to His Majesty, he dismisses it saying, ‘You’re just blinded by parental affection,’ and won’t take me seriously. Why can’t His Majesty see her adorable foolishness?”

“Well... I shall refrain from commenting on that,” I replied, swallowing the myriad of responses that came to mind, trying to steer the conversation back on track.

“If I were to advise my father, we would need some sort of sample... We can’t exactly show him this book, so we might need Miss Bertia to write something with different content.”

“I will request this of my daughter. For now, the most pressing issue seems to be... her eagerness to turn me into a criminal. She talks of nothing else day and night, and unless I engage in some grand scheme, she doesn’t seem to direct her attention elsewhere.”

“That is quite unfortunate,” I replied sympathetically. I had assumed Miss Bertia was merely engaging in rhetorical exercises and had a general understanding from the reports of her from my “errand runner”... but hearing about the personal struggles of the person targeted made me feel slightly remorseful for not having stopped her.

It was amusing to observe... but I could only worry, while the person directly involved must be quite distressed. I couldn’t help but feel the marquis had aged from the ordeal.

What to do? Allowing Miss Bertia more freedom could prove interesting... and perhaps yield useful information. However, if the marquis fell ill due to stress, it could disrupt governmental operations and cause problems for my father.

Ah, perhaps the solution was to help him develop a resistance to Miss Bertia’s outbursts. *If he can learn to enjoy her antics... or at least handle them with equanimity, he is capable enough to manage on his own. So...*

“Marquis Noches, if there really are any inappropriate actions, I will intervene, and you shouldn’t worry too much. It’s probably just a typical adolescent phase where she’s attracted to the ‘bad boy’ image.”

“And why would she try to make me the bad man instead of you?”

“She loves you dearly, sir. She probably projects her ideal image of a man onto you rather than me.”

“Is that so...? Well, perhaps.”

I think I deserved credit for not muttering, “You’re blinded by parental love.”

“Besides, I am still young and hardly fit the image of a bad man. It must be that she thinks such a role suits a dashing, mature man like you better.”

“I see. Without even trying, Your Highness, you already exude a certain cunning. She must have decided that encouraging you is unnecessary.”

“Marquis Noches?”

Did you just subtly say something rather impolite? And Zeno, standing back there, I can see you nodding vigorously, you know?

“Oh, my apologies. It was an unfortunate slip of the tongue. I’ve been so troubled by my daughter’s antics lately that I find myself tiring and speaking out of turn. Just the other day, I muttered in front of His Majesty, ‘Take your lovestruck foolishness elsewhere, you blockhead. Finish your duties quickly.’ Ha ha ha...”

The marquis’s expression lightened, and he chuckled merrily. *However, Marquis Noches, or rather the Noches family... What exactly do you think of the royal family? I would like to have a lengthy discussion about this sometime.*

“Well then, it seems all I can do is accept my daughter’s behavior as part of loving her, and if she goes too far, I guess I’ll have to treat her to some tough love...” He sighed. “It does weigh on me, but knowing that Your Highness will handle anything that arises, I suppose I can bear it.”

It felt like he was trying to off-load all of Bertia’s troublesome behavior onto me, but perhaps I was imagining things? *Despite appearances... Well, actually, as you can plainly see, I’m still a child, not yet fully participating in society.*

I really didn’t want all these troubles pushed onto me. For now, maybe the marquis should take a more active role.

“If it’s becoming too much, why not consult your wife? Miss Bertia is your child together, after all. She might be able to help. Besides, a woman might better understand her daughter’s feelings and manage to communicate more effectively?”

“There’s sense in that. However, as a man, it feels somewhat unseemly to show weakness or complain in front of women and children. I worry that my wife might think less of me...”

I’m still a child, you know. Is it really appropriate to ask me for help, given all the foolishness?

“What are you saying, Marquis Noches? A man who maintains his dignity in public but shows his vulnerable side in private is considered ‘special’ by women.

According to my father, occasionally tickling a woman's maternal instincts when it's just the two of them is the secret to a happy marriage. Father often goes to mother's bedroom to complain or be coddled, and the next day, they are more affectionate than ever—utterly in love.”

“What did you say?! Such a thing?! That's preposterous!” Marquis Noches exclaimed, then wilted. “But, if it pleases my wife, then perhaps a bit of embarrassment is a small price to pay. And if it means receiving comfort from my beloved wife, perhaps I would feel a bit more spirited.” He paused, reluctance still evident in his expression. “No, but still...”

After my words opened his eyes, Marquis Noches let his gaze wander, seemingly in contemplation. It was interesting to see that he shared this amusing trait with Miss Bertia.

“Marquis Noches, even we men need solace. My father always said that spouses should support each other. Especially given the crucial roles we bear within the state's machinery, I believe that tranquility at home and support from one's spouse are of utmost importance.”

“So, Your Highness also believes that? I see, indeed! I think I will take courage and show some vulnerability to my wife.”

As the marquis's eyes sparkled and he nodded, I returned the gesture with a smile. “That sounds like a good plan.”

It seemed like the conversation had shifted from discussing Miss Bertia to leaning on his wife for support. *But, well, as long as it brings no harm to me, it shouldn't be a problem, right?* Besides, deepening the bond between my future in-laws was surely beneficial.

“Your Highness, I must excuse myself then. Today, I must finish my duties early and return home to”—he coughed—“have an important discussion with my wife.”

There goes the marquis, letting his true intentions slip. Well, being the still innocent child that I was, I was supposed to not fully grasp what that might entail.

I'll pretend I don't understand, at least.

“My dear fiancée is involved. Please take your time with the consultation.”

“Indeed, it’s a matter of importance. I’ll devote an entire night to it if necessary!!”

“Good luck...” I said, primarily to the Marquise of Noches.

Part Three

Well, setting aside those past stories for a moment, right now it’s about Miss Bertia in front of me. While we waited in the green room for the party to start, I shared my thoughts on that particular book with her.

“It was really well done. The illustrations were very charming too.”

Since that day, Marquis Noches had occasionally dropped by to vent his lovestruck foolishness and grievances about Miss Bertia. However, I had been enjoying peaceful days. On the other side of the coin, Miss Bertia often visited me to complain that her father “won’t turn evil!”

Does the Noches family really understand that I’m the crown prince? My room isn’t your personal consultation office, you know?

“Oh, well! It’s not something worthy of such praise!” she said, her face turning bright red, though she didn’t seem entirely displeased.

“By the way, was the content of that book just fantasy? Or did you interview someone for it?” I asked with a smile, tossing a curious question her way.

While no actionable criminal information could be gleaned from the book, it seemed too well-crafted to be mere fantasy.

“It’s half and half! Some parts I wrote based on memories from my past life, and others I created by conducting interviews,” she explained.

Memories from a past life aside, she really conducted interviews? Isn’t that crossing a rather dangerous bridge?

“Oh, who did you interview?” I forced a smile on my slightly strained face and asked in a gentle tone to avoid alarming her.

“Viscount Raleigh Consavtie!” she replied cheerfully.

Honestly, I had been reluctant to ask who she interviewed, thinking it might cause hesitation... but that turned out to be an unnecessary worry.

She’d conducted her research solely for the purpose of writing a book. That was probably why she could name the criminal without hesitation. Yet, it was surprising how freely she spoke... *How could Viscount Consavtie have so openly shared his misdeeds with such an honest girl?* To me, it seemed nothing short of suicidal.

But well, she’s still a child, and he must have thought that without evidence, her words wouldn’t be taken seriously.

“Once, Viscount Consavtie came to visit my father, and that’s when I remembered. I realized then that he was one of the people who had led my father down the path of evil. He is connected to one of the routes that led to the downfall of the Marquis of Noches, and in it he became my husband.”

“There are quite a few things I’m curious about... But for now, may I ask how you came to be on such good terms with Viscount Consavtie that you could discuss these matters?”

Miss Bertia’s penchant for making seemingly nonsensical statements appeared to be something I was getting used to.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say we’re particularly close. But since there’s a route where he makes me his wife, I figured my looks must be somewhat to his liking... So, acting childishly innocent, I praised him and looked at him with sparkling eyes. Then, he had me sit on his lap, fed me sweets, and shared various stories with me!”

I stared, and finally said, “A honey trap, then.”

Even I, who is usually composed, was about to lose my composure.

“Wh-What are you saying?! I have not done any such disreputable thing!!”

“Miss Bertia. Are you aware that Viscount Consavtie is infamously known for his predilections toward children and that he views them as objects of desire?”

After a beat, Miss Bertia said, “Huh?”

“You’ve not been touched or anything of the like, then?”

Miss Bertia’s face rapidly turned pale.

“Now that you mention it, I was called a doll-like person and embraced, had my legs stroked, and my chest...”

She seemed to have just now realized how perilous her situation was.

“And then what happened?”

“I’ve been receiving a lot of letters. Recently, there have been secret talks about wanting to meet me in private, without my father or mother knowing...” Her voice trailed off before a strangled “Noooooooo!!” escaped her mouth.

While speaking, unable to bear the terrifying realization, Miss Bertia crouched down, clutching her head with both hands.

I sat down next to her and gently stroked her trembling back. Glancing at Miss Bertia’s maids, I saw that they too had turned pale.

They probably hadn’t realized how precarious the situation had become.

After all, Viscount Raleigh Consavtie outwardly appeared to be just a kindhearted old gentleman who was fond of children.

Well, I wish they had at least felt uneasy about the sheer number of letters... Though perhaps some of those letters had been delivered secretly, evading the maids’ eyes.

“It’s going to be all right. I’ll do something about this. I’m not so naive as to remain silent while my fiancé is being molested, you know?”

I gently embraced Miss Bertia, who had become as frightened as a small animal, and she lifted her tearstained face.

“Your Highness...”

“That’s why I’m asking, to protect you. Have you had contact with any other dangerous individuals?”

“No, I haven’t. I didn’t have a chance to interact with Count Commorno or Baron Saghil, who played roles in the game to tempt my father... I planned to

establish connections after my debut in society and then introduce them to my father.”

I decided not to delve into “Why would you arrange for your father to meet with villains?”

It was clear that her reason for wanting her father to meet these individuals wasn’t to persuade them back onto the right path or to have them arrested.

“Miss Bertia, would you please refrain from engaging in dangerous activities?” While I could enjoy observing and making minor corrections to her course as long as she wasn’t in immediate danger, it wasn’t good if she fell into peril without my knowledge. If something irreversible happened, even I wouldn’t find it amusing.

Her safety allowed me to observe—and enjoy—her efforts, no matter how futile... No, her earnest efforts were what made watching over her worthwhile.

“Yes, Your Highness, of course! I definitely don’t want to experience something frightening like this again! So, from now on... I’ll be careful when making contact!!” Despite her tears and trembling body, Miss Bertia clenched her fists with determination.

Why won’t she give up at this point?

“No, making contact at all is dangerous. I’m really worried.”

“It’s okay! If I see my father, I’ll run away immediately!”

“That’s not the point...”

“If I give up now, I’ll ruin the bright future you deserve, Your Highness! I’ll do my best!!”

That’s not what I’m trying to say.

“Listen, Miss Ber—”

“If that’s decided, then...”

“No, don’t decide anything, please?”

“Oh no! The party is about to start, and my makeup and hair are a mess!”

“Are you listening to me?”

“Your Highness, I need to fix myself up! I’ll be back before it starts. Please excuse me for a moment!”

“Ah, she’s not listening at all... Go on, then.”

Bertia grabbed the hem of her pure white dress and hurriedly left the room with her maids in tow. I watched her go with a wry smile.

Now, what should I do? I certainly can’t just leave things as they are.

“Your Highness, what will you do?” Zeno, of the same mind, immediately asked as they left the room.

“Um, well, can you discreetly bring Marquis Noches here as quickly as possible?”

“Marquis Noches, you say?”

“Yes. While waiting for the marquis, I’ll write a letter. Once you’ve shown him in, deliver it to my father.”

“Understood,” he replied solemnly.

“I’ll say it again—quickly and discreetly. I want the preparations done before Miss Bertia returns. If she gets directly involved, it’s bound to complicate things further.”

“Understood. I will do as you say,” Zeno confirmed with a bow before leaving the room.

Once he was gone, I began writing a letter to my father. “This situation... if handled well, could be a good opportunity to expose some of the rot within the kingdom.”

Marquis of Noches would be arriving soon. I needed to finish the letter quickly, so I skipped the formal greetings and got straight to the point. I wrote about rumors of corruption involving Count Commorno, Baron Saghil, and Viscount Consavtie and the possibility that they might try to contact Marquis of Noches. I suggested using this situation to our advantage by having the marquis act as a spy to gather evidence of their misdeeds.

I had just sealed the letter in an envelope when I heard a knock at the door.

“Come in.”

The door opened to reveal Zeno and a flustered Marquis Noches.

“Your Highness, what is the matter?!” The urgency of my call seemed to have alarmed the man.

“Zeno, please take this to my father. Marquis Noches, there’s something important I need to discuss with you. Please have a seat.”

After handing the letter to Zeno, I gestured for the marquis to sit on the sofa opposite me.

“The fact is...” I relayed to the marquis the same information I had written in the letter to my father, and then I added, “It appears that Viscount Consavtie has already made contact with Miss Bertia. Furthermore, it seems he has attempted some inappropriate actions...”

“What did you say?!” The marquis’s expression turned stern instantly.

“He was just lightly touching her, but I’ve heard that Viscount Consavtie harbors untoward feelings toward children, so there’s no doubt about the nature of his actions.”

“Unforgivable!!”

“Miss Bertia herself confided this to me, crying and trembling as she spoke. So, please, let’s not bring this up in front of her. It would surely be painful for her to recall,” I cautioned, ensuring my own schemes involving Miss Bertia remained unknown by making up a suitable reason to keep the marquis quiet.

“Bertia...”

“Those who might harm her should be kept away from her as much as possible, and we would like to handle the removal internally... just among ourselves. Of course, I’ve already informed my father to avoid any misunderstandings. Can I count on your cooperation?”

A flame of anger lit up in the sorrowful eyes of Marquis Noches.

“Of course! Those vermin, I’ll crush them completely, grind them into dust!” The marquis clenched his fists, clearly resolved.

“I won’t ask exactly what you plan to ‘crush’... but thank you for your cooperation. Now that we’ve finished discussing this, please excuse yourself before Miss Bertia returns.”

“Yes, we mustn’t let her notice and worry or reopen any emotional wounds,” he agreed solemnly, nodding heavily before leaving the room.

With the preparations complete, there shouldn’t be any problems now. Marquis Noches would take care of it thoroughly. He was, after all, the prime minister of this country. He should handle it well... Probably.

“Looks like I’ll need to keep an eye on things for a while too.”

Having completed one task, I sighed deeply and leaned back into the sofa, a brief reprieve before facing another major task—my debut in high society. I felt a bit tired, so I’d rest until Miss Bertia returned.

It seemed my fiancée—and somewhat of a toy—had been a bit too headstrong lately.

Chapter Five: Bertia, Twelve Years Old

Part One

“Prince Cecil, we will arrive at the Noches Estate shortly,” Zeno said, his voice echoing inside the rattling carriage. He slightly parted the curtains to peer outside through the small window.

“Ah, understood.” As I directed my gaze toward Zeno, a familiar landscape peeked through the gaps in the curtain.

It had been just over a year since I enrolled at Halm Academy in the spring of my thirteenth year. Living in the dorms meant that the opportunities to talk with Miss Bertia or look after her had drastically decreased. Exchanging letters alone was, admittedly, quite dull. That was how I had been feeling, but...

“Your Highness, do you think Lady Bertia is all right?” Zeno asked in a hushed tone, as if wary of being overheard, despite the fact we were alone in the carriage.

“All right” in what sense? Physically? Or mentally? If you’re implying there’s something not right with her mind, I’d rather not comment on that.

“Hmm, it’s hard to say without seeing her in person. Well, she might be a bit distraught, but for her, that’s ‘business as usual,’” I said with a wry smile, to which Zeno responded with a similar chuckle.

“That’s certainly true, but...”

“However, it would be nice if we could speak to her before any incidents like the last one occur again.”

Indeed. Just because I had moved into the dorms didn’t mean that Miss Bertia had quieted down any.

“It has been quite challenging, hasn’t it?”

“It was entertaining in its own right... and rather endearing, but it does affect our reputation,” I murmured and then followed it with a soft sigh. Zeno laughed.

“The only one who could inspire such an expression must surely be Lady Bertia,” Zeno remarked.

“Well, even if something similar were to happen, it’s you, Zeno, who’d act as my hands and feet, scurrying about to quash the rumors,” I said with a broad smile.

“Your Highness! Babysitting Lady Bertia is your job, isn’t it?! Don’t you have any idea how much effort it takes to suppress these rumors?” Zeno’s expression shifted dramatically as he made his desperate plea. I didn’t reply, just laughed it off with a “Haha...”

By the way, since when did I switch careers to become Miss Bertia’s babysitter? If my memory serves me correctly, I was supposed to be the crown prince of this country, wasn’t I? Well, she is my fiancée (toy), and I’m not entirely reluctant to take care of (and maintain) her.

“But, still, having her moderate her antics would be preferable, wouldn’t it?” I muttered as I recalled the reason for our current visit to the Noches Estate—and her related outbursts—and let out a weary sigh.

Part Two

Around autumn, about half a year ago, I grew thoroughly bored with life at Halm Academy. I attended classes, but I already knew most of the material, so there wasn’t much to do beyond pretending to take notes.

The primary reason I had enrolled at Halm Academy was to expand my network and learn how to interact with others as a member of the royal family. I had anticipated that the lessons might be dull, but still, the boredom was profound.

Halm Academy was divided into a middle and upper division. The middle division was attended by children from the ages of fourteen to sixteen, and the upper division from seventeen to nineteen. It was a boarding school predominantly attended by nobles.

Among the many schools in the Kingdom of Alphasta, Halm Academy was particularly populated with children of the influential nobility. By merely attending the academy, most of the people I needed to connect with would cross paths with me naturally.

All that was left was to observe their character and ideologies, assess whether they could be of benefit to the kingdom, and figure out how to recruit them.

During the early stages following my enrollment, I spent my time observing those around me. After identifying a few particularly promising and interesting peers, I began to lead a somewhat meaningful school life with them. I was not just gradually honing their skills but fostering friendships.

Half a year into my enrollment, I realized that my circle included not only talented individuals but also those with peculiar quirks. However... they were ultimately just ordinary nobles.

None of them exhibited the level of amusing and intriguing behavior that Miss Bertia innately displayed.

Thus, my life at the academy was passable but lacked excitement. The only real pleasure was the letters I regularly received from Miss Bertia.

Watching Marquis Noches, as previously instructed by her, diligently engaging in espionage to root out the corrupt nobles, she joyously wrote, "Father has finally embraced the path of evil!" Her sincerity and charm were evident in those words.

Bertia's handwriting vividly reflected her emotions at the time they were penned. The characters were sometimes rough, shaky, or repeatedly overwritten, and imagining the expression she must have had while writing them brought me great amusement.

One day, during my otherwise dreary life at the academy, which was only brightened by letters from her, a familiar voice echoed around me. For a

moment, I thought I was hearing things... I wished that were the case.

Because this place was... the boys' dormitory at Halm Academy. She shouldn't have been here.

Not even female students were allowed in this area, let alone this girl, who wasn't even an enrolled student.

Feeling an ominous premonition, I reminded myself that, as royalty, I must not be disturbed by such trifles. As I stopped in my tracks, about to enter the dormitory with Zeno, and turned around with a forced smile, there she was—my fiancée, Miss Bertia. And in her arms, she firmly held Kuro, her little fox.

She had passed through the gates of the boys' dormitory and was running toward us at a tremendous speed. I couldn't help but give a wry smile as I glanced behind her to see her maids all simultaneously bowing at the gate. Their smiles seemed to say, "We cannot enter the premises, so we leave her in your care from here."

The maids of the Noches household really do let Miss Bertia have too much freedom. No, perhaps it would be more accurate to say they relied too much on me.

From what I'd heard, in my absence, they seemed to fulfill their role as guardians quite adequately.

I feel that I need to have a serious discussion with them soon.

Suddenly, I sensed a gaze from a distant tree. Since it wasn't a menacing presence, I turned my attention back to Miss Bertia.

"Miss Bertia, what brings you all the way here?"

"Your Highness, I... What should I do...?"

"Calm down. Let's move to another location first. It's inappropriate for you, an outsider, to be inside the academy grounds, especially in the boys' dormitory."

Ignoring my words, she blurted out in complete panic, "Your Highness, what should we do? We're having... a baby!!"

Then, as if a taut string had snapped, she buried her face in my chest and began to wail.

Kuro, caught between us, looked exceedingly inconvenienced, but that was the least of my concerns now.

Her cry of “We’re having a baby” had the male students present turning shocked expressions toward us. Behind me, Zeno burst out laughing.

No, could you not look at us with that “I’ve seen something I shouldn’t have, but still can’t help looking out of morbid curiosity” gaze? And Zeno, stop looking so amused.

But really, wasn’t it absurd when you thought about it? Certainly, Miss Bertia was well-developed among ladies of her peer group, so perhaps it was possible? But still, it was much too early for us. Besides, as a member of the royal family—not to mention as a gentleman—I would not engage in such conduct with my fiancée before our marriage was official.

Hey, you over there, don’t whisper, “Well, if it’s Prince Cecil, he might just do it.” I can hear you, okay? And you, a relative of the viscount over there, don’t look at me with admiration, muttering, “A man among men.” This isn’t about being “a man among men”; it goes against the code of a gentleman. It could lead to a major royal scandal, you know?

For the first time in my life, I felt I’d experienced what it truly meant to panic. While maintaining a smile to control the crowd, I gently rubbed Miss Bertia’s back to soothe her. She continued to make remarks that could lead to further misunderstandings.

“It might cause trouble for Your Highness! Even though it’s such a joyful occasion, I can’t feel happy about it sincerely. I’m worried about the future. I don’t know what to do...”

We really need to stop this soon, right? Somehow, I feel like my brain isn’t working as quickly as usual. Ah, is this what they mean by “going blank”? And though it’s not hot, the slight dampness on my back must be that famous cold sweat.

No, none of that mattered right now. More importantly...

“Miss Bertia, who exactly is pregnant with whose child?” I asked her with a voice as calm and gentle as I could muster, maintaining my usual smile. I really wanted to relocate us, even if it had to be a bit forceful, but I reconsidered, thinking it best not to leave this place right now.

At the very least, we couldn’t go elsewhere before clearing up the misunderstanding among the students present here; otherwise, an outrageous rumor that “Prince Cecil impregnated Lady Bertia” would spread throughout the academy... No, it would permeate through the entire social sphere.

This could not stand. The notion of a thirteen-year-old crown prince impregnating his eleven-year-old fiancée was nothing short of scandalous.

The only recourse was to have Lady Bertia clarify things herself.

“Miss Bertia... It’s okay, I’m with you,” I said, comforting her as she struggled to stop crying. I then cast a stern look around, my gaze saying, “Before you jump to conclusions, please make sure you’ve heard the whole story and stay put, okay?”

Perhaps sensing my earnestness, the students nodded vigorously, their faces slightly pale.

“Miss Bertia, what happened? If you don’t tell me, I won’t know how to help you. Witnessing my fiancée in tears like this is not something I wish to see.”

Lady Bertia looked up at me with tear-soaked eyes. Her expression was endearing yet tinged with a hint of something more, causing a murmur to ripple through the crowd.

Ignoring the whispers, I leaned in closer, urging her to speak.

Seeing my face up close, she turned a deep red and averted her gaze. “Uh, um... I apologize. I was completely beside myself... My behavior was unbecoming of a lady.”

“No, it’s all right. So, who is pregnant with whose child?” I asked again, trying to restore some calm to the conversation.

Unless she explained the situation here and now, the suspicions against me wouldn’t be dispelled. This is what mattered the most at the moment.

“Eh? Naturally, my mother is pregnant with my father’s child. Who else could it be... Eh?!” With a puzzled expression as if to say, “Why state the obvious?” I gave Miss Bertia a wry smile. Realizing the implications of the stares around us and what her words might suggest, she hurriedly distanced herself from me.

“Ah!! N-No, that’s not it at all! It’s not me!! The prince and I haven’t even kissed yet... I mean, that’s not the point! Please, don’t misunderstand!”

The students, upon hearing Miss Bertia’s words, looked at us, their mouths agape. They probably stumbled upon a new question: Why was she so flustered just by mentioning that a sibling was on the way?

Realizing that her words were still being misinterpreted, Miss Bertia began to tear up, muttering, “But it’s not like that.”

“It’s okay. Everyone understands now,” I reassured her since she looked like she might start crying again, and I gently offered her my hand.

“But it’s probably best we don’t continue this conversation here. Let’s move somewhere else,” I suggested. Reflexively, Miss Bertia placed her hand in mine. I looped my other hand around her waist and escorted her somewhat hurriedly.

Smiling at the remaining students, I gave them a look that said, “Don’t start any strange rumors... You know what I mean, right?” before leaving through the dormitory gates.

“Actually, why don’t we prepare a carriage to take us to the Noches Estate? That way, we can talk at length on the way,” I proposed. Halm Academy was located on the outskirts of the royal capital, and it was about an hour or two by carriage to the central city where the Noches Estate was situated.

I glanced at Zeno, and he signaled the servants to prepare the carriage.

“Um, actually, there’s the carriage I arrived in, so it’s fine,” Miss Bertia stammered, her face turning bright red. “We’re in the suburbs, so it was a bit far to walk... I mean...”

Her flustered appearance was adorable, but it was strange that she’d even considered walking such a distance—certainly not a stroll a marquis’s daughter would usually make.

“Don’t say things like that. Let me take you home. Would you make me out to be a terrible man who just sends his fiancée, who came all this way to see him, back on her own?”

