



Takasugi Naturu

Illustrator
kieshi akaz

Marriage, Divorce, and Beyond

The White Mage and
Black Knight's Romance Reignited



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Marriage, Divorce, and Beyond: The White Mage and Black Knight's Romance Reignited Volume 1

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Prologue

The forest, its many trees awash in leaves of deep green, gave off the impression that it was protecting the small white church made of stone that lay within it. The abundant nature and clean air, along with the twittering of the small birds that lived there, surrounded the quiet church. From time to time, this serene spot was where people came to offer up prayers to God. At least, that was what usually happened.

Now, in this normally peaceful, relaxed space around the small church, a large number of people had gathered—men and women, young and old—all dressed up and looking at the entrance to the church with smiling faces.

“Here,” the priest announced, “a new couple is born. Ladies and gentlemen, let us give blessings upon these two as they walk together from this day forward!”

Following his words, both roaring applause and cries of “Congratulations!” and “May you have a happy marriage!” rang out continuously.

“Shall we?” invited the smiling man beside me as he held out his hand. It was he who had just exchanged marriage vows with me.

His name was Joshua Granwell, aide to the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Mert. He was a young man of noble birth, flawlessly dressed in the black ceremonial suit of a royal civil servant, with a strong red tinge to his brown hair and shining green eyes.

“Let’s,” I answered after a short pause, gently placing my hand, cloaked in a beautiful glove, in his. Joshua kindly escorted me down the stairs, leading me to the beautiful garden adjacent to the church.

My dress was of a demure design, white with pale green accents. It swayed delicately at the hem, where the crest of the Granwell marquis family was embroidered with gold and light green threads. Jewelry of several types—unified by their use of jade—adorned my ears and neck, and the bouquet in my hands was made of lovely white and pea-green flowers. For this once-in-a-

lifetime celebration, all of the items that had been prepared were of high quality, beautiful enough that they seemed to dazzle the eyes of those around me.

I wore a white wedding dress, jewelry made of jade, and a delicately embroidered veil, and held a lovely bouquet of fresh flowers. A crowd of people was congratulating me while the man who had vowed his love to me in the church held my hand.

There had been a scene I had adored when I was young, from a picture book—the marriage of a prince and princess. While I had longed for that, I had never dreamed that I would be in the same position as that storybook princess.

After the ceremony, we remained in the garden adjacent to the church, transitioning to the reception. Once we had finished thanking the guests for coming, I was finally able to have a conversation with two female knights from my graduating class. They were both married women, their bodies wrapped in beautiful, elegant dresses.

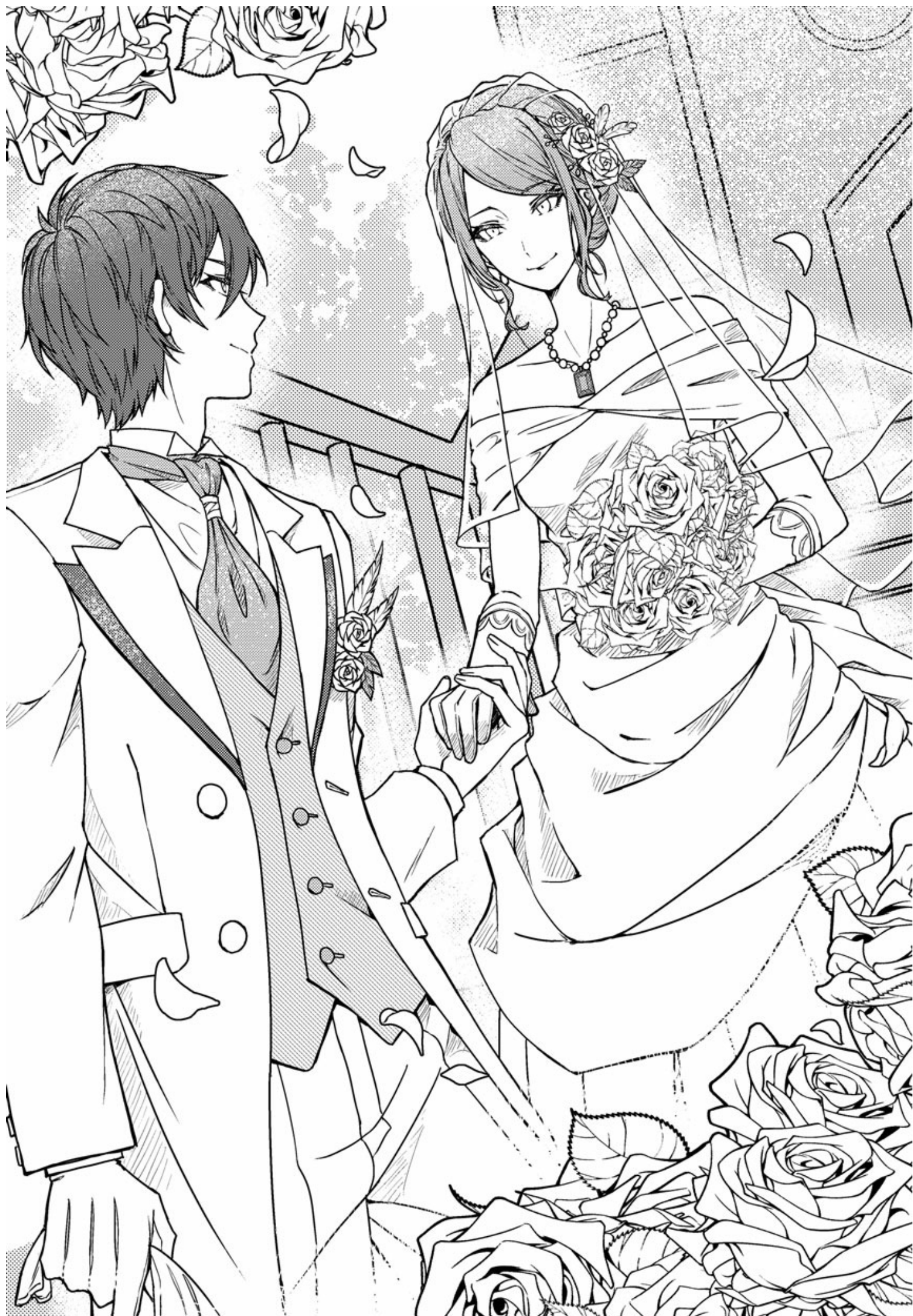
“Lina, congratulations! You look so beautiful, and that dress suits you so well!”

“You’re such a beautiful bride. Congratulations on the wedding. I’m glad—relieved, really—that you were finally able to find a suitable white mage as your spouse, Lina.”

“Thank you both for coming from so far away today,” I said in response. “The thing is, I always thought that I’d be the first black knight to never get married. I still can’t quite believe it.”

“You silly!” One of the women smirked. “There’s no way you would be allowed to remain unmarried. Those born with the ability to use old magic like us, regardless of being male or female, become black knights and are married to white mages with whom they have a good magic affinity. There are no exceptions—it’s compulsory, especially for us knights who are women. Rather than doing battle, they expect us to bear children.”

My friend was a very beautifully dressed figure, but she put her hands on her hips, letting out a huff through her nose as she made a displeased expression.



“Both sides of my family have been nagging me,” she continued. “‘Have a child, have a child,’ like some kind of hex. Sorry, I’m not a tool to have children. Lina, you’d better be prepared for it, because they’ll start telling you the same thing soon.”

“Oh, really?” I asked.

“Really,” she replied. “That’s what being a female black knight is like. The societal expectation is for a mother to give birth to as many black knights of the next generation as possible!”

“Now, now, let’s put aside the issue about children,” my other friend suggested. “I really am relieved—I was worried that Lina here wouldn’t be able to find a partner. Though...well, he wasn’t what I expected.”

The two looked over my shoulder at my husband, Lord Joshua.

My first friend spoke. “Oh? I think he’s good for Lina—an older partner fits a quiet girl like her more. Like he’ll wrap her up and take her by the hand. Just look at her dress! The jewelry, the bouquet—it’s all so nonchalantly made with green! Using his colors like this is quite the statement, isn’t it?”

“But he doesn’t seem to talk much, and since he’s an upper-class noble I get the feeling that he doesn’t express his emotions,” the other said. “No matter how you look at him, he’s the type that’s kind of difficult to understand. I mean, if I had to guess everything he felt, it would be twice as hard on me. Lina, how is he really, the prime minister’s aide? Did you get along well with him during your engagement?”

“O-Oh...” I stammered.

“Tell us!”

“How was it?”

The two had married their fiancées upon coming of age, and by this point were not only wives, but mothers as well. Despite this, they urged me on with such force it was as if we had returned to our school days. Though exchanges like this had happened countless times back then, having the same kind of discussion despite the passage of time and becoming adults—and, in their case,

becoming mothers too—was strange.

“Where did you go on dates? Did you have meals together?”

“What kind of gifts did he give you? Dresses? Jewelry? Or was it basic, like candy or flowers?”

It really was like we were girls in our mid-teens again. The overwhelming majority of students at the knight school had been boys, and what few of us girls had been there helped each other to endure the strict training regimens and exams. What had been born there, regardless of our lineage or societal positions, was friendship and trust.

“Just talk to us!”

“It’s better if you just come out and tell us, you know.”

I paused. “Well, um...”

“I do hope you aren’t pushing my wife too hard.” Lord Joshua came up from behind me, placing his hand on my lower back. His words reined in my overenthusiastic friends. “You know, I’ve heard many things about the two of you, such as how the three of you worked very hard together at the knights academy.”

“Oh, you can’t call this pushing her,” one friend responded.

“Well, maybe asking him directly would be an effective way,” the other proposed.

“Whatever is the matter?” Lord Joshua replied.

“Lina is a dear friend, companion, and sister to us. We would like to know how you cared for her during your engagement, and if you will cherish her henceforth, now that you’re married.”

“We would like to hear what you have to say. Don’t leave out anything.”

The pressure emanating from my two friends was immense, but Lord Joshua didn’t seem to be particularly bothered and muttered, “I do wonder if I can answer in a way that will satisfy you both.”

Under a clear, sunny sky, the church’s garden was decorated with beautiful

flowering plants. Those gathered there were my superiors, colleagues, friends, family, and those close enough to be called relatives. Because of this once-in-a-lifetime event to congratulate me on my marriage, they were dressed up in made-to-order, refined, beautiful outfits.

It was a beautiful, happy scene.

At that time, I truly was happy.

Four years ago, in the center of that bustling celebration bubbling with lively conversation, I was indeed the happiest person in the country.

Chapter 1: Losing Her Job

Kingdom of Mert Calendar Year 785

When I opened my eyes, the world seemed blurry.

Though I blinked several times, my vision never seemed to be completely clear. It was so hazy that I could only make out broad shapes, colors, as well as light and dark. It was as if a fog had risen around me.

“Oh, Lady Granwell!”

Light footsteps sounded out, and I got the feeling that the owner of the voice ran to my side as I lay there. While I could see her face through my blurry vision, I could only make out that she was a woman wearing white clothes and some kind of white cap on her head.

“You’ve awakened!” she exclaimed. “Please don’t worry. This is a treatment center.”

It seemed that the woman in whitish clothing peering at me was a nurse. At that moment, I must have been lying in a treatment center bed.

I tried to reply, but all that came out was a hoarse breath; I could not speak.

“You don’t have to push yourself to talk. I will get the head mage right away.”

After I watched her blurry back leave the private room, I slowly moved my arms. From the hospital gown that had been put on me emerged two white hands, so I assumed they were covered with bandages. The sensation in both was very dull, and I could only control the fingers on my left hand. I could also move my left leg down to my toes, but my right leg did not move at all.

Somehow, it seemed that the right side of my body was severely damaged.

I checked my body for a bit, but I was already tired, and my eyelids were falling. Unable to hold on, I closed my eyes just as I heard the sound of someone coming into the room. I didn’t catch the first part of what they said.

“—Granwell? Lady Lina Granwell? I’m so glad you’re awake. You were

brought here five days ago and have remained unconscious until now. I am a white mage working at this treatment center, and I'm in charge of your recovery."

The head mage was a woman who wore white clothes. As she stood beside my bed, she turned the pages of a medical record book and continued, "How are you feeling? And is there any place where you are in a lot of pain, or have no feeling at all?"

I explained to her with small gestures that I couldn't speak.

"Well then, if you want to answer 'yes' to any of my questions, tap my hand once. For 'no,' tap it twice. If neither yes nor no, or you don't know, tap three times."

I poked the doctor's hand once with my left index finger. *Yes.*

"Can you hear my voice?"

Yes.

"Can you see?"

Neither yes nor no. I poked three times.

She paused. "Follow my finger with your eyes."

A fuzzy index finger appeared in my hazy vision, and I followed it with my eyes to the right, then to the left.

"Are you experiencing blurred vision?"

Yes. I poked once.

The questions continued, and I was able to convey that I could not move my right hand nor my right leg, and that my senses were dull. Just explaining that was difficult, and I felt again how important it was to be able to speak in words.

"Now then, black knight Lina Granwell," the doctor said. "I don't know how many details you remember about being brought here. Therefore, I can only explain to you the extent of what I've been told."

In all honesty, as my memory was unclear, I appreciated an explanation of the circumstances. I turned my unsteady gaze to the doctor and nodded.

“You faced a dragon that had appeared in the east at the Abyssal Gorge and defeated it splendidly. However, at the same time, you suffered grievous wounds. The blue knights stationed at the fort found you wounded and unconscious. They rescued you, and from there, white mages transported you here while casting a recovery spell on you.”

As I took in the explanation, my memory slowly came back to me.

There had been a huge dragon, wrapped in purple scales so dark they were almost black, with two large, curling, sheeplike horns. Its front feet had been small; its swinging, spiked tail had been thick; and it had expelled poisonous breath as it flew through the air.

“Lady Granwell, were you aware of how close to death you were?” the head mage continued. “You were thoroughly doused in the dragon’s venom, and had severe lacerations across your limbs. While you were being brought here, three of the fortress’s white mages had to take turns drinking mana elixirs to staunch your wounds and slow the circulation of poison through your body—as well as try to detoxify you.”

That... That sounded like a terrible ordeal. I could only be thankful to those mages.

“I’m sure that they would be proud and relieved to know that, thanks to their efforts, your life was saved. Their hard work left your lacerations mostly healed; however...the problem with your condition lies with the poison. We can assume that your inability to see clearly, speak, or move the right half of your body is due to the poison.”

When I nodded, she kindly touched my left hand and said, “Regardless, I am quite glad that you survived. From now on, we will focus your treatment on detoxification and physical therapy for your limbs. But first, take lots of time to rest.”

I tapped the head mage’s hand once, then closed my eyes.

In an instant, my consciousness slipped away as if my body were being pulled into the mattress, into a complete darkness that was both warm and peaceful.

In this country, the Kingdom of Mert, four groups made up the Royal Knights Corps.

There were white knights, who were the bodyguards of the royal family and protectors of the royal castle. Next were the red knights, who patrolled the downtown areas of major cities and guarded the citizens within. Blue knights, stationed in fortresses built in areas awash with monsters, fought beasts. Last but not least were the black knights, whose job was to slay dragons.

I, Lina Granwell, was a member of the black knights' division. While I did hunt monsters with the blue knights, I was a special knight whose main duty was to slay the dragons that appeared in the various areas where monsters lived.

The only qualification to become a black knight was having the ability to use old magic. Since you were born either with or without this ability, being able to wield old magic was not something that could be achieved through hard work.

Regardless of status or gender, at the age of five, every citizen of the country bore a duty to undergo a magic viability test. Children found to have the gift for old magic entered into the national knights' academy at the age of twelve to become black knights. Every year in the Kingdom of Mert, about twenty to thirty children were judged to have aptitude, and it seemed that that number was increasing gradually.

As a child, I had also been evaluated to have the ability to use old magic. As I had been a peasant with no parents, I entered the knights' academy from the orphanage, underwent training, and from the age of fifteen had been slaying monsters and dragons with my fellows.

Battling monsters and slaying dragons was no easy feat. Fighting for my life became fiercely grueling. While there had been twenty-six of us in my graduating class, that number had currently dropped to twenty still on the front lines, due to loss of life, sustaining major injuries, and the like.

And now it seemed that I, too, was among those who had withdrawn from the front.

While I had been treated with kindness and care at the hospital, I had a feeling that, since I couldn't detect an adequate response in my body to the treatment, I probably wouldn't heal enough for me to continue working as a

black knight.

After the better part of twenty days since regaining consciousness, my sight had recovered and I could now use my voice. I could now feel both of my hands, and now that I could move my right one, I had become able to write. Twice a day, the white mage in charge had been administering energy-strengthening and detoxification magic. I was glad to know that I was healing, even if slowly.

Cody Macmillan, who had been a more senior apprentice back when I was in training, now sat in my room in a small chair that had been provided.

“At the fortress where I was stationed, the word was that the dragon had killed you. When I heard the news, I stopped breathing,” he said, keeping his words brief regarding my reason for being in the treatment center.

“Thank you for worrying about me,” I replied.

Cody opened up the notebook I had given him and expertly flipped through it, stopping his hand on the page with the newest entry. I had recorded information there regarding the dragon that had left me hospitalized. I had written those notes in part for physical therapy—training to use my hand again—so the letters there were sloppy compared to those on earlier pages. However, he didn’t seem to mind as he perused the words.

Cody didn’t really look like a knight—with how he pushed aside his light-brown hair, I thought he looked more like a scholar or clerk. Indeed, he peculiarly carried out research on dragons. If it weren’t for his ability with old magic, he would surely have become a scholar.



“Oh, right.” Though he had been so absorbed in the new entry in my hunting notebook as soon as he saw it, Cody seemed to finally remember the reason he had come to visit me, as well as the objects he had left atop the table. “These are get-well gifts from me and Malik.”

Inside the woven basket were what appeared to be plums—early for the season—and several varieties of berries. There was also a box, inside of which were jars of jam, one being mixed berry flavor while the other was orange. I didn’t know whose gift was whose, but I accepted them all gratefully.

“During the battle, Malik had to go fight a different dragon,” I said. “Was he able to defeat it as well?”

“If you’re talking about that rock dragon that burst in on the fight, it ran off after Malik broke its prized horn.”

Malik, a black knight whose main weapon was a lance, had been in the same graduating class as Cody. While I had expected him to be fine, I was still relieved to hear it confirmed.

Each rock dragon had a single horn protruding from the end of its snout like an imposing lance. The longer a rock dragon lived, the larger its horn grew. To a male rock dragon, its horn was proof of its existence, a symbol of its strength, and a component in its courtship with a female. If its horn had been broken, its retreat was understandable.

I plucked one ripe, red berry from the basket. Its sweet and sour flavor spread throughout my mouth. “Speaking of which, how did the process of dismantling the dragon go?” I—being the one who had slain the dragon—should have been the one to dispose of its body, but I had been unconscious.

No matter the species of dragon slain, the corpse had to be handled promptly. Aside from certain scales called reverse scales, all parts of a dragon’s body—such as its talons, horns, spikes, fangs, and bones—soon started to turn to poison upon death. In particular, flesh, blood, and internal organs transformed into a terrifyingly strong toxin that could quickly pollute the ground, water, and air, so a quick disposal was essential.

If all you needed to do was *slay* a dragon, even modern magic would work.

However, the responsibility fell to those who could use old magic. That was because disposing of a dragon turning into poison after its death required purging via old magic, the amount of damage that could be dealt differed between modern and old magic, and the pace at which the body turned toxic varied completely depending on which type of magic was used to kill the dragon.

“No need to worry. Malik cleaned up with the group from the fortress, and I helped out too.” Cody leafed through my hunting journal. “Forget about that, though. You sure have hunted a lot.”

Ever since my mentor had given me the notebook back when I started training under him and fighting monsters, I had continued compiling entries. “Record what kind of opponents you fight, how you cope with them, as well as the results. You can put that information to good use the next time,” he had told me.

“Is that so?” I responded. “Now that you mention it, I do think I fought more frequently over the past year.”

“I see.” Cody paused. “Hey, Lina...”

“What is it?”

“How are you feeling?”

His words contained another question: *Do you think you can return to knighthood?*

“The head mage of the treatment center told me that I need time to heal. Based on how my body is feeling, I think it would be difficult for me to return to duty. I may heal fully after however many years, but...” I trailed off.

No matter how long it took, I—as a black knight—was not considered important enough by the country nor by the Knights Corps for them to *want* me back. If anything, I was in a position where I could be cut loose with no issue.

Cody paused again. “I see.” He closed the hunting journal and gave me a serious stare. I could see myself reflected in his navy blue eyes. “If that’s the case, then—”

The sound of knocking reverberated, interrupting his words, and a person stood in the doorway that had been left ajar. The newcomer was a secretary who still had a baby face and was wearing a brand-new uniform. When he saw that I—the one needing treatment—wasn't the only person in the room, and that this other person was an active-duty black knight, he saluted with a nervous expression.

"Excuse me! I've come with documents for Lady Lina Granwell, black knight."

"Enter," Cody said after a pause.

"Yes, sir." The rookie secretary entered the clinic room and gave me the large envelope that he had been holding. "Please fill out the necessary items in these forms and submit them to the Knights Corps executive office. The deadline is until the end of the seventh month."

"Understood," I replied.

The rookie secretary gave a salute so stellar he nearly let out a *pop* sort of sound, then left the room.

Cody let out a sigh so big that it almost seemed to make the large envelope sway. I knew without checking the contents of the envelope that the Knights Corps had already decided my future.

"Lina, think carefully before acting," Cody said. "Don't make an irresponsible decision because you're upset."

"I understand."

At my reply, Cody stood. "Rest and heal up. I'm glad you're alive."

With that, he left the room.

My right leg still hadn't recovered much. The head mage told me that since a lot of the dragon's venom had entered through the lacerations on my right leg, its detoxification wasn't progressing. In the worst-case-scenario, there was a possibility that my leg would never move again.

"Well, there's not much I can do about that," I said to myself as I opened up the envelope delivered by the Knights Corps.

Withdrawal Request Form. Wounded Knight's Pension Request Form. Official Notice of Dismissal from Knights Corps Dorm. Together, these documents were colloquially known as the “three points and you’re retired” combo, but it would also be no mistake to call them the “three points and you’re fired” combo.

The hospital must have been reporting my condition to the Black Knights Regiment executive office. The fees for hospitalization and treatment would be billed to them after all. After taking the contents of the reports into account, the upper brass must have judged me to be unusable.

Because only those with old magic made up the Black Knights Regiment, anyone could get in regardless of social status or gender. Typically, starting at age twelve students spent two years receiving education and training at the knights academy, and then from age fourteen until adulthood at eighteen, they spent four years accumulating hands-on training from a black knight mentor. Upon becoming an adult at eighteen, you could go out as a fully-fledged black knight and hunt monsters and dragons. You could fight on the front lines until about the age of forty, whereupon you would pull back and help cultivate the next generation.

This flow was the ideal way of things, but only a handful of black knights actually lasted that long. This was only natural since we certified black knights were willing to give our lives to take those of monsters and dragons.

Many people who withdrew from the front lines took on apprentices to raise, gave lectures at the knights academy, and taught the fundamentals of military arts and magic. I had even heard that there were people who opened private schools. However, since there were no papers in the envelope about transferring my assignment to be an instructor at the knights academy, nor becoming a mentor, this had to mean that I would be completely discharged at the end of the seventh month.

The country and Knights Corps had both judged that, as a knight from the peasant class, I would be of no use as a knight academy instructor nor as someone’s mentor.

I was twenty-four now, and had been working hard for the past twelve years, ever since I had entered the knights academy. Thinking about how I would have

retired from the front lines at forty, twenty-four could be seen as early. However, there were people who lived as knights for far shorter times. It seemed that to some extent the aftereffects of my wounds would remain, but since I had both my life and my limbs at the end of my career, it wasn't all bad.

From a young age, it was the duty of those with an aptitude for old magic to become black knights, fight dragons, and protect the lives of the country's citizens. That was the rule we were taught, so we carried it out.

I understood that knights who could not fight did not belong in the Knights Corps.

I had a little more than two months until my departure.

I would endeavor to heal my wounds and practice walking until I could return to a normal life. After leaving the hospital, I would clean out my room at the dorm, then live out a peaceful life in some rural town.

If I hadn't become a knight, I never would have married my husband.

When I thought about that, I felt a deep pang in my chest. The possibility of being told so easily that it didn't matter if I was a knight, that just being a wife was what he wanted of me, made me shake my head. Falling in love didn't matter when it came to contractual marriages between black knights and white mages.

People said that often, but in reality, there were many couples who were close. Having a partner with a good magic affinity generally meant having good chemistry in all other respects.

I knew that my relationship with my husband wasn't *bad*. However, outside of our good magic affinity, the deep distance between us in our marriage was in large part because of the obligatory, contractual origins of the relationship.

So, regardless of my feelings, I assumed that, with the end of my usefulness as a knight, so also our marriage would be dissolved.

After a little over another month and a half of hospitalization, my treatment and physical therapy to regain the use of my limbs were both proceeding rather

favorably. My long stay in the care of the treatment center would end in roughly three weeks, and along with that would come my separation from the Corps.

I still had to fill out other necessary paperwork, so I spread the documents across the bedside table and held up a pen. I had only filled out the date and my name in the boxes on the dorm dismissal form and the knight's pension request form. On the Corps withdrawal request form, other than my name and date, I had to write a reason for leaving. I wondered if putting down "due to wounds" would work.

As I was thinking, the sound of a soft knock echoed through the room.

"Come in," I said, putting down my pen.

In contrast to the knock, the white door was opened so vigorously that the hinges squealed.

"You alive, Lina?"

With a voice seemingly loud enough to break the glass in the windows, a figure over two meters tall with an imposing physique—his frame befitting his thunderous voice—came into the room. Since I had grown used to living in the quiet treatment center and hadn't heard such a loud voice in a long time, it surprised me. My heart raced.

The one who entered the room was a man who had reached his old age. White and gray thoroughly peppered his short-cropped black hair, and deep wrinkles engraved his face and hands. Surely he had passed seventy by now, but he was still immensely energetic.

It took me a moment to speak. "Master, you've gotten old."

"Is that what you say to your mentor when you haven't seen him in ages?!" he barked.

"On the contrary, surely 'You alive, Lina?' isn't how you address a wounded apprentice you haven't seen in a while. Also, as we are in a treatment center, so please keep your voice down," I replied.

The man was my mentor, Alexander Varnita. After the two years I had spent

in the knights academy from age twelve learning fundamentals and undergoing training, he had been the one to spend time with me and look after me during the four years between fourteen and eighteen.

When he roughly patted my head, another person spoke. "Stop that, Alec. Lina is injured, so you have to be quiet and gentle with her."

Though I hadn't noticed her because of my mentor's bulk, I saw his wife, Leila, come into the room. Her hair was the color of milk tea, and I was happy to see that her kind violet eyes and gentle smile had not changed.

"Lina, we heard about your condition from Cody," she continued. "But we're sorry that we took so long to come visit you."

"Ms. Leila!"

While naturally I was indebted to my mentor, the same was true for Ms. Leila. She taught me the basics of increasing the power of barriers and resistance magic, as well as treated me to many delicious meals. Since I had lost my parents at a young age from an epidemic and spent my early childhood at an orphanage, I thought of my mentor and his wife as something like parents.

"It's okay. I apologize for worrying you. My wounds have mostly healed, and my physical therapy is going well! The cane I'm using now is small, and look, I can write again!" I proudly showed off my name, which I had written just a short while ago, to them.

Really, there was no deep meaning to it. I had only wanted to demonstrate that my once-paralyzed dominant hand had regained its movement, and that my letters, which had previously looked only like earthworms, could be read normally now. I had only wanted them to praise me and say that I had done a good job.

"Lina?" Ms. Leila asked. "What are those papers?"

"U-Um... They're the forms for moving out of the dorm, obtaining a pension, and leaving the Corps...?"

Ms. Leila sat in the bedside chair and took my bandaged right hand in both of hers. While she wore a kindly yet admonishing smile, that smile did not reach her eyes.

“Um, the Black Knights Regiment executive office sent me these to fill out and submit,” I explained. “I think that they judged that with my injuries, I won’t be able to return to duty.”

“Lina, tell us about how you got those wounds,” my mentor demanded in a low, intimidating growl. “And where’s the equipment you had on when you got ‘em?”

Alexander was a large, muscular man, and you could see scars in places his clothes didn’t cover, like his face, hands, and neck. He was like a walking, talking dreadnought that wore clothes, with a glare that could kill. I wanted to praise myself for not fainting from his loud voice.

However, there wasn’t a word in my dictionary for opposing my father-figure of a mentor, so I answered his questions. “I was ordered to hunt a large number of boar-type monsters that had appeared in the Abyssal Gorge. I was stationed at the eighth fort in Aston territory.”

“There’re a lotta boar and bear-type monsters in the Abyssal Gorge. It’s ‘specially dangerous when boar-types swarm. Were you the only black knight?” my mentor asked.

“No. I was with Malik Farrar. We were in the middle of hunting the boar-type monsters with the blue knights when the dragon appeared. We left the boar-types to the blue knights and switched to fighting the dragon.”

“I see. What kinda dragon was it?”

“A flying-type poison dragon—a sheephorn purple. Afterward came a rock-armor yellow. Ground-type.”

Alexander huffed. “So the monsters’ blood and dragon’s howling attracted that second one. Happens all the time during hunting—even more during spring hunts.”

When battling in places like mountains and valleys where dragons and other monsters appeared, it was common for additional creatures to interrupt the fight. The smell of blood and noises from the battle seemed to entice them, causing them to gather. I heard that monsters were especially sensitive to smells and sounds during breeding season, between the fourth and sixth

months. Even monsters that fundamentally didn't leave their territory would roam a vast area during this time to find a mate, and otherwise calm creatures could become vicious. Because it wasn't uncommon for other monsters to appear during a fight, black knights and blue knights had a duty to prepare for any situation.

"I took on the poison dragon while Sir Malik fought the rock dragon. He broke his dragon's horn, causing it to lose the will to fight and retreat. I killed the poison dragon."

"And the equipment you wore for that is...here, right?"

In the treatment center room was a bed, two small, simple chairs, one bedside table, and one closet which my mentor opened, then took out a basket within. Inside the basket were the clothes, boots, weapons, and the like that I had been wearing when I was brought here.

The shirt, pants, and boots were dyed a strange color by the dragon's poison, ruined to the point that I would have to throw them away. My gauntlets, greaves, spaulders, and chest plate were all split with cracks and deformed with dents. The drawstring of my favorite, main longbow was cut, and the body of the bow had a large gouge in it. My quiver seemed as if it would split into two due to the huge fissure in it, and the arrows that remained were all broken. Even my spare dual swords' blades had been ruthlessly chipped. The only thing left in usable condition was the dark blue poncho-style robe that my mentor and his wife had given me as a present when I came of age.

"Your gauntlets and greaves are corroded, your chest plate is torn, and your spaulders have lost a lotta strength. Your shirt and pants are torn and contaminated by poison, and your boots are the same. The mana in your magic stones are completely used up too." Alexander paused. "Why was your equipment given such terribly weak divine magic?"

"Well..." I trailed off.

Black knights' opponents were dragons, which reigned over the many other dangerous monsters. They were covered in hard scales, and could fly freely through the sky, bore through the ground, breathe out ferocious fire or ice, and attack with sharp talons and heavy tails. To combat those dragons, black knights

used old magic and armed themselves with powerful weapons and defensive items.

Moreover, even for just a slightly higher chance of winning, white mages bestowed divine magic on their black mage spouses. Divine magic was an umbrella term for resistance magic, recovery magic, and barrier magic, which a white mage imbued into armor and weapons.

Sir Malik, who had set out with me, also donned equipment that had been bestowed with divine magic by Ms. Leila. His armor, weapons, and accessories had sparkled brightly with powerful magic, with properties such as physical protection magic for bodily danger; several elemental defenses like fire and ice protection to ward off varying types of dragonbreath; healing and detoxification to repair wounds and cure status conditions; and absolute protection, which was for emergencies.

In regard to the divine magic bestowed upon my equipment—it *had* been weak.

The robe Ms. Leila had given me was blessed with genuinely strong physical protection. However, the magic stones that I had slotted into my gauntlets and belt were only for body enhancement and speed enhancement. Although this enhancement magic permeated the armor, it was still relatively weak, and it was doubtful how effective it could be against dragons.

“Lina,” my mentor said. “Answer honestly.”

I struggled to get words out. “Um, well...”

“Answer me.”

My mentor’s sharp gaze pierced me, and I lost my breath. I had to answer or else I felt like he really would kill me.

“I’m...” Without knowing what else to do, I could only apologize. “I’m sorry.”

The eyes of my mentor and Ms. Leila went wide, their expressions both disappointed and shocked. “What happened to your husband?!” Alexander shouted.

Because black knights were married to white mages with a good magic affinity

between them, fundamentally I was supposed to be using equipment that my husband had bestowed with powerful divine magic.

“Forget about apprentices or unmarried knights!” my mentor continued. “It’s impossible for you to go out hunting without receiving your spouse’s divine magic!”

I bit my lip and looked down, closing my eyes and remembering again the man who held the position of my husband. It had been four years since we married, and before that we had had a short engagement, so we met four years and nine months ago.

I couldn’t say that our first meeting had been a good one.

Chapter 2: His and Her First Meeting

Kingdom of Mert Calendar Year 781

The customary age of adulthood, as well as marriageable age, differed from country to country. In Mert, the kingdom where I was born and raised, people became adults at eighteen, and usually women were married by the age of twenty-two, and men by the age of thirty.

In particular, black knights who had the ability to use old magic were encouraged to marry quickly and produce many children. The reason was simply that children born to black knights were comparatively more likely to have the ability to use old magic than other kids. The aim was to produce even just one more person who could defeat the dragons that would otherwise cause people harm, and to dispose of those dragons' corpses. This was all to protect both the tranquility of the country and the lives of its people.

"Why not?!" The voice of the commander of the black knights, Sir Rolence Baxter, echoed in his office. I knew he truly didn't understand *why not*, but on my end, I understood all too clearly.

"Do you not think," Vice Commander Derrick Gill replied, "that it's because Lina is a woman, a commoner, and an orphan?"

"I agree." I nodded along to his words.

At that, Commander Baxter vigorously stood up and slammed his fist on his desk. The impact momentarily caused the glass pen and ink bottle on the desk to jump midair.

"I don't get it!" he declared. "Lina is a woman who has satisfactory military records as a black knight, can use high-level old magic, and is still young and single! Just twenty! She can't be that bad looking!"

"You are correct in saying that, sir," replied Derrick. "Lina surely has good qualifications, though she would have more...if she had just a bit more noble blood in her."

At seventeen, black knights without fiancés began having matchmaking dates with potential white mage spouses. Once matchmaking began, a fiancé was quickly decided upon, and couples married upon becoming adults. Even taking into account ones who married late, about eighty percent of black knights tied the knot by twenty-two. Among them, many already had fiancés from the young age of six or seven. However, I was currently in the middle of an extended series of failures, which I had long since stopped counting.

“To tell you the truth,” Derrick continued, “there are no longer any white mages left who both have good affinity with Lina and are close to her in age. If there were a white mage from the commoner class with good magic affinity for her, that would be wonderful, but unfortunately there are none. Frankly, this is a problem.”

Not just any white mage could enter marital relations with a black knight; they needed magical affinity. The survival rate of black knights was higher when they received divine blessings from white mages with good affinity—it was just more effective that way. Plus, children produced between those with good magic affinity had a higher chance of inheriting the ability to use old magic.

It was common to gather several white mages close in age and with good magical affinity and sit them at the same table for a tea party to further ascertain chemistry. In the end, the people in question, of their own will—and that of their families—formed a marriage.

I had been having tea with male white mages of good magical affinity of my age, meaning those within two years older or younger. During these tea parties there had been no strange atmosphere, and I thought the time had passed calmly. I remembered many people with whom I had had pretty engaging conversations. However, upon inquiry, every one of them had refused to become my spouse. This was because I was not suitable for these aristocrats—I would not bring their houses any fame or distinction. I was a peasant and an orphan, after all.

“What the hell?!” Commander Baxter shouted. “How many black knights have come out of the commoner class by now? They had to have gotten spouses!”

Vice Commander Gill turned his gaze to the documents in his hands. “I looked

into that. In the past, three people—all men—were black knights from the commoner class.”

“Men, huh?”

“The first can be said to have been a commoner. However, he was the child of the second son of an earl, so he had sufficient noble lineage. He was adopted into his uncle’s house and made a son of the earl. The second was the third son of a merchant family, but his mother was the daughter of a baron and thus had noble blood. He was adopted into a relative’s house as a viscount’s son. The third was the firstborn son of a livestock breeder’s family, and it seems he was a genuine commoner.”

“What happened to him?” Baxter asked. “He must have had a difficult time marrying!”

“No. From a young age he was an exceptional swordsman, and an earl whose house had produced generations of knights was charmed by his ability and welcomed him as his adopted child. He was able to rise up quite admirably as the earl’s son.”

“Adopted, adopted, adopted! All these men made it into the aristocracy by being adopted!”

Baxter once again slammed his fist on his desk. This time, the impact caused the glass pen to fall, and a battle-ax, which had been leaning against the desk, crashed to the floor.

“Well,” explained Gill, “for a noble house, it would be a big honor to produce a black knight. It must be common for noble houses to want to welcome one in through adoption.”

Their gazes caught mine, so I replied, “I remain a commoner. There has never once been talk of adoption.” I had been born the daughter of a fruit farmers, and all at once my immediate and extended family had died in an epidemic. There was no way I could be adopted into nobility.

“I assumed so, since you’re a woman. If you were a man you could at least be adopted into a baron’s house, or maybe if you had just a bit of noble blood in you...” Vice Commander Gill trailed off.

“I’ve got the gist,” said Commander Baxter. “You’re saying that those stingy white mages don’t want to be Lina’s spouse because she’s a commoner.”

“It’s not necessarily that they don’t want to,” Gill argued. “Setting aside their feelings, they also have to answer to their families’ expectations. If a nobleman makes a commoner his bride, he brings her into his house, after all.”

I did have aspirations for marriage. Close married couples were all around me and towns were full of harmonious couples and lovers, all of whom seemed happy. Though I was a commoner and not an outstanding beauty, I hoped that there was perhaps one person out there in the world who would tell me that they were okay with that.

Two female black knights from my graduating class had both married their fiancés when they became adults, and already had children. About eighty percent of the men from my class were married too. The remaining twenty percent may not have been married, but they assuredly had fiancées. The difference between them and me was our status—they were all aristocrats while I was a peasant.

There was more of a wall between aristocrats and peasants than I had thought.

“Um, well, then perhaps I don’t need to get married?” I asked. If no one wanted to marry me, there was no need to force them. As I had no house to preserve, there was also no need for me to consider an heir.

Commander Baxter returned the fallen battle-ax and pen to their former positions. “Not the case. Whether you can have children is another question—it’s the rule for black knights to get married.”

“But—”

“No ‘buts.’” Baxter plunked himself down into his chair. “Those are the rules. To increase the number of people who can use old magic, black knights have to get married and have kids. That is the law of our kingdom. You must accept that.”

That may have been law, but I thought that if no one wanted to marry me, then there was nothing to be done about it. A marriage couldn’t be made up of

just one person, after all.

“I’ve got it!” Vice Commander Gill clapped his hands together, the noise breaking the strange air. “We’ll increase the target age!”

He handed several documents to me. On them were sketches, followed in writing by a simple personal background, family structure, and the like.

“Are these profiles?” I asked.

“These are all single white mages—no lovers or fiancées,” Gill explained. “Aside from having higher social status than you, they would all have good affinity with you, but are three or more years older than you are. Among nobles, marriages with an age gap of ten years or more are commonplace. Besides,” he added, “I thought an older man might be good for you, Lina.”

“Huh?”

“There’s no use arguing about it, Lina. You need to have a tea party.”

Vice Commander Gill’s eyes narrowed as the corners of his mouth lifted in a smile. That smile brought to mind the image of some reptile, leaving a chilly impression.

My acquaintance was doubled over, holding his sides with laughter so great he couldn't speak. Even though his breathing sometimes seemed painful, he showed no signs of stopping. While I considered how he might die from his lack of breath, I drank some of the cafeteria's complimentary tea. It was a large place, and we sat in our usual corner.

"I'm glad you seem to be enjoying yourself. Did you know that laughter is supposed to be good for your health? It lengthens your life, apparently." My voice was flat.

"N-No, I..." He laughed again. "Sorry, sorry. I just didn't think you'd come to me for a favor again."

"Well, I thought so."

The acquaintance I was asking a favor of was named Brendan Turner, a white mage. After a few deep breaths, he finally stopped laughing and held out a hand.

"My bad for laughing. No reason to say no—of course I'll help you out."

"Thanks. The usual will do."

I had with me a leather pouch of money—compensation for commissioning Brendan to bestow divine white magic upon my items. I placed the pouch in his palm.

Normally, you would ask your white mage fiancé to bestow divine magic upon items like armor or weapons. However, since I didn't have one, I had sought out white mages who would do it for money. Even for money, there weren't many people who would do this for me, since I was a black knight from the peasantry, but eventually I had found Brendan.

"I'm the sixth kid from a poor baron's house," he had told me when we met two years ago. "I left my house, so I'm just a poor white mage now. Even worse, I'm a reserve junior officer. But if you're fine with that—and fine with paying—I'll help you out."

Since then, we had maintained this customer and vendor relationship.

Brendan spread out a cloth made of leather on the table, and I set out my

gauntlets, greaves, longbow, and other equipment and accessories on top of it. With a practiced air, Brendan checked the armor and weapons for any remaining divine magic, as well as my magic stones for mana. Then he bestowed new divine magic upon my items, and added mana to my magic stones. It was a familiar scene.

“So, you struck out again? Even though this guy had your vice commander’s seal of approval?” Brendan asked.

“Yeah,” I replied, “but I figured it wasn’t going to work out the second I met him.”

Yesterday, I had tea with a white mage whom Vice Commander Gill had chosen for me. The man, from a viscount’s family, was six years my senior and an intermediate level white mage. However, he didn’t work as a white mage, and instead was a civil servant in the castle town’s public office.

As one might expect from two adults, our time spent having tea had gone by peacefully. However, from the beginning it had seemed like a line had been drawn in the sand between us which he hadn’t wanted to cross. I had felt that he had been ordered to meet me, but that nothing would come of it since I was a peasant.

That was why when I had heard that he had sent a reply this morning turning me down, I hadn’t thought much of it. It had been no surprise.

Brendan grunted. “That so?”

“Yep.”

Brendan was a low-level white mage and a reserve soldier, meaning that instead of being an official member of the army’s magic division, he was only called upon when necessary. Naturally the magic division only paid him for the times they summoned him, so he privately took on jobs involving magic. Apparently this was the norm for reserve white mage troops.

“You still have another matchmaking date though, right?”

“Seems that way.”

“You make it sound like this is all his fault.”

“Well, I’m only getting another rejection letter—I’m not the one doing the rejecting. So it *is* his fault.”

Brendan’s material enhancement magic kept trickling into my gauntlets, breastplate, and other armor. The items glowed gold, making a pretty sight.

“You know, I really, really appreciate the commission,” he said, “but you really should pick a spouse soon.”

“Brendan?”

He put body and endurance enhancement magic into the magic stones he held in his hand. They had been pitch-black, devoid of mana, but now glowed orange.

“Our magic affinity is by no means good. The power of my magic is clearly inadequate for protecting you against dragons and monsters. It’s better than nothing, but a strong fireball might burn you up like a wooden shield. If you had nothing at all, you’d be more likely to get injured—or worse. That’s why all black knights marry people with good magic affinity to get their support.”

“I do know that, you know,” I replied.

“I don’t think you do.”

One after the other, the mana-devoid magic stones in Brendan’s hand began to regain their glow—red, blue, and orange. When he arranged them back on top of the cloth, they shone like jewels.

“You should be more serious about picking a spouse,” he suggested. “If you meet a guy with that ‘no one will marry me’ attitude you have and make all sorts of assumptions about him, he’ll do the same to you.”

“Oh... Yeah.”

Brendan pulled two magic stones from the pocket of his magic division uniform and infused magic into them. They both glowed blue with healing magic.

“These are for good luck.”

“Huh?”

