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2

Marriage, Divorce, and Beyond

The White Mage and
Black Knight's Romance Reignited

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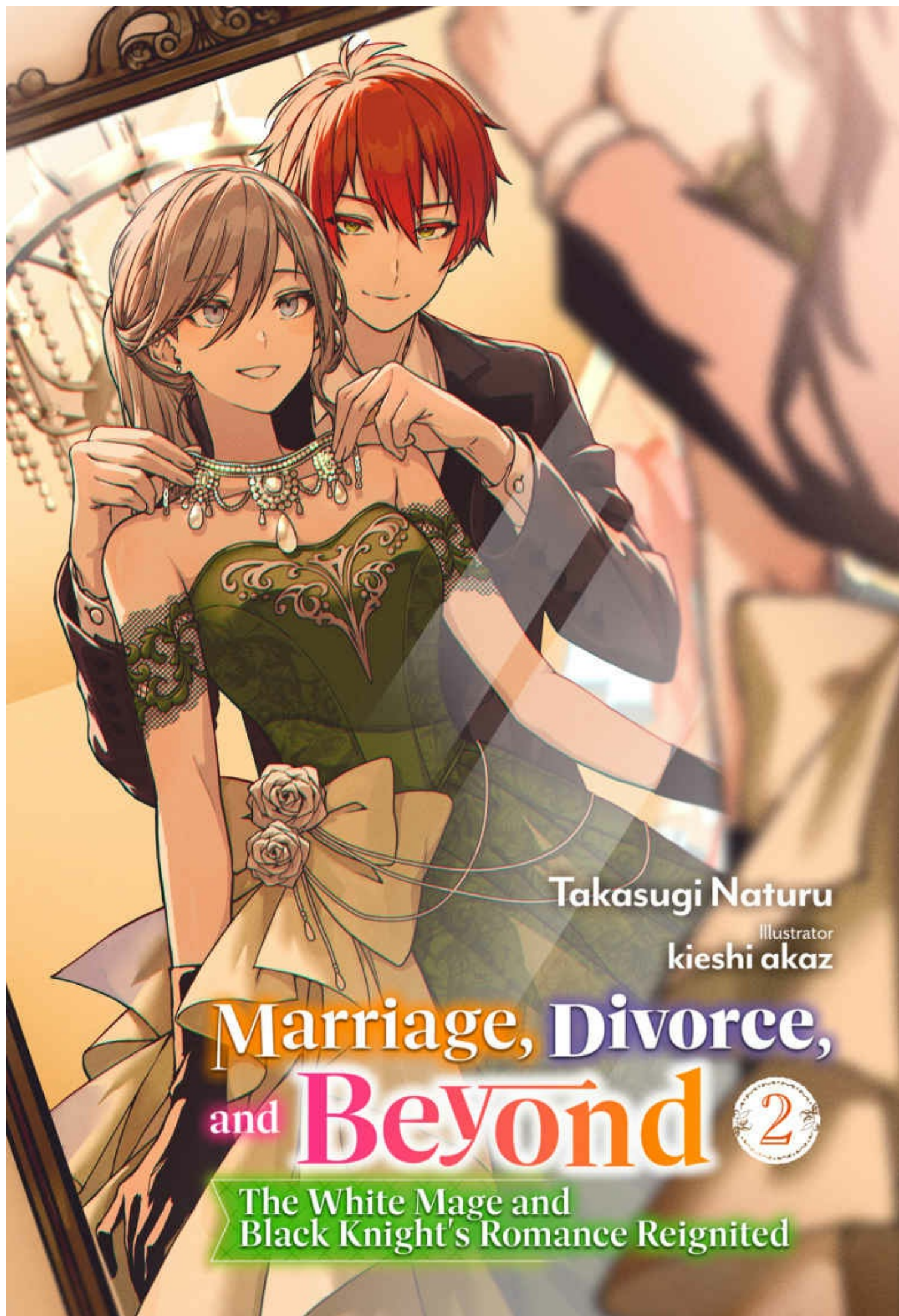
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Marriage, Divorce, and Beyond 2

The White Mage and
Black Knight's Romance Reignited

An anime-style illustration of a woman with long brown hair in a ponytail, wearing a red dress, standing and talking to a man with short red hair and green eyes. The man is wearing a white and blue military uniform with gold epaulettes and is sitting on a patterned sofa. They are in a room with bookshelves filled with books in the background. The woman is holding a small object in her hand, and the man is looking at it. There are three text boxes: a pink one at the top left, a blue one at the top right, and a pink one at the bottom left. The man's name and title are in a blue box on the right.

"I'm coming in.
Would you like tea?
You also have mail."

"Oh, right.
Thank you."

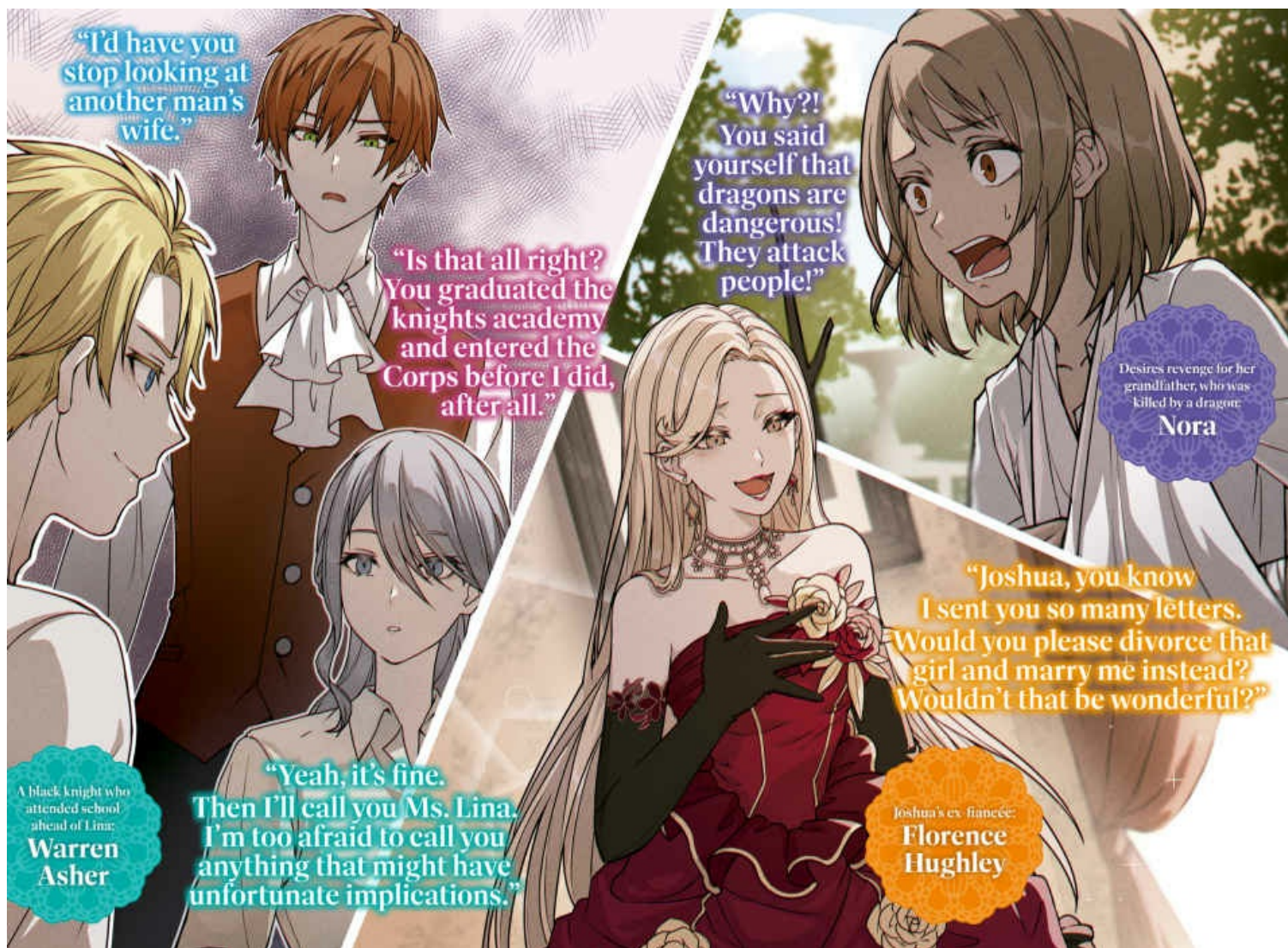
"The letters have
been growing more
frequent since we
moved here."

Aide to the prime minister,
on temporary transfer to
the frontier:

**Joshua
Granwell**

Joshua's wife and
former black knight:

Lina



"I'd have you stop looking at another man's wife."

"Is that all right? You graduated the knights academy and entered the Corps before I did, after all."

"Why?! You said yourself that dragons are dangerous! They attack people!"

Desires revenge for her grandfather, who was killed by a dragon.

Nora

"Joshua, you know I sent you so many letters. Would you please divorce that girl and marry me instead? Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

Joshua's ex-fiancée:
Florence Hughley

"Yeah, it's fine. Then I'll call you Ms. Lina. I'm too afraid to call you anything that might have unfortunate implications."

A black knight who attended school ahead of Lina:

Warren Asher

“We only just reignited our
romance—it’s like we’re
newlyweds.”

“Newlyweds’?”

“Yes, newlyweds.
I said we’re newlyweds,
so we’re newlyweds.”

“Oh, Joshua...”

“You’ll get cold.
Let’s head to bed.”



Prologue

The dragon's shrill howl nearly popped my eardrums. My sense of hearing diminished considerably, and my surroundings swirled in circles.

While there were many areas throughout the world designated as habitats of beasts and dragons, this place—the Abyssal Forest—was the largest one in the Kingdom of Mert. It, along with the Great Azure Sands and the Grand Crimson Canyon, made up what was called the Three Wicked Expanses.

“Aim for the wings! Don't let it fly!” a knight called.

We had left the woods proper, so the trees here had already been sparse—but now this area was the battleground for our fight against a dragon with green and white plumage. The creature had mowed down the remaining timber to make a considerable open space. It currently roared and rioted in the center of the battlefield.

“Warren! Don't do the impossible— Get back!” someone yelled at me.

I grimaced. This was shameful. Shameful! *Absolutely shameful!!!* I was *the* Warren Asher, an active-duty black knight who always had my name listed in the top ten for number of dragon kills. I couldn't believe that I was falling behind, and that the other knights were protecting me.

In the first place, it was impossible for the dragon's roar to damage my ears—the sound should have been like a gentle breeze that caused no impairment at all. At least, that was what was supposed to happen.

“It's gonna fly!” someone called.

“Restrain it!” shouted another.

The dragon unfurled its four wings and began to flap them. A great wind picked up, stirring the surrounding trees, the dirt, and broken branches. Massive leaves danced in midair. At this rate, the creature would become airborne.

I sensed a great amount of mana being deployed, forming three yellow magic circles in the slightly cloudy air. From them, countless enormous chains glittering with magic shot forth, entangling the dragon as it tried to take off and stitching it so tightly to the ground it was as if they were trying to flatten the creature.

No dragon could untangle itself from the binding of old magic. The entrapped beast lashed its tail, violently flapped its wings, and let out cries akin to screams.

“That’s it, Cody!” yelled someone. “Great—now that the dragon’s caught in the binding magic, let’s finish it!”

“Warren, can you keep going?” one of my comrades on the mission called out.

“Yeah,” I replied.

Of course I could keep going. I was a black knight in the Kingdom of Mert’s Black Knights Regiment. I slew dragons. This was a run-of-the-mill mission, and there was no way I was falling behind!

I adjusted my grip on the sword in my hands. The blade had once been lighter, sharper, and shinier—it had stripped the hard scales off of dragons and cleaved through their flesh. It had even cut through a dragon’s piercing claws.

The armor I wore was similar. It had once been easier to move in, tougher, and gleaming. It had defended me against dragons’ fire breath and lightning breath—not even attacks with their claws or fangs had pierced it.

But even so...why was I like this now?

My sword was heavy, it only emitted a cloudy light, and its sharpness was deplorable. My armor felt weighty, and my gauntlets and pauldrons had become dented from just being grazed by this dragon’s attacks.

“Warren, come around from the right!” Cody Macmillan shouted.

“A-Acknowledged!” I replied, flustered.

I circled around to the dragon’s flank. The creature was still bound by magic chains. With it pinned down like this, the sides of its soft abdomen would make

for the easiest place to attack.

I poured magic into my sword, and the blade glowed a light red. But in the very moment I was about to swiftly close in, something dark erupted from the bushes behind me to my right.

“What the—?!”

The dark something let out a scream, and I saw that it was a thin child.

The child wore a set of filthy leather armor and clutched a worn two-handed sword. Showing absolutely no signs of hesitation, they brandished the huge weapon and rushed toward the dragon—alerting the dragon to my position as they screamed at the top of their lungs. Immediately the beast swung down its thick, thorny tail.

“Stop, you idiot!” I instantly seized the child’s arm and drew them in close.

The dragon’s tail slammed down right in front of the child’s eyes and gouged the earth, scattering soil and rocks. Pebbles poured down like rain, and the rising cloud of dust obscured my vision.

“Stupid reptile!” The child tried to shake off my grip and once again charge toward the dragon.

Who the hell is this kid?! Where did they even come from?! “Stop!” I yelled.

“Shut up and let me go!”

The child glared at me with the same eyes with which they had glowered at the dragon. Their hair, face, and whole body were completely black with filth, and I didn’t even know what kind of expression they were making. However, their chestnut-colored eyes were powerful and striking.

“Warren!” someone yelled.

The next moment, the dragon’s large, white tail—with sharp spikes that it could freely extend and retract—hurtled toward me. Quickly, I pulled the child in close to protect them and was immediately thrown sideways.

I heard the sounds of my resistance ward breaking, my armor caving in, the bones in my body snapping, and my flesh tearing. Then, I slammed against the ground and rolled, and I felt myself floating momentarily before coming back

down. The child in my arms screamed, but we were both helpless as we continued to fall over a precipice and down into a gurgling river.

I heard a splash, and cold water flooded my mouth and nose mercilessly. Just like that, I lost consciousness.

Ugh, what a mess. I couldn't believe that I, Warren Asher, had come to such a disgraceful defeat.

I had never thought that I would be put in such a pitiful position. This was all *her* fault... No, that was wrong.

She had been the catalyst... Right, that woman—ever since that woman had left the Knights Corps...my unit had entirely changed.

Chapter 1: The Rural Couple and Their Relatives' Epidemic

Kingdom of Mert Calendar Year 786

The Kingdom of Mert's eastern region was temperate throughout the year, and each local lord—including the countess at the top of the regional hierarchy—mainly made their livelihoods through agriculture, as well as dairy farming and livestock husbandry. As a major producer of crops such as wheat, barley, fruits, and vegetables, this area sustained the kingdom's food supply.

Countess Carlton was known as the Frontier Countess. Her family, renowned for their military prowess, governed the eastern region. They also directly supervised the Eastern Knights Corps, which was a slightly unusual knightly order with a roughly fifty-fifty male-to-female ratio. They specialized in defense and healing—quite natural, given that there were several areas in the region where dragons and other beasts lived in droves.

The capital of Carlton territory housed the base of the Eastern Knights Corps, and this was also where the Frontier Countess's family lived in a fortified manse. The city, due to its forbidding structure, could appropriately be called a citadel. The entire municipality was surrounded by an outer moat of deep water, within which were three concentric layers of walls, as well as an inner moat protecting the city center. It was reputed that people could hole up in the innermost area for several months during a siege or other emergency.

I was honestly surprised at the differences in lifestyle and culture between this area and the royal capital and its environs—usually referred to as the heart of the country—despite both being inside Mert's borders.

"I apologize, Joshua."

I looked over my shoulder toward the voice behind me to see my current superior: the Frontier Countess of the eastern region, Beatrix Carlton. She wore a shiny blue day dress and had tied her long black hair up with an ornament

made with swaying golden pearls—a rarity in Mert. Among the crowd of dressed-up individuals in the party venue, she especially commanded attention.

“Has something happened to warrant an apology?” I asked politely.

“‘Something’?” she repeated. “Why, my child’s deprived you of the company of your wife.”

“There is no need to worry,” I replied. “Your son is the important one today.”

After all, today was the official party to announce the next Frontier Count of the eastern region—the countess’s eldest son, Alexis Carlton.

An announcement party for a novennial was held during the month that a child turned nine—half the age of majority in this country. Once the event ended, the childhood of the person in question was completely over. Their education and preparations for adulthood would begin in earnest. They would receive intense instruction from private tutors until they turned twenty, when they would attend the royal academy and officially choose their fiancé.

At the moment, Lina was speaking with the star of the hour—Lord Alexis—and his sister Lady Cecily, who was two years his junior. Their conversation seemed relaxed and without pause, and they had been constantly smiling.

I had heard that regardless of gender, members of the countess’s family thoroughly learned the arts of fighting with weapons—such as swords and spears—and with magic. I thought that the two children must have been curious about Lina, who had once been a dragon-slaying black knight.

Her Excellency the Frontier Countess’s relentless gaze was fixed upon me. “Is something the matter?” I asked after a moment.

She let out a soft laugh. “No, that’s not it.” She paused. “I was just thinking that the rumors I’ve heard about you two seem to have been wrong.”

“Wrong?” I repeated.

“I’d thought you and your wife had a shallow, even cold marriage. The stories and written reports must have been wrong. I wouldn’t have taken you for the kind of man who would have his wife wear dresses and jewelry that spoke to such brazen exclusivity.”

Lina wore a day dress with beautiful lace dyed in a dark red gradient. There were spots of embroidery and beading which were deep green. Of course, the necklace and hair ornament she wore were made of jade—my color.

It took me a moment to reply. “I suppose that previously, the stories and reports were not necessarily untrue.”

As the reigning lady of the region, the Frontier Countess oversaw the nobles living in this remote land. At the same time, she also fought alongside the blue knights from the Royal Knights Corps to subjugate the beasts that overflowed from habitats such as the Abyssal Forest. She also supervised a private contingent who guarded the national border. One could say that she was a cornerstone of the country’s defense.

This was why it was natural for her to have looked into my and my wife Lina’s backgrounds when I was deployed here from the royal capital. It seemed like Countess Carlton had taken an interest in the fact that what her research claimed was so drastically estranged from what she saw with her own eyes.

“Oh!” she replied. “Then have you two grown closer?”

I thought for a moment. “Perhaps it would be better to say that we are in the midst of that process.”

“Oh, well that’s a fine thing. It’s good for married couples to have a close relationship—both for them and for their children.”

If I remembered correctly, the countess was twenty-eight, and she had three children with her husband, Leonard. However, she had a youthfulness that belied this fact. Rather, she was a woman who reminded me of a white knight in the royal guard—perhaps because she fought with a sword, or because her conduct and manner of speech were reminiscent of such a person.

“I’d like for your wife to visit the manse again,” the countess continued, “so that she can recount her practical experiences with dragons and dragon slaying to my children. Seeing that there are beasts’ territories inside this domain’s borders, so long as we live in this land, we live with those creatures.”

“I will see that she comes.”

Her Excellency the Frontier Countess began to walk over to Lina and the

children—still engaged in lively conversation—before stopping and turning back as if she had remembered something.

“Oh right. I need to tell you...”

“Yes?”

She waved her folding fan and slightly lowered her voice. “The territory adjacent to Carlton land has had an outbreak of an epidemic of unknown origin. At the moment, it is confined to a small village, but it appears to be a contagious disease.”

“And what village is that?” I asked.

She paused. “Riberry Village in Aston.”

I gasped.

“The earl’s family lives in the regional capital, so they have not contracted the sickness,” Countess Carlton assured me. “They are containing the disease within the village and, at the very least, have no intention of letting it spread outside their territory. However, they sent a message warning us to be careful about contacting them from our side. If I remember correctly...yes, I believe Aston had another outbreak of a mysterious illness a little over twenty years ago. I think it might be best to conduct an investigation into the cause.”

My younger sister had married into the Aston family. She, my brother-in-law, and my young nephew lived in that region. Even though it seemed that they had not contracted the disease, I still felt a twinge of concern. Sickness could easily snatch away someone’s life—just like it had with my father.

Much like the eastern region, the main industry of Earl Aston’s territory was agriculture, especially fruit production. Before the plague over twenty years ago, the produce industry was so prosperous that “fruit” and “Aston” were practically synonymous. But now, much of the region’s agricultural endeavors had shifted to the cultivation of seeds and leaves used for making dye.

Much of Aston’s population had died from the plague, and many survivors—terrified of the disease—immigrated to other territories. Because of this, Aston was one of Mert’s least populous regions, and its governors struggled with tax and labor shortages.

“Then I will look into it,” I replied.

After lightly patting my shoulder, Her Excellency the Frontier Countess headed off with her husband toward their children. I followed slowly several steps behind and caught sight of the star of today’s show, the young Lord Alexis, taking Lina’s hand and giving it a kiss.

“Lady Lina, I thank you for your time today,” he said.

“Yes, thank you,” his younger sister echoed.

“The pleasure was all mine, Lord Alexis, Lady Cecily,” Lina replied. “Thank you.”

As this announcement party was an official event—despite it being held in the daytime rather than evening—Lina wasn’t using her cane. She was still worried about her leg, so I stood next to her, and she leaned her body against mine. I took her arm and supported her, an action I’d grown accustomed to. A smile automatically rose to Lina’s lips as she leaned into my arm.



When the star of today's show saw this, he pouted just slightly. It seemed that the young lord had taken a liking to Lina, but not to me. However, I didn't care. Lina and I were in a marriage recognized by the kingdom. A child who had just barely become a novennial could do nothing about it.

"Lady Lina," Lord Alexis said, pleasantly and quite politely despite his slight pout, "please feel welcome to come here once again. I have many things I would like to talk to you about."

"If that would please you," Lina replied.

"Lady Lina, is this gentleman the man you're married to?" Lady Cecily asked. She wore an adorable shiny light purple day dress. She looked between me and Lina one after the other, and when Lina responded in the affirmative, the little girl smiled radiantly.

"You're so close!" she chirped. "That's so wonderful!"

Lina and I smiled at the young girl's pure sentiment. The surrounding adults beamed as well, along with the young boys and girls who I thought were probably marriage candidates for the young Lord Alexis and Lady Cecily. Only the star of the hour couldn't hide his sulky expression. His father chided him by giving him a small push from behind.

"Honestly, Joshua, please don't make strange faces at the children," Lina told me, looking displeased.

We stood watching the Carlton siblings engaged in happy conversation with lords and ladies close to their age, all around a table laden with a variety of sweets.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You were looking at him like you'd won something from him, weren't you? Even though he just turned nine. That's immature, Joshua," she chided.

"Well, it was only natural."

"What are you talking about?"

There were many young boys who fancied older girls. However, it wouldn't do for these young boys to get the wrong idea or make things complicated—not to mention the fact that their feelings for these women would of course be unreciprocated.

I had only wanted to show Lord Alexis that the path to adulthood doesn't go as one might hope—instead, it is a series of severe events. In this way, he had taken his first step toward adulthood.

“It's no matter,” I replied. “Now then, let's go over there and have some tea as well.”

I wondered if the venue for this announcement party was more like a battlefield for the parents of the young Carltons' potential marriage candidates. However, for myself and my wife, this party was nothing but a celebration. Now that we had given our best to the star of the hour and his family, we were at ease.

We took seats with a view of the beautifully manicured garden and accepted warm tea with fruit floating in it as well as some baked sweets. Seeming to take a liking to the drink, Lina asked the lady-in-waiting how it was made. I assumed that before long, it would be served during teatime at home.

We had moved here to the eastern region from the royal capital in the ninth month of the year. It had been three months since then. Winter had arrived, but the climate in this land was mild throughout the year. While this was the harshest season, it was still peaceful.

One of Mert's Three Wicked Expanses, the Abyssal Forest, lay here in the eastern region. Many of the dragons and other beasts that lived there were quieter varieties that had finished their autumn preparations and gone into hibernation. Thus, winter was calm.

The weather overall during the year had been favorable, and the majority of the territory had yielded abundant harvests. One area had experienced landslides and suffered issues with insects, but otherwise, this year's haul had exceeded the usual. Perhaps this was one of the reasons that the people we sat at the table with were smiling as they enjoyed the tea and snacks. I assumed that my and Lina's first winter here would be spent the same way as them—

peacefully.

“Will the Earl of Aston be attending?” Lina asked, tipping her head as she returned her teacup to its saucer.

My younger sister Margot had married into the Aston family, which was distantly related to the Frontier Countess’s as they were from the eastern region. It would be natural for the Astons to attend the announcement party of her eldest son.

“The Astons are here in the manse,” I replied. “The youngest child of the Carltons is only a year apart from my nephew, so they’re meeting in another room—the children will be both playmates and schoolmates. I assume once they are done there, they will join us.”

“I see.”

“They sent a message saying that they would like to meet tomorrow morning, before they leave to return home,” I continued. “They will come to see us. Although,” I added, pausing for a moment, “I don’t know the reason for the visit.”

I had received a letter, the contents of which had left an impression that they might have something they wanted to discuss. The only thing I could imagine Patrick wanted to talk to me about would be reorganizing the management in Aston due to the damage caused by years of nasty rumors regarding the previous epidemic.

“Regardless of the reason, it’s good that we’ll be able to see them,” Lina said genuinely as she brought a cookie—glossy with fruit jam—to her mouth.

The sweetness of the cookie caused her face to relax into a natural, authentic smile, which brought a sense of both security and joy to my heart. I loved seeing her smile—I got caught up in it.

“This is very delicious,” Lina said, recommending the cookie. Just as I picked up the snack, I felt a piercing gaze—a fierce stare focused only on me.

I paused.

I looked in the direction from which I had felt the glare come, near the

tabletop set with confections. At the large, round table sat Lord Alexis, alongside the similarly aged boys and girls who were marriage candidates for him and his sister. There were ten of them, all happily chattering and enjoying sweets. At least, they were supposed to be—he wasn't.

"Joshua?" Lina asked. "Is something the matter?"

"No, nothing at all."

"Hm?" she hummed curiously before continuing. "Would you like to try this cake? It's nectar-flavored and has a lot of nuts. You like nectar, don't you, Joshua?"

I thought for a moment. "Yes, I'll have some."

As I leaned in toward Lina and opened my mouth, she laughed. "You're just like a child, aren't you?" she said, cutting a bite-size piece of cake with a fork and bringing it to my mouth.

The sweet nectar and moist texture of the dessert coupled with the taste of the crunchy, savory nuts filled my mouth. While I liked all sweets, at that moment I felt that nectar flavor was best of all.

"Would you like another bite?" Lina asked.

"Yes."

Once again, Lina cut into the cake with her fork and brought the piece to my mouth.

At that moment, I felt the sharp gaze pierce me again, even more cutting than before. When I glanced over, I locked eyes with the Frontier Countess's son. His blue eyes were practically green with intense envy.

At this rate, I doubted that he would be able to converse with the other young lords and ladies, and that wouldn't do. At least a few of the reasons for holding today's announcement party would be wasted.