Trying to lighten the mood, I winked at her, causing her cheeks to turn even redder.

“Oh, I really appreciate your intentions, but if I stay with Your Highness any longer, I might die of embarrassment,” she confessed, her face and even her fingertips blushing furiously. Her amusing and... incredibly cute reaction of being so flustered that she almost forgot her initial purpose, and not even realizing it, was endearing.

Seeing such a fiancée (toy) in front of me, how can I not want to tease her a little?

I leaned close to Miss Bertia’s ear, whispering softly as if breathing the words onto her.

“Don’t worry. Even if we’re alone, I’ll make sure we only go as far as our ‘first kiss.’”

“What...?!” Her face turned the color of a ripe tomato, and her mouth opened and closed without producing sound. The tension seemed to reach the rest of her body too. The little fox she held in her arms started to smack her too tight grip in complaint.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, feigning ignorance, but she seemed to have been shocked mute.

“Bertia?” I ventured, using her name informally as a final nudge. *She is my fiancée, after all. It should be fine, right? Yes, I’ll call her that from now on.*

“Meowwwwww!!” With that bizarre cry, Bertia shook off my hand and sprinted away with astonishing speed.

“Eh? Wait, Bertia?!” It seemed I had teased her a bit too much.

“‘Meow’? Bertia, since when did you become a cat?” I called out to her rapidly retreating back, my voice laced with laughter.

“Your Highness?” Zeno said, a cold stare in his eyes.

“Sorry. She’s just so adorable that I couldn’t help myself, you know?” Certainly, it wasn’t some kind of retaliation for being shaken by her overreaction. It wasn’t my fault she reacted so amusingly... adorably.

“Well then, shall we follow her?” Despite her aristocratic upbringing, the speed at which she ran, possibly thanks to her fitness regimen, was uncharacteristic for a lady of the marquis’s house; she was already out of sight.

Her maids had been left behind with us, so the Noches family carriage wouldn’t be departing just yet. Besides, there should be people preparing my carriage at the carriage stand.

They’d hold Bertia back for us.

“Are you not going to chase after her?” I asked, glancing at the maids who were bowing their heads, waiting for me to pass.

“Regrettably, we are unable to catch up with the young lady, so someone else is following her,” one of them explained.

“Hmm, I see,” I murmured, turning my gaze toward a distant tree, narrowing my eyes. I had thought there was something odd there earlier, but it turned out it was just Bertia’s bodyguard.

I hadn’t sensed any malice, so I had left it alone, but it might be good to remember their presence from now on.

But, Bertia... What exactly are you trying to achieve by training your legs to the point where even your maids can’t keep up? I’ve been hearing reports that you’ve become overly enthusiastic about physical activity, moving beyond mere fitness.

If you could, please moderate it a bit? A muscular crown princess would be, well, somewhat awkward.

“Then, shall we go meet her as well?” I started walking, and Zeno and Bertia’s maids followed behind me.

I hope that by the time we reach the carriage stand, she’s calmed down a bit...

Part Three

About half a year later, news arrived that a legitimate son had been born to the Noches family. Along with this news, I received a letter from Bertia in which her anxious thoughts and joy about having a younger brother were jumbled together. Honestly, it was a hassle to decipher her writing, and I decided that congratulating them in person at the Noches Estate and hearing the story directly would be the best approach.

“What exactly is Lady Bertia feeling anxious about?” Zeno asked as we were on our way to the Noches Estate in the carriage. I tried to organize the information again, recalling the day Bertia had come to the academy.

That day, although I had managed to escort Bertia back in my carriage, she was entirely too flustered to engage in proper conversation. What I could glean from her mumbled, red-faced ramblings were the following:

In the “otome game” she remembered, Marquise Noches was supposed to be dead, which meant that Bertia should not have had any siblings. Furthermore, the birth of a brother could significantly disrupt the “scenario” she anticipated. And she had become very worried about that disruption, becoming quite distraught.

“Honestly, I don’t fully understand it. At that time, I reassured her that if the expected child was a girl, there would be no problem... but it turned out to be a boy. Bertia’s anxiety must be at its peak now.”

“Surely, she’ll cry on your shoulder again,” Zeno commented cheerfully.

“It’s Bertia, after all... Well, this time we’ll meet at the Noches Estate, so we can take our time and listen to her thoroughly. That might help alleviate her worries.”

“Didn’t her letter explain the details?” Zeno asked.

“She seemed eager to communicate something, but it was all incomprehensible words like ‘capture target,’ ‘event,’ ‘kuudere,’ and ‘flags.’ Either way, I couldn’t do much until the sex of the upcoming child was

confirmed, so I postponed taking any action. I didn't want her to panic and said I'd prefer to discuss it in person."

It would be troublesome if she stormed the boys' dormitory again, overwhelmed by her thoughts. As to her previous actions, I had to forcefully conclude that Bertia, overjoyed at the prospect of having a sibling, had impulsively decided to share her joy with me.

Since Bertia had generally shown proper decorum at social functions, her actions were seen as a youthful and adorable fiancée's slight overexcitement due to love, and fortunately, people took it in a good light. However, if such behavior were to occur frequently, it would undoubtedly become problematic.

"Observing her is fun, but her unpredictability also makes it challenging," I mused.

"For Your Highness, challenges are preferable, aren't they?" Zeno teased.

I let out a small sigh and responded to Zeno's comment with a smile. "Well, in the sense that they provide some entertainment, yes."

Just then, the carriage jolted, and the coachman announced our arrival at the Noches Estate. Since my visit had been communicated in advance, Marquis Noches was waiting for us as we disembarked from the carriage.

"Prince Cecil, thank you so much for coming to celebrate with us," he greeted.

"Congratulations on the birth of your son," I replied.

After exchanging pleasantries and presenting a gift, I was led into the room where I met Marquise Noches and Bertia, who was awkwardly holding my future brother-in-law. This was my first meeting with the marquise. She had deep crimson hair similar to Bertia's and appeared to be a gentle, calm woman. She was still in the early days postpartum, wearing a loose dress and only lightly made up, yet she was very beautiful. And the baby in Bertia's arms—Anes—was just a normal, adorable infant. Having witnessed Bertia's outburst, I had somehow expected the child to be an exceptional being.

On reflection, even if his birth might impact the "scenario" Bertia mentioned, he himself wasn't going to actively change it. There was also the issue of how

much we should trust this “scenario.” True, there had been the endemic, but with some measures, it had been quite simple to alter that “scenario.”

Perhaps this situation was also minor, and Bertia needn't worry as much as she had been.

“Your Highness, this is my brother Anes. Isn't he adorable? His cheeks are so chubby and soft. When you touch them, he grips your finger tightly. He's really so cute... What should I do?”

Bertia spoke in a gentle, soft voice, seemingly mindful of her sleepy younger brother. It was clear she adored her newborn sibling. Her gaze, warm as she looked at him lovingly, nevertheless carried a hint of melancholy, and occasionally she cast pleading looks my way. Perhaps it was because of her young brother's presence that she didn't outright cry, as Zeno had suggested, but inwardly she was likely filled with unease.

It can't be helped.

“Bertia, isn't it about time for your brother to take his nap?” I suggested.

At my remark, Marquise Noches exclaimed, “Oh!” and peered into the baby's face. The marquis, smiling happily, watched this tender family scene with contentment.

“Ah, Your Highness, perhaps we could have some tea while Anes is sleeping?” Seemingly catching on to my intention, Bertia handed Anes over to the marquise and naturally invited me to tea.

The marquis responded enthusiastically, “Indeed, I shall prepare it in our proud garden. Please come this way—”

“Father, are you planning to disrupt a rare meeting between engaged partners? That's hardly tasteful,” Bertia interjected before the marquis could finish.

Although it was unfortunate for the marquis, Bertia and I had some things that needed to be discussed in private. The marquis looked momentarily baffled at her words. Kuro, who had somehow appeared at his feet, seemed to chastise him with a swat of its bushy tail as if to say, “You're slow on the uptake!” Realizing his faux pas, the marquis shook his head.

“No, but still...” He hesitated, his gaze turning reluctantly toward me.

Today, I was here primarily to celebrate the birth of the Noches’s legitimate son. It was proper for the marquis to host as the head of the house. He was likely concerned about whether it was appropriate to leave such duties solely to Bertia, even if she was my fiancée.

“I was hoping to have a conversation with Miss Bertia as well, since it has been a while. Could we possibly have a moment alone, even if it’s just for a short while?” I asked with a reassuring smile, seeking permission.

Marquis Noches nodded in relief upon my request. Normally, it would be problematic for a young man and woman who had just entered society to be alone together. However, it should be fine since Bertia’s maid, Zeno, and likely Kuro would be accompanying us.

The marquis and I had discussed various matters concerning Bertia before, and I had earned a degree of his trust; I saw no reason for him to object.

“Then, to my room...” Bertia intertwined her arm with mine, which caused the marquis’s expression to stiffen slightly.

“Bertia, the door...” he began.

“I’ll leave it slightly open,” Bertia replied with an exasperated nod and then led me to her room.

Marquis Noches, we have a relationship based on trust, right? You’re not implying I might do something untoward by insisting on the open door, are you?

And, Bertia, shouldn’t you be a bit more wary of me as a man? Inviting someone suddenly into your room, even if you are still somewhat young, isn’t quite proper for a lady who has entered society, is it? Perhaps show a bit of caution?

Well, I was curious about what her room looked like, and since I’d been granted permission, I wasn’t going to refuse.

With these thoughts in mind, I entered Bertia’s room, which was surprisingly tidy and charmingly decorated. It was filled with adorable little trinkets, adorned with lace and delicate carvings, truly befitting a girl’s room.

The walls were a soothing light yellow, and the windows were adorned with pure white lace curtains. The carpet was a deep navy, reminiscent of the night sky, and the furniture, a balanced mix of white and dark brown, was tastefully arranged.

I recalled that Bertia often wore light yellow or deep blue. *Perhaps those are her favorite colors? Surely, it isn't because... they match the color of my hair and eyes?*

This unsettling notion unexpectedly crossed my mind, stirring a strange unease within me. Feeling somewhat disconcerted, I took the seat Bertia was offering me.

After the maid finished preparing the tea and left the room, Bertia suddenly bowed deeply.

“Your Highness, I apologize for the matter concerning my brother!”

I was puzzled by what she was apologizing for.

“Bertia, please lift your head. I don't understand why you are apologizing all of a sudden. Could you explain what's going on first?”

“Your Highness...” Raising her head, her eyes brimming with faint tears, she began to speak slowly.

As I listened to her story, I interjected occasionally with questions to confirm details, and I gradually came to understand what she was trying to say.

While I ended up understanding her frustrations, it was far from a satisfying explanation, and there were many aspects that warranted further discussion.

I summarized, “So, according to the original ‘scenario,’ as the only daughter, your engagement to me would mean the Noches Marquisate would lose their heir. Thus, a capable individual from the distant branches of your family was to be chosen and adopted as your brother and also became one of the ‘capture targets.’ However, since your mother gave birth to a legitimate son, this ‘scenario’ has fallen apart, right?”

“That's exactly it. Ideally, he—Courtgain Deles Noches—would have been taken into our family by now and subjected to a harsh regimen under the guise

of ‘education’ by my father, using the promise of family support as leverage. He was supposed to start at Halm Academy as a second-year student in the middle division next year and quickly rise to prominence as a potential close aide to you.”

I see. With the birth of a legitimate son, the likelihood of him being adopted by the Noches family was virtually zero. It would also be difficult for him to enter Halm Academy on his own since he was from a distant branch with hardly any significant title, with his family already in need of assistance.

If he truly was a talented individual, it would indeed be a great waste.

“If the scenario had proceeded as planned, Lord Courtgain would have met the heroine and eventually fallen in love. However, as the heir to the Noches Marquisate, he would also inherit its darker aspects. Bound by his father’s commands, he would be compelled to commit misdeeds, struggling with intense inner conflict. Despite his attraction to the pure and straightforward heroine, he would push her away to avoid tainting her with his darkness!” Bertia narrated as if she had witnessed these events herself, occasionally muttering incomprehensible things like “That illustration from that time was so lovely” or “I really like the poignant feel of the ‘Courtgain route.’”

I feel it’s better not to delve too deeply into this, so I’ll let it slide.

“I see. By the way, Bertia, didn’t you say before that I was the one destined to end up with the ‘heroine’? Why then are there other ‘capture targets’ who might end up with her?” I asked.

The idea of one woman being linked to two men was peculiar indeed. While it was understandable for men of royal lineage to have several concubines to continue their line, this was different.

“Oh, how embarrassing. Did I not mention that? There are multiple capture targets, and depending on the heroine’s actions, who she ends up with can change,” she explained.

“Hmm, you haven’t mentioned that before. Then there’s no need for you to be rejected by me, right? Just make sure she ends up with someone else.”

Why would you forget to mention such a crucial detail?

“Oh no, that won’t do! The likelihood of the Noches Marquisate falling into ruin is very high in the other routes as well. If we’re doomed to fall, I want to sacrifice myself for Your Highness’s happiness! That’s the pride of a top-tier villainess!”

Villainesses usually don’t choose such a path, do they?

“And if not, then...”

“Bertia?”

“Oh, nothing! But you see, Your Highness, you must become even more splendid and outshine all the other capture targets to ensure happiness with the heroine! I find it upsetting that the heroine would be fawned over by anyone other than you, so ideally, I’d like you to avoid a reverse harem scenario too!!” Bertia averted her gaze markedly, as if she were trying to hide something.

She was definitely dodging something there. If she didn’t want to talk about it, I wouldn’t press her, but... it did pique my curiosity.

“Interesting. So, you’re saying I should outcompete the rivals and end up with this ‘heroine.’” Honestly, I had no interest in other women while Bertia was around. I liked to think I was not that disloyal.

Saying that now might just trigger another outburst from her... Best to leave it unsaid.

“So, who else are these capture targets?” I asked.

“Everyone who is a candidate for Your Highness’s personal aides.”

“Everyone?”

“Yes, everyone. If I were to name them, they include the son of the captain of the royal knights, Sir Valdo Nohkins; the younger son of the Duke Laonel, Charles Laonel; the current Minister of Foreign Affairs’ legitimate son, Nelt Krum; and Lord Courtgain, who was supposed to be adopted by the Noches family. And also... Your Highness’s younger brother, Prince Shawn Turquoin Alphasta.”

That was a bit of a shock. Apart from this Courtgain fellow and my not-yet-enrolled brother Shawn, these were young men I worked closely with. However, Bertia shouldn't have been aware of that.

"Due to the script's compelling force, when the time comes, an event will automatically trigger, and they will all surely be drawn to the heroine!" Bertia, getting somewhat excited, began spouting more incomprehensible terms.

"But, but, Lord Courtgain's route is already irreparably broken. If the powerful force of the story were to make him our adopted son... I can only think that something unfortunate might happen to Anes."

Her blend of scripted fate and personal concern wove a complex narrative that left much to unpack. As fascinating as her view of predetermined paths was, it raised serious questions about how much agency she believed we all had.

Bertia's mood plummeted suddenly, and she shivered visibly. Tears quickly welled up in her eyes, and before long, they were streaming down her cheeks uncontrollably.

"If Courtgain isn't compelled to join us, the Noches Marquisate will fall into decline, and we'll lose Lord Courtgain, who would have been an excellent 'shadow' for you," she said between sobs.

It was good that she worried about potential misfortune befalling her brother and the loss of a valuable "shadow"—an intelligence agent for me. However, it was odd that she would lament not causing her own family's decline.

But if what Bertia was saying was true... This could be useful.

"Bertia, so basically, if this Courtgain person enrolls at Halm Academy and becomes one of my personal aide candidates, there wouldn't be a problem, right?"

"Uh? Oh... Yes, that might be the case... Probably."

"Got it. Then I have a plan."

Enrolling him in the academy would be straightforward if I took the right approach.

“Really?”

“It’s simple. We can have him adopted by another family and enrolled at Halm Academy. Whether he becomes an aide candidate or not will depend on his merits, but if he’s as talented as you say, there shouldn’t be any issue.”

“That might be true but... still...”

“I already have the perfect family in mind, so leave it to me.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. So, please stop crying?”

“Your Highness...”

There was indeed a perfect family for him to be sent to as an adopted son.

Recently, through the espionage activities of Marquis Noches, it was discovered that Count Connery was involved with a troublesome family. This family—the Vladir countship—currently lacked an heir, so it would be ideal to place Courtgain there through the Noches family. We could ensure his training and protection by assigning a competent intelligence officer as his attendant and guardian.

In return for going through with this adoption, we could provide support to his family and, if he truly proved to be an excellent “shadow,” we could guarantee his future prospects. Naturally, we would also ensure that his family did not face any dangers. Ultimately, it would depend on him and his family, but if managed well, this could lead to a beneficial relationship. Yes, this should resolve everything.

“By the way, Bertia, I’ve been wondering about something you mentioned earlier—what exactly is a ‘reverse harem’?”

Now that a solution seemed in sight, I decided to address a term that I had ignored until now.

“A ‘reverse harem’ is when one woman has multiple men attending... loving and being loved by her simultaneously,” she explained.

“Wait a minute. So, you’re saying all of us could potentially be giving our affections to one woman?”

“That’s right. I personally find beauty in loving one person wholeheartedly, so I don’t really like it...”

“Impossible.”

The idea of multiple men competing for one woman was one thing, but sharing her was another matter entirely—especially if those men were candidates to be my personal aides, future key players in the government.

Such behavior could lead to a major scandal, not to mention issues with succession. If a queen consort were to have illicit affairs with others, it could even be considered treason. A misstep might lead to doubts about the royal lineage of a crown prince. Naturally, that was unacceptable.

Beyond that, I had no interest in someone who took relationships so lightly. There was no trace of sincerity in such behavior. Such a person should not even be considered for a consort, let alone a queen consort.

“I think neither my friends nor I would favor a woman who engages with multiple men at once in such an indiscriminate manner.”

“Yet, there are paths where, out of love, you all cannot part ways and choose to share instead. That’s one of the routes available,” Bertia said with a knowing look.

“That’s inconceivable. We’re not so foolish.”

“Hmm, in cases like this, there’s often a trope about ‘enchantment magic’ being used, but that’s not possible in this world, is it? Maybe it’s just that the heroine is so charming that she’s irresistible, something like that. But really, we won’t know until it happens.” Bertia used another term that was hard to grasp.

“Enchantment magic?”

“It’s a type of mental influence magic that enthralls people. But magic doesn’t exist in this world, so it can’t be used...”

“Wait, that’s not the case.”

“Exactly, it’s not the case. Magic doesn’t exist here.”

“No, I mean, it does.”

“What does?”

Bertia looked puzzled as she stared at me.

“Magic. Well, more precisely, it’s about utilizing the power of spirits to produce similar phenomena. However, spirits are very rare and whimsical, so they seldom make contracts. They often mimic things or become invisible, and except when they choose to show themselves, only a limited number of people can see them. Their existence is known only to a select few among the high nobility. Marquis Noches should be well aware of this.”

Hearing this, Bertia’s already wide eyes grew even wider.

In this country, spirits were spoken of almost like legends.

High-ranking nobles, who often held important positions, were taught that spirits truly existed. However, not many had actually seen a spirit. Even those who had encountered one might not recognize it as a spirit since the creatures could change their form or become invisible at will.

The number of people in this country who had made a contract with a spirit was perhaps less than ten.

To form a contract with a spirit, one must first be favored by the spirit. It is said that spirits sought partners who could provide stimulation during their long lifespans. The contract itself was not of significant importance to them; it was made on a whim.

To the spirits, humans who could see them were rare and often favored. Once a contract was made, the person could use magic with the help of the spirit’s power. When I explained this, Bertia was very surprised.

“There was nothing like this in the game...”

From my perspective, it was more surprising that Bertia, the daughter of a high-ranking noble and prime minister, did not know about spirits.

“Hmm. But magic that attracts people? I wonder what kind of spirit lends its power for that?” I wondered.

“Please wait a moment. I still need to organize my thoughts...”

“Mental influence... Ah, perhaps a spirit of light could do something similar.”

“Your Highness...”

“A high spirit of light could use ‘healing light.’ It’s supposed to purify evil and bestow great happiness on the righteous. I see. If someone were to continually experience unmatched happiness only in the presence of this woman, they might eventually develop a strong fear of leaving her. It wouldn’t be strange if they became dependent on her.”

As I concluded my thoughts, Bertia hastily interjected, “Wait! That’s just a drug!”

“Hmm? It’s not a drug. It’s just magic used by someone who has contracted with a spirit. It might have similar effects, though.”

“I refuse to believe such a joyless tale! Besides, I’m still half in doubt about spirits and magic anyway!” I couldn’t help but chuckle at Bertia’s vigorous head shaking.

“What are you talking about? Both you and I are contracted with spirits, aren’t we?”

I really thought she would have noticed by now.

“Huh?”

Blinking repeatedly, Bertia looked completely baffled. It was almost exasperating how oblivious she was.

Seeing no other option, I stood up and picked up the little fox that had been lying at her feet.

“Here, this is your contracted spirit. A high spirit of darkness, ‘Kuro.’ A contract with a spirit is established by giving it a name and blood. Kuro is unmistakably a spirit you contracted with.”



Kuro seemed to say, “Don’t touch me so casually if you’re not my master,” swatting my hand with its tail. I placed it back onto its usual spot on Bertia’s lap.

“Wait, what? Kuro is just a normal black fox...”

“That’s its disguise... Normal black foxes can’t float in midair, wrap around people’s necks, or choose to become invisible to select individuals, can they? Actually, it seems that even among your maids, there are those who can’t see it as a black fox. Because normally, if you brought a fox with you to meet royalty, someone would usually stop you.”

Bertia sat in silence, then lifted Kuro, shaking it back and forth in disbelief.

If you ask me, the real question is, “How did you not notice until now?”

“By the way, Zeno is my contracted spirit. His main attributes are water and wind. He’s of the Spirit King’s lineage, so he can use magic of any attribute, although typically limited to what a midlevel spirit can handle. He usually takes the form of a valet, so I don’t let him use his powers openly.”

“Wha... No way...”

“Why would I lie about something like this?”

I’ve kept quiet until now, and seeing your reaction has been quite entertaining, so I have no intention of misleading you further.

“Such a thing... A dark spirit fits the villainess role so well!”

“Ah, the dark attribute might sound sinister, but its abilities are more defensive.”

“Defensive? That doesn’t sound very villainous...”

Maybe we should step away from that line of reasoning?

“But look, high-level dark spirits are good at defensive magic, which can even repel influences from light spirits.”

“What do you mean?”

“If Bertia and Kuro work hard, the likelihood of ending up in this ‘reverse harem scenario’ should be virtually zero.”

“Really?! But... we still don’t know if the heroine is actually using magic like that...”

“If you’re suggesting that a woman could captivate several men of diverse tastes simultaneously, it’s much more highly probable that she’s using some kind of power, right? Doesn’t your ‘otome game’ feature a creature similar to a light spirit, like an animal or a person?”

Bertia paused, thinking hard, then suddenly brightened as she remembered something. “Ah! Perhaps it’s Pii-chan? The heroine brought a white bird named Pii-chan to the academy! If I recall correctly, there was a backstory where she saved an injured bird as a child, and it grew attached to her.”

“Yes, that must be it. Good, it looks like all the problems might be resolved now.”

“What?! Really?”

“Ah, could you study some magic before you enroll? If you ask Marquis Noches, he’ll surely provide you with the necessary materials.”

I gave her a reassuring smile and patted her shoulder encouragingly.

“Whaaaaaaaaaat?!”

Hearing Bertia’s shriek echo through the mansion, Marquis Noches rushed into the room. The fact that Bertia had only just realized that Kuro was a spirit, and the marquis’s subsequent exasperated sigh, hardly needed to be mentioned.

Chapter Six: Bertia, Thirteen Years Old

Part One

“On this fine day, I have to say I’m delighted to meet with all of you and to be sharing our time at this academy together,” I announced from the podium. The large auditorium of Halm Academy was filled to the brim with students seated in rows. As I delivered my congratulatory speech, all eyes were fixed on me with earnest attention. Now in my third year of middle school, I had naturally been appointed as the student council president. This speech was one of my duties.

I paused at the end of my lengthy introduction to scan the audience, and my gaze landed on a particularly striking group of young women in the front row. Sitting in the center of them, with her deep crimson hair elegantly styled, was one particular woman whose sparkling amber eyes seemed glued to me. Truly, she had transformed into a striking figure who effortlessly caught the attention of everyone around her. I couldn’t help but let a smile slip.

My voice, deeper than it had been years ago, resonated throughout the hall.

“Welcome to Halm Academy. Congratulations on your enrollment.”

A thunderous applause followed in response.

There, amid the clapping crowd, was Bertia Ibil Noches, now thirteen years old.

Today, my fiancée had finally entered the middle division of Halm Academy.

“Wow, truly befitting of Prince Cecil’s flower. The young ladies with her were an impressive group, but she was the most captivating,” Charles remarked as he lounged on the sofa. The entrance ceremony had just finished, and after

addressing the guests and wrapping up, I had returned to the student council room.

The usual student council members—Charles, Nelt, Valdo, and Courtgain—and Shawn, who had just enrolled today, were all present in the room, along with Zeno, who was tucked away in a corner.

After skimming through some documents, I looked up and responded with a smile. “Is that so?”

Charles likely brought up Bertia to playfully needle me and get a reaction out of me. Falling for his bait wouldn’t benefit me in any way, so I chose to ignore it. Especially since I needed to finish up these documents quickly because I had other places to be and couldn’t afford to linger.

Shawn sat next to Charles, stuffing his face with cake and smiling guilelessly. “I had heard rumors about her, but Miss Bertia is really beautiful. Of course, I know she’s your fiancée, so I won’t have any romantic designs on her. But since we’re in the same class and she’s going to be my future sister-in-law, I do want to get along with her.”