“Think more seriously on your next date. I get that your dates aren’t perfect to say the least, but you *have* to get married.” He held up the two, shining blue stones in the palm of his hand. I could feel a gentle mana radiating from them. “You’ve got to work hard to compromise with the next guy if you want things to go smoothly.”

I looked at Brendan again.

He had light yellow hair and green eyes. The magic division uniform hung over his thin, worn body. While until now our relationship had only been about business, unexpectedly, it seemed like my smart-mouthed acquaintance had become concerned about me.

“Got it,” I said.

“If you and I had a better magic affinity, I could at least be your potential husband, but unfortunately that’s not the case. I wish you good luck, but if that doesn’t work out, you can still come to me for magic.”

I paused. “As long as I pay, right?”

“Hey, I’m not gonna work for free. I’m not your husband or even your fiancé.”

For a moment, I wondered how it would be if the two of us had good magic affinity.

Even if he became my spouse, I knew there would be no romantic love—only platonic bonds could spring up between us, like that of family or friends. Still, I felt that we would work well together with a shared common purpose.

But in the end, that was just a dream, smashed by the reality that we weren’t magically compatible. Still, it had been nice to think about.

As I had told Brendan, the commander and vice commander thought that the conclusion of my first return to tea party dates was quite unexpected. After an unnecessarily combative outburst by Baxter (“Are all those stupid mages just making fun of us?!”), my next date was promptly arranged.

“My name is Joshua Granwell.”

A terrace had been set up for the tea party. My date was a high-level white

mage who had gorgeous red-brown hair and clear green eyes. I remembered seeing his sketch and personal background on the second page of profiles that Vice Commander Gill had given me. Noted on it had been the fact that this man had the highest level of magic affinity with me out of any suitor I had met before.

I paused. “My name is Lina.”

He was a candidate to be the next head of the marquis house he belonged to, and was currently working in the palace as aide to the prime minister. Of all the dates I had met at tea parties or through connections in the Corps, he was the highest ranking nobleman I had ever met, as well as the one closest to the top politically. When I had perused his profile back in my room, I had assumed our date would be hopeless—that he would reject me. And now, with him in front of me, I felt that even more strongly.

In my first attempt at finding a spouse since adopting a more positive outlook, I felt like my heart would break.

Arranged on the table was an elegant tea set, fragrant black tea, and baked sweets from a renowned confectioner. An exquisitely ornamented glass vase with white, blue, and green flowers sat on the table as well. Anyone would call this a beautiful setup for a tea party.

And at this beautiful tea party, ignorant to my breaking heart, Lord Granwell drank his tea with sophisticated grace.

Neither of us spoke.

With him the son of a marquis family and me an orphaned peasant, we had never met before now. I could think of no commonalities to speak of, so I stayed quiet as I drank my tea and nibbled at the sweets.

Yet still, neither of us spoke.

A gardener had neatly arranged the garden that we could see from the terrace—early spring flowers were already in full bloom. Normally, tea parties were joyous affairs. It was supposed to be amazing to chat with someone as the two of you fell in love, and even more fun just to speak normally. My meeting with Lord Granwell was not going well.

This man was a high-level white mage and a capable civil servant who had been appointed aide to the prime minister in his *mid-twenties*. Furthermore, he was the son of a marquis, and attractive from head to toe, what with his refined features that just screamed “nobleman,” his handsome auburn hair, and his deep, intelligent green eyes. As a bachelor with no lover or fiancée, he was prime real estate for the ladies of the world. He was in the position to have any wife he wanted.

The handsome Lord Granwell looked at me and let out a small breath.

My own looks were just below average, and with no regard for fashion trends, I had tied my short gray hair—which was cut a few centimeters below my shoulders—into a ponytail. No noblewoman would be caught dead with my hairstyle, but on Brendan’s advice, I had at least washed my hair and combed it with an oil made from flowers and tied my hair with a bow. My eyes were a lackluster grayish blue, and my skin, which had once been pale, was now sun damaged. Of course, since I was routinely dispatched for battle, my body was riddled with scars. I had tried to cover as much as possible with my clothes and gloves, but I suspected that some old wounds could be seen.

I didn’t wear any sort of beautiful dress, but instead my worn-out Corps uniform which I at least had washed. The white gloves I had only just received were the only pretty item I wore, and seemed out of place.

While I was a model knight, all I did was fight—I was plain and unsophisticated. With how often beautiful women must have surrounded him, Lord Granwell surely couldn’t believe that I was a candidate for him to marry.

“Perhaps you are not inclined to speak,” Lord Granwell said finally, “but I would like to ask you some questions.”

It took a moment for me to answer. “Okay.”

“I read your profile. You have achieved an incredible military record with an earnest attitude toward your duties and there have been no issues concerning your conduct.”

“Thank you,” was all I could say.

Even though he said this about my military records, I didn’t really understand.

I had only ever just been fulfilling the tasks that the Black Knights Regiment executive office gave me. I couldn't remember there ever being any sort of major problem, but I also couldn't remember ever being praised.

"You always had top marks at the knights' academy, and are the favorite apprentice of the infamously tough and experienced Sir Alexander. Your service as a black knight is exemplary, and you are also a high-level user of old magic." He paused. "So why have you not chosen a spouse until now?"

I paused. "Excuse me?"

"From what I have heard," Lord Granwell continued, "you have found fault with and turned down every partner recommended to you. Why have you done so?"

I paused even longer. "Excuse me?"

I didn't understand the question.

No, wait. I didn't understand *at all*.

He regarded me with a furrowed brow and tipped his head. "Even if that was not your intention, you have found fault with and refused all your suitors, have you not?"

Silence prevailed for a time. "*Excuse me?*"

"Are you not aiming to marry a high-level white mage among the high nobility of the royal capital? Is the gravity of a black knight's marriage—"

"I'm sorry, but please hold on a moment." I knew it was rude, but I interrupted him. "Lord Granwell, I'm afraid I don't understand what you speak of."

"We white mages are people too, with personalities and appearances that you may either like or dislike. Thus, I don't expect you to find a spouse quickly," he explained. "That being said, I heard that during the past three years that you have been having tea with white mages, you have refused every single one based on grounds such as their social standings and held territories."

I was the one refusing marriage? It was true that I had had tea party dates with many white mages over these last three years, but I was the one *being*

refused.

“Excuse me, but it is I who is being rejected.”

At that, Lord Granwell’s eyes went wide with astonishment. “What?”

“If you need proof that white mages have been refusing me, I’m sure that the commander and vice commander of the Black Knights Regiment would testify that I have been receiving rejection letters. I also have many of those letters in my possession—would you like to confirm it yourself?” I offered.

“You’re serious?”

“I have never rejected even a single prospective husband. I swear on my badge as a black knight.”

When I put my hand to my chest, over the gleaming knight’s badge that proved my knighthood under the Black Knights Regiment, Lord Granwell took a deep breath and seemed genuinely perplexed. While I assumed that was an action unbecoming the manner of an aristocrat, I was impressed that this extravagant nobleman could make any gesture look cool.

It took him a moment to speak. “I see. So that’s the case, is it?”

“May I ask what you mean by that, Lord Granwell?”

He drained the last of his now lukewarm tea and turned to me. He looked as if he had bitten into a somewhat bitter food.

“A short while ago, I heard that you yourself were refusing marriage proposals, the reasons being that, primarily, you did not like your dates’ social ranks; that they had to be high-level white mages; that they needed to own substantial territory; and that they had to be handsome and not too short.”

There was another long silence. “Huh?!”

I had never been interested in things like social rank or owning territory. However, I could remember that when I had filled out the spousal preferences survey, I said that I would prefer a commoner or someone of low standing in the nobility. A commoner would have been my ideal choice, with someone from a baron’s family being a runner-up, with the third—or even better, fourth—son of a viscount being the last. I felt like I had also written down that it was better

that, if my partner originated from a noble family, he would leave his house after becoming an adult to live independently as a commoner.

Could that be part of this problem?

“So according to your account,” Lord Granwell continued, “you have been continually refused by every single prospective white mage you have met. Is that correct?”

“Yes. Within a day or two I would receive a letter containing a rejection for marriage alongside well wishes for my military success.” Just in case, I had refrained from tossing away the letters, and over the past three years had accumulated quite the hoard.

“Among both the nobility and white mages, it would be an honor to be chosen as a black knight’s spouse. These refusals are normally inconceivable.” After a moment, he added, “I don’t know why they would reject you.”

I didn’t expect him to be so uncomfortable.

“It’s because I’m a commoner,” I explained. “Rather than bringing distinction to their houses, having a plain, plebeian orphan as a bride would bring disgrace.”

Lord Granwell’s expression showed that he seemed to find something about that unpleasant, and he shook his head.

“Well, let’s assume that since rejecting the honor of marrying a black knight isn’t something one would want to tell the public, the story became one where you are the rejector. If that were the case, and that lie spread throughout many houses... Well, it would evidently seem that that is the ‘truth’ which is circulating among white mages.”

I could see how, with that being the case, the more I had tea with prospective partners, the more they seemed to change from having a neutral attitude to a slightly hostile one.

Among the white mages’ circles, my reputation had become that of a good-for-nothing, greedy knight who kept refusing potential marriage partners based on things like social status and land. This made both myself and my dates expect to be rejected from the start—so they took advantage of the story going

around of my selfish refusals even if they were the ones to reject me.

If that story really was what white mages were saying about me, then there was no way I would ever be able to arrange a marriage no matter how many tea parties I attended.

“Well then, I have another question for you,” Lord Granwell continued.

“Y-Yes?”

“Is it your intent to marry a white mage?”

It took me a moment to speak. “Yes, as I have been told by my commander that black knights must marry.”

“Do you have specific hopes regarding marriage?”

How could he ask that? Of course I did. I had written on the spousal preferences survey that I wanted to marry a commoner or the third or fourth son of a lower noble house.

However, I almost certainly knew that that wasn’t what he meant.

“Well, um, in that regard...”

“Please speak. I wish to take your answer into consideration.”

Into consideration? Did he mean even after this conversation? Perhaps it was my imagination.

“I am a commoner and know nothing of aristocratic life. I grew up a commoner and was educated as a knight, and have experienced only fighting. I am not versed in nobles’ customs, nor manners. As my top priority is my military duty, I want to remain a black knight who is not a noble. That is my hope.”

The requirements to become a knight were many; for example, white knights in the royal guard had to be from the nobility, while black knights had to be able to use old magic.

The greatest priorities for black knights were to slay dragons and other monsters, and to protect the lives, livelihoods, and homes of the citizens. By putting their lives on the line to fight dragons, black knights were considered to

carry out their duty to the country. Fundamentally, they weren't expected to have any obligations to the nobility.

However, there were more than a few people who wanted to ignore these fundamental conventions and make black knights have similar customs and etiquette as aristocratic white knights.

I supposed that was fine for those who had been nobles since birth or were adopted into the aristocracy at a young age, but I didn't want that for myself, since I was born and raised a commoner. Besides, with me being a peasant, I thought that the only thing waiting for me after diving headfirst into the noble society I so disliked would be cutthroat harassment.

According to the stories I had heard from nobles and servants around me in the Corps, the aristocrats' world was a terrifying place. The words of those in high station were so absolute that they could say black was white and everyone would agree. Rumors arose from nothing, and groundless gossip ruled the roost. That was the world of nobles.

I couldn't put myself in that terrifying place. I was a commoner who knew only how to fight battles—they would harass me to death in the blink of an eye.

We once again fell into silence.

Lord Granwell put a hand to his chin, seeming to roll thoughts around in his head. I received another cup of refreshing, sweet-smelling lemon tea from the attendant and ate a delicious baked sweet.

Just as the confections had nearly disappeared from the plates, a knock sounded at the entrance to the terrace. It seemed like the tea party was coming to a close.

Being the prime minister's aide, I assumed he would be busy and unable to stay longer, and sure enough, he announced, "While I would have liked to stay longer and have a more relaxed chat, unfortunately I have a previous engagement that I must attend."

"Of course," I replied, standing from my chair and giving a bow, following up with the same recycled phrase I had been using at the end of every tea party. "Thank you very much for your time today."

I would receive a rejection letter and that would be the end. I would never see this man again.

“Regarding your hopes,” he continued, “I would like to address them appropriately, as much as possible.”

He held out his right hand. A handshake?

Shaking hands at the end of a tea party, and saying he would like to “address” my hopes? I didn’t really understand this development, but took Lord Granwell’s hand nonetheless. The moment our hands touched, I could feel his mana.

It was slightly cold, and the circulation of mana in his body was a bit quick. While the majority of white mages specialized in magic types like healing and defense, a rare few had a specialty in attack magic. However, his mana felt serene. I committed to memory the euphoric feeling of being wrapped up tightly.

Emotions boiled up within me. It felt good—I wanted this touch to last forever, to make him mine and not let anyone else touch him. I had never known compatible magic affinity could feel like this.

A civil official came to pick up Lord Granwell, and together they left the terrace. I watched him leave, then thanked the attendant for preparing the tea and confections and headed for home.

However, I was astonished. I had noticed that white mages seemed to not think much of me, but now the reason was clear. I now understood why people other than Brendan wouldn’t bestow divine magic for me even when offered payment, as well as why my dates seemed to dislike even just looking at me despite it being our first meeting—it wasn’t just because of my social standing or birth.

I never would have dreamed that there would be a rumor about me rejecting prospective spouses. Noble society was truly terrifying—rumors really did arise from nothing.

I walked briskly to the commander’s office to report to him and the vice commander that my tea party had ended peacefully, and share why white

mates disliked me.

“At this point, there must be no one left who would marry me. Are you sure I can’t remain unmarried?” I asked.

“Listen, Lina,” Vice Commander Gill scolded me. “We black knights all begin married life through a contract. The commander and myself both had our wives chosen for us through suitability of age and magic affinity. We married them.”

“Um, I see.”

His words surprised me. I was cognizant anew that the black knights around me had all been in the same position as me at one time. I was the type of person who didn’t think too deeply about everything, and I had completely missed this.

“However,” Gill continued, “many marriages are happy ones. Why do you think that is?”

When I didn’t answer, he went on. “Even if there is a strong contractual element in the beginning of a marriage, getting to know each other by talking, and working through issues to reach compromises, is what makes your feelings and mana go back and forth. Do you understand? It is true that you have been rejected by many white mages and there is a cruel rumor circulating out there about you. Nevertheless, you cannot impart your negative feelings about the situation nor about nobles to your potential partners.”

“I understand,” I finally responded.

“Otherwise, those feelings will surely come back to haunt you.”

Though Brendan had warned me of the same thing, hearing such an experienced person like the vice commander say it hurt me all the more.

“Lina,” he continued, “your dates may be noblemen, but they are *just* men as well. Endeavor to know the man in front of you, and endeavor to let him know you. If that remains impossible, then you weren’t meant to be with that particular man.”

He patted my shoulder.

“When you have a partner with compatible magic affinity, fundamentally you

should get along with them. ‘Love at first touch’—falling for someone after feeling their mana—isn’t rare. The commander and I both have happy marriages, and neither of us remotely think that they’re just ‘contractual’ anymore.”

It took me a moment to speak. “You’re saying that you love your wife.”

“Yes indeed, I do love her. I love her so much that I cling to her. I don’t want to see her with other men, even envying my sons for stealing my precious time with her. I hate it and I want them to hurry and grow up so they can leave the house.”

I moved back slightly at his serious declaration of love—he hadn’t even hesitated to speak about it. I thought his love for his wife must be quite deep if he was even jealous of his sons.

“Men are simple things,” he continued. “They fall in love with their partners due to the slightest thing. So first, you need to be upfront and understand your true self. Get some exercise and lighten your mood. You’ll have a positive outlook with the next white mage you meet.”

As he said this, he held out an extermination missive, which had probably just come from the Black Knights Regiment executive office.

“Thank you, sir,” I said before inspecting the paper.

According to the missive, in two week’s time after my mission was finished, I was to return to the royal capital and immediately report to the commander’s office.

“Lina, good news!” Commander Baxter said, passing me a white envelope. “You’ll definitely win this guy’s heart, for sure.”

The envelope he handed to me was made of high-quality paper, embossed with the beautiful, red wax seal of a marquis family’s crest—a pattern of ivy with a unicorn.

“You know, among the rejection letters I’ve collected, this one is of incredibly high quality,” I remarked. “Isn’t this just the usual rejection letter with a wish for my success in finding a spouse?”

“You idiot!” Baxter barked.

“That isn’t a rejection letter,” Gill added.

“Excuse me?” Their words surprised me so much that I dropped the letter. It fluttered about like it was dancing before landing beside my scuffed boots.

“You’d better give your best effort with Lord Granwell,” Commander Baxter said. “I mean it! That’s an order!”

“Huh?!”

I looked at the commander and vice commander one after the other. They both nodded.

“I told you to be more positive with your dates, Lina, didn’t I?” Gill said. “I’m so glad you remembered. You did it!”

I picked up the letter and checked its contents.

I would like to begin courting relations with the intention of marriage.

If there are no problems from either party during a courting period of three months, I would like to propose an engagement lasting six months.

Although we are both busy, I hope that we might ensure time to speak together once over tea or perhaps dinner.

I await your reply regarding the date and time.

This was the first time I had ever received a letter from a marriage candidate that wasn’t a rejection. The contents read quite matter-of-factly, as if it were an extermination missive from the executive office.

Chapter 3: His and Her Relationship

Kingdom of Mert Calendar Year 781

With the coming of spring, the dragons' and monsters' breeding season would begin, and black knights and blue knights were constantly preparing for battle during those three months. Therefore, I was told to make the time for a dinner date.

Lord Granwell took me to the outskirts of the royal capital castle town, to a small restaurant visited by nobles and commoners alike. I had thought he was doing this to appeal to me, but it seemed he was acquaintances with the owner—meaning that he had come here, to a place the masses went too, many times.

I had thought that we would go to a well-known restaurant that served only aristocrats, so I felt a bit let down—but I had been betrayed in a good way. The store felt cozy, relaxed, and family-friendly, too.

It had seemed that an appointment had been made for us, and we were led to a private room in the back and brought food and alcohol.

Any way you sliced it, popular commoner foods had been laid out on platters: cocor poultry and vegetable stew; salad with yam, ham, and cheese; yam, bacon, and jan potato omelets; and sautéed giz beef.

“I was born in the marquis house.”

Lord Granwell distributed the food from the platters with what seemed to be practiced ease, then ate with a refined air—and quite enthusiastically. I had expected the son of a high-ranking noble family to like more high-class, elegant food, but not this sort of fare.

“The previous head of the family was my father,” he continued. “However, when I turned fifteen, he suddenly collapsed at work and soon after passed away. At the time I was a student at the royal academy, and also a minor, so I handed the position of family head to my uncle.”

“I see.”

“Normally, after graduating from the academy and spending a few years gaining experience as a civil official, I should have learned how to manage our territory from my uncle and taken over. However, I happened to like my job, so I still work in the royal palace.”

“And is your house okay with that?” I asked.

Didn’t the son or daughter of the head of a house usually take over? I understood that Lord Granwell’s uncle was marquis in the interim because he had been a minor, but he should have taken over upon an event like becoming an adult or getting married.

“As my uncle and father were brothers born from the same parents, there was no issue regarding bloodlines, nor was there issue about my uncle’s character or ability.” Lord Granwell paused. “I’m considering asking my uncle to continue his duties as marquis. He has a son—my cousin—who is soon to marry.”

When he didn’t continue, I asked, “Which means?”

“Which means that I’m not asking for the woman I marry to be an aristocrat. With no territory or the like, there’s no need for me to manage anything or engage in social matters of that kind. There is no issue with me leaving my house and having my own family registration changed to that of a commoner. My uncle has secured the marquis lineage.”

“Which means?” I eventually had to ask again.

“I’m saying that I can meet your wishes for marriage. And since I understand how compatible our mana is, there should be no problems for our marriage.”

Certainly there wouldn’t be. If anything, our marriage would be endorsed. Were they here, the commander and the vice commander would be glaring daggers at me, as if to scream at me to get married.

Lord Granwell paused. “I hope that you will favorably consider marrying me. I will not force you if you find me unbecoming; however, I think you might find the terms agreeable. How do you feel?”

“Agreeable” was too weak a word for this—wouldn’t it be better to say “perfect”?

Lord Granwell was a high-level white mage, we had great magic affinity for each other, and I wouldn't have to deal with a noble's social life or household concerns. Furthermore, he seemed fine with becoming a commoner. In other words, even if I married this man who came from such a high-class family as a marquis, there would be no problems. Really, this marriage would work out far too advantageously for me.

With such a high-level white mage as my husband, he could bestow highly effective divine magic upon my equipment—as much as I wanted.

However, this marriage would bring nothing beneficial to Lord Granwell. While he wasn't asking me to do anything aristocratic and seemed fine with becoming a commoner, I had no idea how those in the marquis's house would take it.

You had to be cautious when speaking with nobles—oftentimes, one's expectations and their house's expectations ran counter to each other.

Finally, I asked, “Lord Granwell, what benefit would you get in marrying me?”

“Don't you think that it's because I've fallen for you?” he asked.

“No, I don't,” I answered immediately.

A bitter smile rose to his lips. “You have heard that there are people in the world who fell in love at first sight, have you not?”

I paused. “I'm not pretty enough for someone to fall in love with me at first sight. Moreover, those who are in love have stronger emotion in their eyes. Lord Granwell, you do not have those eyes.”

My friend who was in love with her fiancé was always restless before her dates. She was so hectic and unstable that her face would redden or go pale, and she would go back and forth between whether her clothes, accessories, or makeup was okay or not.

“So,” I continued, “I think you must have something to gain.”

“I have no other partner or fiancée,” he said after a moment, “and I am not particularly looking for one. However—and this is not hyperbole—a mountain of matchmaking profiles have been sent to both my uncle and myself.”

“Are you perhaps trying to avoid marriage talks?” I lifted a small bite of an omelet to my mouth, and I quite liked the sweetness of the egg mixed with the saltiness of the bacon. The stew and salad were both delicious as well.

“The mountain of profiles is because those around me believe that I am going to be the next marquis. There are many who think that my uncle is just acting as the interim head and that I should be the true heir by blood.”

“I see.”

“However, with this opportunity for marriage, I intend to inform my uncle clearly that I do not wish to succeed as the head of house, and that I plan to leave the marquis house—and the nobility with it. Once that is made known, I suspect the matchmaking profiles will stop coming.”

Lord Granwell smiled bitterly once again and took a drink of sparkling fruit wine.

“In addition, there is still an old custom that civil officials working in the palace only become fully-fledged once they are married. Regardless of your social rank, civil officials are constantly told to get married until they finally become so. Just like you, people are demanding that I marry.” He paused. “Though, regardless of the reason, if I am to marry, I do want to make it work.”

I could understand how he felt. Regardless of liking or disliking a person, marriages were decided by station and centered on contracts. However, I would like to get along well with my partner if at all possible.

“I thought it might be possible with you as my spouse,” Lord Granwell continued. “Besides, when I felt your mana when we had tea, it felt nice—calm. I feel very peaceful when we are together.” He paused. “May I touch your hand?”

I put my fork down on my plate, held out my hand, and touched his.

His hand was large and warm, while his mana was slightly cold.

“Ah, it’s as pleasant as I remember,” he said. “Your mana feels as warm as the sun’s rays, and its circulation is calm. While I’m sure it must speed up as fast as the wind while in battle, right now it is peaceful. I find it quite nice.”

The flow of his mana enveloped me up and reached the depths of my chest. The cold calmed my heart, and I understood what he had meant when he said that my mana was pleasant and peaceful.

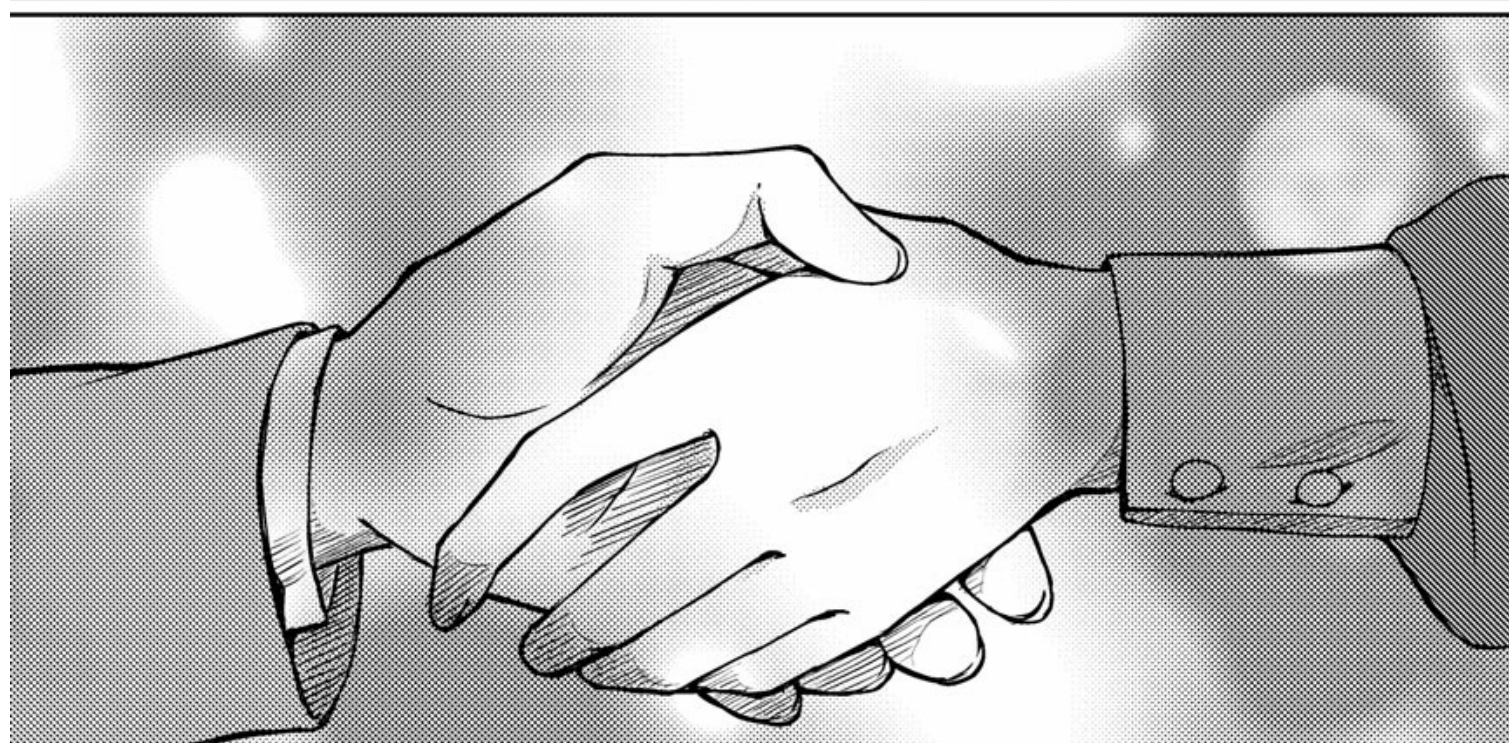
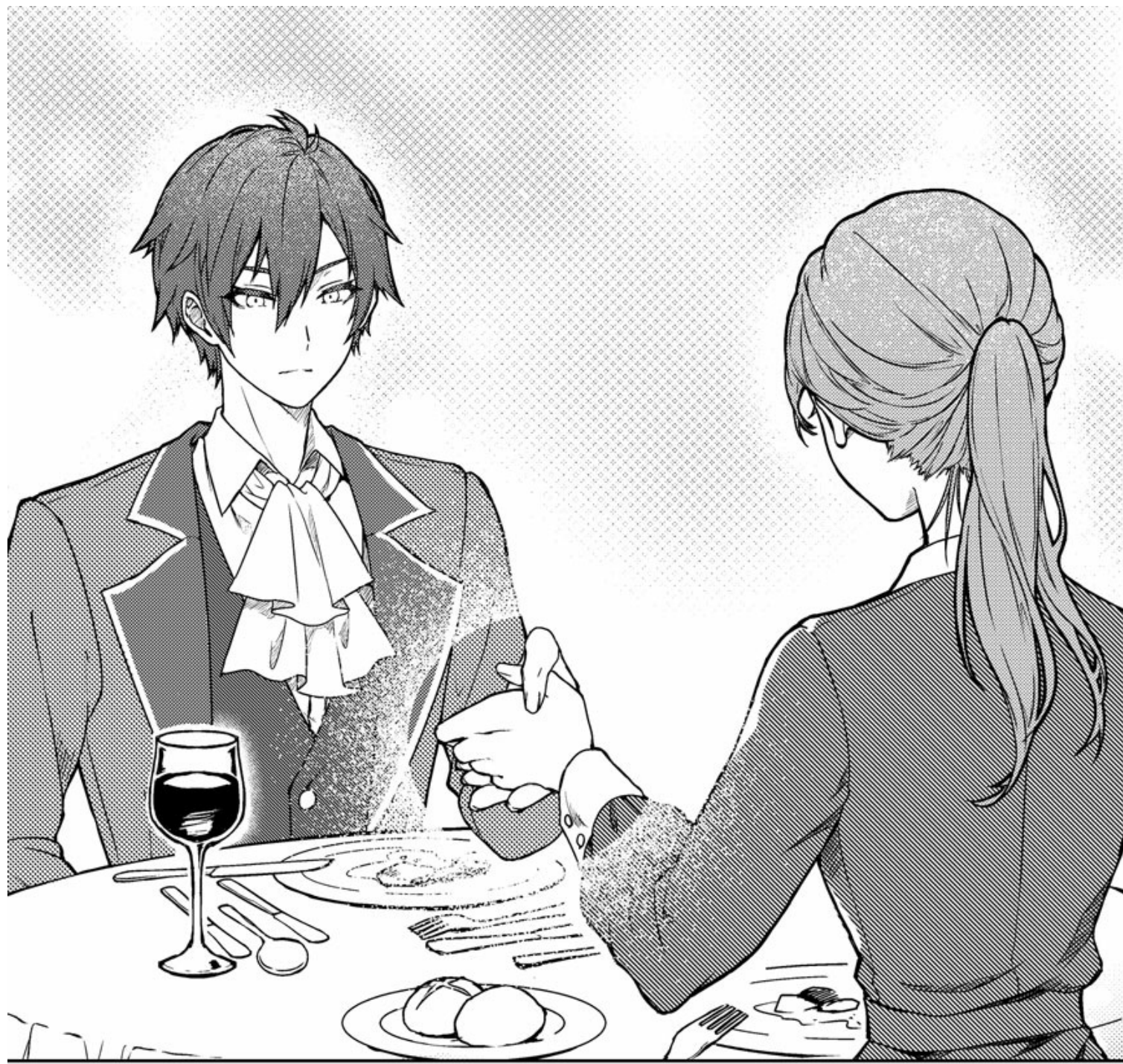
“How does my mana feel to you?” he asked.

“It’s a little cold,” I replied. “And its flow is a bit fast.”

“I see, so it’s cold to you, is it?”

I paused. “It’s cold, but also...pleasant?”

“Hm?”



“When you hear the word ‘cold’ you might think ‘frozen’ or ‘frigid,’ which isn’t a very good impression,” I said. “But to me, it’s like your mana is saying ‘calm down, it’s all right, keep cool.’ It relaxes me.”

Depending on the person, mana temperatures and circulation rates differed. Mana could feel as hot as if you were being scalded, or as sharp as if you were being sliced to ribbons. Sensations like that would mean you had terrible magic affinity. A peaceful, relaxed feeling of course meant your magic affinity was good, and to me, his cold mana felt like a temperature I couldn’t do without.

Fundamentally, having good chemistry in magic affinity meant having good chemistry everywhere else—from personality, to favorite foods, likes, and of course in bed.

“I see,” Lord Granwell said after a moment. “If that is the case, then I’m glad. When you said my mana felt cold, I thought it meant you didn’t like it—and that I was about to become the first man you’d ever rejected.”

His smile didn’t seem like a nobleman’s. Rather, it gave off the impression of a man slightly younger than him in his mid-twenties. Surely, this was the true face of the man named Joshua Granwell, and not that of an aristocrat.

“Lord Granwell,” I said. “Going back to the topic of marriage, I have a request.”

“What is it?”

“I would like to form our marriage contract based on that of a black knight and white mage with good magic affinity.”

“Of course.”

“Aside from that,” I continued, “I would like to become family with the person I marry. I would like to live together, and trust in him like family. I have heard that endeavoring to compromise is essential for that.”

Both Brendan and the vice commander had both told me that compromise required both parties, and that I should endeavor to compromise with my husband-to-be. If that hard work could bear fruit—even if I couldn’t receive the kind of love that the vice commander had for his wife—maybe we could

become the kind of couple that thought of each other as family, like I had dreamed about.

If it was possible, I wanted it. So...

“If you are willing to compromise and strive to become a family as a married couple, then I will accept your offer,” I said.

Our hands had only been touching, but now, Lord Granwell strongly squeezed my hand.

“Certainly.”

Although his current of mana had not changed temperature, the rate sped up significantly. I had no idea what he could be feeling to make his mana give such a response.

At the very least, I had not heard one word of denial from Lord Granwell, and considering the various conditions, he was a partner with only good things for me. In all likelihood there could not have been a better partner for me.

Our marriage would start by being firmly founded on the contract between a black knight and white mage with good magic affinity. However, I thought—no, I wished—that with time, it would change to being based on more than just a contract.

With spring came the monsters’ breeding season, and I grew busy with hunting missions. I couldn’t say that I had any meaningful exchanges with Lord Granwell; however, he frequently sent me treats like candies, confections with a long shelf life, and tea, as well as cards composed with concerned words for my well-being. I didn’t know if his words were from the heart, but I was still happy to read the phrases “Are you unhurt?” and “Don’t overwork yourself.”

I sent him my own cards and other stationery in return, along with a handkerchief. Our short three months of courtship went by, and I and the prime minister’s aide signed the documents to become officially betrothed.

On the first holiday after our engagement, I visited Lord Granwell’s estate to meet his family.

I had expected that there would be no greeting for me, so I didn't mind the questionable air that hung about the residence, nor the unwelcoming attitude of the staff.

The Granwell marquis family estate was a mansion on a hill, in a prime location even compared to other prime locations in the royal capital's nobles' district. I was led to an extravagant parlor where I met Lord Granwell's mother and younger sister.

The two wore lavish, elegant day dresses and glimmering jewelry, and had taken scrupulous care with their hair and skin. They had well-defined facial features, and seemed aristocratic in both appearance and demeanor.

"Joshua has told me the situation," his mother, Lady Sherry, said. "Under normal circumstances, it would be an honor to support his decision to marry a black knight. In the past, we have had the honor to welcome black knights as grooms and brides into our house. However..."

Although Lord Granwell had introduced me and I had greeted her with the most careful adherence to etiquette, I was not accepted—as I had expected. The wife of the late marquis seemed only able to sigh and shake her head.

Beautifully decorated furniture had been arranged in the parlor, and on the stylishly adorned table was an elegantly curved tea set. Although expensive teas and pastries from a famous confectioner had been laid out, I had no inclination to even lay a hand on them.

"Even if you're a black knight, you're still a commoner with no parents, correct? Having such a shady individual become my sister-in-law would be so distasteful."

Lady Margot distorted her pretty face in clear rejection of me. She had the same beautiful green eyes as her brother, but they held a distaste in them as if she were looking at an insect or garbage.

"And whatever is that hair? So damaged and dull—how odd! Gray? I can't believe how dirty that makes it look. And that skin, so burnt and rough from the sun and positively unsightly with all those scars. Perhaps this is usual for a peasant knight, but I would be disgusted to have such a relative."

Many nobles truly despised the peasantry. There was no specific reason for that distaste—just that peasants weren't nobles. The young Lady Margot was that kind of noble, and was not unusual at all in this regard.

"Be quiet, Margot," Lord Granwell snapped.

"Wh-What do you mean, Joshua? It's the truth!" Lady Margot cried out.

The young Lady Margot of the Granwell marquis family was four years her brother's junior at twenty-two. I had heard that she had recently become engaged to someone in an earl's house, and in one year would leave the Granwells.



“You’ll be marrying into the earl of Aston’s house, so though you will be Lina’s sister-in-law, you’ll basically have no relationship with her. Don’t butt into others’ affairs—stick to yourself. Even at the best of times, you’re a pest.”

“What a heartless thing to say...!” Lady Margot gasped. “I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Who are you to say that? You should be grateful that the earl of Aston’s house is willing to take in someone like you. You should pack your things and prepare for your marriage already.”

“Joshua!” Lady Margot shrieked in a loud voice unbecoming of a young noblewoman, and her face turned beet red as a scatter of tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Joshua,” his mother scolded. “Please stop tormenting your sister.”

“Mother! Joshua is so cruel...!”

“You’ve become like this because mother has spoiled you so much,” Lord Granwell said, more calmly now. “You reap what you sow.”

Apparently, young noblewomen became adults at age eighteen and usually married straight away. There were those who had fiancés chosen from birth, but most found a partner sometime between fifteen and seventeen from among fellows with whom they had spent their school days, and cultivated emotions and bonds with as people who they would share their future together.

As a high-ranking young noblewoman, Lady Margot’s upcoming marriage was late. Well, it seemed that—in Lord Granwell’s words—she was a pest, which was the reason her engagement had come about so late.

“Joshua, do you not love your sister?” his mother asked. “And your marriage is so...*willful*...”

“This is not the first time Margot has said something cruel—and you as well, mother. If you say that a marriage with a black knight is an honor, then you should accept it without question. I am satisfied with this marriage, and I have not come to ask either of you for permission. I’ve only come to let you know of

it.”

“Joshua!” they both cried.

Lord Granwell ignored them and called to a young butler clad in a black uniform standing at the ready in the corner of the room. He scowled at me before bowing his head to Lord Granwell.

“Cameron, a message from the earl of Aston’s house came about receiving Margot. The money they sent for the arrangements is here. Use it and move forward with the preparations for the wedding. After three months, Margot will move there and learn the etiquette and housekeeping required of an earl’s wife.”

“Understood, sir.”

Upon hearing she had three months until her move, Lady Margot’s face turned pale and she held onto her mother and wailed. Was she that displeased with her fiancé?

The Aston territory was located in the country’s east and was certainly rural. Many vegetables and fruits were cultivated there, as well as plants used for dyes. I knew it well, having gone there many times for missions. The fortresses in that area made delicious food with vegetables supplied from the local towns.

As the Abyssal Forest was close, monsters and dragons appeared occasionally, but overall it was a peaceful area with a mild climate. Some time ago, a disease of unknown origin spread there and the population fell, so it was a little lonely, but the food was good and the remaining people were all friendly and kind. I thought it was a fine place for a woman to marry into, even if it was in the sticks.

“After that,” Lord Granwell continued, “clean up the west hall. I’ll be having mother move there. Lina and I will be moving into the main hall, so prepare the room and furnishings there as well.”

Cameron took a moment to answer. “Yes, sir.”

“Joshua!” his mother protested.

“Mother, you are no longer the wife of the Granwell marquis. I’ve heard

about the extravagant tea parties you hold and the dinner parties you attend. The current marchioness is my uncle's wife. She is the one carrying out marchioness duties, not you. Please live quietly while mourning father's death. I will be lowering the budget you receive, so please manage within that limit. If that is disagreeable to you, perhaps you might look for a partner for your second marriage? Father has been dead for ten years; no one will make a fuss if you remarry."

Mother and daughter cried and shouted about how cruel and unfeeling toward his family Lord Granwell was.

While I had not expected things to go well, I certainly had not anticipated to be at the scene of a domestic dispute.

In this room arranged beautifully with lavish furnishings, Lord Granwell's cold voice cut down his family's wails with a single stroke.

As if I were a spectator at a theater, I could only watch.

After leaving the parlor—otherwise known as the scene of the domestic dispute—I received an invitation to tour the mansion and garden.

The Granwell marquis family had their property on an extensive plot of land. The lovely house was split into the main hall, which was a large mansion, and the west hall, which was a smaller residence. The house had been built facing a splendid garden, and had white walls topped with a green roof. Apparently the estate hosted events like tea parties and luncheons.

For generations, the west hall was the residence where the retired head of the family and his wife lived, as well as temporary housing for Granwell-born women who had been divorced or otherwise separated from their husbands. Though now it would surely become Lady Sherry's home.

After the tour of the vast garden, we settled in a gazebo surrounded by white and pale pink flowers.

A maid brought me a sandwich full of ingredients, vegetable soup, and tea, and only then did I realize it was lunchtime. More time had passed than I thought, though I supposed that was because the incident in the parlor had been so shocking.

"I apologize about my mother and sister," Lord Granwell said. "My sister was young when our father passed, and my mother pitied and spoiled her. It's made Margot into a selfish and arrogant young woman."

"There's no need to apologize," I replied.

Lady Margo had acted like many nobles did when they found out that, despite being a knight, I was from the peasantry. It hadn't been a new reaction, and what was said was more or less the same as usual: that my short hair was a dirty color; my sun-damaged, scarred skin was ugly; and I was plain.

I was not flashy like a noble. I didn't have waist-length bright, beautiful hair like noblewomen did, and compared to their snow-white, spotless skin, mine was outrageously tanned and covered with scars. Even my face generally left a sober impression upon others.

I had lunch and drank tea with Lord Granwell, then took a breath before raising my hand.

“Is something the matter?” Lord Granwell asked.

“Um, I have a proposal.”

Since just then the butler, Cameron, had brought documents, I decided that he might listen to my proposal as well. “Would you hear this as well, Cameron?” I asked.

Cameron’s voice was filled with displeasure as he responded, “I shall.”

“About Lady Sherry moving to the west hall,” I began. “Would it be better for me to live there? Lady Sherry can continue living in the main hall.”

I had been shown the west hall, but from my point of view it could have been called a magnificent mansion. It was different from the main building and had a quiet, calm atmosphere. It had to be suitable for a retired marquis and his wife, as well as for returning divorced women, to live in after all.

“What are you talking about?” Lord Granwell asked. “Mother is a widow. If she doesn’t remarry, it’s common courtesy for her to live quietly.”

“But...” I paused. “For my duties, it would be better if I had an easy way to enter and exit the estate.”

Both Lord Granwell and Cameron wore puzzled expressions.

As its name implied, the west hall stood on the west edge of the grounds, and just behind it was the small west exit, as it was called.

“My duty is to slay monsters and dragons. In the event of an unforeseen situation, I would need to be on-site immediately, and it would be unclear as to when I might return afterward. Furthermore, even if I am notified in advance of an order to go on a mission, I might have to leave at an incredibly early time, or return suddenly late at night. Therefore, it would be better for me to freely be able to come and go.”

“Then you can freely come and go from the main hall,” Lord Granwell argued.

“However, if I go in and out of the main building, would it not be an issue for the servants?”

Even if I were to be stealthy about it, I didn’t want to cause problems for anyone. I would be stained with blood, mud, and dirt from slaying beasts, and I

would feel awkward walking around the mansion with expensive carpets in such a state.

“Still—” Lord Granwell started, but Cameron interrupted him.

“Lord Joshua, is it not all right?”

“Cameron!”

“This is what the person in question wishes,” Cameron explained. “And if the lady black knight were to move into the west hall, then Lady Sherry and Lady Margot could remain living in the main hall.”

Cameron was smiling contentedly, nodding over and over. He seemed very relieved at the idea that I wouldn’t be moving into the main hall so Lady Sherry and Lady Margot could remain there.

“Lina, is that really okay with you?” Lord Granwell asked. “I do not mind you freely using the main hall.”

“Yes, it really is,” I replied. “And as I do not have much luggage, I can keep my room clean so long as there is a bit of light cleaning done in there first.”

In the end, after a long back and forth discussion, it was decided that I would use the west hall in a month after it was cleaned and the furniture replaced, and Lady Sherry would continue to use the main hall.

However, it remained the case that Lady Sherry’s budget would take a drastic cut, and she would be unable to have extravagant dresses made or buy jewelry. It seemed that she would be allowed to host small tea parties and attend her friends’ soirees, however. Lord Granwell said that he would leave her enough money to live comfortably as was appropriate to her position as the late marquis’s wife.

Lady Margot was to remain in the main hall until her move to Aston, and she would continue to prepare for her marriage while making memories with her mother. It seemed that together they would choose the dresses, jewelry, trinkets, furniture and the like that Lady Margot would bring to her marriage, as well as review manners and study information related to her husband-to-be’s territory.