I decided it was best that Lina and I not linger in a place where young Lord Alexis's eyes were. He would have to start building good relationships with the boys and girls of his generation at today's party in preparation for when he became the next count. It wouldn't do for him to be jealous of the husband of

the older woman that he fancied.

I drank up the rest of my tea and returned the cup to its saucer, then stood and extended my hand to Lina.

“I hear the garden here at the manse is worth viewing—it’s the best time to see a flower that bears the name of a departed emperor,” I said. “If your leg is all right, would you like to go for a short stroll?”

“Let’s.”

Lina reached her hand out for me to scoop up, and the two of us headed through an open doorway into the garden as if escaping from Lord Alexis’s piercing gaze.

The flower that was named after a historical emperor bloomed at the beginning of the winter. It was large—about the size of an adult’s fist—with multilayered petals that were such a deep red that they neared violet. Legend said that the princess who had become the emperor’s consort had brought the plant here from another country.

Lina was delighted to see the well-maintained garden; the beautiful, magnificent flowers; and the trees that bore small berries, some yellow and some red. Her eyes sparkled at the sight of the pairs of mated migratory birds that came to pass the winter at the artificial pond.

My heart leaped as I watched her—dressed to the nines—enjoying our stroll through the garden.

I still had several things on my mind, such as what my sister and her husband wanted to talk to us about tomorrow and the fixation that my superior’s son had with Lina, but I could put that all aside for now.

The beginning of winter brought the occasional chilly breeze, but when we pressed together, I didn’t feel the cold. Leaning into each other as we walked, we strolled undisturbed through the garden.

<<<>>>

“The Earl and Countess of Aston have arrived. I have escorted them to the parlor,” our housekeeper Ms. Ada announced.

The morning after the announcement party, the Earl of Aston had, as promised, come to our home. At Ms. Ada's words, we stood.

"Shall we, Lina?" Joshua asked.

"Of course," I replied.

The home we rented here in this frontier city had a somewhat small parlor. Placed on the light brown rug were a pair of loveseats which faced each other, and between them was a low table. We had no gaudy furnishings; instead, there was a single landscape painting on the wall and a vase filled with lavender-colored flowers. As I walked with Joshua into the room, I wondered if Lady Margot, my sister-in-law who adored lavish, gaudy things, would be irritated at our plain parlor.

Waiting inside were Earl Aston and Lady Margot, both wearing dark clothes. When they saw us, they immediately stood and bowed their heads deeply.

"What happened, you two?" Joshua asked, his perplexed tone reverberating through the room. I understood and shared his surprise. The couple were dressed as if they were in mourning.

Joshua had told me that Patrick Aston usually liked to wear more subdued clothing, but even Lady Margot was wearing something sober. She typically liked dresses with flashy colors and designs, and would forever love luxurious jewelry. However, the dress she wore now was dark gray, with a minimal amount of embroidery, ribbons, and lace.

Ms. Ada set the table with tea and sweets before leaving. When the four of us were alone in the parlor, Earl Aston lowered his head deeply once more. "Lord Joshua, I must deeply apologize," he beseeched his older brother-in-law.

"I apologize as well," Lady Margot said, echoing the sentiment.

"Before you start apologizing, would you explain what's going on?" Joshua asked. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I sat down together with Joshua, encouraging the two—who still bowed their heads—to sit, though it was rather difficult to get them to do so. We were going to have absolutely no idea what was going on unless they provided an explanation.

“I am sorry, well, for my hurriedness,” the earl said. Even though he sat down, he kept his head lowered. “By all rights, I should have come to give you an apology much sooner. My lateness weighed and weighed on my mind. I am deeply sorry. When I heard that you had ended your stay at the townhouse in the royal capital, I thought you had returned to your family’s marquis territory. However, when I traveled to the estate, I did not find you, Lord Joshua. I was informed that you had been temporarily transferred to work with Countess Carlton.”

“I’m sorry you had to go here and there after us,” Joshua replied. “However, why the need to apologize? I can’t recall any reason.”

“Well...” The earl hesitated. “I assume you heard about the incident with the former secretary Tommy Shaldain—about how he embezzled the money that was supposed to be Lady Lina’s cash bonus for slaying a dragon.”

Tommy Shaldain was Joshua’s younger cousin on his mother’s side, and he had been a secretary in the Black Knights Regiment executive office. He had embezzled the cash reward given to dragon slayers that had been meant for me, and instead sent the money to Lady Margot under the Granwell family name. I had seen firsthand and remembered well how he had incomprehensibly justified his actions during his hearing with the office of inspection. Currently, he was serving time in the Nevilis Magic Mine, digging out and polishing magic stones. His sentence was supposed to last for several years.

“That money was sent under the Granwell name to Margot,” Earl Aston explained.

“Yes, I do remember him saying that,” Joshua replied. “When I first heard the story, Margot, I had thought you must have been pestering Tommy for cash.”

“Of course I was not!” Lady Margot protested, her face pale. “I haven’t had any correspondence with Tommy since I got married.”

“It’s inevitable that I would think that about you,” Joshua retorted. “Besides, I know how you treated Tommy like your servant—you’ve done that since you were little.”

Lady Margot paused for several moments. “I am sorry for that. But the truth remains that I never asked Tommy for money.”

“I understand,” Joshua replied. “Tommy himself said that he wasn’t asked to send the money. He acted independently because he thought it should be used for your benefit.”

“Since the money was sent in the Granwell name, I genuinely thought that you were providing Margot with her own funds,” Earl Aston continued. After a pause, he added, “But Margot said it was odd, so though we received the money, she never used it.”

From what Joshua had told me about Lady Margot, she was a failure of an aristocrat who had no patience when things didn’t go her way. Plus, she had a penchant for the lavish and expensive. For her to have not used the money sent to her in her family’s name was such an unbelievable shock to Joshua that he stared open-mouthed at her.

When I turned my gaze to Lady Margot, she hunched up and hid slightly behind the earl.

“W-Well, I thought it was strange,” she stammered.

“What?” Joshua said. “I thought for sure that you would’ve pounced on the money and said that it was yours before buying up all the dresses and necklaces in sight.”

“Well...” Lady Margot looked down and shuffled to hide even further behind her husband. “It’s not like you would send money to me for no reason, Joshua. Lina had no reason to send me money either, since I said such cruel things to her when we met. And mother’s budget was reduced, so she’s just been living quietly.” Lady Margot paused. “No one in the Granwell family would send me money, and that’s why I thought it strange.”

I could understand the logic in what she said.

“Did you not consider the possibility that our uncle sent you the money?” Joshua asked.

“You know that our uncle and our cousin Chris only send gifts and flowers to their family for birthdays and the New Year. Other than those, I have only gotten sensible gifts from them for special occasions like my wedding and the birth of my son.”

Now that she mentioned it, she was right. Joshua never sent Lady Margot any money, and my mother-in-law hadn't the extra funds to do so either. My lord uncle—the previous Marquis Granwell—and the current Marquis Granwell, my husband's cousin Chris, had an ordinary relationship with Lady Margot as her relatives. That all being the case, the money sent in the name of the Granwells naturally became a mystery.

In actuality, the money had been sent by Lady Margot and Joshua's cousin, the former secretary Tommy Shaldain. To the Aston family who had not known this, the money was nothing but strange and of uncertain origin.

"So you only received money from an unknown source, correct?" Joshua asked. "If that's the case, why apologize?"

"I spent the money!" Earl Aston blurted out. He bowed his head thrice over. "I apologize!"

He had used those shady funds of questionable provenance?

"Wh-What?!" Joshua stammered, then demanded, "How much? What for?"

"I am so sorry." To my shock, Earl Aston remained bowed so low that I could see the golden hair all the way on the back of his head. "There were circumstances which forced my hand. Once I found out where the money really came from, I knew that I had to repay the total amount to you, Lady Lina. But I..."

"You said that there were circumstances which forced your hand, correct?" I said. "May I ask what happened?"

Earl Aston slowly raised his head. His eyes glistened—he looked about to cry. Finally, he said, "The plague."

"Plague?" I repeated. "You mean an epidemic?"

Earl Aston nodded vehemently. "There is a very small village within our borders known as Riberry Village. Several people there have fallen ill in succession and then collapsed." He paused. "The disease seems to be contagious."

According to Earl Aston, children and their families were the main victims of

the disease, and they were presently isolating themselves together in their homes as a precaution. Thanks to this action, fortunately, no additional people had become infected so far. However, in case of the worst, the villagers had been abstaining from leaving the area and had begun rationing everyday goods like food and clothing.

Nevertheless, the cause of the epidemic, how it was transmitted, and its treatment remained unknown. Of course, the situation as it stood could not continue forever, and Earl Aston had been at a loss for what to do as their already limited funds had dried up. It was then that he had remembered the existence of the mysterious money they had received.

Backed into a corner as he had been, Earl Aston had used the funds to help the villagers. However, he had felt the need to explain himself and apologize, and so sent word to arrange a meeting with us.

“I see,” Joshua said at last.

“I...I really am so sorry. I promise I will return the money, just...please let me borrow it for a while!” Earl Aston slipped off the sofa, both knees on the floor as he lowered his head.

“Ah, um— Please, you don’t have to do that,” I stammered. I had neither the position nor status for him to do this, but there he bowed like a frog on the floor.

I stood from the sofa, coming closer to the flustered earl and trying to get him to lift his head, but all he did was keep repeating, “Please, please!”

“Patrick,” Joshua said finally. “Calm down. You’re upsetting Lina.”

“I... I’m sorry,” Earl Aston said, sniffing, and I gave him a handkerchief.

Tears kept spilling from his blue eyes, and I knew that he was suffering from the bottom of his heart. He had used the money without permission because there had been no other way, and the guilt of his wrongdoing had been torturing him.

Earl Aston seated himself on the sofa again and wiped at his tears with the handkerchief. Lady Margot pressed close to him while shooting a glance at Joshua to gauge his reaction.

“I never thought someone as straitlaced as you would use money for frivolity, and since you did in fact use it to help the villagers...” Joshua began before pausing. “I’m not angry, and I don’t think you need to repay the full amount right this instant. Don’t you agree, Lina?”

I nodded, and both Earl Aston’s and Lady Margot’s expressions showed their relief. No doubt they had been prepared for some harsh words from me and Joshua.

“Her Excellency the Frontier Countess has already informed me of the epidemic in Aston territory, and I have heard of the mysterious one that broke out roughly twenty years ago. As a coordinator for the eastern region, I am considering investigating the two incidents,” Joshua continued.

“Y-You...” Earl Aston was at a loss for words.

“I know that everyone in Aston territory has been struggling for many years because of the previous epidemic,” Joshua added. “I would like to help, both as a civil servant on temporary transfer under Countess Carlton and as your relative. So...”

Joshua paused, looking at me apologetically.

“I’m sorry, Lina. First of all, we have to contain the sickness and cure the people. Repayment for the money will come afterward, if that is all right with you.”

“Lady Lina, I beg of you!” Earl Aston entreated, once again lowering himself to the floor and bowing his head. “Please lend me the money for now, and I promise I will pay you back!”

“Lina, please!” Lady Margot added, planting herself down on the floor as well and pleading in a near scream. “I will apologize for my past behavior however many times it takes, so please!”

“N-No, don’t! Please lift your heads!” I cried, embarrassed, and once again the earl and Lady Margot sat upon their sofa.

I had been surprised to hear that Joshua and Lady Margot’s cousin had embezzled my dragon-slaying bonus in the course of his clerical work for the Black Knights Regiment. He had sent the money to Lady Margot while

pretending it was from the Granwells. I had been just as surprised at Earl Aston's confession to using it.

The saving grace of the matter was that the money had not been used for entertainment such as gambling or drink, but instead gone to helping the sick, suffering people in Aston. I was genuinely glad that the money had helped them.

Of course, it was not commendable for Earl Aston to have spent the funds without permission. However, knowing that he had been at his wit's end, I felt no anger welling up inside me, nor did I demand—or have any desire to insist—that he pay up immediately.

“Um, the villagers are in trouble now, correct?” I said hesitantly. “Let's not worry about the repayment for now. Why don't we work on a cure for the sickness? Lady Margot, you as well.”

“L-Lady Lina...” Earl Aston was speechless for a moment. “I am so, so sorry for the trouble. Thank you so much.”

“Lina, thank you, truly,” Lady Margot added.

It was hard to keep Earl Aston and Lady Margot from leaving the sofa and putting their hands on the floor for the third time to bow their heads, and equally difficult to get them to stop weeping.

As I handed multiple handkerchiefs to Earl Aston and Lady Margot, I thought about how even adults with good social etiquette could act irrationally when put between a rock and a hard place.

Earl Aston and Lady Margot, along with their three-year-old son, did not stay for lunch, instead hurrying home to their territory. Many duties relating to dealing with the epidemic as well as normal governmental affairs had piled up.

The Carlton and Aston territories neighbored each other, but the trip would still take a day's carriage ride. I insisted that they eat, so I packed them sandwiches for lunch, a bacon-filled quiche for supper, and some baked sweets for snacks. I hoped that at the very least they would have sufficient time to eat together as a family.

While I made preparations for our after-lunch tea, Ms. Ada received a stack of letters from the postman. She gave them to me to sort through.

I had felt like the number of letters and parcels we received had increased since our move to the eastern region, and in actuality, it wasn't my imagination. There were a great many faraway people who worried about us, and I was happy that the large volume of letters we received was an indication of that.

There was an unbroken series of items from names that I knew—the female knights I graduated with; Cody's wife; my esteemed mother-in-law back at the estate; and Lord Virgil, Joshua's colleague and an aide to the prime minister.

Then, I came across a single conspicuous envelope. It was light pink and smelled of flowers. Written in a beautiful, flowing script on it was a name I did not recognize.

“Florence Hughley?”

There was another letter as well; perhaps they had come at the same time because the mail had taken a while to arrive from the neighboring region. This second one was a pale orange, also from the same sender, and also addressed to Joshua.

I paused, an uneasy sensation burning in my chest. There was a woman sending Joshua scented letters in pretty pastel envelopes.

No, I didn't know what sort of relationship they had just because of pink and orange envelopes. The sender could have been a relative, or a civil official who had worked alongside Joshua in the royal palace. It wasn't good for me to imagine things and suspect my husband of an affair just because someone had sent him letters.

The crystal prismaphone installed in our home rang, startling me and chasing away the gloomy thoughts inside me.

I heard Ms. Ada's distant voice as she answered the prismaphone. The caller sounded female from her high voice, but I couldn't make out what she was saying.

“I see,” Ms. Ada said after a moment. “I apologize, but the viscount is currently out.”

A prismaphone was a useful magical tool that allowed people to see and speak with each other despite being far away, so long as the parties involved both had one set up. Installing them was actively promoted in the eastern region, and there had already been one in the house when we moved in.

Joshua, typically hounded by work, had said that while prismaphones were handy, they had the disadvantage of not letting one relax after coming home, since a work-related call could always come in.

“Yes, unfortunately I do not know when he will be returning home,” Ms. Ada continued. “I apologize again.”

“Honestly!” came the voice of the woman. Her voice was so distant that I could barely hear it. *“Do you...I am?!”*

“I deeply apologize.”

Although Joshua was indeed at home, Ms. Ada continuously apologized for his absence. This was something Joshua had instructed her to do, although it made me feel guilty that she had to lie and apologize over and over again.

The woman on the other end of the line was so frustrated that Ms. Ada wouldn't fetch Joshua that her voice grew rough and loud enough for me to hear what she said.

“I will call again, you know! I have tried contacting him over and over again, and not once have I gotten ahold of him! How unreasonable!”

“I apologize, ma'am,” Ms. Ada replied.

“Oh, this is pointless! Tell Joshua to stay at home so I may reach him, and that I've called him repeatedly!”

Ms. Ada paused. “Once again, I am sorry. Please excuse me.”

With a click, the prismaphone cut out. At the same time, I heard Ms. Ada let out a large sigh.

“Ms. Ada, I'm sorry you had to answer such an unpleasant call,” I said, approaching her and the prismaphone.

Ms. Ada shook her head vehemently and forced a smile. “No, Lady Lina, I'm fine. Compared to a firsthand meeting, simply speaking over the prismaphone is

just fine.”

“But the caller—” I began.

Ms. Ada waved her hands emphatically, a little flustered. “It appears that the caller is an acquaintance of Lord Joshua, but he instructed me not to let her speak to him no matter what she said. He said that I should handle the call politely, but in the worst-case scenario, it was fine to cut her off.”

“But—”

“Please pay it no mind, Lady Lina, I am all right,” Ms. Ada insisted. “More importantly, it’s time for tea.”

We moved to the kitchen to boil the water and prepare the tea.

The water in the kettle over the fire began to bubble as it grew hot. While I listened to the sound, I thought about the caller on the prismaphone.

The woman’s way of speaking had made her sound like an aristocrat, and furthermore, she knew Joshua—and the fact that she would refer to him as “Joshua,” without any sort of honorific, meant that she was on familiar terms with him. Furthermore, she had tried to get in contact with him over the prismaphone several times now.

Speaking of trying to get into contact multiple times, the same situation sat on the table in the form of the letters addressed to Joshua: the two pretty, pastel-colored sealed envelopes that were scented. Now that I thought about it, I had a feeling that there had been several pastel-colored envelopes among the letters that we had been receiving since we came to the eastern frontier.

All envelopes had all been addressed to Joshua with beautiful handwriting, and were light, gentle colors that women seemed to like.

“Lady Lina, the water is done boiling,” Ms. Ada said. “Would you like any sweets?”

“Oh, thank you. Since we just had lunch, we will have no snacks, only tea,” I replied.

“Understood.”

The call on the prismaphone a few minutes ago, and the letters the

noblewoman had been sending ever since we had moved to the eastern frontier, weighed on my mind. But just as I had decided earlier, it would be wrong of me to jump to unpleasant conclusions. Joshua hadn't told me anything, nor had I caught him in any unfaithful act, so I knew I shouldn't doubt him.

After reasoning with myself, I brewed the tea and headed to one of the guest rooms, which Joshua used as a study.

I knocked. "Joshua?" I called, but there was no answer. I opened the door slightly and saw him sitting at his desk, staring at something with great seriousness. "I'm coming in," I continued. "Would you like tea? You also have mail."

"Oh, right. Thank you."

I entered the room and placed the teacups on the desk, then handed Joshua the mail. He looked over the senders one by one before seeing the light pink and pale orange envelopes, and his expression momentarily hardened.

"The letters have been growing more frequent since we moved here," he noted, echoing my thoughts exactly.

He put all the mail in a box on his desk. This was where he put documents and letters that still had to be dealt with, though he had deemed them unimportant enough to not need a prompt response. I felt some relief to see that the pink and orange letters were now there too.

It seemed that Joshua had been looking at a map of the eastern frontier. It showed a close-up depiction of Countess Carlton's territory and the neighboring Abyssal Forest, one of the Three Wicked Expanses.

Joshua noticed my look. "I was curious where the village with the outbreak is."

While he sipped his tea, Joshua tapped his finger against the map at a spot labeled "Riberry." Sketched near it were a river and a small forest. Downriver was a marker for the former site of Rondale Village.

"Lina?"

“Oh— Here.” I pointed. “What did the Frontier Countess say about the outbreak in Riberry Village?”

“That she believed it necessary we conduct an investigation,” Joshua explained. “Especially since there was another epidemic in this area a little over twenty years ago as well.”

The mysterious illness had sprung up over twenty years ago in Rondale Village. People throughout the village had become infected, and most had perished—only a handful had survived.

It took me a moment to find my words. “When you investigate, would it be possible for me to join you in visiting where Rondale Village was?”

“Huh?!” Joshua forcefully returned his teacup to his desk with a *thunk* that echoed around the room.

“Of course you’re not going—you’re neither a civil official nor a knight,” Joshua said. “Besides, the majority of the Rondale site has been sealed off since the epidemic over twenty years ago. Also, it’s close to Riberry, where the outbreak is now. It would be incredibly dangerous if the disease were the same one. I won’t have you going to such a—”

“Rondale Village was my birthplace,” I explained.

“You...” He trailed off, stunned.

I didn’t have any memories of living in Rondale Village. My parents, grandmother, and other relatives had all passed, leaving me alone. I had been taken in by the orphanage when I was a toddler, just a few months past two years old. However, my teacher at the orphanage had told me that I’d been the firstborn child of a husband and wife who once ran a fruit farm.

The origin of the disease that had run rampant in Rondale was still unclear. I had heard that the site of the village had been blocked off, making it impossible to visit. However, the pretext of investigating the disease would probably make it possible to get in.

“My parents, grandmother, and relatives lie buried there,” I continued.

“Please, if only once, I would like to visit the graves of my family.”

Joshua covered his troubled expression with one hand and let out a deep sigh.
“Lina, you’re being unfair.”

“Huh?”

While I had thought that surely it was an unreasonable request since I wasn’t related to the investigation, I was surprised that he had said I was being unfair. Joshua’s expression became sullen, and he took me by the wrist, pulling me with an unexpected amount of force. As if I had leaped to sit in the chair with him, I found myself on his lap, being embraced.



“Joshua?”

“You should have known that there was no way I could refuse once you said you wanted to visit the graves of your relatives.” He hugged me tightly, and in a soft voice whispered, “You’re unfair.”

It took me a moment to reply. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I want to grant every wish of yours that I can. However, it truly is a dangerous location, and I don’t know if I can get you there. If Her Excellency the Frontier Countess says you cannot go, then you’ll have to give up for now,” Joshua said.

“I understand.”

Joshua let out another loud sigh and kissed my temple.

I felt like I was in a dream as he held me against his warm body and gave me sweet kisses. I forgot about how the pastel-colored envelopes had made me feel ill, and about the call from the woman who had referred to Joshua by only his name.

One week after Earl Aston and Lady Margot visited our home, the earl and Countess Carlton arranged a joint investigation into the epidemic. A suitable treatment, restoration of Riberry’s economy, and measures to prevent future outbreaks would be based on the results of the research.

The Frontier Countess was sending Joshua and knights from the Eastern Corps, who could also use white magic. Even Earl Aston himself was coming to gather information from his people and examine the actual site.

I had been allowed to accompany them. The Frontier Countess knew of my birthplace, and she understood my desire to visit my family’s graves.

I stood on a small hill separated from the large, main road en route to the area. Looking around, I saw stones laid out over what had once served as part of a road, and beyond that were ramshackle buildings. The structures had mostly collapsed until only their foundations and part of the walls remained, and a shrine—at least, what looked like one—barely remained standing,

although its walls had largely fallen away.

Bare rocks and withered yellow and brown plants protruded from the hard ground, and the imposing trees had lost their leaves; just looking at the plants left a wintry, gloomy impression. I assumed the whole area was covered in vegetation from spring to fall.

Beyond the ruins, I saw the orchard, which seemed to have grown wild with a multitude of fruit trees sprouting haphazardly. Branches that should have been trimmed stretched out however they pleased, and I assumed that in the right season, the leaves would make the trees look incredibly unkempt.

If I had to describe the scenery in a few words, they would be “rotting ghost town.”

The town where I had been born and lived until I was two was littered with wilted plants and tumbledown buildings—it really could only be called a ruin. While I couldn’t remember living here, I felt lonely looking at the remains.

If there had been no epidemic, I would probably have lived my life as the daughter of fruit farmers with my family and other relatives. I assume I would still have entered the knights’ academy to become a black knight after discovering I could use old magic when I took the magic viability test at five years old. However, I would have had a home to return to, as well as family who supported me waiting here for me.

One of my fellow travelers, the Earl of Aston, shook his head at the sight. It must have been heartwrenching for him to see a town in the region he governed decaying like this.

“Lina, we’re only looking for a bit,” Joshua told me. “We’ll be coming back again.”

“Okay,” I replied.

This was the site of the former village of Rondale, which Earl Aston presided over. Twenty-two years ago, a sudden, mysterious illness had swept through and killed most of the villagers. The fields and orchards that had promised abundant harvests withered and died with them. The disease had spread through the corpses of the villagers, so they had all been cremated and buried.

Afterward, the epidemic had been deemed so exceedingly infectious that the area had been cordoned off and declared a forbidden zone.

Earl Aston's domain had once been a major producer of fresh fruits and processed fruit products, but both industries had deteriorated at once, leaving the region rural and poverty-stricken. Faced with a dramatic decrease in the region's income, the earl's family had begun restoring the restricted areas so they could again be used for agriculture and industry. As a result of these efforts, the economy was slowly being revitalized, and there were now more jobs available to people in the territory. I had heard that they were making every effort to one day eliminate all hazards so that Rondale Village and its orchards could be restored, but progress was slow.

Joshua compared the map in his hand with the view and muttered, "I checked the materials, but this orchard is even larger than I thought." After reflecting a moment, he continued. "Speaking of Rondale Village, it was famous for apul and pera fruits. They were supposed to be sweet and fresh, and the jam and juice made with them were quite popular."

"That's right," said one of the pair of knights from the Eastern Knights Corps dispatched to accompany us on this expedition. An absent-minded smile came to her face, and she continued, "Pera jam was my favorite, so every morning I'd pile it on my bread like a mountain. My mother and sister liked the apul cake made by a local baker, and we often drank apul-flavored tea."

Judging by how happy she looked, the memory was probably a delicious one. I assumed that the Rondale villagers must have been able to collect a bountiful harvest, as the orchard was certainly huge.

"Every town and village in this region put on three festivals a year," added the other knight, a man. "Rondale Village's autumn festival was especially grand. There was lots of fruit wine, dishes made with fruit, and delicious fruit pastries. It was really popular."

This, however, I couldn't imagine just from looking at the expanse of withered plants and crumbled buildings in front of me.

"Right, right!" the female knight said. "I was a kid so I don't remember much, but I stuffed myself with sweets at a festival, and when I couldn't eat dinner my

mom got mad at me!”

“I remember it well,” the male knight continued. “There was an incredibly delicious pokk meat sauté with a sweet and sour apul sauce. Apuls also made for good jams, juice, and pastries. Rondale Village might have been deep in the countryside, but many people traveled here from other regions.”

Earl Aston looked out at the dilapidated, rotting village. “This area has been sealed off since my father was governing the territory. We are aiming to restore this orchard and rebuild the village. I do not know if it will happen during my time, my son’s time, or in some generation further down the line.” He paused. “But one day it will be the beautiful grove it once was.”

I, too, would be happy if this land could be turned into an orchard once more.

“Now then,” Joshua said, “Riberry Village should be close, correct?”

The male knight nodded, then pointed toward the small forest on the north side of the Rondale orchard. “Riberry Village is through those woods. The people mainly grow plants used for dyeing cloth or for feeding to the insects that make silk. People started getting sick about a month ago.”

Earl Aston, Joshua, and I boarded and set off in the wagon that would circumvent the forest on its way to Riberry. The two knights followed us on horseback.

From the window, I could see the dense, dark green leaves of the forest despite the winter season. I thought it seemed similar to the Abyssal Gorge, where beasts lived.