“I’m sure Bertia would be happy to hear that,” I replied with a smile, to which Shawn’s smile widened even more.

My brother, with honey-blond hair lighter than mine and a facial structure similar to mine, should have a smile just like mine. Yet lately, Shawn’s smile had been dubbed “the smile of an angel,” whereas mine had sometimes been called “the smile of a fallen angel.”

Why is that? It’s puzzling.

“What do Valdo, Nelt, and Courtgain think?” Perhaps sensing my lukewarm response, Charles turned the conversation toward the others.

“It would be presumptuous of me to comment on someone His Highness has chosen. Please don’t distract me from my work,” Courtgain, who had been working at his desk, responded first.

Pushing up his glasses with his middle finger, he then cast a sharp, almost irritated glance at Charles.

The young man continued regardless. “By the way, weren’t you originally from the Noches family? Haven’t you met Miss Bertia before, Courtgain?”

“My family was at the very bottom of the Noches clan, so I only ever saw her from a distance. Lady Bertia is from the main family. Someone of my standing wouldn’t normally have the opportunity to meet her directly,” explained Courtgain Deres Noches, now Courtgain Deres Vladir after being adopted by Count Vladir. True to Bertia’s word, I had found the young man to be an exceedingly capable individual.

After conducting my own investigations based on Bertia’s account, I concluded that it was indeed a waste to let such a talent languish in obscurity as a low-ranking member of the Noches family. Thus, I promptly arranged with Marquis Noches to sneak him into the Vladir family as an adopted son.

Given the risky nature of the new position, I had considered the possibility that Courtgain and his family might refuse... but they gladly accepted my proposal.

“I vow to repay the honor you’ve bestowed upon someone as lowly as myself, who scarcely qualifies as nobility, by serving you with loyalty for the rest of my life,” Courtgain had said, kneeling and swearing his allegiance with tears in his eyes. I almost had to look away from his open display of emotion, but if the result was mutually beneficial, then it was all for the best.

Of course, I could never admit that it all started because of Bertia’s stories from her past life.

Now, Courtgain served as a rightful heir in the Vladir household while also acting as one of my operatives at the academy. He was somewhat rigid in his thinking, but that’s what I was currently addressing with his “shadow” education.

With a sense of justice to combat evil and an unshakable loyalty to me, he readily accepted my guidance. There was certainly potential for growth in him. I owed Bertia gratitude for such a good find.

Courtgain, being serious by nature, had no interest in participating in Charles’s casual chatter while his work was incomplete. He promptly returned

his gaze to the documents in front of him, refusing to engage further in the conversation.

Acknowledging Courtgain's stubbornness, Charles shrugged and turned to another member of the group.

"Vaaaaldo, what do you think?"

It seemed Charles had shifted targets to Valdo, the imposing man across the room, who was sipping tea. When prompted, Valdo looked up with a puzzled expression, his teacup appearing minuscule compared to his large frame.

"Miss Bertia? She stood out at the entrance ceremony. A dazzlingly beautiful girl!" Charles explained.

That's a high rating borne out of not knowing her true character. They'd surely be shocked by the contrast if they knew her real self. Well, I appreciate her for all her aspects.

As I mused over this, Valdo responded, "Ah, the redhead!"

Charles's face lit up immediately. "Exactly. What did you think of her?"

"A wonderful lady," Valdo muttered, eyes closed, nodding thoughtfully. Watching this, an uncomfortable feeling stirred within me.

"Right? I thought you only had eyes for martial arts, but you seem to appreciate the finer qualities of a lady too."

"Of course. Her sculpted and shapely legs, the beautiful line that flows down her arms to her wrists, and her defined waist. Truly magnificent."

Shawn blushed, and Charles grinned lecherously.

"Oh? Quite the mature perspective for your age. So, you're interested in such things too?"

I stared. *Valdo, what are you saying in front of her fiancé?*

It seemed some educational guidance might be necessary.

"Definitely! For a noble lady, she's unusually well-toned. She's carefully crafted her muscles to be lean rather than bulky. Not quite ready for battle but impressive, indeed!!"

No, it appears he needs a different kind of guidance than I initially thought. Mainly about how to view and think about women.

I *had* planned to entrust him with my personal protection in the future. However, if he were to praise the wives and daughters of important figures I had dealings with in such a manner, it could lead to complications.

Who would be pleased to hear someone praise the important women in their life for having extremely impressive muscles? Even if there were those who would appreciate such comments, they would certainly be in the minority. Of course, it was utterly inappropriate to frame such remarks as compliments to the lady herself.

“Come on, Valdo. No matter how great Bertia’s proportions may be, it’s unlikely that a lady of her stature would have trained her body so extensively. Noble ladies rarely engage in strenuous physical exercise,” Charles replied, seemingly speaking on my behalf.

“No, she’s clearly well trained. She must be doing a lot of running and strength training,” insisted Valdo.

“That’s impossible. Bertia, a paragon of ladylike grace, doing such things? You can speculate all you want, but don’t say that to her face. She’d probably get upset,” Charles advised, laughing awkwardly as he tried to reason with Valdo.

Charles loved to make light of things, but he also took care to protect those he cared about. He was likely trying to instill a sense of decorum in Valdo... *Sorry, but Valdo is actually right.*

Yes, this meant I had to address the issue of Bertia’s “diet,” which was actually a strength training regime. It was something I’d been putting off for a while.

The ideal lady, huh?

According to reports from those who saw her regularly, Bertia continued to strive daily to adopt her ideal high-spirited (villainous ladylike) demeanor. The opinions of Charles and the others were likely a result of her efforts, but their perception and the reality were vastly different.

If she ever let her guard down or panicked, her facade would quickly crumble. At least, she had never managed to maintain it in my presence.

As they spent more time with her, they would soon discover her true nature. I was somewhat looking forward to their reactions.

I subtly lifted the document I was holding to hide a smirk that was threatening to show.

Glancing back, I noticed that Zeno had averted his gaze, apparently unable to look directly at Charles and Valdo anymore.

“Come on, Nelt, put down your book for a second and say something.” Charles, seemingly exasperated with Valdo’s obstinacy, turned toward Nelt, who was curled up on the sofa, engrossed in a book.

Startled by being called on, the young man looked up abruptly. “There’s no point in saying anything. Valdo is just being Valdo.”

Charles chuckled in response. “Yeah, that’s so Valdo.”

Valdo, known for his undeniable talent in combat, struggled with the nuances of noble society... Actually, not just that, but even in normal conversation, he often missed the underlying implications of words. Moreover, his tendency to charge ahead once he set his mind on something meant he could be recklessly headstrong.

He’s easy to handle because he’s straightforward, at least.

Given his nature, it was futile to expect him to be swayed easily in this situation. Charles and Nelt knew this well, hence their resigned acceptance with “It’s just Valdo.”

After a moment, Charles said, “So, what do you think, Nelt?”

“About Lady Bertia?”

“Yeah, I was hoping to hear your honest thoughts.”

Charles, even if you glance over here, I can’t entertain you with the kind of reaction you’re looking for.

“Hmm, I find people with such forthright attitudes a bit intimidating... She seems like she might scold me.”

Wait, who exactly is he talking about?

Charles nodded in agreement. “True, she’s beautiful, but her poise makes her seem like she’d speak her mind clearly. I mean, if someone that gorgeous scolded me, I guess I wouldn’t mind too much.”

No, really, who is this about?

For the record, I’d been scolded by Bertia numerous times, but I’d never found it frightening, nor had she ever been blunt. More often than not, she went all out on tangential discussions or complained while crying. Maybe it was her slightly upturned, catlike eyes that gave off such an impression? Or perhaps it was because she’d been wearing slightly sharper makeup lately, trying to fit the image of a top-tier villainess?

Hmm, public perception really was a fascinating thing.

As I listened to the idle chatter, I began to finish my review of the last document. Zeno quietly approached and whispered in my ear, “Your Highness, it’s about time.”

Looking at my watch, I realized that the appointed time was indeed drawing near.

Already, huh?

I quickly stamped the last document and added it to the pile of completed paperwork. “Sorry, but I need to excuse myself now,” I said as I stood up, smiling warmly at the group who were still animatedly discussing Bertia.

Charles looked at me suspiciously. “It’s just past two-thirty... You tend to work later than this. It’s unusual. Oh, are you going to see Miss Bertia or something?”

“Hm? Yes, but what about it?” I tilted my head with a smile that said, “Is there a problem with that?” Charles’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Of course, it’s only natural to go see her since my adorable fiancée has just enrolled. I haven’t yet had a chance to congratulate her in person.”

I gestured to Zeno with my eyes to grab her prepared gift. “You all should probably say congratulations, too, don’t you think? Surely, there’s someone you each separately know deserving of that at the same tea party, isn’t there?”

With that, I glanced around the room, and everyone but Courtgain and Shawn muttered, “Ah,” and looked away, clearly realizing there was someone they had forgotten to congratulate. It seemed like a classic case of remembering someone they needed to celebrate but had forgotten.

With an exasperated look, I stared at them, and Charles let out a surprised laugh.

“I didn’t expect His Highness to point that out. You always look like you’re not interested in others unless you’re playing at being charming in front of the students.”

“That’s not true. I’m interested in anyone I find intriguing.”

“The criterion being ‘intriguing’ is just so like Your Highness. Does that mean Miss Bertia is special to you? Seeing you do something unnecessary without considering profit or loss for the first time—we wish you’d share some of that kindness with us.”

As I responded with a silent smile to Charles’s wry laughter, he seemed to concede defeat, raising his hands slightly and shrugging. It’s funny how just a smile from me could have such an effect. *Well, none of that matters right now.*

“I need to go now. I promised to make an appearance at the afternoon tea.”

It was a tradition for the new middle school students to have a tea party either in the school’s restaurant or the courtyard facing it, following the entrance ceremony.

In high school, there were balls on the nights of the entrance and graduation ceremonies, and the tea party served as a sort of substitute for the younger students.

The given pretext was to create opportunities for networking and to help them acclimatize to the academy as quickly as possible, but the real purpose was to showcase and stabilize one’s standing within the school through a display of connections—a very noble-like custom, indeed.

The influential upperclassmen prepared their own tea parties and invited desirable contacts from different grades to join them. They sat at the tables prepared by higher-status individuals to flaunt their closeness with the powerful.

Those from lower nobility strove to get invited to the tables of higher-ranking ladies and gentlemen.

When I entered the school, the members who sat at my table ended up being the current student council members, apart from Courtgain, who'd begun a year later.

For a while, I had been undecided about choosing my close aides, but ultimately, I'd settled on the ones I'd first noticed, selecting them in order of their competence.

Reflecting on that time, I realized it had already been two years... Although much time had passed, they really hadn't changed all that much. While their individual abilities had improved, their fundamental human essence—what made them them—remained unchanged. Their steadfast dedication to their own paths was something I didn't dislike, to be honest.

As I was thinking this, on the cusp of leaving the room with Zeno, Charles held us back. "Ah, wait a moment, Your Highness! I'll come with you."

I wonder what he had planned by tagging along.

"Why don't you all join us? If we're going to congratulate someone important to our Prince Cecil, it's better to do so sooner rather than later. Besides... the other people we should be congratulating will be in the same place, right? Isn't that right, Your Highness?"

His reasoning was sound, but I was certain he was looking forward to something else. Perhaps he was expecting some sort of reaction from me when I met Bertia. Well, I didn't really mind. I was also quite interested in seeing their reactions when they truly understood Bertia's nature.

"That's fine with me. Speaking of other people to congratulate, Miss Silica, a childhood friend of Nelt, and Miss Cynthia, Valdo's fiancée, were also sitting with Bertia during the entrance ceremony."

Silica Runea was a countess, and Cynthia Soneris was the Countess of Frontier. The two of them were famous for embodying beauty, brains, wealth, family status, and charisma all at once, having quickly established their places in high society soon after making their respective debuts. In other words, they were this year's promising freshmen. The reason Bertia was exceptionally conspicuous during the entrance ceremony was largely because she'd been sitting with them.

"Silica, huh? I guess I'd better offer my congratulations... or else I might get scolded again," muttered Nelt begrudgingly as he closed his book and stood up. Although his expression was gloomy, he seemed to have decided that facing Silica's wrath later would be worse.

Naturally timid and lacking the requisite social skills, Nelt apparently couldn't stand up to his younger childhood acquaintance. However, despite his interpersonal challenges, he possessed knowledge far beyond that of the average person; I thought he could afford to be a bit more confident in himself.

"Ahh, Miss Cynthia. I was surprised when I saw her among the new students earlier and realized she was just starting this year. It's been a while, so I guess I should at least say hello," Valdo mused.

Valdo, did you really forgot that your own fiancée was starting school this year? I knew you only had martial arts on your mind, but this is really something, isn't it?

Charles seemed to share my thoughts and promptly corrected him with a strained face. "Valdo, I'm not trying to be harsh, but maybe keep that to yourself? Girls are delicate like candy intricately made by craftsmen, and saying something like that could shatter them and deeply hurt them."

Valdo, upon hearing this, tilted his head in confusion, clearly not understanding. "Candy craftsmen? Shatter them?"

I reluctantly chimed in to clarify, "Just stick to 'Congratulations on your entrance. I'm really happy to be able to spend time at the same academy as you,' and don't say anything unnecessary beyond that."

He nodded with a smile. "Got it! Leave it to me!!"

Valdo wasn't a bad guy. He was straightforward and genuinely amusing. Plus, when it came to combat, he exhibited a natural affinity that really stood out among his peers. It was just that... he was disastrously bad at intellectual tasks.

"Charles, the rest of the introductions are up to you, okay?" I said as I headed for the entrance.

He followed me, slightly disgruntled. "You're just dumping this on me?"

"You were the one who wanted to come along. And you invited them. So, naturally, it's up to you to handle it, right?" I said with a broad smile. Previously enjoying himself, Charles's cheek now twitched in annoyance.

"Shawn and Courtgain, you should come along too. Now that it's come to this, it's better to get all the introductions done at once," I called out.

Courtgain, who had been silently working on his tasks with an indifferent air, quietly nodded and stood up.

Observing the scene, Charles complained about the stark contrast in how he was treated compared to others. We might as well have chalked it up to a difference in popularity.

Fortunately, Shawn's introductory tea party started at four o'clock. It was a later start compared to other students, but when I asked why... "I delayed it because I wanted to meet my elder brother first" was his response.

Well, the timing of tea parties isn't fixed, but could it be my imagination that I sensed a hint of brother complex in him?

I cast a quick glance at the clock. "Ah, we're a bit behind schedule. We need to hurry, or we won't make our three o'clock appointment," I noted.

With brisk steps, we left the student council room.

Part Two

As we neared the courtyard, we quickly located Miss Bertia. Her tea party had been set up in the eastern pavilion, a popular and coveted location. Of course,

she deserved such a position because of her high status. Being the daughter of the marquis and prime minister, as well as the fiancée of the crown prince, she was second only to Shawn among the swell of freshmen.

Inside the pavilion, Bertia was accompanied by four other young ladies. Kuro was trailing behind her, disguised as a young maid. The form she'd taken on was that of a striking young girl, around ten years old, with jet-black hair and an expression devoid of emotion. The voluminous frilly maid outfit she wore reached to her knees, while atop her head sat sharp fox ears. It was the first time I had seen her in this guise.

Presumably, with Bertia's enrollment at the academy, it was deemed appropriate for Kuro to adopt a form that better suited her proximity to her mistress. Choosing a human shape over that of a fox was certainly the right decision—provided the disguise effectively blended in.

Charles and the others directed an intrigued look toward Kuro. Feeling our gaze, Kuro tilted her head inquisitively and flicked her tail, as if to ask, "What?" After a brief glance, the others dismissed her.

Sure. Spirits tend to be capricious beings, and many of them enjoy their mischief, so I guess I'll just accept "that's just how it is." Even if Kuro hadn't been there, Bertia would have stood out regardless, given the distinguished group that had gathered before us.

"Hey, hello, Bertia."

She quickly stood up, eyes wide with surprise, as she greeted us.

"Wh-What, Your Highness?! Why are you here?! Weren't you supposed to be late? And to have other members of the student council here too..."

Why is she so surprised? We had planned to meet at this time, right? I never said I'd be late. Could she be shocked that I brought the student council members along unexpectedly? But it feels like it's not just that...

"It's funny you should say that, Bertia. There's no way I'd be late to your entrance celebration tea party."

"No, but..."

Bertia looked bewildered, her eyes wavering. She opened and closed her mouth several times, surely having something else she wanted to ask me.

Before Bertia could speak, however, a voice unexpectedly came from a lady next to her.

“It has been a while, Prince Cecil. May I say something?”

Joanna, Duke Curstwarren’s daughter.

Joanna was a third-year student and my cousin. It was a surprise to find she had been invited to Bertia’s tea party. Her family background and abilities were impeccable, and she was a woman well regarded by many; at one point, she had even been considered a candidate to be my fiancée. We never had a formal matchmaking meeting, but we did cross paths a few times.

Eventually, I ended up engaged to Bertia, and Joanna... remained a candidate for Shawn. She was still just a “candidate” because Shawn felt awkward around her and had been reluctant to agree to the engagement.

Strategic marriages were a duty for royalty. Thus, just because Shawn had yet to accept it didn’t mean his engagement was not going forward. The relevant parties had decided it would be more beneficial to announce their engagement publicly once their relationship had matured. Currently, they were in what was called a “period of deepening relations.”

The deadline of said period was their graduation from Halm Academy.

“It’s been a while, Lady Joanna. Please, feel free to speak,” I said to her in greeting.

“Thank you... Lady Bertia was very, very worried that Prince Cecil, given your busy schedule, might not be able to attend today’s tea party. Despite not wanting to trouble you, she was quite restless, looking around and seeming downcast as she searched for you... She looked quite endearing in her concern...”

Bertia hastily interrupted Joanna’s words. “Wait, Lady Joanna, what are you —”

“Your Highness, you are dearly loved,” Joanna continued smoothly, ignoring Bertia’s flustered interruption. She was smiling sweetly behind her fan, a look of amusement on her face. It seemed she also enjoyed teasing Bertia.

I returned the smile. “If that’s true, it’s my luck to have such a benefit as her fiancé.”

“Indeed, you have chosen a wonderful fiancée. Lady Bertia is also very kind to us. At a party, when I was being persistently pursued by some ‘gentlemen,’ she used her status to protect me. It was the first time I met Lady Bertia. She stood in front of me, shielding me from those men, blushing and stammering while desperately defending me... She was so adorable at that moment, I almost fell for her myself,” Joanna reminisced with a dreamy expression.

She detailed the events of that time. As she revealed what Bertia had done, she even imitated Bertia’s speech, repeating her words from then.

“I am here because I have business with her, so you must leave now. Who do you think I am? I am... I am... I am... the fiancée of Prince Cecil, the future... the future queen! How dare you hinder me?!”

Bertia... You probably wanted to play the “villainess using her status to her advantage,” but with all that stuttering, you just seemed like a desperate, adorable girl. There’s zero villainy in that, and actually, isn’t it usually the prince’s role to protect the princess?

Wait a second, is that supposed to be my role?

It was common to see drunkards stirring up trouble at parties, and there’d be no end if I tried to handle each one individually. *Normally, I’d have the servants deal with them, but perhaps it’d be good to put on such a performance occasionally?*

As I pondered this, I gazed intently at Bertia’s face. Flustered and turning bright red, she quickly spoke up.

“I didn’t say it quite like that! I was graceful and elegant...”

“I had no idea such a thing happened. You should take care not to engage in such risky activities, okay?”

“It wasn’t that dangerous...” she said, looking downcast.

I approached Bertia, taking in her expression, and then gently stroked her head.

“There might be times when being my fiancée alone isn’t enough to protect you, especially since you won’t be able to physically best most men. Try to seek help quickly or get others to handle things whenever possible, all right?”

Helping those in need was noble, but if it came with risks, it couldn’t be overlooked. Bertia was straightforward in both the best and worst ways, making her prone to danger. Thus, I hoped she could take care of herself when on her own, especially in my absence.

“But... I am supposed to be the villainess...” she began, trying to justify her actions.

Sternly, I asked, “Bertia? What’s your response?”

“Yes...” she replied with a nod, her face blushing red.

Does she really understand?

After looking down for a while, she suddenly perked up and raised her face. “Ah, but—It’s all right now! During these two years when I haven’t been able to see Your Highness much, I’ve made many friends... or rather, followers! Look!” She gestured proudly at the women sitting at her tea party table.

“Let me introduce them! From the right, we have Lady Joanna, Duke Curstwarren’s daughter; Lady Silica Runea, a countess to be; Lady Cynthia Soneris, the Count of Frontier’s daughter; and Lady Anne, Marquis Kogares’s daughter. Lady Anne is a second-year student, and Lady Joanna is a fellow third-year, like Your Highness. They are all rival ladies!”

Hmm? She just slipped in a term from her previous life, didn’t she? And she intentionally changed “friends” to “followers,” which sounds somewhat derogatory, right? Considering some of these ladies hold titles of similar or higher rank, that might not be very prudent.

I suppose I should caution her, just in case. After exchanging brief greetings with the ladies and introducing the members of the student council, I took my

place beside Bertia. The men also took their seats, and watching them settle, I began to speak gently while admonishing her.

“Bertia, you shouldn’t refer to these ladies, who could be considered your equals in excellence, as merely ‘followers.’ They are important friends, aren’t they?”

“Th-That’s not it. I mean... Um... Yes. I apologize.” Bertia stumbled over her words, seemingly aware that she had misspoken, and nodded meekly.

She probably wanted to come off as the formidable “villainess.” I considered whether she should firmly be giving up this ambition if striving to be the “villainess” only tarnished her reputation. However, given that these ladies were looking at her with warmth, it was clear that her attempt had failed.

Joanna said, “Prince Cecil, please don’t worry overly. We members of the Bertia Fan Club are, in a way, her followers.”

“The ‘Bertia Fan Club’? Lady Joanna, what exactly is that?”

“Ahaha... It’s an informal group, somewhat like a club dedicated to admiring Lady Bertia. Among our members are fans of her publication *The Must-Visit Spots in the Capital: A Complete Guide*, those who are smitten by her unwitting kindness, and others who have fallen for her as they watch her tearfully persevere. Lady Bertia is immensely popular among both men and women, after all.”

It appeared that Bertia’s eccentric behavior had been interpreted favorably. However, she seemed unaware of the existence of the society and was visibly surprised.

“What? What do you mean, Lady Joanna?” Bertia asked, hurrying over to her.

Joanna simply smiled back silently, her grin conveying a sense of complicity. Alongside, Anne and Cynthia were nodding in agreement.

“Lady Bertia is quite soothing to be around,” Anne commented.

“Lady Anne, I’m not supposed to be that type of character...”

“The higher one climbs in society, the more people around you carry their own burdens. Being near Lady Bertia, whose kindness is palpable, provides a

great sense of relief,” Cynthia added.

“Even you, Lady Cynthia?!”

“It’s just that... she’s magnetic. I feel compelled to protect her, to ensure she continues to grow as forthrightly as she has been!” Silica said.

“That’s practically a maternal perspective, isn’t it?! We are the same age, Lady Silica!!”

Surrounded by these unexpected declarations from her “followers,” Bertia looked taken aback. The ladies looked on with amusement.

I had wondered why Bertia hadn’t made more blunders in social settings, and now I realized that she had managed to enlist these distinguished young ladies not just as allies but as guardians—albeit unwittingly.

My fiancée is impressive, indeed. It was commendable that someone poised to become a crown princess possessed such a compelling quality. However, knowing that my betrothed was admired by others, regardless of gender, did stir up some complex feelings. It was somewhat akin to thinking a kitten you’d grown fond of was being affectionate with others too.

I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of jealousy.

“Enough already! You’re all joking too much! Please stop teasing me!” *Bertia, first, you should realize that they’re not just “joking.”*

“More importantly! Your Highness, on your way here, did you encounter a charming lady playing with a white bird?”

I gave a wry smile at her attempt to shift subjects, yet I considered her question. Thinking back, I seemed to recall encountering such a student on my way here. Having been running late for the tea party, I’d only briefly glimpsed her as I made my way here.

“If you mean a student who was chasing a white bird while laughing in an oddly high pitch, looking somewhat like a drug addict, then yes, I saw her. She kept glancing over here as if she were checking us out, and suddenly ran off while talking to the bird. I noticed her strange behavior and had Courtgain report it to a teacher. But why do you ask?”

Bertia's mouth dropped open in shock, her expression freezing. *That's a bit out of character for a noble lady, you know? It's entertaining when it's just between us, though.*

"A drug addict?! You weren't intrigued by her?"

"I thought she was unusual, but she seemed suspicious, and I wasn't interested. Women who wrap black foxes around their necks are far more interesting, don't you think?"

"That's not the point!! Wasn't there anything else? Something that stirred your feelings the moment you saw her?!" Bertia seemed as though she were desperately digging for a specific response.

"Hmm, not really. I was in a hurry, so I didn't really get a good look at her."

"You didn't feel anything else?"

"Well, the way she kept stealing glances at us was rather annoying..."

"That's not what I mean! Ah!! Could it be that at first you didn't like her, but then you couldn't take your eyes off her... It's that kind of romance development?! In the game, there was a plot where you got drawn to her unique innocence, and then gradually... Has something changed then?!"

Watching Bertia mutter incomprehensibly, I couldn't help but feel that some things never changed.

"She felt like a writhing mass of ill intentions. Just like those women at balls who look at you, hoping to be approached... So, no, I wasn't particularly interested."

Besides, I have a rather fascinating fiancée named Bertia already.

However, the fiancée in question seemed dissatisfied and pressed on.