I didn't really understand nobles, but I thought it would be good for mother and daughter to spend time making memories in the main hall before the marriage would take Lady Margot far away.

Lady Sherry, Lady Margot, Cameron and the other servants in the main hall, and me. Since everyone accepted this compromise and seemed to relax, I thought it a great success. However, Lord Granwell still seemed discontent, with a deep furrow between his eyebrows.

"Um, Lord Granwell, it's perfectly all right for you to continue living in the main hall," I hedged.

It took him a moment to reply. "I will also live in the west hall. This is nonnegotiable."

"Huh?!" I shrieked.

By no means had I thought Lord Granwell would live in the west hall. Apparently neither had Cameron. Flustered, he protested, "But Lord Joshua, the main hall..."

"We're becoming family, are we not?" Lord Granwell said. "And because I promised to make an effort toward that, it's only natural for us to live together. Also, I've noticed for quite a while that you have only been calling me by my family name. I would have you stop. It is not *my* name, and as we are to be husband and wife, I would prefer you call me by my first name."

"Huh?!" I shrieked again.

"Surely you must know my name."

"Lord..." I paused. "Joshua."

When I said his name, the furrow between his brows disappeared and he smiled tenderly.

Things changed quite a bit from what I had thought they would be, but this was how my life with the man who had promised marriage to me, Lord Granwell—no, Lord Joshua—began.

From the west hall of the Granwell marquis mansion I could head out on

hunting missions or to fortresses, and then return home inconspicuously. I felt uncomfortable with this lifestyle, but I assumed that with time, repeating this routine would soon make my life here feel ordinary.

It had been one month since I became Lord Joshua's fiancée. After marriage, black knights were usually removed from long-distance hunting missions, and the days spent on duty at fortresses were lessened as well.

Secretary General Roche, a man with an impressive goatee who had been in charge of the Black Knights Regiment executive office for many years, said to me through tears regarding this, "It's only natural after you marry. Anyway, I'm so glad to see you marry before I retire. I want you to give birth to children as soon as possible and live happily surrounded by them." Then, now that his worries about my marriage were gone, he vowed to spend the remaining three years of his term searching for and educating his successor.

I hadn't known that I had made Secretary General Roche so anxious and worried. I hoped that his successor would be successfully trained.

As I was walking back to the west hall from the Black Knights Regiment executive office after delivering my report regarding my most recently completed hunting mission, I heard girls' voices. I automatically hid myself in the shadow of a pillar, uncomfortable at the thought of meeting the young noblewomen. Many of their conversations were harsh, after all.

"But you know, there are surprisingly many people who don't do it even if it's obligatory, right?" one said.

"Oh, yes, it's worse than I thought," the other replied. "My fiancé was kind until we got engaged—he even took me out on dates. But now it's been three months since then, and I don't even get letters or cards, much less dates."

"So my fiancé—he escorted me to the entrance of a soiree and just left me all alone! He was such a wallflower. What's worse, he didn't get me a dress or any jewelry for it!"

"What?! That's awful!"

"As my fiancé," the first continued, "it's his duty to escort me to the soiree *and* dance with me, as well as give me dresses and jewelry. You have to interact

with the person who's going to become your wife, you know!"

The girls huffing with dissatisfaction at their fiancés seemed to be handmaidens in the royal palace.

Every couple was a stranger at first. Certainly, aristocratic marriages began with obligations, as many of their marriages were made from contracts based on political maneuvers. The commander and vice-commander said that it was important to curry favor through such maneuvering.

"Even getting dresses and flowers doesn't make me happy when I think about how it's just a requirement," one grumbled. "But I can't even get those as an obligatory gift. I was so sad and miserable when my fiancé left me alone at that soiree."

Seeing those young, beautiful handmaidens wrapped in such a lamentable atmosphere felt almost like I was looking at a painting. However, when I considered their hearts, the thought didn't sit well with me. I could understand the feeling of being sad and miserable, since I also had a fiancé—I would feel awful if Lord Joshua neglected me.

I left them and headed for one of the many exits of the palace, not far from the Knights Corps executive office. There were many people coming and going—knights, apprentices, merchants who peddled weapons and armor and other equipment, and many other related parties. Although the palace was frequented by nobles, it was also used by many second and third sons of lower-level aristocrats, as well as commoners. One could call it lively to sound nice, but to be honest, it was chaotic.

"Lina!"

I looked up. "Hm?"

I was not expecting to see *him* here.

A majestic horse pulled an expensive carriage embossed with the crest of the Granwell marquis family. Standing in front of the carriage was Lord Joshua. His unlikely presence here stuck out like a sore thumb and was attracting attention.

"Wh-Why are you here?" I stammered. "The entrance for royal civil officials is closer to the center..."

“I thought your hunting mission might be over, so I came to collect you,” Lord Joshua said. “I’m glad to see you return without incident. Are you uninjured?”

“Oh, I’m fine. Thanks to you, I was able to complete the mission safely.”

Smiling, he offered his hand to me, and I thoughtlessly moved to take it before snatching my arm back. I hadn’t had a hot bath since the hunting mission and was terribly filthy.

“Is that so? I’m glad.” He took the hand that I had pulled back. A large writing callous stood out on his finger. “I was worried that my divine magic might not be up to the task.”

He had wondered if his white magic could protect me against a dragon’s attack. It had been my first hunting mission since we became engaged, so he must have been anxious. If I got injured, it would hurt Lord Joshua’s reputation as a white mage. I was sure he was relieved that I came back without incident, since his honor as a mage was preserved.

It was my fiancé’s duty to grant divine magic to my equipment—however, it was not his responsibility to pick me up here. I was sure Lord Joshua was only doing it out of the kindness of his heart. I was happy that he felt that way, and I was glad that he hadn’t hesitated to take my grimy hand.

Small bits of happiness like this would surely accumulate and grow into a feeling called love. In fact, that love in me was growing, little by little. I knew it.

“Let’s go home,” Lord Joshua said.

A young coachman opened the door of the carriage, revealing the luxurious and sophisticated interior. Even at the best of times I would feel awkward about riding in it, but I didn’t think it was okay for me to get in now since I was filthy with dirt, dust, and sweat.

Pushing back against Lord Joshua with my small hand, I said, “Actually, um, I’ll return by myself. Please go home ahead of me.”

“Why?” Lord Joshua asked. “We’re going to the same place.”

“I’m...filthy,” I admitted. “I don’t want to dirty the carriage.”

As soon as I finished speaking, Lord Joshua lifted me up for some reason,

carrying me in his arms as he got into the carriage. He sat in his seat in the narrow vehicle and held me in his lap—I couldn't move. The doors closed and the carriage slowly began to go forward.

"Ah, um..." I tried to protest.

"If you're concerned about dirtying the carriage, don't worry. I'm holding on to you," Lord Joshua assured me.

That wasn't the problem here, but I didn't think he would listen to me.

"Are you really uninjured? Are you okay?" Lord Joshua asked as he peered at my face.

I wanted him to stop speaking in my ear. He was so close. Heat rose to my face in a rush of embarrassment.

"I-I'm okay," I stammered. "Besides, even if I did get hurt a little, it wouldn't be the fault of the white mage who bestowed protective magic on me, so don't worry. Lord Joshua, I would not tarnish your honor—"

"No!" Lord Joshua argued. "That is not the case. My honor as a white mage doesn't matter. What's important is if you were hurt, and if you're okay now."

I didn't reply.

A white mage was supposed to protect their black knight spouse with magic. That was their duty, and it was an honor for them if the black knight remained free of injury. But Lord Joshua wasn't concerned about his honor—instead, he was worried about me. Was this really just the duty of a fiancé? No, surely not... Maybe not?

"Lina? Are you okay?" Lord Joshua pressed. "You aren't actually hiding an injury from me, are you?"

He asked me that many times, a worried look on his face. His concern for me made another piece of happiness inside me pile up atop the others. But this wasn't a small piece of happiness, but rather an oversized one.

"I-I'm okay... Really."

"Then good," Lord Joshua said. "If something happens, I don't want you to put up a facade. You're my fiancée, and I'm supposed to protect you."

“Lord Joshua...”

“By the way,” he continued. “Is there a better address to send letters to you?”

“Huh? Can you not just address them to the west hall?”

My current address was the west hall of the town house on the Marquis Granwell estate. If a letter was sent to the west hall, it should arrive.

“That won’t do. The entire manor is under my mother’s control, and a letter sent to you could be destroyed before it arrives. So I would like to send you letters via a different method.”

I felt guilty hearing that, but I understood what was going on. It was possible that the servants of the marquis family had not accepted me, and their harassment even extended to Lord Joshua’s letters to me—they weren’t receiving the letters nor delivering them. It was rather sad.

“What about through the Black Knights Regiment executive office?” I said after a moment. “The majority of black knights receive their letters there. If we both send mail through each other’s offices, it would not matter which fort I am stationed in nor how distant my mission has taken me. Although it would take some time for the letters to arrive, we could still communicate.”

“Well then, let’s go through the offices. I’m relieved that we have a solution,” Lord Joshua replied.

“I as well.” I paused. “Um, I believe you can put me down now. Even if the carriage is not getting dirty, you are, Lord Joshua.”

“It’s too late to worry about that now. Besides, it would be easier to clean up my clothes than the seat if it got dirty. Don’t concern yourself about it.”

“But—”

“Do not worry about it. I’m not.”

Lord Joshua held me for the entire ride to the marquis town house. He seemed in a great mood.

The reality that I was the only one in the world he worried and cared for occurred to me. Happiness and embarrassment mixed together, and I thought I was about to burst. My pounding heart felt like it would jump out of my mouth.

Lord Joshua was kind and caring, more so than I ever had imagined. But I thought that that kindness did not show on his face.

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“Well then, Joshua, that matter is settled.”

Sitting in a large seat at the back of his office and buried in papers, Prime Minister Herschel raised the edges of his mouth in a grin. And when he looked at me, he kept grinning.

“Your uncle should be relieved,” he remarked. “He won’t have to struggle with all those matchmaking profiles for you, and he can concentrate on managing the domain and training his successor.”

I took a moment to respond. “I am sorry I troubled you.”

I didn’t like his grin, but it was true that I had caused him trouble, so I bowed my head.

“I don’t mind,” he replied. “An excellent black knight and an excellent white mage becoming spouses means that your fiancée’s missions will become more stable. Stability in missions will reduce damage she might receive from monsters and dragons, and protecting the people’s livelihoods will improve production.”

“I’m quite glad that you decided to marry, Joshua,” added Connelly. “When Virgil here was of age, he didn’t get married—said there was too much pressure. You all will lead the next generation, so you can’t be alone forever. It’s only when a man gets married and has a family that he takes his first steps as a full-fledged member of society.”

Prime Minister Herschel and his aide Connelly, who had supported both the former prime minister and the current one as an assistant for many years, were smiling. I hadn’t known they were so excited about my upcoming marriage.

“Anyway,” Herschel continued, “the self-esteem of many noblemen has taken a bad turn. I feel sorry for Ms. Lina.”

“Oh, you mean that story? Where she found fault with and refused every potential suitor?” Connelly asked. “Well, I feel like one can make a refusal once

or twice, but it's strange to think that it lasted for three years."

"Her record as a black knight is really impressive," Virgil, another aide, chimed in. "I can't believe that anyone would reject her just because she's a commoner. And that nobles like us refused her but blamed Ms. Lina for it."

Prime Minister Herschel nodded at Virgil's words. "I agree," he said, "but really, if you just put a little research into it, you'll see it was all lies."

Prime Minister Herschel's deep blue-green eyes seemed to say, "It seems that *someone* didn't investigate this matter," which made the atmosphere rather uncomfortable.

But his unspoken words were right—it was certainly my oversight. As Virgil said, Lina had been at countless tea parties trying to find a partner. Considering all of that, it was preposterous to think that she had rejected *everyone*.

Since I was a white mage and had many friends and acquaintances who were also white mages, I had often heard rumors of a black knight from the commoner class who found fault with all her potential spouses and refused to marry any of them. As I had never expected to be among those marriage candidates, I had accepted the rumors without question. Trapped in the story I heard from friends and acquaintances, I had failed to confirm it on my own.

After meeting Lina face-to-face at tea, I had visited the Black Knights Regiment commander's office and asked about the truth behind the gossip. The vice-commander had responded with a smile that didn't meet his eyes, and then showed me a number of rejection letters addressed to Lina.

There were so many that I wanted to hold my head in my hands. Every single rejection letter ended with a wish for her to find success in her marriage search, so much that I thought it must be some new phrase going around to end letters with.

"I guess you are going to send a rejection letter as well?" the vice-commander had said to me. "You can give your verbal reply now if you would like. It is true that you and Lina have a very good magic affinity; however, her hopes in a marriage partner are far removed from you as you are a noble."

I inquired as to Lina's hopes—the ones she put on her spousal preferences

survey.

“Hm? Her hopes for a partner? A commoner, or the third or fourth son of a noble house, one who will step down from the aristocracy.”

I had continued to ask him questions, which he answered.

“She’s never spoken about her social status nor her family’s wealth. Yes, as the firstborn son of a high noble family, you are not a match for her hopes. Actually, the next match she has is likely to win her heart. He has a good magic affinity with her, just second to yours, and he is the third son of a baron’s house that is in good standing. He is currently the vice-commander of the Third Unit under the Second Magic Division. I’m sure he will support and protect Lina.”

Frankly, I had been shocked when the vice-commander of the Black Knights Regiment handed me a list of houses that had sent Lina a letter of rejection. He was smiling, but I could tell he was angry, and I thought his anger was only natural.

I was happy to know that there were people in the Black Knights Regiment who cared about Lina’s struggles, but at the same time, I felt anxious.

I was not the only white mage who had a good magic affinity with Lina.

In fact, the next man who was slated to meet her was likely to become her husband.

At first, I was just going to meet the rumored black knight and ask her why she kept refusing to marry. But I had been attracted to those gray-blue eyes, her unadorned personality, and her warm mana. I wanted to touch more of her warm, comforting, calming mana. I wanted it to be just for me.

I may have fallen in love with Lina’s mana—love at first touch.

Love at first touch happened from time to time among those who used magic—upon touching another person’s mana, you would become intensely charmed by it. With our mana proving so compatible, I had known since the beginning that Lina and I were a good match.

It was no wonder people were attracted by mana.

However, I hadn’t expected to be attracted to someone in that way at all, and

it perplexed me.

Regarding the women around me, they approached me while wrapped in extravagant dresses and jewelry, scented with perfume, and with manufactured smiles plastered on their faces. They were all women who coveted my house's social rank and fortune, and my position. They didn't even hide the fact that they were after me because I would be the next marquis.

The noblewoman to whom I had been engaged in the past had never outright said that her goal was climbing the aristocratic ladder, but I knew now that it had been something to that effect.

Compared to the image of women in my head, Lina was far removed—completely different, in fact, with her knightly, short gray hair tied into a ponytail; her skin so far from snow-white; and the scars peeking out from under her knight's uniform, suggesting they were scattered across her body. She was a bit tall for a woman, and her slender figure and deep gray-blue eyes were not cute or adorable, but dignified.

It wasn't just her mana that attracted me to her—I had never seen someone so true to herself without putting on any airs.

I was sure that if the truth behind the lies regarding her marriage search were to come out, then so too would a groom appear, especially if it were a man my age or a bit older. We knew that marrying a woman who was only cute wouldn't give you happiness or stability.

I thought that if Lina accepted a marriage, it would be with the intent to start slowly before getting closer with her partner. Even if there was no romantic love or affection in the beginning, it would probably develop into such before too long.

It was a childish possessiveness that had sprung up within me, but only I needed to know about her warm mana—not any other men.

After realizing this, I had sent a letter before she could meet the next suitor. I had thought myself both pushy and impersonal, but still invited her to dinner and requested a relationship with her. After that, we had made time in between work to exchange cards and gifts until our betrothal.

I knew I wasn't able to sort out Lina's feelings. I still hadn't been able to sort out my own either, so there was no way I could understand hers.

And yet, I wanted the right to be with Lina as soon as possible.

"In any case," Connelly said, "this will keep you from being called inadequate due to being unmarried, Joshua. Please get along well with the black knight."

"Thank you, Connelly," I replied.

Currently, the prime minister's office had three assistants to the prime minister including myself, with twelve senior-level secretaries in the policy division under us. And under *them* were many more people. Frankly, even with so many, I was very busy.

His Majesty the King was undertaking a variety of initiatives. There were a wide range of domestic efforts alone going on, such as addressing problems with medical facilities, children's schools, the slums, damage caused by monsters and dragons, and sudden epidemics. Furthermore, when involvement with other countries came up, cooperation with other departments made everything dizzyingly hectic.

Still, when I saw the country gradually changing for the better, I felt proud of the work I did at the prime minister's office.

Rather than working as a marquis to manage the Granwell territory or socialize with nobles, I had held a fascination with my work as a civil servant that endured to this day. I intended to continue with it.

"Joshua, what will you do after you get married?" Connelly sipped what should now have become lukewarm tea and picked up a soft cookie.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Your uncle is the marquis currently, but your father was the previous one," Connelly replied. "So given the direct blood relation, shouldn't it be logical that you will be the next marquis?"

"What?! Joshua, after your marriage, are you going to quit here and return to your territory as the marquis?!" In a panic, Virgil hurriedly stood, bumping the desk and causing it to shudder.

In response to the shaking, the disorderly pile of documents on the desk swayed violently. With the mountain of documents about to collapse, someone—I didn't know who—screamed, his voice reverberating in the room.

Virgil and I rushed to prop up the heap of papers.

"I'm not quitting," I declared. "I intend to continue my work as a civil servant. My uncle has a son, and I don't have any problems with him as the successor. Upon marriage, I intend to formally tell my uncle that I will not inherit the marquis title."

Virgil, who was holding up the pile of papers with a strange stance so as not to let it collapse, cried, "Good!" and began to concentrate on rebuilding the stack of papers.

"Wonderful!" agreed Connelly. "If Joshua stays, then the prime minister's office will be in safe hands in its next era. I was worried that Joshua leaving would cause problems, but it seems that was a needless concern. I guess the question of who will remain in this office is settled."

Prime Minister Herschel and Connelly smiled as if they had been reassured. Feeling grateful that they were smiling because they wanted me to remain in the office, I went to Virgil's aid.

With the help of the others, we were finally able to restore the untidy, unsteady mountain of papers to a state that was both miraculously close to falling yet remained standing. The documents had been placed there in a certain order, so I was glad that they didn't fall.

My public-facing role belonged here. And as for where I belonged as an individual...I planned to make that with Lina, even if I couldn't do it right away.

Located on the east side of the royal capital, the Second National Theater was crowded with people. There were many theaters both large and small in the royal capital, but there were only two founded by the government. One was completely for the nobility, while the other was used by wealthy commoners as well as lower-level aristocrats.

When Virgil had handed me tickets to the latter theater, he said, "It's part of

celebrating being engaged. You need to do things together—fun things, happy things, even tough things. It’s the basics of love.” The tickets were for special box seats reserved only for the nobility, and the current showing was both popular and seemed a go-to choice for an engaged couple’s outing.

Before going to the theater, we stopped at a dress shop so I could gift Lina clothes. She wore an elegant dress decorated with dark, peacock-green and navy blue lace and a hairclip, earrings, and necklace made with mother-of-pearl. It all suited her incredibly well.

“Oh...” She was lost for words for a moment. “These are all so wonderful. I can’t believe that you would get these for me.”

The green matched the color of my own eyes, and the calm color suited Lina well. I felt immersed in a feeling of satisfaction that my fiancée was wearing my colors when we continued our walk together to the theater.

“It looks great on you,” I told her. “Besides, even for those not of the nobility, a man giving clothes and jewelry to his fiancée is common. I’m glad to give them to you.”

It took her a moment to reply. “Th-Thank you... I’m glad. This is the first time a man has given me such beautiful gifts. I’ll cherish them.”

“The first time, huh?”

Lina examined herself in the mirror many times, smiled shyly, and, cheeks red, thanked me repeatedly. While she was dignified when wearing her knights uniform, right now she was more adorable than I had ever imagined.

Lina had never received dresses or jewelry from a fiancé, never gone out together to see a play, never eaten at restaurants with him. And even when not taking into account being engaged, Lina had never experienced many commonplace things in this country. But now I, having given Lina two of these firsts, felt ecstatic.

“From now on,” I told her, “I’ll give you many firsts.”

Once again, it took her a moment to respond. “Thank you.”

The redness had spread from Lina’s cheeks to her ears and neck, and she

shyly cast her gaze down. I took her hand and led her up the theater stairs, to our designated box seats. Inside the small room were two somewhat large chairs next to a table set with refreshments. With the stage right in front, anyone would call these great seats.

“This is the first time I’ve seen a play,” Lina said, busy gazing at the inside of the theater before reading the pamphlet explaining the play’s contents. From my perspective, her reaction was like that of a child’s, but I was happy that she was showing me her true self and not some sort of constructed countenance. She was herself, inside and out.

The bell rang to announce the start of the performance, the lights were turned low, and the actors took to the stage accompanied by music.

In response to a monster that had suddenly appeared, the princess in the play was given to it as a living sacrifice for the good of her country. A youthful hero leapt to her rescue and temporarily repelled the monster, but when the creature appeared again, the hero and princess enlisted the help of allies to exterminate the beast. The hero was revealed to be the prince of a faraway kingdom, and the two married and brought peace and happiness upon their kingdoms.

This was about what I had heard the story was like, although I had been under the impression that it was about the marriage of the princess of a faraway country instead of the prince. However, the details were irrelevant—it seemed that the program was popular and enjoyed by commoners and nobles alike, and that it was especially common for lovers or betrothed couples to go see it.

I myself was not that interested in theater, but I found it lovely to see Lina be drawn in and absorbed in the story.

At the intermission, Lina said, “I will be back shortly,” then walked out of the box seat.

In her place came an attendant who put out more snacks and drinks filled with fruit before leaving.

Did the women I watched plays with in the past sincerely enjoy theater like Lina did? Had they genuinely appreciated, admired, and felt the passion behind the paintings hung at the art exhibition, the flowers in full bloom in the

botanical gardens, or the tools made by assembling the best of technology exhibited at the industrial fair? Had they just treated my position and the house of a marquis like jewelry to parade around in?

Lina had been absorbed in the play's story and never hid her feelings of excitement or suspense. I was sure that being escorted and given gifts for the first time made her both happy and bewildered—she had not hidden that.

I had no need to fumble trying to understand her feelings; I just had to accept them as they were. Everything—her happiness and joy, her embarrassment and shyness, and even her bewilderment.

There were less than ten minutes until the play was to resume, but Lina hadn't yet returned. "Perhaps she got lost," I muttered.

I got up and opened the door to the box seat. There were many people in the hallway, some returning to their seats, while others were talking to those who came with them or who they met by chance here at the theater.

As I weaved between people as I headed down the hallway toward the lounge, I heard the voices of people talking in the lobby.

"Yes, I saw him earlier!"

"Really? Wouldn't the eldest son of a marquis's family be more likely to see a play at the First National Theater?"

"No, really! It was him, the next Granwell marquis!"

There was a group of young noblewomen in the lobby, prettily dressed in bright, colorful gowns of yellow, orange, and pink.

"Then that woman with him—was that really his fiancée?" asked the first.

"Yes, I saw her!" said the second girl. "That black knight from the peasantry—she doesn't know her own place! She's so audaciously wearing a dress with his colors. You know, she refused to marry my cousin. Said she didn't care for viscounts."

"Oh my, how could a peasant say such a thing?" said the third girl.

"Because she *is* a peasant!" the first girl replied. "You know, she also turned down my brother. Apparently she rejected him because our territory was too

far away from the royal capital.”

Fury boiled in my chest. I had heard the rumors too, and had been a fool who had let them drive my actions. This was the first time I had heard people with no relation to Lina at all talk about her so brazenly.

The girls continued talking. “I can’t believe that she’s engaged to the Granwell heir. Well, she was aiming high after all.”

“I’ve heard a rumor that they don’t actually have good magic affinity at all.”

“Oh my! How awful of her to go as far as to falsify their magic affinity!”

“Can you believe she wanted to go so far to tie herself to a marquis’s house? Peasants really are vulgar.”

One only had to consider this for a moment to understand the truth. Being a commoner with no influence, Lina had no possible way to become my fiancée while ignoring magic affinity. She would have had to fool or convince a great many people, like the mages who investigated magic affinity or their managers, the head office of the Knights Corps, and the commander and vice-commander of the Black Knights Regiment. There was no way she could do all that—it was impossible.

However, as rumors like these irresponsible, half-joking remarks spread, the lies grew endlessly.

Until now, Lina had no power to stop the malice and rumors surrounding her, and there had been no one to protect her. However, now that I was officially her betrothed, I was to bear the duty of protecting her.

“By the way, she was at my relative’s party the other day!” one of the girls continued.

“No way! How awful!”

My mother’s and sister’s attitudes and remarks toward Lina had been terrible, but these strangers’ flippant conversation was all the more displeasing. I took a step forward as if to crush that displeasure underfoot.

“Oh, if it isn’t the heir to the marquis!”

“Goodness, I never expected we might see you!”

I ignored the shrill voices of the girls as they spotted me and instead headed toward the corner of the lobby—toward Lina, who was hidden in the shadow of a pillar and wore a blank expression as she shrunk in on herself.

“Lina, so this is where you’ve been?” I asked. “The play is about to continue.”

“Lord Joshua, I...”

“You were taking a while, so I started to worry,” I explained. “If you had forgotten where our seats were, you could have asked an employee. However, I still thought it best to come find you first.”

Lina’s face was pale from hearing such reprehensible gossip. I drew her close and took her hand, pressing a kiss to it. I heard a shriek from somewhere behind me—probably from one of those girls.

“U-Um...” Lina’s ears and cheeks had once again been dyed a bright red. She was probably embarrassed. It was such a different expression from her usual dignified self that it was adorable.

“Let’s get going,” I said, leading her. As we walked, I kept my hand against Lina’s lower back, keeping her snug against me.

“Lord Joshua, um, you are quite close to me.”

“It’s normal for us to be this close. We’re engaged, you know. Oh, I forgot to mention this to you,” I continued. “Regarding your previous marriage talks—about the houses of those white mages who were spreading rumors and lies about you rejecting them for some strange reason.”

“There was such a thing, wasn’t there?” Lina replied.

She didn’t seem to be very interested, but I assumed the young noblewomen were. Their jabbering had stopped as they strained their ears to listen—even the others around us seemed to be trying to eavesdrop.

“An investigation has been made into the truth of the rumors. All that rubbish about how you refused to marry anyone has all systematically been proven to be false. The houses that spread those rumors—and I’m sure there are quite a few of them—will receive their fair share of punishment.”

“Oh, they’re going to be punished?” Lina asked.

“Yes. Marriages between black knights and white mages are a state policy, so punishment is no surprise when they flouted it for such trivial reasons.”

When the young noblewomen heard my words, they let out silent screams and flocked for the exit, even though the play was still only halfway through.

“I do hope it’s not a very heavy punishment,” Lina replied, then paused. “Lord Joshua?”

“What is it?” I opened the door of our box seats and led Lina inside. When the door closed, we were left alone.

“Thank you for helping me.”

When Lina smiled, it was the most beautiful, adorable smile I had ever seen.

The anger inside me disappeared, replaced with a different kind of heat.

“Of course I did. I’m your fiancé.”

Without thinking, I took Lina in my arms and pressed my lips to her temple.



A month before my marriage to Lina was to begin, a classmate from the royal academy approached me. “Joshua! I heard the news!”

How many years had it been since we last met? For a moment I had no idea who he was.

“It’s been a while, Donald,” I replied.

Donald was originally from another marquis house, was my age, and was also a white mage. We had many things in common, and when we had been classmates enrolled at the royal academy, we had spent long hours together with our schoolmate, His Highness the First Prince.

With his pale reddish-brown hair and green eyes as calm as spring leaves, Donald had a tender and quiet personality suited to those colors. Even during his time at the royal academy, he had been the one who took the middle ground between the prince and our other classmates.

“It really has been, hasn’t it? I haven’t seen you since my wedding six or seven years ago.”

While at the academy, Donald had found out that he had good magic affinity with a black knight who was the heiress to a count’s estate. As there had been no issues between them nor their houses, they married upon his graduation at the academy. Donald happened to be the first son of the marquis house he had been born to and by all accounts should have inherited the title, but as he had been adopted into his wife’s house, the role had been passed to his younger brother.

“Seven years?” I said. “Time flies.”

“Please don’t talk like an old man,” Donald replied. “Anyway, I heard that you got engaged! It’s late for me to say this, I know, but congratulations.”

“Thank you. Did you come all the way here to congratulate me?”

“You’re my friend—let me celebrate with you on this happy occasion,” Donald said. “So, what kind of person is your fiancée?”

“Oh, right. I’m in the same position as you.”

“Huh?” Donald gave me a puzzled look. I remembered that when he had been teased by the prince and our schoolmates, he often wore that kind of expression.

“My fiancée is a black knight,” I explained. “Though everyone keeps talking about how she’s a commoner.”

Donald made a couple of noises that did not amount to any words whatsoever.

“Donald? Are you all right?” I asked.

“Ah—sorry. I was just surprised,” he replied. “You see, usually a black knight’s partner is chosen when the black knight is seventeen or eighteen, and the white mage is within just a couple years older or younger. I simply hadn’t thought that someone from our generation would be chosen for that.”

It was true that Donald had been fifteen when he got engaged, and his black knight counterpart had been two years older than him at seventeen. She had waited until he graduated and became an adult before they married.

As I would turn twenty-five this year, I would normally not have been chosen as Lina’s partner, considering she was just twenty. It was understandable for Donald to be so surprised by such an unusual choice.

“There were many reasons,” I explained. “I hadn’t been interested in marriage, but I feel like things are going well with my fiancée. I hope they will continue to do so.”

It took Donald a moment to reply. “I see. If there’s anything I can do to help, please let me know. We may have been in the same class, but I am a bit more experienced in having a black knight as a spouse.”

“Thanks. I’ll hold you to that.”

After stopping in at the Second Magic Division Donald was to return home, so I walked with him down the hallway.

He told me about how usually he remained in his territory to support his wife and raise their children, though he also worked as a reserve soldier in the busy spring season and was on guard here and there as a white mage during

autumn too. It seemed that he had heard about my engagement at the same time that he had been summoned by the magic division and had decided that, since it was a good opportunity, he would pay me a visit.

“You know,” Donald said, “I’ve heard those rumors about the female black knight—the commoner. She’s apparently a real skillful black knight, but...well, also difficult to handle. But if those stories were lies, what’s the actual situation?”

When I explained to him about the gossip regarding Lina’s marriage search, Donald replied, “Ah, I see, so that’s what it was. I thought it was strange.” He nodded several times as if my words had convinced him.

“The rumors were shut down just the other day,” I said. “The houses that refused her marriage talks without good reason and spread gossip about her will be punished one by one.”

“Well, it seems like the nasty underbelly of noble society showed itself. But anyway, I’m relieved that you’re looking forward to the marriage.” Donald paused. “Joshua?”

“Yes?”

“Becoming her spouse...” He paused. “I think it might be more difficult than if you had married a black knight from a noble family. So if anything happens, you can come to me—don’t carry it all alone.”

It took me a moment to reply. “I see. Thank you.”

I looked up and saw Donald smiling. As had been the case many times during our school days, Donald’s soft smile and sensible words were a big help and comforted me.

“But you really do have to be careful,” Donald cautioned. “Knightly society is tied to aristocratic society, and gossip often circulates. Rumors can arise from nothing.”

I nodded at his words and we continued down the corridor to the cafeteria. Outside of lunchtime the place was deserted, though I could see people here and there using the space who seemed to be adjusting their schedules or had missed their meals.

Among them, I saw a familiar figure.

She was dressed in a black knight uniform and wore her gray hair up in a ponytail. I couldn't be wrong.

"Lina..."

"Huh? Oh, is she your fiancée? Call her..."

Donald trailed off. Lina was alone with a young man at a table in the corner of the cafeteria, talking with him as if they were familiar with each other.

At this distance I couldn't hear what they were discussing. However, they seemed friendly, and seeing her smile at a man other than myself made my heart sting with pain.



Donald seemed to recognize the young man with Lina. “He’s a low-level white mage in the reserve troop.”

“So you know him?” Uncharacteristically of me, I spoke in a strong tone—then covered my mouth with my hand. Donald laughed at that and patted me gently on the shoulder as if to calm me.

“I can’t say I know him,” Donald explained, “but I’m also a reservist, so I’ve seen him before. He’s a low-level white mage, so he wasn’t able to be employed with the regular soldiers. You see the bright green line on his mage badge? That’s the mark of a reserve soldier. He’s only employed during the spring and fall when it’s busy.”

“I see... So it’s fixed-term employment,” I replied.

“Yes, since hunting missions get very busy during the spring and fall, even lower-level mages get hired. I’m sure he used to give your fiancée divine magic or put mana into her magic stones.”

Once a black knight left the patronage of their mentor and became an adult, it was their betrothed’s responsibility to grant them divine magic. However, Lina hadn’t had a fiancé until I came along—so she must have been receiving divine magic from this low-level white mage.

When confronting dragons and monsters, divine magic protected you. Depending on its efficacy, the probability of being injured could rise or fall—to put it more extremely, it could mean the difference between life and death.

I thought it natural to ask for this life-protecting magic from someone close to you. That would make it an easier conversation and you would know the other person’s disposition, after all. Of course, friends could fill this role—or someone else. An icy, heavy feeling of doubt welled up in my chest.

I didn’t reply.

Donald patted my shoulder again, a little more strongly than before. “Joshua, calm down. People get jealous regardless of age or gender, but it’s better you don’t let it show too much.”

“J-Jealous?!” I stammered.

As someone born into a noble family, I had been controlling my emotions since I was a child, and I was good at it. But for that heavy feeling in my chest—jealousy—to show on my face? I surprised myself.

“Joshua, it’s okay. It’s your job now to give your fiancée divine magic. That reservist was just filling in for you before. You’re the one performing that role now. Naturally, the relationship between him and your fiancée will get weaker, so there’s no need to be jealous.”

It took me a moment to reply. “Ah, yes—you’re right.”

“You’re in a special position now, as a black knight’s white mage fiancé. You’re being asked to protect a black knight—a valuable human resource—and to help continue her lineage.” Donald paused. “It’s easy enough to say, but really, lots of things can go wrong one after another,” he muttered, looking terribly hurt and sad.

“Donald?”

He shook his head slightly from side to side and forced a smile. “Please get along with your fiancée. It’s important to talk to her—the idea that you can guess what the other person is thinking or understand each other without words is just a fantasy. Besides, Joshua, you’ve been pretty bad with words since you were a kid.”

At the age of eighteen, Donald had joined his black knight wife’s family and she had since become the countess. He worked to support her and the Second Magic Division as a reserve soldier, and reared their three children—with a fourth on the way.

In my eyes, Donald was a man who had gotten his hands on happiness.

He was the spouse of a black knight, the highest honor for a white mage, assisted his wife with her missions and the management of their house’s territory, and had been blessed with children. Moreover, their firstborn had taken the magic viability test and had been shown to have an aptitude for old magic, and therefore had a tentative future as a black knight.

While it was hoped that the children of black knights would become black knights themselves, those talents were not passed on so easily. It was a

common story that even a highly capable black knight had not even one of their children inherit their aptitude for old magic.

With that in mind, since a child inheriting that talent had already been born, Donald had fulfilled one of his spousal duties and was also assured a stable future. However, this was just the Donald that I could see—I figured that in reality, he must have plenty of hardships that I had no idea of.

“Thank you, Donald. Your advice is always spot on.”

Donald nodded, this time with a real smile. My once-schoolmate’s gentle green eyes and kindhearted feelings naturally brought a smile to my face.

I should have taken this advice more seriously and reflected it in my actions. I was aware of how bad I was with words, after all, and he had clearly told me as well.

My wedding to Lina occurred without incident.

As a noble, I had thought that the proper way to have a wedding ceremony was to make it huge, performed in a grand cathedral and followed by a lavish reception party at the marquis's estate. However, Lina, tears in her eyes, had pleaded, "I would rather not have something too luxurious." Thus, the ceremony had been small—unprecedented compared to my noble family's past weddings.

The ceremony had been held in a small, nearby church.

Attendees from my side of the family had included my mother and little sister, my sister's fiancé, my uncle and cousin, as well as my superior Prime Minister Herschel and coworkers Connelly and Virgil. Lina's guests had been her mentor and foster parents Sir Alexander Vanitas and his wife, her once-fellow apprentice Cody Macmillan and his wife, and Commander Baxter and Vice-Commander Gill of the Black Knights Regiment. Two of Lina's friends, female black knights from her graduating class, as well as that one reserve soldier, also attended.

The reception after the wedding had also only been a buffet-style garden party in the space adjoining the church. It had been a ceremony completely unbefitting the typical aristocrat. Even so, however small the ceremony was, I thought that exchanging vows in that church filled with such a pure atmosphere, and having the reception with close friends in that garden surrounded by beautiful blooming flowers and abundant trees, had been wonderful.

Those invited had steadily given us their congratulations one by one, and the buffet had served as a tidy meal. There had been no stench of perfumes nor cigarettes, but instead the ceremony had felt fresh due to pleasant breezes and the scent of greenery and flowers.

Lina had refrained from having an original dress be designed, instead opting for a basic, off-white dress made with some additions. Lina, wearing that dress with decorations of green jade—my color—had been beautiful. Indisputably beautiful.

"Lina is a dear friend, companion, and sister to us. We would like to know

how you cared for her during your engagement, and if you will cherish her henceforth, now that you're married."

"We would like to hear what you have to say. Don't leave out anything."

Being brought into the conversation with Lina and her two female knight friends and being persistently asked about our relationship became a fond memory as well. I had been genuinely glad to learn more about the unknown sides of Lina and her relationships from her student days. Her friendship with those women had been heartwarming.

As a black knight and white mage, Lina and I had met with strong intentions of forming a contract. And under such sobering circumstances, we had become engaged and then married.

However, no matter how we met or began, we could change our relationship as we went forward.

I, tied as a husband to my wife Lina, would protect her, just as I had vowed to God in that church, to the friends and family attending, and to Lina herself.

Since then, nearly three years had passed.

During this time, my relationship with Lina was by and large favorable. As we both worked, our circumstances caused us to occasionally go for days without being able to see each other. However, as husband and wife, we lived in the same house, slept in the same bed, and ate together.

However, the past two months of work had become so busy that I usually returned home late at night, if I was able to return home at all. As the timing of Lina's deployments was unpredictable, I found it difficult to secure opportunities where I could bestow divine magic upon her equipment. I was devising ways to make time or have Lina come to me for divine magic, but we were limited.

"I understand what you are saying," I told Connelly. "However, I am troubled by how often this happens."

"But it's only during your time as an aide that you can gain practical experience in supporting the next era. Joshua, it's highly likely that you will be the next prime minister, so you must work hard now," he insisted.

I understood what Connelly was saying. Were I still a bachelor, I wouldn't have hesitated to put my nose to the grindstone. However, I was no longer in a position where I could operate solely according to my own convenience.

"But leaving the royal capital for so long—and for so many times—means that I won't be able to fulfill my duties to my wife," I argued.

Compared to the other countries of the world, the Kingdom of Mert was of middling size. Even so, leaving the royal capital to inspect the provincial towns and cities took two to three weeks at a time—and some locations took over a month to visit.

Moreover, during the time I would be participating in an inspection, I wouldn't be able to bestow divine magic on Lina when she went on missions. If I couldn't do that, she would be exposed to danger. I couldn't have that. As her husband, I couldn't let her go on a mission without divine magic.

However, Connelly ignored my worries and smiled as if he were admonishing a child. "There's no need to worry."

He was approaching sixty and gave off the initial impression of a good-natured old man. Truly, I had never seen him angry—he was always calm. However, I knew him to be surprisingly stubborn.

"Your problem is that you don't have time to grant divine magic to Lina. But if she didn't go out on missions, you wouldn't have that issue," he continued.

"Excuse me?"

"Going on missions isn't the only thing black knights do. Raising younger generations at the knights' academy, for example, is a fine job."

If my memory was correct, the majority of instructors at the knights' academy were former knights. I had the strong impression that this reemployment was reserved for those who had aged into retirement or taken a step back from the front lines due to illness or injury.

"You mean for Lina to leave the front lines?" I asked.

"I don't think it's such a bad idea," Connelly said after a moment.

"So what you mean to say is that I would have my wife be employed in a safe

job so that I would be able to leave her alone, and that way I could devote myself entirely to my work as I did when I was a bachelor. Is that correct?”

I knew that there were only a finite number of people among those who worked as knights, hunters, adventurers and the like who could say that they loved to fight. Those same people also said that they really felt alive by becoming stronger and fighting for their lives with monsters and dragons.

While Lina may have been a black knight, that didn’t mean that she wanted to fight. The law stated that those with ability in old magic became black knights to fight dragons—that was why she did it. In our three years living together as husband and wife, I had learned that Lina had no taste for battle.

So, Lina might think it was a good idea, what Connelly said about working as an instructor at the knights’ academy. However, that wasn’t something Lina had brought up, and I would be remiss to selfishly make that decision for her.

“Think about it a bit more positively. This way, Ms. Lina wouldn’t get hurt, nor would her life be put at risk. Furthermore...wouldn’t it be safer were you to have a baby?”

It was encouraged for black knights and white mages to have plenty of children—the more the merrier. As of yet, the difference between those who had the gift for old magic and those who didn’t was still a mystery. However, it was said that the gift was inherited through blood, and it was true that many children who had been born to or otherwise descended from black knights became black knights themselves.

Naturally, others hoped that Lina and I would have children. However...

“You tell me that we have too much work here for me to go home, and then bring up having children...” I muttered.

“You don’t have to be apart forever, you know,” Connelly said. “Instead of you both being busy as bees, she can take up permanent work here in the capital and you’ll be able to meet. Well, I suppose she can’t promise to always be able to come home if the knights’ academy happens to go out training in the field.”

As I looked at the smiling Connelly, I realized that he would neither withdraw

nor yield.

I thought for a moment before replying, “Please allow me time to think about my own work and that of my wife’s.”

“So long as you consider it thoroughly. I’ll be waiting for your answer—make it a good one!”

Connelly was seasoned, having worked for many years as one of His Excellency’s the Prime Minister’s assistants. While he may have been a mellow man, he could be incredibly pushy. I took a deep sigh, and it suddenly occurred to me to consult with a friend about the matter.

Life with Lina in the west hall was quiet.

The attendants and maids came to do their work during the day, and when they finished they all returned to the main hall, so they weren’t around at nighttime. When Lina was out on missions, I was alone in the west hall.

I used to love the quiet that came with being alone, and would look forward to enjoying my favorite tea in silence or continuing to read popular books. Now, however, I was a bit lonesome when left by myself in the west hall.

Lina was currently on duty at the second fortress in Allbury, and had thus left the estate.

Near the Allbury territory was the Great Azure Sands, a sprawling desert where monsters and dragons lived.

There were countless areas throughout the world where those creatures thrived, but in our country there were three particularly large ones known together as the the Three Wicked Expanses: the Great Azure Sands, the Abyssal Forest, and the Grand Crimson Canyon.

As a great many large dragons inhabited these areas, I had bestowed upon Lina’s equipment the maximum amount of the strongest divine magic I possessed...but I still couldn’t help but worry.

“You know, a suave, sighing man makes for a pretty picture.”

“Don’t make fun of me.”

From time to time, I talked to Donald through a prismaphone, an anchored magic correspondence device that used crystal prisms infused with mana. If both sides had this handy device, they could use mana to see and speak to each other even if apart. However, due to the fact that it required a large amount of mana and heavy crystal prisms, it was nearly impossible to carry around. Many people wished for a smaller version.

Just having a person in the same position with similar problems, one who could understand my worries, made me feel at ease.

“I’m serious. Joshua, has something happened?” Donald, projected in the prismaphone, tilted his head. *“Lina is on a mission, right? I understand your anxiety and uncertainty—even if you gave her the most magic you possibly could, anything could happen.”*

“That’s right, I am anxious. In addition, I’m a bit troubled by something,” I admitted.

“What’s the matter?”