Near Riberry Village flowed a relatively large river, and on its north bank sat a forest. It seemed like a fine place. Deer, boar, rabbits, and other animals lived in the woods, and edible nuts and mushrooms grew freely. The river also served as a source of irrigation for agriculture.

Despite the favorable conditions, the reason people had avoided this area for so long was because of its proximity to the ruins of Rondale Village. There were many people who remembered the epidemic from twenty-two years ago, so I could understand why they wouldn’t want to immigrate to Riberry.

Five years ago, however, people had begun to settle the area and were still in the process of developing it. The people must be cooperative and hardworking to have built a village from the ground up in such a short span of time. There were wooden homes where people lived, storehouses, meeting halls, and other places that the townspeople shared that spread out from the village center, and beyond that were fields.

The town mayor, Jeff, was a man with dark brown hair peppered with streaks of white. About fifty years' worth of dark circles had accumulated under his eyes, making him look terribly tired.

"Thank you for coming," he greeted us politely, though his voice was scratchy and hoarse. "I don't have the words for how thankful I am that both the Frontier Countess and the esteemed earl of our domain have sent help."

He asked the villagers to unload and start handing out the medical supplies, sheets, towels, and other daily necessities that we had brought with us in the wagon. Joshua had made no omission in his preparations—foodstuffs and other additional household items would be delivered on another day.

"You have my thanks," Jeff told us. "No one is allowed to go past the second field on the outskirts of the village. There are things that just can't be made or procured here, so these supplies are a great help."

"If there is anything you lack, write up a list," said one of the knights sent by the Frontier Countess. She and her colleague were helping with unpacking the supplies. "You would know best about what provisions you need for aid."

Joshua kept an eye on the people. They seemed relieved now that outside help had arrived.

"So," he said to Jeff, "where are the infected villagers?"

"Over here; we are using this building as a sanatorium." Jeff indicated the place. "I must ask you to refrain from entering. There's a possibility you could contract the disease."

He went on to say that the somewhat large building was a meeting hall where the villagers normally gathered for assemblies. However, it was currently where the infected patients were being taken care of.

“It’s hard to say they’re being ‘taken care of,’” Jeff amended himself, pausing for a moment. “We don’t know how to treat them, so all we can do is give them boiled fever-reducing herbs and feed them mild rice porridge.”

“What are the symptoms?” Joshua asked.

Mayor Jeff let out a soft sigh and shook his head. “The first signs of sickness are fever and dizziness. Afterward, there’s stomach discomfort, nausea, and coughing. Then comes loss of appetite which causes the body to weaken. I’m worried about the children; they’ve become so frail.”

“I see. Are children the ones contracting the disease? What about the elderly?”

“Them too, yes,” Jeff replied. “The sickness is very similar to the outbreak twenty-two years ago, although the symptoms are milder. We referenced documents from that time and began quarantining the sick, and the villagers who haven’t contracted the disease have been forbidden from leaving the immediate area. Because of that, we’ve been running out of food, everyday goods, and medical supplies, so we asked the earl for assistance.”

The meeting hall, now turned into a temporary sanatorium, was on the west side of the village. It was a one-story structure, but it had been built on a raised foundation at the top of three steps. I went to the terrace on the south side of the building and peeped through the window. Inside, thin mattresses blanketed the floors, and small children and a handful of adults lay resting on them.

Everyone was curled up on their sides, seeming pained and occasionally coughing violently. The children appeared especially sick. Although they had become so weak, it was a comfort to know that there hadn’t been any deaths yet.

Thanks to frequently changed linens and the dry breezes common in this season, the sanatorium had been kept clean and well ventilated. Because of this, no other illnesses had sprung up, and the patients’ symptoms had slowly been getting better. However, there was a high risk that the weaker children would die from emaciation before the illness could run its course. Despite the sanatorium’s cleanliness, a dark, depressing atmosphere hung in the air inside.

“Currently, no one other than those inside has contracted the disease,” Jeff

explained. “However, since we don’t know how the disease is spread, we had no choice but to quarantine them.”

“Didn’t Aston set aside emergency funds in case something like what happened in Rondale occurred again?” Joshua grumbled. “Since the main industry here is agriculture, it’s quite possible that the village could face other problems too, such as flooding, droughts, and insect damage. Prudent budgeting is quite necessary for such times.”

Earl Aston’s face paled. “You are right.” He paused. “Well, we did want to make room in the budget. Very much so. But securing the funds...”

“You mean?” Joshua prompted.

“My family didn’t know how to deal with the outbreak twenty-two years ago,” Earl Aston explained. “As a result, many people became sick and the greater part of the population passed away and crossed the rainbow bridge. The fruits and the products made with them were our main industry, and Rondale Village was our largest producer.” He paused. “All at once, our working population diminished, and tax and commercial income dropped dramatically. We still haven’t recovered.”

“I had only just turned thirty at the time,” Mayor Jeff remarked. “I had observed the Rondale villagers over and over again to learn their fruit farming methods. They had an enormous orchard and large workshops where they’d make all sorts of products like jam, candied fruits, and liquor.”

“That’s right,” Earl Aston replied.

The two seemed nostalgic for those days as they looked out over the Riberry fields. The saplings being raised there were now tall enough to reach an adult’s waist, and dark green leaves grew thickly on their branches.

“When the people of Rondale passed away, we lost the workers who cultivated and harvested the trees, as well as the ones who processed the fruit. Our region’s income dropped significantly. Vegetables became our main industry instead, but they aren’t nearly as profitable as the fruit industry. To this day our business dealings have been tainted with the rumor that Aston’s food is poisonous,” Earl Aston explained.

The Aston family had lost their income in an instant; it had taken all their meager revenue and past savings to protect their people's daily lives. They were gradually dispelling the rumors and now seemed to be back on their feet, but I could imagine it had been impossible to create a budget for emergencies.

"Sickness really is a burden," Joshua murmured, kindly patting Earl Aston's shoulder. "The really important things can be taken away in the blink of an eye."

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The dry wind, mixed with the chill of early winter, blew fiercely, shaking the branches and shrubbery of the Riberry crops. The deep green leaves, once picked, would be boiled to turn the water a deep navy color. When cloth and threads were dipped in the liquid, they would be dyed a beautiful blue. With repeated drying and soaking, the item would become darker, giving a different impression despite using the same blue dye.

Currently, Riberry Village's main industry was cultivating and shipping raw materials used in dye and feed for silk-producing bugs to other territories. Most likely, exporting nonfood products was their only option because of the harmful rumors surrounding Aston's fruits and vegetables.

Eliminating said gossip would be necessary to solve the problems in this area. However, that required the currently ill to make a complete recovery from the epidemic. At any rate, the first step was to treat the villagers who were suffering from the sickness.

"Who was the first person to contract the sickness?" I asked. "What were they doing?"

"A pair of siblings were the first," Mayor Jeff replied. He pointed out the siblings—an older sister and younger brother—through the window. They were lying down next to each other, resting. The young boys and girls inside all seemed very sick, but the brother and sister most of all.

"Then four other children, their mothers, and grandparents were infected," Jeff continued. "It seems that the children and their families went to the forest to gather seed husks from the bine trees."

“And what are bine trees and seed husks?” I asked.

“Bine trees are a type of evergreen that grows in the forest. There are a lot of them, and seed husks come from them. The husks are shaped like eggs—they’re about the size of a child’s fist, I’d say. Inside the husks are seeds that, when fully ripened, burst out of the husk and just about fly off. A seed husk is what we call what’s left behind afterward.”

Jeff took something out of a basket that had been sitting in the corner of the terrace. “This is one,” he said, holding out a seed husk for me to look at. It was brown, rugged, and tough.

“Seed husks contain a lot of oil, so we use them for fuel,” Jeff explained. “We gather lots of them in each home to warm them during the winter.”

“Ah,” I replied. “So the children and elderly both go to gather them.”

“Yes. It’s one of the jobs we have from autumn until early winter.”

Another cold gust of air blew. Worried about Lina, I turned to look at her. She stood at the edge of the sanatorium deck, staring intently toward the forest on the north side of Riberry Village.

“Lina?”

“Um...” Lina turned toward me and abruptly asked, “Can we go to the forest?”

“What?”

“I would like to go into the woods.”

“Is there something there?” I asked. “Certainly, I am inclined to investigate since the children got ill after collecting the seed husks.”

Of course, the forest was a place that had to be checked, but Lina’s words were filled with a surprising degree of conviction.

“I—”

“Mr. Mayor! Mayor Jeff!” A villager interrupted her, rushing toward us so quickly that he seemed like he would tumble over.

“What’s wrong?” Jeff asked.

“People— Two people washed up in the river!”

Mayor Jeff’s eyebrows knitted together, and he let out a large sigh. “Again? Well, the right thing to do is bury—”

“No, they’re alive!” the villager interrupted. “They’re heavily wounded, especially the man. He might die!”

“What?! If they’re alive, treat them!”

“The Frontier Countess’s knights are using white magic to heal them, but the man is terribly hurt. If someone dies in this village *now*...” The villager shuddered. “We’re so close to Rondale, and that went under from the plague. The gossip that spread about that is only now fading, and slowly at that. If word got out that a new epidemic has begun and people died here, what kind of rumors would start up again?”

I wanted to tell him that rumors weren’t the main problem here. However, even if I said that, the villager seemed as if he were in a maelstrom of chaos; he wouldn’t understand.

“I will come too,” I said instead. “Take us to where these people are. Lina, please get inside somewhere warm and rest. Patrick, stay with her.”

“O-Of course,” my brother-in-law replied.

“Lord Leewell, this way.”

“Please be careful,” Lina called after me as I hurried after the villager at a run.

A river flowed right beside Riberry, which was downstream of the Abyssal Forest. Apparently, the corpses of beasts were occasionally washed down here—and sometimes, the mercenaries and knights who had fought them too.

“Over there!” the villager said, pointing.

He led me to a spot where several townspeople had gathered. The knights who had joined us were casting recovery magic on two figures who lay on the ground.

“How are they?” I demanded.

“Oh, Lord Joshua!” The male knight looked up. “The girl over there looks like

she'll make it, but this man is in a perilous state. He has a deep wound to the abdomen, and one of the large blood vessels in his thigh is ruptured—it's bleeding badly. My magic can't keep up with it."

"Let me take over."

I knelt across from the knight, with the unconscious man between us. He had been pulled from the river and was still sopping wet. With his body deprived of blood and warmth, his complexion was completely pale.

"Heal," I murmured, calling upon my mana.

His broken ribs had damaged his organs, and the internal bleeding was severe, but first I worked on stopping the bleeding from his lacerated right thigh.

Parts of the armor that the man had probably been wearing lay scattered nearby. What had once been pauldrons were broken and mostly crumpled. The breastplate was terribly dented too. I assumed that he had taken a powerful hit and fallen into the river.

"Have the villagers get as much hot water, towels, bandages, and medicine as possible," I instructed. "While I'm healing him, wipe him dry. If he stays wet like this, his body temperature will only continue to drop."

No matter how mild a climate the eastern region had, it was still the twelfth month of the year—the wind and river were cold. Even if we could stanch his wounds, he might still freeze to death.

"Understood," the knight replied before turning to his colleague. "How's it going over there?!"

"She has a compound fracture in her left wrist, and two ribs are broken," the female knight replied. "There are a large number of bruises and small wounds on her—mostly on the abdomen. I finished healing her ribs and internal organs, so I think she'll live. I healed the fracture in her arm, so once the break is set, I think the rest of the healing should happen naturally."

A short distance away, the female knight was casting healing magic on the person who had washed up with the man. From the looks of her, she could still be referred to as a girl rather than a young woman. I imagined that the man had

been protecting her.

“Good, then once you set her arm, carry her inside somewhere,” the male knight said. “I want some of the village women to tend to her. Lord Leewell, I’ll dry off this man.”

“Please do,” I replied.

Although my recovery magic could heal the man’s wounds, there wasn’t much of a reaction. It looked like his mana and mine weren’t compatible. After I took care of his life-threatening wounds, it would be better to switch his treatment to medicine. It was said that relying on healing magic from the start wasn’t good for the body, anyway. It was better for people to use their natural ability to recover.

First, we had to heal this man to the point where he could be moved. Afterward, it would be best to transport him to a medical center to receive the appropriate treatment.

Figuring out his identity and contacting his relatives and place of work would be another step. Judging by his appearance, I assumed he was a knight—but *who* was he?

The white knights who guarded the royal family and the red knights who defended towns were easy to identify because all their equipment from the uniforms to the armor were part of matching sets. However, the blue knights and black knights who fought beasts each had their own styles of fighting, and therefore had personalized armor to suit their individual needs rather than standard-issue gear.

I hoped that we could find something on his equipment that might identify him. In the event that he didn’t regain consciousness, determining his identity would take time, and I wanted to let his family know about his condition as soon as possible.

“Joshua, are you all right?”

I turned my head to see that Lina had appeared alongside Patrick.

“Lina? Why are you here? I thought I told you to rest,” I said.

“I’m sorry, but I was worried,” she replied. She noticed the unconscious man and stared hard at him, tipping her head as if trying to remember something. “Hm? He...”

“Lady Lina, do you know who this man is?” the male knight asked.

“Hmm,” Lina hummed quietly in response, looking at the man’s face from the right, then from the left. “O-Oh, oh!” she said finally. “Sir Warren! This man is Sir Warren Asher!”

“Is this man a black knight?” I asked.

“That’s right,” Lina asked. “There’s no mistake—he’s Sir Warren Asher of the Kingdom of Mert’s Black Knights Regiment. I didn’t recognize him because he’s so pale, and unconscious too.”

If this man was a black knight, then who was the girl who had washed ashore with him? To my eyes, he had been trying to protect her. Had this man been a mercenary, blue knight, or even a red knight, I would have been convinced that he had tried to rescue her from having the misfortune of being attacked by a beast.

However, this man—Warren Asher—was a black knight. A black knight’s principle mission was to slay dragons. It would have made sense if only he had washed ashore here in Riberry Village, since it was downstream of the Abyssal Forest. It was logically sound to infer that a black knight had tumbled into the river during a battle. However, I had no clue what the girl had to do with this.

“Well, that can wait,” I muttered to myself. Once Warren Asher awoke, I could ask him for details about how he and the girl had washed ashore here. It would be useless to come up with wild guesses. I spoke again to the knight, “All right, I’ve stanchd the bleeding. It will be too much strain on your body to use up all your mana, so stop for today. Carry this man inside.”

“Understood,” the knight replied before carrying out the orders.

Lina watched them leave, a troubled expression on her face.

“Lina? Is something the matter?” I asked.

“No,” she replied. “I was just thinking that it was rare for there to be a

dragon-slaying mission during winter.”

She picked up a piece of Sir Warren’s tattered armor. The tears and dents in it were quite significant.

“Dragons and other beasts aren’t very active during the cold months,” she went on. “They stay quiet until their breeding season starts in spring. Despite that, Sir Warren was fighting a dragon in the twelfth month of all times.”

“But the possibility of that happening isn’t zero, right?” Patrick asked.

“That is correct, but...” Lina hesitated. “There is often a clear cause for having to slay a dragon in the cold season.”

“And that cause is?” I prompted.

Lina bit her lip before replying, “Because people provoked the dragon.”

Chapter 2: The Rural Couple, the Black Knight, and the Girl

Kingdom of Mert Calendar Year 786

Aston's Riberry Village was small to begin with—there was hardly any room to spare. In addition, the villagers were mostly focused on the nearly ten sick people, most of whom were children. Also taking into account the restriction preventing anyone from leaving, the townspeople were not in any position to care for additional patients. Thus, Joshua and I took the washed-up survivors to the capital of Aston territory.

There was no other choice. There was no surgical treatment available in the village, no place for the two to lie down and rest, and no extra food. There wasn't even anyone able to care for them.

The two were admitted to the annex of a treatment facility, where patients who needed to be isolated were hospitalized. In the unlikely case that the two were to have the same illness that the Riberry villagers had, the annex would be able to contain the sickness.

The treatment facility's annex was a small building that contained an examination area, a ward large enough to accommodate four patients, a washroom, a restroom, and a laundry room in the corner of the establishment. As there was no kitchen, meals were brought in from the main building. Sir Warren and the girl had been put opposite each other on two of the four beds in the ward.

I opened the window, letting in cold winter air that gently stirred the dividing curtains hanging from the ceiling. Letting the room temperature fall too much wouldn't be good, but if we didn't ventilate the annex, the air would stagnate, so I opened the window once in the morning and once in the evening.

Joshua was busy. To gather data, he had been going back and forth from the capital to Riberry to survey both the village and its surroundings, as well as to

check on the villagers' conditions. On top of that, he had been using his spare moments to cast healing magic on Sir Warren and the girl.

Joshua had usually had a full plate when he was an aide to the prime minister in the royal capital. I had thought that we would be able to relax upon moving to the eastern region, but instead it felt like we had returned to those hectic days. However, it couldn't have been my imagination that he seemed more lively now.

A strong, whooshing wind blew, and I hurried to shut the window. The room had ventilated for long enough. As the dividing curtains which had been dancing in the wind settled down, I locked the window and cast my gaze toward one of the beds—only to meet a pair of blue eyes.

“Wh-Where...am I?”

“Sir Warren, I'm so glad you've woken up!” I cried out.

Between Sir Warren and the girl, he had certainly suffered a greater number of deeper, bloodier wounds; for him to have awoken first was probably a testament to his vitality as a knight. Though he was still pale, the fact that he had regained consciousness was a relief, at least for the moment.

“You're in a treatment facility in the Aston capital,” I explained.

As I approached his bedside and examined his face, his eyes widened as he saw me more clearly.

“Wh...”

“Yes?”

“Why are you here...?”

He tried to lurch into a sitting position and throw his hands out, as if intending to shove me away—but in reality, he could only raise his arms slightly under the sheets. Shocked, Sir Warren looked first at himself, and then at me.

“Please calm down,” I urged him. “I'm here because my husband is on a temporary transfer to work for the countess of the eastern region—nothing else.”

It took a moment for Sir Warren to find his words. “Wh-What happened to

me?”

“You have two major wounds—one in your abdomen, and the other in your right thigh. Rest assured that the worst of your broken bones, internal injuries, and ruptured blood vessels have been healed.”

“I...can’t move,” Sir Warren croaked.

“Your whole body took a severe beating, and many of your nerves are damaged,” I explained. “You may not be able to move for a while. Please take the time to rest.”

“I—” Sir Warren began, but probably because he had tried to shout, he started coughing violently.

“Please calm down,” I repeated. “I’ll go get you some water, and we can talk after.”

I fixed the sheets around Sir Warren, then headed to the main building of the treatment center. There was no drinking water in the annex; if I were to drink the water there, I would probably get a stomachache on account of the fact that it was used for cleaning and laundry.

I went to the kitchen on the first floor of the main building to retrieve a glass of water with lelemo juice in it before heading back. I still limped a little on my right leg, but I was happy I could walk around without my cane. When I used both hands to hold a tray, I could carry the drink for Sir Warren with a good degree of steadiness.

I walked down the small pathway dotted with paving stones, opened the door to the annex, and heard shouting.

“Stop...you brat!”

“Why’d you get in my way?!”

“I didn’t get in your way! Don’t you realize *you* got in the way of the mission?!”

“What?!”

Alongside the voices came the violent clatter of furniture scraping the floor. It seemed that Sir Warren and the girl—who until now had been sleeping—were

arguing. I wondered what in the world they were doing—they were both injured.

I hurried into the annex and placed the tray on a small table in the hallway before peering into the patients' room.

Inside, I saw the girl straddling Sir Warren—who was still unable to move—and holding her splinted left hand up as if she were about to take a swing at him.

“Wh-What are you doing?! Stop! Stop!” I yelled.

Despite my warning, the girl didn't look like she was going to give up. I hurried into the room and grabbed her left arm. The splint that kept her fracture in place was quite sturdy—if she hit Sir Warren's face or another part of his head, he would be left with more than just a smarting pain. And given that he was too injured to move, he wouldn't even be able to dodge her blows.

“Who're you?!” the girl snarled.

“You must stop!” I demanded.

I forcefully pulled the girl off of Sir Warren, and she violently shook me off. My bad leg couldn't hold out—I staggered, and she pushed me onto the floor.

“Stop it, you dumb brat!” Sir Warren yelled, flustered. “Knock it off!”

The girl didn't give me the opportunity to get up off the floor and started coming toward me. She lifted her splinted arm, and I saw myself reflected in her rageful, chestnut-colored eyes.

“How dare you get in my way?!” she spat.

“Run, idiot!” Sir Warren screamed.

I covered my head with my arms just before her splint smacked into me with an unpleasant thunking sound. A shock ran through my arm, and I cried out.

“How dare you?!” she screamed again.

“Stop it!” Sir Warren yelled.

“Bind!”

I stiffened in anticipation of an attack or more pain, but neither came.

I could sense mana flowing. At the same time, something fell with a thud to the floor, followed by the sound of a muffled voice.

As Sir Warren was still unable to get up from the bed, he couldn't have been the one to stop the girl and save me.

I slowly lowered my arms and opened my eyes to see that the girl had been pulled down to the floor and caught in binding magic. Her arm was still outstretched, but yellow beams of mana formed a net around her. She struggled, trying to shout through the magic over her mouth.

"What are you doing?" came a voice from the doorway. It was my husband. "That splint is to help heal your fracture, not bludgeon someone with."

"Joshua," I said at last, relieved to see him.

"I'm sorry I didn't come sooner," he apologized.

I shook my head. When I fell to the floor, I had hit my behind and my elbow, which still stung with pain. I had heard the sound of my arm bone being jarred when I had taken the blow from the girl's splint, so I assumed I would have a large bruise there. I was injured, to be sure, but Joshua had still come to my rescue.

"Thank you for the help," I said.

Joshua came to me and looked me over. "No major injuries, but you're still hurt. I'll take care of you after this, if you're okay to wait a moment."

Joshua helped me to my feet, and I sat in a chair in the corner of the room. I watched as the girl bound to the floor continued to struggle. She was right in front of me.

"Now then, it's good that you've woken up," Joshua said to Sir Warren. "My name is Joshua Leewell, a civil servant serving as an aide to the prime minister in the royal palace; however, I am currently on a temporary transfer to work under Her Excellency Countess Carlton. You are the black knight named Sir Warren Asher, correct?"

"Y-Yeah. I'm him," Sir Warren replied.

"Good. Now that that's taken care of, let me explain to you your condition. I

am open to any of your questions, so please answer mine as best as you can.”

With that, Joshua set to work applying recovery magic to Sir Warren’s wounds. As the two spoke, Sir Warren was obviously distracted by the girl who remained on the floor, but Joshua completely ignored her. It was as if he didn’t perceive her at all, even though she continued her incomprehensible protest.

I watched silently as the girl at my feet writhed about like a caterpillar and let out muffled screams. All the while she had been glaring at Joshua with anger blazing in her eyes. He had reduced her to such a helpless state only to ignore her. If looks could kill, Joshua would have surely been torn to shreds.

Joshua finished up his question and answer session with Sir Warren and stopped casting healing magic. He turned to me, then finally glanced momentarily at the girl lying at my feet. However, he quickly removed his gaze from her and held out his hand toward me.

“Now then, Lina,” he said, “let’s get you taken care of.”

“O-Okay, but...” I glanced down. “Um...what about her?”

“Let’s go to the examination room,” Joshua said, smiling sweetly.

The girl at my feet violently thrashed, even though doing so would only drain her strength. Joshua’s magic was very strong; she wouldn’t be able to break his binding spell.

I took Joshua’s hand, and together we left the patients’ room. He was still smiling.

At the end of the hall was the annex’s exam room. There was a desk, chair, shelves lined with pharmaceuticals and medical tools, and an examination bed.

I sat in the chair and rolled up the sleeve of my blouse. The spot on my arm where the girl had hit me with her splint was completely red; it was sure to be bruised by tomorrow. However, I didn’t feel anything wrong with the bone, nor was there a laceration—I’d simply taken a beating.

Joshua inspected my arm. “It’s quite red. I assume it will hurt for a while.”

“I’m fine,” I replied. “This is nothing.”

Joshua retrieved an ointment from the shelf and began to cover my arm with

it. The medicine smelled refreshing, like mindt, and it took effect on my sore muscles immediately. I was very familiar with it, as it was commonly used for bruises, aches, sprains, and even growing pains.

“Why is that girl being so violent?” Joshua asked.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “When I returned with water for Sir Warren, she was straddling him and about to beat him.”

“Huh? Straddling him?” Joshua echoed, surprised.

“They were quarreling about whether they got in each other’s way. Since Sir Warren is a nobleman and the girl appears to be a commoner, I can’t imagine that they know each other or have anything in common, so I don’t understand why they argued about such a thing.”

Joshua put away the ointment and folded his arms. He let out a deep sigh. “What kind of girl climbs up onto a man she doesn’t know—one who can’t move, no less—and clobbers him while hurling verbal abuse at him?”

Certainly, the girl’s actions weren’t praiseworthy—especially from Joshua’s point of view, I assumed, as he had a noble’s education. For a girl to straddle a man like that was unacceptable.

Joshua remained deep in thought for a moment, then finally said, “There are many things to consider, but for now, let’s go talk to her.”

“All right.”

Joshua gave me his hand once again, and I placed mine in his. We left the exam room and returned to the patients’ room to find the girl still letting out muffled shouts. The binding magic had robbed her of movement and left her unable to speak for at least half an hour now—I couldn’t believe that she still had the stamina to cry out. Youth was an incredible thing.

Joshua approached slowly and peered at the girl’s face. The girl stopped struggling.

“Now then, I’m going to ask why you behaved so violently toward my wife,” Joshua began. “Do know that depending on your reasoning, you’ll be punished.”

The girl cried out, her face rapidly draining of color.

“Though,” he continued, “no matter your answer, I don’t think there’s any justifiable cause for beating someone out of the blue.”

The girl whimpered. Her expression was tinged with fear, and her body trembled.

“You’re quite the energetic girl despite being injured. Now then, let’s talk.”

Joshua might have been smiling, but his eyes were cold and without a hint of emotion. It couldn’t have been my imagination that the temperature in the room dropped—and not just because it was the twelfth month.

The girl was rather beautiful. She had pretty facial features, healthily tanned skin the color of wheat, fiery chestnut eyes, and light brown hair that hung to her shoulders. Her fractured left hand hung in a white sling, and her body was covered here and there with pitiful-looking scratches and bruises.

I sat next to her on a bench in the courtyard between the main building and the annex. The morning sunlight was pleasantly warm, enough to let one forget that it was early winter.

“I’m Lina. What’s your name?” I asked.

She looked back over her shoulder toward the window of the ward. More accurately, she was trying to look at Joshua through the window. Finally, she replied, “Nora.”

Yesterday, after Joshua had restrained her with binding magic, glared at her ruthlessly, and subjected her to his merciless reasoning, he had started to question her—but she had ultimately lost consciousness. She must have been terrified.

This morning, Joshua and I had come back to the annex to continue Sir Warren’s treatment. When Nora had seen Joshua, her body had trembled so badly that I had brought her out to the courtyard so that we could talk—she certainly wouldn’t have talked inside with him.