"Did you talk to her?"

"How could I have time for that when you were waiting on me?"

"What about making eye contact?"

"I only saw her from a distance for a moment; I couldn't even tell you the color of her eyes." I said with a shrug of my shoulders. "Ah, but her hair seemed

to be a pale pink blonde. In comparison, I thought I much prefer the deeper hue of your hair.”

She seemed slightly pleased and ran her fingertips over her long hair. But then she suddenly gasped, shook her head, and a look of disappointment crossed her face.

“Then the meeting event was...” she murmured just loud enough for me to hear, her shoulders slumping. She looked like she wanted to bury her face in her hands, but perhaps mindful of the public eye, she covered her face with her fan instead.

Then, as if struck by a sudden thought, she looked up abruptly.

“That’s right! What about the roses? What happened with the roses?”

“Just as you requested, I made sure they were prepared for your school entry celebration.” I turned to face my aide. “Zeno.”

The spirit in human guise, who had been standing by like a shadow at my back, stepped forward at my call and handed over the roses he had prepared.

“Bertia, congratulations on your admission. I’m happy that we’ll have more opportunities to spend time together,” I said.

Reflexively, she took the flowers from Zeno. “Thank you... Wait, Your Highness, why is it a potted plant? And blue roses at that...” She paused, and upon realizing what she held, nearly dropped it in surprise. “Aren’t these the blue roses of legend?”

“Hold them carefully, Bertia,” I cautioned. “This isn’t the wild specimen, so it’s not legendary in that sense. I’ve created this through crossbreeding and a variety of modifications. Though, if we were to propagate and sell these, they could indeed make a fortune.”

“What is this miracle you’ve created?!” Bertia’s eyes widened in astonishment.

“I made them because you seem to like that color. It was specially crafted for your enrollment. This is the only pot in the world made just for you as a gift, so if you drop it or it dies, it would be quite difficult to replace.”

“That’s quite the responsibility...”

“Not exactly, Bertia. It’s yours to do with as you please. If you don’t like it, you’re free to dispose of it.”

There was a pause. Bertia had frozen, the potted plant pressed to her chest in a hug.

The others, enjoying their tea and watching our interaction, seemed to have their faces strangely contorted. *Such atmospheres around me aren’t unusual, so perhaps it’s not something to be overly concerned about?*

Bertia suddenly snapped back to reality and began muttering to herself, “The counterpart is the Android Prince. If you care, you lose. If you care, you lose...” She coughed. “Excuse me. By the way, Your Highness, didn’t you also have a bouquet of red roses? On your way here, did you perhaps give it to that woman with the white bird?”

“I only prepared the one. Though I thought normal roses might be too plain, so I tried making something special. Was it not to your liking?”

I had intended to cater to Bertia’s preferences. Perhaps I had made a mistake. My troubled thoughts must’ve appeared on my face, as Bertia hurriedly shook her head with vigor.

Behind Bertia, Kuro mimicked her actions playfully, reminding me that sometimes, perhaps, it was best not to take things too seriously.

“No, no, not at all!! It’s a very beautiful shade of blue. Their depth... Almost like Your Highness’s eyes... Wait, that’s not it! I just like it because it’s a brilliant color!!”

As I suspected, it seemed she was fond of the color because it reminded her of my eyes. *She’s not quite managing to disguise that fact, with her face turning bright red. This is really part of her charm.*

Bertia truly did have a way of making things enjoyable.

“Your Highness, um... About that, you’re sure you didn’t give any of these roses to the woman with the white bird?”

“I wouldn’t give away something I prepared for you to some suspicious woman passing by.”

“Right, of course...”

Bertia peered intently into the pot of roses in her arms, as if expecting to find a branch cut from it. Her troubled expression gradually blossomed into a beautiful smile, like a rose in full bloom.

“It’s all in the past now, and it’s okay to be happy about it now, right?” Her whispered words, spoken to no one in particular, strangely tightened my chest.

After a pleasant enough tea party, I decided to walk Bertia back to the girls’ dormitory. Along the way, I learned that, apparently, I was supposed to have become interested in the heroine I had seen on my way to the tea party today and was meant to have an “encounter event.”

Upon meeting her, I was supposed to take a rose from the bouquet I had planned to give to Bertia and present it to her as a gift for her enrollment. Bertia complained that I had completely overlooked this detail. However, I think it was understandable, given that a young lady who wraps a live black fox around her neck certainly makes a stronger impression than one merely playing with a bird. Besides, just seeing Bertia’s happy face and her amusing reactions was enough to satisfy me.

Ah, yes. I needed to properly investigate the “Bertia Fan Club” that Joanna mentioned earlier. While it seemed to be a beneficial presence for her at the moment, the fact that it had many members raised the possibility of trouble if any of them were out of the ordinary. Even though she was surrounded by capable individuals, it was important to have a thorough understanding of the situation.

With that thought, I ordered an inquiry into the society to ensure everything was in order.

Part Three

A month after Bertia's enrollment, I found an opportune moment to call Joanna to the student council room. It was just the three of us there—myself, Zeno, and Joanna. I had summoned her to inquire about the informal group known as the "Bertia Fan Club."

I had initially thought the name quite peculiar, but it turned out that it wasn't specifically coined by anyone in particular. It emerged naturally among those who sought solace in Bertia's presence and eventually solidified into that title.

The club's mission was to oversee the healthy development of Bertia. While the exact number of members was unknown, it appeared to be quite substantial. Joanna and Bertia's other friends seemed to exert some control over the group, but there were also so-called "hidden fans" whose activities were less manageable.

Incidentally, it seemed I also had a fan club—or rather, multiple ones with names ranging from the innocuous to the unfortunate, such as the "Group Admiring Prince Cecil's Darkness" or the "Cecil's Condescension Squad." Given the dubious nature of these names, I'd opted not to investigate further and leave them be. Charles and the others had assured me that they were harmless, if not a bit overzealous.

The real concern, however, is Bertia.

"It seems to have grown into quite a large group, unofficial though it may be," I mused, spreading the documents I'd received on the desk and pondering over them.

"Are there any members who might become a risk factor, Lady Joanna?"

"You're asking me that, Your Highness? Surely, you've conducted your own investigations already?" She shielded her mouth with her ornate fan, her eyes narrowing... It was a look that made her seem more the villainess than Bertia ever could.

"Well, I have, but I believe a mutual exchange of information is necessary."

"Probing into a lady's secrets is quite inelegant, isn't it?"

I smiled broadly, flashing a piece of paper I had prepared beforehand. "Would you like me to tell Shawn how much you've been investigating him?"

Her eyes widened in shock. Joanna was deeply fond of my brother. However, her meticulous nature as a noblewoman, ensuring she gave no one any leverage against her, seemed to create a barrier when it came to her romantic pursuits. Her desire to conduct herself correctly as a lady had unfortunately made her seem unapproachable to Shawn.

Joanna chased.

Shawn fled.

Joanna strategized.

Shawn grew frightened.

It was a vicious, continuous cycle.

Despite this, she still wanted to get closer to Shawn and had recently been covertly gathering information about him.

Thus, I decided to use this knowledge as leverage.

She snapped her fan shut with a sharp click. “Oh, enough! This is why I detest deviousness!”

Her grip was so tight that it looked as though the fan might snap in half. I directed a full, beaming smile at her.

“That makes two of us, doesn’t it?”

Reflecting on the time when Joanna had been a candidate for my fiancée brought back distinctly dull memories. Our similar ways of thinking meant that we could almost read each other’s minds, making our conversations feel like mere exchanges of information—functional and devoid of depth. In contrast, my relationship with Bertia was the complete opposite. With her, I never felt the need to pretend to enjoy myself in a “childish” manner.

At the time, Joanna, sensing my mindset, continued to behave as a proper lady suited for an engagement, despite knowing I wasn’t making any effort to engage with her on a more personal level. Eventually, she wasn’t able to bear my lack of consideration.

And so, our engagement had been dissolved, and ultimately, Bertia had become my fiancée—a turn of events I now viewed as quite fortunate. Life had

become more enjoyable, and while Joanna did seem to be chasing after Shawn rather unsuccessfully, she appeared to be enjoying the pursuit... possibly.

“It’s hard to believe that the pure and charming Prince Shawn and you come from the same parents. Moreover, to have such a lovely lady as Bertia for a fiancée and to be loved by her!”

“Are you jealous?”

“Jealous? I am not... not jealous...”

“You are jealous, aren’t you?”

My grin widened, filled with ease, as Joanna’s usually composed face twisted into an expression of frustration. Watching our interaction from behind, Zeno chose the perfect moment to intervene.

“Your Highness, please moderate your teasing of Lady Joanna. We need to proceed with our discussion before the others arrive.”

Zeno was right. It would be troublesome if someone were to interrupt. I didn’t want this conversation overheard, and setting up another meeting would be inconvenient. His timely intervention reminded me once again how capable a servant he was.

“Let’s get back to the matter at hand, then. You’ll tell me about any potential risks among the members you’re aware of, won’t you?” I maintained a smile but added a bit of firmness to my tone, making it clear there was no escape this time.

Joanna put her hands on her hips and sighed in exasperation, but she nodded in acquiescence. “Very well! Honestly, Prince Cecil, you really lack the charm that Prince Shawn possesses.”

It was unusual for her—both the Joanna of the past and the one now—to express her emotions so openly in public. Perhaps this was due to Bertia’s influence.

“There are no dangerous elements among the members I am currently aware of. We’ve conducted thorough... let’s call it educational guidance. However,

Lady Bertia does tend to charm a bevy of people wherever she goes, so there are some suspicious actions among those outside the club.”

Her report aligned closely with my own findings. Truly, Bertia could be a handful, unconsciously drawing people to her, irrespective of age or gender.

“We are addressing these individuals as needed. However, in Bertia’s case, it is rare for anyone to develop romantic feelings toward her, so that type of trouble is unlikely.”

That made sense. Bertia was adored more like one might cherish a small, beloved pet rather than as a woman to be romantically pursued. It was more like everyone wanted to gather around her and have tea while watching her charm unfold. Still, perceptions could vary widely.

“And?” I prompted Joanna, sensing there was more she hadn’t yet disclosed.

“Lady Bertia’s popularity does incite jealousy in some, so they’re the ones we need to be vigilant about,” she explained, pulling a neatly folded piece of paper from a hidden pocket in her dress and spreading it out before me. Listed on it were the names of several students, clearly identified as blacklisted by the Bertia Fan Club.

“This list comprises of students we’ve found suspicious lately. It’s not yet fully vetted, so the number might decrease upon further scrutiny.”

“Countess Remitt Ulkaria, Baronet Crowel Sittern, Viscountess Eirin Silbertz... Baroness Hironia Indelon...”

Some of the names matched those I had noted myself.

“Most of the ladies listed are either admirers of mine or are concerned that their lovers or fiancés are showing interest in Lady Bertia. The men, on the other hand, seem to be channeling their grievances with me toward Lady Bertia.”

Joanna looked at me as if to say, “The rest is up to you,” but I merely smiled and brushed it off lightly.

“Sounds like things are about to get interesting, huh?”

“How is any of this ‘interesting’? It’s Lady Bertia who’s in a pinch!”

“It’s not that much of an issue. After all, she has you all by her side.”

I let my words imply “Please take care of Bertia.” Joanna responded with a displeased flutter of her fan, yet her expression wasn’t entirely negative. In fact, there seemed to be a slight hint of pleasure.

I knew that even if I didn’t intervene, Joanna and the others would protect Bertia in my stead.

“I’ll step in if necessary, but for now, I’ll leave it to you,” I said.

“We have no choice, do we? Lady Bertia is our friend, and we can’t just leave her be. We’ll make sure to protect her,” Joanna declared, turning her face away with a huff that was almost audible.

Seeing her reaction, I couldn’t help but smile wryly. She seemed to emit a defiant “Hmph!”

I find myself more intrigued by this version of Joanna than the one I knew before.

Indeed, while Joanna provided her own form of intrigue, the dynamic vivacity Bertia brought was incomparable. As we moved forward, one couldn’t help but wonder what sort of academy life awaited us. The anticipation I felt was far greater than when I first entered the academy.

Chapter Seven: Bertia, Fourteen Years Old

Part One

There was a special room in one of the salons shared between the middle and high school divisions. It was a quiet space used for small tea parties and meetings. Within it, Bertia and I were sharing lunch, enjoying some peaceful time together for the first time in three months since I'd graduated from middle school. Kuro, in her maid guise, stood by Bertia's side while Zeno prepared the tea. We were having dessert and sipping tea leisurely when Bertia suddenly leaned in close with a question.

"So, Your Highness, how are things going with the heroine? I haven't heard any rumors about the two of you 'getting along' recently..."

"Hmm? The heroine... Ah, you mean Miss Hironia. To be honest, we haven't even been properly introduced. Despite that, she approached me with an overly familiar attitude, which made her seem rather suspicious."

Hironia Indelon, a baroness, was whom Bertia referred to as the heroine. She was someone we frequently encountered around the academy since Bertia and her classmates had enrolled. She had been meddling with some of my potential close aides, so I'd had to keep tabs on her...

Her name was even on that infamous blacklist.

In reality, I knew not just her name but much more about her. The fact that Bertia accidentally referred to her as the "heroine" in public, turning it into her unofficial nickname, was something I was also aware of. It seemed the others had abbreviated Hironia Indelon's name to "hiroin" based on the "Hiro" in "Hironia" and the "In" in "Indelon." This misunderstanding might just well have been a stroke of luck for Bertia.

That said, I couldn't exactly say I was familiar with her, despite all I knew.

Even though Halm Academy existed outside the sphere of noble society, there were still basic manners to be maintained. These manners were reflective of the social rules meant for nobles who would be part of the social world and for commoners who would increasingly interact with nobility.

One of the paramount rules was, "Except for official business, those of lower status must not address those of higher status first. Additionally, one must act as if they do not know anyone who has not been formally introduced or mutually acknowledged." This etiquette allowed higher nobles to avoid those who might seek to curry favor, and it fostered the habit of promptly finishing greetings with those they must interact with. Lower-ranking individuals could thus practice avoiding disrespectful behavior when they eventually interacted with higher-ranking ones.

According to this etiquette, I still treated the heroine as a stranger.

Whether she understands this or not, I do not know.

"Why, why is this happening?! After I guided you to so many event-trigger spots over the past year, why are you still less than acquaintances after all this time?"

"Oh? 'Guided,' you say... So, Bertia, that was intentional after all?" I smiled teasingly, implying my complaint.

Bertia let out a small gasp, and her shoulders jerked as she began to sweat. She averted her gaze.

Ever since Bertia enrolled in the middle division of Halm Academy, and throughout the year until I graduated, there were numerous occasions where I followed her lead, and Baroness Hironia just happened to be there.

As I gazed at my endearing fiancée with a smile, I remembered a particular incident.

Part Two

“The roses in the courtyard are in full bloom! Please, let’s go for a walk together!”

Bertia invited me, a few months after her enrollment at Halm Academy, on a promenade to view blossoming flowers—an unusually rare occasion since she’d sought me out not just for help. Her eyes sparkled with unusual brightness, which excited me... Mostly because I was curious about what ulterior motives she had.

Oddly, when I arrived at our meeting spot, Bertia was nowhere in sight. Instead, Baroness Hironia was there, napping in the shade of a tree alongside a small bird. Her nostrils flared in excitement, making it blatantly obvious that she was deep in feigned sleep... *Well, it’s none of my concern, really.*

I thought it inconvenient to have someone occupying this spot as it was in the way, but the courtyard of the academy was a public space. I couldn’t just tell her to leave, so I decided to sit on a bench a little distance away. It was a convenient spot to sit and keep an eye out for Bertia while I waited.

As I sat down, I pulled out some student council documents I’d intended to review during my free time.

From the direction where the baroness was pretending to sleep, I thought I heard exaggerated coughs and sneezes a few times, but I ignored them all and immersed myself in my work.

Eventually, I heard someone screaming for help.

“Aaahhh!! A caterpillar!! Someone, please, remove it!!”



Suddenly, Bertia burst out from behind the rose hedge, her eyes teary. She was spinning back and forth in a terrible panic. Reluctantly, I approached and embraced her gently, brushing off the insect from her hair with a handkerchief.

I had noticed her hiding there when I arrived, after all. It was hardly a secret, considering her deep crimson hair had peeked out occasionally. Kuro, unable to grasp her intentions, had also been comically popping her fox-eared head in and out, making it even more obvious.

I had been observing her hiding while continuing my work, wondering how long she would keep up such antics, but her entrance had been unexpectedly dramatic. Well, it was entertaining enough to satisfy me.

“It’s all right now. I’ve chased away the nasty bug that startled you,” I said with a reassuring smile, and Bertia finally stopped moving, a relieved expression washing over her face.

“Thank you, Your Highness!”

“You’re welcome.” I paused and then thought for a moment. “So, are we done playing hide-and-seek? I’ve finished the work I brought along, and it might be a good time to take that walk, don’t you think?” I swiftly brushed the leaves out of her hair and off her clothes as I spoke. Her face suddenly took on a look of “oh no.”

“You were hiding so earnestly, so I thought you were initiating a new game. I was waiting for something to happen, but when nothing did, I wondered what to do. Perhaps you were trying to blindfold me but got confused about when to hide?”

Recently, a game of sneaking up behind someone and blindfolding them had become popular at the academy. Seizing the opportunity of escape that my words offered, Bertia awkwardly shifted her gaze. “Yes, that’s right!”

“I thought so. I was also worried that you might have stood me up on purpose, hoping something would happen... But I’m glad that wasn’t the case.”

“No, no, no, no, no! I would never do such a thing!!”

“Cough! Cough! Achoo!” More exaggerated coughs and sneezes could be heard from a certain someone, but I chose to ignore them and continue the conversation.

“Right? Well, now that you’ve come out, shall we go for that walk?”

“No... um... that...” Bertia hesitated, glancing worriedly at the girl pretending to nap in the shade. I extended my hand with a broad smile, and then—

“Ahhh, I’m so sleepy!! I just can’t seem to wake up!! I wonder if a prince will come to wake me up!!” Baroness Hironia finally started her grand self-promotion loudly.

If she could shout like that, she was surely awake enough on her own. Not to mention that waking a noble lady was the duty of a maid, not a prince. How presumptuous would it be to ask a prince to perform such a menial task?

Of course, there was no obligation on my part to fulfill her wish, so I chose to continue ignoring her. “It seems there’s a rare rose blooming over there.”

“Your Highness, aren’t you going to wake the heroine...?”

“Hm? Is there a problem? Has something urgent come up that requires me to do that?”

“No, it’s not that...”

“I was really looking forward to this date, especially since you invited me. Let’s go, shall we? After we’ve seen the roses, we can have some tea. I’ve got some delicious exotic sweets.”

At the mention of sweets, Bertia’s eyes began to sparkle with excitement.

“Exotic sweets!!”

“They have dried fruit in them, and the balance of sweetness and sourness is just perfect.”

“The perfect balance of sweet and sour!!”

She seemed completely oblivious to the glaring Baroness Hironia, who had given up pretending to sleep and was now staring daggers at us.

“Well then, let’s go see the roses as a bit of exercise before our snack.”

“Snacks, roses, and you, Your Highness... How wonderful!”

I wonder if snacks are a higher priority for her than I am. It was a bittersweet feeling, but since Bertia seemed happy, I’d let it slide.

“Shall we?” I offered my hand with a warm smile, and Bertia, ever the perfect lady, placed her hand delicately atop mine.

Having just seen her spinning around like a dog chasing its tail, I couldn’t help but see this gesture as if she were giving me a paw. I chuckled under my breath and, to cover it up, called over to Kuro.

“Kuro, why don’t you join us? Zeno, please escort her.”

At my call, Zeno appeared as if from nowhere, promptly lifting the maid-outfitted Kuro without hesitation.

“Now that is what hiding should be, Bertia,” I said with a smile to a surprised Bertia.

She seemed not to fully grasp what I meant, tilting her head in confusion, but that in itself was amusing enough.

In the background, I thought I heard some baroness exclaim, “Kyaaa!! How dare that villainess!!” I ignored it and chose to focus on enjoying my time with Bertia.

Part Three

As we sipped tea in the shared salon, reminiscing about the final year of middle school, Bertia spoke up. “I wish for Prince Cecil to find happiness with a woman who is truly special to him, for the sake of the world and its people. But as a villainess, I cannot directly facilitate anything between His Highness and the heroine. So, I thought at least I could help make sure that events unfolded as they should...”

From my perspective, with Bertia as my fiancée, such efforts were nothing but unnecessary meddling.

Though her earnest (and futile) efforts were sometimes amusing—endearing even—they brought me no real benefit.

Despite this, similar incidents continued to occur after the one in the courtyard. For instance, when Bertia sent me to fetch a forgotten item from a classroom, I found Baroness Hironia there, to my “delight,” and coincidentally, the door had then been locked from the outside, trapping us together.

Given that I couldn’t keep my fiancée waiting unnecessarily, nor could I afford to be alone with another woman while engaged, I politely sidestepped the chatting Baroness Hironia, escaped swiftly out the window, and climbed down a tree.

As I was leaving the room, I thought I heard a voice exclaim, “Hey! What am I supposed to do all alone in this situation?!” So, I mentioned to a teacher passing by that a female student had been locked inside the classroom. I didn’t hear any reports of trouble afterward, so I assume she was rescued without issue.

The reason I personally went to retrieve Bertia’s forgotten item, despite my busy schedule, was because her acting was so over the top that it was amusing. I also harbored a hope that perhaps she was planning something entertaining. Otherwise, I would likely have sent someone else to fetch it.

In this way, Bertia’s poorly devised schemes continued one after another, and I knowingly played along with them... because her earnest struggles were amusing... and endearing.

Given how adorable my fiancée was, I thought it wouldn’t hurt to become “acquainted” with Baroness Hironia as she wished. After all, becoming “acquaintances” was manageable; I just had to keep things casual and maintain my distance.

While I found amusement in the situation, Bertia’s desperation was far from amusing, and it made me feel uneasy. Eventually, I reached a point where, upon seeing Baroness Hironia, I would just smile and walk away. She might have been a formidable and interesting character, but she didn’t captivate my interest more than Bertia... and lately, I found the baroness somewhat troublesome.

It was also awkward when, without having given her any roses, she thanked me for one, saying, “Thank you for the beautiful rose you gave me last time! I was so happy I placed it by my window!” *How am I supposed to respond to that?*

And when she talked about her bird, saying, “Pii-chan usually doesn’t warm up to people, but it seems especially fond of you, Your Highness. Just like me, it must really love you!” I was left utterly baffled.

Perhaps the bird accompanying Baroness Hironia was a light spirit that had bestowed her with “charm magic.” When she had declared, “I really love His Highness,” the bird, trying to create a *fait accompli*, darted with great force toward my chest. I almost swatted it away reflexively, but at the last moment, I calmed myself and merely sidestepped.

The little bird couldn’t stop in time and ended up crashing into a wall. I had only stepped aside so that wasn’t my fault.

Therefore, when Baroness Hironia exclaimed, “Oh, I’m so sorry! Please don’t worry about it. Oh, but... I have some areas I’m struggling with in my studies... I would be so happy if Your Highness could tutor me!!” I naturally ignored her.

Our interactions, if they could even be called that, generally went as such.

Baroness Hironia’s words often seemed like she was reading lines straight from a script, lacking any genuine interest. It was like watching a poor actor who continued to stick rigidly to the script while everyone else was improvising, thus bringing down the atmosphere of the scene.

If you listened closely, her statements did seem to echo some of Bertia’s past life stories, so maybe they could be interesting in a different context.

I found no interest in her actions or words.

“I also asked Lady Joanna and others to introduce Baroness Hironia to Your Highness. But I was refused with comments like, ‘Such kindness only hurts the person more, you know?’ and, ‘Nothing is more bitter than the salt sent by the partner of someone you secretly love,’” Bertia relayed.

The ladies like Joanna, not knowing the true intent behind Bertia’s words, must have misunderstood. They probably thought that Bertia, feeling pity for

Baroness Hironia's unrequited crush on me, was trying to create sweet memories for her.

Bertia, in turn, likely didn't fully grasp their intentions either.

"Bertia, I have my reasons for maintaining my current distance with Baroness Hironia. Could you just sit by and watch for now?" I asked, furrowing my brows in a troubled expression and speaking in a way that seemed plausible. I let a hint of "please understand" seep through, hoping she'd grasp the misunderstanding correctly.

"Your Highness, you had a deep strategy in mind, didn't you?! Yes, of course. There's no way Your Highness would simply let a beloved princess escape so easily. It was all part of the plan!!"

"Of course, I'm always working hard not to miss chances with my princess," I responded. *Specifically, this adorable, albeit silly one.* I had always made it a point to never miss any of Bertia's amusing antics. *I'm not lying, am I?*

That reminded me, speaking of Bertia's amusing antics, there was something I wanted to discuss with her.

"Speaking of which, Bertia, I've been hearing a lot about you from my friends lately."

"Eh? About me? I'm not sure what that might be about."

"Yeah, I suppose there's just too much going on for you to keep track of," I said with a wry smile as I observed her genuinely clueless expression.

"It seems you've been putting even more effort than last year into bringing my friends and your friends together?"

"Oh, that! Yes, I've been working hard to block reverse harem and other potential rival routes!"

It seemed Bertia finally recalled what she had been up to, her expression brightening as she proudly puffed out her chest.

Do you not realize how many complaints I've been hearing from my close aides because of what you're doing?

And due to you busying yourself with them, our time together has decreased... Aren't you aware of that?

Really, as long as you're having fun, that's what matters.

Part Four

It was early last summer when Charles burst into the student council room, his face flushed red and his eyes brimming with tears as he voiced his first complaint. He revealed that Bertia had taken it upon herself to divulge his secret feelings for Anne, the leading candidate for his brother's fiancée.