I summarized my conversation with Connelly to Donald—that both foreign and domestic affairs would make my long-term business trips as one of the prime minister’s aides grow in number, and to help with that, Connelly had suggested that Lina leave the front lines to become an instructor...not that Lina had been asked.

I took hold of a glass full of alcohol, and the ice inside clinked loudly as it rolled around.

Donald listened silently to my story, and took a sip from his large mug before laughing. I couldn’t believe he was laughing at my worries. There was no reason to smile at any of this in the first place.

“Taking pleasure in the misery of others, huh?”

“No, that’s not it! I’m happy.”

“Happy?”

“Yes. I’m happy to know that you and Lina have built a good relationship. You know, your marriage was so unusual and abrupt, and I had been worried

whether it would go well.”

That reminded me that when Donald had heard that my wife would be a black knight, he had been terribly surprised. I assumed that he must have applied that to his own situation and felt many factors that contributed to his anxiety.

“You’re thinking of and worrying about your wife, as well as considering the future,” Donald continued. “I’m glad that you’re being considerate like that. So no, I wasn’t laughing at your worries.”

“I see.”

“Anyway, about your wife’s duties. It’s not a bad idea, her becoming a teacher at the knights’ academy. My wife is teaching as an interim instructor at the moment.”

Donald’s wife taught geography at the knights’ academy—it seemed that that was recognized as part of a black knight’s duty. As female black knights were involved with childbirth, many taught the upcoming generations rather than go out to battle.

“Well, I know this is a bad way of saying this, but society wants female knights to have and raise children rather than go on missions. The data we have up until now suggests a trend that black knights who are mothers are able to use stronger old magic than black knights who are fathers, and there is also a slightly higher ratio of black knights born to mothers who are also black knights.”

“I see, so they leave missions to male black knights and childrearing to female black knights. The overwhelming majority of black knights are male anyway, so they can make do without a few female ones,” I surmised.

“That’s right. Since old magic users are stuck with the level of ability they’re born with, the country can’t afford to be complacent. Moreover... I know it’s wrong for me to say this. I’m not fit to be a black knight’s spouse.”

As if Donald were telling me a secret, he came closer to his prismaphone and lowered his voice. I thought that since this was a direct meeting between us through the device, there wasn’t much meaning in the action—however, Donald was clearly showing his feelings.

“I’m so relieved that my wife isn’t in danger on missions. I know I shouldn’t say that—not even to you—when there are others whose partners are out on assignment. Still, the fact that the worst won’t happen is incredibly important to me.”

I thought that, surely, a black knight’s spouse wasn’t fit to say this.

Regardless of what division knights belonged to, it was their duty to protect the country, its people, and their livelihoods—they took pride in that. To deny that at all was simply unacceptable.

However, I was able to understand his feeling of relief that his beloved spouse was teaching students history or geography, rather than worrying about her losing her life.

“So, Joshua, it’s important to talk to Lina and hear her thoughts for the future, but she’ll be safe as an instructor. You wouldn’t have to worry about her dying, or her getting injured. Please understand how important that is.”

No one wanted their beloved spouse to be in danger.

Black knights and their white mage spouses may have met and married each other because of their roles, but we were still men and women who thought of each other as husband and wife. It was from that line of thought that Donald was advising me—to seriously consider Lina becoming an instructor.

“I’ll talk to her,” I said after a moment. “Thank you, Donald.”

I was able to be honest about my gratitude. My fellows at the royal academy had all noted how bad I was with words. I assumed that I was still lacking in that area, but I had vowed to make efforts toward forming a family with Lina as our compromise, and I thought that my relationship with Donald was going in a good direction.

On a morning several days after Lina had been scheduled to return from her mission, my mother sent me a summons from the main hall. The contents had only mentioned having breakfast together, however, I expected that our conversation would turn to her wanting to hold tea parties and have dresses made, and how she thought her budget was too low. The thought left me

dispirited from an early hour.

An attendant escorted me to the dining room in the main hall, where my mother and I partook in the breakfast that had been set out for us. It wasn't until after we had eaten and were sipping tea that my mother finally opened her mouth to speak.

"Has that girl still not returned?"

Mother always called Lina "that girl," I assumed because she still had not been able to accept her as my spouse. Even so, I thought that mother even taking an interest in Lina was progress.

"Yes. It's common for missions to go on for several days longer than anticipated."

While I knew this, it still worried me. A mission extending past its planned time meant that an issue had sprung up.

My mother did not respond for a moment. "Is that so?"

"Yes."

Thinking about the possibility that danger had befallen Lina made a chill spread through my chest. I received another cup of hot black tea to distract myself, and just then, heard a distant scream.

Startled by the voice, I raced from the dining room. I followed the sound of screams and commotion to the west hall, dreadful sweat running down my back.

I burst into the west hall, and the stench of damp sand and earth mixed with the reek of blood and rot permeated the air.

A maid sat in the corner of the entrance. She must have come to collect the laundry—a basket had fallen to the floor, and sheets and clothes lay scattered on the floor. I followed her line of sight to the source of the stench.

Filthy with dirt and dyed with blood, a ragged figure slowly lifted her head from where she sat on the bed.

"Ah, I'm sorry for causing trouble," she said after a moment.

“Lina!”

“As soon as I realized I had made it back, I lost my strength. I’m truly sorry for causing a scene.”

“That doesn’t matter! Are you okay?!”

I reached out my hand, but Lina shook her head to ward me off from approaching.

“I’m fine. I’m filthy, so it’s not a good idea to touch me.”

“But—”

“I really am fine—there is no need to worry. I will clean myself up, so we may talk later.”

“Don’t be stupid—you don’t look okay at all! Not to me!”

I ignored her warning and lifted her in my arms.

“W-Wait...!” Lina shifted, her cheeks and ears dyed red. “Please let me go! I’m heavy and filthy!”

Although she was still wearing all of her armor for her mission, her body was lighter than I had expected. Deep down, her delicateness surprised me. I couldn’t believe that she could fight monsters with her slender body.

I ordered a servant to prepare a bath, change of clothes, and a meal for Lina, then headed toward the washroom further in the west hall.

“You can’t call yourself heavy if a civil servant like me can carry you.”

“L-Lord Joshua! Please put me down—I can walk by myself!”

“It’ll be faster if I carry you.”

I sat Lina down in a chair in the dressing room, then started to take off her robe, spaulders, and other equipment.

My intention had been to give Lina the strongest divine magic I could—resistance magic, body enhancement magic, speed enhancement magic, and barrier magic. Considering Lina’s fighting style didn’t allow for heavy armor, I had bestowed magic upon her spaulders, greaves, breastplate, boots, and robe. I had even put recovery magic into her earrings.

Even so, her equipment was now ragged and had lost its strength. Her gauntlets were so crushed that I thought her hands would have been torn off had they not been worn. Some parts of her equipment crumbled under my touch, unsettling me to my core. Large cracks split her spaulders, and her main weapon, the longbow she still gripped tightly, had many gashes in it as if left by claws.

If my divine magic had been even a little weaker... I shuddered at the thought.

I urged Lina into the washroom that the attendants had so frantically prepared and ordered the maids to attend to her in the bath, while I returned to the sitting room with Lina's tattered equipment. As I looked at the gear that she would never use or wear again, I felt terror over and over again.

I had never felt such deep fear—the fear that I might lose my wife.

Afterward, I heard a report from the Black Knights Regiment that on this mission, one of the black knights suffered a grievous injury and had been pulled from the front lines. A new breed of dragon had appeared in the Great Azure Sands, and that black knight had lost both a leg and an eye; with an enormous laceration across their back as well, they had been forced into retirement.

While the probability of encountering a new type of dragon was quite low, it wasn't impossible. Matching that new breed of dragon in battle had apparently been difficult, and the mission had been hard fought. That was why the expedition had been extended.

I felt that before long, if missions like this continued to happen, something would befall Lina that she would not be able to recover from.

What if Lina had been that black knight, forced to retire? What if Lina had returned with an immense wound? Without limbs? Or as an unspeaking, chilled corpse?

Just imagining it left me shuddering, and it felt like my heart had frozen over.

Donald's words rang in my head: "The fact that the worst won't happen is incredibly important to me." I, too, knew it was wrong to think this as the spouse of a knight, but right now I understood my friend's words very much.

As I gazed at the greaves crumbling like dust in my hands, I made up my mind.

I would not hesitate to protect my wife.

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Time passed incredibly quickly. With each birthday I felt time move all the faster.

It had been three years since I married Lord Joshua in that small church, and it was now our kingdom's calendar year of 784.

Black Knights Secretary General Roche, who had presided in his position for a long time, retired due to his age, and a new secretary general took his place. Apparently this man was young and kind, a deeply trusted friend to His Highness the Crown Prince from their time at the royal academy, and performed duties as a white mage husband to a female black knight.

I had only met him once, and I thought he seemed to be a person of many talents. Well, for a plain black knight like myself, he was completely removed from my everyday life, so the change in secretary generals only brought with it a bit of loneliness that Roche wouldn't be around anymore.

For the past three years, my married life with Lord Joshua had been going well—for a time. Lately, we hadn't seen each other at all.

With his job at the royal palace keeping him busy, he rarely came home. Although we were supposed to be living together as husband and wife in the west hall at the Granwell estate, it felt like I lived there entirely alone much of the time. Thanks to that, I was ill at ease.

Those living in this house before I came—namely, Lady Sherry and the servants—still did not accept my marriage to Lord Joshua. Our life in the west hall was still pleasant only because this was Lord Joshua's home.

The majority of the servants thought that it was beneath them to service this house where I was effectively living alone. That was why things had been so difficult since Lord Joshua had stopped coming home so often.

I myself had been put on more missions at fortresses that were in territories slightly farther away, affording me less time spent in the west hall—which may have been my saving grace. It took quite a lot to put up with the servants' brusque attitudes and objections.

The trouble of not being able to meet with Lord Joshua was that he could not grant divine magic to my equipment. This was only an issue when I was away on hunting missions or stationed at fortresses, because without divine magic I would be left defenseless with my life at stake—and that could spell trouble for the lives of the black knights I fought beside.

My loneliness at being unable to meet Lord Joshua and living in solitude in the west hall was a separate problem.

In three days, I would be dispatched to another fort. As this fort was near to one of the Three Wicked Expanses where monsters and dragons frequented, I wanted my preparations to be perfect. However—

“We’ve just received word from the royal palace. It appears Lord Joshua will not be returning until the end of the week,” a blunt lady-in-waiting told me.

At the end of the week, I would be on duty at the fortress. His schedule would not allow for us to meet before then.

If that was the case, I would have to take my equipment to Lord Joshua at the royal palace and receive his divine magic when he had a recess. I had done this many times by now.

I checked my equipment and began to pack it. I was sure I could save time if it was all ready for Lord Joshua to imbue it with divine magic. I didn’t want to trouble him for longer than necessary.

After I checked my spaulders, breastplate, gauntlets, and other gear, Lady Sherry came from the main hall in an unexpected visit. Two ladies-in-waiting accompanied her, along with Cameron—and these three were glaring at me.

“Do you have a moment?” Lady Sherry asked.

“O-Of course.” I could not refuse.

“Do you understand the position Joshua is in now?” Lady Sherry continued.

It took me a moment to respond. “Huh?”

Lady Sherry sat down comfortably on the sofa, a folding fan in her hand. “My son is in a position of grave importance. He is spending his time now in necessary preparation to become the future prime minister.”

“I-I understand.”

“It appears that you do not understand whatsoever just how important this time is for him, so I will spell it out clearly for you, all right? I will not have you interrupting his work.”

As if to supplement the former marchioness’s words, Cameron added, “In other words, you will not be taking those items to Lord Joshua, and you will not be distracting him.”

“Ah, but I must see him!” I protested. “I’m going on a mission to protect citizens from dragons and monsters! Telling me not to prepare for that is—”

Before I could finish, a leather pouch filled with money was placed on the table. The coins inside clinked against each other.

“Before you married Joshua, you received magic through commission, correct?” Lady Sherry asked. “Why not go ask that same white mage? So long as you have the coin, it shouldn’t be a problem. You may go ahead and use this money.”

“But if I do that...” Surely they understood how magic affinity worked!

“This should settle the matter,” said Cameron.

From the breast pocket of his jacket, Cameron pulled out an envelope and handed it to me. It was addressed to me, and sent by the Black Knights Regiment executive office.

I opened the envelope. Inside was a single sheet of paper, written upon with letters so beautiful they looked as if they were modeled from a textbook.

We wish for you to work even harder on your hunting missions as well as your fort duties. However, you must not trouble your spouse’s work.

The letter was directly from the newly-appointed secretary general of the Black Knights Regiment. It stated that it would be impossible for me to receive divine magic from Lord Joshua, who was busy with his work. However, the letter still asked me to work hard on my missions against dragons and other monsters.

It took me a moment to speak. “This can’t be...”

“If you care for Joshua, then I implore you to take this into consideration,” said Lady Sherry.

The former marchioness stood, and just as easily as she had arrived, she began to leave the sitting room before adding, “Oh, one more thing. I would like you to consider the real reason as to why my son has not been coming home to you in the west hall.”

Lady Sherry left the west hall along with the two maids. It wasn’t like Lady Sherry had been loud or spoken to me in a domineering tone, but I felt exhausted, as if a typhoon had just swept through.

“You do understand the real reason Lord Joshua has not returned home?” Cameron asked.

“Well...because he is busy with work,” I replied. “He hasn’t the time to return home.”

Cameron shook his head and sighed deeply. His expression seemed to be making fun of me, as if to say that I really didn’t understand. “Do you not think it’s because he doesn’t want to see you?”

“I...”

“Of course, he is tied up with work. Currently, Lord Joshua is spending important time working as a civil servant in the royal palace. However, even so, do you believe it impossible for him to return home for days at a time?”

I couldn’t breathe for a moment. Could the reason he hadn’t returned to the west hall be that he didn’t want to see me? Had he been emphasizing an official reason for not returning home because of that?

“By all accounts, a civil official such as Lord Joshua should have a wife who is a renowned noblewoman of high birth. As he has decided not to inherit the title of marquis, it is all the more important for him to have close ties with other nobles. Yet... Thanks to the law of the country, a woman like you is his wife.”

I couldn’t reply.

“I ask you to think about the future, for Lord Joshua to be able to spend his time in peace when he returns,” Cameron continued.

Was I the only one who had thought that these three years since our marriage were going well? Had I been full of myself? I was suddenly aware that I had only been taking Lord Joshua's protection and support. Had I ever been of use to him? No matter how I thought about it, I couldn't come up with an answer.

"You are fortunate to be a knight. The Corps has dormitories, so you will have a place to reside and sleep. That should be sufficient."

"B-But Lord Joshua has said nothing about me being a nuisance..." I protested.

I hadn't seen him for days. He had sent me letters and cards when he started to get busier, but now they had stopped coming. Even correspondence via the prismaphone wasn't addressed to me, but rather to the maids and butlers.

Did he not even want to see my face?

"Do you believe Lord Joshua would do such a thing?" Cameron asked. "He is a kind man. However, his not returning home is an answer in itself."

I gathered my belongings. I felt awkward taking the things that had been bought for me, but there were a number of items that I wanted no matter what. I considered that I might get yelled at, yet still packed them.

The only things I wanted to take were a dress for outings, as well as everyday shirts, pants, and dresses. Then, the jade earrings I had received to commemorate our marriage, and the necklaces, bracelets, and other mementos from our anniversaries.

When I packed all of my equipment and maintenance tools, and then put on my knight uniform, my preparations were complete.

I left the west hall early the next morning, by myself. Surely, those in the marquis house would be happy now that I had finally left.

I wondered what Lord Joshua would think. I wondered what he truly thought of me—I still didn't know, but I was afraid to ask him. I was afraid that he would say, "I signed a contract with you and made a promise. That's always been our relationship, so don't get in my way."

It was a similar fear to standing up to a dragon.

When the Knights Corps executive office opened, I filled out the forms to

reenter the dorms, then took the pouch of money to Brendan for the first time in three years.

I wondered how my white mage friend would react when he saw me. Would he smile? Get angry? Be shocked? I hoped that if it were possible, he would laugh it off.

“Wh-What are you doing here?!”

When my friend saw me for the first time in a while, his voice echoed in the lonely cafeteria.

Chapter 4: He and She Sever Their Ties

Kingdom of Mert Calendar Year 785

After being discharged from the treatment center, I returned to the royal capital via carriage. En route I had to make transfers at towns and villages—and as I had not yet made a complete recovery from my injuries, I rested at one of these towns before taking another carriage. I took my time returning to the capital, and the journey lasted five days.

The carriage stopped at a wagon station in the center of the capital where I disembarked and then headed for the Kingdom of Mert's Knights Corps General Headquarters. The deadline to hand in my papers—the end of the seventh month—was drawing near.

I assumed that, as the General Headquarters was the department which coordinated all colors of knights, I would have to present my forms for withdrawing from the Corps and leaving the dorns not to the Black Knights Regiment executive office, but rather here instead. If I was wrong, I would ask the General Headquarters secretariat to deliver the papers the rest of the way for me.

I entered the whitish stone building and passed the reception desk on my way to the counter for the executive office. Seated behind it was the secretary, a woman who was still young and cute.

"Excuse me," I said. "I've come to submit these papers."

"All right, let me take them."

The female secretary smiled as she accepted both my documents and my knight badge, which was proof of my identity. Then and there, she confirmed the contents of the papers and handed me a replacement identification badge, and then the withdrawal process was over.

Enlisting had required so many trials, like stamina and practical exams, written tests, and interviews, yet resigning took only a moment.

“Also,” the secretary added, “this letter is addressed to you.”

“Thank you very much,” I replied. “You, and the rest of the Corps for taking care of me for so long.”

As I took the letter and turned to leave, everyone in the General Headquarters executive office stopped working, stood, and saluted.

“Thank you for your service to our nation!” they said as one.

“It is I who should thank you,” I replied, returning the salute.

I left the Knights Corps General Headquarters executive office, then cleaned out my room in the knights’ dormitory. I hadn’t left anything significant there, so I finished quickly.

When I returned my dress uniform to the dormitory supervisor, I was told that I could do whatever I liked with my everyday uniform. I put it in my luggage, more or less as a memento.

Then, I rented a room at an inn in the lower city. After resting, I looked at the letter that I had received from the General Headquarters.

The envelope was of pure white, high quality paper, and sealed with a design of a unicorn and ivy. It was a letter from the Granwell marquis family.

The next morning, I left my luggage in the room and headed toward the upper echelon of the capital’s nobles’ district—to the Granwell estate.

The letter stated that upon my return to the royal capital, I could come at whatever time—and it terrified me. Although I had been summoned by the marquis family, it hadn’t been by Joshua—it had been by Lady Sherry. Telling myself to not be nervous was impossible.

It had been a while since I stepped onto Granwell grounds. My home had once been this estate’s west hall for three years. Now, it had been a year since I was last here.

Just a little over a year ago, Lord Joshua had stopped coming back to the west hall, and it had seemed that he had been trying to take his spare moments at the royal palace to give me magic. The servants with longstanding connections

to the marquis house, without the master of west hall presiding there, had looked at me with cold, severe eyes, and in the end I hadn't been able to stand it and left. The small, simple room in the knights dormitory had felt warm and secure by comparison.

When Lord Joshua had been in the west hall, it had been my home—I had felt safe. Now, that felt like something from long ago.

I entered the grounds through the servants' gate on the east side, and when I rang a bell on the backside of the main hall, Cameron appeared.

"Come along quietly," he ordered.

"Understood."

This was the second time I had entered the main hall, with the first being when I had initially met Lord Joshua's family—four years ago, just after we had gotten engaged. I had not set foot in the main hall even once since then. Just like before, the main hall was so extravagant and elegant that my eyes hurt to look at it. And also just like before, I couldn't calm down.

After entering the sunroom facing the garden, we found Lord Joshua's mother, Lady Sherry. She wore a mellow dress and a minimal amount of jewelry. The round table had been set up with tea and snacks, but only enough for the former marchioness—none for me.

She eyed me as I hobbled over, relying on my cane, and furrowed her brows, seemingly displeased. "It seems you've greatly injured yourself."

"I apologize," I replied.

"I heard that you quit the Corps. Was it due to that injury?"

"Yes. I apologize," I repeated.

It was a while before Cameron carried in a plain chair for me and placed it facing the former marchioness. "Sit down," he ordered.

I wondered if Lady Sherry had needed that time to mentally prepare herself for sitting at the same table as me, a plebian.

"It's been four years since you married Joshua," she said. "Time flies."

“Yes it does,” I replied.

“I assume you understand the basic premise of your marriage to Joshua, with you being a black knight and him being a white mage, correct?”

I could guess what she was about to say.

My marital relationship with Joshua had been established because I had been a black knight. However, now that I wasn’t one anymore, our relationship was no longer valid—that was what Lady Sherry wanted to say. From the start, the former marchioness and her daughter had not approved of my marriage to Lord Joshua, but since it was an honor for a white mage to marry a black knight, as well as the law of this country, they had reluctantly put up with it.

As I was now, I had no qualification to stand by Lord Joshua’s side.

“My son took the opportunity in his marriage with you to refuse the title of marquis and decline to become head of our noble house,” Lady Sherry continued. She paused. “I approved of his decision to live as a civil servant—although if I must speak the truth, I would have liked for him to follow in his late father’s footsteps as head of the Granwell house.”

The former marchioness let out a small sigh. I wondered if she was sighing because her beloved son hadn’t fulfilled her wish to become the next marquis, and felt sad every time she remembered that reality.

“If my son chooses to be a civil servant, I will support him. Thus, I want him to become prime minister and protect this country in the future. To that end, I will do whatever it takes.”

Lady Sherry rang a small silver bell that had been left on the table. At the sound of the clear chime, the far door opened and Cameron entered with a black lacquered tray.

On the tray was a single document, a quill pen, and an inkwell.

“What my son needs is a wife from the nobility who befits his status and can support him to become prime minister,” Lady Sherry continued. “You and he have no children. The nobility typically does not condone divorces, except in unusual cases such as a grave crime or the inability to have children. In case you were unaware, it is typical among this country’s aristocracy to annul marriages

that do not produce children after three to five years before entering a second marriage.”

The document presented to me was to file for divorce.

During my four years of marriage with Lord Joshua, I had not had any children. With that as a strike against me for divorce, alongside my no longer being a knight, I had no reason to remain married.

I didn’t understand aristocratic society, but I thought that surely for a civil servant to succeed, he naturally needed a good understanding of his work, as well as a powerful family. For Lord Joshua to assume the position of prime minister, the influence of his spouse’s house and relatives was essential. I also thought it necessary for him and his prestigious wife to have a child between them.

I had nothing.

As a commoner with no living relatives, I had no family backing me, nor did I have children. Even if I did, they would be the children of a commoner—they would score Lord Joshua no favor in the political sphere. I couldn’t give him anything.

“I am grateful that you thought highly of and loved Joshua.”

I didn’t register her words for a moment. “Huh?”

The former marchioness lifted her head, and for the first time looked me directly in the eyes. This woman with light blonde hair, pale blue eyes, snow-white skin, and a delicate body was Lady Sherry. I thought that Lord Joshua and his sister Lady Margot must have taken after the late marquis, but I felt that she had the same intense, willful eyes as Lord Joshua.

“I am grateful that you cherished my son,” Lady Sherry continued. “I know there are many married folks in this world who are not able to cherish each other. For that, I am grateful. However...”

“I understand,” I said. “I would be of no use to Lord Granwell.”

I picked up the quill pen and signed my name on the divorce form.

My hand shook, and my handwriting—which hadn’t been pretty in the first

place—was now even messier. I hoped they would pardon me.

Though I had been suddenly told to separate from the man I yearned for and cherished in my own way, I did not cry, and I did not scream. I took my leave without complaint. I wished that they could at least forgive me for my poor handwriting.

“That reminds me,” Lady Sherry said. “One year ago, too, you agreed to my request so quickly.”

“Request?”

Lady Sherry checked my signature, then returned the document to the tray Cameron held. Without a sound, Cameron left through the door he had entered through.

“My request as a member of the Granwell house to not intrude on Joshua’s work, for his sake.”

I paused. “I remember.”

She had made that request just as Lord Joshua and I had started to not see each other due to our schedules—just over a year ago, after I had encountered and fought a new breed of dragon in the Great Azure Sands.

Our days where we could return home to the west hall—where we were supposed to live together—had grown fewer, and my hours alone there had grown longer. In the beginning, I had received letters and cards of apology for not being able to return home and lines proclaiming his loneliness at not being able to see me. But those had steadily stopped coming, replaced by ladies-in-waiting informing me that my husband would not be returning home that day. In the end, even those messages had stopped.

As Lord Joshua hadn’t had the time to return to the west hall, I had gone to meet him at the royal palace under the pretext of receiving divine magic or giving him gifts, but then Lady Sherry and the newly-appointed Black Knights Regiment secretary general had warned me not to interrupt Lord Joshua’s work.

I hadn’t been able to meet Lord Joshua. Without him at home, living alone in the west hall had felt shameful, and so I had left. Cameron and the other attendants had been ecstatic, telling me never to come again unless

summoned.

Though I had been unable to meet Lord Joshua, my missions had not changed, and I had once again had to ask Brendan to bestow divine magic on my equipment and infuse my magic stones with mana. I had told myself that I was just returning to how things had been before I had gotten married and that nothing had really changed compared to when I lived with Lord Joshua, but in reality, there was a steep difference.

My chances of injury and ruining my equipment had risen.

I remembered well the first days I had begun fighting with Lord Joshua's divine magic, wondering just how powerful it was. It hadn't felt real, repelling dragonbreath and taking attacks without a single scratch.

I stood from my seat and gave an official salute.

"I thank you for your hospitality. From the bottom of my heart, I hope for Lord Granwell to marry a splendid noblewoman."

With that farewell, I turned and left the sunroom. Cameron, at attention in the hallway, guided me back to the exit on the east side of the estate. I exited the residence, and then the grounds.

"Never see Lord Joshua nor Lady Margot ever again—you're a stranger to them now. And don't even think of trying to get into another noble house again, peasant."

As Cameron said this, he slammed the gate closed behind me.

With a heavy thud, he told me that my ties to Lord Granwell had been cut.

The restaurant we had gone to together had been plebeian, with many large platters of food that Lord Joshua had dished up for us splendidly. I remembered how surprised I had been to learn that he liked unsophisticated food and had a commoner's palate.

In the first play I had ever seen, the princess had nearly been offered to the beast as a sacrifice before the hero drove off the creature and, together with her, slew it. Through their cooperation they had fallen in love and gotten

married, then lived happily ever after, making a popular story at the theater. It had been interesting and moving, and I had felt like I had been in the story myself.

Though those young noblewomen at the theater had said such awful things, Lord Joshua had gallantly rescued me. I remembered well how gentlemanly he had been, and how my heart had pounded.

He had gifted me the book that the play we saw had been based on. After that, like a tradition, every time we went to see a play he would give me whatever book it had been based on. I had been happy to be able to look back on those memories.

On our anniversary, he had given me semitransparent jade earrings. It had been the first time a man had given me jewelry. I had been ecstatic. I had been embarrassed to hear later that receiving gems that were the same color as his eyes had shown his possessiveness and desire to keep me for himself, but I had still been happy.

I had been someone who had known only battle, and Lord Joshua had been the one to show me little by little the pleasure and happiness I could have as a person and as a woman.

Whenever I had faced off against dragons and monsters, Lord Granwell's divine magic had protected me. His slightly cold mana had surrounded me, defended me... I don't know how many times it had saved my life.

Over the past year we had hardly met, but he had upheld his promise to endeavor toward our compromise of becoming family. I had fallen in love with him and wanted to cherish him. Even now, I still felt that.

Now that I wasn't a black knight, I would only hold him back. I would be of no help to him.

I left the nobles' district and headed toward the inn I had left my luggage in. As much as I could, I kept to deserted streets as I relied on my cane.

Just being together didn't mean someone would treasure you. Sometimes, it was surely better to separate.

Surely that was the case. I thought that way—I wanted to think that way.

When I returned to the room I rented at the inn, my tears started to fall. My vision distorted and my breathing came quicker. It was there that I sat, as if I had crumbled.

I started to sob.

Soon enough there would be a beautiful noblewoman close beside him, and together they would live in that dazzling main hall. I could no longer be that person beside him. I could no longer eat meals with him, no longer go to the theater with him, no longer stroll the city with him. We had been separated.

I sobbed more. I felt such severe distress that I thought my chest might burst. I hadn't known how yearning for someone could be so painful.

Many of my tears fell, spreading round blotches on my knees and the floor.

From now on, I would be alone. I could never be close to him again.

I hoped they would forgive me for continuing to think of the man I fell in love with, the husband I had spent only a handful of years with.

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For the first time in roughly five months, I stepped onto the soil of my homeland and felt its breeze. When I realized I was home, my feet naturally stopped. The earth was slightly damp, and moisture was in the air.

"Lord Granwell? Is something the matter?"

"No," I replied. "Just happy to finally be home."

"Ah, right. The Allied Fiefdoms of Kiniath may be our neighbor, relatively speaking, but as it's sandwiched between seas, it's the same as having one or two countries between us."

One of the people accompanying me this time on my trip abroad across the sea was a mage civil servant. He smiled and took a deep breath of our country's air.

"I once heard that when you go to another country, the air is different too. I'd say that's true," he said.

"I suppose so."

The Allied Fiefdoms of Kiniath had been dry, and its air had smelled of parched earth. I was able to say that my inspection of a country with a different climate and environment had been enjoyable, educational, and enriching.

I and the other civil officials boarded a carriage that had been waiting at a curb for us, and alongside the knights guarding us, the carriage set off.

“More importantly, I was stuck in a town for a month and a half due to an out-of-season sandstorm,” the mage civil servant said. “I was lucky to see their technology that protects them against sandstorms, but still—a month and a half!”

Kiniath was rife with deserts and arid regions, and sandstorms were a common natural disaster. If nothing was done, the sand could swallow up both towns and people. To prevent that, magic tools had been arranged throughout the towns to encompass and protect them during sandstorms.

In our country, there were no such magic tools that could maintain a barrier strong enough to endure a sandstorm that lasted up to two or three months. Our mage civil servants and magic craftsmen were understandably in a tizzy after seeing that.

“However, thanks to being trapped for a couple months, we were able to see why the people and livestock in town had no troubles with eating. It’s important to see these things for ourselves,” I replied.

Magic was closely related to people’s lives. Our country specialized in divine and attack magic to face off against dragons and monsters, while Kiniath had developed magic tools that were less for attack and more for defense and aid in their livelihoods. That was why, even though a sandstorm had trapped us for months, we had had access to food and drinking water.

I thought that both our countries would be able to sincerely work toward commerce, study abroad opportunities for students, and the like. We could receive technology related to magic tools, magic for daily life, and various support magics, while in return we could offer our country’s technology related to divine magic and export foodstuffs.

“You’re right about that, Lord Granwell!” the mage civil servant replied. “I found it to be of great interest. However, our planned three months’ stay

turned into five. I was brought into my wife's house, you see. I don't want her and my daughter to lose their affection for me and throw me away!"

I paused. "That sandstorm was large, and certainly unexpected. We finished our work while we were confined there, so once our oral and written reports have been submitted, we can take a sizable holiday. Please spend that time with your family and no one else."

"I will do that. I hope they like the souvenirs I brought from Kiniath."

The other mage civil servants and foreign officials nodded, sharing similar feelings.

All civil officials here were enthusiastic and ambitious about their work, which was why they had been chosen for this trip overseas. They all found their jobs important and worth doing, but it wasn't as if they made light of their families, fiancées, or other personal connections. Everyone here wanted to have a happy relationship with those people, myself included.

Though I felt satisfaction and fulfillment from my work, Lina had constantly been on my mind.

Without asking her opinion, I had the Black Knights Regiment executive office reassign her to the knights academy as an instructor. Immediately afterward, Prime Minister Herschel and Connelly had ordered me to begin inspection visits to many foreign and domestic locations, and I hadn't been able to properly see Lina this year.

Magic prismaphones grew unstable depending on both mana amount and distance, so I hadn't been able to use it for a long-distance conversation. In the end, the only means for communication were letters. The further letters had to travel, the more chances there were for them to be lost, so even if I had been able to send a letter, there was no guarantee Lina would receive it.

Even if we could only have one-way communication between us two, I diligently sent letters to Lina through her executive office—although I hadn't been able to send letters during the sandstorm due to being completely isolated. Along with the letters, I sent along hair ornaments and ribbons I had come upon during my travels. I didn't think they would remove her anxieties or displeasure, nor serve as an apology for changing her occupation without

asking. Even so, it was all I had been able to do.

Connelly had told me that my travels abroad would go on for about two or three years—five at most. I hoped my colleagues would pardon me from spending five whole years doing this, as I believed two to be plenty.

After my travels abroad finished, I could once again spend time with Lina. I would use the vacation time I had accumulated to go home to my family's estate.

Our relationship which had come to a standstill would once again be able to advance. It was a pity that time had been wasted between us, but we would be together until our old age. I hoped that we could take back that time, and that everything would be all right.

The carriage made its way from the harbor to the capital, and then arrived at the royal palace.

In the time I had been gone, both the palace and the rest of the capital had embraced autumn, and the maids and civil officials that worked in the palace had changed to their cold-weather uniforms.

The foreign affairs director who had led the trip abroad addressed us in the lobby.

“This long trip overseas was successful because of everyone’s cooperation. Thank you. About the unexpected sandstorm which befell us—I regret that the natural disaster ate up so much of our time. I would like to apologize to your families as well. While our travel group will be dissolved momentarily, I would like for each of you to use the results you brought back in meaningful ways. Also, we will be holding a party in recognition of your services at a later date; for this brief period, please take leisurely vacations to rest your bodies and spend time with your families. That is all—dismissed!”

With that, we successfully reached the end of our trip abroad.

“Good work,” I said to the others.

“Oh, Lord Granwell—you must be tired after the trip. Are you off to His Excellency the Prime Minister’s office?” someone asked.

“Yes. I already have my papers ready to deliver, so I will be submitting them and giving him my regards,” I replied.

The young civil officials from the policy department who had gone on the trip with me lugged heavy-looking written reports and materials.

The minister of foreign affairs lightly patted their shoulders, and mine too. “It’s good for you to be keen in your work, but try to do your duties in moderation.”

He and the foreign affairs officials departed together. I was sure that they were off to perform a detailed examination of the data collected during our trip. By all means, I also had to do the same, but I was naturally exhausted. For just under a year, nearly without pause, I had been traveling here and there

both abroad and domestically, and my fatigue had built up.

“Well then, we are off as well. After submitting the written reports and data, it will be time for vacation,” I told the policy department officials.

“Understood,” one replied.

I entered the prime minister’s office and reported to Prime Minister Herschel, Connelly, and Virgil about my return from abroad, and apologized about my tardiness.

“It was a natural disaster, Joshua. Still, it looks like you got a lot of information,” commented Prime Minister Herschel.

“I did. I believe we procured a lot of excellent things for our country.”

“Good work, Joshua. I’m glad you seem to have had a rewarding trip. Now,” Connelly said with a cheerful smile as he picked up some documents, “about the next one.”

Unable to hide my shock at having the next trip brought up as soon as I had returned from the last one, I gasped. Prime Minister Herschel’s and Virgil’s faces both froze in surprise too.

“This trip will be short, as we are joined by land—it should be a bit easier for you,” Connelly continued. “Now, the Kingdom of Yurlo—”

“Hold a moment!” Prime Minister Herschel interrupted.

“Dear me! Whatever is the matter?” Connelly asked.

“Joshua has just returned—what’s more, his trip abroad went on for five months!”

“And why does that matter?” Connelly passed me the details on the next trip abroad. He looked clueless.

The prime minister paused. “When is the trip to Yurlo supposed to commence?”

In response to the question, I looked at the materials I’d been handed. It seemed that the departure was to be in five days. I was supposed to read and review reports related to the Kingdom of Yurlo, clarify the contents of the trip,

conduct briefs with every department, select the personnel, and confirm the schedule—all in that time?

I stiffened. Virgil held his head in his hands. Prime Minister Herschel—anger clear on his face—snatched the documents from me.

“What’s the matter? Is there a problem?” Connelly asked.

“The problem is that you don’t see any issue with this!” Prime Minister Herschel snapped.

“Why? Joshua is capable of it. If he can’t handle this level of work, then he won’t be able to continue in this office in its next era. He should be doing what he can now to—”

A loud, low thud reverberated through the room, and even the policy department officials froze. Not even once had Prime Minister Herschel pounded his hand on his desk before.

“Quit it, Connelly. Joshua hasn’t sat in his chair here for most of the past year to begin with! It’s always inspecting, inspecting, with him—either abroad or in some provincial town! Why are you only sending Joshua to do work outside the office?”

Connelly paused. “I have hopes for him. In this country’s next era, when His Highness Prince Silas becomes the next king, Joshua and Virgil will be the ones in this office to support him.”

“I don’t object to them being the ones remaining in this office when that time comes. I’m also not denying that there is plenty of experience that they can only gain now as aides. I do want them to gain that experience,” Prime Minister Herschel stated.

“Then why, may I ask, are you so against my actions?”

Connelly threw the question at Prime Minister Herschel in the kind of voice one takes when trying to reason with a naughty child. His expression revealed that he really did not understand why he was being refused. Was he—Frederick Connelly—the right hand to both the former and current prime minister, and a man who had worked for many years as an administrative assistant, a person who would make excessive demands of a colleague?

“Why?” Herschel retorted. “Joshua, Virgil, and everyone else employed here don’t exist just to work. They all have families and private lives. Without time off they’ll just wear themselves thin—they won’t be able to produce good work. Joshua just finished a trip abroad that lasted five months and needs a vacation. Why can’t you understand something that obvious?”

Suddenly, the light left Connelly’s eyes, and a hollow expression transformed his face as he started muttering in a low voice. His lightless eyes were unfocused, and I couldn’t sense any will or vitality from him.

“A vacation? For Joshua? He needs...something like...a vaca...?”

Something was clearly wrong—he was not normal. Unsteady on his feet, he crossed the room and went out into the hallway.

Prime Minister Herschel took a deep breath and ordered, “Someone, go restrain Connelly.” He looked down at the papers he held and crushed them in his fist, then threw the documents—now wastepaper—into the trash bin.

“Anyway, Joshua,” he continued. “You worked hard on your long trip, as well as on those data and reports. Go get lots of rest.”

“Thank you. But what about the trip to the Kingdom of Yurlo?” I asked.

“It has nothing to do with the policy department. It’s a social event for students focused on culture and the arts. There’s no need for you to go.”

Virgil nodded as he drank black tea from a large mug—one I had brought back from Kiniath. “Even so, what happened with Connelly? I didn’t think he was the type of person to say unreasonable things like that. He seemed rather off too.”

“I agree,” I said. “It felt...sudden, somehow—how strange he became.”

“He’s not old enough to nod off during work and then mix things up, and he acted so oddly out of the blue. I wonder if he’s all right,” Virgil added.

As soon as Connelly had heard the word “vacation,” he had started muttering to himself, like he wasn’t all there. I didn’t understand, but nevertheless thought it was eerie, and I wouldn’t be able to relax if we left him as he was.

“We’ll talk about Connelly later. Joshua, you’re due for a rest. Ms. Lina should be busy instructing at the knights’ academy, but you might be able to talk to her

office and get her on a vacation as well,” suggested Prime Minister Herschel.

“Leave the rest to us,” added Virgil.

“Then I will be taking a brief vacation,” I said, bowing my head.

I left the prime minister’s office. It was just before noon, and the knights’ academy wouldn’t let out until evening. I supposed that Lina and I could have dinner together.

I had sent a letter announcing that my return would be roughly today or tomorrow, although since neither the date nor time could be definitely stated, I thought Lina might be surprised at my sudden return.

Perhaps she would be angry. I had selfishly had her transferred from going on missions to becoming an instructor, and without any word to her I had also spent all my time on foreign and domestic inspections. I had barely been home.

I may have been thinking a bit too selfishly. I also may have been somewhat afraid to see Lina. However, if she were angry, I would apologize and tell her my thoughts and feelings, and listen to hers as well. We would find a common ground together.

With those thoughts in my head, I started for home, riding in an unsteady carriage.

It left the royal palace and went down through the castle town before turning to the nobles’ district. It was in the heart of the nobles’ district that the Granwell estate lay.

I was accustomed to the scenery of the nobles’ district and the Granwell estate, but after five months away it all seemed fresh. The main hall’s curtains and furnishings had all been changed for autumn, and from my window I could see that the vegetation which covered the west hall’s walls had turned amber and crimson.

When I entered the main hall, my mother, Cameron, and the attendants came to greet me. Understandably Lina wasn’t among them, but I still missed her.

“Welcome home,” my mother greeted me. “You were abroad for quite a long time.”

“Although it may have been due to work, I apologize for being away for so long. I’m glad to be home. I’m relieved to see you’re the same as ever, mother.”

“Thank you.” My mother paused. While she wore a pleased expression, there seemed to be some tension mixed in as well. “Joshua, I have something to discuss with you.”

After a quick bath, I changed my clothes and ate lunch before heading to the sitting room.

In here, too, everything had been prepared with autumn in mind—the flowers arranged in the vases, the cushions, and more. The tea that the maid prepared smelled of fruit, and the confections and chestnuts set out had been sprinkled with syrup and boiled sugar. As always, my mother was rather fond of organizing every minute detail in accordance with the current season. I remembered the dresses she had made for grand soirees, and the jewelry she had bought—they had been lovely.

“Now then,” I started, “what did you want to discuss?”

My mother was seated on the sofa, sipping a tea that smelled like apples. She gave me a small nod. “First, I would have you sign this document.”

I picked up the single paper that Cameron had placed on the coffee table. It was a filing for divorce, and for some reason, Lina’s signature was on it. It was terribly disheveled, so much so that I could barely even compare it to her normal handwriting.

I stared at it. “What?”

“Once you sign it, I’ll have it sent to the royal palace at once,” my mother continued. “Then, you can choose whomever you find an interest in among the noblewomen listed in here.”

An imposing mountain of profiles sat upon the table. From the white and pink bindings, I could tell that the contents of the profiles were all of high-ranking ladies.

I stared at my mother. However, due to the anger brewing in my gut, my stare

turned into a scowl. “Why should Lina and I have to divorce?”

My mother let out a soft gasp, and Cameron’s face turned pale as he took two or three steps back—yet my gaze did not waver from my mother.

“W-Well, because...” She seemed to search for words. “That girl no longer has any qualifications to be your wife.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If you are to become the future prime minister, you need to accept an influential noblewoman as your wife. You are past your mid twenties, but a ten-year age gap is common for us nobles. You should—”

I crushed the file for divorce in my fist and snapped, “What do you mean Lina ‘no longer has any qualifications to be my wife’? I would have you explain, mother”

She seemed stunned. “What are you saying? I mean, you... You have ignored that girl for the past year. You neglected to take the time to give her divine magic—as if you had stopped caring for her. A person’s heart is subject to change, so I thought it natural that your feelings toward her had diminished.”

“Huh? What—I, ignore Lina? I have not had a change of heart either!”

Being told that I had ignored my wife shocked me as if I had been punched. Certainly, I hadn’t been able to make the time to speak to Lina face-to-face. As much as I could, I had sent her letters and minor souvenirs—I hadn’t expected that to be “ignoring” her.

“You don’t have to lie. That girl already has no more intentions to remain with you. She has moved on.” My mother gripped the fan she held in both hands. “When we discussed the divorce, that girl said nothing. She did not object nor refuse—she signed her name at once. Thus, she must have moved on from you. Periods of absence change one’s feelings. A year may seem short, but is in fact long.”

“No...”

Lina had signed the file for divorce without saying a thing? I couldn’t believe it—I didn’t want to believe it.

“When you first married, I could not agree to it,” my mother continued. “After all, that girl was a plebeian and an orphan—even after becoming a member of our house, the only honor she could offer was to you, as you are a white mage. However, during the last four years, I watched you grow closer and saw how that girl treasured you. I started to think that your marriage may not have been a bad one.”

My mother gripped her knees tightly with both hands.

“I thought it was going well, but after the third year you neglected that girl. For the past year you have been absorbed in your work as an assistant to the prime minister, going on inspections out in the county and abroad—never coming home. You didn’t give her divine magic and she got injured. She’s grown weak. Yet you have no concern for her and have ignored and disregarded her.”