“Nora? That’s a pretty name,” I said.

She didn’t answer for a few moments. “My grandfather wanted me to be

named that.”

“He named you? That’s wonderful.”

“But I didn’t meet him,” she replied. “He died before I was born.”

The courtyard was mostly void of vegetation. Although there were plenty of flowerbeds edged with red bricks along the short walking path, there were only a smattering of sprouts in them that would probably bloom in spring. For now, it was a little melancholy.

“Is that so? My grandfather died before I was born too, from what I heard,” I said.

Her only response was a quiet grunt.

“Nora, how old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

I had figured she was still a minor, though she was a bit older than I expected. Judging by her build, childish judgment, and impolite way of speaking, I had assumed she was thirteen or fourteen.

“Could you tell me about your family?” I prompted.

“Huh? Well, I guess they’re still in the village, if they haven’t moved yet.”

“Don’t you think they’re worried about you?”

In Mert, pretty much all children under eighteen were considered minors and were supposed to be under a guardian’s protection until they became adults. A guardian could be one’s birth parents, grandparents, relatives, a teacher at an orphanage, or even a priest at a shrine.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Nora laughed, waving a hand in front of her face.

“Why do you say that?” I asked gently.

“That family is made up of the mom, the dad, and their daughter. I’m *not* that daughter—just an unwanted extra.” Nora looked down, as if hurt by her own declaration that she wasn’t a member of the family she was born to. “I doubt they even realize I’m not in the house.”

“But that’s awful,” I protested softly.

“There are homes like that, you know,” Nora said. “I don’t really care—they’re not family to me either. My only family was my dead grandpa.”

She told me about how she had inherited her light brown hair, wheat-colored skin, and chestnut eyes from her grandfather, Caleb. It sounded like she was happy and proud to have that connection to him.

“I see,” I replied. “Well, will you tell me about why you were in the river even though it’s winter?”

Nora snorted. “I would’ve finished the thing off if those knights hadn’t gotten in my way! Stupid pains in the neck—especially that old guy sleeping inside. He’s the worst of ’em all. He threw himself on me out of nowhere and then we both fell off the cliff—like whoosh! It was so cold I thought I’d die.”

I couldn’t follow what she was saying at all.

“So Nora,” I said haltingly, trying to find my words, “you got close to the Abyssal Forest, then?”

“Yup.”

“Why did you go somewhere so dangerous?” I pressed. “Winter might be the quietest time of year, but you do know that dragons and other monsters live in those woods, right?”

Looking at Nora’s small, thin body, I couldn’t imagine that she was any good at fighting. She didn’t have the build of someone who had trained for combat, and the way she moved was sloppy. She also didn’t seem to be able to use magic—I didn’t feel any mana radiating from her, which would be a giveaway that she was a mage. I had no idea why she would go anywhere close to where monsters lived when she couldn’t fight or use magic.

“Obviously so I could kill the dragon there!” she said as if I had missed something self-explanatory. “I had to kill the big, stupid lizard!”

“Huh?”

A sixteen-year-old girl? Kill a dragon?!

“The dragon’s my enemy,” Nora continued animatedly. “I’ve gotta kill it and

get my revenge. But those dumb knights got in my way, and that old guy totally bodied me! What a pest!”

“So—” I had to restart my sentence. “So Nora, you went to kill a dragon?”

“Yeah,” she replied innocently. “My grandfather was the leader of a group of mercenaries called the Indigo Cyclones—they’re super famous in the south and the east.” She paused. “Though now my great-uncle and his family lead them.”

“Did your grandfather fight dragons when he was a mercenary?” I asked.

“I mean, probably? Over twenty years ago, he went to kill a monster and never came back. According to the stories, he died fighting a dragon, but there was no body, no belongings, *nothing*. So I thought he might still be alive somewhere... I mean, there’s no proof he’s dead. But still, he hasn’t come home in twenty years, so he’s probably dead.”

I understood Nora’s hope that her grandfather was still alive since there was no evidence of his passing. However, there was a law stating that, even without proof that someone was deceased, a death certificate could be filed for them after seven years without contact from that person. It would be natural to assume her grandfather was dead after twenty.

“If a dragon really did kill my grandpa, I’ve gotta take revenge,” Nora continued determinedly. “So I wanted to join the mercenaries, but my relatives and the other members told me no—they just said I’d be worthless in a fight and wouldn’t even listen to me.”

“So that’s why you went alone?”

Nora nodded, putting her feet up on the bench seat and wrapping her arms around her legs. “I wanted the mercenaries to avenge my grandfather since they insisted I couldn’t fight, but my relatives all said that fighting a dragon was ‘too dangerous’ and ‘impossible.’ So I figured I had to be the one to get retribution!”

“And how did you plan to fight a dragon on your own?”

“Lina, did you know that monsters don’t like smoky, sour-smelling things?” she asked. “People that hunt deer and boar and stuff in the woods use a stinky sachet to repel ’em. I was gathering a bunch of those bags so I could force that

dragon out of the Abyssal Forest and attack it from a distance. See, I was gonna lead it to a place where I'd have the advantage. I also booby-trapped that area to take the dragon out real fast, and...well..."

Despite her plans, she explained in a voice heavy with emotion, the black knights had rudely appeared when she was in the middle of luring the dragon out of the Abyssal Forest. They had begun battling the beast in a place she hadn't planned for, thereby ruining her plan.

I didn't know if Nora's booby traps would have been effective against a dragon, or even if they would have gone off successfully, but she had an incredible amount of drive to actually execute this plan. At the same time, I was disturbed by what a terrifying, immature, and ludicrous thing she had done.

"But how were you able to identify which dragon killed your grandfather?" I asked. "You said that you were guiding it to a place where you could get revenge, right?"

"Huh? I don't care if it's the same dragon or not, I just wanna kill one," she said simply. "How could I know what dragon my grandpa fought? It was over twenty years ago, remember?"

"Then... Then..." It was hard to find my words. "The dragon you were trying to kill might not have been the one that your grandfather fought?"

Nora hopped off the bench, then grabbed a fallen branch and started scratching a picture into the dirt. The drawing had a large mouth, numerous fangs, and a long, fat tail—it looked like a dragon.

"Yeah. It might not have been the one that got my grandpa, but to me, all dragons are guilty."

Nora trampled on the drawing, kicking it until it disappeared. As I watched her, I could feel the anger and hatred she held for dragons.

"Nora," I began, "you do know that dragons are especially dangerous, even compared to other monsters, right?"

"Of course I do. Common sense."

"Well, that's why there are special knights dedicated to fighting dragons," I

explained.

“I know that too—they’re black knights. That old guy’s one, right?”

“His name is Sir Warren Asher of the Kingdom of Mert’s Black Knights Regiment. There’s a *reason* there are specialized knights to deal with dragons. It’s not enough just to fight and kill them.”

“But—”

“Suppose you had managed to lure the dragon to the right spot just like you wanted—you would have been killed in the blink of an eye.”

Nora raised her gaze up to mine. Her face blazed red. “You don’t know that!”

I shook my head. “I do know. Even knights that have trained since childhood can get hurt or even lose their lives when fighting a dragon. A dragon is not something you can do anything about, Nora—you have no training.”

“You can’t know that unless you let me try!” Nora snapped.

“It was because Sir Warren sacrificed his well-being to save you that you got away from the battlefield,” I continued sternly. “And you’re alive because the knights from the Eastern Corps used healing magic on you.”

“That’s not true!” Nora snapped, stomping even more forcefully on the dirt, leaving footprints.

“Nora, do you know what happens to a dragon after it dies?”

She stopped stomping and shook her head. “Don’t care. Turns to dirt?”

“When a dragon dies, all but a few of its parts turn to *poison*. Its blood and organs become especially potent toxins that are released into the air—if you breathe in even a little, you’ll get sick and dizzy. And after inhaling a bit more, you’ll die.”

She paused. “Huh?”

“If you had killed the dragon like you planned, the dragon’s poison would have polluted the soil, air, and nearby water. What do you think would have happened if there were villages or crops nearby?”

Nora couldn’t answer for a moment. “You... What? You’re lying, right?”

“I’m not.”

“I... I never meant...”

I knew that she wouldn’t have had any inkling of what happened after a dragon was killed. Most people didn’t. People living normal, everyday lives would never even consider the idea of killing a dragon in the first place.

“That’s why there are specialized knights,” I explained. “It’s part of a knight’s mission to deal with the cleanup after killing a dragon.”

“I see,” Nora said slowly, hunching her shoulders slightly.

“One more thing,” I continued. “It’s illegal for people to attack dragons first. The only dragons targeted for missions are ones that have already attacked people or livestock, or that have wandered too close to where people live. You aren’t allowed to kill a dragon living in a forest or desert unless it is bothering someone.”

“Why?!” Nora snapped. “You said yourself that dragons are dangerous! They attack people!”

“Because dragons come in many different varieties, just like people. Of course there are dragons that attack humans, hunt livestock, or go after food stores. However, there are also dragons that are docile. Whether it’s a dragon or another kind of monster, humans only fight them to defend themselves.”

Nora quieted again. “Why?”

“Monsters are part of the ecosystem,” I explained. “They’re a necessary part of life in this world. Therefore, it’s illegal to attack them without provocation. Those who do are punished.”

Nora gasped.

Luring a peaceful dragon out of the Abyssal Forest and provoking it made her guilty.

Going out of the way to attack a nonviolent dragon caused damage to the environment, and in the worst-case scenario, brought suffering to villages and injury to people—or worse, resulted in the loss of human life. That was unacceptable. Battles against dragons were fundamentally for defense.

“I-I...” Nora began, but she was at a loss for words. Her skin paled, and she hugged herself.

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“Old guy? Does she mean...me? Am I old?”

As I cast recovery magic on Sir Warren, Lina’s and the girl’s voices drifted through the window. The girl—Nora—had called Sir Warren an “old guy,” and Sir Warren couldn’t hide his shock.

“She’s sixteen,” I replied. “To her, all men over thirty are ‘old guys.’”

“Old guy...” He paused for a while, then muttered the words over and over. “An old guy after thirty, huh?”

Sir Warren’s wounds were deep. Although the bleeding had stopped, his internal organs were swollen, some bones were broken, and some muscles and nerves were severed. While my recovery magic was gradually healing him, our mana wasn’t very compatible, so the process was slow.

“Yesterday, I sent word to the fort you were stationed at, as well as to the Asher family, that you are safe. I also noted that you are seriously injured and in need of healing from your wife.”

I explained that as long as his nerves were damaged, it would be best to receive healing as soon as possible from someone with whom he had a good mana affinity—namely, his wife. Sir Warren frowned—a different expression than when he had been denounced as an “old guy.”

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No, nothing,” he said after a moment.

Whatever the matter was, it didn’t seem like nothing, but I sensed an air about him that made it seem unlikely I’d get anywhere were I to press him further. It was not my place to meddle in the affairs of him, his wife, and the rest of his family, so I kept my mouth shut.

Instead, I asked, “That girl, Nora—is what she said true? I know that the dragon went into a rampage near the Abyssal Forest.”

“Yeah,” Sir Warren replied. “We were deployed on an emergency mission

because we got word that a white dragon was raging in the Abyssal Forest and heading toward a village. We were battling the dragon on a clifftop just outside the Abyssal Forest when that girl jumped out of nowhere. She was wearing light armor—really old armor—and was trying to stab the dragon with a blunt sword.”

“A single blunt sword?” I said after a moment, bewildered. “That’s...insanely reckless.”

“Isn’t it? She also screamed at the top of her lungs, quite sportingly revealing her position to the dragon as she charged it head-on. I’d pay to have guts like that, but she had no brains. I had no time to think—I just immediately protected her.” Sir Warren paused. “I took the whole blow. As a result, we were thrown off the cliff and plunged into the water.”

“So that’s how you and the girl washed downriver. I see,” I replied. “But isn’t it strange that it happened in the first place? I mean, many dragons and other beasts spend the winter quietly.”

“You’re right about that. It was unusual for that white dragon to try leaving the Abyssal Forest. I thought for sure that there had to be a reason for its rampage.”

I stopped casting healing magic on Sir Warren’s abdomen and moved to start on his leg. I focused on his nerve damage; his leg bone fracture would be allowed to heal naturally.

While it was possible to heal all wounds through magic, doing so was known to cause the body’s innate ability to heal itself to degrade. According to historical texts, those who had been totally dependent on healing magic had, in the end, been unable to heal even the slightest scratches and bruises naturally. It was an ironclad rule to stop using white magic once the patient had recovered to an appropriate level.

“I’d say...the reason was the girl,” Sir Warren said, sighing loudly as he listened to Lina and Nora’s conversation coming in from outside. “Well, I knew it was strange,” he continued. “The target of our mission was a white dragon—a docile herbivore that eats leaves and fruits rather than attacking people or livestock. It’s a species that never leaves the forest it was born in, so it’s

unthinkable for one to rampage and head toward a human settlement.”

“So,” I said slowly, “the girl attacked the dragon, and the pain and strong smells made it rage.”

“Seems so.”

There were people burdened with the sad past that a dragon or other beast had killed their family or friends. No matter how much knights fought to protect the people, there would always be those they couldn’t save. I could sympathize with the survivors’ hatred and desire for revenge. However, I had never heard of someone actually going through with plans to enact vengeance upon a dragon. People usually didn’t think in terms of personally carrying out that retribution—it was generally entrusted to knights.

“Are you gonna report this?” Sir Warren asked.

I paused. “I will. The girl’s actions were against the law, and if that one-in-a-thousand—no, one-in-a-million chance had occurred where she *did* kill the dragon, she would have to take responsibility for the ensuing environmental damage. However, there are her circumstances to take into consideration as well.”

“Yeah,” Sir Warren said finally. “You’re right.”

I finished up the healing session for the nerves in Sir Warren’s leg. Yesterday, he had had no feeling in his leg whatsoever, but today he told me that he could feel the bed linens, as well as hot and cold. His recovery was slow, but it was a relief to know that my healing was working. All that remained was to wait for Sir Warren’s wife.

“I, uh...” Nora’s voice drifted through the window. “I’m sorry about yesterday. I didn’t mean to hit you. I just got all riled up.”

“I accept your apology,” Lina replied. “But you do understand that violence isn’t acceptable, right?”

“But that old guy deserved it!”

“Violence *isn’t acceptable*,” Lina repeated.

I wondered what kind of upbringing would make a girl so shameless and

violent as to straddle a man and try to beat him.

“I get it.” Nora paused for a long while. “Hey, that mage you’re with, is he really your husband?”

“Hm? Yes, he is.”

Their conversation topic had turned to me, it seemed.

“He’s really, really, really scary!” Nora said. “When I saw him smile yesterday, I honest to gods shook. His mana is ridiculous too. You okay, Lina? Has he ever been mean to you or forced you to do anything?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, I was so scared yesterday—I thought he’d kill me! His expression was totally blank—like, there wasn’t even light in his eyes. He could’ve been wearing a mask or something for all I knew. He’s definitely a demon.”

“That’s not true,” Lina protested. “He’s very kind—”

“Oh, no, you don’t have to cover for him,” Nora interrupted her. “The old ladies in my village and in the mercenary group all told me about how women being mistreated by their husbands will totally defend them.”

“But—”

“Since you’re married to scary ol’ Demon Mask, you live together, right? You’re a real nice lady, so you must be suffering. I’m sorry.”

Actually, my nickname in school had been “Coldhearted Mask.” She couldn’t have known about the moniker, yet her words came so close that I wondered how she had done it.

“Demon...” A snort of laughter came from the bed, and I looked to see that Sir Warren was concealing his mirth—well, not that he was doing so all that well. His shoulders shook violently, and chortles leaked out of his mouth.

“You have to take responsibility for your actions,” I said finally. “It seems to me that the girl needs to learn this lesson properly. I will think over her circumstances again.”

“Ha, haaa...” Sir Warren seemed out of breath. “You really are scary, Lord

Leewell. Especially your smile.”

Lina had told me once that my smile left a gentle impression. Therefore Sir Warren’s words were incomprehensible.

Chapter 3: The Rural Couple and the Forest of Blessings and Death

Kingdom of Mert Calendar Year 787

Joshua remained busy going between the Aston capital and Riberry to assess the situation, facilitate the daily lives of the villagers, and continue the investigation into a medical treatment for those suffering from the disease. In his spare moments, he kept up Sir Warren's care in the annex. The days flew by at a staggering speed until the twelfth month ended and the new year began.

For New Year's celebrations in the royal capital, lively events like soirees and parties were held everywhere around the city. The town squares were filled with peddlers' markets, traveling entertainers that performed plays and dances, and bands that played music.

In comparison, the New Year's holiday in the east was quiet. The beginning of the year here was spent together with close family and other kin. It was quite eye-opening to see such a big difference in culture despite both locations belonging to the same kingdom. However, I thought that spending time together with family and other relatives was a rather wonderful custom.

This tradition was also common in Aston territory. I usually spent the new year with just Joshua, but this time we joined Earl Aston, Lady Margot, their son the young Lord Louis, and Lord Patrick's mother the former Countess Aston for the occasion.

Apparently, dinner tables in Aston territory would be lined with a variety of extravagant food and drink. Chief among these goodies were bird meat pie and a cake made with plenty of nuts, dried fruit, and a prized fruit wine. Incidentally, it was traditional to make the cake large and cut it into pieces to share, but more recently, it had become popular to make small cakes as individual portions.

Two generations ago, the then-countess had started sending these small

cakes to hospitalized patients who could not spend the holidays with their families. Ever since Lady Margot had married into the family, her cakes had been the ones sent to the treatment centers year after year.

Joshua's surprise at hearing that was immense. "You, baking?!" he blurted to his sister, resulting in a light sibling squabble.

According to the former Countess Aston, Lady Margot's New Year's cakes had a reputation for being delicious. Women and children especially liked them, as Lady Margot made them in shapes like flowers and stars.

Lady Margot had been born and raised an aristocrat in the royal capital. She had married into the family that presided over one of the rural eastern territories—one that was suffering economically, and also had quite a different culture from hers despite still being in Mert. Considering these factors, I had imagined that Lady Margot would have trouble adapting, but it seems that I was wrong.

It appeared that she got along well with Earl Aston, and she had taken to the customs and culture here. Moreover, she seemed calmer now than she had back when she lived in the royal capital. Her countenance was gentler too. Perhaps living in a rural environment had helped her slough off her excess energy. I was relieved to see that she had changed for the better.

However, her fierce quarrels with her brother were the one thing that had not changed. It looked like the two would need a bit more time to be able to conduct an amicable conversation.

The next day, Joshua and I went to the treatment center annex so Joshua could apply more healing magic to Sir Warren. It had been ten days since Sir Warren had been brought here, and his body was on the way to recovery. He could now fully sit up on his own and had regained function in both hands. He still couldn't move his right leg as it had been the more grievously injured appendage, but he could bend his left one.

Sir Warren was steadily recovering, and it seemed like he would be able to walk again with continued magic and medical treatment alongside physical therapy. However, Joshua's expression was cloudy.

“Sir Warren,” he began, “when will your wife be arriving?”

Sir Warren did not answer for a while. “Well, who knows?”

“This isn’t the time to make light of your situation,” Joshua said. “Your treatment going forward requires the mana compatibility you have with your wife.”

A knock sounded at the door, and Lady Margot appeared. She was probably in the middle of her usual rounds at the treatment center, bringing snacks to the hospitalized children, reading to them, and otherwise consoling patients.

“Joshua, we have a guest. You also have a letter,” she announced, handing a single envelope to her brother and then making way for the person in the hallway behind her.

When I saw who it was, I forgot my manners and called out, “Cody!”

“Hi Lina, it’s been a while. I thought you might be here in the provincial capital, but I’m still surprised to see you. Did your husband drag you out here to the sticks?”

Cody Macmillan was a black knight who had trained under the same mentor I had, and I considered him like a brother. I hurried over and gave him a hug, amused that the badge and decorations on his uniform poked into my arms and face slightly painfully.

“Of course he didn’t ‘drag’ me here. We’re *married*—that’s why I came,” I replied.

“You do know that his job transfer doesn’t require you to come out here too, right?” he teased. “Anyway, I’m glad to see you’re doing well.”

“You too,” I replied.

We lightly patted each other on the back and then hugged once again, cheeks brushing before we separated. Over Cody’s shoulder, I met Joshua’s gaze. My husband looked like he had taken a large bite of bitter leaves which had given him both a headache and toothache at the same time.

“How long are you two going to hug?” he asked finally.

“Oh my, I didn’t know you were such a jealous man,” Cody replied. “I’m

shocked.”

“Please take that back,” I told him.

“Oh, let me have some fun.”

Cody gave me an exasperated smile and gently pushed me toward Joshua. While Joshua took me in his arms, Cody turned toward Sir Warren, who lay on his patient bed.

“Well, well, looks like you’re still alive,” Cody remarked.

“What, were you hoping I’d died?” Sir Warren retorted. “Why’re you here, anyway?”

“To check whether or not you had survived. Well...”

Sir Warren glanced toward Lady Margot. She gave a small nod, then beckoned to Nora, who had been watching our conversation with keen interest.

“Nora, there’s a party being put on for the inpatients in the common room of the main building. There will be snacks and drinks, and a theater troupe will be performing a magic show as well as a play. You should go enjoy it.”

“Snacks? A play?” Nora parroted. “Oh, but I don’t live here.”

“That’s no matter,” Lady Margot replied. “You may not be a resident, but you’re a child and inpatient here in the treatment center.”

Lady Margot beckoned to her again, and Nora slipped down off her bed. It was obvious that she wanted the snacks and drinks in the common room, as well as to see the magic show and play, but that she also wanted to stay and listen to the conversation.

“Go on and enjoy it,” Lady Margot urged.

“Go on, now,” I said.

“You’ll have fun,” Joshua added.

“Get going, brat!” Sir Warren all but snapped.

Nora pouted, her lips in a shape reminiscent of a shorebird’s beak, to show her disappointment, then left the room with Lady Margot.

“Now then,” Sir Warren grumbled after a moment, “why’d you come in person to check on me?”

Cody took the chair in the corner of the room and put it beside Sir Warren’s bed. Then, he sat and crossed his legs. “I had to check in person because the Knights Corps has deemed you, black knight Warren Asher, MIA.”

“Wh-Why?” I asked, raising my voice without meaning to.

I would have understood if Sir Warren had been deemed missing in action after he fell from the cliff and was washed downriver, as his survival wouldn’t have been determinable then. However, Joshua had sent word to the fort Sir Warren had been stationed at, as well as to the Asher family, soon after rescuing the black knight at Riberry Village.

“The fort was informed of your safety, and the battalion commander in charge there reported the same to the Knights Corps,” Cody said to Sir Warren. “Since you were too injured to move, the commander also requested that your wife come here to treat you.”

Joshua nodded. “Since Sir Warren and I don’t have good magic affinity, it will be a long while before he’ll fully recuperate. Healing from his wife would allow for less strain on his body and a faster recovery time.”

“I’m sure that letter Lord Leewell here just received is from the Asher family,” Cody said, “and I suspect I know what it says.”

Joshua opened the envelope he had received from Lady Margot and ran his gaze across the letter inside. Then his brows furrowed deeply.

“What did Count Asher write?” I asked.

Joshua paused, then paraphrased, “That his son-in-law Sir Warren died from wounds sustained on the mission. Hereafter, any need for healing is irrelevant, and the next head of house, Lady Chloe Asher, has no need to travel to Aston territory. The Black Knights Corps has also been notified of Sir Warren’s death.”

I was speechless. Sir Warren was certainly alive right now, but he was being treated as if he were dead? He had survived fighting a dragon. Why did it seem like his family wished he hadn’t?

“The fort and the Knights Corps had already been informed that Sir Warren was only injured, so they wondered what in the world was going on when the Asher family submitted the death certificate,” Cody explained. He took the letter from Joshua and checked over the contents. He looked exasperated. “That’s why I came to confirm whether Warren Asher is alive or dead.”

“Well, I thought that might’ve been it,” Sir Warren said matter-of-factly. “Of course this would happen in that house. I figured my father-in-law would try to disown me. Instead he decided to cut me off by pretending I died.”

Once again, I had no words.

“Cody,” Sir Warren went on, “I’d like you to tell the fort and the Knights Corps that the day before you came here, I died from my injuries. Sorry, but I’ll also need you to set up the Ashers with the life insurance and bereavement money.”

“Is that all right with you?” Cody asked. “What about Lady Chloe and the kids?”

“Doesn’t matter—without me around, they’ll continue on in the Asher house just fine. I don’t have a bad relationship with my wife—in fact, I’d say it’s good—but she would never go against my father-in-law. As the head of house, what he says goes with no ifs, ands, or buts. It’s just that type of family.”

A heavy silence fell upon the ward.

Every family had its own way of doing things, and long-standing noble houses even more so. I knew that, as well as the fact that it was taboo to meddle in the affairs of other families.

“All right, I’ll do it,” Cody said. “Now, Lord Leewell, I have a separate matter to discuss with you.”

He and Joshua left the room together, leaving Sir Warren and I alone.

He sat up, and I poured a cup of lelemo-flavored water and handed it to him before sitting in the chair Cody had vacated.

“Is it truly okay to pretend you’re dead?” I asked.

“I don’t mind. Better this way,” he replied.

“Why do you say that?”

Sir Warren gulped down half of his glass, then stared at me. “I’ve been stationed at forts here in the east for the past year. Never once did I return to the capital or see my wife and children. Do you know why?”

It was normal for black knights to be stationed at forts throughout the country. However, each posting would be for a month at most before a separate black knight would replace the former, allowing the first to return to the royal capital to rest. Once that vacation was over, the black knight would be given another assignment. For Sir Warren to have stayed at a fort for such a long time without a holiday was unheard of.

“This posting was given to me as a punishment,” he said.

“Punishment? What for?”

Sir Warren didn’t reply for a moment. “Because I discriminated against you and the other knights who were from the peasantry, or even just lower nobility like barons and viscounts.”

“Oh...”

After I had retired, the crown prince had ordered that the entire Royal Knights Corps be massively overhauled. The inner workings were audited, and a large number of people were caught and punished. Sir Warren was one of them.

“I married into the Asher family,” he continued. “They’ve been putting out high-level white mages for generations—that’s all that matters to them. They only want to continue the lineage with superior white mage blood. They have no need for black knight descendants—they only wanted me to give them kids with a lot of mana.”

“That’s awful,” I murmured.

“My wife and I already had two children, and both of them inherited white mage abilities. My wife was pregnant with our third when I left—I assume she had the baby some time ago. Now that my father-in-law has three grandchildren, he has no further use for me. And since I brought dishonor on them by being censured for misconduct, all I am is a no-good nuisance. I figured it was about time he tossed me aside.”

He drank the remaining fruit-flavored water and held the glass out toward

me. I poured him some more from the pitcher.

“Don’t make that face. I said it earlier—my relationship with my wife is fine.” He paused. “Though with that house the way that it is, I’d put my wife and kids in a bad position if I were with them, ’cause of the disciplinary assignment. That’s why it’s better for them if I’m counted as dead. They’ll get condolence money and my pension too.”