"It's no laughing matter to have feelings for my brother's potential fiancée! I've been desperately trying to forget her, to suppress my feelings that must not be recognized!! What are you going to do about this? Your Highness, Lady Bertia is your fiancée, isn't she? Please, do something! Before these suppressed feelings overflow!"

Seeing Charles, who usually maintained a carefree demeanor, plead so desperately almost made me burst into laughter.

Unbeknownst to Charles, Anne, with her face just as red, was standing just beyond the open door, having followed him along with Bertia. Charles probably ran away in panic after his feelings were unexpectedly revealed. Anne, I assume, had come out of concern for him.

While I watched, wondering when he would notice them, Charles's emotions escalated, and he began to cry profusely. Moreover, amid his tears, he started declaring his love for Anne. Completely missing my chance to intervene, I ended up listening to his passionate outpouring.

"The moment I saw her, I fell in love. Just hearing her voice makes my heart... my body heat up. But considering her position, there's nothing I can do, right? She's a candidate to be my brother's fiancée. It would obviously be better for her to marry my older brother, who will inherit the dukedom, rather than a second son like me, who has no such prospects. Thinking about it leaves me feeling hopeless..."

Charles's impassioned declarations of love for a woman he didn't realize was there further intensified.

"It's excruciating to think about her. I've tried dating various women to forget her as quickly as possible. But it's no use. I can't maintain those relationships because she's always on my mind. No one seems as significant as she does, a realization that hits me painfully every time. Yet, I keep repeating the same actions, hoping someday to forget her... and I always end up regretting it.

"I love her so much it hurts. And I hate it just as much. Because isn't it true? She's captivated my heart, yet she is destined to choose my brother. The thought of having to watch her become his, to belong to him forever, feels like my heart is about to burst."

I had somewhat noticed his feelings for Anne—evident from the way he looked at her, the increased twitch of facial muscles when they met, the doubling of his blink rate, and the slight hesitation before he spoke to her. However, I hadn't realized he harbored such vivid emotions.

Few would have guessed that Charles, known for his frivolous liaisons, could harbor such devoted feelings for anyone. Anne, for her part, seemed utterly unaware, her face reddening to an unprecedented degree.

Perhaps unable to bear watching him further or simply having something she felt compelled to say, Bertia suddenly raised her voice, bringing Charles's theatrical display of affection to a close.

"How pitiful, Lord Charles! If you are so smitten, why don't you seize the opportunity? Is she not your target after all?"

"Even if I took her, could I really make her happier than my brother would? Our family holds several titles besides the dukedom, so marrying me wouldn't mean she'd live poorly as a noble. But still, it'd be merely decent, not the happiness that comes with being a duch—" Charles finally noticed Anne's presence. "La-Lady A-Anne?!"

His eyes widened as if he had seen a ghost, and he froze, mouth agape—a pitiful sight, indeed.

“This is when you should kneel and beg for love, saying, ‘Even so, I will make you happy! Please choose me!’” Bertia lectured.

She pointed sternly at Charles’s nose.

“Indeed, financial stability might be necessary for living. However, women cannot be made happy by that alone! In a world where strategic marriages are the norm, it is love that we seek.” She spoke fervently, her hands clasped tightly as she continued to make her case. “The idea that a man would fight to take you away from others because he truly loves you—that’s romantic. Women are drawn to that... They are moved by it! If a lady could spend her life with a man who cherishes her so deeply, she could forsake the title of duchess and still find happiness.”

Charles, reeling from the damage of his heart’s exposure, showed no sign of response. Bertia’s appeal continued. “Whether you can truly make her happy depends on your manliness and the effort you put in! How much you strive for the person you love, and how much you can envelop her with your love, is all up to you!”

Still preaching, seemingly unconcerned with Charles’s lack of reaction, Bertia said, “Stealing away a fiancée candidate from your elder brother is no small feat. However, since she is still only a ‘candidate,’ there might still be a possibility. I hear your brother is quite the playboy—a genuine one, unlike you. It’s clear that Miss Anne will suffer with him.”

Although she had never met Charles’s brother, her blunt description was unapologetic. Yet, it wasn’t incorrect, so there was no need for admonishment.

“Won’t you regret letting someone like that take away your beloved Miss Anne? I can see a future where you, overwhelmed with regret, become even more dissolute, a reckless libertine beyond help. And I see Miss Anne, having become your brother’s official fiancée, sighing in a loveless arranged marriage. And then, there’s the illustration—no, the scene—of you saying you don’t deserve to comfort her because you fled without fighting, watching her from afar, biting your lip.”

Bertia, did you just say “scene”? That’s clearly a memory from your previous life, isn’t it?

“Now is the only time to act! Surely, Miss Anne would prefer to be the wife of a count who truly loves her and leads a happy life enveloped in love rather than a duchess married to a man who dazzles other women and brings her suffering, right?”

“Uh? Oh? Y-Yes?” Anne nodded, overwhelmed by Bertia’s momentum.

Then, as if a light returned to the murky depths of Charles’s eyes, he seemed reinvigorated. “Really? Lady Anne?”

Caught between the hopeful gazes of Bertia and Charles, Anne looked around, flustered. “Um... I... Uh...”

Anne was visibly bewildered, not immediately denying anything but occasionally glancing at Charles, perhaps considering the validity of Bertia’s words. As I enjoyed the unfolding scene, Anne and I unexpectedly made eye contact, her eyes seeming to plead for help, prompting a wry smile from me. Well, this tumultuous situation had been orchestrated by my fiancée, Bertia.

Perhaps some intervention is in order.

“You two, it’s not proper to pressure a lady in such a manner. Look, Miss Anne is blushing as red as a ripe apple,” I chided gently.

Bertia looked somewhat disgruntled by my comment, but Charles seemed to take it to heart, quickly apologizing to Anne. “I’m very sorry, Lady Anne.”

“Ah, and Charles, while family status is indeed important, consider this: if you can secure a position as a future king’s aide, that will certainly elevate your standing enough,” I suggested, trying to provide a more constructive perspective.

“That’s exactly right! As His Highness says, being a royal aide would secure a significant social position. Miss Anne’s family might very well accept that,” Bertia chimed in, her face lighting up with enthusiasm.

Charles, however, was quick to object. “But I’m not in such a position yet...”

Bertia was relentless. “What are you saying?! It all depends on your effort! Right, Your Highness?”

“Indeed, I do appreciate capable individuals. In that regard, Charles, I believe you meet the criteria. The rest is up to your resolve and hard work,” I affirmed with a reassuring smile, which seemed to widen Charles’s eyes further.

“For now, why not start by clearly expressing your feelings to Miss Anne and striving to excel in your work under my guidance? If your efforts seem promising, I might just lend you my support,” I suggested, giving him a nod.

Charles looked at me intently, then returned the nod. Until now, he had seemed somewhat elusive, like a tumbleweed blowing in the wind. But now there was a determined look in his eyes, a stark and marked transformation into a man with a firm resolve.

He turned to face Anne directly, kneeling on one knee and looking up at her with unwavering determination in his eyes. “Lady Anne, I have long been enamored with you. However, I thought you were a peak too high to reach and had resigned myself to that fate. But if there is even the slightest possibility, I want to take that chance. I want to become a man worthy of proposing to you. No, I will become that man. So, please, will you watch over me?”

With that, Charles extended his hand to her.

Anne seemed perplexed by Charles’s gesture, but as she gazed into his earnest eyes, she appeared to recognize the sincerity of his feelings. She pressed her lips together tightly, then slowly placed her palm over his.

“I am a noble’s daughter, not so foolish as to misunderstand the meaning of a political marriage... Yet, if possible, I too desire a happy marriage filled with mutual love, as Lady Bertia suggests. I do not fully understand love or romance yet, but I am touched by your feelings, Lord Charles. If you say you will strive to be worthy of me, then I too want to reconsider my future. Is it permissible for me to give such an answer?”

Anne’s expression was tinged with uncertainty.

In stark contrast, Charles’s face melted into a blissfully sweet smile. “Of course. Just hearing your response makes me feel like I could serve under the devil himself.”

Hmm? That “devil”—surely, he’s not referring to me, is he?

As I watched the two of them with a broad smile, I noticed Charles shudder briefly. Surely, it was just a tremor of overwhelming happiness.

Well, thanks to that whole affair, Charles had been able to confess his feelings to his beloved princess and had since been working harder than ever as one of my potential aides. All in all, I think it turned out to be a good outcome for everyone involved.

As a result, Charles occasionally came to me to complain about Bertia, and I handled it without worry, sometimes even indulging in the drama if it seemed entertaining.

Later, Bertia referred to her own actions in this matter as playing a “Cupid of Love.” *What exactly does she mean by that? I’m still not quite sure.*

However, due to Bertia’s actions, Charles and Anne had certainly grown closer than before.

I did catch Baroness Hironia exclaiming in frustration, “Why has it come to this? Who is responsible for this?!” upon seeing their closeness—but I decided it’d be best to pretend I didn’t hear it. Sometimes, turning a blind eye was part of the courtly dance, especially when it led to happier outcomes for those involved.

Part Five

Bertia’s unusual behavior as the self-proclaimed “Cupid of Love” didn’t stop with Charles. Silica also found herself within Bertia’s designs, albeit accidentally.

Nelt had always been introverted and preferred the company of books to people, often secluding himself in his room. In contrast, Silica was a very responsible and nurturing woman, which was probably why she felt compelled to look after Nelt, her childhood friend.

She frequently admonished him and took care of him. Several examples of this included:

“Lord Nelt, don’t just read books all the time; talk with your friends occasionally! If you keep this up, you’ll be left out just like before!”

“Really, Lord Nelt! Don’t read while eating. Your food is spilling from the corners of your mouth. You are truly untidy.”

“Lord Nelt! You’ve left your vegetables again. You won’t grow strong if you don’t eat properly. You’re not a child anymore, so please eat up.”

“What’s with that pale face?! You’ve been staying up late again, haven’t you? That’s unhealthy! And sometimes, please go outside. If you stay indoors all the time, you’ll grow mold!”

Silica continuously nagged Nelt, and her relentless attention seemed endless.

In response, Nelt, perhaps due to her somewhat stern manner, often reacted timidly, frequently apologizing with a flustered “I’m sorry.”

When Nelt got lost in concentration, he inevitably lost awareness of his surroundings and actions. Thus, she was forced to caution him again.

It was my opinion that since his behavior didn’t bother others, she should leave him alone. But it seemed that Silica, so worried about Nelt, could not do so. It led to them repeating similar exchanges ad nauseum.

In a heated moment, under the strain of a particularly hot summer day, the usually reserved Nelt snapped at Silica.

“Enough already, Silica! You’re scary and always angry! If you dislike me so much, then just stay away! It’s better for both of us,” Nelt retorted to one of her voiced concerns, forgoing his usual apologies.

Visibly shocked and unable to respond, Silica absorbed the harshness of Nelt’s words silently. It was a surprising and out-of-character outburst, especially since Nelt was typically more compliant. This sudden departure from his usual demeanor left Silica stunned and clearly hurt.

Nelt continued, unchecked, “What are you to me, anyway? Just a childhood friend, yet you constantly meddle in my affairs. It’s suffocating! With that attitude, no one will ever want to marry you.”

The reason behind Nelt's anger wasn't entirely clear. Perhaps it was due to a combination of poor mood, lack of sleep, and the recent receipt of a scolding letter from his father, Count Krum. Additionally, the excessive heat might have exacerbated his irritability, creating a perfect storm of bad circumstances. However, no matter the reason, Nelt had undoubtedly gone too far.

Silica clutched her dress, her lips quivering, as tears began to roll down her cheeks. At that moment, Bertia, who had been observing the exchange, lost her composure and confronted Nelt.

"Enough!! How dare you blame Lady Silica for your own shortcomings? Who do you think you are?!" Bertia's voice boomed in a manner uncharacteristic of a lady, bringing everyone in the room to a stunned halt.

Bertia continued to defend Silica, her voice impassioned as she stood up for her friend. "It's true; Lady Silica can be quite stern in her words. However, she is genuinely kindhearted, especially toward you, Lord Nelt. Even our friends are astounded by her dedication to you! Why can't you see the kindness and love that are obvious behind her words?"

Nelt, bewildered by the sudden defense, stammered in confusion, "Dev-Devotion? Kind-Kindness? L-Love?"

"Lady Bertia, what are you saying?! That's not it at all!" Silica interjected, trying to stop Bertia's assertions, but my fiancée was not one to be easily silenced.

"Lady Silica, you should be clear about your feelings! Otherwise, someday, some sweet-talking nobody will steal Lord Nelt away from you!"

"Please stop!!" Silica cried, her plea filling the room as Nelt looked on, his expression one of perplexed concern.

"What do you mean?" Nelt asked, his confusion growing.

"Lady Silica may indeed be strict with you, Lord Nelt, but it's all out of concern for you," Bertia explained. "Her manner may be a bit harsh, but who do you think cleans up the crumbs you leave behind, makes sure your precious books are not stained, and offers you a handkerchief to wipe your hands?"

"Uh?"

“Who brews you nourishing and relaxing tea when you’ve stayed up too late and aren’t feeling well? Who covers you with a blanket when you fall asleep? Even the vegetable-filled cookies you were eating just now—Lady Silica created those after much research, hoping to get you to eat some vegetables. If all these acts of devotion aren’t love, then what are they? A mere childhood friend wouldn’t go to such lengths!”

Silica, her face turning crimson from Bertia’s unmasking of her true feelings, desperately tried to deny it. “That’s not it! It’s just my nature, or something along those lines... Anyway, that’s not it at all!!”

Nelt, puzzled by Bertia’s words and Silica’s reaction, seemed lost in thought, contemplating these revelations. Charles, on the other hand, nodded in understanding, his expression indicating a shared sentiment. “Yeah, I get how Lady Silica feels,” he seemed to say, his gaze distant.

Well, good for you, Charles. Looks like you’ve found a comrade. Maybe you can start a “Victims of Bertia Club”?

“Lady Silica is kind and takes good care of others. She has always offered me a helping hand when I get lost and has always come to my aid when I needed it. She even scolds me when I’m being a bit oblivious. But the way she treats you, Lord Nelt, is filled with a different kind of affection!!” Bertia exclaimed.

Bertia’s mention of getting lost probably wasn’t metaphorical—she’s literally gotten lost before. I was aware that Silica often had to fetch Bertia when she couldn’t find her way to the next class. It was good to have such caring friends around who could accompany Bertia everywhere and ensure she didn’t lose her way.

“There’s no such thing! I treat everyone equally!! I don’t give Lord Nelt any special treatment!!” Silica insisted.

The more Silica denied it, the more she seemed to dig herself deeper into a hole. Everyone began to watch her with warm, understanding eyes, and even Nelt himself seemed to find some answers, his face flushed with embarrassment.

He paused to think of the words.

“Silica, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize,” Nelt finally said, covering his mouth and turning away as he apologized, his face beet red. Seeing this, Bertia smiled contentedly, apparently pleased with the outcome.

“Oh! You’ve finally understood! How wonderful for you, Lady Silica! It seems your feelings have finally been conveyed!”

The mood swiftly shifted.

“Lady Bertia! Prepare yourself! I will not let this go lightly!!” Silica glared at Bertia with piercing eyes, her face aflame with a wrathful blaze.

“La-Lady Silica? Why are you angry...?” Bertia’s face contorted in confusion.

It seemed Bertia truly didn’t understand why Silica was upset, though she sensed the imminent danger from Silica’s furious demeanor. Desperately looking around for help, she finally turned her gaze toward me. Indeed, this seemed a fitting consequence of her own actions.

So, maybe it’s time you faced the music?

Seeing my nod, Bertia took a step toward me. “Your Highness?”

But she was swiftly apprehended by Silica.

“Prince Cecil, may I borrow Lady Bertia for a moment?” Silica asked me in a firm tone.

Bertia was my fiancée, not something to be lent out at will. However, given the situation and being directly asked, I had to respond. “Well, Bertia is at fault this time. All right, perhaps for two hours?”

I limited the time as a small mercy toward Bertia, suggesting, “Maybe let her off easy after that?”

From the sidelines, someone murmured, “Two hours is quite long, isn’t it?” but I chose to ignore it.

“That will be sufficient. I will take this time to thoroughly educate Lady Bertia on what exactly a maiden’s heart entails,” Silica said, her smile slightly terrifying.

The fury of a woman—of a maiden—should never be underestimated.

“Your Highness, a little help...?”

“Bertia, consider this part of your bridal training... Maybe,” I suggested with a hint of amusement.

“That’s not ri—”

“Ah, since you’re going to be my wife, perhaps ‘queen training’ would be more appropriate?”

“That feels wrong too...” Bertia protested, her voice trailing off in exasperation.

“Just say you’re sorry and make up, okay?”

Bertia fell silent, her eyes welling up with tears. It was clear she didn’t want to leave things unresolved with Silica, who was not only an important friend but also someone she deeply respected.

Clinging to hope, Bertia turned her gaze from me to Silica, her eyes pleading. As Silica looked down at Bertia’s tearful, upturned face, she couldn’t help but smile gently. For a moment, I thought I saw the illusion of a blizzard shimmer behind her.

“If I listen properly and apologize, will you forgive me?” Bertia asked, quivering like a frightened little animal.

Silica’s stern demeanor softened slightly. “It depends on your sincerity,” she said, turning away to hide the trace of affection that flickered across her face.

Bertia drooped, dejected. Unbeknownst to her, Silica’s eyes conveyed a mix of exasperation and warmth... A sign that her anger was already dissipating.

Given their social standings, Bertia, being of higher rank, wouldn’t normally need to seek forgiveness in such a manner. She could have commanded forgiveness, and Silica would have had to accept it. But Bertia chose not to wield her status. Instead, she approached Silica as an equal, as just a friend, which undoubtedly eased some of Silica’s irritation.

Regaining control of the situation, Silica straightened up and cleared the air. “Well then. Lord Nelt, we shall revisit this conversation another time. I need to speak with Lady Bertia now. Excuse us, everyone,” she announced formally.

With that, Silica grasped Bertia's arm and led her away. Bertia's face was flushed, biting her lip nervously, perhaps a bit too intensely.

Her unsettled state was obvious to everyone.

Nelt was indeed left looking bewildered by the whole affair. Once Silica and Bertia exited the room, a sense of calm returned to the student council room. Apparently, Silica's lecture did indeed last the promised two hours. I was not privy to exactly what was said during that time, but Bertia was noticeably jittery around Silica for a while afterward.

During tea times, Bertia, a known confectionery lover, could often be seen timidly offering up her favorite sweets to Silica with teary eyes. This gesture seemed to be part of her effort to make amends and avoid any further scolding.

She started muttering the following reminders to herself: "A maiden's heart is delicate!" "Insensitivity is disliked!" and "Be silent as soon as you're signaled!" From then on, she was careful never to casually relay someone else's romantic feelings to their object of affection again. Whenever Bertia made a borderline comment, she would cautiously watch Silica's reaction, clearly still haunted by the fear of another lecture.

Part Six

The impact of Silica's intervention seemed to moderate Bertia's impulsive actions to some extent, though it certainly didn't eliminate them entirely. At this point, any eccentric behavior from Bertia could only be met with a resigned, "Well, that's just Bertia for you."

On one occasion, she showed up at the student council room with Cynthia in tow, suddenly requesting that Valdo teach them how to ride horses. Valdo, being the good-natured, elder-brother figure that he was, and not one to sweat the small stuff, agreed without much question. However, it was likely Bertia's attempt at creating an "event" to bring Valdo and Cynthia closer together.

Eventually, it ended up with the four of us being dragged into a horse-riding practice session. Once we got started, it turned out that Cynthia was

exceptionally skilled at riding, leaving nothing for Valdo to teach.

Bertia was dumbfounded by this revelation. “Eh? But I heard that Lady Cynthia had fallen ill with a common disease a few years ago, barely survived but ended up somewhat weakened, and had since been confined to her estate...”

Cynthia, who had been confidently riding astride in a saddle most men used rather than the sidesaddle commonly used by women, looked puzzled at Bertia’s statement.

“Oh? I wonder where such a false rumor came from? I have never suffered from a serious illness in my life. While I do enjoy reading in my room, I equally enjoy horse-riding. I often ride around my estate.” Cynthia’s clarification left Bertia visibly confused.

I watched Bertia’s perplexed reaction, internally shaking my head at her oversight. Quietly, I approached her and whispered in her ear to jog her memory. “Bertia, remember the illness that briefly swept through the capital a few years ago? It ended almost as quickly as it started.”

“Ah... Oh, that’s right!” Bertia exclaimed, suddenly realizing her mistake and then burying her face in her hands in embarrassment.

With the cleared-up misunderstanding removing the need for basic riding lessons, we decided instead to go for a leisurely ride together. Valdo and Cynthia, acknowledging each other’s riding skills, soon started a friendly race, leaving Bertia, who had only ever ridden sidesaddle, far behind. I ended up carrying her as we tried to keep up.

Perhaps unnerved by the unfamiliar speed, Bertia clung tightly to me, tears in her eyes. I couldn’t help but find her reaction a bit amusing, so I playfully increased the speed and made my support slightly less stable as a show of affectionate teasing.

Meanwhile, Baroness Hironia watched Valdo and Cynthia enjoying their ride together, her mouth agape in shock. After a moment, her face turned bright red, and she started shouting, though I don’t recall what she was yelling about.

Part Seven

On another occasion, Bertia planned and executed a homemade-sweets-delivery strategy to overcome Shawn's dislike of Joanna.

Joanna, who had taken a liking to Shawn, seemed eager to join in on Bertia's suggestion.

To be precise, it was partly due to her maidenly desire to try making sweets for Shawn and partly out of curiosity about Bertia's intriguing strategy. Thus, the "homemade sweets delivery strategy" spearheaded by Joanna came into being. Their tutor was Silica, a noble young lady unusually skilled in cooking.

To be clear from the outset—the strategy was a resounding failure. Though Joanna was generally adept at most tasks, it seemed she lacked any talent for making sweets. Whenever she attempted baking, the results were so bizarre that one couldn't help but tilt their head in confusion. Despite her competitive nature, her attempts at various desserts invariably ended in disaster.

They turned out either charred like coal, hard as rocks, or excessively soft. The flavors were too sweet, too salty, or too sour—she hardly ever managed to create anything genuinely tasty. Yet, she somehow produced something edible and decided to present it to Shawn. Predictably, Shawn's reaction was lackluster.

Seeing this, Joanna was quite disheartened, but this played to her advantage. Having always felt intimidated by the always confident and perfect Joanna, Shawn saw her dejected state and realized for the first time that she was just an ordinary girl. As he comforted the deeply upset Joanna, he began to relax and even started to feel protective toward her.

A rejuvenated Joanna grasped the essence of the situation, saying, "Ah, Prince Shawn needs experiences like this where he can be relied upon!" She began to deliberately act dependent on and visibly sulk around Shawn. Thanks to this, Shawn gained confidence as a man and started to see Joanna as "someone he needed to protect."

Moreover, while Joanna initially started acting just to capture Shawn's attention, it seemed she too found solace in relying on him. Gradually, a sense of tranquility began to peek through her usual strictly composed demeanor.

Though the "homemade sweets delivery strategy" failed, the outcome was ultimately positive. Bertia, while averting her gaze, boldly claimed, "It went exactly as I planned!" However, I think it was more a case of "every cloud has a silver lining." Watching the relationship between Joanna and Shawn deepen brought Bertia joy.

Seeing her innocent smile made one instinctively want to pat her on the head and say, "Well done."

My fiancée's rash actions may have been a nuisance to those involved, but they inadvertently helped deepen their relationships. Meanwhile, as if to disrupt our harmony, around this time, the behavior of Baroness Hironia toward Bertia began to worsen. She started spreading malicious rumors and making public accusations that undermined Bertia's position.

Bertia seemed to think it was only natural for her to clash with Baroness Hironia, considering she was supposed to be the villainess and didn't seem too bothered by it. However, it went without saying that those of us around her had become more vigilant.

Part Eight

Despite the hectic year we had, in the spring, the majority of us graduated from middle school and moved on to high school. Courtgain and Anne progressed to their third year of middle school, managing the student council along with Bertia and several other second-year students.

Bertia, as ever, seemed to be rushing around trying to thwart the "events" involving my close associates and the heroine. I often heard about Bertia's activities from them. But...

"Hey, Bertia? Since I entered high school, this seems to be the first time we've really had a chance to spend together with just the two of us. Why do you think

that is?" I asked with a smile, tilting my head as I took a sip of our second cup of tea in the sunlit salon room. As she reached for some tea snacks, Bertia too tilted her head in thought.

After a moment, she brightly nodded as if realizing it for the first time. "You know, you're right!"

Bertia was still a second-year in middle school, so her life hadn't changed much, and it seemed she continued her days as usual. That was fine and all... but now, I found myself harboring a certain dissatisfaction.

Dissatisfaction?

Yes, that's right. This feeling could be described as "dissatisfaction" or "discomfort." Generally, I was not someone whose emotions were easily stirred, so it was rare for me to feel such negative emotions. But now, I was experiencing something akin to "anger."

Unaware of my inner turmoil, Bertia began speaking proudly, "The main events for your conquest, Your Highness, were during middle school, and there are hardly any in high school. That's why your route is considered the most difficult—practically impossible! On the other hand, Courtgain's events are now peaking since he's become the student council president, and Prince Shawn's events occur fairly frequently. Especially next year, when there will be many events for the high school group..." She continued with a broad smile, "Lord Charles, Lord Valdo, and Lord Nelt will all have events during the middle school exchange activities, and there are several others. I've been so busy preventing these events that I haven't had the chance to meet with you lately."