“You’re being ridiculous! What are you saying, mother?! Lina’s hurt? Weak? Impossible!”

Lina was an instructor at the knights’ academy. I had received documents from her executive office detailing her classes there. She taught the first-years Monster Studies—a lecture on the ecology of dragons and other monsters—as well as the basics of archery. What had she been doing to get injured or grow weak? I couldn’t figure it out.

“The one being ridiculous is you, Joshua! Obviously she wouldn’t be safe on missions without your divine magic!”

“Lina is no longer going on missions! She was transferred to teaching children at the knights’ academy!”

At that, both my mother’s and Cameron’s eyes opened as wide as could be, and they grew rigid.

For just a moment, the room fell completely silent.

Shouting at each other so loudly had left us both breathless. Our panting echoed loudly in the room as we regained our breath.

“Joshua, I...”

As if to cut off my mother’s words, I left the sitting room and ignored the

words my mother and the servants threw at me. I hurried to the west hall—the home where Lina and I lived together.

The west hall seemed unchanged after my long departure. I opened the large door, and the entrance room spread out before me, its calmly colored furniture and curtains welcoming me. Thanks to the maids' diligence in cleaning, everything was orderly, without a hint of dust. However, there was absolutely no sense of life. There was no presence of a person living here, nor any warmth. Lina did not live here.

I rapidly ascended the stairs and entered Lina's room.

The room was made up of white walls, wood-grained furniture, and curtains of deep green with lace that let in light. There was a bed, a dresser, and a small wardrobe. There was not a single thing extravagant about it—it was a quiet space.

I opened the wardrobe to find a number of her everyday clothes and day dresses inside. From some open spaces, I could tell that several pieces had been taken out. Some shirts, pants, and modest dresses had disappeared, while the more lavish clothes had been left behind. I opened the small jewelry box inside the wardrobe—most of the jewelry I had bought remained.

"Why, Lina?" I whispered.

"That girl left the Black Knights Regiment—she no longer needed to be with you."

My mother had come after me. She spoke as if she were appealing to me.

"Now you can have a young noblewoman at your side, from a family that can help you succeed in your career. This is a good thing."

"Why did Lina quit being a black knight?" I asked.

"Because she was greatly injured while out on a mission, of course. When I summoned her here, she was limping along with a cane. Her body is no longer befitting of a knight."

Lina quit being a knight because she was greatly injured? Wounded so badly that she was limping and using a cane?

“You now have no need to concern yourself with...” My mother paused. “Joshua?”

“What was I doing all that for?” I could barely speak. “I had been trying to prevent something like this. Why...?”

I had wanted to protect Lina. I had striven to keep her far from danger, to ensure that she suffered no injuries nor had to worry over her life. I had worked to prevent her from forming painful and grueling memories. Yet even so, what I had done had turned out to be meaningless.

“Joshua, did you... Did you perhaps not know...?” my mother asked.

“Lina was ordered to stop going on missions and instead become an instructor at the knights’ academy. It was what I wanted—I submitted the transfer request and the Knights Corps executive office officially approved it. His Excellency the Prime Minister also confirmed it. The notice of personnel change came a year and a few months ago.”

“But that means...!”

The jewelry pieces inside the box I held in my hand were all made of jade, the color of my eyes. Only the jewelry with value remained—the items missing were the jewelry a commoner could afford, as well as the gifts I had bought Lina for our anniversaries.

Was it okay for me to think that her leaving with the anniversary presents meant that she still had feelings for me, if even only a little?

“Mother, when did Lina leave here?”

She thought for a moment. “About a year ago, I believe. I heard that after she left here, she lived in a dorm at the Corps. However, after her resignation, she should have also left the dorm.”

“When did you summon her here?”

Another pause. “Just a few days ago.”

“Then where is Lina now?” I asked.

My mother’s face went pale, and she shook her head. “I don’t know.”

I had to find her. With that thought, I returned the jewelry box to its former spot.

I would call upon my uncle's help to track down Lina's whereabouts—she would need protection and recuperation before her injuries worsened.

A knock sounded at the door of Lina's room, and a lady-in-waiting entered.

"Lord Joshua, a guest has arrived for you," she reported. From her flustered countenance, the visitor had not sent word before their arrival.

"Who is it?"

"There are, um, inspectors here from the royal palace." Her voice quivered as she held out a slip of paper. "Um, they're asking where Lady Lina is."

"Where Lina is?" Were the inspectors asking if I knew where she was?

The note that the maid held was an official summons from the royal palace's office of inspection.

Chapter 5: Her, in the Town of Steam

Kingdom of Mert Calendar Year 785

If you looked at a map, you could see where the local lord's rule extended in this remote northern region. The cold came early here—while the calendar claimed that it was still autumn, the low temperature turned my breath to white mist.

I was in the Kingdom of Mert's foremost hot springs village: Sathante.

A forest surrounded the village. Leaves were changing to red and yellow before falling, and evergreens stood out with their pungent pine needles. It seemed that snow would start falling in a few weeks.

The white, cloudy water that gushed from the hot springs helped with recuperation from exhaustion, improved one's sensitivity to the cold, and sped up recovery from wounds. Despite its remote location, many people from both in and outside the country traveled to the hot springs to take advantage of their therapeutic properties.

Because nobles were naturally among those in need of such treatment, red knights were deployed to guard this hot springs town despite its distance from the territory's capital. It was their duty to protect the village from monster invasions.

The village was divided into three large zones. The center area had a large fountain gushing with springwater, with lines of shops surrounding it. On the north side was the expansive nobles' district, where there were nobles-only hotels and private villas. Opposite, on the south side, was the commoners' district. There were hotels for commoners, long-term rental complexes, and the like.

The promenade I walked along had been developed with strolling in mind and circled the perimeter of the town. I was doing my physical therapy for walking, and refilling the mana in monster-repelling lanterns as I went. This was a job I undertook in lieu of rent for the room I was staying in. I was grateful that

someone like me, relying on a pension during my long-term medical treatment, could perform this small job to save money. I was glad I had come here—the recuperative effects of the hot springs had lessened the cramps in my limbs as well as reduced my pain. I could move more easily now too.

With today's work finished, I slowly walked along the promenade to the commoners' district.

Unlike the private facilities for aristocrats in the nobles' district, there was a relaxed warmth to the line of hotels and restaurants here. Furthermore, there was a residential district on the far side of the area. Those who had lived here for a long time had their houses here, along with dorms and housing complexes for hotel employees who had moved here from other cities. The locals' eateries, grocers, and general stores were also here.

I entered the residential district and headed for the pharmacy on the far side. An old woman named Mary ran the store, selling medicine, cosmetics made with natural ingredients, and daily necessities.

When I opened the door, a wooden chime affixed to it gently clacked.

The inside of the store was small and dim, with medicinal herbs dangling from the ceiling to dry. Bottles filled with things that looked like lizards and bugs lined the shelves on the walls. The place had a fairly eerie ambience. However, the medicine Mary prepared was especially effective, so I could endure some of the creepiness and the odors.

"Thank you, Mary. We'll come again. Enjoy the rest of your day."

"Yes, you too."

At precisely the right moment for me to take their place, a young married couple left the shop with a bag of medicine.

"Ah, hello," I said to them as they passed. "Hello, Mary. I'm here for my usual medicine."

Mary made a cream that reduced the cramps in my limbs, and tonics that expelled the remaining poison in my body and treated my magic burns. Thanks to the cream and tonics, my once aching body was now quite a bit better.

Mary seemed to have been mixing herbs behind the counter. After checking to see that it was me—Lina—she said, “All right. Wait while I get it all ready,” before beginning work on my medicine.

A chair for customers had been placed in the corner of the room. Already used to the wait, I took a seat. Through the window, I could see the couple who had just left the shop with the medicine they had bought. If I remembered correctly, they once told me that they had been married for four years—just as I had been. The two were linked arm in arm, bodies pressed together as they walked home, seeming blissful. Whenever I happened to see happily married couples or parents with children, my heart ached.

I couldn’t help but compare myself to them. I knew everyone had their own circumstances and positions—but sure enough, I couldn’t stop my miserable thoughts.

“Now then,” Mary said, giving me a broad smile, “let me see how your wounds look.”

I responded with a strangled, “O-Okay.”

My everyday attire consisted of long-sleeved blouses I could wear year-round, cotton pants or long skirts, and flat shoes. In the winter, I put on a heavy cardigan as well. I wore these to cover the terrible scars on my arms, as well as the discolored skin caused by the poison. I would feel miserable if I caught the attention of others, and I didn’t want to show anyone my arms or legs.

Mary sat in a chair on the interior side of the counter. I had rolled up the shirt sleeve on my right arm, and she was running both hands over it as if to envelop it.

“It seems like the poison isn’t going away so easily. It figures that a dragon’s venom is such a pain in the neck. The recovery on your magic burns is still slow no matter how many times I treat them too,” Mary said.

My skin was originally a pale peach, but patches had been discolored where the internal tissues had been affected by the poison. They had started out purple, but were now a reddish black. Cut into my skin were large scars,

crisscrossing these spots and making for a rather disgusting sight. My right leg looked just as bad.

Mary, however, had no qualms about touching my arm and leg. She had told me once, “When you live a long time as an herbalist, you examine hundreds of people in far more wretched conditions than this.”

“Your wounds still cramping? Any pain in there?” she asked.

“Yes, but since coming here and using the cream you made for me, the pain has gotten much better,” I replied.

“Is that so? Well, that’s only natural, ’cause you’ve been using my medicine, hee hee hee.”

Mary started preparing my cream and tonics. Apparently every time she inspected my condition, she subtly changed the mixture.

“How’re you doing, Lina?” Mary asked suddenly as she crushed dried herbs and some sort of powder in a white mortar.

I tilted my head. “How so?”

“You seemed pretty envious of that couple earlier.”

“A-Ah... Well, um, I’m sorry, I didn’t...”

“What’re you so flustered about, child? Where’s your husband? You said you’re retired, but you were still a black knight. If you had your husband healing those wounds with recovery magic every day, you’d heal up a lot more quickly.”

The scraping sound of the pestle against the mortar echoed in the shop.

“We divorced,” I said finally.

“What? Divorced?!” Mary cried. “What kinda life did you and your husband lead, child? If you had just lived normally as husband and wife in the first place, you probably wouldn’t have gotten such large wounds. Even so, being a white mage, he should have healed you up quickly.”

I paused. “Well...”

“I’m sure you know this,” Mary continued, “but a great many black knights retire from serious injuries or die when they’re young—that is, when they’re

still single, or when they're not yet close to their spouse."

"Oh?" I responded after a moment.

At my noncommittal reply, Mary let out a large sigh and mixed the contents of the mortar more roughly than usual. "Child, you do have the right understanding about the relationship between a black knight and a white mage, don't you?"

"They are marriage partners. The white mage bestows divine magic on a black knight's armor," I answered.

Mary raised her head from the mortar and gave me an angry look before her expression suddenly turned to astonishment. "Child, what is wrong with you? And what has your husband been doing?"

I told Mary about my former husband and his work as an assistant to the prime minister.

I spoke about our initial tea party, which hadn't left such a good impression, then about how our initial three month courting period had been fine, but that there really hadn't been much interaction between us. Even so, he and I had promised to strive toward a compromise to become family, and then got engaged.

I told her that the first three years of our marriage had been happy, but during the past year, my former husband—perhaps because his feelings for me had lessened—took on a staggering amount of work bustling about both in and outside the country, and had rarely returned home. I explained how I had heard from others that putting his nose to the grindstone was necessary because he wanted to take the prime minister's seat in the future, and how I had been told numerous times not to interfere, so I had taken a step back. Naturally, the times we saw each other, as well as the circumstances where I could receive magic from him, had dwindled to nothing.

I had turned to the white mage I previously received divine magic from before my betrothal to once again obtain magic, although the fact that it wasn't as powerful as Lord Granwell's caused me to be injured while on my last mission and get my equipment ruined. Then, as soon as I had completed my mission concerning the poison dragon, my time as a knight had come to an end.

As I was no longer a black knight, I had no need of a white mage's divine magic. As a result, my contract had been dissolved and my marital status met its end.

By the time I finished summarizing my story, Mary had finished the cream for my external wounds and the detoxification tonic.

"And that," I concluded, "is how my relationship with my husband ended. As a noble, he needs things like political and economic power, and as a wife, I can't give him that."

"Honestly, child! You're hopeless—your husband too."

Mary brewed an herbal tea that smelled faintly of flowers and poured me a cup. When I drank the pale green tea, it tasted just a little bit sweet.

"Listen here," Mary began. "The bond between a black knight and a white mage can't be broken. A good magic affinity means good affinity in all aspects. You make up for each other's shortcomings. You understand so far?"

I nodded.

"You and your husband complement each other, child. Your contributions may not have been clear to you, and they may not have been tangible political or economic benefits, but you surely supported your husband."

I couldn't reply for a moment. "If it's as you say, Mary—that I was of some help to him—then I'm glad."

I had never felt that way, as I did not think that I had been of any use to him. Lord Granwell had always been the one protecting me. But if I had assisted him in any way without me being aware of it, then I was happy.

"But what my former husband needs from now on is surely not me. Besides, it was because I was a black knight and he was a white mage that we even talked about getting married, so now that I'm not a knight anymore, it's only natural to cut our ties. I understand that, and I believe that, surely, he does as well."

"Did you ask him that directly?" Mary asked.

I froze up momentarily. "Well..."

"So you didn't ask him? You didn't say, 'I may have stopped being a black

knight, but would you still continue being my husband?”

“But, well, his mother—the former marchioness—was the one who spoke to me about the divorce.” I paused. “She said I would be a hindrance to his career.”

“You idiot!” Mary snapped. “Child, you weren’t married to your husband’s mother—you were married to him! Why wouldn’t you speak to him about matters concerning the both of you?! His mother shouldn’t have butted in in the first place. From now on, if a decision concerns the both of you, then you shouldn’t make it by yourself—and neither should that woman have any say.”

Mary’s words were so startling that I almost forgot to breathe.

She was right.

My marriage to Lord Granwell had been made because I was a black knight, he was a white mage, and we had good magic affinity. No one had been able to speak out against it because I had been a black knight. However, I had thought that once I stopped being one, our relationship would end regardless of my feelings.

Even so, our relationship was between *the both of us*—consequently, even if we had decided to dissolve our marriage, we should have first spoken about it.

“Child, did you think that no matter how much you said ‘Let’s compromise and get along,’ nothing would work out because nobles just behave cruelly toward commoners? Did you think that feelings don’t matter to someone from the high-ranking nobility?”

She hit the bull’s-eye. I couldn’t respond.

“Did you really think he would tell you that he was only treating you as his wife because of a contractual obligation? Weren’t you the one to assume that he would ignore your feelings? You were afraid of him telling you that to your face, so you ran off before it could happen—am I wrong?”

Unable to come up with anything to say in response, I sat there, stiff as a doll.



“Here’s where you’re going today. Sorry it’s so different every day.”

The red knights that guarded Sathante had a station in the hot springs town. It was here that I received written work instructions about what I was to do and where.

I checked the details that the commanding officer—a man with an impressive mustache—had given me. I was to check and replenish the mana in the monster-repelling lanterns near the village entrance, as well as in the farthest section of the nobles’ district—around a garden with a water fountain.

“It’s no problem. There are high-ranking people going to be there, right? Of course I should go there,” I replied.

“It sounds like they’ll be there for about a month in a few days,” the commanding officer said. “They’ll also be holding a festival. Well, checking the lanterns and replenishing their mana stores is always something to get done, so changing up which locations get serviced each day doesn’t matter too much. Sorry to keep you busy.”

“I don’t mind. I’ll just perform as instructed.”

I checked the locations a second time, then picked up my cane.

“Oh, that’s right—Lina, take this.” The commanding officer handed me a small paper bag. Inside were four thumbnail-sized gunpowder spheres.

“I have some already,” I replied.

“You must have had those for at least ten days, right? The insides of your old gunpowder spheres are probably damp, so switch them with these dry ones. If you’ve got ones that are damp, you won’t be able to use them in an emergency,” he explained.

His point made sense. I exchanged the ones I had in my pocket for the bag he handed to me.

The bag was for emergencies, such as if I were to encounter invading monsters. Throwing the bag onto the ground would result in a loud sound to intimidate the monsters and produce a large amount of smoke to render their

noses useless. The rising smoke would also alert the red knights to my location so they could come running.

Gunpowder spheres had to be dry for the sound and fumes to work, and walking around with them in a bag would gradually let them grow damp from humidity. It seemed that to combat this problem, the red knights periodically collected the unused gunpowder spheres to dry them out again.

“There have been a lot of monster sightings this autumn,” the commanding officer continued. “It happens maybe once every several years, but there have been large monsters that have gotten into the town center before. In particular, the far side of the nobles’ district is near Mt. Mulian, so be careful.”

“Understood.”

I put the new bag of gunpowder spheres in my pocket, then bid farewell to the red knights on duty and left the station.

I checked how the monster-repelling lanterns installed near the town entrance were operating, then replenished any mana that had been depleted. The lanterns were working without a problem and emitting sounds and smells that monsters hated and humans couldn’t pick up...or at least, I assumed they were. As we humans couldn’t sense the sounds or smells, we had to check the lanterns’ light to determine if they were working.

I marked off on the instructions given to me that I had completed checking the entrance, then headed toward the nobles’ district.

It had been a little over a few months since I came here to recuperate, and I had become used to my life in this town. Lately, however, I felt restless. I fully understood the reason.

Since speaking to Mary, I had been thinking about the man I had cut ties with—the one who had once been my husband—and feeling regret. If only I had talked to him without running away.

I wished I had checked with him about continuing our marriage. I wanted to ask why it had been so hard for him to even look at my face during the last year. More than anything, I wanted to thank him for protecting me with his divine magic.

When his barrier magic and shield magic had automatically activated and blocked a dragon's breath and repelled its talons to protect me, Lord Granwell's mana had enveloped me. It had been as if he had held me in his arms.

Whenever that had happened, my heart had fluttered even though I had been risking my life in the midst of battle. And every time, I felt gratitude toward him. It had been impossible not to fall in love with him.

I had never thought I would fall in love with someone, but he had been the one to show me what love was. To love was to feel both incredible happiness and suffering at the same time. Still, I was glad to have learned it.

That was why I should have spoken to him directly after all. I regretted not doing so.

After I had signed the file for divorce that Lady Sherry had given me, I had cried my heart out in the inn before boarding a long-distance carriage and leaving the royal capital. I had told no one.

Thinking about it now, I should have contacted my mentor, his wife, Cody, my female black knight friends from school who were so close to me, and Brendan, who had continued to give me divine magic and filled my magic stones. I should have at least told them about my official retirement from the Black Knights Regiment at the end of the seventh month, and about my recuperation from my wounds.

But I had let out all of my emotions and thoughts alongside a mass of tears, and I had been in such a daze that I hadn't thought about communicating with anyone.

Today, after I finished my job checking the monster-repelling lanterns and refilling them, I would go to the general store and buy a stationery set. I would use that to send letters.

It would be appropriate for me to write to them about officially leaving the Black Knights Regiment, and about my current stay at Sathante to recuperate. I would also let them know that I would contact them again if I decided to move somewhere to settle down. Perhaps I would also send along some Sathante specialties.

The girls I had graduated with would like sweets—perhaps those cakes steamed with hot spring water and shaped like a bear’s face? And it would be perfect to send my mentor and Cody some alcohol made with hot spring water, as well as meat and fish dried by the cold north winds. I wondered what Brendan would like—he didn’t drink alcohol, so perhaps a sweet?

Deciding on something to do made me feel a little bit better.

As I thought about sending presents to my loved ones, I walked slowly along the promenade as the town continued preparations for the festival.

The festival preparations were underway in the town center's plaza. Festivals celebrating the autumn harvest occurred in every region, including Sathante. The festival offered gratitude to the god of abundance with a banquet prepared using food made from the bounty of crops harvested in the surrounding forest, and the ample amount of seasonal fish caught in the ocean at the nearest town. Apparently when the festival was in full swing, you could find a smorgasbord of treats—cookies and cakes made with numerous nuts; rich mushroom and shellfish stews; boar and venison steaks; and fish pies.

The townspeople had set out dolls modeled after the god of abundance, and decorated the whole town vividly. Colorful flags and other decorations filled the town and streets, and Sathante teemed with liveliness. It was delightful to see the festival preparations slowly come together.

I took the shortest route to the far side of Sathante's nobles' district, and arrived at my destination: the public park with the water fountain.

The park had been built in a snug circular shape, and the fountain in the center had been designed with a forest fairy motif. Seasonal plants, flowers, and fruit trees had been planted in the outer perimeter of the garden. This spot was neither as large nor as grand as the town's main square, but I had heard that the relaxed atmosphere made it a popular spot for elderly nobles.

An older gentleman and his grandson were collecting leaves and trash that had fallen into the fountain and around the park.

"Ah, so you're checking the lanterns here today, are you?" the man asked.

"Good day," I replied. "I see you two are doing a great job."

Seeing the residents clean up sections of the town was an everyday sight—they all took turns—but I thought that they might be putting more effort into it with the festival coming up. Watching the young boy enthusiastically rake up the fallen leaves was adorable.

Monster-repelling lanterns had been set up in various places along the boundary between the park and the forest. I headed toward one to check for any malfunction when I heard something loud echoing from the depths of the woods. The ground shook violently. A creak resounded as something knocked

down a tree, and an enormous roar shook the air.

I remembered what that mustached commanding officer had said—that there were a large number of eyewitness reports of monsters this season, and that large beasts invaded Sathante once every several years. I didn't know how long it had been since the last time.

But even if a monster had burst into town last year, that didn't guarantee that this year was safe. Dragons and other monsters lived by a completely different logic than humans. It wouldn't be strange if they invaded every single day.

The tremors and roars continued, slowly growing ever closer.

The old man and his grandson were still cleaning.

“Run!” I screamed at them, then threw my bag of gunpowder spheres down on the beautifully arranged mosaic tiles on the ground. With a loud smack, the gunpowder burst, and yellowish smoke rose into the air.

The guards should be able to see the cloud and come running. But there was a problem—this place was at the farthest reaches of Sathante. It would take time for the red knights to get here from the guard station at the town's front entrance, and for the man with his age-weakened legs and his tiny grandson to flee.

Were I still an active-duty black knight, I would have no issue taking on monsters—be they boars, snakes, or bears. But my body was weakened now. My movements had grown dull, and I had no weapons.

I glanced at the old man and his grandson. Spurred on by the bellowing and crashing coming from the forest, they fled, stumbling, from the garden. At almost the same time, several of the monster-repelling lanterns set up along the boundary between the forest and the town emitted strong light before bursting in showers of sparks.

With a resounding, earsplitting roar, an immense bear-type monster appeared, knocking down trees. It had long, sharp claws, which had expanded along its upper forelegs to clad those spots in gauntlet-like armor.

When I had been an active-duty black knight, I had confronted monsters many times over. I knew that physical blows against monsters with hard armor,

fur, and thick fat weren't very effective, but magic attacks were. Monsters that inhabited the mountains had heavy-looking bodies that moved surprisingly nimbly, unleashed hefty blows, and could even breathe fire, though they only gained that ability as they aged.

Were I still as I was when I had been active duty, this monster would not prove to be a difficult match. However, now it was a formidable enemy. My limbs still couldn't move well due to the numbness and paralysis caused by my wounds and the poison.

As I had continually used magic far beyond my capabilities, my mana circuits were fried—whenever I activated them, they stung, and on top of that whatever magic did come out was weak. To make matters worse, I didn't have any sort of weapon on me. All I had was the cane I used for support. There were no bells or whistles on this simple wooden stick.

The monster turned round and round, letting out roars that sounded like earthquakes, then glared at me and the pathway that led to the nobles' district. No matter what, I couldn't let this creature get to where there were people living. Until the red knights came, I had to either prevent it from leaving this park or bring it down.

I stood between it and the nobles' district.

Mary had told me not to use magic, but I couldn't worry about that now.

I used body-strengthening magic to force my stiff limbs to move, and I poured earth elemental, growth-activating magic into my cane. Before being cut down and made into a cane, it had once been a tree—and now, that tree came back to life. With all my strength, I thrust the cane into the ground, and a pale green, glowing magic circle spread out on the ground.

Usually, using magic left no sort of discomfort. Like blood naturally flowed through veins, mana flowed through mana circuits. Unlike blood, though, the mana currents could be controlled.

Roots sprouted vigorously from the former cane, now a revived tree. They bored through the ground and penetrated the tiles, twining around the growling bear-type monster as it stood on its hind legs. The roots continued to grow, lengthening from the creature's legs to its body, constricting its

movements and trying to stop and kill it—and they would continue to do so as long as my mana could last. The monster raged, bellowing as it tried to tear off its entanglements.

I grunted from the pain. My fried mana circuits already felt as if they were about to burst—my arms and fingers, flowing with mana, hurt as if they were being burned. But with my limbs as sluggish as I had thought they would be, my only way to fight was with magic.

The raging monster was turning this beautiful park and its fountain into a tragic battlefield. The planted flowers had enclosed the fountain and walkway, which had been built with tiles, forming a mosaic themed around a legend about fairies passed down in this region. Yet our battle had ruined those flowerbeds and broken and scattered some tiles without a trace. The fountain in the center was still standing, but it was cracked and off-kilter.

I knew I had had no choice but to fight the invading monster. I wasn't a resident of Sathante, but I felt wretched when I looked at this disaster that had struck just before the festival.

The bear-type monster let out a particularly loud roar. It shook violently as the tree roots wrapped and twisted around its body. I was channeling a great amount of mana, trying to force the roots to bind the creature and strangle it to death. Pain shot through my right hand as I clasped the former cane. The nail on my middle finger split in two, and blood gushed out.

I groaned. It hurt. I was in pain, plain and simple—and honestly, I wanted to stop. But if I ran away here, I would be letting the monster into the heart of town. I had to avoid that no matter what.

“Lina!”

From the path to the nobles' district behind me, I heard someone call my name, as well as the clatter of running feet. The owner of the voice was the mustached commanding officer.

I was so relieved that the red knights had come that I automatically lessened the amount of mana I was pouring into the cane. At the same time, a shriek pierced the air. I thought it might have emanated from one of the apprentice knights who had arrived with the commanding officer—screaming at the sight

of their first monster.

Perhaps provoked by the shriek, the bear-type monster flailed its arms violently—though it injured itself doing so, it also tore off the tree roots, and the groaning of breaking wood filled the air.

I released more mana, and the shock split the nail on my left pointer finger. I grunted as blood spurted from the wound, but my former cane sprouted a new tree root that pierced the monster's eye. Bluish black gore gushed from the beast, and the pain pushed it into an uncontrollable rage.

At that moment, a dark shadow ran up beside it, and the bear monster's head flew off.

"What...?" I gasped.

Blood spurted out of the decapitated head as it flew before falling onto the edge of a flowerbed. Even more blue-black blood poured out of the headless body of the beast, and it fell with a thud alongside the tree roots binding it. The mosaic tiles on the pathway shattered upon impact, and the ground shook—but neither I, nor the commanding officer, nor the rest of the people at the scene paid any attention to that.

Instead, we were looking at what had beheaded the bear monster with one strike.

A knight or skilled adventurer gallantly saving the day in the nick of time was a pretty common story found in adventure novels on bookstore shelves. In the blink of an eye, he would eliminate the extraordinary creature before him, and with a twinkling smile, ask, "Are you all right?"

I would have liked it if I were in a storybook—if there were a knight or adventurer standing there. However, in the end that was just a fantasy in my head, and not the reality in front of me.

Instead, the creature that had killed the beast was one of its brethren. The new bear-type monster growled with a voice that rumbled like an earthquake. It had sharp claws glittering dully with blue-black blood, and large, long fangs.

The difference between the two beasts was their size. While the first monster had been huge, the one in front of us now was about twice as large. Bear-type

monsters were fiercely territorial—I assumed that the killed monster must have trespassed on the other’s land, resulting in a chase that had led here to the town.

The giant bear-type monster set its sights on me, smelling my blood, and it swung its forelegs down, its sharp claws slicing through the air with a whoosh and buffeting me with wind pressure.

I could feel the gust from its attack. I dodged, diving in close to the beast, then stumbled around toward its backside. The monster’s claws swung down where I had been, pulverizing the mosaic tiles there and shattering the former cane that I had left standing up in the ground.

If I had taken that attack, I would be dead.

As I thought that, the beast swung at me again. I knew I had to avoid the attack, but my legs couldn’t move—they trembled, weak. Cold, greasy sweat broke out all at once across my skin. It would all end when the bear tore into me with its huge, sharp claws. I closed my eyes.

I heard the monster bellow loudly, and the sound of a blow rang out close by. However, no matter how much time passed, its attacks did not hit my body. I thought it strange and opened my eyes to see a light green, glowing magic barrier had been spread out before me.

“What?” I whispered.

It was force field magic—the kind of magic that had always protected me up until a year ago. It had defended me time after time against attacks from dragons and other monsters, formed from mana that felt slightly cold. Though it should have disappeared long ago, that force field magic had deployed to protect me—and it had done so flawlessly against the bear-type monster’s attack.

“Lina, don’t breathe!”

I heard the commanding officer’s voice at the same time that something burst with a popping sound. A copious amount of greenish, light brown smoke permeated the air alongside the grassy scent of herbs. It was a monster-repelling smoke bomb—an item that wasn’t necessary for urban security, but

indispensable for guarding rural fortresses and towns. The haze blinded the monster, and the scent of herbs rendered its nose ineffective.

I gathered that the monster hadn't cared for the offense. Irritated by the smoke and the smell, the enormous bear-type creature set its sights on the commanding officer and the red knights who had rushed to the scene. Through the smoke, I could see them forming up to fight the beast. However, the blows from their swords, bows, and other weapons were barely effective against the monster, covered as it was with its thick skin, fat, and tough fur. If this went on too long, the red knights would be harmed.

The monster wasn't paying attention to me—now was the time.

Trying to keep the creature from noticing me, I slowly crawled toward the crumbling fountain in the center of the park, then plunged my hands into the water. The water that surged out of Mt. Mulian was clear, cold, and beautiful—and I poured mana into the element around my hands to control that water. Pain shot through my fingers as I deployed a blue magic circle, and the water started to sway before swirling in circles. The water vigorously whirled inside the fountain before assailing the monster's backside in a small tidal wave—and the moment the water touched the beast, it froze into ice.

Being doused in cold water and frozen into immobility, on top of the smoke, smell, and stinging attacks from the knights, caused the monster to rage violently and let out a roar. But whatever icy chunks splintered off due to its thrashing were soon replaced by a new wave of freezing water.

Normally, this magic could instantly trap a monster in a frozen coffin, but in my current state I could only freeze the creature a bit at a time. And now that I had started, I couldn't put a stop to it no matter what agony assailed me, at least not until the monster was dead—I feared that the moment I cut off my mana, the creature would destroy the ice and crush my unmoving body without mercy in one strike before returning to hounding the red knights.

I grunted with effort. The ice gradually grew thicker, and the monster stood on its hind legs, raging and struggling to shatter the ice—but the ice spread to its chest. It was a blessing that the underground water supply from which the fountain drew was inexhaustible.

“Lina, are you okay?!”

I hurt. I was in so much pain that the commander’s voice felt like it was coming from far away—I could barely hear the monster’s roars and the splintering of the ice. It felt like my arms were going to come off.

“You’ve got it! Just a little longer!” he continued.

“Amazing—it’s a coffin of ice!” someone else said.

I didn’t know how much time had passed—but it felt to me like several hours had gone by. Only the shrill sound that accompanied the water as it froze reached my ears.

Finally, I could see through my blurry vision that the ice had covered the monster’s face completely and grown thick, and I stopped releasing mana. The searing pain in my hands had quit, but now they hurt as if stung by needles. My fingertips, already normally sore, must have made for a hideous sight with the broken nails.

“Lina, are you all right? You sure are reckless,” the commanding officer said. “Eric, once you’ve checked the injured, form parties to patrol the area, repair the lanterns and set up the spares, and dispose of the monster. Everyone else is prohibited from entering the garden.”

“Understood,” someone—Eric the vice-commander, I assumed—replied before pausing. “The disposal of the headless one will be fine, but what should we do about the one encased in ice?”

“It would be a pain if it could breathe through cracks in the ice—let’s leave it in there for a few days to make sure it’s dead. This area can’t be used for the festival, anyway.”

After listening to the commander and vice-commander, I finally relaxed.

“I’m sorry, Commander,” I croaked. “If only I were a little more able to maneuver, I could have—”

“You’re not a knight anymore—just a regular visitor who came here to Sathante for recuperation. You shouldn’t have had to fight, but still, thank you. You were a great help,” the commander told me.

He propped me up by the shoulder, helping me to stand. A boy training to become a knight supported me on my other side.

“Because you pushed yourself to fight,” the commander continued, “the damage was limited to a busted-up garden and just a few scratches on this kid here. Normally, two bear-types invading the town would’ve resulted in lots of harm to knights and citizens too. A bear-type got into town about ten years ago and killed three knights and badly injured a lot more. Two citizens also died. Mind you, that was just one bear.”

Being told that this was actually a victory—with no one dead despite two monsters invading—made me both relieved and happy. I was glad that I had been of use.

“Now before anything else, you’re going to the treatment center. Ron, after we’ve taken Lina there, go fetch Mary the herbalist. Don’t forget to bring medicine.”

“Yes, sir!” the boy on my other side replied.

“Sheesh,” the commander continued. “You would normally be getting some experience in dismantling and disposing of a monster here...”

The young knight in training paled at his commander’s words. “I’ll get Mary as soon as possible.”

I assumed that Ron would assuredly be brought in to help dismantle the frozen monster later, but I felt bad for him and kept quiet.

A gentle warmth spread slowly from the ends of my limbs throughout my body. As my body grew warmer, the pain and prickling feeling grew lighter. The heat was soft and pleasant—it was a captivating feeling, and I wanted to stay like that forever.

Though I thought that, I felt a chill on my face. I shivered and opened my eyes to meet Mary’s gaze as she frowned at me.

“Huh?” I said after a moment.

As I slowly sat up, I realized that I was in one of the two treatment centers in

Sathante. One of them was a large, lavish facility in the nobles' district meant for guests. The one I was in, on the other hand, was a small clinic for the locals, situated in the heart of town. An elderly white mage who could use recovery magic was on duty three days a week—in emergencies, someone would go to his house to retrieve him so he could cope with whatever issue had occurred.

From the look of things, only Mary and I were here. The head of the treatment center must have been at home.

"I'm glad to see you awake. I was worried that you might not wake up," Mary said.

She brewed a floral-scented, light green herbal tea. I knew that when I drank it, my fried mana circuits would feel slightly better. I accepted the cup of tea with both hands, in which I still felt a dull pain and a light pins and needles sensation. Bandages were wrapped around my hands, up to my elbows.

"How long was I asleep?" I asked.

"Just about a whole day," Mary answered. "Don't worry—the knights on guard don't have any major wounds—mostly just bruises and scratches. You're the one with the most injuries, child."

"Is that so? I'm glad."

When I drank the herbal tea and it settled in my stomach, my body felt comfortably warm. It was a little sweet, and delicious.

"Honestly—you shouldn't be glad, child!" Mary grumbled, but even as she spoke she prepared new bandages and cream to put on my arms. "You don't have a body that can fight anymore. And because you so recklessly fought, the mana circuits in those hands and legs of yours—which you spent all that time trying to heal—are all fried up just like they were when you got here!"

I drained the cup of its tea and sat sideways on the bed to let Mary take off my bandages. Underneath them on my wrists were distinct marks left by burning my mana circuits. My right arm remained unchanged, discolored with purple and reddish black splotches. With the scars from my lacerations, too, I looked absolutely revolting.

"Your mana burns have gotten worse," Mary noted. "They'll probably hurt

and feel like needles for a while yet. Just drinking tea won't heal them quickly, so I'll make you some medicine too."

"Thank you, Mary."

"As for your leg... Did you force it to move with magic again?"

"If I hadn't, I would be mincemeat right about now," I replied.

An attack from the bear-type monster's foreleg, with its sharp claws and heavy strikes, would have killed me with one hit. Even a glancing blow would have squashed me into a lifeless pulp.

"Didn't that force field magic activate?" Mary asked.

"Oh, that..." I trailed off.

It had been Lord Granwell's force field magic. I touched the small earrings I wore—I was sure that the force field's deployment was thanks to them. He had gifted me these jade earrings to commemorate our marriage. The pair had been one of the few mementos I had taken with me when I left the west hall. They had been the first pieces of jewelry I had ever received, and I had wanted to keep them no matter what because they were the same color as his eyes.

It seemed that he had put force field magic into these earrings, and when I had faced an emergency, the magic had automatically activated. Even though Lord Granwell and I had been separated, he had once again saved my life.

There was a silence between Mary and me for a moment.

"At any rate, child, I'm glad you're okay," Mary said. "Now then, Lina, let me put this cream on you. We'll start again from the beginning with your massages and physical therapy."

"I'll work hard," I promised.

Mary applied a cream just slightly warmer than my skin from my knees to my calves. Just as she started to massage me, the bell attached to the clinic door chimed as someone came in. I wondered if it was the elderly mage who ran the clinic—however, it was someone else, alongside another person, who flung open the curtain that divided the hallway from the treatment room.

I was stunned. "Yes?"

“What’s wrong with you?” Mary snapped. “Coming in without permission!”

The two women who had appeared stood out conspicuously in the small commoners’ clinic. Both had blonde hair with a strong yellow hue, blue eyes, and snow white skin—I could tell at first glance that they were nobles. Given their similar hair and eye colors as well as their facial features, they were most likely sisters.

Although this was the first time that I had met them, they scowled at me with rather irritated expressions.

“So you’re the red knight who fancies herself a blue one? The one who let the monsters into town yesterday?” the one in a blue dress—who appeared to be the younger of the two—asked.

“Excuse me?” I asked after a moment. I had let the monster into town? Me? “What do you mean?”

“Do you not understand what you did?!” The woman in the blue dress said. “Were you even doing your job? If you had been, the monsters wouldn’t have invaded like they did yesterday!”

She hit me with her folding fan.

It didn’t really hurt—the elaborate folding fan was only meant to cover her lower face, and there wasn’t much power behind the strike since she was just a sheltered noblewoman. However, I had no idea why she struck me.

“What are you doing?!” Mary snapped, angry on my behalf. “First you barge in, then you start shouting nonsense and hitting people out of nowhere!”

The noblewoman in blue huffed and pointed her folding fan at me.

“This wannabe knight didn’t properly refill the lanterns with mana to repel the monsters. Don’t you think that’s why they got in?! This year’s festival was important—we invited a noble to whom this town owes a great debt! It was supposed to lead Sathante to future development as well! However, since you didn’t do your job properly, our beloved garden was destroyed. Guests who found out about the monsters’ invasion cut their plans short and returned home, and those who had been scheduled to come canceled!”

Her large blue eyes overflowed with tears, which spilled onto her white porcelain cheeks. The noblewoman in the deep green day dress consoled her with a hug.

“The monsters’ invasion was an accident!” Mary protested. “This region is deep in the northern mountains, and Sathante is at the foot of the Mulian Mountain Range. We’re much closer to monsters than other towns are, and the beasts have invaded countless times in the past. These things just happen now and then.”

“But if this wannabe knight had been doing her job, the town would have been protected!” the noblewoman in blue shouted. “Why did you put off checking the lanterns on the far side of the nobles’ district?! If you really are a former knight, why didn’t you handle things better?!”

Mary bent forward. “She—”

Mary was bent forward as she argued. I put a hand on Mary’s shoulder to interrupt her, then got off the bed. As I thought, my overworked right leg would not move—I staggered a bit, but braced myself on my left leg to stand. I bowed my head deeply, giving a knight’s salute.

“My lack of strength allowed for the monsters to invade, and as a result, one of Sathante’s important locations was destroyed. For that, I truly, deeply apologize.”

“It’s your fault! Your responsibility!” the woman in blue seethed. “It’s all because of you!”

In my childhood, I had learned a great piece of wisdom: it was better not to oppose nobles. Nobles—not every one, of course, but most of them—disliked plebeians on a fundamental level. If something happened, the blame always fell on the commoner. My mentor, his wife, Cody, and the black knights from my graduating class weren’t that way. They treated me kindly, like an equal. But the reality was that nobles like them were the minority.

Yielding to them was unwarranted, but if it solved the problem, that was better.

As I continued to bow my head, something bounced off my hair and hit the

floor. It was the ornate, beautiful folding fan that the noblewoman in the blue dress had held. It looked incredibly expensive, but now it was bent.

“Calm down, Marsha!” commanded the girl in green.

“But sister!”

I stared vacantly at Marsha as she cried over concern for her hometown while her older sister comforted her. Wearing extravagant dresses and coming from high birth as they did, the two noblewomen looked like they were acting out a scene from a play.

“Your name is Lina?” said the older sister.

“Yes, that’s correct,” I replied.

The older, green-clad noblewoman glared at me with a mix of hatred and scorn in her eyes, as if she were looking at trash. She looked me over from head to toe, then laughed scornfully.

“A commoner with gray hair, dull gray-blue eyes—a female knight who left the Corps after getting injured,” she noted. “I’ve heard a lot of stories about you.”

“Sister, do you know about her? How awful!” cried Marsha.

“Yes, I heard it straight from the main house. The whole story was absolutely appalling to hear.”

Marsha’s gaze grew even more disdainful. “Honestly, you are the absolute worst!” she raged. “Commoners are all inferior, but even among them, you are the lowest of the low!”

As if to protect Marsha, the older sister stepped forward and hit me on the shoulder with the fan she held.

“Would you kindly leave this town? This is a well-known hot springs town, and a great number of high-status individuals come here for them. It is not a suitable place for a woman who fancies herself a knight—such as yourself. I may not live here, but my precious little sister married into a family here and this town is irreplaceable to her. This is a place where many people come to recuperate and relax—I wonder if you even understand that.”

Mary once again looked like she was about to protest. I once more stopped her with a hand, bowed my head, and said, “I will do as you wish.”

This was fine—if I left Sathante, everything would work out.

The townspeople had worked hard for the festival—and even though not being able to use the beautiful garden on the far side of the nobles’ district was a hard blow to take, there were other gorgeous places here. They could decorate, prepare delicious snacks and meals, and even alcohol. I was sure that the festival would be a success.

“Be quick about your departure—I would have you gone by the start of the festival,” the woman in green commanded.

Marsha and her elder sister left the clinic arm in arm. The doorbell chimed again, and I kept bowing my head until the ringing faded. I let out a deep breath.

“Lina, you idiot! You absolute moron!”

It seemed that Mary had been holding in her words this entire time. She pushed my shoulder—with my leg so weak, I couldn’t keep my stance and ended falling backward into a sitting position.

“I’m sorry, Mary,” I told her.

“There was not a single thing you needed to apologize for!” she retorted.

“But monsters did invade,” I explained. “And that once beautifully maintained garden is now a wreck.”

“Isn’t the order in which the mana in the monster-repelling lanterns are refilled decided between the garrison and Marsha-Leigh’s husband? The person in charge of lantern maintenance is her husband, not you.”

Mary placed a dish of ointment on my lap, then touched my discolored leg without hesitation, spreading cream on it and restarting her work on massaging it. Her hands were deeply wrinkled, and because she worked with so many herbal remedies, her fingertips and nails were dyed green. A noblewoman might call her hands dirty, but to me, they were the kind, warm hands of a grandmother.

“There have been times in the past where monsters got into the village,” Mary said as she worked. “Many knights and civilians have fallen victim to them. This time, even though two bear-types invaded, no one died, and no one even got severely injured. It’s a miracle.”

The cream felt good on my skin—incredible, actually, now that I could relax—and its citrusy scent filled the room.

“This should be obvious, child,” Mary continued, “but in the first place, your body is in no state to battle monsters. You’re like me—a person who has no means to fight. Even so, you pushed yourself to go against two of them...”

Tears dropped onto the dish on my lap. They should have been cold, but instead were incredibly warm.

“Thank you, Mary,” I replied. “I don’t regret it, you know. I’m sad that the garden was destroyed, but no one was hurt, and no one died.”

“Lina...”