“Sir Warren,” I began, but stopped.

“I resented you, at first,” he continued after a moment. “I thought it was the natural way of things for commoners to be given dangerous missions and chores. I didn’t care if you or lowborn nobles struggled or got hurt.”

The hands I held in my lap tightened into fists. When I had been a black knight, my senior black knights who originated from houses ranked earl or above had been especially unreasonable toward me. Remembering that caused me distress even now.

“When His Highness Prince Silas and all the leaders in the Corps found me out and reprimanded me, I couldn’t understand why I was being punished at all. Why shouldn’t plebeians and lower-class nobles do the dirty work? My mission was to slay dragons, not slaughter lowly beasts with commoner blue knights.” He paused again. “As I was passed around between forts out here in the east, I obviously fought dragons, but I squashed other monsters with the blue knights too. I also had to do a lot of chores and odd jobs I didn’t have to do before being put on the disciplinary assignment.”

“Chores?” I repeated.

He rattled off a list. “Cleaning, laundry, weapon maintenance, cleaning the training grounds. I also had to do prep work for meals, weeding, and harvesting beans and potatoes out in the fields.”

I had also helped out in the forts I was stationed at by sweeping, peeling vegetables, and the like. Thinking about it made me feel nostalgic. Many of the forts maintained fields and cultivated root vegetables and beans that would last for a long time in case of emergency. I remember how fun it had been to reap the well-grown crops. However, I couldn’t imagine Sir Warren—his nobility apparent even in his glistening blond hair, deep blue eyes, and handsome face

—gathering the harvest in a basket.

“I was put to work with newly apprenticed blue knights—you know, basically kids. Even then, they were faster at harvesting than me. They’d make fun of me for taking too long.”

“That’s because they’re used to it,” I tried to reason with him.

“My birth and status had no meaning or power there. That was the first time I had ever noticed things like that—the difference between nobles’ and commoners’ social positions, ways of thinking, and areas of knowledge. I realized that what was done to black knights like you and lowborn aristocrats wasn’t right.”

Sir Warren drained his cup in one gulp and fervently lowered his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Huh?”

“I’m sure I said careless things that hurt you, and the tasks I forced on you might have even injured you. I understand that now, but... I still have to apologize. I’m sorry.”

Among aristocrats, there were those who believed that the higher one’s birth, the more precious they were—with commoners being the least valuable. People who thought this way were called elitists or classists. Of course, there were those among the black knights who held these notions, and Sir Warren had been one of them.

I took a moment to reply. “I accept your apology. I suppose that you grew up in an environment that taught you commoners were supposed to work for the nobility.”

“You’re exactly right.”

“You lived over thirty years with that assumption before realizing that wasn’t what the world was like—what it meant to be a knight in the lower classes.” I paused. “I’m sure that for you it was as shocking as if heaven and earth had flipped.”

The reverse was also true for me. As the daughter of farmers and as a

commoner raised in an orphanage, I had never thought that the life and rules of the aristocracy were even part of the same world I lived in.

“I’m sure that there are many people who have not realized this,” I continued. “So, I would like to accept your apology on behalf of those born as commoners.”

Sir Warren paused. “I’m just sorry that the apology comes so late.”

“Please get better quickly—then we can think about what to do next.”

“Thank you, Lady Lina,” he said, smiling.

This was the first time Sir Warren had called me by name. He had always said “hey” or “you” or “commoner.” This was also the first time I had seen him smile, and it was incredibly kind. I knew that this was what he showed his wife and children. People really did have many sides to them.

“Stop calling me ‘Sir,’” he added. “The black knight Warren Asher is dead, and I’m not on any family register. I’m just a refugee named Warren.”

I paused. “Then I’ll call you Mr. Warren.”

“Mister?”

I nodded. Although I had left the Knights Corps first, he was a man seven or eight years older than I was and had entered the knights academy well ahead of me. I felt like I had to use some sort of honorific with him.

“Is that all right? You graduated the knights academy and entered the Corps before I did, after all.”

He thought for several moments. “Yeah, it’s fine. Then I’ll call you Ms. Lina. I’m too afraid to call you anything that might have unfortunate implications.”

“Huh?” I asked, bewildered.

“I’d have you stop looking at another man’s wife,” Joshua said, coming into the room. He walked quickly to stand behind me.

“Hey, Cody,” Mr. Warren began, “was this guy always so jealous? I’d heard that they had a purely contractual relationship.”

“Well, you did hear right,” Cody said, coming into the room after Joshua. “But

after they got past that initial rough patch and opened their hearts to each other, Lord Leewell here unleashed his clingy, deeply jealous side. It's surprising, I know."

I could feel Joshua's mood steadily souring at Cody's teasing. He never did well when he was the butt of a joke.

"Well, Lina's dense, so I'm actually relieved that her husband is so obviously attached to her," Cody continued.

"'Dense' is cruel, Cody," I protested. I looked up at Joshua, and he smiled kindly at me.

For a moment, I thought I sensed conflict in the atmosphere, but then Joshua's wry laughter filled the room and he said, "So long as you're happy, that's all that matters."

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"All right, I'll do it," Sir Cody said. "Now, Lord Leewell, I have a separate matter to discuss with you."

Sir Cody looked at me as if to say, "Let's talk elsewhere." We would be leaving Lina alone with Sir Warren, who seemed to be arrogant and to hold commoners in low regard, but he was still an invalid who couldn't move his right leg. If he said anything rude to her, she could simply get out.

After deciding that she would be fine, I exited the ward, and Sir Cody and I went to the examination room.

"Now then, what did you want to talk about?" I asked.

"You're the one who has the best understanding of what's going on in Riberry Village and the circumstances of the epidemic, right?" Sir Cody asked. "I might have come to confirm whether Sir Warren was alive, but he wasn't the only thing I wanted to check."

I considered his words. "The fort commander sent you for something else?"

Sir Cody sat in the exam chair and nodded.

He, Sir Warren, and another black knight were stationed at a fort in Countess Carlton's territory, but it was close to the border with Aston—and not far from

Riberry Village at all. One could even call them neighboring villages. Considering that an outbreak of illness had caused suffering for the villagers, it was natural for the fort commander to have sent Sir Cody to investigate.

“There are villagers in Riberry falling ill,” I began. I told him what was happening there, and Sir Cody occasionally nodded or interjected with questions. At the end of it, he folded his arms and looked up at the ceiling.

“There’s no need to worry,” I continued when Sir Cody didn’t speak. “The disease is currently confined to the village, and it hasn’t leaked out of their makeshift sanatorium.”

“I understand,” he replied. “That’s not what I’m worried about.”

“Then what is the problem?”

“It’s not exactly a problem. The commander just wants to know what sort of aid the fort can give to Riberry Village. You know, providing supplies or helping out with other troubles.”

“Is that so? The assistance would be most welcome.”

“Of course. Now,” Sir Cody continued, looking back down from the ceiling and leaning forward, “there’s something else I have a personal interest in: the source of the sickness.”

“What?” I gasped. “Do you have a lead?”

Understanding the origin of the outbreak was essential. Currently, we had finished distributing food supplies and daily necessities to Riberry Village, but it would take more investigation to identify an effective treatment and determine the sickness’s origin. Once we knew how it all began, we could take appropriate steps.

Sir Cody paused. “I think it might have to do with a dragon.”

“A dragon?!”

Sir Cody put his forefinger to his lips. “Shh,” he whispered. “It’s just a hunch. I want to look into it—you’re going to the village soon, aren’t you, Lord Leewell? I’d like you to take me along with you.”

He smiled sweetly. Sir Cody was a black knight who had been Lina’s fellow

apprentice under the same master. Sir Alexander and his wife had been parents to them, and Cody and Lina were almost like siblings. Apparently during their time together, Sir Cody had unconsciously picked up some of Lina's facial expressions—including this one.

As incredibly weak as I was to my wife's smile, I found myself involuntarily nodding when faced with an echo of it.

"Why do you want to come along?" I asked Nora.

I couldn't understand her reason for wanting to go to Riberry Village at all. We weren't on a pleasure excursion, yet her mood suggested we were going on a picnic.

"Well, because it's super boring at the treatment center. Besides, the old guy told me to go."

"Sir Warren did?"

"He's...not sleeping," Nora admitted. "It seems like he's got lots of things on his mind, you know? He looks really tired during the day. So..." She paused. "I thought he might like some time alone, I guess."

Sir Warren had been the one to agree to the "death" of Warren Asher, black knight of Mert. I knew that he had made the decision based on many factors, such as the relationship he had with the family he married into as well as his knightly status. He was a respectable adult, not a child—I would abide by his choice. Getting his thoughts and feelings in order, however, was another matter. It was critical he get time to think by himself and get some sleep.

"I see," I replied.

"Anyway, I'm not gonna get in the way—you can take me with you!" Nora chirped.

"Nora," Lina said after a moment, "you are not to get in anyone's way while they work, leave the village, or enter forbidden places. If anything happens, you are to let someone know right away. Do you promise?"

"Got it!" Nora said with a smile. For better or worse, she was a frank girl.

Fortunately, she tended to follow Lina's instructions obediently. For Sir Warren's sake, we decided to take her along.

Two days later, we headed to Riberry Village. I traveled in a carriage with Lina and Nora. Sir Cody rode on horseback ahead of us, and behind us was a wagon laden with winter clothing, bedding, and foodstuffs.

Nora jumped from topic to topic, first talking to me and Lina about sweets, and then about the play and magic show she had watched at the party. Since I was busy responding politely (as she kept obstinately pulling me into the conversation whenever I ignored her), I didn't catch the family crest emblazoned on the carriage that passed us heading in the opposite direction.

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This was the second time I had visited Riberry Village, but the mood was vastly different from the first. Before, a dark air had hung over the town, but now liveliness had returned to the people. Villagers smiled as they baked bread in shared outdoor ovens and washed laundry.

"No other people have gotten sick, and in all likelihood the disease is not easily transmitted," Joshua said. "It looks like the villagers have been able to relax a lot more."

It was only natural that their moods had improved. The Frontier Countess and Earl Aston had sent more foodstuffs and goods, and members of the Eastern Knights Corps were taking turns guarding the village (without a doubt to make sure that the villagers weren't leaving the designated area). There was no need to fear attacks from monsters, and it seemed that the disease wouldn't spread.

"By the way, Lina," Joshua continued. "Before Sir Warren and Nora washed up here, you wanted to see the woods, didn't you?"

"May we?" I asked. I was watching Mayor Jeff and the knights from the Eastern Corps checking the clothes, bedding, and foodstuffs that we had brought. The knights were quite open with the villagers—it was like they had become part of the Riberry community.

Cody, who stood beside me, quickly spoke up. "I'd like to go too."

"The villagers who became sick had gone into the woods, so I did have plans

to take a look. I don't mind if you come." Joshua paused. "May I ask why you're so keen to do so?"

"I want to smell it," I replied.

"Smell it?"

I paused. "The last time I was here, I smelled something in the wind coming from the forest: the scent of a dragon."

"Dragon?!" Mayor Jeff and Nora cried out in unison, looking around wildly.

"Don't worry—it wasn't a live dragon," I soothed. "The smell was that of a dead dragon. I just barely noticed it."

"Deceased dragons smell?" Mayor Jeff asked.

"Yes," I replied. "I don't understand why, but dragons release a surprisingly sweet odor upon death. It's similar to boiled honey."

About seventy percent of the forest on Riberry's north side was made up of verdant bine trees that maintained their prickly needles even in the cold weather. With that many bine trees, there were sure to be a lot of seed husks that had fallen to the ground.

The path that the villagers took to gather kwint fruit, mushrooms, and seed husks from bine trees saw such heavy use that the earth was hard packed. There were no paving stones here, but anyone could recognize the trail for what it was.

Cody and I led the way slowly along the path. Joshua, Mayor Jeff, and Nora followed behind.

Both sides of the path were lined by wooden fences. On the right side were orderly rows of short green bushes, while on the left was an empty field, waiting for seeds to be sown in the spring. Mayor Jeff explained that the shrubbery provided berries that were harvested in the autumn and winter and were then pressed for their oil. Seeds for plants that bore yellow flowers were sown in the field on the left side during spring; the flowers were used to dye cloth, and the leaves and stems provided food for the villagers.

Since Riberry was close to the ruins of Rondale, selling food products for

human consumption had been just about impossible. They were limited to producing raw materials such as dye and oil that could have multiple uses, and any food they grew was for their own benefit.

It wasn't just like this in Riberry—Aston on the whole was still in the process of recovering. It felt like I was watching this transformation spread out before my eyes.

After five minutes of walking, we arrived at what the villagers simply called the “forest.” From Riberry proper, it seemed like a small area, but upon closer inspection, the woods were much deeper than I had imagined.

Cody led the way into the forest. Nora followed, then Mayor Jeff, myself, and Joshua.

Many of the trees here, not just the bines, were tall, thick, and elegant. Even on a sunny day, it was dim under the canopy. Around our feet lay numerous withered leaves and tiny berries that small animals liked to eat. Lots of seed husks covered the ground too; if there were this many so close to the entrance of the woods, the children and their chaperones who gathered them might not have gone deep into the forest.

After several minutes, the path we walked came to an end. A wall of dirt on the right side had crumbled, blocking the trail.

“A landslide?” Joshua surmised.

“We can't continue this way,” Mayor Jeff said. “We used to be able to go to the other side of the forest, but heavy rains caused a mudslide that blocked the way.”

He went on to explain that the spot we were looking at on the right side of the path had once been a small knoll covered in bine trees, shrubbery, and weeds. The left side of the path was so densely lined with trees that going that way would prove difficult. The trail was meant to wind between them, but there was no way to continue now.

Using magic tools and flying spells, it would be possible to cross the landslide, but I assumed the villagers wouldn't be able to get over it easily.

“When did the mudslide happen?” Joshua asked.

“I’d say the beginning of fall,” Mayor Jeff replied.

“So when the plague struck the villagers, the trail was already blocked?”

Mayor Jeff nodded. “Yes.”

Cody sniffed loudly, pulling his sword from his side and poking the huge mound of dirt. The earth made a gritty sound as he thrust the weapon into it, and the smell of wet soil drifted out alongside a sweet scent. It was the same odor that I had picked up a trace of when I first came to Riberry.

“Cody!” I gasped.

“I know,” he replied. “Mayor, Miss Nora, get back. I don’t want you two to get sick.”

Once he was sure that Mayor Jeff and Nora were a fair distance away, Cody began to dig furiously into the mound. Soil and large rocks tumbled away, and the sweet scent came all the more strongly to my nostrils.

“Hey, are you guys gonna be okay?” Nora called, holding a handkerchief over her nose. Mayor Jeff stood beside her, a hand over his mouth. They both were peering at what was going on.

“The toxins from a dead dragon don’t affect black knights—those who can use old magic,” I explained. “Cody and I will be fine with the poison from this one, but we wouldn’t be, were it still alive. Ah, while it might be harder for those with magical backgrounds to be affected by a dead dragon’s poison—”

Joshua interrupted me. “I’m fine. However, this sickly sweet stench is making me feel ill—the poison has nothing to do with it.” He coughed lightly and pulled out a handkerchief, putting it over his mouth and nose like Nora.

Cody moved his sword right and left through the soil, and the hardened earth began to crumble. He pushed further to the left, and a large section of the dirt fell away. The stench became even stronger, and I saw a light purple mass.

“Huh? Is this—” Cody began.

“A dragon egg?” I gasped.

The surface of the light purple eggshell seemed coarse. I could only see a small portion, but estimated that the egg was large enough to fill an adult’s

arms. The apex of the egg was chipped, and the contents were leaking.

“A dragon egg?!” Joshua all but shouted, surprised.

Nora and Mayor Jeff stopped breathing.

“Is it alive?” Joshua asked after a moment.

Cody peered at the egg. “No,” he said at last. “It’s dead.”

I had never seen a living dragon egg to compare this with, but I couldn’t sense the warmth of life from it. I assumed that the dragon inside hadn’t even grown much before its shell had broken, causing the creature to die.

Cody tapped the eggshell with the tip of his sword sheath. He pulled a notebook, pen, and portable tape measure from his uniform pocket and began taking notes about the egg. He observed it from the right and then the left, measured its size and shape, and drew a detailed picture of it.

Cody’s hobby was studying dragons—to him, the discovery of a dragon egg was invaluable for research. I assumed he wouldn’t leave this spot until he was satisfied with his investigation and his note-taking. He was so absorbed in it that he was unaware of his surroundings.

“Since the egg is lifeless, did the dragon turn to poison?” he thought aloud. “Is its toxicity weak *because* it’s an egg? We don’t know the details, but did the egg’s toxins cause the villagers to fall ill?”

“The rains and subsequent landslide happened in autumn,” Joshua said. “After that, the village children and their families got sick. The egg must have been hidden here under the ground, and the landslide pushed it up near the surface. Something struck it, breaking the shell and causing a hemorrhage. That is probably how the dragon poison spread.”

“I suspect you are correct,” Cody agreed.

Aside from a substance called dragon lead that rarely formed in a dragon’s stomach, all parts of the creature—its horns, fangs, talons, scales, and organs—became poison. No matter the breed of dragon, upon death its flesh and blood released a sweet smell alongside a poisonous substance. Knights usually called it “dragon poison” or “dragon toxin.”

This substance could be suppressed and eliminated by a black knight using old magic purification alongside a distilled solution made from lontas flowers.

Lontas bloomed in clean lakes. They were pink, luxurious blossoms that had large, round leaves. The oil extracted from the petals had a strong purifying effect that could dilute dragon poison.

Black knights—preferably two or three of them at a time—dismantled dragon corpses. In addition, barrels of the distilled lontas oil solution were brought from the nearest fort to purify the ground and water that had been contaminated with dragon blood. Unlike poisons made from mushrooms, plants, or minerals, dragon toxin absolutely required purification through old magic or oil from lontas flowers—ideally both.

If the cause of the villagers' ill health was dragon poison, the cure was simple. They needed to drink water with lontas oil and take pills made from lontas oil, pollen, and roots. This would purge the toxin from their bodies. After that, they would recover quickly.

"Now everyone..." Mayor Jeff's voice shook with joy, and he couldn't finish his sentence.

Dragon poison was so toxic that even blue knights, who were used to working alongside black knights during the dismantling process, could get sick. If the village children and their families had inhaled the sweet-smelling air containing the toxin while gathering mushrooms and seed pods, it was only natural that they had fallen ill.

"We can cure them," I told him. "They'll be fine."

"Oh!" he gasped, unable to find words.

"I just received an offer of assistance from the nearby fort," Joshua added. "Both distilled lontas oil and pills made from it should be stockpiled there, so I'll arrange for them to share."

"O-Oh! Thank you so much!" Mayor Jeff cried.

"Happy, aren't ya, Mr. Old-timer?" Nora said.

The villagers who had fallen ill would recover once they received medical

treatment, and once they did, the plague scare in Riberry Village would end. They would be able to come and go freely from the village, and their peaceful daily lives would return.

All that remained was cleaning up the dragon egg.

“Hmm, I see,” Cody muttered. Then, revealing his dangerous inner thoughts, he said, “Dang, I could’ve figured out so much more if the egg had been alive.”

When a dragon egg was alive, it was a given that the parent—both parents, actually—would fly back to the spot. A mated pair spent their entire lives together and laid one or two eggs a year and took care of their young. I supposed they were surprisingly doting, but it was hard to imagine—the dragons I remembered were all individuals, full of rage, and ready to fight.

“All right, this will be easy. I’ll purify it,” Cody said.

He held his hand toward the egg, and six small, light blue magic circles floated in the air around it. The magic circles glowed steadily brighter, enveloping the egg. After waiting a few minutes, the light gradually faded, and I could see the egg once more.

It had lost its light purple color and turned gray. Then, like petals falling from a flower, the egg lost its shape and disappeared. As a precaution, Cody sprinkled a small amount of distilled lontan solution—which a black knight typically kept on their person—from a vial on his belt over the area where the egg had been.

With that, the dragon egg had been purified.

“That reminds me...” Cody thrust his sword deep into a small hill on the right side of the path and dug something out. The earth crumbled, weeds that had taken root in the heap collapsed, and a large white object emerged from underneath.

“Is this...” Joshua approached and took the object into his hand. “A dragon bone, I see.”

“Huh?!” everyone cried out in surprise.

A piece of the dragon bone slipped from Joshua’s hand, and a cold,

whooshing winter wind blew through the forest.

“There’s something else,” Cody said. “This fell near the dragon bone.”

He placed a small iron plate with rounded, beveled corners in Joshua’s hand. It was dirty and had lost its original luster, but I could recognize it as an identification badge worn by mercenaries. These badges were engraved with the wearer’s name, date of birth, hometown, and the designation of the unit or guild to which they belonged. Many mercenaries wore them around their necks with a leather strap or chain.

“It looks like there are human remains here,” Cody continued. “Judging by the number, I’d say more than one or two people.”

Joshua peered at the iron plate. “‘Ca...leb’? It must’ve belonged to a mercenary. Their group’s name is here too, but it’s too scratched to read clearly. ‘In’? And...‘clones,’ perhaps?”

“No way!”

Nora rushed up, snatching the badge out of Joshua’s hand with her good one. Her face was completely pale.

“No way... No way,” she repeated.

“Nora?” I asked.

Nora wiped at the dirty badge over and over again with her fingers, and her eyes widened. “Grandpa...”

A second cold, dry wind blew through the forest. There was no longer any sweet scent, only the refreshing smell unique to pine trees.

After unearthing the human and dragon bones, we returned to the capital to report on the purification process so far and make preparations to continue it. Cody and Joshua headed to the Aston manse to get ready for numerous meetings in that regard, while I returned to the treatment center with Nora, who was deeply shaken.

“We’re here, Nora,” I said.

“Kay,” she mumbled.

She had completely lost her usual vitality and kept her gaze downward as we headed toward the annex. “Trudging” would be an accurate way to describe how she walked. It hurt my heart to see her so depressed when she ordinarily overflowed with energy and didn’t care about whether the people around her were men older than her or even nobles.

The identification badge we had found had once belonged to Nora’s grandfather, which meant that in all likelihood, some of the human bones we had unearthed were his remains.

“I’ll be fine, thanks,” Nora said, unprompted. “I believed that he was alive as much as I believed he was dead. That’s why I wanted revenge. I’m glad to know for sure that my grandpa is dead.” She paused. “I won’t have any weird expectations anymore, I guess.”

“Nora...”

“But I’m pretty tired after today. I’m gonna go to bed. Thanks, and goodnight.” Nora waved goodbye, then quickly entered the annex.

I couldn’t find any words to say, and could only remain there in the courtyard and watch as she left.

“Are you Ms. Lina?”

A woman had come down the path leading from the entrance to the main building. She had beautiful white-blond hair, large hazel eyes that glittered like jewels, skin unblemished by either sun or scars, and full lips. She wore a lovely, lavish, loose-fitting deep green dress, and a white fur cape. She was a noblewoman in every sense of the word.

“Yes, I am,” I replied.

“Wonderful. I keep missing you.”

While I didn’t know who she was, she appeared to know me. She also seemed to be a noblewoman who wasn’t from here in the east. Aristocratic women who lived here followed the Frontier Countess’s administrative policies and therefore tried to be frugal; they only wore lavish dresses for formal occasions

or parties.

“I apologize, but, um... May I ask who you are?” I replied.

“Come now! You don’t know who I am?!” she snapped. “If you’re unaware of that simple fact, then you have no right to be Joshua’s wife, regardless of the fact that he’s now a viscount. Honestly, no matter how many black knights the government wants, it’s still a horrible rule to force you to marry someone based only on mana affinity.”

The noblewoman let out a large sigh, her lavish fur cape swaying.

“I... Um—”

“You’re unaware of the role the Leewell viscount plays for the Granwell marquis!” she realized. “That’s why you’re acting so dim!”

The noblewoman continued ranting about just how unfit I was to be Joshua’s wife. The diatribe meandered across a wide span of topics, such as my social standing, the pointlessness of us remaining together after I had left the knighthood, and the fact that even after over four years of living together, we hadn’t had a child yet despite the hope that we would raise one who had a talent for old magic. Thanks to my time in the Corps, I was used to tuning out rants about how lowly commoners were, but I still felt a pain in my chest at her verbal abuse.

“Are you listening to me?!” she snapped at the end of her tirade.

“I am,” I replied quietly.

The day was nearing its end. Despite the general warmth here in the east, the first month brought a chill with it. I had gotten so cold that I was shivering.

“Mother?” came a voice. “Oh, here you are!”

A young girl of about ten appeared coming from the path that the noblewoman had used. The girl had inherited her mother’s white-blond hair and facial features, though her eyes were a deep green. She was so cute that she looked like a doll.

“Oh, Lotte! Didn’t I tell you to wait in the carriage?” the noblewoman asked.

“You were taking a long time to come back,” the girl—Lotte—explained.

“Besides, I still haven’t seen father yet.”

“You’re quite right—we still do have to see him. However, it seems that he went to the manse.”

Despite coming here to visit Lotte’s father, the noblewoman had wanted to see me and gripe at me for reasons I simply couldn’t understand.

Unconsciously, I tipped my head to the side in confusion.

“Don’t you think that my daughter has such a beautiful countenance?” the noblewoman asked suddenly. “Well, of course she does.”

“Pardon?” I responded, unsure of what she meant.

“Oh!” The adorable little girl stood right in front of me, looking up at me with a slightly doubtful expression. “Are you my father’s wife?”

“Pardon?” I repeated.

The current wife of her father? Me? Did this cute little girl just say my husband was her father? Joshua, a father? To this girl? Joshua’s daughter?

A heavy sensation filled my whole body, and I felt as if everything around me were going dark.

“Let him go soon, please—he’s my father!” Lotte said, giving me a sweet, friendly smile. “I really want to live together with both my parents, so could you give him back?”

If this had been a normal greeting, I would have thought that this little girl was precious. However, in my eyes, I could only see a sweet-faced emissary of misery.

Chapter 4: The Rural Couple, Continued Ties, and the Frontier Queen

Kingdom of Mert Calendar Year 787

“Lina!”

A loud voice brought me to my senses, and I gasped. I was no longer in the treatment center courtyard, but instead in a private tearoom in the back of the Aston family’s manse. In the room were four upholstered chairs encircling a round table. I recalled that this was where the Astons would chat with close friends, family, and other relatives.

I sat in a chair near the fireplace. It was lit, and the flames flickered inside. A blanket had been spread across my lap, and on the table were baked sweets and a tea set. In front of me was Lady Margot.

“Oh, Lady Margot, is something the matter?” I asked.

She didn’t speak for a moment. “I should be asking you that question. After all, I found you cold to the touch in the treatment center courtyard staring out into space. You didn’t respond to me at all.”

“Oh, is that so?” I replied slowly. “I apologize.”

I remembered being in the courtyard. An unknown noblewoman and her daughter had said a myriad of things to me. However, I couldn’t recall returning to the manse at all.