I responded without dropping my smile, "Is that so?" She didn't seem to want to prevent my events. In fact, she was actively causing them, hoping to pair me with Baroness Hironia.

And yet, you are my fiancée, aren't you? Ah, what is this? Bertia's actions were always amusing, but this just felt distinctly underwhelming.

Recently, I had heard two particularly displeasing pieces of news from my friends. That's why I'd invited her to dine with me today.

“Bertia seems to be getting along well with Courtgain lately, doesn’t she?” Although Courtgain was still in middle school, he often visited me as part of his training to be my “shadow.”

Lately, he had been coming to me with a somewhat troubled and embarrassed look when it came to Bertia. Apparently...

“Bertia has been pestering me to let her call me ‘Brother Court’?” It seemed she approached Courtgain every day with sparkling eyes, pleading, “Please let me call you ‘Brother Court!’”

Initially reluctant, Courtgain started to feel guilty as Bertia visibly deflated when he refused. Recently, he even mentioned seeing illusions of her looking like a small, forlorn animal, complete with drooping fox ears and a tail, which had him quite distressed.



That was almost certainly Kuro's doing. She had to be making it appear as if the ears and tail were sprouting from Bertia. It was probably just a bit of mischief for Kuro. That young spirit resembling a black fox sometimes played similar tricks on me as well, so I could vividly imagine the scene.

"That's right! In Courtgain's route, the plot mainly revolves around the justice-minded Courtgain struggling with being coerced into the nefarious deeds of the Noches Marquisate, which the heroine comforts him over, and overcoming the obstacles I, as the villainess and his stepsister, put in their way to eventually become closer. But now, we are merely distant relatives, so it's difficult for me to involve him in evil deeds or to obstruct the heroine... Therefore, I thought perhaps I should settle into a close sister role and do the obstructing myself!" She paused, thinking for a moment. "Besides, in my past life, I never had a brother or sister, so I've always been a bit envious of such relationships."

"I see." That last part must be your truest sentiment, right?

Watching her speak excitedly with a slight blush on her cheeks, I couldn't help but find her endearing. It also somewhat explained why the usually stern Courtgain had recently asked me with a hopeful yet apologetic look, "May I allow her to call me 'Brother Court'?"

But, after all, I am her fiancé.

So, I had immediately said, "That won't do."

Courtgain probably thought I hadn't noticed, but his attitude toward Bertia was already changing. I knew he secretly slipped her favorite sweets into the tea-time treats, and sometimes he even increased the quantity of the sweets just a bit. Recently, when Bertia was about to run down the hallway, he tried to grab her hand, saying, "You mustn't run," but then quickly tried to cover it up in a fluster.

His behavior was clearly that of an older brother, but... I must admit, I found it not particularly amusing.

Given that I couldn't simply condone such behavior, it seemed prudent to set clear boundaries with Bertia before Courtgain got too deeply involved.

“Hey, Bertia. What do you think others would think if you, my fiancée, appeared overly familiar with someone like Courtgain, who is virtually a stranger to you despite being a distant relative?”

“Eh?”

“Most likely, they would think this: ‘Despite being engaged to His Highness, Miss Bertia Ibil Noches is friendly with other men.’ Or even that ‘She is a promiscuous woman engaging in adultery.’”

“I didn’t mean it like that!” Bertia turned pale, clearly having never considered this perspective.

“Even if you don’t intend it that way, others might not see it like that. Rumors can grow more elaborate, and it could turn into quite an amusing situation. You understand how ruthless the gossip mill can be, right?”

I feigned a concerned expression and tilted my head as if seeking agreement, which easily convinced the straightforward Bertia.

“Yes, um... Yes.”

Even if she ended up calling Courtgain “Brother Court,” I knew her capable friends would cover for her. But that wouldn’t be as interesting, so I believed this solution was the best. *For me.*

However, it seemed a bit cruel to leave Bertia feeling downcast.

“Hey, Bertia. If you’re that eager for a brother, you can call me ‘Brother Cecil’ if you like.”

Bertia looked up suddenly, a momentary gleam of happiness flashing across her face. However, she then caught herself, and her expression reverted as she shook her head slightly.

“Your Highness is Your Highness. You are my, my, my fiancé, not my brother.”

Hearing those words, I felt the discomfort inside me lighten slightly. *It was a strange sensation, indeed.*

“All right, then. Instead, you can call me Cessie.”

“Eh?! Why would it turn into that?!”

“Because you looked lonely, Bertia. Go on, try saying it.”

I smiled warmly and peered into her face.

“No, um, ‘Your Highness’ is quite sufficient for me.”

“Hmm? You prefer Cil over Cessie?”

“Nobody said that!”

“Hmm?”

“No, um...”

“Hmm?”

“Because!”

“Hmm?”

Bertia was silent.

“Hmm?” I insisted.

She reluctantly said, “Prince... cil.”

It seemed that a faint “cil” might have been said, whether it was in “Cecil” or just “Cil.” Either way, it felt much more personable than “Your Highness,” so I decided to accept it. *Ideally, I’d also like to drop the ‘Prince,’ but perhaps that can wait until after we’re married?* It was best to save some fun for later.

“Well done.”

I reached over the table to stroke Bertia’s head. The moment my hand touched her, she let out a small “Meow!” and her body jerked. Behind her, a black fox’s tail fluffed out, appearing almost like it was Bertia’s own tail. *Kuro, we don’t need that kind of help, okay?*

Unnoticed until now, a small maid with fox ears stood behind Bertia, as if hiding. She popped her head out, tilting it as if asking, “How’s this? Is this good?” I couldn’t help but respond with a wry smile.

“Let’s move on to the main topic, shall we?”

Smiling warmly, I lowered my hand from patting Bertia’s head. She said, “The main topic... What do you mean? Isn’t today just a lunch to catch up?”

Ah, so that was her understanding.

Watching her tilt her head curiously, I shook mine. “Bertia, isn’t there something you still haven’t given me?”

“Something I haven’t given you? What do you mean?”

Trying to play dumb won’t work, you know? You must be aware of what I’m referring to. Your gaze is unnaturally evasive right now. Oh, you just touched your chest lightly, didn’t you?

Ah, there it is. Along with the necklace I gave you, there’s another longer chain around your neck. That’s where it is, isn’t it?

“It’s a bit cold of you, isn’t it? To give something to others but withhold it from me, your fiancé. When I heard about it from Charles and the others, I must admit, it made me quite sad.”

That was the other unpleasant story I had heard from friends.

“It’s not like that! I just thought it wasn’t necessary for Your Highness!” Bertia began to deny it hurriedly, her eyebrows furrowed in an awkward expression. “And... I got a bit carried away with the design...”

Not necessary for me, huh? And there’s something about the design too?

I see...

“It is necessary. So, it’s okay if I take it, right?”

I returned to my usual smile and swiftly pulled at the chain from around her neck, careful not to hurt her.

“Eh? Your Highness?! Wait!!”

I drew out the large pendant nestled in the valley of her well-developed chest. “It’s in this, right? My gift.”

The pendant was designed like a lidded pocket watch. Pressing a protrusion on the top caused it to open with a small click, revealing a set of two pairs of earrings inside.

“Ah, sorry about that. It must be uncomfortable to stay bent over like this,” I apologized as I closed the pocket watch. I’d been intending on placing the

pendant neatly back into her bosom. However, Zeno, standing behind us, cleared his throat pointedly.

A little mischief like this could be forgiven, but I understood it was not the behavior expected of a gentleman, so I wouldn't push it any further. I resigned myself to simply handing it back to her in a more conventional manner.

I admired the two pairs of earrings, holding them up high. "They're beautiful."

Bertia, now as red as if she could emit steam, huddled up and sipped her tea in tiny, shy gulps.

No wonder.

The design must be quite embarrassing for her. One pair of earrings featured a crimson stone snugly accompanied by a slightly smaller deep blue stone. The other pair mirrored the design with a milky tea-colored stone alongside an amber-colored one. A delicate red chain linked each pair of stones.

"Ah, the red chain... like a red string of fate tying together our hair and eye colors. Quite a charming concept."

I mused, "It's considerably more thoughtful than everyone else's. I heard their earrings were simple, just a single stone matching their partner's eye color and imbued with dark attribute defense."

These earrings, crafted by Bertia, were meant to guard against Baroness Hironia's "charm magic." It appeared she took my advice to study magic with Kuro seriously. Bertia's earrings, imbued with protective magic by Kuro, would shield the wearer not only from the "charm magic" of light spirits but also from various other spirit-based influences.

She had been distributing these as self-defense items to my close associates and their partners. Bertia fidgeted, swirling the cup in her hands as she scrambled for an excuse.

"No, um... Well... Since Your Highness is destined to be with the heroine, there's no need to defend against her powers, and so no need to give you these... And since I wasn't going to give them to you anyway, I thought a more... elaborate design would be acceptable."

Behind her, Kuro again mirrored Bertia's emotions, flattening her ears in a display of solidarity.

Really, Kuro. There's no need to adjust so perfectly to appear as Bertia's ears; that's unnecessary.

"So, Bertia, are you saying it's okay if I essentially become a drug addict?"

"That would be unacceptable!" she exclaimed.

In truth, I had been cautious about "charm magic." Up until now, Zeno had been using mid-tier dark powers to make me less susceptible, and I had been careful to stay away from Baroness Hironia and the bird that accompanied her. The light spirit seemed to be of a lower tier than Zeno or Kuro, and the range it could influence with magic seemed limited, so precautions could be taken. However, having these earrings certainly offered a different level of reassurance.

"So, you will protect me, ensuring I can stay in my right mind to choose the woman I desire on my own terms?"

"Of course! I will protect you, in the name of a top-tier villainess!"

"Then I'll accept these."

"Yes, they are yours to take, though the design is a bit..."

"Ah, wearing one pair by myself does seem a bit like an unrequited love charm—a bit embarrassing, indeed. So, how about you always wear the other one? That way, it won't appear as if my affection is one sided."

"Ah, I see! Understood! Leave it to me!"

"Then, show me your ear, and I'll put it on for you."

"Yes!!"

The rapid pace of our conversation hadn't given her much time to think before she agreed. I attached the earrings with the milky-tea and amber stones to her ears.

Turning to Zeno, I spoke softly, "You understand, right?"

Zeno, though he made a reluctant face, quickly conjured the magic I had in mind, and I felt the vibrations ripple through the air. Kuro bristled in response.

“K-Kuro? What’s wrong?” Bertia looked at her, puzzled.

Seeing that magic had been used, Kuro glared at me with a stern look. Meanwhile, I quickly put on my own earrings—the ones with crimson and deep blue stones—and had Zeno cast the same magic on them. Now everything was set.

“It’s okay. I just had Zeno cast a spell, and Kuro reacted to that.”

“A spell? What kind?”

“Hmm? It’s an earth attribute spell to ensure the earrings won’t come off, and a water attribute magic to keep them clean so you can wear them all the time.”

“Eh? Huh? They won’t come off...? Eh? Eeeh?!” Bertia’s eyes widened in shock.

“This way, we can show we’re in love, and I can avoid the label of being a guy hopelessly in love.”

“That’s good to hear... Wait a minute!! In love? That just makes us look like a silly lovelorn couple! If we’re both wearing the matching earrings, there won’t be any denying it!!”

As Bertia finally caught on to what was happening, I couldn’t help but chuckle as I watched her realize the full implications.

Yes, this is indeed amusing.

“Isn’t this the appeal you find in your so-called ‘fate-bound lovers’? Sounds fun, doesn’t it?”

“Not at all! The heroine will be furious! She might misunderstand and choose a different route!!”

“Don’t worry. Baroness Hironia is... distressingly strong-willed.”

“But what if, possibly, maybe, she does!! Kuro, take them off... Eh? You can’t? Because Zeno’s magic is stronger?”

Kuro, wordless and expressionless, shook her head, pointed at Zeno, and then gestured upward to the sky, which only increased Bertia's panic.

"Then, Zeno! Please remove them!!"

With impeccable posture, Zeno performed a flawless bow, his gaze decidedly averted.

"I apologize, Lady Bertia. It would be frightful to go against my lord's wishes... No, as a servant, I cannot disobey my master's commands."

"Prince...!"

"It's 'Prince Cil,' right?" Finding Bertia's flustered state increasingly amusing, I leaned in to call her by an affectionate nickname. "Tia."

"With this timing?! The impact is too high... No, that's not the point! The real issue lies elsewhere!!"

"Ah, it's almost time for the afternoon classes to start. My dear Tia, let's meet here again for lunch tomorrow?"

"Yes!" She halted, eyes wide. "No, wait! Why is there suddenly this sweet, lovey-dovey atmosphere?! Prince Ce—" I sharply narrowed my eyes, and she hurriedly corrected herself, "Prince Cil."

Hm? I'm not intimidating her at all.

"You're teasing me, aren't you?!"

Bertia is really straightforward, isn't she?

"You're imagining things." I said, "Well then, see you."

Spending time with Bertia after so long had been enjoyable, and I found myself talking more than I had intended. I had to hurry, or I'd be late for my lecture.

"Make sure you're not late either, Tia."

"But... Prince Cil, we need to talk! Please remove the earrings!"

Bertia said something more as I walked away, but I didn't let it bother me. As the crown prince, I couldn't afford to be late unless under exceptional circumstances.

“Priiince Cil!!”

Hearing Bertia call out my name was oddly satisfying. Conversations with Bertia were indeed far more entertaining than any hearsay from others. Before I knew it, any “dissatisfaction” or “discomfort” I had felt had vanished.

Chapter Eight: Bertia, Fifteen Years Old

Part One

“Ah, look, Zeno. Our school is finally coming into view,” I said, lifting the curtain of the carriage window so that Zeno, sitting opposite me, could also see the view outside.

Beyond several buildings, the distinctively large structure of Halm Academy appeared. Though it had only been four months since I had last seen it, it felt strangely nostalgic.

“We’re finally back, aren’t we?”

“Yes, finally... Truly finally!!” Zeno seemed oddly teary-eyed.

“Even though it was by Father’s command, the four months of study abroad in that neighboring country were dreadfully dull.”

I had been away from the country on official duties many times before, but on this occasion, time seemed to drag unusually slowly. Perhaps it was because my student life had been unexpectedly enjoyable? Or perhaps I was more concerned about “that matter” than I was personally conscious of?

“I was really worried that if Your Highness became too bored, you might start doing something outrageous.”

“Hahaha... I wouldn’t do that.”

“You’ve already done quite a bit, haven’t you?!” Zeno said.

“Maybe it’s just your imagination?”

“It’s definitely not my imagination!”

“Well, when we get back, I suppose I must have a proper chat with Tia, right?” I said, smiling gently, and returned my gaze to the window.

Staring at the buildings of Halm Academy, my grip on the “reports” in my hands tightened slightly. The pages detailed what had happened at the academy during my absence and also included the letters from my fiancée, which always managed to entertain me.

Part Two

The catalyst for my journey abroad was a summons from my father. As the letter of summons had not been a personal message but a formal one sent from the king to the crown prince, I had immediately understood that it concerned official duties.

“Father’s directive was to spend four months, from spring to summer of my sophomore year, studying abroad to foster diplomatic relations with this neighboring country.”

Well, though it was termed a “mission,” it really was just to “study abroad,” and no other specific instructions were given... except that my father mentioned, “Just behave as you usually do, and that alone should suffice to exert influence over our neighbors.”

So, I took the initiative to learn more about this neighboring country, casually investigating matters that had long piqued my interest, such as tariffs and the maintenance of roads that connected our nations. During this process, I also tried my hand at a bit of... negotiation, using some leverage I’d gained from what I learned.

Oh, and it’s not like I was merely entertaining myself by dodging predictable and thrill-less probes from the assigned noble guides, or getting bored and looking for ways to kill time. Everything I did was strictly to better understand our neighbor and to “deepen our friendship.”

Amid these official duties during my study abroad, my greatest pleasure was the letters from Bertia and the “reports”—or rather, the updates from those who were watching over her in my absence.

In her letters, Bertia cheerfully wrote about preparing for a “cultural festival” with everyone and how she elegantly disrupted Baroness Hironia’s attempts to befriend my close associates, a maneuver that somehow earned her applause and praise instead of reproof. There was also a mention of a male student she had bossed around to carry her belongings in true villainess fashion, who, after completing the task, inexplicably asked for a handshake—likely a member of the Bertia Fan Club.

Upon reading this, I thought about tracking down this student to perhaps teach him a thing or two about how a gentleman should behave toward women.

Of course, purely out of a sense of kindness.

The journey from the capital of the neighboring kingdom to Halm Academy was long, and exchanges of mail were very infrequent. While I could ask Zeno to use wind magic to facilitate more regular communications, doing so could potentially expose the presence of spirits to the country I was visiting, which I wanted to avoid.

While I was visiting, I noticed a subtly tense atmosphere beginning to permeate the nation. It wasn’t immediately threatening, but it felt as though my presence was more like a thorn in the country’s side than that of a revered guest. Even though I naturally kept my surveillance tight, it wasn’t clear whether there might be spying eyes at any given moment. In such a situation, it wasn’t justifiable to use Zeno’s powers merely for my amusement.

Ultimately, I could only communicate through trusted intermediaries, and letters from Bertia would arrive at my hands at best once every two or three weeks, or at worst nearly a month apart.

Reports, being unilaterally sent, arrived relatively more frequently, but the information in them was often outdated by a week or two.

Given these circumstances, some discrepancies between Bertia’s letters and the reports were unavoidable. However...

“It’s quite concerning when they differ this significantly,” I murmured, a week or so before my departure from the neighboring nation back to Alphasta. For

some time, I had been troubled by inconsistencies between Bertia's letters and the reports.

For example, one day Bertia's letter read:

"Everything is as peaceful as usual here! The heroine remains adorable and popular with everyone!"

But the report from the errand runner stated:

"While Your Highness is away, Hironia Indelon is attempting to tarnish Lady Bertia's reputation by staging incidents and framing her for various offenses. There is also frequent harassment aimed at harming Lady Bertia. The academy is divided into three factions: Hironia's fanatical supporters, those who are trying to protect Lady Bertia, and those who merely watch from a distance. The ratio is approximately 2:5:3."

Taking into account the time it took for correspondence to be delivered, these reports and letters should have been discussing the same events. Even allowing for some delay, it was unlikely that the divisive structure involving the whole academy would change so abruptly. Given Bertia's pattern of thinking, it wasn't hard to deduce the reason behind these discrepancies.

She had, in the past, praised Baroness Hironia and defended her, keeping silent even when wronged. "I am the villainess, after all. Being disliked comes with the territory!" she would say with a smile. She deliberately provoked dislike... and often failed in the process.

However, it seemed the situation had started to shift lately.

"Viscountess Eirin Silbertz, huh..."

A familiar name stood out in the report from the "errand runner." I tapped my finger on the name, contemplating what to make of it. Viscountess Eirin Silbertz. I remembered the name from my conversation with Joanna; it was once on the Bertia Fan Club's blacklist.

Although she had been relatively quiet until I departed for the neighboring country, prompting Joanna to consider removing her from the list, Eirin's actions were limited to occasional jealous glares at Bertia. She didn't overtly do anything significant.

Insensitive as Bertia was to such subtleties, none of these actions even managed to bother her, much less affect her negatively. Viscountess Eirin's social standing wasn't particularly high, nor was she notably talented—just one among many.

Yet, it seemed she began to act after I left Alphasta.

I looked down again at the reports spread out on the desk. Torn textbooks. Dead insects planted among Bertia's tea leaves. Sharp stones placed inside her shoes after riding lessons.

These acts of harassment, although swiftly removed by Kuro, her competent friends, and the maids before Bertia could notice, could not be entirely prevented, and it seemed Bertia was beginning to realize something was amiss. Yet, for now, she continued to act cheerfully, at least superficially, according to the report.

"If only Tia would openly consult with me about it," I mused, picturing my always-spirited fiancée, which inexplicably left me feeling a bit uneasy. It was a strangely irritating sensation—like an itch I couldn't scratch.

"Nevertheless, this method of harassment is unacceptable."

To those around her, this series of nuisances likely seemed the work of Baroness Hironia, who frequently clashed with Bertia. Indeed, it appeared the actual perpetrator was cunningly crafting situations to appear that way.

The true culprit behind Bertia's harassment had to be Viscountess Eirin Silbertz. While she cleverly hid behind the shadow of Baroness Hironia, my errand runner was competent; they had already identified her as the real perpetrator.

"This Viscountess Eirin seems even worse than Baroness Hironia in a way."

With their clear difference in tactics, it was obvious the current offender was not Baroness Hironia. *Lady Hironia wants Bertia to play the "villainess" role, so she avoids direct bullying. She seems to understand that by doing such things, she would become the villain herself.*

This Viscountess Eirin, not understanding such nuances, seemed stupider and more malicious than Baroness Hironia.

“For now, Kuro and the others should be able to handle it, so I need to finish up here and return as soon as possible.”

Being so far away limited what I could do. It was not ideal to be absent when my fiancée might need help.

“I’m getting tired of these ceremonial duties anyway. Let’s wrap them up quickly.”

With just a week left in my diplomatic mission... I smiled as I thought about how to proceed.

Zeno hesitated before commenting, “Your Highness, that smile is kind of scary.”

“Quiet, Zeno.”

I pushed aside the letters and reports on my desk, began planning the quickest route home, and started my preparations to return.

Part Three

“Welcome back, Prince Cecil!”

As soon as I returned to Halm Academy, I called Bertia to the salon. Seeing her greet me with a beaming smile, I truly felt, *Ah, I’m back.*

Bertia rushed over to me, and, taking her hand, I escorted her to our table. After seating her, I took the chair opposite her. As usual, Bertia’s maids began preparing the meal.

“I’m back, Tia. Has anything changed during my absence?” I deigned to ask this because I wanted to see how she would describe recent events.

“Nothing at all! The heroine was as cute as ever! Oh, there was an event that seemed to deepen her relations with other capture targets, so I quickly went ahead and broke those flags!” Bertia reported back to me, her face plastered with an expression that screamed “praise me, praise me” and a delighted smile.

It seemed she was boasting to me about how she'd interfered with other suitors to ensure I could get along with Baroness Hironia. But honestly, that mattered little to me.

Bertia, looking up at me with the eager eyes of a dog that has retrieved a thrown stick, was amusing... and cute, but there was something else I wanted to hear from her right now.

"Tia, I'm asking if anything new has happened to *you* in any way." Bertia tilted her head in confusion, as if she couldn't understand why I'd be interested in such a thing. But I think it'd be only natural to be more concerned about one's fiancée than about a stranger.

"Me? Well, ah! Yes, that's right! As I wrote in my letters, I'm currently working with Prince Shawn and all our friends to prepare for the cultural festival. We're coming up with a variety of events to create lots of memories, you know?" said Bertia, cheerfully.

"Is that so?" When I had read about the "cultural festival" in her letters, I was intrigued by her uniquely imaginative and out-of-the-box ideas. However, now that I had other things I wanted to ask, the diversion in conversation wasn't particularly appealing.

"I actually wanted to have a 'cross-dressing contest' as a classic event for the post-festival celebrations. I thought Prince Shawn, with his lovely appearance, would suit it well... but Lady Joanna and the others said it was inappropriate to have royalty cross-dress, so they stopped it."

That's why I find these tangents uninteresting...

"Lady Joanna agreed to dress as a man, and I suggested how wonderful it would be if Prince Shawn and she could be a 'beautiful gender-swapped couple'... This seemed to sway Lady Joanna a bit. So, I proposed that we all join the contest as gender-swapped couples with our fiancés!" She paused, then said, "But Lady Cynthia flatly refused and ended up squashing the whole plan."

Bertia, what an interesting thing you're doing...

The mere idea of dressing royalty in drag was funny enough, but to think you'd even try to get Valdo to do it. It was a good thing his fiancée, Cynthia,

stopped it, or it could have been a disaster. With his high status, the other students wouldn't have been able to laugh; they would have been utterly frozen. Knowing Valdo, he might not have read the room and tried to liven things up by imitating a lady's mannerisms and speech. Had he actually done that... it would have chilled the atmosphere and disrupted the event.

"In the end, we decided to opt for something a bit more normal for the contest, and we're still considering options now."

Seeing Bertia hanging her head dejectedly, I wanted to interject with numerous comments... but no, at this rate, I wouldn't be able to hear the story I truly wanted. Moreover, my frustration with her for not consulting me about anything hadn't faded.

A course correction was necessary.

"Tia, while that story is very interesting, isn't there something else you should be telling me about?"

"Eh? Something else? What do you mean?" Bertia asked, genuinely puzzled, furrowing her eyebrows and tilting her head.

Seeing her like that, a sigh inadvertently escaped my lips. I had hoped she would start the conversation, but it seemed I had to broach the topic myself.

"I've received reports. You've been suffering quite some trouble at the academy, haven't you?"

For a brief moment, Bertia's expression tensed. However, she quickly reverted to her usual cheerful smile and started to explain, placing her hands on her hips.

"Ah, that's not it! See, I am the villainess, so it's a good thing for me! Of course, being a top-tier villainess, I'm not bothered by such things!!" Her speech suddenly sped up, as if she were trying to obscure something.

"Tia?"

"Especially since I'm the one who started bothering Baroness Hironia! I've been really mean to her, you know!"

I didn't reply.

Along with everyone else, she too probably thought the constant harassment she faced was the handiwork of Baroness Hironia. Thus, eager to ensure that my impression of the “heroine” didn’t worsen, Bertia had quickly begun to make excuses for her.

But I know, don’t I? That your “meanness” has never quite managed to be truly mean.

In the end, the “meanness” Bertia perpetrated often turned into kindly admonition toward Baroness Hironia, who lacked proper manners, inadvertently making Bertia look good in the process.

Other young ladies also clearly knew that Bertia would not hesitate to play the villain if it meant helping others. Consequently, her reputation had been steadily improving.