“I came here to recuperate, but I was quite happy here and ended up overstaying my welcome, it seems,” I continued. “This is good timing—I was just thinking that it was about time to head to another town. I’m sorry for the sudden request, but could you make me more medicine and cream? Tea, as well? I’ve found that your creations are the best for me.”

Mary’s black eyes overflowed with tears, but she laughed and said, “I’ll prepare you some really effective stuff.”

After Mary treated me, the elderly white mage came to the clinic to check me over a second time. He told me that the pins and needles sensation and aches in my hands would heal with time, although my legs would need even more time and I would have to start my physical therapy over again. My mana circuits, already burned out even before the battle, had been severely damaged by the forceful flow of elemental mana.

Pouring my mana into magic items and tools had become painful, and now my job refilling the monster-repelling lanterns was unfeasible. Of course, the hot springs felt wonderful, and Mary’s medicines and teas were incredibly effective on me. I also thought that I was getting along well with the members

of the garrison and the townspeople.

However, I was an outsider, and as I was in no position to spend lots of money as a visitor to the hot springs for medical treatment, it wasn't proper for me to overstay my welcome.

This was a good opportunity to leave Sathante.

During the night I packed my belongings and did a bit of light cleaning in the room I was renting. My right leg had never been so difficult to move before, and the pins and needles sensation in my right hand kept me from using it as I would like. This made the packing and cleaning time-consuming, but somehow I got it done.

The next morning, I would visit Mr. Landon, the superintendent of Sathante who oversaw the town. He was the one who had given me the job of refilling the monster-repelling lanterns to pay the rent for my room in the commoners' district. I thought it best that, since I could no longer do my job, I inform him about leaving my room and Sathante, and bid him farewell.

After that, I intended to go to Mary's store to buy my cream and medicine, and then head to the garrison to say my goodbyes before leaving. Even if I took the time to give my regards to the people who had helped me, I would be able to leave Sathante just past noon—in time for me to disappear before the festival started.

With my trusty new crutches, I headed toward the nobles' district to visit the nobles-only hotel that Mr. Landon managed. I went to the back entrance that the employees used and talked to someone who led me to Mr. Landon's office.

"Good morning, Lina," he greeted me. "Is something the matter? It's quite early."

"I apologize for the sudden visit," I replied. "Today I will be leaving town, so I came to give you my regards."

"What?!"

"Lina?!" Mr. Landon's son, Ezra, cried out in surprise. In a rush, he arranged to

have a chair brought for me to sit in and even told someone to prepare tea.

“What’s happened to make you leave town so suddenly?” Ezra asked, taking a seat opposite me. “If it’s about what happened the other day, that’s not your fault. Since we’re next to the woods, monster incursions are inevitable.”

“That’s exactly right,” Mr. Landon added. “None of the citizens even got a scratch on them, and the garrison knights only got scrapes and bruises! Everyone in town is grateful to you—you have nothing to worry about!”

Despite Mr. Landon saying otherwise, I knew that there were people who thought I was to blame—I was sure that Marsha-Leigh and her elder sister weren’t the only ones, though I didn’t voice these thoughts.

A maid brought the tea, and as she set it out she gave me a stern glare. I immediately found a new person who thought I was at fault.

“But since I wasn’t able to move properly, the garden was destroyed just before the autumn festival,” I said. Alongside my apology, I explained that my burnt mana circuits had gotten worse, and that I wasn’t able to refill the monster-repelling lanterns with mana anymore. I also let them know that I would be leaving Sathante.

“But you don’t have to worry about the garden,” Ezra protested weakly.

“Thank you,” I replied. “However, I was visiting this town to recuperate from my injuries. Sooner or later I would have to leave anyway, and today is that day. I apologize for the inconveniences I caused. Thank you for all you have done for me.”

I bowed my head, and Mr. Landon and Ezra, so used to years of greeting and sending off a great many guests coming both for treatment and sightseeing, replied with, “Thank you for coming.”

Since they had gone through the trouble of having the tea brought out, I drank my cup before taking my leave. The tea in the lavish, off-white cup tasted odd. Even though I had put sugar in it, it was a bit sweet yet still bitter. Such an expensive tea was something that I as a commoner could not identify.

I left the nobles’ district and headed to the far side of the commoners’ quarter where Mary had her pharmacy. After checking the signboard to ensure

that the store was open, I entered. The gentle clacking of the wooden door chime and the scent of medicinal herbs surrounded me.

“Good morning, Mary,” I greeted.

“Morning, Lina,” she replied. “You took your time. I expected that you would come here first thing in the morning before rushing out of town.”

“I thought I should give my regards to Mr. Landon just in case,” I explained.

“You fool. Landon’s wife and her sister are the ones chasing you out.”

“They’re not chasing me out. Besides, Mr. Landon and Ezra are different.”

Mary shrugged her shoulders in exasperation, then put my oral medicine and a case of cream on the counter. After I placed the payment down next to the items, I took them. I heard the sound of hot water being poured into a teapot, and the familiar scent of her usual tea filled the shop.

“You’re in no hurry to leave, right? Have some of an old woman’s tea,” Mary said kindly.

“Thank you,” I replied after a moment. “I will.”

I sat in my usual chair to wait for the tea. Suddenly, I felt a heat around my stomach, and I put a hand against my belly. My stomach was tying itself in knots—the heat was slowly spreading outward from the middle of my body. My vision started to swirl violently.

“Lina?” Mary asked. “What’s wrong? You look pale.”

“I’m f-fine...” My speech was slurring. “Just a bit...dizzy...”

“Lina!”

My stomach felt hot, like it was burning—it was as if I had swallowed numerous scalding pebbles. It hurt, and I felt faint.

I couldn’t remain sitting in the chair and I fell to my knees. The impact caused the sweat on my body to splatter to the floor. It was the end of autumn—it wasn’t hot enough out for me to sweat in such large amounts like this.

“Lina, it’s going to be okay. I’m going to get the white mage.”

I wanted to tell Mary that I was fine, but the words wouldn’t come out. I could

only take rough, rasping breaths.

Something suddenly came up from my stomach. I put a hand over my mouth, but I couldn't restrain it—an ironlike taste filled my mouth, and reddish black blood flooded out.

I heard Mary shriek as if from incredibly far away even though she should have been close by.

“Lina!”

I thought someone called my name, but it was distant.

I felt like I was slowly sinking into a deep, dark hole. I couldn't move my arms or legs, and I couldn't see. Still, I thought I heard someone call my name from far away again.

That voice... It sounded like Lord Granwell's, but that was probably just what I wanted to hear. It was the fault of a wish that would never be granted—seeing him again and hearing him call my name.

After all, I would never see Lord Granwell again.

Chapter 6: Him, in the Town of Steam

Kingdom of Mert Calendar Year 785

“Once again, we are from the office of inspection. My name is Frost Val McGuire, and this is Faion Hawking. His Excellency Prime Minister Herschel as well as Sir Alexander both consulted us to begin an investigation.”

Inspector McGuire gave a cool impression with his bluish silver hair and deep blue eyes. He gave an elegant bow, then picked up the documents lined up on the desk.

The office of inspection simply called this room “the multipurpose room.” It only had one large desk, and some plain, unadorned chairs. I assumed it was used for interviews, drawing up documents, and screenings—and, at times, for rough interrogations.

After receiving the summons from the office of inspection, I had returned to the royal palace and been led to the multipurpose room. I was there with the head of inspection, His Excellency the Prime Minister, and Sir Alexander—Lina’s former mentor.

“First,” Inspector McGuire declared, “let me state our conclusion: there was nothing inadequate about the documents brought to our attention.”

The documents that the prime minister’s office submitted for inspection had been sent by the Black Knights Regiment executive office—they were the papers affirming that my wife, Lina Granwell, was employed as an instructor at the knights’ academy. They had been officially signed by a secretary as well as the secretary general—they were in no way counterfeit.

“And are the documents Sir Alexander presented also official?” asked Prime Minister Herschel.

Inspector Hawking nodded.

“Yes,” Inspector McGuire explained. “Sir Alexander brought in the documents with Ms. Lina’s mission instructions. They’re official, signed by the head

secretary in the Black Knights Regiment executive office. In all likelihood, Ms. Lina followed these instructions and went on missions to subjugate dragons and other monsters.”

I felt a rush of dizziness and bit my lip to endure it.

The reassignment forms I had submitted for Lina had been accepted. The documents that the executive office had sent confirmed this. His Excellency the Prime Minister and all the civil servants in the policy department were aware of this. Without those documents, even though I was an aide to the prime minister, I would not have been able to take charge of all those long-term inspections abroad and around the country, since I wouldn’t have been able to provide divine magic for Lina’s missions. Everyone knew about my and Lina’s relationship as a white mage and black knight, and our marriage.

Yet, Lina *wasn’t* actually teaching Monster Studies and archery at the knights’ academy. Her duties had been the same as before I submitted the transfer request: to subdue monsters such as dragons—though without my divine magic.

“As for the rest of the documents submitted, everything is official,” McGuire continued. “The Black Knights Regiment executive office managed and issued them. Our office is currently investigating all such documents for any discrepancies.”

McGuire gathered the papers and passed them to his subordinate. Then, he once again looked at me.

“Lord Granwell, I must ask: where is Ms. Lina currently?”

I paused. “I do not know where she is.”

“After Ms. Lina’s hospitalization, she returned to the capital,” McGuire said. “There is testimony that the Granwell estate summoned her.”

“My mother called for her,” I explained. “Lina arrived at the estate, spoke to my mother, and then left. As to her whereabouts, neither my mother nor the servants know anything. However, I’ve heard that after she left, she stayed for one night at an inn and left the next morning. The last people to see Lina would not have been anyone from my estate, and there is no evidence that she was

followed or harmed.”

I still remembered the shock I had felt upon hearing that Lina’s whereabouts were unknown. I had believed without a doubt that she had been coming and going from our estate’s west hall to the knights’ school where she worked. I had assumed that the young fledgling knights there would be a handful, but I had been relieved that her life would not be in danger at that job.

The reality, though, was that just over a year ago she had left the west hall to live in the dorm at the Knights Corps, and had gone out to fight dragons and other monsters without my divine magic. When I had learned that wasn’t a joke, I hadn’t been able to breathe. It was unbelievable that she had gone out on missions with her equipment blessed with divine magic by that low-grade mage. Even if it was the same resistance magic, the difference in effectiveness between mine and that man’s was tremendous—like a shield made of thin paper versus one made of specialized steel. Going out on missions despite that was reckless.

“It is as Lord Granwell says,” Inspector McGuire agreed. “Sir Alexander, this has already been confirmed by members of the office of inspection. The former Granwell marchioness and the estate servants, and naturally Joshua Granwell himself here, committed no unlawful acts vis-à-vis Ms. Lina. Our judgment as the office inspection is that there has been no criminal activity in this case. Ms. Lina left the royal capital of her own free will.”

“Hmph, fine.” Another dissatisfied expression transformed Sir Alexander’s face, and he glared at me.

It seemed like he thought that the Granwell family had been involved in Lina’s disappearance. Perhaps he surmised that Lina’s mere existence was a nuisance to the marquis family, and that we had let her go off on a mission without blessing her with divine magic—and if she died from her wounds, so be it. He probably suspected that, since Lina escaped with her life this time, we had summoned her afterward to dispose of her or something like that.

It would be one thing if Lina had died in the line of duty while out on a mission, but if a member of our house had wanted to eliminate her, then surely they would have devised a more sophisticated method. It would have been easy

enough to do without leaving a trail straight to the Granwell name or even a whiff of our involvement.

“We also have confirmation that Ms. Lina took a long-distance carriage headed toward a remote northern border district,” Inspector McGuire continued. “However, we haven’t yet been able to verify where she disembarked, though we are continuing the search. Sooner or later we should be able to establish her whereabouts.”

Inspector McGuire stood from his chair, then looked at me and Sir Alexander one after the other. Finally, he gave a slight bow of his head to Prime Minister Herschel, who was still neatly seated.

“As soon as we learn of Ms. Lina’s whereabouts, we shall be in contact. I ask that you please wait until our investigation is finished regarding any inconsistencies in the official documents from the Black Knights Regiment executive office and we have a detailed picture of what happened. I hope that this is agreeable, Your Excellency.”

“Well, I suppose it is,” Prime Minister Herschel allowed. “It is unthinkable that our office should be accused of persecuting an honorable black knight, and certainly not a joke to suspect my aide of mistreating his wife.”

Investigator McGuire paused. “Well, according to the contents of these documents, there was no doubt about Ms. Lina’s employment at the knights’ academy as an instructor. The question is how both these sets of orders were made official. I ask for your patience—we will take it from here.”

The two royal inspectors took the documents and departed the multipurpose room, leaving His Excellency, Sir Alexander, and myself behind.

“Well then, Joshua,” Prime Minister Herschel said. “We should be going. We’ll have to wait for the inspectors to contact us.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

If I were being honest, I wanted to go search for Lina at once. If I followed that long-distance carriage’s path among towns and villages up toward the northern region, I was sure that I would discover her whereabouts. I felt uneasy—why should I have to leave the search for my own wife up to others?

As I was about to follow Prime Minister Herschel out of the room, Sir Alexander—seeming a bit despondent—said in his low voice, “Lord Granwell.”

“What is it?” I replied.

“Well...” Sir Alexander trailed off.

His Excellency paused. “Joshua, I will give you a moment to speak with Sir Alexander. As he is your wife’s former mentor and foster parent, that makes him something like your father-in-law, does it not?”

“I...I must apologize,” Sir Alexander said, bowing his head. “I’m sorry for suspecting ya, Lord Granwell.”

We had left the multipurpose room and gone to the rear garden on the other side of the building. It was a small space and a quiet one, too, as not many people frequented it.

I didn’t respond.

“I deeply apologize,” he continued.

“It is true that some sort of problem occurred in the Black Knights Regiment executive office in regard to the paperwork,” I finally replied, “and as a result—while not my intention—I neglected Lina. Considering that, I must apologize to you, her mentor, and everyone else involved for any concern this may have caused.” I bowed my head.

After I had seen the official document that came from the executive office, I had concluded that Lina had been removed from mission duties. However, what I had failed to do was physically check that Lina was going to the knights’ academy to teach.

Flustered, Sir Alexander said, “Please stop—don’t apologize.”

When I lifted my head, I saw that he wore a bewildered expression.

“As for myself, I woulda just been happy to see Lina happy,” Sir Alexander mumbled. I had never expected to see such a renowned dragon slayer and veteran knight to look so disheartened and tired.

“Going on missions to slay dragons is certainly an honor, but it goes hand in hand with danger,” he continued. “My wife and I were never blessed with any kids, so we thought of my apprentices Cody and Lina as if they were ours. When we heard that Lina was going out on missions while her husband was ignoring her, we were terrified.”

I thought it only natural for him to worry about the knight he had raised as a daughter after hearing that her husband was neglecting her, even if she had been getting divine magic from a coworker to go out on missions. I thought it a matter of course for him, as a mentor and foster parent, to look into my and

Lina's relationship.

"As a knight, if Lina were to get badly wounded or even lose her life, it would be fate—there's absolutely no safety in battling dragons and other monsters. But Lord Granwell, I worried 'bout what would happen to your marriage if she survived, but had to step down from being a black knight. Though ya did seem close during your first three years of marriage."

"Well..." I trailed off.

"The marriages between black knights and white mages are contractual, based on mana compatibility—which means that divorce can happen," Sir Alexander continued. "If it were Lina's informed decision, regardless of whether it was to continue or cut off her marriage with you, my wife and I would support her."

Sir Alexander clenched his fists tightly.

"But she left the capital without a word. When we looked into it, we found out that she'd moved out of the Corps dormitory. She was supposed to be living with ya in your estate in the first place, but she moved back into the dorms over a year ago. She'd had less and less to do with ya, so I figured your marriage wasn't going well." Sir Alexander paused, then added, "I'd thought that you might've had a change of heart, Lord Granwell. And then after Lina was injured and couldn't be a black knight anymore, I thought it wouldn't be all that strange of ya to consider her a bother."

"Ah, so that is why you thought it possible that we might have done something to Lina after hearing that she had been called back to the estate, as she was already estranged and a nuisance," I surmised.

Sir Alexander didn't answer for a moment. "I'm sorry."

Considering Lina's position and circumstances, I could understand why Sir Alexander would come to the extreme conclusion that my family and I had done away with her, as well as bring that idea to the office of inspection's attention. As there was no evidence to support that suspicion, Sir Alexander had been rash, but that had been due to his concern for Lina.

I wondered which one of us actually cared more for her—but when I thought

that, I felt ashamed.

“Let’s both stop apologizing,” I suggested.

“Lord Granwell?”

“I am also justly at fault for what’s happened to Lina,” I explained. “It’s natural that you and everyone else, Sir Alexander, have certain feelings about me.”

“But—”

I held up a hand to stop Sir Alexander from continuing.

“I understand what you were trying to say,” I explained. “Those in the prime minister’s office, including myself and the policy department members, all thought that Lina was employed at the knights’ academy because of the official documents. The cause of this incident lies with the source of those documents—the Black Knights Regiment executive office.”

They had accepted the transfer request and had issued official documents confirming it, yet at the same time had neglected to inform Lina of her transfer and continued to send her out on dangerous missions. Only the Black Knights Regiment executive office could issue those conflicting orders, but I didn’t know why it had done so.

“Inspector McGuire is currently leading a team to audit the executive office, and we have no choice but to leave this matter to them and wait for the inspection to end—then, everything should be clear. But to begin with, there is no meaning in blaming each other or apologizing for Lina’s disappearance.”

I had meant to mutter this to myself, but Sir Alexander lowered his head and agreed with me. “That’s true.”

In the end, though, I had neglected Lina. I let out a bitter sigh—then suddenly felt strong mana. Sir Alexander, who had been so dejected, snapped into alertness and turned his gaze toward where the mana was coming from.

A dry autumn wind blew, and the surrounding temperature dropped slightly. I felt that strong mana coming nearer—then saw a faint, pale green, glittering mass of light flying toward us. The green thing bumped into Sir Alexander, then burst.

I didn't understand what was happening at all—but it didn't seem to be something evil. The green glow left behind after the thing burst encircled Sir Alexander, and he stood frozen, seeming to feel or receive something.

There was silence.

In the distant past, there had been a country which we now called the old magination. All the people who lived there could freely use what we referred to today as old magic—which was incomparably stronger than our modern magic. However, as time had gone on, that power had faded and died out. We still did not know precisely how far that magical civilization had expanded, nor did we understand why they had declined. It was a mystery lost to the annals of history.

In today's world, black knights could still use old magic, which drew from the power that structured our world. Old magic included many aspects that did not exist in modern magic, and I thought that this green light was most likely connected to it.

Sir Alexander, enveloped in the glowing green cloud, furrowed his brow deeply and adopted a severe expression. Then the light disappeared, and he turned his sharp hazel eyes on me.

“Sir Alexander?”

He didn't speak for a moment. “Lord Granwell, come with me.”

With long strides, he approached me, then grabbed me by the arm and pulled me along. He was so strong—stronger than I thought humanly possible—that I stumbled.

“Wh-Where are we going?!” I cried.

He tugged me to a spot near the center of the garden; all the while, I kept almost tripping over myself.

“Oh, Lord Granwell! What good timing—I was just about to head over to the prime minister's office.”

“Inspector Hawking?”

The man I had met just a short while ago during the inquiry approached us.

Without a word, Sir Alexander took Inspector Hawking by the arm as well and stood him at my side.

“Inspector, I’d like you to go too.”

“H-Huh? What? Sir Alexander, what in the world is going on? Excuse me!”

Inspector Hawking wore a befuddled expression on his face as he protested, but I couldn’t answer his question, and the only one who could was keeping quiet about it.

“Um, excuse me?” Inspector Hawking tried again after a moment. “What’s happening?”

“Honestly? That’s somethin’ I’d like to know too,” Sir Alexander replied.

In front of our eyes, the aged knight rose to his full height and held out his right hand toward the stunned Inspector Hawking and myself.

“Inspector, I’d like to entrust ya with the matter you’ll see over there. Please judge it with your honest observations,” requested Sir Alexander.

Inspector Hawking was bewildered. “What are you talking about?”

“Lord Granwell,” Sir Alexander continued, “Please save Lina.”

“Huh?” I breathed. “Save Lina?”

Sir Alexander’s words raised questions from me and Inspector Hawking, but we didn’t receive an answer. A large, glowing, light purple magic circle unfurled at our feet, spreading out in three tiers. It was some sort of old magic.

I soon couldn’t hear any sound around us, and the scenery in front of us warped significantly—it felt as if we had been sucked into something, pulling us up. Like a leaf dancing in the wind, the force shook me about right, then left, then up and down, before finally lifting me up off my feet and forcefully throwing me aside. Though I had been unbalanced, I somehow managed to land on my knees. Immediately, Inspector Hawking, his face white as a sheet, fell on his backside on top of the light purple magic circle.

“Ugh,” he groaned. “I feel awful...”

It seemed being tossed about like a leaf had made him feel sick.

“Where are we?” I asked, bewildered.

As the glow from the magic circle started to fade, I took a look at our surroundings. It was clear that we were not in the royal capital. We were deep in the mountains, the temperature was lower, and the air around us smelled different.

“It worked—you did it, Master! I was worried since I’d heard that you weren’t good with magic, but you did it! If you’d failed, we would have two talented civil servants’ worth of mincemeat here.”

The one who had said such disturbing things was a boy with a dazzling smile who seemed to have just passed his mid-teens. Beside him was a middle-aged man, sitting on the ground with his head hung low as he breathed roughly. I didn’t have to look twice at him to recognize him due to his distinctive features—he was Sir Elijah Altman, a black knight with a tall, solid build, tan skin, black hair peppered with a bit of white, and blue eyes.

“I wonder what kind of punishment we would’ve gotten if they actually had been made into chopped liver. I’m really glad you succeeded, Master!” the boy continued.

Sir Elijah regained his breath enough to say, “Shuddup—take Lord Granwell and get going!”

“Okey dokey,” the boy responded, exuding youth. “Come on, Lord Granwell, let’s get going! Mr. Inspector, sir, please wait for my mentor to get his breath back to hear the details, okay?” He then grabbed me by the arm and pulled me along.

I glanced at our surroundings as we hurried on. I guessed that whatever was going on probably had to do with what Sir Alexander said about saving Lina.

“I have a question,” I said.

“Yes, sir?”

“Where are we?”

“We’re in Sathante, the northernmost hot springs town in the northern border region,” the boy replied chipperly. “Though to be more accurate, we’re

in a clearing a bit outside the town, in the mountains. I hear it's some sort of secret hideaway that the local kids play in. We borrowed the place because you need a quiet, kinda biggish spot for teleportation magic to work."

The boy continued pulling me along, and we passed under a gate with a signboard attached to it that read *Welcome to the Home of Hot Springs*.

There were several towns and villages around the country that called themselves the "home of hot springs." There were natural differences when it came to the efficacy of hot spring water that bubbled up from underground. Each hot spring had its own unique characteristics that appealed to tourists and other visitors, such as having a view of the ocean, being frequented by animals such as monkeys and deer, or being used to make cuisine.

Sathante, a hot springs resort deep in a forest, was located on the northern side of the country. It was cool throughout the year, even in the summer, and during the winter visitors enjoyed watching the snow while taking a pleasant bath. Furthermore, despite being deep in the forest, Sathante visitors could enjoy cooking made with fresh seafood from the nearby harbor town. With these as selling points, it was incredibly popular even among other hot springs towns.

Teleportation magic was a specialized spell among the broader field of old magic. Thanks to it, in an instant we had been transported from the corner of the castle to Sathante, when an overland trip from the royal capital should have taken days. It seemed like a convenient kind of magic.

The boy led me along through the center of town to a small establishment with a signboard identifying it as the Second Sathante Clinic. We entered and ran through the hallway until we came to a treatment room at the end and went inside.

"I've brought him!" the boy declared.

"At last! I'm at my limit—swap with me, boy."

An elderly white mage in white robes spoke to me, and I stood in front of him next to the treatment bed. I caught sight of the person lying there.

"Lina!" I cried.

Her complexion was utterly pale, although strangely her cheeks and neck were red—I assumed because of fever. Her breaths were thin and ragged, and she seemed unconscious.

“Boy, aren’t you her husband?!” the elderly mage shouted. “Hurry up and help with the poison!”

“Poison?!” I echoed.

“Not the dragon poison that’s accumulated in her body—the poison in her veins! Hurry!” the elderly white mage shouted close to my ear.

I traded roles with him. “Poison in her veins,” I muttered.

I gripped Lina’s hand, checking her condition closely from head to toe with magic. A toxin was in her veins, flowing throughout her whole body. There was also another kind of poison in her right arm and right leg, but that wasn’t in her bloodstream—instead, it was in her muscles and bones, and seemed to not be affecting her body so much as the one that was currently circulating. There were a large number of scars all over her, both old and new, though these weren’t what was threatening her life. First, as the elderly white mage had said, I had to detoxify her bloodstream.

“Detoxify,” I murmured, and light green magic glowed as it slowly encompassed Lina’s body.

Throughout the night, I continued to heal Lina with detoxification and recovery magic. Looking at how many injuries she had collected on her body over the past year hurt me more than I could have imagined.

The old herbalist who was tending to Lina asked me to extract the poison that Lina had drunk, so I did as told while I worked on detoxifying the rest in her body. Thinking about it later, I realized that the poison was necessary for evidence, though apparently I was so upset that I hadn’t been able to process that simple fact in the heat of the moment.

At dawn, Lina’s condition stabilized, and I breathed a sigh of relief alongside my overflowing tears. As I thought about how glad I was that Lina was alive, I passed out. I hadn’t slept long before the boy who I had met upon first arriving

in Sathante roughly woke me and dragged me to the Heiress Hotel.

Sathante had numerous lodging facilities. There were ones for nobles, ones for the masses, and even privately owned holiday villas. Among them, the Heiress Hotel was a large and extravagant accommodation for nobles. On the first floor were areas like the entrance lobby, sitting room, restaurant, and dance hall, while visitors' rooms started from the second floor. All rooms had their own terrace and private bathroom, it seemed.

There were people waiting for us at the far back of the lobby, where sofas had been set up. Sitting there drinking an after-breakfast coffee was Sir Elijah—the man who had teleported Inspector Hawking and me to this place. Moving to stand behind Sir Elijah was his apprentice, the boy who had brought me first to the clinic and then here—Noah Lakes. Opposite Sir Elijah sat Inspector Hawking, who had lost the sickly pallor that had been on his face when we arrived here together yesterday. There were others here as well, but I focused on these people.

“Hey, we’re here!” Noah greeted.

“Good morning, everyone,” I added.

The two who were sitting stood, and we exchanged names and greetings. When I shook Sir Elijah’s hand, it was hard and calloused from using his sword.

“Once again, Sir Elijah, thank you for your correspondence regarding Ms. Lina,” said Inspector Hawking, bowing.

Sir Elijah roughly scratched his head, then shook it side to side. “Nah, it was a coincidence that I came across what was happening and then contacted you.”

“About that,” Inspector Hawking began, “may I ask about how you discovered what was going on?”

Elijah nodded and asked a nearby maid for another cup of coffee, then offered us the second sofa. When we sat opposite him as the maid set out coffee, though I couldn’t even think of touching it. After all, I had been told that Lina had been offered poisoned tea in this very hotel, and she had vomited up blood before collapsing.

Sir Elijah gathered his thoughts before speaking. “I came here to give my

apprentice some practical experience. I also thought we'd take the opportunity to enjoy the hot springs, eat some good grub, and see the festival."

"Gain practical experience in Sathante, you say?" Inspector Hawking inquired.

"Yeah," Sir Elijah responded. "On the north side of this town is a forest that leads to the Mulian Mountain Range. In the fall, monsters that prepare for hibernation move 'round real actively, which is why we're as on guard during this time as we are during the spring breeding season. I thought we might come here to take down a few bear-types for experience."

Noah, Sir Elijah's apprentice, was standing behind him. He nodded in affirmation.

Sir Elijah carried on with his story. "Soon after we got here, we happened upon an old herbalist who was screaming for someone to come help her. I asked what was wrong, and she said that a young lass had vomited blood and collapsed, so she needed help right that minute to carry her to the clinic."

Inspector Hawking processed this information. "And that 'young lass' was Ms. Lina."

"Exactly. I had orders that if I found Lina, I had to contact the office of inspection. So, soon as I helped carry her to the clinic, I sent an emergency correspondence to the office and to Alexander."

"To Sir Alexander too?"

"Yeah, 'cause he's Lina's former mentor. Usually, I would've assumed I should call her husband Lord Granwell as well, but..." Sir Elijah paused. "Considering her whereabouts were unclear and I had been instructed to contact the office of inspection if I found her, that suggested she was in some sort of trouble that concerned the office. Lina isn't the kind of girl who causes problems, so I assumed that the issue involved her husband and his family."

I caught Sir Elijah shooting a fleeting glance at me that silently said that he had been right on the money. As that was the case, I kept my mouth shut.

"In the meantime," Sir Elijah continued, "I found out that Lina'd been poisoned. This town only has one guy who can use healing magic—that old man—and he said that he couldn't save Lina by himself. Something about magic

affinity and ability. If he took too long, Lina would die of the poison, so I decided to call Lord Granwell. I thought that the culprit who had administered the poison might still be in town too.”

“I see, so that’s why you teleported Lord Granwell and myself,” Inspector Hawking surmised. “That teleportation magic is quite the convenient spell.”

“Actually, it’s *not* convenient,” Sir Elijah countered. “The person who performs the spell can’t teleport, and the more mass you teleport, the more mana it consumes. Teleporting two people wipes out my mana completely. I and Alexander used all of our mana to teleport you two and I had nothing left. And yesterday before I teleported you, I sent that emergency communication spell, too, so my stamina was all gone.”

So that was why when we had arrived in Sathante, Sir Elijah had been sitting limply on the ground—he had expended all his mana using an emergency communication spell as well as teleportation. It seemed that before the teleportation, that green light that had enveloped Sir Alexander’s body had been magical correspondence.

“You all right, Lord Granwell?” Sir Elijah asked. “You were up all night helping Lina with healing magic, right? You’ve been using magic since you arrived yesterday.”

“I’m fine,” I replied. “I’m used to staying up for two to three days at a time.”

There was a lot of work to do regarding the country’s policies at my job. As there was a large volume of work to do among so few civil servants, each person’s responsibilities were myriad. Virgil and I—still young aides to the prime minister—as well as the civil servants under us had a particularly large number of tasks. In the busy season, it wasn’t rare to have no time to sleep, or to continue work for two to three days at a time.

“Ah, to be young,” Sir Elijah said. “Working through the night is impossible for me nowadays.”

“White mages are not only defensive but also healing mages,” I explained, “so it’s reasonable to expect us to be able to provide care in emergencies.”

“I see. And how is Lina doing?” Sir Elijah asked.

“The detoxification has finished, and she’s sleeping now. We removed the poison and put it in this.”

I placed a small glass bottle on the table. A seal covered it, keeping the poison taken from Lina’s body from becoming diluted by airborne contaminants.

“Has the poison been identified?” Inspector Hawking asked. He picked up the bottle, and the light yellow poison sloshed around inside.

“Mary, the town herbalist, looked into it. It’s mainly made from a poisonous fungus called a daybreak mushroom, and has a delayed effect. Apparently, a portion of the nobility often uses this poison. Its unique trait is that the larger the dose, the longer its effects take to activate,” I explained.

Sir Elijah considered that information. “A poison favored by high society, and one that makes it harder to identify the culprit the larger the dose. So, who poisoned Lina?”

Inspector Hawking wet his lips with his tea, shrugging his shoulders ambiguously.

“The perpetrator was a maid working for the family that runs the Heiress Hotel. The one who ordered her to do it was Baroness Amelia Talys,” he answered.

“Who’s this Amelia Talys woman?” Sir Elijah asked.

“The current administrator of the Heiress Hotel is Mr. Landon. His son Mr. Ezra has a wife, Lady Marsha-Leigh. The one who ordered the poisoning was Marsha-Leigh’s older sister,” answered Inspector Hawking.

Sir Elijah thought for a moment. “Why’d she have Lina poisoned? Also, Lina collapsed in the town pharmacy—was it really okay for Amelia to have the poison take effect so soon?” He gestured more and more as he voiced his doubt. “If you can adjust the time that the poison starts to take effect after being administered, then wouldn’t she at least have given enough that it would only take effect after Lina left town?”

“It seems the baroness did account for that,” Inspector Hawking answered. “However, in actuality, the poison took effect much sooner than she expected. Do you know the reason for that, Lord Granwell?”

“Mary the herbalist’s medical opinion is that it likely has to do with the dragon venom that has remained unneutralized in Lina’s body,” I explained. “She believes that it reacted somehow with the poison that Lina drank, affecting Lina’s body much faster than planned.”

The remaining dragon venom in Lina’s body had yet to be detoxified, and it was still dulling her senses and making her numb. It was imperative that the poison be neutralized as soon as possible. If I had blessed her equipment properly, things would not have come to this.

However, it could be said that the dragon venom had saved Lina’s life this time. If it hadn’t been in Lina’s body, the slow-acting poison might have taken effect after she left Sathante and arrived in another town. If that had been the case, Sir Elijah would have passed her by, the doctor and Mary the herbalist would have been unable to treat her, and I wouldn’t have made it in time. Lina could have lost her life.

“Well, at least Lina’s life was saved,” Sir Elijah concluded. “Now, here’s the important part: this lady, Amelia Talys—why’d she make the maid serve poisoned tea? Did she or the maid have any relationship with Lina?”

“None at all,” Inspector Hawking replied. “Ms. Lina hardly has any connection to the nobility outside of the few nobles she does know. That was virtually their first meeting.”

“All right then, what’s the motive for poisoning? It can’t just be because she’s a knight from the peasantry,” Sir Elijah said.

“The motive is still unclear. Lady Amelia Talys, who gave the order, and her maid Ann, who did the poisoning, still have not revealed anything. I will continue the interrogation thoroughly,” Inspector Hawking promised.

He shrugged his shoulders again and raised a hand in a beckoning gesture, upon which three people approached. Judging from the clothes they wore, I wondered if they were affluent commoners.

“This is Mr. Landon, superintendent of Sathante and the owner of this establishment. This is his son, Mr. Ezra, and Mr. Ezra’s wife, Lady Marsha-Leigh. This is Ms. Lina’s husband, Joshua Granwell, an aide to the prime minister.”

At their introductions, the three bowed their heads deeply.

“Thank you for coming so far.” The speaker, Mr. Landon, was an obese man with a thin head of hair—the picture of being past middle age. He paused before continuing. “I am deeply sorry for what has been done. We cannot apologize enough for it.”

Next to him was his son, and behind Mr. Landon was his son’s wife, who bowed stiffly.

“Amelia Talys and her maid—the mastermind behind the poisoning, and the executioner, respectively—have both been apprehended and are currently being restrained in the garrison dungeon. In a few days they shall be transported to the royal capital. I believe they will suffer a heavy punishment, seeing as they attempted to kill a former black knight and member of a marquis’s family.”

At Inspector Hawking’s words, the faces of the three turned even paler, and I could see them sweat profusely.

“How *wonderful* that our country does not practice capital punishment,” the inspector continued drily. “They’ll get to keep their lives.”

Even though the attempt at taking Lina’s life ultimately failed, the crime that the Talys family committed against her—a member of the Granwell marquis family— was severe. Being relatives, Mr. Landon’s family was most likely in on the act as well.

“Lady Marsha-Leigh, on the day before Ms. Lina was poisoned, I hear you visited the clinic she was at,” Inspector Hawking continued. “Would you care to explain why?”

The lady in question, standing behind her husband and father-in-law, turned even paler. She took a shaky step forward and lowered her head. After a moment, she said, “I had heard that monsters had invaded the town. I was relieved that there were no people with serious, terrible wounds. However, the park in the nobles’ district had been destroyed, leaving it unfit for strolling.”

“Well, two big bear-types were rioting there. If it was just a park they destroyed, isn’t that good?” Sir Elijah asked.

Lady Marsha-Leigh's face turned pure white. "That is..." She struggled to find words. "I heard that the monster-repelling lanterns hadn't been functioning well. Since the person refilling their mana wasn't doing her job, the lanterns weren't working, and...and the monsters got in."

"And who told you that?" Sir Elijah inquired.

"My elder sister and her maid, Ann. They said that a former knight—a commoner—was refilling them, and that since she was neglecting her duties, the monsters invaded the town."

"So that's why you went to the clinic," Sir Elijah pressed, "harshly complained to Lina—the very one who dealt with the two monsters—and then hit her with your fan?"

Hit Lina with her fan? At Sir Elijah's unbelievable words, I scowled at the noblewoman—Sir Elijah and his apprentice did the same.

"I checked the monster-repelling lanterns myself," Inspector Hawking reported.

"They all had seventy percent or more of mana remaining within them. It is my judgment as an inspector that they were working without a problem. In the first place, while they may be called 'monster-repelling,' those lanterns cannot perfectly protect towns from monster incursions. They are devices to discourage the beasts from approaching as much as possible. Thus, Ms. Lina is not to blame, don't you think?"

"I..." Lady Marsha-Leigh whispered, and she sank to the floor. It seemed that she really had thought that Lina was responsible for the monsters' attack.

"That's enough," I said after a moment.

Inspector Hawking shrugged his shoulders once more. "You're right," he agreed. "It seems that she doesn't know why her older sister poisoned Ms. Lina."

"Lina was in no state to fight—and as a retired knight, she's a noncombatant, same as you all," Sir Elijah declared. "Yet she pushed herself, fighting to protect this town and its citizens. And despite that, you blamed her for everything and demanded she leave the town."

“I-I’m so sorry,” Lady Marsha-Leigh repeated, pressing her forehead to the floor in apology. Next to her, Mr. Landon and Ezra also expressed their condolences again.

I couldn’t bear to listen to them despite their apologies.

Rather than Lina leaving after her treatment had finished, they had been about to drive her out for something that wasn’t her fault. Naturally, a great snort of indignation escaped me.

“How could you do such a thing?!” I snapped.

“I-I didn’t know!” Lady Marsha-Leigh shrieked. “I didn’t know she was a member of a high noble family—I didn’t know she used to fight as a black knight! I swear! If I had known I wouldn’t have said a word!”

“Marsha-Leigh!” Mary the herbalist interjected.

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t know, I didn’t know!”

Lady Marsha-Leigh screamed and cried as she clung to Mary. Her state was unbecoming of a noblewoman. It chilled me to my core, thinking about what humiliation and absurdity Lina must have experienced.

The afternoon autumn sky was a clear blue without a single cloud in sight, and the chirps of birds filled the air alongside the voices of a great many people as they worked to dispose of the bear-type monster that had been frozen. Lina had defeated this one—as well as the other one which already cleared away—despite being so unfit to fight. Because of that, her wounds—which had been gradually healing—had worsened again.

After the discussion at the hotel, I poured detoxification magic into Lina three times a day—morning, noon, and night—for the next few days. I also administered recovery magic over the large wounds on her arms and legs that she had acquired during the past year without my knowing. After my treatment with magic, Mary the herbalist would plaster a cream of her own making over Lina’s limbs and massage it in.

The poison Lina had drunk at the hotel had already been purged, so there was

no urgent threat upon her life. However, Lina had yet to wake up, possibly because of the accumulation of dragon venom in her body.

Now, I had moved on to detoxifying it and healing her external wounds, but since a lot of time had passed since she had received those wounds, the magic wasn't very effective. I could only continue to be patient and persevere.

I had just finished the midday treatment. I sat on a bench, absentmindedly watching the monster be disassembled.

It seemed that the dismantling of the monster was being done with great skill, and I figured it would be done within the next two hours. Bear-type beasts' claws, fangs, bones, and hides were used to make items such as weapons and armor, while one part of the internal organs were used for medicines, and the meat for food.

"Are you feeling regret? After all this?" Mary the herbalist asked. She sat on an adjacent bench and let out a long sigh.

"I'm full of regret," I answered. "All I've felt recently is regret."

"I'm amazed at you, boy," she answered. "It's like you know nothing at all of being the white mage spouse to a black knight."

"A white mage protects and supports the black knight. I know full well—"

"What it's about, is that what you want to say?" she interrupted. "You saw all those wounds on Lina's body, didn't you? She can barely walk because of them. And the effects of the dragon's poison discolored her skin all reddish black and purple." She paused. "Boy, if your magic had been there for her, she wouldn't have become like that. A white mage doesn't just protect their spouse's body, you know—they support and protect their spouse's heart. That's just as important."

From the treatments, I knew that Lina's body was riddled with wounds and her skin was discolored, all because my magic hadn't been there for her. Surely her heart had likewise suffered many wounds, even though I was the one who was supposed to protect and heal that part of her too.

I had no argument against Mary the herbalist. It was just as she said.

She continued speaking after a moment. “The way I see it, you and Lina are both *utter morons*. If you don’t communicate what you’re thinking through your words and behavior, *nothing* gets across.”

“Does Lina resent me?” I asked.

“I don’t think she resents you,” Mary replied. “If anything, I think she felt guilty.”

“Guilty?”

“She told me she felt that there was no way she was a good match for you. She’s a commoner, and you’re a dazzling, high-level aristocrat, as well as someone who supports the country as an aide to the prime minister,” Mary explained. “She said that you were only matched because of your compatible magic affinity, and that you must have pitied her because of all those rumors surrounding her about refusing marriage proposals time after time. And then once you were engaged, she thought you protected her because you were valuing the contract and your duty. Even if you took care of her out of obligation or out of pity, it made her happy, and she loved you.”

“What...?” I whispered.

“I assume you didn’t intend for there to be any love? You must have thought you’d start out with familial affection for her, and if you happened to build up trust between you two, so be it—but now, you’re in love with Lina. Am I wrong?”

I couldn’t speak for a moment. “You’re not.”

“Thought so,” Mary said with a bitter smile. “You know, boy, it’s not all your fault, okay? Don’t get that wrong. You two worked to compromise with each other, loved each other, cared for each other, and acted like you did. But first of all, you and Lina should have spoken to each other—used your words.”

I covered my face with both hands and squeezed out all the air from my lungs. No matter how many times I did so, the heavy feeling in my chest couldn’t be expelled alongside my breaths.

Finally, Mary asked, “What do you intend to do with Lina now, boy?”

“I...”

“You know that she already meant to divorce you.”

No words came to me.

Lina had left the west half of her own will to live her life, had signed the divorce paperwork that my mother had given her, and left the royal capital. I had searched for her, found her—and yet, what did I intend to do?

I wanted to start over with her. I wanted to do as many other couples did, and live a normal, married life with her.

I had destroyed the file for divorce that Lina had signed. I had crumpled it in my hands and burned it to ashes in front of my mother’s eyes.

“Even so,” I said finally, “I want to be with her.”

Even if it was only what I wanted.

“Because of your contract?” Mary asked. “Because you have to?”

“Because I’m in love with her.”

There was a high probability that Lina no longer wanted to be with me. I had neglected her for the past year, and consequently, she might have exhausted her fondness for me. But just as Mary the herbalist said, nothing would start between us unless we spoke. For now, I would continue with Lina’s treatments. She still hadn’t woken up, after all.

“Use this.”

“Hm?”

Mary handed me a paper bag. When I looked inside, I saw an unorganized mix of oral medicine, a case filled with cream, and leaves that seemed like they were to make herbal tea.

“That’s the medicine she’s been using, and the tea she’s fond of. It lessens the symptoms of magic burns, and it’s supposed to help dilute the toxin left in her body. We’ve used up all the medicines and creams to treat her, you know. The rest of it all must be running low by now.”

“I...”

“You’re a white mage, boy, and you’ve got a good magic affinity with her. When it comes to healing her, nothing is going to be more effective than *your* magic.” She paused. “Still, this stuff is nothing to sneeze at. It’ll help.”

Mary the herbalist patted my shoulder with more force than I thought possible for an old woman, and a shock ran through my body. My shoulder stung for a while afterward, continuing to supply me with pain.

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My head spun round and round. With my eyes closed, I couldn't tell up from down. I felt just like a leaf that had fallen into a current of water—at its mercy, jostled and pushed around. I was incredibly hot too. I didn't know whether it was the room's temperature or perhaps a fever, but I was burning—sweltering and suffocating. I was dizzy, hot, and could barely breathe.

I held out my right hand. I thought I might feel something. Desperately, I extended my arm, searching for something to cling to—if even my fingers or the back of my hand could touch something, that would be fine.