“There is no need to apologize,” Lady Margot told me. “After all, that woman and her daughter said such strange, selfish things to you, didn’t they? Honestly, the nerve! As soon as you and my brother headed for Riberry Village today, they appeared here without any prior warning and demanded to see Joshua. Well, there’s no need to worry anymore. I chased them off.”

Lady Margot brewed some milk tea and handed a cup to me. A single marshmallow floated in it. The sugary scent tickled my nose. I took a sip, and

both warmth and a light sweetness thawed my stiff body.

“Excuse me,” I started a bit awkwardly, “but who were that woman and her daughter? I’m embarrassed to say, but I don’t know them.”

“It’s only natural that you wouldn’t. That woman married a nobleman from another country and moved to his residence there. It’s been more than ten years since then.”

“I see.”

“That woman’s name is Florence Balliol,” Lady Margot explained. “She’s Joshua’s ex-fiancée. After their engagement was called off, she married into a noble family in the neighboring Yulekirk Kingdom. Oh, she has since divorced that man and returned to Mert, so she reverted back to using her maiden name, Hughley. I believe her daughter’s name was Liselotte?”

Joshua had once been engaged. Through some circumstances, they had called it off. She was now his ex-fiancée, and her name was Florence Hughley.

Florence Hughley? Tonight was the first time I had met her, but I could recall her name. After thinking about it for a moment, I remembered that I had seen it written on the pastel envelopes mailed to our home in Carlton territory. If I was correct, two had arrived at once because of the time taken for them to be mailed from the neighboring territory.

“Right now in the Yulekirk Kingdom, many people have been struck by the True Love Bug,” Lady Margot continued.

“The True Love...Bug?” I echoed. “What is that?”

True love was something I often heard about in stories or plays where the characters cared for each other from the bottom of their hearts. But what did an insect have to do with it?

Lady Margot, in the midst of sipping her milk tea, nodded. “It’s a fad—going around like it’s contagious,” Lady Margot explained. “People in that country are marrying not for politics or contracts, but for love, regardless of one’s status or rank.”

Ah, so that’s why it was called the True Love Bug.

Lady Margot continued on. “The commoner class was always allowed to marry freely, of course, but now it appears to be in vogue among the nobility. This would be more acceptable if it were only unmarried or engaged people taking to this trend, but unfortunately those who are married and have children are divorcing in droves in hopes of marrying the one they ‘love.’”

“I assume Lady Florence Hughley is one of them?” I said.

“It seems so. I heard that her former husband, Earl Balliol, fell in love and had a son with a commoner before his marriage. Therefore, in order to become a family with his lover and son, he divorced his wife, whom he had married for political reasons.”

That was an awfully selfish thing for Earl Balliol to do. It was especially irresponsible considering Lady Hughley had such a sweet daughter.

“I am sorry to hear about the divorce, but...” I paused, gathering my words. “Why tell me this? Besides, Lotte said that her father is Joshua.”

I held my teacup in both hands. The milk tea made the cup warm, and a sweet scent wafted from the half-melted marshmallow in the liquid.

“That woman is using the fact that she is Joshua’s ex-fiancée in an attempt to marry him,” Lady Margot said.

“Huh?” I had been about to take a sip from the teacup, but the words made me stiffen.

Lady Hughley wanted to marry Joshua, despite the fact that he was already married to me?

“Noblewomen who get divorced and return to their birth families often remarry. Some may join a monastery, but typically, their birth house picks someone new for them to marry. Earl Hughley is a shrewd businessman, so I assume that woman will be married off for political gain. She probably doesn’t like the earl’s choice and so has turned her attention to Joshua.”

“Even though Joshua is married?”

“That is a trifling matter to her—all she needs is for you two to be divorced.” Lady Margot let out a deep sigh. She seemed to dislike Lady Hughley—

especially considering she hardly ever called her by name. “Anyway, about her daughter—you do understand that there is no way she is Joshua’s, right? The timeline doesn’t match. Besides, it’s ridiculous—none of the Granwell complexion can be seen in her. That woman probably told her daughter to say such things. To use a young child like that—how infuriating!”

Having finished her milk tea, Lady Margot nibbled a baked sweet.

Lady Florence Hughley was an incredibly beautiful woman, one whom I would not have thought had borne a child. She had the gorgeous brilliance of an aristocrat, a regal bearing, polished behavior, and the perfect manners of a noble. She would probably be able to wear any lavish dress or jewelry easily.

Was I supposed to fight her for the position of Joshua’s wife? Could I fend her off?

I had promised Joshua that we would start our married life over and never give up on each other. We had agreed to look after each other and make every effort to remain both a married couple and a family. So, if Lady Florence wanted to drag me down from my position as Joshua’s wife, I had to stand up to her.

If a woman besides myself stood at Joshua’s side, I would go along with it, but that didn’t mean that I would so easily part with that privilege. However, when I thought about the beautiful, aristocratic Lady Florence, a pessimistic sensation rose within me.

“Lina, can you get a hold of yourself?”

Lady Margot’s words pulled me out of my thoughts. “O-Oh, um, I’m sorry.”

I put my teacup back on its saucer, and Lady Margot poured me fresh milk tea.

“I must confess,” Lady Margot said after a moment, “I was one of the reasons for the revocation of Joshua’s engagement.”

I wondered if this was the reason that Joshua was so distant toward his sister, and why he called her a “failure of an aristocrat.”

“Why do you say that?” I said. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Because I *hate* that woman!” she brazenly declared, finishing her statement

with a soft snort.

It was an incredibly understandable feeling. There was absolutely no way I could see the two of them getting along.

“Soon after our father died, our uncle arranged that woman’s marriage to Joshua,” Lady Margot continued. “Of course, it was for political reasons. The Hughley family had approached my uncle about it—apparently they were quite overbearing. I am unaware of the details, but the engagement was to tie the Hughleys’ sales expertise with the Granwells’ land, where valuable cloth and fabric products are made.”

“I see.”

“My uncle and Earl Hughley came to this decision after considering many angles. That woman and Joshua are only two years apart in age, and there was no issue regarding their respective social statuses. However, I...despised it.”

“Why is that?”

Lady Margot dropped a flower-shaped sugar cube into her milk tea and stirred the contents with her spoon. It was as if she was trying over and over again to keep her annoyance in check.

“Well,” she said at last, “I believe it was during the presentation of a new fabric that the marquis was unveiling at our main estate. At that time, Joshua and that woman had been engaged for about two months. You know, I wanted to get along with her at first. It might have been by marriage, but I was excited to have a sister and see our family grow.”

I had heard that Joshua was still a minor when his and Lady Margot’s father passed away. Of course, Lady Margot had been even younger. Surely, she must have been genuinely elated to gain more family after losing someone.

“However, I overheard...” Lady Margot paused. “I overheard that woman laughing with Earl Hughley. ‘The marquis died young,’ she said. ‘Surely his son will do the same, and when he does, the Granwell family will belong to me and my children.’”

I held back a scream. What an awful conversation for Lady Florence and her father to have had! Even worse, they had the gall to say it while in the Granwell

estate!

“They also spoke ill of my father’s death. He had worked as a civil servant in the royal palace and also managed our territory, you see. They said that he had died without producing any results in either field—that that was proof of his incompetence. They added that my brother would surely be just as inept.”

“I’m speechless,” I finally responded.

“My father died of illness, and my brother, unlike me, is brilliant. Yet that woman laughed and said that once Joshua inherited the marquis title from our uncle, she would keep him only as mindless window dressing—you know, as a mere figurehead—while she and her father ran the Granwell family.”

Of course, Joshua was an incredibly capable man, so Lady Florence and Earl Hughley’s schemes would not have come to fruition—he would not have allowed them to do what they wanted. Regardless, I fully understood Lady Margot’s position. If I were in her shoes, I would not have liked Lady Florence after hearing her say such a thing, nor would I have wanted her to marry my brother.

“Lady Margot...”

“After that, I was absolutely against the marriage, and didn’t want her joining our family. I decided to harass that woman as much as I could. I was still a child, so of course I did childish things to her. I didn’t know what else to do, even though I wished I could do more. Joshua called me foolish, and of course, word of my actions spread across high society. Naturally, my reputation soured, and I didn’t receive any decent marriage proposals until my husband’s came along.”

“But Lady Margot, you did stop the two of them from getting married,” I pointed out.

“I did,” she agreed. “However, half of the reason for that was because the Hughleys found a more favorable marriage partner for that woman—an earl. She fell head over heels for that man’s pretty blond hair and blue eyes.”

As contracts were involved with political marriages between nobles, a shift in a business scenario could result in a revoked engagement.

“Also,” Lady Margot continued, “there was the fact that Joshua didn’t want to

become the next marquis. That woman wanted to marry him for his assets and influence, but he told her that he planned to work as a civil servant and that he intended to let our cousin, Chris, inherit the title from our uncle. I assume it was more incidental than anything that that woman didn't want to become my sister in any sense of the word after I harassed her so much."

This entire time, Lady Margot had been stirring her milk tea. Finally, she returned her spoon to the saucer and took a sip with exquisite movements.

"To be honest, I..." She paused, then blurted out, "I didn't want you to marry my brother! I would have rather remained as a typical noblewoman, supporting my brother as he worked while I received my family's monetary backing—and your being a commoner would have diminished my social standing."

"I-I, um, I'm sorry," I stammered, bowing my head in apology, although part of me wanted to stand and give a proper one.

Lady Margot didn't speak for a long while. "But I...maybe...maybe changed my mind."

"Huh?"

I couldn't believe what I had heard. I looked up, face contorted in confusion as Lady Margot all but shoved her teacup back onto its saucer in a rather unladylike fashion, causing a clatter.

"You are much preferable to *that* woman!"

I laughed wryly. Considering how much Lady Margot despised Lady Hughley, probably anyone would have been preferable in my sister-in-law's eyes.

"You're considerate of my brother and take care of him," Lady Margot added after a moment. "And now he's kinder and closer to me, and he even expresses his emotions more. I'm sure that this is because of you."

"Do you...think so?" I asked haltingly.

"I do! Ever since he became an adult but before he married you, I'd only seen three things on his face: blankness like a mask, exasperation, and anger."

"No!" I gasped.

"Yes," she insisted. "He gives you kind smiles the likes of which I've never

seen from him before. I've even heard *mother* say that Joshua is happy with you. I didn't believe it until I saw it with my own eyes."

Lady Margot pursed her lips, her brow wrinkled, and her jaw tightened as she looked away from me. She might have seemed sullen, but I knew this was how she showed embarrassment—Joshua made a similar expression when he was abashed and would hide his face with his hands. The siblings were quite alike in the fact that it was difficult for them to be honest with their feelings and stay composed at the same time.

"Lina, I'm... I'm sorry," Lady Margot said.

"Huh?" I blurted, surprised.

I had clearly seen how Lady Margot had hated me from the moment we met. I had been a black knight, yes, but also an orphaned commoner—she hadn't considered me fit to be Joshua's wife. After that awkward tea party at which we had first spoken, I had largely not had any exchanges with her, and she had gone off to marry and live with Earl Aston. I had attended the wedding, but all I had said to her was customary congratulations.

"My attitude toward you was hardly praiseworthy," she replied. "While I understood that, I couldn't control myself. Joshua was right about me being a failure of a noblewoman."

"Lady Margot..."

"After coming to the east and joining the Aston family, I realized what I had done. You must have noticed that the nobility and their subjects here are close, correct? I was shocked at the lifestyle here and didn't think I would be able to adapt to it."

As a noblewoman born and raised in the royal capital, she would naturally have a difficult time adjusting to a life closer to a commoner's.

"Still, it seems like you've become used to life in Aston by now," I noted.

"Yes, I have. I've seen firsthand—and have some practical experience now—how the people till the fields day after day to grow crops, and how they take care of livestock. Those jobs are what clothe me and feed me. My husband taught me that."

“Your husband is a kind man.”

Lady Margot smiled softly and nodded. Her smile wasn't as dazzling as the ones she had worn at past tea parties, but it was gentle.

“We call our people commoners, but they're just the same as us nobles,” she said. “So, Lina, you and I are the same as well. I've come to understand how cruel my attitude and words toward you were, and I sincerely apologize.”

Her words surprised me deeply, but at the same time, I was glad.

Ever since she and Earl Aston had visited Joshua and me in the house we rented, I had sensed that she had lost the prickly aura that used to hang about her. However, I had thought that was only due to her growing into an adult, getting married, and having a child—it now turned out that these developments were only part of her newfound approval of me. It made me incredibly happy. I was glad circumstances allowed us to get along together in a more general sense and not just as in-laws.

“Thank you for accepting me, Lady Margot. I'm overjoyed,” I replied.

I took another sip of milk tea. It seemed sweeter and milder than before. My current frame of mind might have been affecting my taste, but I thought it was delicious.

Lady Margot's reply was somewhat rapid, and she stammered a little. “Y-You know, I think that woman might try to start something. She has an absurd amount of money; she may employ people to enact something dangerous. She ignores whatever isn't in her favor and only listens to conversations that give her some kind of advantage. She has no problem doing the outrageous when something doesn't go her way, so be careful. You may not have had to worry about being caught up in violent happenings when you were an active-duty knight, but your circumstances are different now.”

From what I had seen and heard of Lady Hughley, she was an incredibly beautiful woman overflowing with elegance—however, she was highly unreasonable. It was a pity.

“I still hate that woman even now,” Lady Margot continued. “I would never stand for her to become my brother's wife. So please, Lina—stay married to

Joshua forever.”

“Thank you for worrying about me, Lady Margot.”

Lady Margot’s face turned red. “D-Don’t worry about it. A-Anyway, have these—they’re recipes I’m trying out,” she said, indicating the abundance of sweets on the table.

It seemed that she was the type to hide her embarrassment and shyness, unlike her brother, who would freeze up. Thanks to Lady Margot’s bashful actions, the two of us ate sweets until we were full, completely spoiling our dinner.

After taking a bath, I returned to the chambers Joshua and I were using during our stay. When I entered the parlor, I found Joshua already prepared for bed, sitting on the sofa in front of the fireplace and nursing a drink. The nectar-made alcohol he drank was a popular specialty here in the east as it smelled sweet when warmed.

“I hear you had too much tea and sweets to eat dinner,” he noted with a chuckle. “Just like a child.”

He beckoned to me, and I sat beside him. He smelled distinctly of soap, and the scent mixed with the sweet aroma from his drink.

“I didn’t mean to,” I replied. “Lady Margot kept desperately suggesting I eat more. Besides, she made everything on that table.”

Joshua paused. “I still can’t believe that foolish sister of mine bakes.” He lifted his eyebrows and shoulders in such a skillful way that no other parts of his body moved. “A nonsensical tall tale would be more realistic.”

Just what kind of annoying-little-sister mental image did he have of Lady Margot?

“They were all very delicious, with gentle flavors. She made them from sweet potatoes grown here in Aston. She says they hope to make this a famous local product.”

“Margot has been here for what, six or seven years?” Joshua asked

rhetorically. “It’s pleasing to see that she’s doing her duty as the earl’s wife and as mother of the next head of house. I was worried—she had been a failure of an aristocrat beforehand.”

“‘Failure’ is harsh,” I dissented softly.

Joshua put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me close, then pressed a kiss to my temple. “But she was. All she had to do to express her distaste regarding my first engagement was tell our uncle. Instead, she took it upon herself to engage in childish harassment over her temporary emotions, and ended up ruining her own reputation. The height of folly.”

“But Joshua, did you not know what Lady Hughley and her father said would happen after you wed?”

“Of course I knew. Insulting my father and talking about her plans to take over my family in such a lighthearted manner on my property—she might as well have said it to my face. But despite my anger, her actions were so incredibly thoughtless that they made me laugh at the time.”

Joshua put his now empty glass on the table, then resumed holding me—this time pulling me onto his lap. He seemed just a bit tipsy from his nectar-based drink. “Well, that’s all in the past. Let’s talk about now.”

“What about?”

“My ex-fiancée Florence Hughley and her daughter appeared out of the blue, correct? And then said all those cruel things to you.”

“O-Oh, right, that.”

Joshua buried his face against my neck. “I’m sorry to make you remember it. You know, I saw another carriage when we were on our way to Riberry. If I had seen the Hughley crest on it, I would never have left you alone.”

“I’m all right,” I assured him. “I’m used to being on the receiving end of these kinds of things.”

“I wish you weren’t.” Joshua looked up and put his large, warm hands over my cheeks. His jade-colored eyes showed my reflection. “You shouldn’t have to endure such things. Doesn’t it make you feel awful—hurt you, even? You can

tell me how you feel... No, I *want* you to tell me how you feel.”

“But—”

“Lina, just talk to me.”

I realized Joshua wouldn’t let up until I spoke. He was even more stubborn and tenacious than I thought.

“To say I was okay would be lying,” I admitted finally.

“Go on,” he urged.

“She said I don’t understand how to support you as a viscount, that I’m impudent for staying married to you even though I’m no longer a black knight, and she criticized how I haven’t given you any children yet despite being married for several years.” I paused. “Everything she said was true, and it hurt all the more because of it.”

“That—”

“And then,” I continued, interrupting him, “that one pink letter we received was from her, wasn’t it? Actually, I remember seeing two. And weren’t there even more that we got before then?”

I had only just now made the connection that the sender of those pastel envelopes was Lady Hughley, Joshua’s former fiancée who had just been divorced and moved back to Mert—the same woman who wanted to take my place as Joshua’s wife.

“How...” I paused. “How did you reply to those letters? Did you say that you would accept her proposal? That sweet little girl called you her father...”

Unease sprouted and grew exponentially inside me against my better judgment. I had to fight her, to keep her from taking my place as Joshua’s wife. However, I wondered if she had received a reply from him stating that he wanted to marry her. If that were the case, what would be the point of my confronting her?

“I’m sorry, Lina,” Joshua murmured. “Please don’t look so sad.”

“But...”

“I swore to love you and only you, Lina. Didn’t I tell you that that fact would never change?”

“It’s not like that—I do believe you,” I replied. “But...”

Joshua gave me a troubled smile and kissed my brow. “I understand. It’s one thing to believe and another to feel anxious. As you said, that woman did send numerous letters quite soon after we came out east. She wrote in the first one that she had divorced and returned home, and wanted to marry me.”

I’d thought as much. I automatically went to lower my head, but Joshua’s hands were still on my cheeks, and he kept me looking at him.

“I naturally penned a refusal in reply—I have no intention of marrying her. And of course, I don’t have any children. It’s true that she sent many letters after that, but I burned them without opening a single one. I don’t know what they said, and I don’t particularly want to know.”

“Joshua,” I murmured.

“I see that my attempt to keep you from worrying by staying quiet backfired. I’m sorry. I will tell you however many times I need to that there is no need for worry or fear. I have pledged my love only to you, and I have no intention of ever doing so with any other woman. I will not leave you. So please don’t look so sad.”

He pressed his forehead to mine, and our noses touched.



“There’s no law stating that one must divorce a retired black knight,” he continued. “Sir Alexander is retired and still remains with his wife, correct? And as the Leewell viscount family, a branch of the Granwells, our duty is to keep the Granwell line from dying out. Even that is not a critical role since my cousin, the current head of the Granwells, has had a child. We may not have a child now, but surely that can still happen. We only just reignited our romance—it’s like we’re newlyweds.”

“‘Newlyweds’?” I couldn’t help it—I laughed at the unexpected word. We had technically been married for six years already, so it wasn’t as if we had just tied the knot.

“Yes, newlyweds,” Joshua declared, pecking me all over with kisses. “I said we’re newlyweds, so we’re newlyweds.”

Cold winds were blowing outside. It was incomparably warmer in here.

He stood up—keeping me in his arms—and headed for our cozy bed. “You’ll get cold. Let’s head to bed.”

“Oh, Joshua,” I began.

Joshua lay down on the bed and embraced me. He covered me with a blanket and the duvet. His arms were warm, reassuring, and safe.

“I have something I want to talk to you about,” I continued.

“What is it?”

I went on to tell Joshua everything I had thought about since coming to Aston territory.

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We reported the discovery of human and dragon bones in the forest near Riberry Village to Countess Carlton and Earl Aston. Under their joint instructions, a large number of knights and laborers were dispatched to excavate the site.

At the same time, white mages from the fort came to Riberry to treat those affected by the dragon poison by giving them lontas solution and pills. Blue knights were also sprinkling lontas water here and there around the village just

in case.

The treatment and purification process were going smoothly. I was told that after about another week, the sick would be fully recovered, and that the earth would be cleansed after another round of Iontas solution was dispersed. When that was finished, the epidemic here in Riberry would cease with its cause fully known. The uproar surrounding it would end, and the villagers would be able to go about their lives.

All that remained was the discovery of both dragon and human bones. Several broken and ruined objects that looked like they had once been traps, swords, and spears had been found in the forest too. Currently, fifteen people had been identified among the human remains, though it was anticipated that there were still three to five more remaining.

“Well, it seems like just the right number of people for a small platoon,” I said. “And it appears the group was made up of highly skilled mercenaries on a mission. It’s unclear whether their initial target was a dragon, or if they happened across one while fighting some other monster.”

Sir Cody nodded in agreement. He was looking at the dragon bones.

All of the unearthed dragon and human bones had been brought to an unused, single-story building that contained both a warehouse and office. It had once been used to store processed fruit products such as jam and fruit wine. Next to the entrance of the spacious warehouse stood the management office. Unfortunately, this place had been neglected since fruit production fell off.

Currently, we were borrowing the building to sort the bones. We were also searching the human remains for any personal identifiers.

“The dragon looks like it was a sheephorn purple,” Sir Cody said, pausing as he put together the bones from the monster.

This breed of dragon rarely emerged from its territory, so there were few records of it from knights’ missions. However, it was a type of dragon I would never forget. The dragon Lina had slain which had caused her to retire from the knighthood had been a sheephorn purple. As the name suggested, it was a venomous dragon with two horns that curled like a sheep’s did, and it had scales so deeply purple that they were almost black.

Sir Cody held up a bone for me and my brother-in-law Patrick to see. “This is from the hind foot. Do you see how the heel here is split in two? That’s unmistakably a characteristic of a sheephorn dragon. I assume it’s from the parent of that egg. What likely happened was that the mother died without laying the egg—it never left its mother’s womb and died with her.”

“Sir Cody, were you able to figure out when the dragon died?” I asked.

Sir Cody put one arm over the other, holding up the dragon bone and looking at it as he continued. “I’d have to do a detailed study to know precisely, but...I’d say maybe decades ago? Even a human body needs more than a hundred years to completely turn to soil, including the bones. A dragon’s body is so large that it would take a considerable amount of time for all but the hard parts, such as bones and claws, to do the same. This one’s bones are still solid, so I’d say it’s been...twenty or twenty-five years since it died.”

So over twenty years ago, a single sheephorn purple dragon left its home in the Abyssal Forest for some unknown reason. It was a female that had yet to lay her egg. Despite being pregnant, she had fought the mercenary platoon, and lost her life in the woods near Riberry Village.

We didn’t know how many of the twenty or so mercenaries had survived the fight with the dragon, but they had won. After that, however, the dragon’s flesh and blood turned to poison. The ones who had survived the battle had probably not known about this phenomenon and came in contact with the toxins. As a result, the dragon and all the mercenaries had perished in the woods. At least, this was the natural conclusion.

Poison from the dragon’s corpse had soaked into the forest soil, contaminating the earth, air, and nearby river by way of groundwater. Riberry was a new village—it was going on its sixth year since its founding—so it hadn’t existed then. The town that had been closest to the forest at that time was Rondale.

“I will let you know the results of my detailed investigation and write up a report as well,” Sir Cody continued, speaking quickly. He made no attempt to hide his giddiness at being able to examine the dragon bones more closely—it was like he was a child being given a new toy. “In the meantime, I need to head

out to gather the necessary preliminary findings; I'll bring them with me to the manse later. Lord Leewell, would you explain the rest of the situation to Earl Aston?"

"I will."

With that, Sir Cody headed off to go collect the data. According to Lina, he was very enthusiastic about dragon research, which was an asset in this situation. However, I had a feeling that some problems might arise from him becoming so absorbed in the dragon bones. I imagined he might not return to his fort.

"So the devastating disease in Rondale Village was because this dragon died in the forest?" Patrick muttered as he looked at the remains brought into the warehouse. The human bones were being formed into skeletons, while the dragon's sat in a heap.

"In all likelihood, I'd say so," I replied. We couldn't be sure until Sir Cody had finished his investigation, but I imagined Patrick was right.

Lina had been born in Rondale Village and lived there together with her parents and grandmother. However, the place was now in ruins, with only crumbling houses, a shoddy temple, traces of a town square, and an orchard that looked ready to return to the wild.

The villagers had cultivated many types of fruits in that vast orchard. They used these fruits to make jams, candied and syrup-coated foods, juice, fruit wine, and all sorts of other products. It had been the second largest village in Aston territory, and it had fallen to ruin from a dead dragon's poison.

There was nothing anyone could do about Rondale now.

Dragons turned to deadly poison when they died, and the toxin had limited treatment options. However, these facts were not generally well-known. As no one had discovered the dead dragon, it had been no wonder that the sickness was considered a plague of unknown origin—I couldn't blame the villagers for attempting ineffective treatment and subsequently perishing.

"Patrick, let's do what we can for now to help Riberry. That's what's in Aston's best interests right now, and what you need to do as its leader."

“Joshua—”

“All right?”

I lightly patted my brother-in-law on the shoulder and he nodded; he seemed full of mixed feelings. Then, I left the warehouse base of operations.

Back at the Aston manse in the regional capital, Patrick and I were in his office, separated by his large, unadorned desk. The room also held plain chairs, old sofa sets, and a shelf crammed only with practical, work-related books and documents. While there were no paintings, as one might expect to find in an office, I could see the faded outlines where some had once hung on the walls.

My brother-in-law sat directly across from me on the other sofa. He was a young man with slightly dark blond hair, deep blue irises, and a medium build that was neither too tall nor too short. His eyes drooped slightly, giving him a gentle appearance, but ever since I had met him, he had always had bags under them. He looked worn out and exhausted.

“Were you aware of the existence of the natural disaster relief program?” I asked.

“You mean the subsidy program for when a natural disaster occurs?” Patrick replied finally.

“Yes,” I said. “It covers events such as floods or landslides caused by storms or heavy rains, or damage from earthquakes, fires, insect outbreaks, and the like. The national government will provide monetary aid for that region’s economic revival and treatment of its people. Harm caused by dragons and other monsters is another valid reason for invoking the aid program.”

“What?”

I laid the subsidy application on the desk and pushed it toward Patrick.

“Black Knight Cody Macmillan has verified that the sickness that occurred in Riberry was due to dragon poison spilling out of a deceased dragon egg. You should prepare the documents and submit them to the Urban Development Office at the royal palace—you’ll receive a subsidy and condolence money for

the people who suffered sickness.”

“I’ll make arrangements immediately.”

Patrick reached for the form. Disaster relief grants were expedited, and it would not take him long to fill out the application. It wouldn’t even be hard for him to get the accompanying documentation needed.

“Also, about the sickness two decades ago,” I began.