“Listen, Tia. As your fiancé, it’s my duty to protect you. So, it’s all right if I handle this situation, isn’t it?” I offered to take over without revealing the true culprit, wanting to keep everything under control. The most pressing issue might be the matter with Viscountess Eirin, but I also wanted to make sure Baroness Hironia got the warning too.

Eliminating threats to my fiancée is my role, right? I smiled reassuringly at Bertia, waiting for her consent.

But...

“No, Prince Cecil! This is a battle among women!! As a top-tier villainess, I must face it head-on!!” Bertia, smiling, shook her head while squeezing my hand under the table.

“But my role to protect you, isn’t it?” I insisted.

“I am fine! I am a strong woman! So, Prince Cecil, you should comfort the heroine when she is beaten and dejected by me! That will surely bring you two... closer together.”

Bertia’s voice trembled slightly at the end. She endured the pain, yet her smile never wavered.

Why? Why won’t she rely on me?

Instead, she seemed to be defending the person who was hurting her.

“Listen, Tia. Don’t you think you should rely on me here?”

“I do not think so! After all, I am a villainess! A villainess does not depend on her capture targets! She always stands alone and diligently commits evil deeds!”

“That’s not the issue here. You are my fiancée. It’s my duty to protect you.”

“If you end up with the heroine, we will break off our engagement. So, there is no duty!”

“But right now, you are my fiancée.”

“But I am a villainess! So, please, don’t worry about me, and think about your future fiancée instead...”

“Tia, can you please stop this?” My voice dropped as frustration built up.

“Prince Cecil...?”

“I’ve said it multiple times—you are my fiancée. And I see it as my role to protect you.”

“But that’s why I... I shouldn’t be in a position where you feel that way about me...”

“Isn’t that for me to decide?”

“But, but that would mean you and the heroine would be at odds! That can’t happen at all!!”

Intimidated by my anger yet with determination in her eyes, Bertia rejected the hand I offered. Her stubbornness only fueled my irritation further.

I could tell her about the other threats that needed to be eliminated, hoping it might change her stance. But at this point, my desire to do so had faded. Whether or not she considered someone an enemy might hold great significance for Bertia, but to me, it was trivial.

The issue at hand was simple—remove any obstacles. Even if Baroness Hironia hadn’t attacked us directly yet, her presence was becoming a

“nuisance.” I couldn’t say she shouldn’t be dealt with, even if it was just this once.

“So, you think it’s all right to leave things as they are? If we do nothing, it could escalate further, you know?” From the initial reports during my absence to now, Miss Eirin’s actions had gradually become more aggressive.

Those around Bertia probably didn’t find it “amusing” to protect her.

“I’m fine! I am strong! I don’t need to borrow your hands, Prince Cecil. I can handle my own affairs—”

“Then do as you like.” I found myself saying those words to her since she so stubbornly ignored my pleas. It felt as though something inside my head had snapped.

I had everything ready to protect Bertia, yet as she obstinately refused to take my hand, the anger that had been building inside me suddenly cooled. I felt almost indifferent and finally stopped reaching out to her. *After all, if she herself rejects it, what can I do?* Continuing to offer my hand to someone who refused to take it seemed like a waste of time. It would be better to attend to as many official duties as I could at that time.

“Prince Ce-Cecil?”

“Sorry. I’ve suddenly lost my appetite, so I’ll take my leave now,” I informed Bertia’s maid, who seemed to be struggling with the timing to serve the meal, and stood up from the table without eating.

Strange. What was I getting so heated about? I’ve been rejected like this before due to my status, with many feeling it was presumptuous to trouble the crown prince.

But each time, I had quickly withdrawn with a “Well, all right then.” And upon reflection, if she herself said she didn’t need my assistance, there was no reason to insist.

Leaving the salon and walking back to the dormitory, I stared at my own right hand. The hand that Bertia had not grasped felt oddly cold.

Part Four

Conversations with Bertia had been minimal. She seemed unusually cautious around me, speaking to me less frequently.

I've decided to let her do as she pleases. I'm not angry, and there's no need for her to be so careful, right? I won't interfere in her activities. I'd made that decision, yet nothing else should have changed... but she continued to be overly wary around me.

That day, perhaps due to the fatigue from my trip abroad, I found it unusually hard to concentrate on my work. To change scenery, I brought my work to the salon located on the second floor of the dining hall, planning to relax with some tea while I worked.

Courtgain had joined me, and we both silently got on with our tasks, occasionally moistening our throats with tea brewed by Zeno. It was a remarkably peaceful time.

Catching a view of the courtyard, I closed in on the window with my teacup in hand.

"Your Highness, what are you observing?" asked Courtgain. He had quietly approached and now stood behind me.

His ability to move so silently, almost like a "shadow," seemed to be improving.

"Just looking at something interesting," I said, having overheard a conversation that included my fiancée's name, which piqued my curiosity.

Courtgain's gaze followed mine, and he frowned slightly.

"That's..."

Noting his reaction, I pushed the window open wider. A woman's voice carried through clearly to us.

"Enough already! Do you have any idea how much trouble you're causing Lady Bertia? And frankly, it's disgraceful to pursue someone who is already promised! Have some shame!!"

In the same courtyard where we had held a tea party on Bertia's enrollment day, three young ladies surrounded a woman seated in the center.

That woman was... Baroness Hironia.

At her table sat two male students, presumably her classmates.

One of the male students was quite handsome and held a high title, making him popular among the female students. The other was likely the fiancé of the woman who had just shouted at Baroness Hironia. From a distance, it appeared to be a classic love triangle causing a splendid commotion.

Surprisingly, the woman's primary grievance seemed to be about something else entirely.

"Didn't I tell you to fill it out and submit it by last weekend? It's crucial for determining roles for the cultural festival, and I asked you not to forget," the indignant young lady said, as Baroness Hironia feigned confusion.

"What are you talking about? I haven't received anything like that," Baroness Hironia replied, deliberately bewildered.

"Don't lie! I'm talking about the form distributed by the student council! I told you repeatedly that it was due last weekend, and you're the only one who hasn't submitted it yet! Do you realize how much trouble this causes for the student council?!"

"But I really didn't know. Oh, could it be that Lady Bertia is playing tricks on me—"

"My goodness! How can you say such a thing?! Lady Bertia would never do something like that! Blaming others for your own failures, how despicable!"

"But, but... I just..." Baroness Hironia's eyes welled up with tears as she put on a frightened demeanor.

The two male students moved to embrace her in an attempt to console her.

Something about those two seems off; their eyes are somewhat vacant.

Narrowing my eyes to focus, I noticed a strange aura emanating from a birdlike creature perched on Baroness Hironia's shoulder. It wasn't exactly

powerful “charm magic,” but it seemed that some sort of mental manipulation was at play.

Despite the tense situation, the male students looked blissfully entranced, gazing at Baroness Hironia with melting eyes. It was as if they were on the brink of addiction.

“It’s terrible. I really didn’t know...”

The scene continued to unfold quietly: the woman tearfully pleading her innocence and the men trying to comfort her, all under the stern gazes of the three other women.

At first glance, one might perceive the crying woman as the victim and those glaring at her as the aggressors. However, several bystanders dining nearby cast dubious glances toward Baroness Hironia, indicating their skepticism.

The other two young ladies who had been confronting her began to voice their complaints one after another. Baroness Hironia, while shedding tears, subtly redirected, attempting to blame Bertia and portray herself as the victim.

The sight was rather unpleasant.

It seemed the other students felt the same, as most of them looked at her with chilly stares or furrowed their brows in disapproval.

Courtgain, emanating a frosty aura, glared at Baroness Hironia through his glasses with piercing eyes. The intensity of his gaze might very well have conjured a blizzard even without the aid of spirit powers. I stopped him just as his hand seemed to involuntarily reach for a concealed weapon. A lethal incident within the academy would be too troublesome to clean up. If he had to do something drastic, I preferred it be done discreetly and far from prying eyes.

As the charade continued, I grew tired of watching and was about to close the window when I noticed Bertia, Silica, and Cynthia swiftly approaching.

“What is all this commotion about?” Bertia’s voice rang clear across the courtyard, instantly silencing the area.

She looked at the arguing young ladies, her brows furrowed in displeasure yet her eyes betraying a hint of satisfaction, as if thinking, “Am I not just like a

villainess? Amazing, isn't it? Just as expected!"

In contrast, Silica and Cynthia's gazes toward Baroness Hironia were sharp and critical.

There was another woman there whose gaze was even sharper, not directed at Baroness Hironia, but rather at Bertia. It was Viscountess Eirin Silbertz, the one from the reports. She had been enjoying tea a little distance away with two friends. However, her companions seemed oblivious to her venomous expression and the direction of her intense gaze.

Viscountess Eirin was dressed in a thinning blue dress, her lavender curls neatly arranged, painting the image of a perfectly ordinary young lady. Yet, it was her eyes alone that emitted a glare almost lethal in intensity toward Bertia.

"Lady Hironia, it's you again," Silica said with a pointed tone.

"Considering we are in the senior grade of the middle division, perhaps it's time we learned some manners befitting our noble status," Cynthia suggested, her voice laced with exasperation as she hid her mouth behind a fan.

An aura of enmity emanated from both, significantly intensifying the tension in the atmosphere. The focus and irritation of most people there shifted toward Baroness Hironia.

Then, standing up, Baroness Hironia pleaded her innocence with desperation. "Lady Silica, Lady Cynthia... I haven't done anything. Yet these people are accusing me..."

Through this exchange, Viscountess Eirin's gaze never left Bertia. As Baroness Hironia continued, one of the accusers, not wanting to be misunderstood, spoke up. "I'm just upset because, despite repeated requests, Baroness Hironia hasn't submitted her required materials... It's causing trouble for the student council, and I feel terrible about that."

At that point, with tears streaming down her cheeks, Baroness Hironia glared at Bertia.

"Lady Bertia, did you orchestrate all of this? Why would you do such a terrible thing?!" she cried, playing the victim to perfection despite all the context suggesting otherwise.

As this farcical scene unfolded, I found myself observing Viscountess Eirin more closely. While Bertia's reactions were certainly of interest, Viscountess Eirin's behavior was equally intriguing. This vantage point was ideal for watching both, bar Courtgain's chilling aura and Zeno's unnecessary interjections about whether I should intervene.

Amid the rising disdain for Baroness Hironia, Silica and Cynthia seemed to be gearing up for a rebuttal. Unaware of the sharp glances aimed her way, Baroness Hironia was drunk on her perceived victimhood.

Her rhetoric grew more extreme, and finally, several students stood up and gathered around Bertia, as if to protect her. They likely belonged to the Bertia Fan Club.

"This is getting interesting," I muttered to myself, a smile naturally playing at the corners of my mouth.

Just then, Bertia's voice cut through the air. "Please wait!!" She stood straight, exuding the commanding presence of a high noble.

At her words, the members of the Bertia Fan Club stepped back. Bertia moved between Silica and Cynthia and stepped forward to stand before Baroness Hironia. After giving her a sharp glare, she scanned the surrounding crowd as if to keep them in check.

The onlookers watched nervously, but Bertia herself seemed pleased, as if everything was going according to her plan.

"What is it that you want from tormenting me further, Lady Bertia?" Baroness Hironia challenged, stepping back half a step yet fixing Bertia with a defiant look.

Despite playing the tragic heroine, no sympathy arose for her. Instead, her eyes clearly displayed her resentment and condescension toward Bertia, revealing the true emotions beneath her facade of fear.



“How dare you say such disrespectful things about Lady Bertia?!” one of the ladies behind her shouted.

“Isn’t it you who have been troubling Lady Bertia and causing her pain?”

As the tension between Baroness Hironia, who persistently aimed to antagonize Bertia, and the young ladies defending Bertia were about to escalate, Bertia herself shouted, “STOP!!” Whether she felt left out of the spotlight or merely lonely, tears glistened in her eyes.

“Please listen to me! I hate being ignored!!” Bertia pleaded earnestly, causing the young ladies around her to falter and hurriedly apologize, promising to listen attentively.

The members of the Bertia Fan Club watched this with warm gazes, clearly touched by her appeal. Bertia, with hands on her hips and a fierce determination in her voice, then proclaimed, “Lady Hironia is my adversary! So, please, everyone else refrain from interfering! No bullying or anything like that!! I will handle this directly. No sneaking around like a third-rate villain—such actions are unacceptable! If there is to be a conflict, it must be fair and square!! That is what a top-tier villainess does!!”

Startled by Bertia’s declaration of confrontation, Baroness Hironia stuttered, “How terribly cruel—”

“Bravo, Lady Bertia!!” interrupted the young ladies, suddenly praising her.

Bertia looked around, puzzled by their reaction. “Eh?”

“Yes, indeed. Even if subjected to the most vile acts, resorting to sneaky retaliation is something only a third-rate woman would do!” they exclaimed.

“Um...”

“And for you to step forward and choose to face the conflict head-on, ensuring we don’t stoop to ugly feelings of anger or jealousy...” they continued, their admiration clear.

“No, that’s not it...” Bertia attempted to clarify, but her words were drowned out by the unexpected praise.

“And on top of that, you even defended Lady Hironia, ensuring she wasn’t attacked unilaterally by the majority, despite the terrible things she has done to you. How compassionate...” the accolades continued.

Bertia, who had only intended to play the role of a first-rate villainess, was visibly taken aback by the sudden rise in her popularity. Ultimately, the members of the Bertia Fan Club were so moved that they began to applaud, shifting the mood entirely in her favor.

Finding herself completely alienated as the atmosphere turned against her, Baroness Hironia’s face flushed with anger. “What in the world is this?!” she exclaimed as she stormed off.

The audience buzzed with excitement at her dramatic exit.

In a corner of the venue, unnoticed by all, stood Viscountess Eirin, exuding a dark aura. She observed the bewildered Bertia and the jubilant members of the Bertia Fan Club.

After watching both groups for a moment, she plastered on a forced smile and quietly slipped away.

“Courtgain, I have something to attend to outside,” I said, prompting a questioning look from him.

“Your Highness?”

“I’ll be back soon; just continue with the work... Come on, Zeno.”

With those words, I left the salon with haste. This was purely out of curiosity. It wasn’t for Bertia’s sake, but rather, I was intrigued by what that young lady, who had been glaring murderously at Bertia, might do next.

“I don’t need to justify myself to anyone,” I silently muttered to myself and followed the direction Viscountess Eirin had taken.

Of course, I asked Zeno to cast a spell to make us less noticeable as we ventured out.

Part Five

As Viscountess Eirin, disguised with a wig the same shade as Baroness Hironia's hair, furiously carved up Bertia's chair with a knife, I watched hidden in the shadows by the doorway. The chair, a custom-made luxury provided by the indulgent Marquis Noches who doted endlessly on his daughter, represented more than just seating; it was a testament to his love and the wealth of their house—a status symbol a viscountess's family might find challenging to afford.

With her emotions running high, Viscountess Eirin's actions spoke of a tempest within, driven by a jealousy and fervor that seemed to blur the lines between reason and restraint. It was a common trait among the passionate and the proud, sometimes mirrored in Bertia's own dramatic displays—though hers were never malicious.

"Your Highness, shouldn't we stop her?" Zeno asked, his voice laced with concern as he stood by my side outside the classroom.

"Stop her..." I murmured, contemplating the simplicity of such an intervention.

Watching as Viscountess Eirin mutilated the chair, Bertia's rejection of my offered help flashed through my mind, alongside her sometimes weary, troubled expressions hidden behind a veneer of cheerfulness. These memories pricked at a tender spot within me, like a needle softly piercing skin, sparking a faint ache.

Yet...

"She won't ask for help," I whispered, the words chilling me more than I expected and sapping my will to act.

Caught in the throes of these conflicting emotions, the nature of which I couldn't quite identify, I was pondering my next move when I sensed Viscountess Eirin finishing her cathartic destruction and heading toward the exit. Concurrently, the distant sounds of students returning from lunch reached my ears, signaling the end of the break.

The sound of a door latch announced Viscountess Eirin's departure from the classroom, and I discreetly moved to a more concealed position. Immediately

after, the rapid patter of her running feet filled the air. She passed by me, head bowed to hide her face with her hair, unaware of my close proximity.

“If you go too far, you might end up getting hurt,” I murmured almost reflexively to her retreating figure, not truly intending to threaten her but rather to caution.

She gasped, halting momentarily as if about to turn back, but then pressed on, probably to maintain her disguise as Baroness Hironia, which would be compromised if she faced me.

Perhaps it was a misstep on her part not to check who had witnessed her actions, but then again, remaining anonymous might have been her priority.

“Acting through others isn’t quite satisfying, is it?” I muttered to myself with a wry smile as she disappeared from sight. “Zeno, please take care of that,” I instructed, nodding at Bertia’s broken chair. With Zeno’s magical abilities, he could likely repair it discreetly, so long as no one was watching.

“As you wish,” Zeno responded.

As I walked away, I thought I heard Zeno mutter, “Really, our prince isn’t very honest, is he?” I didn’t quite catch the full meaning of his words.

Part Six

“Brother, please do something about her!!”

“Shawn, shouldn’t you knock before entering the room?”

It had been just over a month since I returned from my time abroad. After settling the accumulated tasks during my absence, I was finally regaining a sense of calm on this tranquil afternoon. I was working in the student council room of the senior division when suddenly the door burst open with a loud bang, and Shawn rushed in with incredible urgency.

“That’s not important right now. Please, do something about her!”

No, I believe that maintaining composure at all times as royalty and adhering to basic manners are important, don't you think?

I couldn't help but smile wryly at my brother's behavior, tilting my head at Shawn's unusually raised voice.

"Has Bertia done something interesting again?"

As usual, Bertia seemed to be struggling to handle things on her own, and while I observed her from a distance, a proper conversation had not been possible. Regular reports on her current situation kept coming in, and though I had my thoughts, I felt no inclination to intervene. Her words about not getting involved strangely lingered in my mind.

Bertia, for her part, seemed unusually concerned about my reaction, not approaching me as she normally would. Despite her apparent troubles, she hadn't come to consult me... in the slightest.

Honestly, she's such a troublesome girl.

"It's not about Miss Bertia. It's about Baroness Hironia Indelon."

Unaware of the situation, Shawn furrowed his brow in displeasure and pursed his lips. Hearing his words, I thought, *Ah, it's about Lady Hironia.*

Honestly, I couldn't care less.

Baroness Hironia Indelon is of no interest to me.

Even though I found it bothersome, ever since Bertia told me not to intervene, I hadn't felt the urge to actively eliminate her. "Shawn, I'm sorry, but Lady Hironia is outside my jurisdiction," I replied with a smile, gently declining.

"Why is that?" Shawn asked, puzzled.

"It's more a question of 'Why should I help you?'" I retorted.

"Everyone says you can solve most every problem brought to you..."

"I'm very curious about who this 'everyone' is," I mused.

"Lady Joanna seems anxious. She's been chastised by Lady Hironia for not being suitable for someone like me because of her strong personality. It hurts to

think that others might see her that way,” Shawn continued, glossing over my words. Tears welled up in his eyes as he clenched his fists.

“Seeing Lady Joanna upset about the possibility of my feelings shifting toward Lady Hironia, who has been aggressively pursuing me, makes my heart feel constricted. I feel like I must do something. I must protect her...”

While I think his resolve is admirable, the idea of “needing to protect” someone and then coming to me about it—what about that? That probably isn’t really what Lady Joanna wants.

Knowing her, she was likely thinking about making Shawn mature more while also dealing with the issue of Baroness Hironia as a bonus. Born as the second prince, Shawn had been spoiled by the adults around him. As the first prince, I’d had to handle most things myself, lacking somewhat in charm and requiring no looking after, which might have caused some of this backlash.

So, it might be excusable that he was a bit unreliable or clingy... but still, it was somewhat disappointing for a man.

Thankfully, Joanna had been skillfully handling him, which had significantly improved his demeanor. If this had been the Shawn of the past, he wouldn’t have thought about protecting anyone at all.

Currently, Shawn was desperately wanting to protect Joanna, yet he found himself unsure of how to proceed, biting his lip in frustration.

“Then, Shawn, you must protect her with your own hands. You are the middle school student council president, the second prince of this country... and now, Lady Joanna’s boyfriend.”

At my words, Shawn’s brows shot up, a look of surprise flashing across his face. “Brother, you knew about me and her?! We only officially became a couple yesterday.” He nodded in awe. “As expected of you, brother.”

I smiled back at Shawn, who was now staring at me with his large eyes even wider than usual. *Did I know that Shawn and Joanna had become a couple? Of course not. I merely sensed a deeper hue of love in his eyes than usual and took a guess... Hmm, so they’ve finally come together. That’s good to hear. It looks like Shawn’s engagement issues will also be smoothly resolved.*

“From now on, you two will be engaged, and later a married couple, and together you’ll support this nation. Do you plan to keep relying on me whenever you encounter difficulties, Shawn? Can you truly protect the one you love and the country like that?”

Shawn couldn’t remain a pampered child forever; it seemed like the right time for a change. It might be better to be a bit strict with him without coddling him... After all, I was his big brother.

“But, but I think you would handle it better than me...”

“By saying that, if you never gain experience, nothing will change, right? Besides, isn’t Lady Joanna the one you want to protect? Are you okay with another man taking your place in protecting her?”

“That... I might... not like that idea...” Shawn’s youthful face crinkled as he contemplated the scenario.

“Then, isn’t this the time for you to show what you’re made of as a man? She’s relying on you as her boyfriend, right? Why not try to protect her in your own way, even if it’s not perfect?”

This might help Shawn grow a bit more. Despite everything, he seemed to manage his duties as student council president well enough, and he had decent academic abilities and popularity. He wasn’t lacking in ability; what was left was for him to have the confidence to face challenges when necessary. Even if he failed now, I could back him up, and more importantly, Joanna would likely skillfully guide him. Especially in this case, it seemed clear that she had set this up as a challenge for Shawn. Surely, a support system was in place. She was as capable a woman as I’d want among my subordinates.

“But, still...” Shawn, completely oblivious to these facts, continued to hesitate and waver.

Some women found this kind of behavior “cute and attractive,” but as a prince of the nation, it was hardly reassuring.

“But?” I pressed him. He looked up at me with puppy eyes, seemingly scolded.

He reluctantly began to speak. “I did warn Lady Hironia multiple times. I tried to keep my distance as best as I could. But it’s like she doesn’t understand at all. She insists she belongs on the student council, looks down on Lady Joanna and other young ladies, accuses them as if she’s the tragic heroine of the story, and starts crying in public...”

Well, whether it was a “tragedy” or not, she seemed to think she was the heroine of an “otome game.”

It seemed she hadn’t given up, even seeing the “capture targets” getting along well with the “rival ladies.” I remembered seeing Baroness Hironia Indelon in the hallway recently, muttering to herself, “My favorability isn’t increasing. Maybe I should give up on the reverse harem?” Was she still aiming for that route? Her actions and words were bizarre and complicated, and I didn’t quite understand them. Well, there was also a big part of me that wasn’t trying to understand.

Shawn, with tears forming in the corners of his eyes, pleaded further, “Lately, it’s been especially terrible. I try my best to calm things down each time, but it ends up looking like I’m siding with Lady Hironia, and I just don’t know what to do anymore...”

Hearing this, I realized he’d been doing his best in his own way, which was somewhat reassuring. According to Bertia, most “capture events” for Shawn were supposed to happen this year. It seemed that he was the main target of the heroine this year, likely in a similar situation to what I faced two years ago. But from what Shawn told me, it felt like the trouble had escalated since then. *Normally, Bertia would have prevented other “capture events.” Perhaps something unpredictable is happening?*

No matter the circumstances, kind Shawn, unlike me, couldn’t choose to “ignore,” “deflect,” or “dismiss” the situation, and that must have been making it difficult for him to handle.

“Moreover, big brother, you’re not entirely unrelated, are you? After all, Bertia is the main target of the attacks. Lady Joanna might seem tough, but she’s a kind woman with a lot of empathy, and it must be painful for her to see Bertia suffering. I don’t want to see her in pain anymore...”

I felt my brow twitch instinctively at the mention of Bertia's name. I was aware that Baroness Hironia had made Bertia a target. Shawn may not have realized it, but I also knew that a new troublesome enemy named Viscountess Eirin had emerged.

"But..."

"I'm sorry, but that matter between Bertia and me has already been resolved."

"What do you mean?" Shawn asked, eyes widening in surprise.

Well, his response is natural.

My fiancée was being targeted, yet I showed no sign of action. It was understandable that he would find it odd for me to leave the situation as it was. Especially after I had just lectured him.

"Bertia told me that she wants to handle this matter herself as it's her own problem. That's why I'm standing aside," I explained.

"What?! You know what Bertia is going through right now, don't you?"

"Of course. I had already prepared to intervene... but, you know, I can't force help on someone who has refused it, can I?"

Shawn, not swayed by my calm response, pressed on in a flustered manner. "Is that really the issue here?! Isn't Bertia special to you..."

My heart remained unmoved by his state.

"She's my fiancée. I suppose that does make her quite special."

"That's not what I mean!! Watching how you treat Bertia, I always thought she must be someone special to you. The way you look at her... It's different from how you look at anyone else..."

Confused by what Shawn was trying to convey, I tilted my head.

It was unusual and refreshing for me to find myself unable to understand someone else's words.

"So, a woman in a special position, then..."

“That’s not it!! It’s more like... ‘I can’t just leave her be,’ ‘What if she gets hurt or cries?’ ‘I feel this overwhelming urge to protect her, regardless of her position...’ Like how I feel about Lady Joanna...”

“I, too, would dislike seeing my fiancée harmed.”

“Then why do you leave her be just because she declined help?!”

“Isn’t that how it’s supposed to be?”