Just when I couldn't reach any farther, my fingertips brushed against something. It felt like someone's hand. It encased and gripped my own, squeezing as if its owner would never let go.

“It's...right...”

I could hear a voice, but I couldn't properly listen. I was too dizzy.

The heat seemed to recede through the hand that held mine. *Huh?* I thought as the burning left my body and my breathing eased. My dizziness, too, gradually calmed.

“If...”

Ah, I still couldn't properly listen. The voice belonged to the owner of the hand, I was sure, and I had no doubt that they had come to my rescue.

“Please...I...”

What? What were they saying? I squeezed the hand, and it squeezed back. At the same time, an intense wave of drowsiness overtook me, and I drowned in it.

“You may have been born a commoner, but you have lived for a bit as a knight—so you must know something about the nobility, correct?”

The former Granwell marchioness, Lady Sherry, spoke to me as if she were admonishing a small child and trying to make them understand something.

“Your marriage to Joshua is based on your magic affinity. I, too, am fully aware of the importance of the relationship between a black knight and a white

mage. So, while I was not satisfied with you two being together, I allowed it. This is also a great honor for him as a white mage, at any rate."

The noblewoman sat on a beautiful chair, decorated with a delicate botanical pattern. She wore a beautifully draped dress of fine embroidery and lace, and had her long hair tied up with a hairpiece made with large jewels.

"However, you are no longer a black knight," she reminded me. "You can no longer even give Joshua the honor of being a white mage married to a black knight. You have no value as a member of the Granwell family. For Joshua to become prime minister in the future, he needs to marry a young lady with a documented noble lineage."

Lady Sherry gracefully moved her hand—pale and free of sunburns—and suddenly, a single sheet of paper appeared.

"If you care even a little for Joshua, you should understand. I'd have you step aside and go disappear somewhere. You have some serious wounds, correct? Go to some rural village with a nice climate and live at your leisure there."

An ink-dipped quill pen also appeared in Lady Sherry's hand, and the paper and pen glided toward me. The quill pen slid into my grasp, and the feather trembled as if already trying to sign my name.

"Well, I'd have you hurry up. After this, I have to meet with the young lady who will become Joshua's official wife."

I signed my name on the line, and the paper and quill pen flew back to Lady Sherry.

"Thank you," she said. "I believe this is the first time I have ever felt grateful to you. Truly, thank you for setting Joshua free."

It was the first time I had ever seen the former marchioness smile, and she was beautiful, like the mother of a saint.

"Oh, it's you. Hurry up and get ready so we can go fight."

A senior black knight threw those words over his shoulder, looking at me with a disgusted grimace.

“Sounds like you married that prime minister’s aide and became a member of a marquis’s family. Still, that’s all only paperwork in the end. Don’t get the wrong idea—you’re still a peasant.”

I had no doubt that he was nobility, what with his shining blond hair, clear blue eyes, and well-proportioned features. He wore equipment so expensive that I thought my eyes would bug out of my head, and it had been blessed with more than enough divine magic.

He thought for a moment before saying, “Well, before this you were only able to get your divine magic from a low-grade reservist, but now the great prime minister’s aide will bless your equipment, right? Guess that means missions will be easier for you now.” The black knight seemed to realize something. “Ah, right!” he cried out, coming close to me. “You’ve got lots of strong divine magic now, so you’ll be able to work even harder on missions—you can do our part for us.”

Another black knight joined the first, and then another came along—then more and more. They were all from families holding the rank of count or above, or were related to a count’s family out here in the frontier, and had beautiful hair and eye color, and well-defined features. Then, their wives appeared, all mid-level white mages or higher, all born from equally high houses, and all having complementary magic affinity with their husbands.

“Oh right! Since you’re a commoner, you’ll have to do twice as much of our share,” said the second knight.

“Isn’t twice too little? She’s a commoner, so she’ll have to do five times as much,” the third declared.

“It’s a pity to send you out against a dragon alone though, so go with him. He’s a baron’s adopted kid—another peasant,” added the fourth.

The black knights laughed.

I knew that there were several places that were said to be microcosms of noble society, and the Corps was one of them. It might seem that a knight’s prowess dictated where they stood in the Corps hierarchy, but strangely enough, their status played a large role here as well.

“Hurry up and get out there, pleb,” commanded another. “Kill a lot of dragons and other monsters for us while we’re here at the same fortress.”

“The towns and villages’ll be saved, we’ll be spared a lotta trouble, and we’ll get plenty of special bonuses!” boasted one.

“The good thing is that even if you get eaten up by a dragon, no one’ll care,” said the first. “You’re an orphan with no relatives, and even if your husband ends up known as the no-good white mage who couldn’t protect his black knight, he’s an aide to the prime minister and a marquis’s family member—it won’t be a big bruise to his ego. On the contrary, he’ll be relieved to be freed from having you as a wife.”

“So do your best for us!” another yelled.

Their voices resounded endlessly in my ears.

“Now then, let me say this to you once again: you were born a commoner, yet were blessed with the ability to use old magic. That is a wonderful thing you should be thankful to the gods for.”

As the previous secretary general of the Black Knights Regiment had retired due to his age, the new, youthful secretary general spoke to me.

“You freely use old magic, master the use of various weapons to defeat dragons and other monsters, and protect the lives and livelihoods of the people who make this country their home,” he continued. “This is the mission and duty of those who can use old magic. I do believe you understand this thoroughly, correct?”

In contrast to the light, gentle color of his hair and eyes and the soft features of his face, the new secretary general was polite but prickly. From the moment we first met, I knew he didn’t like me.

“The majority of those blessed with old magic ability are of noble bloodlines. You are not,” he reminded me. “You must make a visible effort to compensate for that. Do not disgrace your dear mentor Sir Alexander, nor Lord Granwell, who so kindly became your husband.”

The previous secretary general had employed a meritocracy system. If you could subdue dragons and other monsters, you did great—and if you could slay many, you were an outstanding knight. It was an easy to understand system which had personally been a great help to me.

“Can you comprehend that?” the current secretary general asked condescendingly. “You were born a commoner, yet managed to have the legendary dragon-slayer Sir Alexander Vanitas as your mentor. What an honor that must have been. You do know that a great many trainees from the upper echelons of high society wished to become his apprentice, right? Disregarding that fact, you became his apprentice and underwent his training. That is something you must repay him for.”

Black knights who left the front lines chose an apprentice from among the trainees at the knights academy. The trainees could not choose their black knight mentors—the black knight chose their apprentice. The black knight would assess the state of the trainees’ classroom learning and hands-on training, then listen to the instructors’ appraisal of their daily lifestyles and the like. Then, the black knight would go “I’ll turn this one into a fully-fledged knight” and select their apprentice.

I didn’t choose my mentor—my mentor chose me. I was frankly glad that he did, and it was my intention to fight in a way that didn’t embarrass him. However, I didn’t want my social status to sully what people said about his choice.

The secretary general remained silent for a long time. “What is with your attitude? Get a grip on your situation. Recently you finally married, but until then you had refused every white mage who had offered to marry you due to their social status, position, and physical appearance. I utterly cannot believe it. You have done the lowest thing a person can do, you know. Do you understand?” The secretary general glared at me through round glasses with his leaf-green eyes. “This will not help your relationship with Lord Granwell. At the very least, you must not interfere with his work as an aide to the prime minister. The executive office will manage this part without fail, so all you have to do will be to follow your mission instructions.”

A young man stood next to the large desk that the secretary general worked

at. *"I will manage this woman's mission assignments from now on," he offered.*

"Ah, that's great. Secretary Tommy Shaldain is a relation of yours, so he's sure to take good care of you," the secretary general smirked.

Secretary Tommy Shaldain of the Black Knights Regiment executive office was a cousin to Lord Granwell on his mother's side, which I supposed made him related to me on paper.

"If you don't work satisfactorily," he said, "you'll be a nuisance to Joshua, Margot, and my aunt. Were you aware that since you—a plebeian—married Joshua, Margot has been treated quite coldly by the family she married into. She gets bullied at soirees and tea parties." He snorted roughly before continuing. "They all talk about how she's the sister-in-law to a commoner with no parents. She's inconsolable. You'll have to work to become a first-rate black knight so people will deem you acceptable!"

Although I was a commoner who had entered the high nobility, I hadn't imagined that I would be the cause of Lady Margot being bullied at tea parties and soirees, nor her being treated so distantly by her husband's family.

"Well, that will cease to be the case depending on how well you do your job," the secretary general noted. "Your mentor Sir Alexander was born into a viscount's family—a low-ranking noble estate. However, every single citizen in this country holds him in high esteem, as he has shown many great efforts as a black knight. So you, too, should follow in your mentor's footsteps on your missions and protect the lives and livelihoods of the citizens. If you can produce results, everyone will recognize you. After all, there is precedent for that." The secretary general put his hands together and continued, "You will not bother your mentor nor your husband, nor interrupt their work. With that taken into account, do devote yourself to your missions."

The secretary general laughed and inclined his head, and a chortling Tommy Shaldain enthusiastically nodded and added, "It's just as you say, Sir Secretary General."

Then, mission directives, filled with tightly-packed schedules, appeared in my hand.

"Devote yourself,' good. That's all you can do anyway," said the secretary

general. He had slightly quirky, soft-looking reddish brown hair, pretty eyes like spring leaves, and a face that seemed gentle at first glance.

“Fight until you die,” he ordered me with a smile on his face.

When I opened my eyes, the world seemed blurry.

Though I blinked several times, my vision never seemed to be completely clear. It was so hazy that I could only make out broad shapes, colors, as well as light and dark. It was as if a fog had risen around me.

Speaking of which, I had a feeling that something like this had happened to me before. Right—before I had been fired from the Corps, I had had the same vision trouble when I woke up in the hospital. But unlike then, I was not in that hospital, and it seemed that those incoherent scenes and conversations I had witnessed were dreams.

I only had to think just a little to understand that fact. Lady Sherry hadn't produced the file for divorce out of nowhere without warning, the black knights who hated me hadn't suddenly popped up in countless numbers, and the secretary general and Mr. Shaldain hadn't laughed together like that. Those had all been dreams that mixed reality with my thoughts and perceptions toward those people. They had been unpleasant, but nothing to worry about. In the end, dreams were just dreams.

My field of vision gradually began to clear. I slowly looked around, and recognized that I was in a room at the Sathante commoner's clinic.

My left hand felt heavy and wouldn't move, so I looked in that direction. Someone sat in the chair there, lying prostrate across the bed. He was ardently squeezing my hand back.

I gasped softly.

He had brown hair with a strong reddish tinge, pale skin that had never known a sunburn, and the hand holding mine was typical of a civil official's, with large writing calluses from continuously gripping pens.

I didn't speak.

There was no reason *he* would be here. Was this a doppelgänger? Was I still dreaming, or perhaps seeing some convenient illusion? While I was reeling, the man in question awoke, then met my gaze. His eyes were a deep green.

He didn't speak for a moment. "Thank goodness you woke up. Do you feel any pain or discomfort anywhere?"

His smooth, low voice was familiar. I had heard it many times—and I had wanted to hear it so many more times.

He waited for me to answer. When I didn't, he asked, "Are you all right?"

"Y-Yes." The syllable came slowly from my lips.

It had become a matter of course to feel pains, cramps, pins and needles, and a general sense of deterioration in my body. However, right now I felt only a little of those discomforts. It wasn't like the damage was all gone, but I felt significantly better. I thought for sure that I had been aided with recovery magic.

"You'll need more time to make a complete recovery, so please be patient," the man continued. "We'll perform healing magic on you, give you medicine, massage you with cream, and we'll do physical therapy too."

"O-Okay," I replied shakily.

"There's no need to worry. I'll be taking full responsibility for treating you and restoring your mobility."

I was reeling. Why was he here? Why, when we had no relation anymore? Why act and talk like he was still my husband?

He paused. "Is there a chance you don't remember me? Did you forget me?"

I didn't answer.

"Be honest." His dark green eyes, full of an intellectual air, narrowed. "Answer me," he pressed.

I wish he had been someone I could have forgotten. If he had been that kind of person, it would have all been easier.

"Lord Granwell," I eventually responded.

“That’s not *my* name.”

I paused, then answered, “Lord Joshua.”

His expression crumbled, and he fell upon me and hugged me. He was warm, smelled nice, and was heavy against me.

“I’m so glad,” he said, weaving words together in a whisper. “I worried that my recovery and detoxification magic wasn’t working—that I couldn’t heal you.”

He squeezed me tight, sniffing. Many warm droplets fell onto my shoulder, and I realized that Lord Granwell was crying.

“I missed you,” he said finally.

The unexpected words made my heart squeeze and quiver with happiness. I had thought that I would never see him again, yet here we were together, and he’d told me he’d missed me.

It was difficult to move my arms, but I wrapped them around Lord Granwell’s back. Immediately, he hugged me even harder. His embrace was slightly painful—no, it was rather painful. However, I wanted to remain in his arms. I stayed unmoving, captured in his arms while warm rain sprinkled on my shoulder.

Chapter 7: His and Her Reunion

Kingdom of Mert Calendar Year 785

“U-Um...” I searched for words as I sat there, straight up on the bed.

I was no longer a knight—just a plain, divorced commoner with no relationship to Lord Granwell. I was in no position to have a conversation with a high-ranking nobleman such as him. However, I had to. As Mary had told me, we had to talk to each other about ourselves. However, though I understood that, I didn’t know what to say.

Lord Granwell let out two large breaths, then made tea in the teapot set out on the table. He handed me a plain mug, just like a commoner’s. To my surprise, the herbal tea inside was Mary’s.

“You were unconscious for five days,” Lord Granwell finally continued, “and the poison gave you a high fever. The poison has been neutralized, but your body is in an extremely weakened state. If you feel any sort of pain, I want you to let me know immediately.”

“All right.” I paused. “I...”

Lord Granwell sat in the chair beside the bed and drank some of the tea. He let out a large sigh. “First of all, there is something you must know,” he began. “We are not divorced.”

I stared at him. “W-We... Huh? What?!”

“My mother called you to the main hall to sign the file for divorce, correct?” he said. “I burned that document to ashes. It was never properly submitted to the authorities, so we remain husband and wife.”

We...weren’t divorced?

Hadn’t Lady Sherry told me when I signed the file for divorce that she would have it sent out immediately? And what was more, it had been burned to ashes?

“I, um...” I searched for words, then managed, “But I was told that since I’m no longer a black knight, I’m not fit to be your wife. That for your future, you should marry a young noblewoman with a powerful family.”

“The one who told you that was my mother, *not* me,” Lord Granwell countered.

“Oh, I...I see. But...” I didn’t know what to say.

Lord Granwell smiled wryly. “No matter what your situation, I have no intention of divorcing you. When we got married and I signed our marriage registration, I swore to the god in that church to love you until death do us part. I don’t have any desire to break my vow. How do you feel?”

I shook my head. When we had married, there had been a number of oaths written on our marriage registration—like to care for and support each other, and to respect each other. Of course, what Lord Granwell had said about being together until death do us part had been written there as well.

“Besides,” Lord Granwell added, “I don’t plan on making those vows all the time. I only want to do it once in my whole life.”

I also had no intention of breaking my vows. I had no reason to cut off our marriage, and besides, I had fallen in love with him. If we were going to discuss divorce, I assumed it would be in relation to Lord Granwell’s position.

“I feel the same,” I stammered out finally.

“Is that so? Then that’s good,” he replied. “If you had truly wished for a divorce, I would have clung to you desperately and begged you by any means necessary to change your mind. I’m relieved.” He muttered that last part and drank his herbal tea.

As I watched him, I also sipped my own cup of refreshing citrus-flavored tea.

Lord Granwell gathered his thoughts. “I didn’t mean to neglect you over the past year and several months, but that is what happened, and I apologize. I’m truly sorry.”

He placed his mug on the table, then lowered his forehead to the bed in a bow. I could see the neatly trimmed hair on the back of his head, but this

wouldn't do. If we were to talk, I wanted to properly see his face.

"Um, about that—would you please explain that to me?" I asked.

"Of course." Lord Granwell slowly lifted his head. "Where should I start? Well, yes—like I said, I did not intend this, but I did neglect you. I—as well as His Excellency the Prime Minister and the entire office—was under the assumption that your duties had been changed."

"Huh? By duties, do you mean my hunting missions?"

"Correct. I..." He paused. "I didn't check with you and rather selfishly submitted a request to your executive office for your transfer to the knights' academy as an instructor."

"Wh-What?!" I gasped. *Me, an instructor at the knights' academy? A teacher?!*

"I still regret doing such a thing without consulting you, but I had wanted to remove you from your missions."

"Um, was that because you couldn't find the time to bless me with divine magic because of your work schedule?" I asked.

"While that was a factor, my first priority was to keep you away from danger. I know it's a selfish excuse, and unacceptable for a knight's husband to say. However, seeing you return home completely exhausted from your missions, with your equipment broken and tattered, terrified me," he admitted.

Lord Granwell squeezed his hands together so hard they turned white. I put my own hands on top of his, and his relaxed—but only just slightly.

"No matter how much divine magic I blessed your equipment with, when something pushed that magic beyond its limits, you ended up injured. You may have only been wounded until that point, but one day...maybe something that couldn't be undone—something fatal—might happen to you." His hands trembled under my palms. "It was frightening to think about that."

Lord Granwell's fears weren't unfounded. Knights' battles against dragons and other monsters always went hand in hand with life-threatening danger. No matter how strong the divine magic we received and no matter how extensively

we trained, it did not change the fact that death was right around the corner—the reality that black knights died in the line of duty.

“So that was why you wanted me to work at the knights’ academy?” I asked, wrapping up Lord Granwell’s trembling hands with my own.

“Yes. I thought that if you were an instructor there, I wouldn’t fear for your life,” he explained. “I received official documentation from the executive office that you taught Monster Studies and archery at the school,” he continued. “So I departed for work around the country and abroad too. But...your situation was different than I thought.”

I pulled Lord Granwell’s hands and pressed them against my forehead. “Thank you.”

“Lina?”

“Thank you for trying to protect me,” I insisted.

“But I *didn’t* protect you,” he protested. “You kept going out on missions—not just that, but you fought those dragons and beasts without my divine magic.”

“The executive office sent you the official notice of transfer,” I explained calmly. “Despite that, I continued to be deployed. The Black Knights Regiment executive office must have done that intentionally. It is not your fault, Lord Granwell.”

“But...” he protested weakly.

“I’m glad that you wanted to keep me safe from harm.”

I was sure that there were many spouses of knights who thought more or less the same way as Lord Granwell—they hoped that their precious life partner wouldn’t get hurt and would come back from missions safe and alive. However, knighthood was an important occupation that protected the lives and livelihoods of the citizens, and many felt pride in their work. The truth was that it was difficult for white mages to ask their partners to quit and transfer to a safe occupation.

However, Lord Granwell had actually done it. He had put my life before his own, even though he had known that he would surely be spoken of badly as a

black knight's spouse.

"I'm truly sorry," he said after a few moments. "For what my mother did, as well."

"But..." I gathered my thoughts. "When I think about Lady Sherry's position and feelings, what she did was a matter of course."

I was confident that she was a mother who thought about what she could do for her son and followed through on it. For a civil servant to be successful in his career, a spouse was important, and in that case, a young lady from a noble house with ties to other civil officials would surely be a better choice than myself.

"My mother wants to atone to me."

"To atone? She wants to make amends?" I asked.

Lord Granwell nodded. "I had a fiancée in the past. She was a young woman from a count's family, and for several details I'll leave out, our betrothal was dissolved. The cause of it was Margot."

"Did Lady Margot cause a problem that your ex-fiancée felt responsible for?"

Lord Granwell nodded. He turned back to the cup he had left on the table and picked it up. I thought the herbal tea must be lukewarm by now, but he drank it in one gulp.

"That's right. When I married you, I officially announced to my uncle that I would not be inheriting the title of marquis and left it in writing too. My mother accepted it because it was my decision."

"Which is exactly why she wanted you to have a successful career," I surmised.

What you thought might be good for another person was not always favorable for them. In that sense, it seemed that Lady Sherry's love for her son was a bit out of sync with his own desires. However, I had a feeling I understood how she thought of him.

"I bear no ill will toward Lady Sherry for what she did to me," I explained. "After all, what happened was a result of her doing what she could for you as

your mother. Besides, I was the one who signed the file for divorce.”

Lord Granwell did not respond.

“I do regret that,” I continued. “It wasn’t until Mary told me that I realized this: you and I are the ones who are married, Lord Granwell—Lady Sherry has nothing to do with it. The only ones who can discuss the continuation of our marriage are the two of us.”

I am neither very smart nor a deep thinker, so I always realize and regret things after someone else informs me about the issue.

Lord Granwell paused. “I was quite shocked when I heard that you’d signed the file for divorce without hesitation.”

Lord Granwell took my hand, squeezing as if to say he wasn’t going to let me slip away.

“Our marriage began with a large contractual element. However...” He paused. “I had no intention of keeping it that way. In my own way, I was fond of you, loved you, and cherished you for the way you wholly expressed your gratitude and feelings for me. Though I did not say all of that in words, I had thought that my feelings had gotten through to you.”

He hung his head and spoke haltingly. His ears were a bright red. “So, when I heard that you hadn’t hesitated to sign the divorce paperwork, I felt...miserable at the thought that you considered our relationship so trifling.”

I paused. “Knights always risk their lives when they fight dragons and other monsters,” I said finally.

At the abrupt change of topic, Lord Granwell raised his head. He looked rather puzzled, and his green gaze flickered.

“Monsters can have large, sharp claws; jagged, pointed tusks; or solid horns; and some breathe out fire or poison,” I continued. “Receiving a direct blow would reduce anyone to dead meat in the blink of an eye. That’s what missions are—dangerous. Lord Granwell, since our betrothal you have blessed my equipment and filled my magic stones with mana, and that has saved my life time after time. During the past year since I lost access to that magic, I realized firsthand its value—how strong it was, and how well it protected me.”

There had been barrier magic that had saved me from being instantly burned to ashes, high-level recovery magic that had immediately healed my body after a long fall had sent me flying into a rock wall, and speed enhancement magic that had given me the agility to evade the thrust from a sharp horn. It was impossible to list all the countless times his magic had saved me.

“Lord Granwell, your magic...” I gathered my words. “Your mana surrounded me and saved my life more times than I can count. I was grateful on every single occasion, and it was impossible *not* to fall in love with you after being saved so many times.”

“Then why did you sign the file for divorce?” Lord Granwell asked slowly.

“The fundamental basis of our marriage is based on the fact that we have compatible magic affinity—I the black knight and you my white mage. My feelings didn’t matter in that situation. When I...had to stop being a black knight, it seemed logical for our marriage to be dissolved.” I paused. “Besides, there was your future to consider. I thought that it would be better for you to...to marry a young noblewoman. Someone who had a family that could support you, with connections among civil servants.”

“And so you stepped aside for the sake of my position and career?” Lord Granwell pulled my hand and pressed his lips to the back of it with a soft smack. “For me?”

“But... I really, really...” I was flustered. “I didn’t want to sign it.”

“I see.”

“But I thought I had to.”

Lord Granwell looked at me with upturned emerald eyes from under long reddish-brown eyelashes. His thin lips had formed into a smile. My heartbeat suddenly quickened, and my face burned.

“I’m glad you were thinking of me,” he admitted. “But I want you to understand that whether you’re a knight or not, I want to remain your husband. I do not want to ever give up on you. So I hope you never give up on me without a word.”

Lord Granwell’s face slowly came closer, so much that I couldn’t properly look

at him.

“From now on, I want you to put what you’re thinking into words—I want us to solve problems together,” he continued. “If you have any desires, I want you to tell me. And I will do the same for you.”

“O-Okay,” I stammered.

Something soft pressed against my lips, but only for a moment. We separated, only to kiss over and over again.

After what felt like an eternity, our kisses concluded. As if to put on a finishing touch, he pressed his lips to the back of my hand once again. “I love you,” he murmured.

“Lord Granwell,” I whispered, stunned.

“Stop that.”

“What?”

“Lord Granwell is a title, not my name,” he explained. “I’d have you call me by my name—you did so a year ago, didn’t you?”

“Ah, well... I...” I stammered.

“Come on, Lina. Call me by my name.”

“W-Well...” I paused. “Lord J-Joshua.”

“I don’t need an honorific—drop the ‘lord.’”

“Wh-What?!”

“Come on, now.”

He continued pestering me until I managed to say it. Fire radiated from my face, and I thought my heart would burst. However, Joshua seemed happy that I had called him only by his name, and he gave me a delighted smile.

Three days later, a group from the royal capital arrived. I had known that Inspector Hawking’s associate would be arriving in a carriage with an escort of red knights, but I couldn’t hide my surprise upon seeing my mentor, Sir

Alexander, come out from the coach. He saw that I stood close to Joshua, relying on my cane, and approached us immediately.

“Even young children tell their parents where they’re going before they go off and play,” he scolded me. “Even now that you’re grown up, if you knew you were going to be absent for a long time, you should’ve told someone at the estate where you were going and how long you’d be gone. At the very least you should’ve told Lord Granwell that you were going to recuperate in the Sathante hot springs for three months! In the first place, you should’ve contacted me when you left the marquis’s estate.”

I had no retort. I bowed my head. “I’m deeply sorry.”

Joshua also lowered his head alongside me. “I also apologize for causing you to worry.”

“I heard that ya managed to speak with my foolish apprentice—that’s excellent,” Alexander told Joshua before turning to me again. “Lina, I’m glad you’re all right. No more causing trouble by going missing. You’ve shortened my and Leila’s lives, ya did. From now on, you’re to have proper discussions with Lord Granwell and you’re not to neglect corresponding with him.”

My mentor put his large hand on my head, rubbing it like he used to during my training when I mastered old magic or completed a mission successfully.

“Yes, sir,” I said finally.

“May we continue? I thought perhaps you might like to lecture her some more.”

Inspector Hawking stepped in, his teasing lightening the mood. Honestly, I had thought that my mentor would scold me for longer—I was surprised Inspector Hawking had broken up the chastisement so easily.

“We may,” Alexander replied. “Lord Granwell is Lina’s partner and protector now, after all.”

Inspector Hawking laughed. “I see your role as father has ended, huh?”

His joke made my mentor turn away in a sudden huff, and Joshua, smiling, pushed even closer to me. I didn’t really understand it all, but I was honestly

just happy not to be lectured anymore. My mentor's rebukes were insistent and long.

"Understood. Now then," Inspector Hawking continued, "let me inform you as to the plan from here on. The maid who attempted to kill Ms. Lina, and the baroness who ordered the poisoning, will be escorted to the royal capital. There, they will undergo investigation and trial, and their punishment will be decided upon and carried out. The departure to the royal capital will be in the morning on the day after tomorrow. Ms. Lina and Lord Granwell shall accompany us."

Nothing about the plan stuck out to me, so I nodded in agreement.

"Now then, Ms. Lina, please make whatever preparations your health will require for the trip. Although, I'm not worried, as your husband Lord Granwell is here with you," Inspector Hawking noted.

"Naturally," Joshua said with a rough snort.

Over the last few days, Joshua had continued caring for me with magic, and Mary had treated me with her tea, medicines, creams, and massages to tremendous effect. The poison I had drank here in Sathante had completely left my body, and the recovery concerning the accumulated dragon venom and magic burns had advanced considerably. Thanks to Joshua and Mary, the discoloration on my skin was fading, my wounds were less noticeable, and I could move my limbs more freely than before.

Inspector Hawking paused. "Ms. Lina, I have a few last things I would like to ask you. About the relative of those who worked at the Heiress Hotel—Lady Amelia Talys. Had you ever been acquainted with her before coming here?"

"No," I replied. "This is still the first and only time I've been to Sathante. The only time I visited the Heiress Hotel was when I went to give my regards to Mr. Landon before leaving town. I only met Lady Talys after the bear-types invaded, when she came to the clinic I was in."

"She arrived with Lady Marsha-Leigh, correct?"

As Mary had been with me then, she had already told him what Lady Marsha-Leigh and Lady Talys had said and done to me. It seemed he was verifying the

information with me.

“Inspector Hawking, why did Lady Talys have Lina poisoned?” Alexander asked.

Inspector Hawking scratched his head of light brown hair. “She said she was told to—that if she saw Ms. Lina, she was to use the special poison to kill her.”

My mentor’s, Joshua’s, and Inspector Hawking’s eyes all turned toward me.

“Who ordered that?” Sir Alexander crossed his arms, scratching his chin with his right hand as he thought. I wondered if he was mentally going through the nobility that he knew. “Although Lina’s married to Lord Granwell and is a member of the marquis’s family now, she’s still treated as a commoner. The Talys family has almost no connection to the Granwells, and they’re not related to any of the different factions. I can’t think of anyone or any house who would order Lady Talys to poison someone.”

“The Talys family is related to Marquis Connelly,” Inspector Hawking pointed out. “However, it’s clear that these houses and their other relatives have nothing to do with Ms. Lina. I’m afraid that the motive and the ultimate perpetrator are still unknown.”

“Which means that more detailed investigations and inquiries are to follow, I take it?” I asked.

I hadn’t imagined that a completely unrelated nobleman or woman was after my life. I wouldn’t say that there was zero possibility that I had done something wrong without realizing it, but surely nothing that would warrant someone wanting me dead.

“Yes,” the inspector replied. “Well, I think everything should be okay, but Ms. Lina, for now, please be careful about what you eat and drink.”

“Understood.”

I looked at Joshua, who had remained silent throughout the exchange. He wore a severe, pained expression on his face. I wanted to know what was wrong, but I hesitated to ask and swallowed my words.

The day after the next, we boarded a carriage in the same caravan as the one

that held the prisoners, and as planned, we left the remote northern village of Sathante.

Sir Elijah and his apprentice went to Mt. Mulian to commence their monster-hunting training—their original goal for coming to Sathante. Ms. Leila would join my mentor in a few days here in Sathante, so he remained, getting a headstart on enjoying the hot springs, mountains, ocean, food, and drink. It seemed that they had already made arrangements to spend the winter here by themselves.

Sathante's autumn festival was held, though on a smaller scale than what had been planned. However, it seemed that both the citizens and visitors still enjoyed it. Mr. Landon's family was apparently disappointed in it, but he still performed his role as town administrator.

I hoped that what Lady Talys had done wouldn't affect the people around her much. However, that didn't seem possible, what with the social standings, responsibilities, and the like found in the world of the nobility. That world seemed even more relentless and complicated than the northern frontier.

Chapter 8: His and Her Return to the Royal Capital

Kingdom of Mert Calendar Year 785

Lina and I returned to the royal capital in the inspector's train of carriages, and borrowed a small residence belonging to the office of inspection for an immediate stay. As Lina had lost her knighthood, she could no longer stay in the Corps dormitory, and all of the rooms in the civil servants' lodgings were essentially for single occupants only. By all rights we should have returned to the Granwell estate, but Lina had hardly any fond memories of it, what with how my mother and the servants had thought so lowly of her. With that in mind, I hesitated to return to the west hall.

The cozy two-story house that the office of inspection owned had been prepared for temporary stays by those people under audit or protection. There was a small garden which Lina took a liking to as she happily inspected the house and yard.

Sir Alexander and Sir Elijah had teleported me to Sathante, and afterward I had stayed there to help Lina recover. In all that time, I had not performed my duties as an aide, so I hurried to the prime minister's office as soon as we arrived at the capital.

In the end, however, I had accumulated many holidays from my long inspections both domestically and abroad, and technically I had already been taking time off even before I went to Sathante.

"You still have vacation left, you know," the prime minister told me. "I'm sure there are still concerns about your wife's health, and things you need to resolve. I'll take on the rest of your work, so you do what you need to do."

With that, he promptly drove me out of the policy office.

After Lina and I had stayed in that small borrowed house for three days,

Inspector McGuire paid us a visit. He told us that the investigation into the internals of the Black Knights Regiment executive office was progressing—although it appeared that there was a friend of mine who would not speak unless I was present.

“To speed the questioning along, I would like you to be there, Lord Granwell,” Inspector McGuire said. “Ms. Lina, as you are the affected party, you may join if you are interested. Well, I believe that the story we are to hear will not be a fun one, at any rate.”

Inspector McGuire seemed troubled to his core. I could not refuse.

At the designated time, Lina and I were led into a plain room. There was a large desk, chairs, writing materials, and a few magic tools, but the front of the room allowed a view into two other rooms. The space we were in was for surveying interrogations, and the two rooms at the front were the interrogation rooms.

“Those in the rooms on the other side cannot see nor hear us,” Inspector McGuire explained.

In the left room was Tommy Shaldain, my cousin on my mother’s side. He was responding to the inspector’s questions like a disgruntled child.

“Why did you embezzle the special bonus that was supposed to be paid to Ms. Lina?” the investigator asked.

“I did not embezzle it! That money should have been used for Margot,” Tommy retorted.

“You did embezzle it. The special bonus was to be paid to the black knight responsible for slaying the dragon. There’s no reason for you to send that money to Count Aston’s family without Ms. Lina’s consent.”

“She wouldn’t have had any objection anyway—she’s a plebeian and married into the marquis’s family, you know. The money is to make up for her annoying everyone there, and it’s not cheap.” Tommy huffed and looked away.

“What...is he talking about?” I asked haltingly.

Inspector McGuire shrugged his shoulders. “Exactly what you hear. He’s been

sending the bonus money that's supposed to be paid to Ms. Lina to Count Aston—using the Granwell name.”

“Why?”

“He said it was for the countess's budget.”

“My sister's budget?” I echoed. “I don't understand that at all.”

“It's all right,” Inspector McGuire replied. “No one else here understands either.”

The inspectors in this room who were watching the proceedings and taking minutes of the conversation were all either gasping in amazement or shaking their heads.

“First, there was something to give to you two... Something to give...” Inspector McGuire muttered. He casually picked up a box on the table and handed it to me and Lina.

Lina tilted her head as she opened the box. Inside was a rather hefty amount of letters and a few small paper parcels.

“We found these letters and gifts under the desk of the Black Knights Regiment executive office's secretary general. By all rights, they should have gone through the office before continuing on their way to you, Ms. Lina, and to you, Lord Granwell. All of them had been kept in the office without being sent.”

“All of these are for me,” Lina said finally.

I recognized the letters and parcels. I had sent them to Lina from the places I had gone to work. The parcels, now worn, were filled with things like small hair clips and blue and green ribbons. I had thought that they were being sent along to Lina, but not a single one had gotten to her. What's more, this was the first time she was seeing any of my letters.

She had not seen my face or heard an explanation, nor had she replied even when I had sent her one. Lina had simply been left alone to perform her duties. Furthermore, thanks to my mother and the servants, Lina had left the west hall, and had thought that I and everyone around her wanted the two of us divorced. It had been a hopeless situation.

“Th-Thank you,” Lina said haltingly after a moment. “I’m happy you sent these letters, and these beautiful ribbons and hair clips.”

“A little late for that,” I noted.

Lina shook her head and held the letters and gifts as if they were precious. “Even so, I’m happy. These are irreplaceable to me.”

For some reason, I felt embarrassed that she would read the letters I had sent so long ago. However, Lina was smiling, and I couldn’t deprive her of them. I was also happy to see that the box contained a number of letters she had written to me as well.

“Now then,” Inspector McGuire said. “Lord Granwell, I didn’t call you here because of Secretary Shaldain. Instead, please direct your attention to the other room.”

Someone was in the room on the right of Tommy’s. I recognized him, and even remembered his voice. The inspectors had traced the information gathered—the documents concerning Lina’s assignment as a black knight, Tommy’s embezzlement, and the marquis family that was related to the noblewoman who had had Lina poisoned—and come to one person.

“Donald.”

Although he wasn’t supposed to be able to see into this room or hear our voices, Donald looked up and met my gaze. The peaceful, gentle smile of the friend I knew from our school days remained unchanged on his face.

When I entered the interrogation room and sat across from Donald at the desk, he was the first to pipe up as usual. “Hi! It took you longer to get here than I expected.”

“As you requested, we have brought Lord Granwell,” Inspector Hawking stated. “Now, Secretary General Donald Faraday of the Black Knights Regiment executive office, you’ll answer our questions, correct?”

“Yes. I did promise.”

Inspector Hawking, who was seated in a chair diagonally behind me, was in charge of Donald’s questioning. He was considerably paler than the last time we had met—it seemed like he was tired of dealing with Donald.

“Well then, let’s start the questioning again,” Inspector Hawking began. “Why did you continue to issue mission directives to Ms. Lina without informing her of the fact that you had officially accepted and processed the request for her transfer into another role?”

“That was, of course, because I wanted her to cross the rainbow bridge,” Donald said easily. “I wanted her to die in the line of duty, so I kept Joshua away from her so that he couldn’t bless her with divine magic, and I also kept sending her out on missions.”

His response elicited gasps from everyone else in the room—including me.

“Crossing the rainbow bridge” was an expression typically used in this country about death. According to legend, when someone died, they became a spirit and crossed the rainbow bridge to a country that the gods ruled.

“Why?” I asked. “Why try to kill Lina?”

The thought of Donald trying to kill Lina was a gut-wrenching one, but to be honest, I had doubts about it. She was a black knight, and he was the secretary general of the Black Knights Regiment executive office—their relationship was not particularly deep. Lina herself had said that she had spoken to the new secretary general only once, and briefly at that, when Donald had been freshly appointed to the position.

“That is, of course, because she married you, Joshua,” Donald replied. “There

is no other reason whatsoever.”

I stared at him. “What?”

“I had heard that she was an incredibly outstanding black knight, but she exceeded my expectations,” Donald went on. “Even without your powerful divine magic, she lived through and completed her missions. I was surprised that I couldn’t get her killed in the line of duty. When I heard that she had been gravely injured, I had thought that at last the time had come—but unfortunately, she was saved. After that, I learned from her medical reports that it would be difficult for her to continue her duties as a knight, and I was quite impatient while I waited for her to get to the General Headquarters and retire from the Corps.”

Donald shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. It was a somewhat theatrical gesture.

“Since she retired, I wouldn’t be able to get her to die in the line of duty. I was sure that the commander and vice commander of the Black Knights Regiment advised the head office to release her and give her a chance to get away from the Corps before they used her up.”

Inspector Hawking paused. “So you ordered your family relations connected through your birth house to poison Ms. Lina if they found her? According to my research, the poison made with the daybreak mushrooms is often used by families related to Marquis Connelly’s family.”

“That’s correct, although using poison happened more in the past,” Donald replied, acknowledging his order to poison Lina in a completely nonchalant manner.

“Why plot to kill Ms. Lina after her marriage to Lord Granwell?” Inspector Hawking asked. “From the way you said it, it sounds as if you wanted to kill her just because she’s his wife.”

“You know, I would not have tried to kill his wife if she were the young lady of some noble family or even some simple mage. But because his wife happened to be her—happened to be a black knight...” Donald, who had always been so gentle, kind, and polite in his speech, changed completely and unexpectedly. “It was because *you* received the highest honor for a white mage—marrying a

black knight!” he declared fiercely.

“There are as many white mages who have that honor as there are black knights, not just Lord Granwell,” Inspector Hawking replied. “In fact, former Secretary General Faraday, you also have that honor.”

Donald laughed dryly. “That’s the point. My wife is Countess Faraday. I am one of those honored white mages with a black knight spouse. That is *my sole honor*, and that was the only thing I had that you didn’t, Joshua... Yet...”

Who in the world was the man in front of me? He looked like the gentle, kind, and calm friend with whom I had spent my school years—the one who had admonished His Highness Prince Silas and our other school friends and mediated their fights during their emotional adolescence.

“Yet you stole that from me!” Donald screamed, his voice echoing in the room as he slammed his fist on the desk.

“I’ve stolen nothing from you,” I retorted. “In the first place, you received a white mage’s honor long before I did.”

“‘Nothing’?” Donald repeated. “You’re really saying that?”

“Of course I am.”

Donald clenched the fist he still held on the table so strongly that it turned white and trembled. “Didn’t you know about what they called me in school?”

“In school? You mean those nicknames?”

The sons and daughters of nobility attended the royal academy. Those in the same year spent time together at school and in the student dormitory, and many things happened that made some become close and others turn sour toward one another. On the surface, some looked like they got along, but in the shadows it was common for them to make fun of others, and name-calling was typically done behind another’s back.

When he was a student alongside me, His Highness Prince Silas’s nickname was “Bottle Glasses Prince.” An unparalleled bookworm, he had spent many long hours reading in dark rooms, and as a result wore glasses with thick, magic-enhanced lenses to compensate for his nearsightedness.

The third son of a marquis—who also happened to serve as one of the prince’s bodyguards—had been so engrossed in training and had been so obsessive over swordsmanship and spearmanship that he would forget to eat; he would also ignore the girls his age and instead eyed muscular knights. He was so crazed about it that people called him the “Meathead Knight,” and people even suspected that he was gay.

My nickname had been “the Coldhearted Mask,” as I barely ever made any facial expressions and spoke so few words.

And from what I recalled, Donald’s nickname had been “the Go-Between Boy,” since he had been good at mediating brawls and quarrels among our classmates.

“I was called ‘Diluted Donald,’ ‘the KnockoffProduct,’ and ‘Mr. Rehashed.’ I was the watered down version, the lesser product, and the rehashed edition of *you*, Joshua,” he snarled.

“What are you talking about? They called you ‘the Go-Between Boy.’”

“That was the nickname only a few of the people who liked me used,” Donald retorted. “You and I are the same age, both the firstborn sons of a marquis, both white mages, and both school friends of His Highness Prince Silas. I was always being compared to you—by both my family and those at school. I was told so many times that I was ‘Diluted Donald, the watered-down version of Joshua Granwell’ because my hair and eyes were lighter than yours. You were always the one who was a better student, athlete, and mage—I had nothing to myself.”

Diluted Donald. The Knockoff Product. Mr. Rehashed. I understood that none of these nicknames had any good meaning to them. In the first place, nicknames were often tacked onto a person to describe their characteristics or shortcomings.

“I was always told that you were the genuine article, and I was just a chintzy knockoff,” Donald continued bitterly. “It was so agonizing. I hated you—I *despised* you. The only thing I had that you didn’t was a white mage’s honor—being chosen by a black knight to be her spouse. It was the only thing I was proud of, even if it was contractual, even if she and I are married on paper only

—even if we don’t love each other.”

I paused. “Donald.”

He plowed on, glaring at me. “But a black knight chose you as her husband when you were in your mid twenties. You got the same honor I did, so that *one thing* I had disappeared. What’s worse, you got along with her. I had never expected you, a highborn, to get along with her, a pleb! I thought for sure your relationship would crash and burn and you’d end up married only on paper—just like me!” He pounded the desk over and over again, the thuds filling the air. “You’re happily married, *and* you have a successful career. Even so, I—I have nothing! I’m just the diluted version of Joshua Granwell! Why am I the only one who can’t have things go my way? I’m *not* a diluted, rehashed version of you!”

I had never seen this side of my school friend. He had been kind and gentle—a quiet man who had never once raised his voice. I had thought that he was leading a happy life with the somewhat willful Countess Faraday and their children.

“Were you behind Lord Granwell’s numerous business trips around Mert and abroad, then?” Inspector Hawking asked. “To make it so that he had no time to spend with Ms. Lina?”

Donald nodded, laughing loudly. “My foolish father hasn’t given up on becoming prime minister. I fanned his ambitions a bit and used a little mind manipulation magic to make him focus on getting ahead, and like an idiot he diligently had you going on inspections all over the place. Don’t you think he’s stupid? He *still* thinks he can become prime minister. He really believes without a doubt that if you weren’t around, he’d be the next one to take the position.”

“That’s not feasible, you know,” I countered. “Lord Connelly is older than Prime Minister Herschel—surely he’ll be retiring before His Excellency resigns.”

“You’re right. It’s common sense that my father has no future anymore. His life as a civil servant in the royal palace will end with him being only an aide to the prime minister. But he doesn’t even realize that—he’s caught up in the *delusion* that he’ll become prime minister.” Donald laughed.

Connelly was Donald’s father, and I had always thought that they both had kind and gentle dispositions. One’s inner thoughts couldn’t be seen on the

outside, however—it seemed that father and son were also incredibly alike in the fact that they kept relentless emotions and desires to themselves. Until just now, I had no idea that they had harbored such thoughts.