“About Rondale Village?” Patrick clarified.

“Yes. I believe the cause of that outbreak will also be determined as the fault of a deceased dragon’s toxins.”

Patrick pulled back from the application and clasped his hands together over his lap. “So the calamity twenty-two years ago was also caused by dragon poison. I see.”

“Dragon bones were discovered in the forest adjacent to Riberry Village,” I continued. “Sir Cody will be writing up a report to confirm that this affected Rondale, which was downstream at the time. Thus you can apply for aid for Rondale now, as well. The people have died, yes, but you can revitalize the orchard after purifying the land there.”

Rondale had been an important place in terms of income for Aston territory. After using the disaster relief funds to purify the dragon poison, the village’s land would become clean once again. The orchard could be revitalized and its products could be sold.

The rumors about the epidemic of unknown origin would also disappear when the government subsidized the project and publicly announced that a dragon corpse had been the cause. Aston wouldn’t immediately become a prosperous region, but it would take a step toward returning to one.

A knock sounded, and Sir Cody opened the door and entered the office. He held a wooden box in his arms.

“Apologies for making you wait. I brought the necessary documents for the application.”

He placed papers from the box on the desk, then tilted a large envelope he

was holding. The contents slipped out onto the desk with a metallic jangling sound.

“What are these?” Patrick asked.

“The personal identification tags that most of the mercenaries wore,” Sir Cody explained.

The metal plates, which were worn around the neck, had been etched with magic to list each wearer’s name, hometown, and mercenary group.

Patrick picked one of them up, reading aloud from it. “The Indigo Cyclones? Was that the name of their mercenary group?”

“They’re a group of mercenaries that still operates here in the eastern and the southern parts of Countess Carlton’s territory,” Sir Cody explained. “They take down monsters, escort merchants and travelers, and guard towns and villages. I suspect they slew the dragon.”

Patrick looked between the identification tag in his hand and Sir Cody. “Are there people other than black knights who are able to kill dragons?”

“If you’re asking strictly about the *possibility*, then yes, someone could kill a dragon with a strong enough attack. However, such a mission is not as easy as it sounds—considering that a dragon turns to poison after it dies, it would be suicide to kill one without any *lontas* solution or a black knight who can perform purification magic.”

Sir Cody took a dragon horn out from the wooden box. It was large, uniquely coiled, and glittered a light purple. It had been found in the woods.

“I believe that the mercenaries killed the dragon and were in the midst of stripping it for parts that could be worth money—like reverse scales, claws, and fangs—when the dragon’s flesh and organs began turning to poison. Then the poison started to eat away at their bodies, killing them. Take a look at this.”

Sir Cody pointed out a spot near the base of the horn where a large gash sat. It looked like it had been made with a blade.

“What is this from?” I asked.

“I suspect the mercenaries had been trying to cut off the dragon’s horn.”

“So the mercenaries killed the dragon to collect its parts, I assume.” Patrick covered his face with both hands.

“Probably,” Sir Cody replied. “Dragon horns, claws, fangs, and reverse scales can all be sold at high prices as valuable raw materials. As black knights are usually the ones to slay dragons, their raw materials essentially belong to the government. If other people want them, they have to defeat dragons themselves.”

Patrick paused. “Then why did the mercenaries kill the dragon when they wouldn’t be able to withstand its poison?”

“It’s not common knowledge that dragons turn to poison upon death,” Sir Cody explained. “I imagine that was probably the case with these mercenaries twenty years ago. They hunted the dragon for its parts and successfully killed it, but lost their lives after being exposed to its toxins.”

“Then,” Patrick said slowly, “the dragon poison made its way to Rondale?”

One thing that did hang on the wall in the office was a large map. It depicted Riberry Village and the ruins of Rondale with the forest sandwiched between them. As Rondale had been downstream of the forest, the dragon’s toxins must have seeped out of the forest and mixed into the air, groundwater, and the river. That was the true nature of the mysterious plague that had struck Rondale.

Patrick let out a deep sigh and hung his head. “I understand now that the poison from the dragon’s corpse in those woods killed the Rondale villagers, but would the villagers in Riberry be affected by that same poison from so long ago?”

“No. Dragon poison does break down naturally,” Sir Cody explained. “The length of time this process takes depends on the breed and size of the dragon, but it’s usually approximately ten to fifteen years. That area of the forest, village, and former site of Rondale should more or less be safe now since more than enough time has passed for the natural purification to have occurred. Just in case, we’re purifying the area with lontan solution and giving all the villagers medicine.”

“I see,” my brother-in-law said after a long moment.

“Patrick, lift your head.”

I picked up the written report and the application form for disaster relief before pushing them in front of Patrick. His blue eyes went wide. He took the documents and looked down at them.

“You have a duty to fulfill as the earl here. Many nobles know that three generations of your house have been struggling with this. Take that certificate that Sir Cody brought—it proves that all of the issues were caused by a dragon. Use it to apply for aid.”

“Lord Joshua—”

“First of all, take that relief money and use it to stabilize the people living in Riberry. Then, work on purification—have you learned how that process works yet? You need long-term solution. Get more people here. I’m sure there are people who left Aston who want to come back, and there may be refugees from other places who need someplace to settle. Bring back the orchards too. ‘Fruit’ and ‘Aston’ are practically synonymous, right?”

“B-But I—”

“Remember that aristocratic marriages are contracts and connections,” I said. “Show up at the next party Countess Carlton puts on and ask for donations. Her Excellency is a relative of yours, so she wouldn’t tell you no.”

The Aston family had a long history. They were related to the Frontier Countess—although somewhat distantly—and personally were rather close to her and her husband, and all their children were close as well.

“Also,” I continued, “who is your wife’s birth family?”

“The Granwells,” he said slowly.

“That’s right, and they’re a marquis’s family and have money. My cousin has been newly appointed as head, and he is more amicable than my uncle—he loves to help people. If you and Margot both approach him and ask for his aid, then he’s more than likely to lend a helping hand to his kin. My uncle won’t have any objections once he sees the backing you have from the government and the proof of the dragon poison.”

I urged Patrick—his head still hanging as he sat on the couch—to take a seat at the desk and pick up his glass pen, as I was going to show him how to fill out the disaster relief forms and write letters to Countess Carlton and Marquis Granwell. Patrick’s eyes went wide at my offer, but he replied in the affirmative and started on the application.

“Oh, right,” I said. “Lina told me she has a message for you.”

“Yes?” Patrick replied.

“It’s about Lina’s bonus money for slaying that dragon—the money you used.”

Patrick stopped breathing, and his face paled. The glass pen in his hand shook relentlessly.

“Oh, Earl Aston, you did such a thing? For having such a meek look about you, you’re quite conniving,” Sir Cody sneered.

The barbed words caused a large amount of cold sweat to break out across my brother-in-law’s body, and his face went from pale to truly white. “That—I mean—I’m deeply sorry,” he stuttered. “I promise to return it. I just... I don’t know, well, when I can...”

Patrick shook as he bowed his head deeply. I didn’t care for how it suddenly felt like we were bullying him.

“That’s not the issue. Listen to me,” I urged.

“Y-Yes,” Patrick said. “My apologies, Lord Joshua.”

“Lina says that since you used the money to help revitalize your land, heal the sick, and secure their livelihoods, she has no need for you to repay her.”

The glass pen fell from Patrick’s hand, sending splashes of ink onto the desk. “Huh?”

“She said to please treat the money as a donation toward helping Aston and its people recover from the dragon poison,” I clarified.

It wasn’t as if Patrick had used the money for luxurious meals, expensive clothes and jewelry, works by famous painters, or statues made by well-known sculptors. Lina had said that she simply wanted to donate the money to help the people of Aston, where she had been born. It was common for knights and

civil officials to contribute to their hometowns if they were needy or stricken by disaster.

“I...” Patrick couldn’t seem to find any words.

“I’ll need you to prepare documentation that you have received a donation to help restore Aston,” I added.

Patrick burst into tears, sliding off of his chair onto the worn rug and pressing his forehead to it.

“Patrick?” I asked, stunned.

“Th-Thank you!” he stammered through his sobs. “I don’t know how to repay Lady Lina!”

My brother-in-law offered his gratitude over and over, his voice becoming nasally. When I considered the circumstances, I realized he had been very young when Rondale—which was responsible for a majority of Aston’s economy—had been lost. Since inheriting the title of earl from his father, Patrick must have been struggling to make money and improve his territory.

“Although you don’t have to repay it,” I said, “there are conditions.”

“Wh-What kind of conditions?”

“Lina said that she wants to eat jam and compote made with Aston fruit. Also...”

“A-Also?” Patrick echoed, sniffing. He trembled as if terrified of what I would say next.

“Lina wants you to invite her to the Rondale orchard once you have revived it.”

Patrick gasped softly.

“Lina has no memories of living in Rondale,” I continued. “She was only two years old when her family died.”

Patrick cried another waterfall of tears and pressed his forehead against the rug once more. He repeated his thanks over and over again, promising that he would fulfill Lina’s wishes. It seemed like seeing hope for his territory for the

first time had released all the severe stress he had endured up until now in the form of sobs.

“I would also like to see Aston verdant again,” I said gently. “Where you, my sister, and my nephew can live happily.”

“I’d like some of that tasty fruit wine,” Sir Cody chimed in.

It took Patrick a moment to get a control of his voice. “Y-Yes, yes, I will. Lord Joshua, Sir Cody, I promise—I promise I will!”

My brother-in-law returned to his chair, but his tears did not stop. His eyes had grown terribly swollen, and the tip of his nose had turned red. When the maid and my sister came into the office with tea and snacks, the two women gave me a curious look. It was as if they thought I had bullied him to this point, and they asked me to explain the situation. It was vexing.

“You have such dull, brutish facial features, Joshua—of course anyone would see this as abuse. You had to have been bullying him,” Margot said, taking me completely aback and vexing me even more.

The tea they brought had been mixed with nectar. Regarding the sweets—according to Lina—my sister had made them with potatoes, by steaming and kneading them until they were creamy, adding nectar and milk, and baking them in cups formed out of cookie dough. The snacks were misshapen and scorched in some places. Apparently, their irregular appearance was part of their homemade charm.

It seemed that my good-for-nothing sister had changed somewhat for the better since coming to Aston territory. Back when she had been in the royal academy, she had gotten in trouble for childishly harassing my then fiancée, Lady Florence Hughley, for whatever reason. Naturally, we had been considering not having her marry at all and instead sending her to live in a convent or sequestering her in the Granwell country estate when my now brother-in-law had extended an offer of engagement.

The Aston family had a long history, but it was the poorest of the poor aristocratic houses in the eastern countryside—so much so that they were ridiculed as the farmer nobles. Patrick was a fine-looking man with a gentle personality, but poverty had left him without a wife. I had felt it was frankly

impossible to tell how his marriage to Margot—immature and highborn as she was—would turn out. I had worried their union would be a disaster, but I was relieved to see that they were getting along surprisingly well.

My three-year-old nephew had a particular homemade sweet his mother made that was his current favorite. Some of those had been brought to the office. I picked one up and nervously brought it to my mouth, only to find that it tasted unexpectedly simple and mild.

My good-for-nothing sister had been the type to like lavish, magnificent dresses and gaudy ornamentation, and when she didn't get her way, she wouldn't even try to hide her displeasure. Now, however, she wore an unobtrusive day dress, and a small piece of blue jewelry that her husband had given her. She seemed to be taking well to her roles both as the wife of an earl and as a mother. Perhaps she was more suited to life here than surrounded by many nobles in the high society maelstrom of love, hate, and jealousy in the royal capital.

I thought that the life my sister led now was reflected in the gentle taste of the sweet I ate. I also realized firsthand what Lina had meant about these potato-based confections being filling—no, *very* filling. I asked the servants to give me less for dinner.

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“This is the capital of Carlton's territory,” I explained as the scenery passed us by outside the carriage window. “The wall we just passed through is the one on the far outside, and there are three more deeper inside. The structure in front of us and off to the left is the fortified manse.”

I had thought Nora would be happy to know what we were looking at, but she was silent as she looked out the window. She was usually so energetic and positive, but right now she was gloomy. I thought she might be scared, since she had asked me a few days ago to go with her to the Carlton capital when she told the countess what had happened regarding Riberry Village and the incident with the dragon near the Abyssal Forest.

“It's pretty big and impressive,” Nora finally said. “That's where the Frontier Count works?”

“Lives and works,” Joshua corrected. “Though Countess Beatrix Carlton is a woman. She rules over the whole eastern region.”

“Countess?” Nora parroted, giving Joshua a surprised look. “I didn’t know women could rule a whole territory.”

“There are four frontier, or border, territories in Mert—east, west, north, and south—that are each presided over by a ruling family,” Joshua explained.

“Currently the head of the Carltons is a woman, and so was the previous one. The Carlton heads have had the accompanying post of leader of the Eastern Knights Corps, and are renown for their swordsmanship, spearmanship, and magical abilities. Gender does not matter to them.”

“Wow,” Nora said. “I always thought only guys could be in those fancy positions like ruler or family head.”

“That may be the case in other countries, but institutionalized distinctions based on gender do not exist in Mert—although the customs of each individual house may vary,” Joshua said. “Some pass on the title of head of family to the oldest child, or to the child who excels the most in martial arts, magic, or studies.”

“Huh, I see.” Nora paused. “Hey, have you two met the countess before?”

We both nodded in unison.

“She’s scary, right?”

“No,” I replied. “She’s never said anything unreasonable, and she always shows consideration to her servants. She’s a kind person.”

“R-Really, huh...” Nora let out a small breath and looked out the window at the fortress.

“Nora, are you all right? Lately you haven’t been that cheerful,” I said.

“Huh? Nuh-uh, I’m fine!” she protested.

“But you don’t seem that way.”

“You’re fine so long as you’ve got your health!” she chirped. “I always eat three square meals a day.”

With that, she looked back at the Frontier Countess's manse, which we were coming near.

It was true that she was eating regular meals, as well as snacks at teatime. However, it looked like she was only putting on a facade to appear lively. I wanted to continue the conversation, but I couldn't find the proper words to say—I could only keep an eye on her.

The carriage we rode continued on through the Carlton capital and headed toward the fortress. There, we would report on the series of events that had been revealed from the epidemic in Riberry, and the plague that occurred twenty-two years ago.

The Carltons of the eastern territory were one of the four families who each presided over an outlying territory of Mert. The head of the family, Lady Beatrix, excelled in martial arts. As generations of the family had valued the art of combat, there was not one gaudy item in the fortress—all furnishings were plain and pragmatic, giving a rather rustic impression.

Upon entering the fortified manse, we were led to an antechamber to wait. Joshua and Cody—who had come here on horseback—went ahead to give their report to the Frontier Countess.

The parlor Nora and I remained in contained only a round table and four wooden chairs, each of which had a cushion embroidered with the Carlton crest on it. A tapestry also emblazoned with the family emblem hung on the wall. Books about tactics, weapons, and geography densely lined the bookshelf, and two unadorned rapiers had been mounted nearby.

The hearth was lit, making the room warm, and a maid had brought hot tea. I was comfortable, but Nora was pale—she looked like she might collapse.

“Nora, are you all right?” I asked.

“J-Just nervous.”

I could understand why—Nora was a commoner about to meet the countess who presided over the eastern region. However, it didn't look like Nora was just nervous. Instead, she looked like she was trying to restrain her fear.

“Hey, Lina?” she said.

“Yes?”

She didn’t speak for a moment. “Do you think I, uh, will get punished?”

Punished? Nora?

“I mean, I know we don’t have the death penalty in this county, but like, I’ll get a punishment worse than that, right?” Nora went on. “Thinking that makes me t-terrified...”

“H-Hold on,” I said. “Why would you think such a thing?!”

Nora, panicking, stood frozen stiff in the entryway to the waiting room. I led her to a chair and had her sit, then poured her a cup of tea and put it in her hands. A sweet, fruity fragrance rose from the drink.

“I mean, my—my grandfather killed a whole lot of people, you know?” she stammered. “That’s why I’ll get punished.”

“Why would that happen?” I asked gently.

“But—but everyone was saying stuff like that,” she protested.

“Who’s ‘everyone’?”

Nora hung her head and looked down at the cup in her hands. “The people working in the town of Aston. The bones we found with the dragon’s were from the Indigo Cyclones—you know, my grandpa and his group. He took them to those woods and killed the dragon for money and valuable stuff, remember?”

She brought the tea to her lips and sipped it, and with trembling hands returned the teacup to the table. She looked at me, and I saw tears gathering in her eyes.

“They took down a dragon ‘cause they were greedy for money,” Nora went on. “And they got poisoned and died. Then that poison got into the river and the wind and a lot of nearby people died, right? My grandpa killed them.” Fat tears started falling from her eyes. “H-He killed them. A lot of p-people. So instead of him, it’ll be me, his granddaughter—it’ll be me getting punished!”

“Nora,” I murmured, wrapping my arms around her. She clung to me, sobbing

her eyes out.

I assumed she was talking about the people who were working with Cody to rebuild the skeletons of the dragon and people who had been unearthed. Those workers were a mix of people from the Aston and Carlton territories, as well as from the fort. Collecting a scattered mass of bones and returning each to its skeleton was likely a concentration-heavy task that sapped them of a lot of energy, which probably resulted in some complaining. I could understand the need to vent, but I wished these people had been more aware of when and where to do so.

“You know you aren’t responsible, right Nora?” I told her. “You’re not going to get punished.”

“But I—I almost did the same thing!” she sobbed.

“Huh?”

Nora dug her fingers even more strongly into the clothing at my back. “I—I wanted revenge for my grandpa, you know? I lured the dragon out and I was gonna take it to a place I’d booby trapped, and that was even closer to a town than where those old guys fought it. I was gonna lead it there and kill it!”

“But Nora—” I started, but she interrupted me.

“You’re just gonna say I didn’t finish it off, right? That those old black knights dealt with it for me. But if they hadn’t, then—then I would’ve been like my grandpa and killed a dragon without knowing anything! And if I had, th-then the people in Riberry really would’ve suffered and died! Even if I wasn’t able to kill it, it might’ve gone to the village and rampaged—everyone would’ve still died!”

The Riberry villagers had built houses, tilled fields, and raised crops on land that could have been poisoned to the degree that no one would be able to live on it anymore. The people could have fallen to the toxins, and a mysterious “plague” could have once again broken out, putting Aston territory into an even more difficult position.

However, these things had not happened. No matter how many traps she had set, I could not imagine Nora being able to kill a dragon—one hit from it would probably have taken her out. Once the beast had killed her, it would’ve

returned to its home in the forest, and life would have continued on as normal.

Reality and suppositions should not be lumped together. However, I was glad that Nora understood the fact that she had put herself and the lives of the villagers in danger.

After I patted Nora's back and stroked her hair for twenty minutes or so as she sobbed, the flow of her tears finally started to ebb.

"I—I put the people in Riberry in danger," she said miserably. "I didn't mean to, but I did."

"It's all right, Nora," I soothed.

"But—"

"The Frontier Countess is a kind person. I'm sure she'll be very understanding."

"You're lying!" Nora snapped. "She's a noble after all! What's one commoner's head being chopped off gonna bother her? There's no death penalty in Mert, I know, but she'll kill me—"

A sudden knock sounded, and without any other preamble, the door opened.

The woman who came into the room had long black hair tied in a high ponytail—truly resembling a horse's tail—and wore the uniform of a knight in the Eastern Corps. She let out a deep sigh, knitting her brows together as she looked at me and Nora. She was Countess Beatrix Carlton, and close behind her was her husband Sir Leonard.

"Bea," he said after a moment. "You're going to scare them, looking like that."

"What kind of heartless brute do you take me for?" the countess asked, ignoring her husband's words. "Am I some sort of tyrant who puts her people to death at the drop of a hat? If that is what you think, then I am vexed and sad, and also a deplorable ruler."

I stood and gave a knight's salute. Nora hurriedly stood beside me and bowed her head low.

"We are not in a public setting. You two can relax," Sir Leonard said. He spoke in a more polite manner than his wife did.

Countess Carlton was quiet for a moment. “You may be seated.”

She sat across from us, and Sir Leonard stood behind her. After realizing he would remain that way, I relaxed from my salute and urged Nora to sit. I stood just behind her to the side and gave a slight bow of my head.

“Lady Lina,” Countess Carlton began, “I am quite happy that your husband has helped us understand and solve so many problems lately. However, he has been working at my beck and call, and in turn that has also caused you to run about here and there. I apologize.”

“There has been no issue,” I replied.

“You might have once been used to knightly duties, but I only want you to rest while you are in my territory. I truly am sorry.”

“I am spending my days here quite peacefully. I thank you for your concern.”

The Frontier Countess nodded, giving me a beautiful smile, then turned her gaze to Nora, who was hunched over in her seat. “Now then, your name is Nora, right? Just a few moments ago, I got to hear your real opinion on the matter at hand.”

“I-I’m sorry,” Nora mumbled.

“I have no idea what you’re apologizing for, but I want you to listen to what I have to say.”

The countess crossed her long, uniform-clad legs and spread out the documents she had been holding on to the table. The papers seemed to be about both the plague that occurred in Rondale twenty-two years ago, and the outbreak being dealt with now in Riberry. The words on the page were somewhat squarish, written in a handwriting that seemed to be Joshua’s.

“Twenty-two years ago, a plague broke out in Rondale Village of Aston territory, and the majority of residents lost their lives,” Countess Carlton said. “The death rate was quite high—only three people survived, one of them being Lady Lina here. This information comes from the reports at the time of the incident.”

She then placed a testimonial with Cody’s signature on the table that stated

the deaths in Rondale and the sickness in Riberry were caused by the poison from a dragon's corpse. According to his research, the sheephorn purple dragon had been an adult specimen that died in the forest on the north side of Riberry, and its poison had killed the Rondale villagers, who had lived downriver. Then, its offspring—still in an egg as it had died alongside its parent—had surfaced in a recent landslide which had broken the shell and caused the poisonous remains of the embryonic dragon inside to spill out. As a result, the Riberry residents who had gone into the forest had fallen ill.

“Nora,” Countess Carlton went on, “as you were saying earlier, a mercenary group called the Indigo Cyclones, which was led by your grandfather, killed a dragon in that forest.”

Nora did not reply.

“Slaying a dragon without preparing to purify the area and without a black knight in attendance is against the law. Do you now know why? Your grandfather and his group killed that dragon, and as a result died by its poison. The particulars about why they were hunting it are uncertain, and we'll never know unless we happen to find someone who was aware of the situation at the time. Your granduncle, the previous leader of the Indigo Cyclones, is now elderly and no longer in a condition to carry on a conversation.”

By “uncertain,” I assumed that she meant there were several possibilities that could have occurred. The mercenaries might have killed the dragon for its valuable parts, or encountered it while hunting down a separate monster. There could have been many other reasons. Items that looked like traps that could have been used against dragons had also been found in the woods, but their true nature remained unclear.

“I don't know who may have told you otherwise,” Countess Carlton continued, “but atonement for crimes is undertaken by the individual who committed them—not their family members or other relations. Therefore, Nora, as you have no connection to what happened twenty-two years ago, you will not be punished.”

Nora hesitated. “But—”

“Yes, you did commit a crime. You attacked a dragon yourself, wounded it,

and lured it out of its dwelling. You attempted to slay it, but of course, that was impossible for you.”

I agreed with her words, and Sir Leonard nodded. Nora was likely the only one who thought that she might have been able to enact vengeance upon the dragon. Unfortunately for her, she could not use magic, nor did she have any aptitude for combat—and she was clumsy.

“As a consequence of your actions, Riberry Village may well have come to harm had it not been for the black knights,” Countess Carlton continued. “I will not hold you responsible or culpable for this speculative portion, but you will answer for hurting the dragon, luring it out of its home, and provoking a battle that did not need to be fought.”

“I understand.” Nora nodded seriously, acting more her age than she ever had before.

“However, you are sixteen and still a minor. Until recently, you have been but an immature child living under the protection of your guardians with no opportunity to receive an education, and in an environment with no one to challenge your shortsightedness. In light of this, I will pronounce the following punishment for you.”

Countess Carlton paused. Nora waited.

“You will participate in purifying the dragon poison from the Rondale ruins and the surrounding area, as well as restoring its orchard. You are to do this until you reach the age of adulthood. You will be assigned a new guardian, and you will follow his instructions.”

Restoring that vast orchard that had been growing wild for twenty-two years would primarily require mowing, weeding, pruning, replacing the soil, and fertilizing. It would be a lot of work for someone to do for free. However, Nora already knew what she had done and what danger might have come about from her actions—she would probably prefer to work without pay.

“Your Excellency, who will be her guardian?” I asked.

“Enter,” Sir Leonard ordered in response, and Joshua came into the room, followed by two men.

One man appeared to be a soldier; he was tall and large, and seemed to be in his late fifties. The other could have been on the cusp of his twenties—it was hard to tell if he was already a young man or not.

“This is the current head of the Indigo Cyclones and his son,” Countess Carlton explained. “They are Nora’s...um...relatives,” she finished lamely.

“Nora’s second uncle and her second cousin,” Joshua supplied after a moment.

The two newcomers bowed their heads deeply. They certainly looked like Nora’s relatives, as they had matching tan skin, light brown hair, and chestnut eyes.

“Uncle Aaron, Nico...” Nora murmured.

“Been a while, Nora,” said the man in his fifties, Aaron.

It hadn’t seemed that Nora got along with her immediate family, so for a moment I was worried about her relationship with these men who were more distantly related. However, her uncle Aaron spoke warmly, and he seemed happy to see her. Next to him, Nora’s second cousin Nico let out a sigh of relief. It put my mind at ease to see that at least these people seemed to care for her.

“Leadership has changed to a new generation, and at this stage I fear it’s too late to talk about something that happened over twenty years ago,” said Countess Carlton. “However, they have given us their full cooperation in the reconstruction of Rondale. Monsters appear in that area; with the Indigo Cyclones guarding the site, work can continue safely.”

“We understand that the original incident was caused by some of our members, and we also deeply apologize for the trouble that our young relative has caused,” the mercenary captain said. “We would be happy to do anything possible to make amends.”

The Frontier Countess nodded, then turned her gaze to Nora. “Your second cousin will be your guardian until you become an adult. I hear you’re quite a tomboy even for a commoner—I don’t want you doing anything rash. All right?”

“Y-Yes, ma’am,” Nora replied.

With the discussion over, the Frontier Countess, Sir Leonard, the two mercenaries, and Joshua all left. Nora, her second cousin, and I remained in the room.

“I was surprised to hear what happened, Nora,” Nico said. “I’m disappointed that you didn’t listen to us when we told you that it’s useless to try hunting dragons, but I’m glad that you—and everyone around you—are all right.”

With that, he rapped his knuckles against her head, producing a solid thunking sound.

“Ouch!”

“I know you don’t get along with your folks, but didn’t we tell you to come to us if you left home? Instead, you went off all by yourself. You worried everyone else in the Indigo Cyclones too, you know.”

“S-Sorry,” she stuttered. “I could only think about getting revenge. When I realized no one would help me fight a dragon, I thought I had to go it alone.”