“No, it’s not—”

Bang!!

Just as Shawn was about to continue angrily, the door burst open with a loud noise.

“Your Highness!!”

It was Charles, his face pale with urgency.

“Your Highness, Bertia has—”

I looked at him, puzzled.

“Bertia has fallen down the stairs...”

“What did you say?”

The words that came from his mouth were painfully and ironically timely.

Part Seven

“Tia, may I come in?”

Upon receiving Charles’s report, I immediately headed to Bertia’s location. Fortunately, it appeared her dress had cushioned her fall, and Kuro had quickly cast a protective spell, preventing any serious injuries. By the time I arrived, she had already returned to her own room.

Entering the girls’ dormitory as a man normally required a special application and permission from the dorm supervisor, and there were several restrictions

on top of that. However, under these circumstances, and as her fiancé, I was surprisingly able to visit her room quite easily.

“Prince Cecil, you came all the way here for me!” she exclaimed. Although she was laying on her bed, she greeted me in her usual manner, which oddly relieved me.

“Tia, what exactly happened?” I inquired, sitting down in a chair beside her bed.

The corners of her eyebrows slightly lowered as she gave me a troubled smile. She responded, “I made a little blunder.”

According to Bertia, she had been assisting a male student named Fannir Road with some student council work. They were carrying supplies out of the student council room. After finishing the task and parting ways with him, she was descending the stairs to return to the student council room when she collided with a girl who was running down the stairs behind her, causing her to fall.

The female student who collided with her apparently just ran off. Bertia hadn’t seen her face because she was looking down, but she mentioned that the girl had a similar stature and the same hair color as Baroness Hironia.

“I guess the villainess must always confront the heroine!” Bertia exclaimed with a determined clench of her fist, although her hand trembled slightly and her expression lacked its usual vitality. Understandably so. Even though Kuro had quickly activated a defensive spell, falling down the stairs must have been a terrifying experience. Especially if there was malice behind it...

A confusing mix of emotions began to stir within me. It felt as if some part of my mind was smoldering with heat. “Hey, Tia. I can’t just stand by any longer, can I?” I asked.

“Uh?”

As she trembled, still trying to face the challenge head-on, I gently took her fist in my hand. I remembered what Shawn had said before I came here. Whether I harbored the same feelings toward her as Shawn did toward Joanna, I wasn’t sure. But for the first time, seeing her harmed, I understood the pain of

seeing something you cherished being hurt. And knowing she was suffering, I indeed wanted to eliminate the cause of it.

“If you refuse my help and choose to act on your own, then I should be allowed to act on my own will, shouldn’t I?”

“Prince Cecil...?” she responded, unsure of what I meant.

I smiled back. “Don’t worry about it.” I had thought about leaving her to handle it. But I couldn’t do that anymore.

Then, there is only one thing left to do.

Part Eight

“Hey, everyone, would you mind helping me with a bit of personal retribution?”

I gathered my close aides, Shawn, and Bertia’s friends right after visiting her.

“Ah, so the general has finally decided to make a move,” Charles remarked with a knowing smirk as soon as he saw my face.

“It’s rare for His Highness to ask for help... Of course, we’ll assist you,” Courtgain said, pushing up his glasses with a smile that was unusually expressive for him... He must have been quite angry. Well, it made sense—despite everything, he seemed to think of Bertia almost like a real sister.

Joanna and the rest of Bertia’s friends, not to be outdone by Courtgain, were exuding an equally dark aura. “Leave it to us, Your Highness. Anyone who dares to harm our dear Lady Bertia will be promptly dealt with.”

Valdo and Nelt nodded silently.

Shawn, pleased with my words, said with a satisfied smile, “Big brother, you’ve finally decided to take action!! Then let’s quickly deal with Lady Hironia...”

“Ah, first, let me correct that,” I interjected.

“Huh?”

I had to put a stop to his misassumption. Everyone gathered here must have been under the same misconception. That included Joanna, who I assumed had been keeping tabs on Viscountess Eirin from the Bertia Fan Club meetings.

“The one who harmed Bertia isn’t Lady Hironia,” I clarified.

“Eh?!” My words seemed to shock everyone to some extent.

Hmm, this group is competent, no doubt, but still lacking... It seems they too easily focus on the most obvious enemies.

Despite having various clues at their disposal, they must have inadvertently stopped thinking thoroughly, caught in the trap that was Baroness Hironia.

“While it’s true that Lady Hironia has been setting various traps for Bertia, those actions were aimed at tarnishing her position, not directly harming her. But recently, the direct harassment has increased. And now, this incident. You understand what this means, right?”

Charles, ever-perceptive, caught on immediately with a look of surprise. “So, you’re saying there’s another culprit?!”

“Correct.” He was always the quickest thinker in moments like these.

“Who could it be?” Joanna pressed, leaning in close to me. Shawn, perhaps displeased by our proximity, hastily pulled her back by the arm.

I chuckled at that and then named the lady in question. “Lady Eirin Silbertz.”

Silence swept through the room.

“Eirin? That Eirin?” Joanna muttered in a daze, clearly shaken by the oversight despite having been supposed to be marking her.

But then, clenching her hands into tight fists, she looked at me with a mix of anger and regret in her eyes. “Your Highness, this is my fault. I apologize,” she said, bowing her head deeply and biting her lip.

Watching her, I truly realized how capable she was. Being able to quickly grasp the situation and admit her fault was proof of that.

“It’s good to be able to reflect, but right now, my retribution is more important. You’ll help me, right?” I said with a reassuring smile.

Joanna and the others exchanged glances, then nodded firmly. As I turned my gaze to my prospective aides, they too accepted with smiles.

Now, how shall we deal with this?

Part Nine

“Lady Bertia! How come there are rumors that I was the one who pushed you down the stairs?!” Baroness Hironia’s voice echoed across the courtyard.

Facing her, at a table, Bertia was enjoying tea with Joanna and her friends. At a different table nearby, Viscountess Eirin was having tea with a male student.

We were hidden in the shadows of the trees, observing the scene. A week had passed since Bertia had been pushed down the stairs. During that time, our sole goal had been preparing to retaliate against the perpetrator. The target was, of course, Viscountess Eirin Silbertz.

She had ignored my warnings and tried to injure Bertia, the future crown princess. *Naturally, she will receive a fitting retribution.*

We had already investigated the events on the day Bertia had been attacked. On that day, it seemed Viscountess Eirin had been masquerading as Baroness Hironia as usual and following Bertia around to harass her. She witnessed the object of her unrequited affection—Fannir—happily chatting and carrying things together with Bertia. Seeing the man she cherished blushing and eagerly talking to another woman infuriated her. Alone with Bertia, she gave in to her anger and pushed her down the stairs, then fled the scene, careful to keep her face hidden.

Really, to think she could do such a thing to my fiancée, she must have quite the nerve.

“Your Highness, is this also part of the plan?” Courtgain asked, nodding toward Baroness Hironia.

“No, that’s just a coincidence. But it doesn’t really matter if she’s there,” I replied.

The timing of her appearance was difficult to judge—whether good or bad, the results were anyone’s guess.

Confused by the sudden outburst from Baroness Hironia, Bertia tilted her head in puzzlement. “Um, what are you talking about?”

This only served to amplify Baroness Hironia’s anger. “This is your doing! Trying to frame me, an innocent person, as the criminal! And falling down the stairs was probably your own staged act! Just what I’d expect from a villainess! But I won’t be defeated by such a trick!!” Her face turned bright red with rage as she pointed at Bertia.

Over her shoulder, her light spirit was exerting its power, trying to assist Baroness Hironia. Kuro skillfully thwarted it, rendering the effort meaningless.

Continuing to simply watch from the sidelines would be a waste of time, so I decided to step in and put an end to this quickly. I quietly emerged from the shadows of the trees and signaled with my eyes to Joanna and her friends, who were glaring murderously at Baroness Hironia beside Bertia.

They immediately noticed and nodded in response. *Shall we begin the punishment?*

“Um... uh...” Bertia, flustered by Baroness Hironia’s assault, looked around in confusion. She seemed to be the only one who hadn’t grasped the situation yet.

Everyone had been considerate not to discuss the staircase incident in front of Bertia, so she was unaware of the rumors pinning Baroness Hironia as the perpetrator.

While facing Bertia directly, my aides and I began moving straight toward her.

As we made our appearance, the students around us began to murmur, and the whispers gradually spread. I stopped just short of where Bertia and her friends were seated, right beside Viscountess Eirin’s table. There, Viscountess Eirin, with an unconcerned expression, seemed to be enjoying the unfolding scene among the audience.

Truly carefree, she is.

I sighed and spoke up. "Could you please stop unjustly accusing my fiancée of being a criminal?"

Upon noticing my presence, Baroness Hironia's face lit up. "P-Prince Cecil!" Her verbal attack on Bertia ceased, and she turned toward me, now pleading that she was being framed by Bertia.

This is rather annoying.

Bertia was watching us with a look of unease. "Prince Cecil..." she murmured softly.

To her, I offered a gentle smile and nodded as if to say, "It's going to be all right."

I turned to Baroness Hironia, who continued to claim her innocence as if she were the tragic heroine of the story, and asked, "You aren't the one who pushed Bertia down the stairs, are you?" Truthfully, I found it bothersome to even engage with her, but in this situation, ignoring her wasn't an option.

"No! Of course not!" Baroness Hironia's eyes sparkled in response to my question.

She probably thought her stance was being validated and thus celebrated the acknowledgment.

Well, I will acknowledge that you aren't the culprit, but I must completely deny any notion that Bertia staged the incident herself, okay?

"Bertia indeed testified that she saw a woman with hair the same color as yours when she fell down the stairs. However, she did not say that it was you," I explained.

Looking into Bertia's eyes, I tilted my head and asked, "Right?"

Bertia nodded vigorously in response.

If I claimed here that "Lady Hironia did it," I might fulfill Bertia's desire to be seen as the villainess, but Bertia seemed too confused right now to think that far ahead. Well, that worked out better for me, so I was thankful for that.

"I'm sorry. It seems someone tried to exploit the situation, seeing how you've been confronting my fiancée," I said, placing my hand on the small shoulder

beside me.

“Eh?” Viscountess Eirin looked up at me in surprise.

Fannir, the male student sitting across from Viscountess Eirin, wiped away his gentle smile and glared at her. “Right, Lady Eirin Silbertz?” I asked, smiling broadly at her.

Viscountess Eirin’s face flushed, and she stared at me, seemingly dazed. *Is this really the time to be lost in gazing at me? Or has she not yet grasped the situation?*

I let my smile fade away and leaned closer to whisper in her ear, “I warned you, didn’t I? ‘If you go too far, you might end up getting hurt.’”

“Eh? Eh?!” Viscountess Eirin seemed unable to immediately comprehend the meaning of my words, standing frozen in shock. But after a few seconds, it appeared she realized what I meant, and her face paled.

She looked like she was about to scream but quickly covered her mouth with both hands to hold it back.

“Courtgain, her bag, please.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Courtgain responded, standing ready behind me.

Though Viscountess Eirin’s belongings consisted only of a single bundle resting on her lap, rummaging through someone’s personal items was generally not commendable. However, circumstances demanded it, and it was us who had orchestrated for her to bring it here.

“Excuse me,” Courtgain said as he swiftly took the bundle before Viscountess Eirin could react.

“Stop, stop!” she protested.

Courtgain was not the type to cease his actions over such words. He briskly opened the bundle, and inside...

“That’s... the same color as my hair...” Baroness Hironia exclaimed in surprise upon seeing a pink-blond wig, her face quickly turning bright red with anger.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Baroness Hironia, forgetting her act, confronted Viscountess Eirin.

“It’s not what it looks like! This just happened to...” Viscountess Eirin stammered.

“Right, ‘just happened’ because today was the dormitory’s scheduled deep cleaning, and you couldn’t leave the wig in your room, so you had to carry it with you?” I interjected with a knowing smile.

At this, Viscountess Eirin gasped with a short shriek.

Nobles of higher ranks often had multiple attendants, and their rooms were cleaned by their own servants. However, Viscountess Eirin, being of a lower nobility, would have her room cleaned by hired cleaners during the academy-wide cleaning days. It was unlikely that she would leave such incriminating evidence as a wig in her room when many different people would be entering.

That was why we invited her here today. Had she left the wig in her room, I had arranged for someone to search her house during this time and ensure it was brought here.

Since she attempted to harm Bertia, it was only fitting that she faced appropriate comeuppance. To ensure this, we took a clear approach to exposing the culprit. And now this was it. Incidentally, her beloved Fannir was already aware of her guilt. Naturally, I had explained the situation to him beforehand and requested his cooperation.

With no way out, Viscountess Eirin turned her gaze to her beloved, who was sitting beside her, in a last-ditch hope. At that moment, Fannir delivered the final blow. “Eirin Silbertz. I despise you from the bottom of my heart.”

Hearing these words, her face was perfectly painted with despair. Surely, being despised by Fannir must be the harshest punishment for her. “No... Noooooo!!” She crouched down on the spot, trying to escape the reality of her situation.

Quietly, I spoke toward her back. “This matter will be reported not only to the academy and Bertia’s parents but also to my own parents, just so you know.” At the same time, several students who had been seated nearby stood up,

dragging her away despite her protests. They were members of the Bertia Fan Club, still furious over the incidents involving Bertia. I was confident they would handle the aftermath appropriately.

Bertia, still unable to grasp the situation, looked at me with a frightened expression. I smiled at her and helped her to her feet. “Well then, that’s the messy part dealt with. Shall we go, Tia?” I wanted to leave, gently holding the shaky Bertia close.

“Wait a minute! What about me?! I’m the victim here, aren’t I? Why aren’t you comforting me?!” Another troublesome person grabbed my arm in protest.

Within my embrace, Bertia flinched. *Ah, this is truly vexing.* “That’s not my role. What I need to do is let her rest,” I said with a smile, shaking off Baroness Hironia’s grip and turning away.

“What on earth is going on with this development?! This is the part where everyone is supposed to feel sorry for me and comfort me!” she shouted, her face turning even redder.

Well, even though she was a victim in this particular incident, there was no room for sympathy because she had been attacking Bertia in other ways. She should have given up here. However, without such consideration, she glared at Bertia.

“And it’s all your fault!! If you’re going to be a villainess, then act like one properly and be disliked as you should be! Because of you, I’m being treated like the villain too! Why do you have to hang around with rival ladies and be popular?! And on top of that, you’re facilitating relationships between the capture targets and the rival ladies, having meals with Prince Cecil—I’m really suffering because of it!!”

Bertia, trembling within my arms, tried her best to respond. “I-I’ve been doing my best with regard to Prince Cecil...”

Baroness Hironia, paying no heed to Bertia’s words, continued to berate her more fiercely. “Do you understand? Unlike other capture targets, your beloved Prince Cecil can’t be happy unless he’s with me! I’m the only one who can save Prince Cecil. As a villainess, all you can do is bring misery to him!! If you understand, then stop getting in my way!”

Bertia gasped.

The other students listened to Baroness Hironia's rant with bewildered expressions, as if watching something bizarre.

Bertia, seemingly the only one who understood the true intent behind her words, was unable to retort. After a pained expression crossed her face, she bit her lip as if enduring something and looked down.

All this time, Bertia had hoped that I would end up with the "heroine" and be happy. At the same time, I had felt that she harbored some degree of affection for me.

Even with the setting of an "otome game" at play, I couldn't understand why she would try to foster a relationship between me and a romantic rival. I thought that by pairing off other "capture targets" with the "heroine," Bertia could remain my fiancée since I wasn't attracted to the "heroine."

However, Baroness Hironia's words now implied that there is some reason I had to end up with the "heroine" as decreed by the "otome game." *But considering everything so far, couldn't this destiny be changed?*

Bertia often talked about "mandatory events" and tended to give up easily, but so far, it seemed like they hadn't been in effect. It felt more like Bertia's own misconception. *If she really cares about me, perhaps there is a way for her to resist?*

I was on the verge of getting lost in these thoughts when I abruptly stopped myself. Now was not the time for such reflections.

Bertia, gripping her dress so tightly that her fingertips turned white, was enduring Baroness Hironia's words right in front of me. People around us, unable to grasp the situation, wanted to defend her but didn't know how and could only glare at Baroness Hironia.

Yet despite the surrounding stares, she continued to rant. "You exist only to highlight me. You couldn't even become a rival, just a third-rate villainess. If you abandon that role, Prince Cecil cannot be saved. You are stealing the happiness that should have been his." Baroness Hironia declared with finality, "You can't replace me because I am the 'fated maiden'!"

To someone unfamiliar with the concept of an “otome game,” she might have seemed like just a delusional person. However, Bertia’s face twisted even more painfully at her words.

“I understand,” she whispered faintly, a statement and a tear that no one else might have noticed, muffled by her agony.

I felt an indescribable mix of anger and sadness directed at her small figure. Stepping forward protectively, I glared at Baroness Hironia Indelon. Almost simultaneously, Kuro moved in front of her, her hair bristling menacingly.

She hissed in anger.

To an ordinary onlooker, it might appear as if Bertia’s young attendant, a mere child, was glaring at a lady who had insulted her master. However, seeing Kuro’s true spirit form, I knew it was an extremely dangerous situation. Around Kuro, black lightning crackled and swirled, ready to strike at any moment.

The air around us seemed to darken and sizzle with tension, running over my skin with an electric static.

Despite the ominous atmosphere, Baroness Hironia only seemed slightly intimidated but not truly afraid—likely because she lacked the ability to see spirits and thus could not recognize the real danger.

In contrast, her spirit, resembling a bird, frantically moved forward to protect her. However, the disparity in power between Kuro and the birdlike spirit was stark...

“What now! What is this?! Why must I, the victim, be treated this way?! It makes me so angry! This world is meant for me to shine, Bertia Ibil Noches! Eventually, your prince will be mine. Enjoy this moment while you can! The happiness of a villainess disappears in the blink of an eye!!”

With that final shout, Baroness Hironia stormed off. I watched her retreating figure, hearing Bertia’s faint voice near me.

“I’m sorry.”

And with that, she collapsed.

Part Ten

“Hmm? Mmm...” Bertia tossed and turned restlessly on a bed partitioned off by severe white curtains. After our confrontation with Baroness Hironia, as Bertia fainted, I had caught her and immediately carried her to the infirmary. I was initially shocked when she lost consciousness so suddenly, but I soon realized she was just sleeping, which was a relief.

According to the maid and the school doctor, ever since she had been pushed down the stairs, Bertia had been dealing with excessive anxiety and stress. Although she appeared calm, she hadn't been sleeping well at night. Apparently, feeling reassured that the perpetrator had been caught, she had fallen into a deep sleep, as if her body had decided it was finally safe to rest.

Hearing this, I reflected, “Maybe I should have been more considerate.” I decided to let her rest in the infirmary bed and volunteered to stay by her side. As she slept, I found myself deep in thought.

She must've been absolutely exhausted by the state of deep sleep she was in. Watching her rest, I realized how precious she was—too precious to lose. Of course, it was wrong to let her get worn out like this. She was one of the few people who brought joy to my life. She was important enough that I should probably make more of an effort to protect her properly. At least, I wouldn't let things go unattended like this again.

“Hmm? Prince Cecil?” Bertia's eyes fluttered open. She was still groggy, barely awake, and looked at me unfocusedly.

“It's all right now. You can keep resting,” I reassured her.

As I gently stroked her deep crimson hair, she gave a drooly smile and drifted back into her dreams.



“Hehehe... Such a nice dream...” Bertia murmured with a blissful expression. Observing her smile at me in that unique way, I thought to myself with a wry smile, *You’re the only one who smiles at me like this*, and decided to relish the comfortable atmosphere.

Indeed... I want to savor it.

From beyond the infirmary door, I sensed people whispering.

“Zeno,” I called out quietly through the curtain, assuming that Zeno, along with Bertia’s maids, was on standby.

He would understand what I meant by just that.

“As you wish,” came Zeno’s prompt response from beyond the curtain.

Listening to the voices beyond the door, I could faintly hear several people whispering among themselves.

“Don’t push me.”

“Why aren’t we going in?”

“Is Lady Bertia all right?”

“Just go in already.”

“What if we’re interrupting something?”

Click.

“Uh? Wait, whoa!!”

“Eh?! Ah!!”

“Please, come in,” Zeno said as he opened the door, and the voices outside suddenly stopped.

An awkward silence ensued.

“She’s resting in the booth at the far end. His Highness is with her.”

“Excuse us,” they murmured after a small cough, as if regaining their composure. Then, the sound of eight sets of footsteps approached briskly.

As everyone drew near, Bertia began to stir.

“Mmm? Eh?”

I really wanted to let her sleep a bit longer, but it couldn't be helped. They were concerned about Bertia and had come to check on her; sending them away now would have been too cruel.

“Lady Bertia? Your Highness?” A concerned voice called from beyond the curtain.

“Tia, everyone's come because they're worried about you,” I gently said to Bertia, who was sleepily rubbing her eyes.

Exposing Bertia's sleeping face to everyone felt like revealing a secret treasure I had hidden away just for myself, almost regrettable in its necessity.

“Prince Cecil?” Her sleepy eyes slowly focused on me.

“Eh? Oh? Where is this? Did I...” she began, still disoriented.

“We're in the infirmary. You collapsed due to lack of sleep and exhaustion. Joanna, Charles, and the others have come because they're worried about you. May I let them in?”

Her still somewhat foggy eyes slowly moved, and her awareness shifted toward the outside of the curtain.

Then, suddenly...

With a burst of energy, Bertia threw off the covers and sat up, quickly tidying her hair before addressing those waiting outside.

“Please, come in!!” Her vigorous reply conveyed relief to those listening.

“Excuse us,” someone said with a measure of caution.

First, Bertia's friends entered, followed by my aides, arranging themselves around Bertia's bed.

“Um, everyone, I'm not entirely sure what's happening, but I'm sorry for worrying you all!!” Bertia said, bowing her head in an attempt to apologize, even though she was still not fully aware of the situation.

Her candid admission of confusion was just so typical of Bertia.

Joanna took Bertia's hand. "My dear Lady Bertia, we were so worried when you suddenly collapsed."

Bertia, as if trying to mask a mistake, chuckled awkwardly, "Ehehe."

Silica approached Bertia similarly and said, "I confronted the school doctor as he was leaving the infirmary... I mean, I held him back to inquire! What's this about lack of sleep? You're not Lord Nelt, you need to sleep properly... Later, I'll bring you my special blend of tea that helps with sleep."

She spoke in a tone that seemed almost like muttering complaints, showing her concern for Bertia. Nelt looked somewhat uncomfortable—likely he was often scolded for similar reasons.

From beside Silica, Cynthia leaned in and added, "Lady Bertia, if you ever feel uneasy, please tell me or Lord Valdo. We're always ready to guard you."

Valdo, suddenly mentioned, looked surprised but quickly nodded in agreement. "Uh, yes?"

Cynthia, since when did you learn enough martial arts to offer protection?

Lastly, Anne chimed in with a knowing nod. "It's troublesome to be unjustly envied by a third party, isn't it? I often get wrongly accused by those associated with Lord Charles... I'm always here to offer advice and teach you how to ward them off, so please don't hesitate to speak up!!"

"Wait?! What?! Wrongly accused?! What do you mean, Lady Anne?!" Charles demanded, flustered by the comment. I decided I should probably ignore that for now.

Shawn clasped his hands tightly and said earnestly to Bertia, "I-I might not be very reliable, but please feel free to rely on me if anything happens!"

After finishing, he looked toward Joanna as if asking, "Was that all right?" Receiving a smile from her, Shawn beamed with pride. It seemed my younger brother was being well trained by Joanna.

"Um, well, um..."

As kind words came one after another, Bertia looked around bewilderedly. When her gaze sought help, I returned it with a smile and nodded gently.

“Everyone’s on your side, so don’t struggle alone,” I reassured her.

“Um, I...” Bertia began, her face scrunching up for a moment as if she were about to cry. However, she then shook her head vigorously as if to cast aside whatever was troubling her. “I will do my best!!”

Despite the situation, Bertia somehow found the resolve to keep trying. To redirect her efforts, I spoke up, “No, what I mean is—”

I stopped myself, and I found all I could do was nod instead.

“First, I’ll start by understanding why everyone is encouraging me!!”

Yes, maybe that’s a good place to start? After a moment of collective bewilderment, everyone laughed and said, “That’s so Bertia.”

Indeed, Bertia’s surroundings have to be like this, right? It was this atmosphere that made it impossible for me to stop watching her.

Back Matter

Author: Shiki Made their publishing debut in 2016 with "It's Too Late Now!!" (Ichijinsha). Received a special award at the 9th Alphapolis Fantasy Novel Awards for "The Observations of My Self-Proclaimed Villainess Fiancée." Enjoys reading and writing novels, though both at a leisurely pace.

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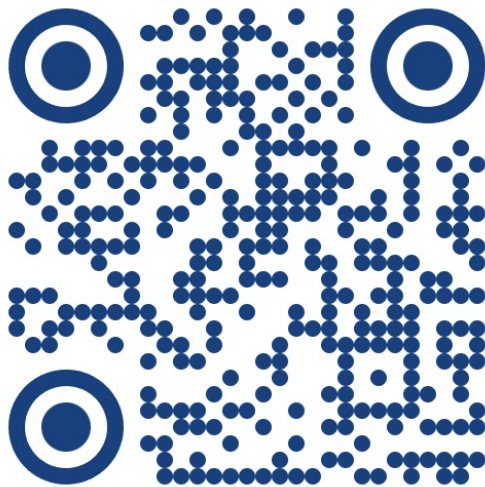
Thank you all

Thank you for finishing Observation Records of My Fiancée: The Misadventures of a Self-Proclaimed Villainess Volume 1! We hope you've enjoyed following Bertia's amusing journey.

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