“I wanted your wife to die in the line of duty—without any decent divine magic blessing her equipment because you didn’t have the time for it,” Donald seethed. “If she died without your protection, you’d lose your honor as a white mage, and your position would suffer for it. In the end, you’d lose your job too. But that pleb black knight is tenacious. She survived, and no matter how much time has passed, your reputation hasn’t even worsened.”

“You did all this for something like that?” I replied dryly.

“‘Something like that’?!” Donald screeched. “‘Something like that’—of course I did! You may think nothing of it, but it’s *everything* to me! You’ve always been above me without even realizing it!”

Tears welled in Donald’s leaf-green eyes before overflowing onto the lenses of his glasses. “You were better than me in every course at school, and when we graduated, you became a civil servant at the royal palace and got all these achievements before landing a position as an assistant to the prime minister. On top of that, you became a black knight’s husband *and* had a happy marriage! How is it that only *you* have a wife who appreciates you, thinks highly of you, and even loves you?!”

“Now then,” Inspector Hawking interrupted, voice resounding as he cut off Donald’s innermost thoughts turned shrieks. “You were envious of and begrudged Lord Granwell, and sought to sour his reputation in order to prevent him from having a successful career. You manipulated and altered Ms. Lina’s documents. You incited your father, Lord Connelly, to task Lord Granwell with going off on inspections both domestically and abroad as part of a scheme to prevent Lord Granwell from blessing Ms. Lina with divine magic. After a long string of attempts at exposing Ms. Lina to danger, you finally ordered nobles you were related to to poison her. You also instigated Secretary Tommy Shaldain to embezzle Ms. Lina’s reward money, then covered it up.”

The inspector’s voice was devoid of emotion—he was merely stating the facts. However, it was as if those words stabbed into Donald’s heart like sharp

knives. Speechless, he adjusted his posture as he sat and hunched over, making himself smaller.

“Do you acknowledge what I’ve said?” Inspector Hawking asked. “Everything you did was because you were jealous of Lord Granwell. All of your crimes stem from your envy.”

The room fell quiet, and Inspector Hawking and I sighed. Donald’s silence was his affirmation.

“I will have to speak to Lord Connelly and his son, the current Marquis Connelly—as well as Countess Faraday,” Inspector Hawking noted. “We’ll leave the questioning here for today. Lord Granwell, thank you for your presence.”

Prompted by his words, I stood and made for the exit to the interrogation room. I was exhausted, in a way different to how I felt after work.

“Joshua.”

I stopped with my hand on the doorknob and looked over my shoulder. Donald was unchanged from how he was just a moment ago—hunched up small and eyes downcast.

“You don’t understand how I feel,” he said. “My rival is right in front of me, but no matter how hard I try to win, I keep losing. Everyone keeps comparing me to you and making a fool of me.”

“That’s right, I don’t understand,” I retorted. “How much one learns at the academy should not be compared to others, be the subject swordsmanship, magic, history, foreign languages—everything. Examinations are to check your own proficiency. If your proficiency was inferior to mine, you should have mastered those subjects. I always considered—and still do—all study to be a battle with oneself. So Donald, no, I do not understand how you feel, nor do I want to.”

“Tch,” Donald hissed.

“You’re free to do as you please and compare yourself to me so much that you develop an inferiority complex,” I continued. “However, I will not forgive you for trying to undermine me by exposing my wife to danger.”

“Joshuaaaa!”

I left the room, Donald’s screams following me. Inspector Hawking accompanied me out before closing the door, though I could still hear Donald’s screeches and the sound of him hitting furniture. I continued to hear him until we left the hallway.

I went to get Lina, who had remained in the observation room to watch the questioning, though it seemed that she was also on her way to me. Looking flustered, she used her cane for support as she walked up to me.

“Joshua!” she cried.

Though she and Donald both called me by my first name, the difference was like night and day.

“I’m sorry for making you wait,” I apologized. “And that you had to listen to such a deranged story.”

Lina shook her head. “Don’t worry about that,” she murmured.

“I’ve done some research.” Inspector Hawking came up behind me, flipping through documents in his hand. “Countess Faraday and her husband have four children. Of course, their family registry lists the children as theirs—however, we have confirmed that former Secretary General Donald Faraday is not the father to any of them.”

“What?” Lina asked, bewildered. I said nothing, but shared her surprise.

Donald had married into the Faraday family and currently had two sons and two daughters. If I remembered correctly, the oldest son had been judged to have ability with old magic when he was five, which would make him a future black knight. All the children had inherited their mother’s black hair or their father’s brown, as well as either blue or green eyes. All of them looked like the children of Countess Faraday and Donald.

“But I have heard that all married black knights and white mages have happy relationships,” Lina protested softly.

“Ms. Lina, that is absolutely not the case for every relationship, particularly in matters between men and women,” Inspector Hawking replied. “Well, it is the

truth that the overwhelming majority of black knights and white mages have amicable marriages. When lives are at stake, people become both desperate and honest about their instinctive desires. We want to connect our lives to the next generation, so we naturally deepen our relationships. It's the same for you and Lord Granwell, isn't it, Ms. Lina?"

He smiled knowingly, and Lina's face reddened.

I lightly tugged on Inspector Hawking's ear, and with an exaggerated "Ow, sorry," he took a step back. "Setting aside the matter of nighttime get-togethers," he continued, "Countess Faraday and the now former secretary general are married on paper only. The biological father of the children seems to be an attendant of Countess Faraday's. Apparently, they have been lovers since before her betrothal, even. It seems that her marriage to the former secretary general was something she only wanted established for receiving divine magic from someone she has good magic affinity with."

Because of the two's compatible magic affinity, the Faradays had begged Donald to marry into the family even though, as the heir to the Connelys, he should have become the next marquis. Since birth, he had striven to become Marquis Connely, yet had thrown away the fruits of his labor and become a Faraday. At the very least he should have been happy if he could have built a good relationship with his wife, but a look into the truth of it revealed that she had only wanted him as a servant for his divine magic. It was shocking.

Lina lowered her head. "What a poor position for the secretary general to be in," she murmured. She was such a docile person that it seemed that she pitied Donald for his situation and his past. Having such a kind nature was virtuous, but there was no need to give Donald too much credit.

"Truly, former Secretary General Faraday's position is incredibly unfortunate; everyone in the office of inspection understands that," Inspector Hawking agreed. "However, just because it is unfortunate does not mean that we can allow him to get away with his crimes. Whatever his situation, there is no reason for him to commit such selfish misdeeds. Falsifying all sorts of documents, inciting a failed attempt at murder, and hiding embezzlement are all undeniable crimes, after all."

“I see,” Lina replied. Though she understood the logic, she was a sentimental person, and surely her pity hadn’t disappeared—even though the root cause of her pain had been Donald’s own actions, fueled by his warped emotions.

“Now then, thank you again for your presence for today’s questioning,” Inspector Hawking said, bowing his head. “Thanks to you, we were able to get former Secretary General Faraday to talk. Many people, once they speak the first time, lose their restraint and come forward with much more, so I suspect that the following interrogations won’t take much time. Well, if something does come up, we may need your help, however.”

“Please call on us if you need to,” Lina offered. “We will help you as much as we can.”

After that, the other inspectors bid us goodbye and we made to depart the royal palace. However, a young civil official had been waiting for us.

“His Excellency the prime minister wishes to see you,” he informed me.

We headed for the prime minister’s office, which was a room I had once visited almost daily, yet had been absent from for a number of months. We were met by the usual personnel: the civil servants in the policy department; my fellow aide, Virgil; and His Excellency Prime Minister Herschel, head of the office. A massive jumble of documents and materials sat on the large desk, making for a somewhat cluttered room.

“I received your summons, sir,” I said.

The prime minister put his elbows on the exceptionally large desk and slowly took in my appearance, looking me up and down. “I’m glad that you seem to have enjoyed your time off to the fullest. You look much better,” he noted with a laugh. Then, he looked to Lina, who was standing behind me, just to the side, and introduced himself. “My name is Elmer Herschel, the prime minister. We have many things to apologize to you for.”

“O-Oh, you don’t...” Lina began, but Prime Minister Herschel continued.

“After all, while it’s true that Secretary General Faraday was the one who made a mess of things for you—sending you out on harsh missions even under

normal circumstances, while keeping Joshua from blessing your equipment—I am also at fault for accepting his words without question. I was under the impression that you were working at the knights’ academy and let Joshua go off on long-term jobs to faraway places over and over again. I’m sorry.”

Prime Minister Herschel stood, soon followed by everyone else in the office. As one, they all bowed their heads and said, “Please accept our apologies.”

Flustered, Lina grabbed onto the edge of my clothes, seeming to not know what to do. “Please, um—please don’t bow. There’s no need for you all to apologize to me.”

“But—” Prime Minister Herschel began, but Lina continued on.

“The documents that came from the Black Knights Regiment executive office should have been official—no one would have doubted them, and no one would have checked whether they were truly legitimate. If it were the other way around, I wouldn’t have doubted documents stating my husband was going off for a couple of months to be in charge of inspections, had I seen any.”

She supported herself with her cane as she moved to stand directly in front of Prime Minister Herschel. Then, in a dignified manner, she declared, “Thus, no one here has to apologize. The one at fault is the former secretary general.”

When push came to shove—right now, in fact—Lina really did have a knight’s courage. She was different from a noblewoman. Rather than being a woman who had to be kept in a lavish mansion and protected, she was someone who could walk beside me.

“I see,” said the prime minister. “But still, I am apologetic for not realizing the situation. I think everyone here agrees with me that we wish we had noticed sooner.”

“I thank you for your concern,” Lina replied.

The prime minister offered us a seat on the sofa, and once we sat, someone supplied us with warm tea. A sweet, fruity scent permeated the room.

“Now then,” Prime Minister Herschel began. “I called you here because I thought we might talk about what to do hereafter.”

“Hereafter?” I repeated like a parrot, and Prime Minister Herschel nodded.

“Have you heard about Connelly?” he asked. “I had thought it was weird that he sent only you on long-distance jobs, but good grief—he was thinking preposterous things.”

“I heard he thought that, were I not here, he would be the next prime minister,” I noted.

“That would be impossible.”

Everyone nodded at his words.

“Connelly doesn’t have the temperament, nor nearly enough achievements, to take over my position,” Prime Minister Herschel continued. “Besides, being an aide suited him. Thus, I never imagined that he wished to be prime minister, nor that he would try to harm Ms. Lina and undermine your career for such an absurd reason.”

“I never expected that either,” I agreed. “Connelly was quite experienced and a reliable senior civil official—I learned a lot about my work from him.”

“However, no matter how much capability he has as an aide and no matter how reliable a civil servant he is, Connelly will never again enter this office,” Prime Minister Herschel announced.

Connelly would not receive a public punishment—all he had done was put me on a multitude of jobs that required me to go on long-term business trips. However, Donald had gone through his birth family, the Connelys, to order nobles he was related to to poison Lina. Even though that had ended in a failed attempt at murder, it had still been carried out. As the former head of the Connelly family, Frederick Connelly had borne the responsibility for it and had been deprived of his post as a civil servant in the royal palace.

“His Majesty has ordered me to take the opportunity to review our personnel here in the prime minister’s office,” Prime Minister Herschel continued. “It’s about time to start laying the groundwork for when His Highness Prince Silas becomes king.”

“Isn’t it too soon for that?” I asked. “His Majesty hasn’t even turned fifty yet.”

“It’s better to prepare sooner rather than later, of course,” Prime Minister Herschel replied. “Now then, Joshua, I want you to take this chance to think seriously about your future. Personally, I would like you to continue your position here in this office, and gain more experience as a civil servant in the royal palace. In the future, I’d like you to succeed me as prime minister.”

“But,” I said after a moment, “Virgil has been here longer than I have.”

It was tradition in Mert that the prime minister had three aides. Until now, that had included Connelly, who had lost his position; Virgil Laskin, who was four years older than me; and myself. Virgil had worked in this position longer than I had, and had an eye for detail in his work.

“I’ll refrain from becoming prime minister,” Virgil declared as he went through documents. “I’m more suited for a job behind the scenes, and I like my work, anyway. Besides, I don’t like being told to get in front of people to do something—I get all nervous and can’t speak, and I can’t stop sweating. I’m begging you, Joshua. You’re good at getting in front of people, aren’t you?”

His expression clearly read, “I’m sorry, but it’s too much for me—and sorry to put you in His Excellency’s line of fire too.”

“If you would like to transfer to another department, Joshua, please let me know,” Prime Minister Herschel continued. He paused. “If you would like to resign from being a civil servant in the royal palace, then I will discuss it with you further before we take action.”

I was concerned about his odd hesitation when he spoke, but more or less, His Excellency seemed willing to comply with my wishes.

“I have heard that Ms. Lina resigned from the Corps,” he continued. “Please consult with her and make your decision.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

Prime Minister Herschel seemed satisfied with my straightforward reply. He nodded, then turned his gaze toward Lina, who sat huddled and stiff beside me.

“Ms. Lina, you shouldn’t hold back when you tell him your thoughts. Your husband is a man who is very good at his job and also very patient, but he is unfamiliar with the subtleties of the human heart, and not good with words. So

don't be afraid to tell him how you feel, even if your words confuse or trouble Joshua."

"What?!" Lina gasped. "But..."

"He'll listen to you, and together you can come up with a good course of action. Of course, there's also the secret to a successful marriage."

Lina paused, and then—with an earnest expression on her face—asked, "What is the secret to a successful marriage?"

Lina had a very narrow perspective and was aware that she couldn't see other viewpoints well. It seemed like she was trying to work on that part of herself by listening intently to the people around her.

"Well, that would be you exercising your privilege as Joshua's wife and lording over him," Prime Minister Herschel replied.

"Yes, that's the number one thing!" Virgil agreed. "I'm also under my wife's thumb at home. But that's the happiest, most peaceful solution. Don't worry, though—Joshua won't dislike it."

After listening to their words and seeing every married member in the office nod, Lina turned to me, her expression reading, "Is that true?"

"Uh," was all I could manage. I was speechless.

"Anyway, be sure to talk at length about that as well," Prime Minister Herschel added. "You still have over three weeks of vacation left."

Everyone else in the office gave me jealous looks, which made me feel rather uncomfortable. I decided to seriously consider resigning from my post as a royal civil servant.

Lina and I spent my days off in quite a relaxed, peaceful manner. Even though we were in the royal capital, the house we were staying at was in a quiet suburb. Every morning we could hear birds chirping as the wind rustled trees and other plants. We strolled in the yard, tried our hands at gardening, and read books on the terrace. We went out to the capital's shopping district, windowshopped, and tried the cuisine at a restaurant rumored to have quite

delicious food.

It was a calm, enjoyable, and restful time that we could deliberately spend together as a couple, and now it was hard to believe that we had not had these kinds of moments before.

“Lina,” I said one day, “I heard that peddlers from other countries will be setting up their own market today. Would you like to go? There might be rare goods there.”

“A peddlers’ market?” she replied. “I wonder what they’ll have for sale. Maybe there will be food too.”

“I assume there will be street stalls—we’d have to stand up and eat.”

“I’d like to go. Let me change clothes first.”

Thus, we headed out together, which was becoming an incredibly joyful, everyday occurrence.

We flagged down a horse-drawn cab, then headed to the peddlers’ market. A large number of people crowded the area. The peddlers had set up tents in a large plaza on the east side of the royal capital, making for a simple marketplace. The goods sold at the stalls were an unorganized mix of clothes, satchels, jewelry, rugs, and tapestries, while the food and drink included candy, fried snacks, sandwiches, juice, and alcohol.

Lina’s eyes sparkled like a child’s as she looked at the merchandise, then picked something up and listened to a woman’s explanation of it.

“What do you think about earrings or a bracelet for the missus, sir?” another peddler next to the woman asked. He was selling jewelry, and arranged a line of jewelry boxes of bracelets and earrings in front of me. The jewelry was novel, given that the pieces were made with designs from other countries, though they weren’t ostentatious.

“Hm?” I turned to him, then protested, “But I don’t have a reason to give her anything.”

He laughed. “You can make one up. There’s no problem with saying it’s a memento from your visit to the market today.”

I paused. “There’s not?”

“Not at all. How about these? I have jade and other lustrous green ones as well.” The peddler smiled as he looked at Lina, who was still listening to the woman beside him talking about the detailing on a bangle. “You’re married to quite a fine lady, sir,” he went on.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked as I picked up a set of jade earrings, which had been made with elegant pieces of dark and light stones strung together.

“There are many revered gods in the country I was born in,” the peddler continued. “The god of crops, the god of water, the god of knowledge—and so on. Among them, the goddess who rules over fate has gray hair and blue eyes.”

“Oh?”

“To me, your wife looks just like the goddess of fate. I have no doubt that while you’re with her, you’ll have a great destiny. Don’t let that goddess go, sir—keep her yours. Now, how do you like those earrings?”

In Mert, people gave others jewelry the color of their own hair or eyes as gifts to show that they were partners. There was no way someone could refute that claim when it was considered an expression of love for your partner to wear the jewelry of your color. Well, it could also be said to be a sign of monopolization, though it certainly wasn’t a bad experience seeing Lina wear green no matter how many times I’d seen it.

“Show me more earrings,” I said finally.

“Yes, sir! Here you are!”

The peddler brought out more jewelry boxes of earrings, laying them out in front of me and trying to sell me this and that. He was skilled in the art of conversation, and it was incredibly difficult to keep my coin purse strings tied tight.

“Your holiday is just about over now. Have you made up your mind?” Lina asked as we made our way back from the peddlers’ market. We probably

should have ridden in a carriage in consideration of her leg, but I had wanted to walk with her.

“To tell you the truth, I’m still torn,” I replied.

Once I had used up my time off, I would have to report to His Excellency about the decision I had made regarding my future—whether I would continue my work as a civil servant in the royal palace, or retire. And if I wanted to continue my work, I had to decide if I wanted to stay in the same position, or request a transfer into another department.

“Lina, what do you—”

“I will agree with whatever you decide, no matter what you settle on,” she replied instantly.

I paused, then asked sarcastically, “Even if I leave my job and the nobility, become a commoner, and take up work as a white mage in a small village?” I would have no status, no managerial position, and an unstable income on top of that, resulting in a substantial decrease in our living conditions.

Lina burst out laughing. “Joshua, I was born a commoner. It doesn’t matter if I’m the wife of a white mage who runs a village clinic, or the wife of a man who runs an editing business—I just want to be with you. So, I want you to please choose a position where you can accomplish what you want to do. I don’t mind if you’re a civil servant in the royal palace or one out in the country, or even a town’s white mage.”

That was right. I had forgotten—it wasn’t like Lina had wanted to become the wife of a nobleman, or to live an aristocrat’s lavish and extravagant lifestyle. She had simply wanted to live a life with her family—one that was quiet, peaceful, and ordinary.

“Besides,” Lina continued, “when I thought we were divorced, I wanted to live quietly in some rural town growing vegetables or flowers, with a cat or a dog. I’d greatly enjoy living out in the countryside.”

I paused, taking in her words. “Is that so?”

I took Lina’s hand in mine. Her small, delicate hand squeezed mine back.

“Please choose a path that you won’t regret,” she urged me. “No matter which path you take, I’ll be with you.”

“Thank you.”

As Lina walked beside me, the earrings which I had just bought from the peddler swayed from her ears. The jade glittered in the glow of the setting sun, but it was nothing compared to the light of Lina’s gentle smile.

“I would like to go back to the peddlers’ market again sometime,” she remarked. “It was quite a lot of fun.”

“Oh? Then we’ll go to the next one. I’d like it if the stall that sells fruit-flavored water comes again.”

“As well as the one that sells fried food!”

With that, we made a promise. Keeping and repeating these everyday commitments built up trust that connected us, and that trust helped to strengthen the bond between us as husband and wife.

Lina seemed to be limping slightly, perhaps because she had walked so much. I drew her close to give her support as we headed to the house. She leaned her body against my arm, and I could feel her trust in me.

I didn’t want to lose her trust, nor her smile. The moment that thought crossed my mind, I clenched her hand, though a bit harder than I intended. I slackened my grip, and she squeezed mine tightly.



“I’m looking forward to next time,” I said at last.

“Me too,” she replied with a smile.

I pressed my lips to her temple. Even amid the bright orange sunset, I could see her cheeks reddening as she became bashful and flustered. It seemed that she still needed a bit of time to get used to that kind of contact from her husband, so I decided to be patient.

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After the remaining three days of Joshua’s time off passed, we received a summons from the office of inspection. It seemed that they wanted us present to go over various details regarding the questioning of Secretary General Faraday, and to report their findings to us before the end of Joshua’s vacation. At the appointed time, the two of us headed to the royal palace where the office of inspection was.

Unlike the place we had been to for the questioning, this time we were led to a reception room that the office of inspection used. Inside was a dark brown leather sofa, a glass coffee table, a deep green rug, and orange and pink flowers placed in a beautifully painted porcelain vase. Overall, the room’s arrangements were relaxed and warm.

“We haven’t completed questioning everyone, but as we have put the majority of the stories in order, we called you to report our accounts directly to the related parties,” Inspector McGuire told us.

I had no issue with that as we were here to listen to the report, but there were two incredibly conspicuous people here in the room with us.

“Prince Silas, Sir Arthur, why are *you* here?” Joshua asked, and I gasped.

I had seen His Highness the crown prince’s light blond hair, deep purple-blue eyes, and well-defined features in portraits. Why was such a high-ranking man here?

“Ah,” His Highness said after a moment. He sat in an armchair, elegantly sipping tea. Behind him stood his knight, Sir Arthur. “Please don’t mind me and my guard. I would just like to listen to the details of this incident, and when the

inspector is done, I have something I would like to discuss with you.”

If I remembered correctly, Joshua had said that the prince was a school friend from his academy days, which is why he recognized him and spoke so familiarly to him—but from my point of view, His Highness was out of my league. I didn’t think it proper to even be in the same room as him, and supposed I should leave, but just when I started to rise from the sofa I was sitting on, Joshua clasped my hand tightly and tugged me back down. I couldn’t even stand.

“Ms. Lina, it’s all right. Do not pay any attention to him,” Inspector McGuire said as he shuffled through some documents in a binder. “Please just think of him as just a well-made ornament.”

“Exactly. Don’t pay any attention to him,” Joshua murmured, squeezing my hand.

“H-Hey,” His Highness Prince Silas protested. He reached for a cookie and asked for more tea, acting rather uninhibitedly. “You have as heartless a way of speaking as you ever did. Of course, I also wanted to meet my friend’s wife, so I thought to take some time for this. Anyway, do not mind us. Start with the report.”

“These two really did come in here of their own accord,” Inspector McGuire said after a moment, letting out a long sigh. “So please do not mind them. Anyway, I shall get on with the report.”

He began to explain the sequence of events regarding the scandal. Although I already knew what had happened, hearing it in an official report from the inspector’s lips was still shocking. A glance at Joshua revealed that, unsurprisingly, his face had paled.

The principal offender of everything was Donald Faraday, the former secretary general of the Black Knights Regiment executive office and white mage husband to Countess Faraday, a black knight. He had been a classmate of Joshua at the royal academy, and a school friend to His Highness the crown prince.

When Joshua had become my husband, former Secretary General Donald Faraday’s inferiority complex, rage, and disgruntlement—which had been smoldering and sealed up inside him since his school days—exploded. He had

despised Joshua.

His goal had been to tarnish Joshua's reputation by having me die in the line of duty. He had begun by separating Joshua from me, but as time had gone on, he had run out of patience and stopped trying to keep up appearances. Finally, he had expanded his plan by asking his relatives to poison me if they got the chance.

When I thought about how all of that had been borne of such a deep, gloomy feeling—deserving of the word “obsession”—toward Joshua, I couldn't help but feel frightened.

“Now then,” Inspector McGuire continued. “A great number of people have been troubled by his schemes, and I would like to inform those affected most about the punishments. Firstly, about former Secretary General Faraday's relative—former Baroness Amelia Talys, who was born to a relation of the Connellys and married into the Talys family; and Ann, the maid Lady Talys ordered to carry out the poisoning. The two will be sent to the Center-Lake Penitentiary and the Mountaintop Penitentiary, respectively, for lifetime sentences. They will never again leave.”

As Mert did not practice capital punishment, the highest penalty was imprisonment. The penitentiaries that Inspector McGuire spoke of were punitive facilities where criminals were sent. As their names suggested, the Center-Lake Penitentiary sat on an isolated island in the middle of a lake, while the Mountaintop Penitentiary had been built atop a steep, snowy summit. Typically, the greater the crime, the longer the imprisonment, and a lifetime sentence was considerably serious.

“This is to be expected,” Inspector McGuire continued. “They attempted to kill a black knight who protected the country and slew dragons. Even if the poison just narrowly did not end up taking Ms. Lina's life, that does not change the fact that they carried out the deed. Baron Talys has divorced Lady Amelia, but his entire family has been stripped of rank and reduced to commoners.”

On top of that, it seemed that Lady Talys's birth family had stepped down in rank from viscount to baron, and the head of the family had been changed.

“Now, on to that former secretary of the Black Knights Regiment executive

office, Tommy Shaldain. It's become clear that he's guilty of embezzlement and falsifying numerous official documents. He has been dismissed from his office, and naturally he has been purged from the Shaldain family registry and has become a commoner. We don't know yet how many years he will be imprisoned for, but he will be sent to the Nevilis Magic Mine."

"That's where the prisoners mine for and polish magic stones, isn't it?" His Highness the crown prince asked, and Inspector McGuire nodded.

There were various mines throughout the country where magic stones could be dug up, but it was a considerably tough job. You had to go into long tunnels in the mine and dig out magic stones. The inside of the mines was dark, the air was humid and of poor quality, and the threat of collapse and other accidents made it a dangerous place. Using pickaxes to mine through tough ore deposits in such a place was hard work, and thus was assigned to prisoners as part of their sentences.

"Secretaries have pretty frail constitutions, and I doubt he has the grit for it," said His Highness as he gracefully sipped his new cup of tea. "I wonder how long he'll be able to handle such a grueling punishment?"

"Hm, maybe a few months," Sir Arthur replied.

"Count Shaldain transferred his title to his eldest son and has now retired with his wife back to their estate," Inspector McGuire continued. "As we continued with the investigation into former Secretary Shaldain, problems within the Knights Corps executive office, as well as other offices, came to light—not just the Black Knights Regiment's. We've uncovered that, more or less, these offices are rampant with counterfeit documents, unfair mission assignments, and discrimination based on things such as status and gender. It's been decided that there will be a large-scale investigation of these issues as well as a review of personnel. At the same time, we will also conduct an inquiry into cases of harassment by upper-level nobles upon lower-level nobles. We plan to expedite this inquiry."

"With this, a little of the rot within the Knights Corps executive office will be expunged, I expect. I would've liked to remove the rot in the administration at the same time as that of the knights' rank and file, but I suppose I'll just have to

make do with one at a time.”

Inspector McGuire loudly cleared his throat and glared daggers at Prince Silas. “Your Highness, if it is your intention to interrupt, I would have you leave.”

“Ooh, scary,” the crown prince jested, merely shrugging his shoulders. Nobles really had terrifying audacious nerves.

“Now, onto former Secretary General Donald Faraday,” Inspector McGuire went on. “He was the mastermind behind everything, although we have yet to verify all of the written evidence and supporting facts. Still, we plan that he will receive life imprisonment with penal servitude in the Lake Monelly Underwater Penitentiary.”

Under the waters of Lake Monelly was a penal institution where criminals who had committed the most serious of crimes were sent. The largest magic stone mines in the country discharged a poison that polluted Lake Monelly’s waters, making them blister the limbs of anyone who happened to touch them. People constantly cleansed the water with purification magic, but as poison steadily infected the lake, it was impossible to completely purify it. However, to protect the surrounding environment, the purification had to continue.

Amid that poisonous water, the penitentiary was protected with special magic, and once a criminal entered, they never left again no matter what. I had heard that there was no hard labor—instead, the prisoners sat in small, single rooms until they died while their mana was extracted to sustain the purification magic. Relentlessly having mana drained from you was supposed to cause a shooting pain like pins and needles throughout your body. Imagining that continuing until death made me shiver.

“Donald Faraday’s younger brother is the current Marquis Connelly, head of the house. He knew nothing of his older brother’s order to have Ms. Lina poisoned, nor of his involvement in having their father send Lord Granwell off on unreasonable jobs. Thus, Marquis Connelly is banned from the royal capital for a year and must pay a fine. Frederick Connelly, one of the prime minister’s aides, has been dismissed from his position and has been sent to a secondary residence of the Connelys. Speaking of him specifically, I would wager that he has been permanently exiled from the royal capital.”

Inspector McGuire closed the binder of documents, then looked to Joshua and me one after the other. “That is all. If you have any complaints about the punishments, please notify us. There will be some time before these decisions are carried out; before then, we can hear your opinions on their penances. Do you have any questions, protests, or requests?”

Joshua thought for a moment. “Not really. Lina, what about you?”

“W-Well, um... May I ask a question?” I ventured.

“What is it?”

“What will happen to the Faraday family?”

Countess Faraday was a black knight, and I had heard that she was very strong, kind, and a fine countess. As her territory was near to where monsters bred, she should have been in charge of managing her territory while taking on missions in the surrounding area—protected, of course, with the former secretary general’s divine magic. Furthermore, when not on missions, I had heard that she taught geography at the knights’ academy.

“The countess and the former secretary general have divorced. As for the children, it has been confirmed through magic that their biological father is the countess’s attendant, so their family register has been amended with him as her second husband. However, as punishment for disregarding the significance of the marriage between a black knight and white mage, as well as falsely reporting a different man as her children’s father, she will be fined and also pay increased taxes to the country for the next ten years.”

“Is that so?” I asked slowly. “But, well, what about the former secretary general’s divine magic?”

“Of course, as he is now her ex-spouse and a criminal, no one can receive his divine magic. She will have to commission some other white mage.”

Her eldest son had the makings of a black knight, but the countess would have to work hard until he became fully-fledged. Black knights and blue knights would be sent out on missions to protect the towns and citizens in her territory, but since she probably wouldn’t look good to the knights who heard about her scandal, she would have a difficult time both on the battlefield and in her own

mind. I supposed that hardship was to be her punishment.

“If anything else comes up, please feel free to contact us,” Inspector McGuire said before standing and leaving the parlor. He really was incredibly busy.

Immediately, a lady-in-waiting brought out fresh tea and snacks, and set up the table for us.

“Now then, that troublesome conversation concerning the fallout is over. It’s all quite the uproar, isn’t it, Joshua?” His Highness Prince Silas said, returning the teacup he had put to his lips back to its saucer. He leisurely crossed his legs.

“It is,” Joshua replied, returning to a more formal tone.

“I’ve been thinking about something,” His Highness began after a long pause, gazing into his fresh cup of tea. He took a breath. “Ever since I learned swordplay from a knight, I’ve been curious about the inner workings of the Corps. They are knights, you know—they save the weak, and protect the lives and livelihoods of the people from monsters and foreign invaders. You would naturally think that their hierarchy would be based on merit, strength, and the number of missions they’ve completed, correct? However, the reality is that they are just a microcosm of noble society. Frankly, I was disappointed.”

“Blue knights and red knights are largely meritocratic,” his bodyguard, Sir Arthur, pointed out. He was a white knight, one of the royal guard, and I was pretty sure he was the second son of a count. “In fact, blue knights seem ashamed if they’re the children of nobles. Meanwhile, the houses that white knights and black knights are born to mean everything to them—they perfectly mimic noble society.” He shrugged his shoulders.

“I wanted to reform the Corps’s interior workings, so—”

“So you inserted Donald into the Black Knights Regiment executive office to be your agent for change?” Joshua finished, interrupting His Highness Prince Silas’s words.

The crown prince took a breath and nodded, scratching his blond hair as if he were mixing it with something. “First of all, I wanted to put the Black Knights Regiment executive office in order to make it a meritocracy rather than a place based on one’s social standing. I was going to spread that meritocracy gradually

into all of the Corps offices. In the end, Donald was going to sit as the head of the Knights Corps executive office and control the administrative side of the organization, while this fellow would take over the more hands-on management of the actual knights.”

The “fellow” he referred to was Sir Arthur, who smoothly bowed.

“However, I’d never thought that Donald would do such things,” His Highness continued after a moment. “I’d known of his competitiveness toward you since our school days, but I never expected he’d be riled up to such a degree.”

“Donald was constantly compared to Joshua, although Joshua never knew and never considered Donald a rival,” Sir Arthur pointed out. “Since Joshua never took that kind of notice of him, things grew incredibly complicated, and Donald burst. I pity Donald to some extent. It’s almost like he had an unrequited love—”

“Be quiet, Arthur.”

“My apologies, Your Highness.”

Prince Silas covered his face with both hands and hung his head. “I’d wanted Arthur and Donald to set up and take control of the entire problematic Corps, and Joshua, I had wished for you to lead the civil officials. I had wanted to make a society based on merit during my time, where civil officials and knights could gain a foothold without worrying about their social status or gender.”

It was said that when the present king had ascended to the throne, society had been a place where civil servants in the royal palace had to be upper-level nobles in order to get ahead in their careers. No matter what work civil servants from the commoner class did, the fruits of their labor were stolen by the nobility, and they had remained doing subordinate and miscellaneous work throughout their whole careers.

His Majesty the king had been unhappy about this and pressed for reforms to allow people to be valued for the work they did regardless of their social standing, to be successful at their jobs, and to be able to transfer into departments in which they excelled. That reform was still ongoing, and it seemed that His Highness Prince Silas had wanted to take that reform to the Corps as well.

“Ms. Lina, you were born a commoner and never adopted into a noble family. You must have made some considerably nasty memories,” His Highness noted.

It took me a moment to reply. “I have heard that it was natural—normal, really—for commoners adopted into the nobility, as well as lowborn nobles, to be tasked with harsh duties like cleaning and chores. Surely other knights in higher classes did the same.”

“They didn’t,,” Joshua spat out with a sigh, and Prince Silas and Sir Arthur nodded in agreement.

“Joshua is right,” Sir Arthur noted. “It’s wrong for everything to go well for the high nobility and for things to be difficult for low nobility and commoners just because of birth.”

“You’re correct, but you’re the second son of a count as well as a royal guard—that’s hardly something for you to say.”

“You wound me, Your Highness. That sentiment comes from the bottom of my heart.”

His Highness Prince Silas sighed heavily as he cast a sidelong glance at Sir Arthur. He did this over and over again, seeming incredibly troubled. It appeared that what had happened with the former secretary general was causing the crown prince much distress.

“Excuse me, Your Highness,” I said after a moment, my voice trembling. I was worried that speaking to him without first being spoken to might make him think I was being blasphemous, but he was seemingly unbothered when he looked at me.

“What is it?”

“Please, Your Highness, do not stop trying to reform the inner workings of the Corps. What happened to me concerning the executive office was devastating, but I think that inadvertent side effect is not necessarily a reason for you to cease.”

He paused. “Hm... You have a point.”

“Right now, there are commoner and low-level noble children studying at the

knights' school—they're fledgling black knights," I continued. "I have heard that there are more and more children every year who come there from the masses. I would like for you to make sure that those children do not feel anything unreasonable about their social status so that when they become fully-fledged knights, they can go out on missions with peace of mind."

I didn't mind if they would have to do chores like cleaning and managing equipment—after all, those things were a new recruit's duty. However, it would be good if the executive office could preempt children being treated unfairly or given dangerous tasks because of their social status, and put a stop to reckless missions. It would be wonderful if His Highness could bring an end to knights being judged by their social rank and make the Corps into a place where fellow knights worked together.

"I beg of you," I continued. Though I remained seated on the sofa, I lowered my head. "Please create a Corps where fellow knights, who have both power to protect the people and kindness in their hearts, work together, as well as a supportive secretariat that can cleanse itself of corruption."

"You know what, you're right," His Highness responded after a moment. "What happened with Donald was so astonishing that I thought that my entire plan was wrong."

"What are you talking about, Your Highness?" Sir Arthur asked. "Please don't say such a naive thing—Donald did not ruin everything that you have worked toward."

"Rebuilding the Knights Corps executive office has begun, although differently than intended and at a different time as well," Joshua added, slipping out of his formal tone. "If we review all the personnel and change course, there should be no problem. Who are you to think that everything has been lost?"

Prince Silas's eyes widened and he froze for a moment, but soon showed a bitter smile. "Yes, that's right. If that's the case, then..." He paused. "Joshua, I want you to stand beside me as the next prime minister when I become king. I've heard from Prime Minister Herschel that you're torn about your future."

"I..." Joshua seemed lost for words.

"His Majesty, myself, and a great many people believe that you will be the

next prime minister,” Prince Silas continued. “It’s difficult to come up with anyone else based on their past work performance. However, you have been worried. I heard that you were supposed to discuss this matter with your wife during your absence from work. Have you arrived at an answer?”

Joshua’s grip on my hand tightened.

I knew that Joshua had been brooding about this since his vacation began. I had a guess as to his answer. He had been reading a large number of biographies about both shopkeepers who owned enormous stores full of magic items and famous designers of apparel and equipment, as well as enthusiastically observing stores and clinics on our walks around town.

Every time, I had told him, “Do what you like, and do what you want. Whatever you decide, I will be with you.” He had told me that he didn’t want me to give up on being with him, so I would spare no effort to be with him.

“I...”

After all, whatever he chose would be just fine by me. He could remain a civil servant in the royal palace as he was now, he could transfer to be a civil servant in the countryside, or he could become a small town’s white mage.

I put my other hand over Joshua’s, and when he looked at me, I was reflected in his beautiful green eyes. When I smiled, he smiled back.

“After this,” Joshua began, “I’d like to go out into a city in the countryside, or even a remote region. I want to reduce the number of injuries received from beasts and dragons, even if only a little, and prevent black knights and blue knights from dying in the line of duty or suffering great wounds. I want to change this society, one that prioritizes status and uses up those with ability until there’s nothing left, into one where anyone can freely choose their profession.”

“I see,” Prince Silas replied.

“I am fully aware that I cannot change everything immediately,” Joshua continued. “It will surely take generations for what I have in mind to take shape. However, I believe that in order for things to change, we have to start moving.”

“You’re right,” His Highness agreed.

“Therefore, I...”

Epilogue

Count Carlton ruled the capital of Mert's eastern region. In that town stood a house with a small garden. The layout included a parlor, two guest rooms, a living room, a dining room, a bath, a single restroom, and a master bedroom. For an aristocrat, it was a relatively small house, but for common people, it was huge. It was this house that I rented, and lived in together with my husband.

There was a mild climate here out east, and the clean water provided many lush medicinal herbs. The wounds on my arms and legs were getting better by the day, and I had recovered enough that I could walk around the house without needing my cane. However, I was still too physically impaired to do many menial tasks, so a housekeeper came every day to do household chores like cooking, cleaning, and the laundry. She was also teaching me how to do the basics, and I thought that I had gotten rather good at cooking.

If you went down the street in front of the house, there was a shopping district frequented by the local population. The majority of goods could be found there at stores that sold vegetables and fruits, eggs and meat, bread and other baked goods, dairy products like butter and cheese, and other daily necessities. I had gotten to know every shopkeeper, and would ask for their recommendations and what kinds of meals they made with them.

I didn't know who created this perception, but people here knew me as a hardworking housewife who had come here with her husband from the central part of the country, and though a disastrous accident had left my limbs somewhat impaired, I worked hard at household duties. I was completely at home in this outlying district, and the people here doted on me.

Unlike the population in the royal capital, the people here were close, friendly, and held nothing back. Other people, such as couples or parents with children, kept helping each other despite any protests, as if everyone in town were like one big family. Everyone cooperated to support and protect our way of life out here. I wondered if this culture stemmed from Count Carlton's influence.

Joshua had officially left his family and inherited a separate title from his uncle, becoming Viscount Joshua Leewell. His new status made him a fully-fledged aristocrat, but without any territory. He had said that he didn't mind becoming a commoner, but as he would be a civil official, the Prime Minister and his uncle had concluded that he would do better as a nobleman.

The Granwell estate that had sat in that prime location in the royal capital's noble district had been relinquished, and now a different noble family was living there. Joshua's mother had moved to a small mansion on property owned by Marquis Granwell, and it seemed that she was living peacefully there with her relatives, friends, and close ladies-in-waiting while remembering her late husband.

"Mrs. Leewell, your mail is here!" The sound of the postman's voice echoed as he arrived that evening.

"Coming!" I called.

I turned off the fire heating the stew—a recipe I had learned directly from the butcher's wife—and headed to the front door of the house. The postman handed me letters and packages, and when I checked, I saw that they had been sent by the count married to Joshua's sister, Lady Sherry, my mentor and his wife, as well as a female black knight from my graduating class.

Joshua's mother and sister may have been his blood relatives, but I couldn't say they had had good relationships—although now, they were slowly improving. The physical distance between them seemed to have allowed them to live peacefully as a family, which was why they were able to exchange letters detailing their concern about each other like this.

I had recently realized how good and important it was to send correspondence asking about the receiver's health and about your own situation. Every time I received a letter like this from someone, I reflected on my past behavior—how I had run away from the royal capital without telling anyone.

A lot had happened in the past year and a half, and a lot had changed. My life as a knight had ended, I had prepared to and thought I did leave my marriage (although in reality I hadn't), I was able to reconnect with my beloved husband

and affirm our feelings, and I had moved from the royal capital to this area.

There had been many difficult and painful times, but I had been able to truly realize what was important to me. If that hadn't happened, I knew that my relationship with Joshua would not be what it was now. I had clarified my feelings for him and told him of them, and he had done the same for me.

I was happy now.

Just like during my wedding, right now, I was the happiest person in the country.

I heard a ringing from the prismaphone, and I checked the time to see that it was a few minutes past the regular time that Joshua would be home. I didn't know if the message would say that he would be home soon or if he would have to work late, but I did know that it was from my husband.

Joshua had left behind his position as an aide to the prime minister, and had temporarily transferred to the eastern region. In order to become the next prime minister and work with the crown prince to advance his reforms, his goal was to study this region's politics and way of life. In exchange, local civil officials were currently in the royal capital learning about Mert's central government and lifestyle. It seemed that this exchange of civil servants would bring good results to both sides, and the practice was slowly spreading to other regions.

Joshua had said that this country was definitely going to change for the better. I didn't understand anything about politics and policy, but I believed in Joshua. I was sure that the Kingdom of Mert would grow and change into something better.

I put the letters and parcels on the table, then held my hand in front of the prismaphone. As expected, the top of the large crystal projected a man with a strong red tinge to his brown hair, clear green eyes, and well-defined features.

"Hello, Leewell residence."

"Lina? It's me. Today..."

The large crystal—the key piece of equipment in the prismaphone—glittered

brightly in the orange sunset light streaming in from the window.

In a certain town in a certain country, an ordinary couple once again headed out together. Their conversation, which was about nothing in particular, melted and disappeared into the evening bustle, unchanged from any other day.

Afterword

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for picking up *Marriage, Divorce, and Beyond: The White Mage and Black Knight's Romance Reignited*.

This work is a version of a story that was posted on a web novel site, with changes to the setting and significant revisions and corrections. As I had been away from writing for a while, I wanted to regain my instincts regarding writing long prose. With that in mind, I started writing this piece as practice, without even having a satisfactory plot down.

I also assumed that this work would be read on a smartphone, tablet, or computer screen, so I wrote without including too many fine details and finished it by consolidating it into a loose form. Therefore, at the time of this novel adaptation, the setting has been changed considerably, the contents have been revised over and over again, and the details differ greatly from the web version. I would be happy if you enjoyed each version on its own merits.

I believe I caused much trouble and concern to those in the managerial and editorial departments. Thanks to them, this project managed to take shape. I am very honored that this work was allowed to join a new label. Thank you very much.

The incredibly lovely, beautiful illustrations were drawn by kieshi akaz-sensei. When I saw the character designs and illustrations, they were so amazing that I got goose bumps. The wonderful illustrations are lively yet atmospheric, and incredibly detailed. I looked at them over and over again and sighed with happiness. Thank you very much for beautifully decorating the world in this work.

I would like to thank everyone involved in the efforts involved in this novelization.

Last but not least, to those who enjoyed and supported the web version, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for picking up this work.

There is no greater joy for me than if you enjoyed read this work and enjoyed

the world in this story even a little,

Thank you. I hope we can meet again somewhere.

Sincerely,

Takasugi Naturu