“You’re a dummy.”

“Sorry. Anyway...” Nora paused. “What should I do from now on?”

I helped Nico explain about the Rondale ruins and what Nora should do there. When we were done, Nora chirped, “Okay, got it.”

For the next two years until Nora became an adult, she would be doing a lot of work to help restore Rondale. It would certainly be a tough undertaking, and it could lead to a series of challenging experiences for the young girl.

However, as I watched her talking to Nico with a determined expression on her face, I knew that she would be all right as long as she had kind relatives and companions among the mercenaries.

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“Now then, that’s one more problem solved!” Her Excellency the Frontier Countess declared, nodding to herself with a satisfied expression as we walked down the hallway to her office. Her steps were light as if she were in a good mood, and her long black ponytail swung side to side.

“Your Excellency, is it truly okay to leave the circumstances surrounding the

slain dragon alone?” asked the head of the Indigo Cyclones. He walked at the back of the group, shoulders hunched.

“What, did you want me to make a ruling on that?” she asked.

“No, that’s not it,” he replied. “While I am thankful that you are leaving the reason the dragon was slain as unknown, anyone would have assumed that it was hunted for its horns, talons, and other parts.”

“Well, that might have been the case. However, your outfit’s former head, Caleb, is no longer alive. People who have crossed the rainbow bridge do not return. Unless we are able to speak to the person in question, Captain, we will not grasp his reasoning.”

“I understand.”

“Since you do, let’s think ahead,” Countess Carlton responded. “Aston territory’s reputation has suffered for a long time, and as a result has become impoverished. Now that we have clarified the true cause of the trouble, we can begin the restoration. I look forward to your support, Captain.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am,” Captain Aaron said, voice shaking as he lowered his head.

For the time being, the Indigo Cyclones would be based in Riberry. Their duty was to protect and assist in the village’s development. They would have to reduce the amount of mercenary work that they undertook during this time, but their efforts guarding and reclaiming the land might become a new career for them overall.

At any rate, Mert and its surroundings had been without war for decades now. It was a peaceful place, and mercenary work had been limited to slaying monsters and escorting travelers. I assumed that the more members a mercenary company had, the more difficult it must be to manage them and make a living. One could only hope that things went well.

Her Excellency the Frontier Countess suddenly stopped outside the door to her office. “Let’s collect donations at the New Year’s celebration that will be held next week. I did receive a letter from Earl Aston asking for permission to raise funds for his land’s restoration during the party, after all.”

Sir Leonard and I glanced at each other. Countess though she might have

been, she could act like a queen ruling over her territory at times, and say things out of the blue occasionally.

“Once the truth of the illnesses from now and twenty-two years ago comes to light, the people who have been saying that Aston’s crops are inedible because the land is tainted by disease will come to their senses—especially after they learn that the country will be giving Aston monetary support,” she declared. “There’s no such thing as too much money for reconstruction.”

The party next week would be a gathering of all the nobles living in the region to celebrate the new year. It would certainly draw a large crowd. Once the central government and the Frontier Countess announced the truth behind the outbreaks, it would be the best place to collect donations to fund the recovery efforts.

“Now then, Joshua, I have a request to make of you,” she continued.

“Yes?”

“I am aware that this is in poor taste, and I apologize in advance. However, I *must* ask this of you.”

I had a hunch that something was wrong—it was a matter of course, considering that she felt sorry for me yet still was going to speak about the issue.

I hesitated. “What is the matter? I admit that I don’t want to hear it, but I will listen.”

“Oh, Joshua!” she blurted, exasperated. “You’re really good at what you do—won’t you stay here and work for me rather than go back to the capital? Not on a temporary transfer, mind you! Leave that blackhearted prime minister and come help me and Leonard!”

“Where in that request,” I said haltingly, “is the part where you feel sorry for asking that of me?”

“I, well...” she mumbled before entering her office.

I had not been joking when I asked the question. I held my head in my hands.

Chapter 5: The Rural Couple and the New Year's Bash

Kingdom of Mert Calendar Year 787

One year in the Mert calendar was divided into twelve months. The new year began in the first month, while new periods in public institutions and schools began every year in the ninth month. Each of the five regions—north, south, east, west, and central—held celebrations to welcome the new year at the end of the first month. The royal family also hosted a spring celebration in the royal capital at the end of the third month.

With the eastern New Year's celebration just a day away, Countess Carlton's fortified manse was a frenzy of preparations. Servants and cooks were busy setting up, and even noblewomen who would be in attendance were occupied with refining their looks and fixing their hair—or at least they were supposed to be.

Without a word of advance warning, a guest arrived at the house Joshua and I lived in here in Countess Carlton's territory. It was only the second time that I had ever met this visitor. The first occasion had been in the courtyard of the Aston capital treatment center, when she had appeared out of nowhere and spoke without any restraint before going home. Just like then, she said whatever she liked.

"My, this looks just like a plebian's house," Lady Florence huffed. "My sympathies go out to Joshua for living in such a shabby hovel. I could never do it. If Joshua is to continue his temporary assignment here, Lotte and I simply must return to the royal capital to live there. Her education and social life is of paramount importance. I must tell Joshua that we need to buy a residence in the nobles' district."

"Lady Florence Hughley," I greeted her, keeping my tone incredibly polite. "What matter brings you here today?"

She was as beautiful as she had been the last time we met. She wore a shiny day dress that was beige with an orange tint, and opal jewelry that glittered in a rainbow of colors. She held a white folding fan decorated with delicate fretwork.

The rented house Joshua and I lived in together was small. It had been prepared for the civil servants who worked under the Frontier Countess to use, and it was not as large or luxurious as one might expect a high-ranking aristocrat to live in. Of course, the parlor we sat in was proportionately small, and only plain furniture sat inside. Lady Florence, what with her extravagant day dress, jewelry, and complicated-looking updo, seemed out of place amid the utilitarian room.

“Well, I’m sure you have heard about me from that girl—Earl Aston’s wife.” Lady Florence concealed her mouth with her white folding fan, but her eyes flared with hatred for Lady Margot. “While I am overjoyed that she fell in status from a marquis’s family member to the wife of a backwater earl, the detestable fact that she is Joshua’s blood-related sister will, lamentably, never change. A while ago, I went out of my way to visit Joshua, only for her to turn me away because he was ‘not available.’”

That was right—Lady Margot had told me that, even before my sojourn in Aston, she had driven off the older woman from the Aston manse. Lady Florence had not been discouraged however, and had appeared again to berate me in the treatment center garden before once again being chased away by my sister-in-law.

“She should be living a quiet, meek life as a backwater noble, but she has not yet shed the pride she had as daughter of the Granwells—what a haughty demeanor she has,” Lady Florence sneered.

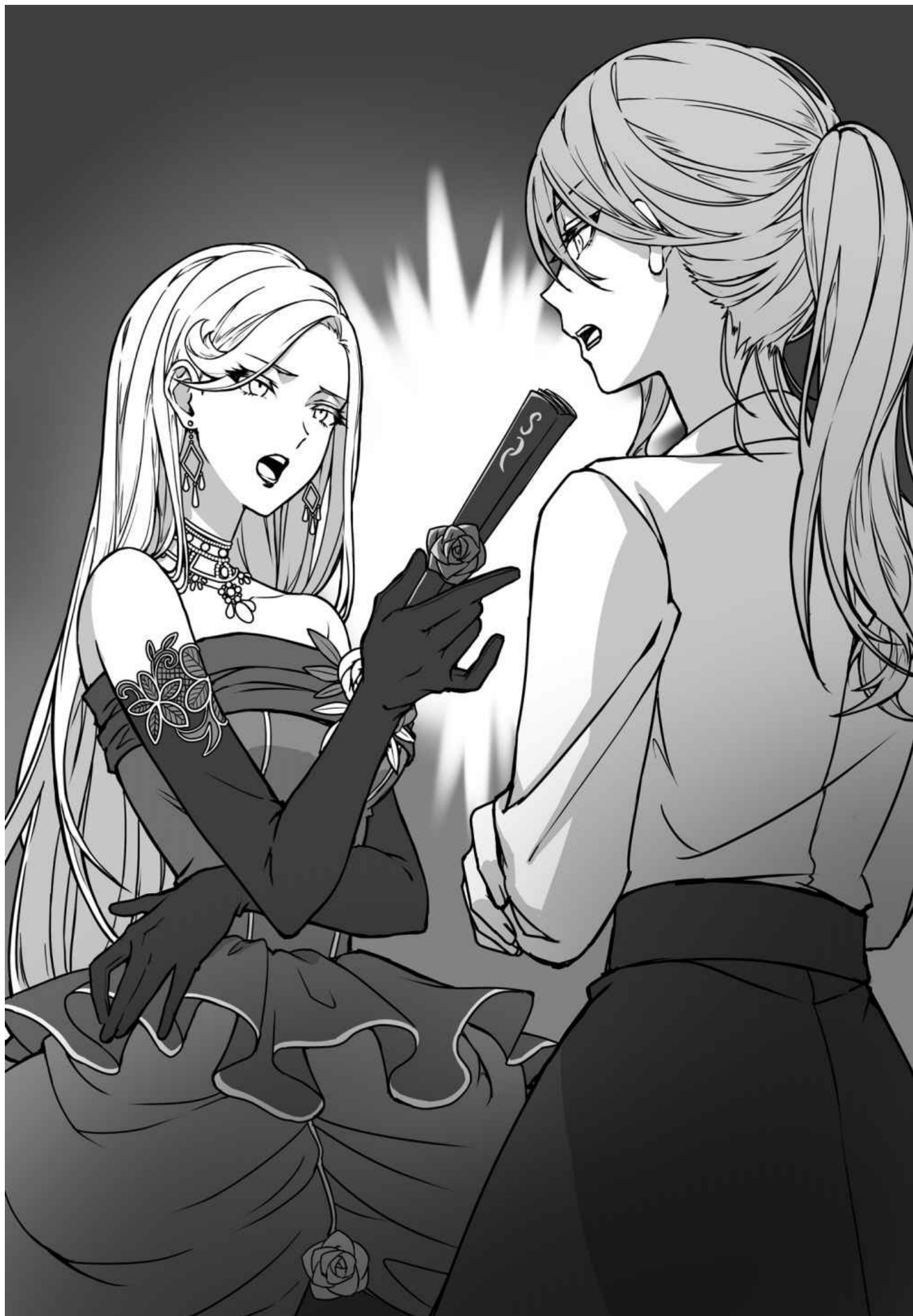
“What matter,” I repeated pointedly, “brings you here today?”

Lady Florence paused. “You’ve yet to figure it out?”

How could I have “figured out” anything? The woman had appeared here without warning, forced her way into the house, mocked our lifestyle, and spoke ill of Lady Margot without doing anything else at all.

“What is it you would like me to understand?” I asked.

Lady Florence let out a deliberate exhale and closed her fan before pointing it at me. “You simply must hurry up and divorce Joshua.”



I had expected such a demand.

“I informed you of this before, in great detail and quite thoroughly, mind you: you are not fit for Joshua. If you could not glean that from my teachings, then you truly are an imbecile. Now, you must divorce Joshua at once!”

I had already decided upon my answer. “I refuse.”

Startled, Lady Florence stopped breathing for a moment. Apparently she had not envisioned a rejection to her order. “P-Pardon?!”

“I said I refuse,” I replied. “I will not consider divorcing him.”

“You—you will not?”

“I will not. I have no plans to divorce him,” I explained.

“You insolent plebeian!”

She leaped up from the simple sofa and flung her folding fan at me. I caught it with one hand and placed it on the table. It had a rather large wooden monture and, when it was unfolded, the leaf showed off delicate fretwork of a jubilant little bird. It certainly looked very expensive.

As Lady Florence looked at her folding fan on the table, her face turned red with anger. “Y-You dare not listen to me?! I gave you that warning out of the goodness of my heart and you disregard it so?!”

“And what was that ‘warning’ in regard to?” I asked.

“I had no plans to torment and humiliate you had you listened to me!” she snapped. “You could have walked away from this without incident. But now—now I will not forgive you!”

Lady Florence snatched up her folding fan and stomped toward the exit with an almost unladylike stride. Then she put her hand on the half-open door and turned around.

“You will regret this—Joshua will surely choose me as his bride! I’m going to *make* him choose me!”

With those vitriolic words, she flounced out of the room in frustration. Before I could even see her off, she departed from the house. Immediately after, the

carriage that had been parked out front started off down the street toward the shopping district.

“Lady Lina, are you all right?”

Ms. Ada had come to do the housekeeping. She nervously peeked into the parlor to check on me.

“I’m fine,” I replied. “I apologize for causing a fuss.”

“Do not worry—there are many noblewomen like that. I’m used to it,” Ms. Ada said. “You must be tired. I’ve prepared tea and snacks in the dining room.”

“Thank you very much.”

I left the parlor and went to the dining room. On the table were tea and tarts made with egg. The snacks’ sweet, light scent filled the room.

“Regardless of how used to it I am, I still can’t believe that there are people just like bang snaps,” Ms. Ada noted.

I could understand why she would compare Lady Florence to a bang snap, which burst when thrown on the ground. As soon as the noblewoman realized she wasn’t going to get her way, she likewise exploded with anger.

“It’s absolutely inconceivable that Lord Joshua would divorce you only to marry her,” Ms. Ada added, while looking through the doorway back into the parlor at the dress left in the corner.

Joshua had handpicked the garment from a dress shop for me to wear at the New Year’s celebration. It was green, with plentiful lace and embroidery on the torso, and a beautiful skirt that flowed from the waistline. Joshua had also gone to the jewelers to select jewelry that paired well with the dress. He bought a matching olivine and jade necklace and earrings, as well as a bracelet made of sparkling jade and amber magic stones.

Thanks to Joshua’s healing magic, the scars on my right forearm didn’t stand out anymore. The scars still remained, so he had also sent for makeup from a famous cosmetics store in the royal capital to help cover them up for me. I was quite happy that I would be able to wear the short gloves he had bought for me without having to worry about my old wounds showing.

Thinking about how he had bought all of these for me in his color, I knew we could never consider divorce.

“I do hope that tomorrow will go off without incident,” Ms. Ada said, shaking her head as she poured a cup of tea for me.

“I as well,” I said, taking a seat in the dining room. I nibbled on the fragrant egg tart and sipped my tea.

I was deeply worried that tomorrow’s New Year’s party would incur some sort of unpleasantness. That morose thought caused the tea to taste more bitter than usual.

A carriage came to the house to pick me up. I boarded it and headed to the Frontier Countess’s fortress where the New Year’s party was being held. After checking in at the entrance, I was leisurely escorted up the stairs that led to the large hall which served as the venue.

The fortress’s hall was enormous. Massive chandeliers which glittered with yellowish and bluish light dangled from the high ceiling. Desserts and hors d’oeuvres had been set up in the corners, and servants walked to and fro serving colorful drinks.

While conversation was the core of the New Year’s party rather than dancing, a band was performing relaxing music. The bright yet gentle lighting combined with the calming tunes to fill the entire hall with a peaceful atmosphere, leaving me with such a sense of relief that I actually sighed.

“There’s no need to be so tense,” said my escort.

“I apologize,” I replied. “I’m not used to such places.”

The man’s name was Terrance Burroughs, and he was the son of an earl. He led me to a chair off in one corner of the venue so I could take a seat. I didn’t use my cane at formal events, which did cause a burden on my leg as well as on whoever was accompanying me.

“Please rest assured that I will not abandon you,” he replied. He smiled wryly. “Though I do apologize that you must endure my company rather than your

husband's."

Lord Terrance was a fine young man with a gentle air, blond hair the color of honey, and blue eyes. He was the younger cousin of Countess Carlton and an erudite high-level black magic user who had graduated top of his class from a government university in a neighboring country.

For generations, many of the Burroughs family had been knights and mages in the Eastern Corps, he had explained to me. His uncle was even the husband of the previous countess. Lord Terrance had no aptitude for martial arts, though he had a natural talent for modern black magic, a type of offensive magic somewhat similar to the old magic used by black knights. Though not a black knight himself, he was immersed in the study of the workings and origins of the old magic that they used.

"Think nothing of it. In fact, I thank you very much for escorting me under such sudden circumstances."

"Thank you," he insisted, "for allowing me the honor of attending to an esteemed black knight. When the countess ordered me to take Lord Leewell's place, well, I thought your husband would kill me with his gaze alone—young Lord Alexis also glowered at me. I do wish you could have seen their expressions, Lady Lina."

I could gather why Joshua had glared at Lord Terrance, but I couldn't fathom why Countess Carlton's son, Lord Alexis, would do the same.

"It is, perhaps, better that you don't understand," Lord Terrance added when he noticed my confusion. "Lord Alexis is in quite the unfortunate position."

I paused. "Is that so?"

There was surely some hidden truth in this perplexing conversation. As I thought about this, Lord Terrance received a glass of fruit-flavored water from a servant and handed it to me. The liquid inside was a light pink, and had the sweet-and-sour scent of berries.

As I enjoyed the aroma and taste of the drink, I noticed that the people around me were glancing at me and giving me rude stares, while whispering to each other about something or other. At first I thought this was just my

imagination, but after I met the eyes of several people, I knew that I was correct.

“Hm?” I murmured.

I wondered if the people around me were gossiping about my attendance here at the New Year’s party despite my being born a commoner. There was also the high chance that they were talking about Lady Florence Hughley as well. I felt sorry for Lord Terrance, but I thought it might be better for me to spend the celebration as an invisible wallflower until it was time to go home.

“I apologize,” Lord Terrance said suddenly. “This is my fault.”

“Huh?” I asked, confused. “What do you mean?”

Lord Terrance shook his head before draining his glass of its orange-colored, fruit-flavored water.

“I am a relative of Her Excellency the Frontier Countess, yes, but I am also abnormal in the fact that my engagement was revoked,” he explained. “And since I’m attending the New Year’s celebration, everyone is gossiping about me. I am deeply sorry that people are giving you odd looks because of it.”

“You?” I asked after a moment. “Your engagement was revoked?”

“Yes. Have you heard about the current trend in the Yulekirk kingdom—the True Love Bug?”

“O-Oh,” I said in realization. “You don’t mean that it happened to you too?”

Lord Terrance placed his empty glass on a silver tray that a servant carried, then picked up a new drink, this one filled with a cloudy white fruit-flavored water.

“I studied abroad at the Kingdom of Yulekirk’s government-sponsored university,” he began. “My focus was on old magic, and I thought that I would like to live my life as a researcher there after I graduated. As I’m the third child in my family, I will not be succeeding my father. There was a teacher at the university who researched old magic. He suggested that I join his family. I would marry his daughter and then continue my studies uninterrupted. So long as I could keep doing that, I would have been happy. I wasn’t interested in anything

about her—not her age, looks, or hobbies—so I would have let her do anything she wanted so long as we had a contractual marriage. So, my teacher introduced us and we got engaged.”

“So,” I said slowly, “that was when the ‘bug’ became contagious?”

“Yes,” he replied. “You see, my disinterest was a problem for her. I would have tea with her and take her out twice a month, and even get her gifts for her birthday or for other special occasions. However, she was the type of person who wanted someone to always be with her.”

So that was the case. His fiancée had wanted frequent dates with him so that they could get closer, while he had wanted to do only the bare minimum as her betrothed so that he could throw himself into his research. Neither approach was necessarily wrong in the aristocratic world—they simply weren’t compatible.

“She found someone who wanted to be with her all the time, and she said she was in love with him—true love. Soon she announced that she wanted to revoke our engagement. As for me, I just wanted to be in an environment where I could do my research, so I didn’t have any argument against it.”

“B-But wouldn’t you have rather had the engagement dissolved?” I asked.

There was a critical difference between *revoking* a marriage or engagement and *dissolving* it. In a revocation, one party unilaterally withdrew from a relationship, implying the other party was at fault. On the other hand, dissolving an engagement was done by mutual agreement, and no dishonor accrued to either party. I had heard that this distinction had great significance among the nobility, with the latter being greatly preferred.

“My former fiancée and her lover were quite fired up. We were at a soiree being held by a high-ranking noble when she decided to revoke the engagement. It felt like I was watching a stage play,” Lord Terrance admitted, “only I was one of the actors—playing an interloper who was trying to tear apart the tragic lovers. I imagine everyone around us was cheering for their love.”

I had no doubt that the audience must have been full of pity to see the star-crossed couple—so deeply in love as they were—pulled apart by an

emotionless political marriage.

Lord Terrance continued. “As it was a large gathering and there were many witnesses, neither I nor my teacher could do anything about it. So, my former fiancée revoked our engagement. I truly wanted to remain in Yulekirk to continue studying old magic, but my parents and uncle were so incredibly angry with me—and still are—that I feared they would come after me with pitchforks. I returned here to Mert before a family war could break out.”

“That sounds awful,” I said slowly, astonished.

“Yes, truly awful,” he agreed. “After all was said and done, the True Love Bug going around the Kingdom of Yulekirk caused my engagement to be revoked, and I came back here as ‘damaged goods,’ you could say, and that fuels the rumors about me. I do apologize for the trouble.”

“There is no need to apologize,” I replied. “At any rate, the True Love Bug sounds terrifying.”

I sipped on the now somewhat lukewarm berry-flavored water. It was a cute color and tasted sweet, making it very delicious, but it couldn’t slake my thirst. I wondered if this was the fault of listening to Lord Terrance’s story about Yulekirk.

“Well, at least I made it out all right.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. I would say that the two who have come down with the most infamous case of that rampant True Love Bug in Yulekirk are Earl Balliol and his lover. Compared to their story, I got out almost scot-free.”

I thought I had heard the name Balliol somewhere before. However, just as I had been about to recall that piece of information, a voice full of disappointment surprised me.

“Honestly, I do hope you remember what I told you!”

“Lady Margot, Earl Aston, hello,” I greeted them. They must have approached us while I was lost in thought.

“Lady Lina,” my brother-in-law replied. “I’m glad to see you are well.”

Lady Margot wore a beautiful, shimmering blue day dress, and jewelry made with sapphires and pearls. Earl Aston, who was escorting her, was clad in a black suit adorned with deep green cuffs and lapel pins, and had a dark red kerchief in his front pocket. The two looked quite lovely together.

“I’m glad that you were able to come,” I said.

I stood from the chair and bowed, and the two reciprocated. Afterward, they greeted Lord Terrance, who seemed to be an acquaintance of theirs.

“Lina,” Lady Margot then said, “do you remember the fine details of the conversation we had together? Do try.”

“I apologize. I do know that I have heard the name Balliol before, but I can’t remember fully,” I said, sitting back down.

At my honest confession, Earl Aston smiled warmly. He kindly defended me by saying, “It isn’t as easy to remember as Maggie might say it is, I imagine.”

“Earl Balliol was *that woman’s* former husband, you know,” Lady Margot pointed out.

“O-Oh! That’s right!” Lady Margot had told me about him when we had been having tea at the Aston estate.

“The Balliol family is in the arms manufacturing business, I believe,” Earl Aston noted.

Lord Terrance nodded. “There is a mine in their territory where they can collect high quality copper and iron—with such natural resources, they can produce armaments quite profitably. They specialize in both weapons—like swords and spears—and armor. Apparently the current Earl Balliol entered into a contractual marriage with a Mert noble to facilitate trade in that sphere. However, he had a lover before his marriage, and she bore him a son—that was how he fell ill with the True Love Bug. However, he had a daughter with his wife, you see, and she had also just borne him a son...”

Lord Terrance had trailed off, so I prompted him to continue. “A newborn son?”

“He...*dealt with*...the newborn and ended up expelling his daughter from the

family upon his divorce,” Lord Terrance explained. “Afterward, he officially brought his lover and their son into the Balliols. The Kingdom of Yulekirk has quite a few societal differences between the genders, you see, so all successors, civil officials, mages, scholars, and teachers are men. They couldn’t be harsh to the woman who had borne Earl Balliol a *son*.”

“But you said that his wife had just borne him a son too,” I pointed out slowly.

“That’s true. However, in the face of Earl Balliol’s ‘true love,’ well...the baby was only in the way,” he replied. “It’s an alarming tale.”

My throat went bone dry. I drank the last of my fruit-flavored water and placed the glass on a servant’s tray.

Was Lord Terrance implying that Lady Florence’s newborn son had been *killed* by his father? If being bound by “true love” caused one to take a tiny life, did it really deserve to be called such? It absolutely terrified me.

Someone called out to the room, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Announcing Her Excellency, Countess Beatrix Carlton, and Vice Commander of the Eastern Knights Corps, Leonard Carlton.”

Loud applause rang around the hall, and the Frontier Countess and her husband entered the venue at the head of the hall. Lord Terrance gave me his hand, and I accepted his offer of assistance to stand so I could clap.

The Frontier Countess wore a champagne-colored dress, a jasper necklace and matching earrings, and a hair ornament that swayed as she walked. Sir Leonard wore a black suit with a gold kerchief in his pocket that appeared to be made of the same cloth as his wife’s outfit, and his cuffs and lapel pin were adorned with jade as well. As the rulers of the eastern region and the mediators of the nobles living there, they certainly felt like royalty. They were a handsome couple quite suited for each other too, I thought as I applauded them.

Then the next guests appeared, and the announcer called out once more.

“Lady Florence Hughley and Viscount Joshua Leewell.”

Joshua escorted a radiantly smiling Lady Florence Hughley to the podium at the head of the hall. She wore a dazzling tulle dress of both cream and green, and glittering jewelry made of jade. Joshua wore a dark gray suit with blue

cuffs, and on his breast sat a corsage made of both beige and emerald cloth.

The sight gave me pause.

Joshua had told me that he couldn't escort me to the New Year's celebration tonight, as he had had a job to do which could not be avoided—the Frontier Countess and Sir Leonard had requested him specifically. He had apologized about it. That was why the countess's cousin, Lord Terrance, was escorting me instead. I had guessed that his job would be to escort another woman, and I had accepted that.

However, I hadn't anticipated that his job would be to escort *her*.

"Lady Hughley's family," the announcer continued, "runs the esteemed Hughley Trading Company, which distributes a great number of arms. The Hughley Trading Company is substantially revising its dealings with the five Knights Corps within our country, particularly with divisions that work in the outer regions. Once again, they are willing to assist..."

The introduction went on, with the audience growing excited to hear about the Hughley Trading Company's involvement with the Eastern Knights Corps. In a rural region such as this, stockpiling armaments as defense against dragons and other monsters was vital. It was only natural that an expansion of such aid and business be welcomed.

I thought it was likely that in exchange for this deal, Lady Florence had handpicked Joshua to be her escort at tonight's celebration. Normally, Joshua would have had the option to refuse, but he hadn't for the sake of the countess, the Eastern Knights Corps, and, by extension, the people of the eastern region. That was why the Frontier Countess had requested Joshua to escort Lady Florence, and the reason Joshua had apologized and appointed me another escort.

He had said there was a job he couldn't avoid—and it was escorting that woman.

Lady Florence stood close to Joshua. When she saw me from the podium, she seemed to giggle, smiling triumphantly as she leaned in closer toward my husband.

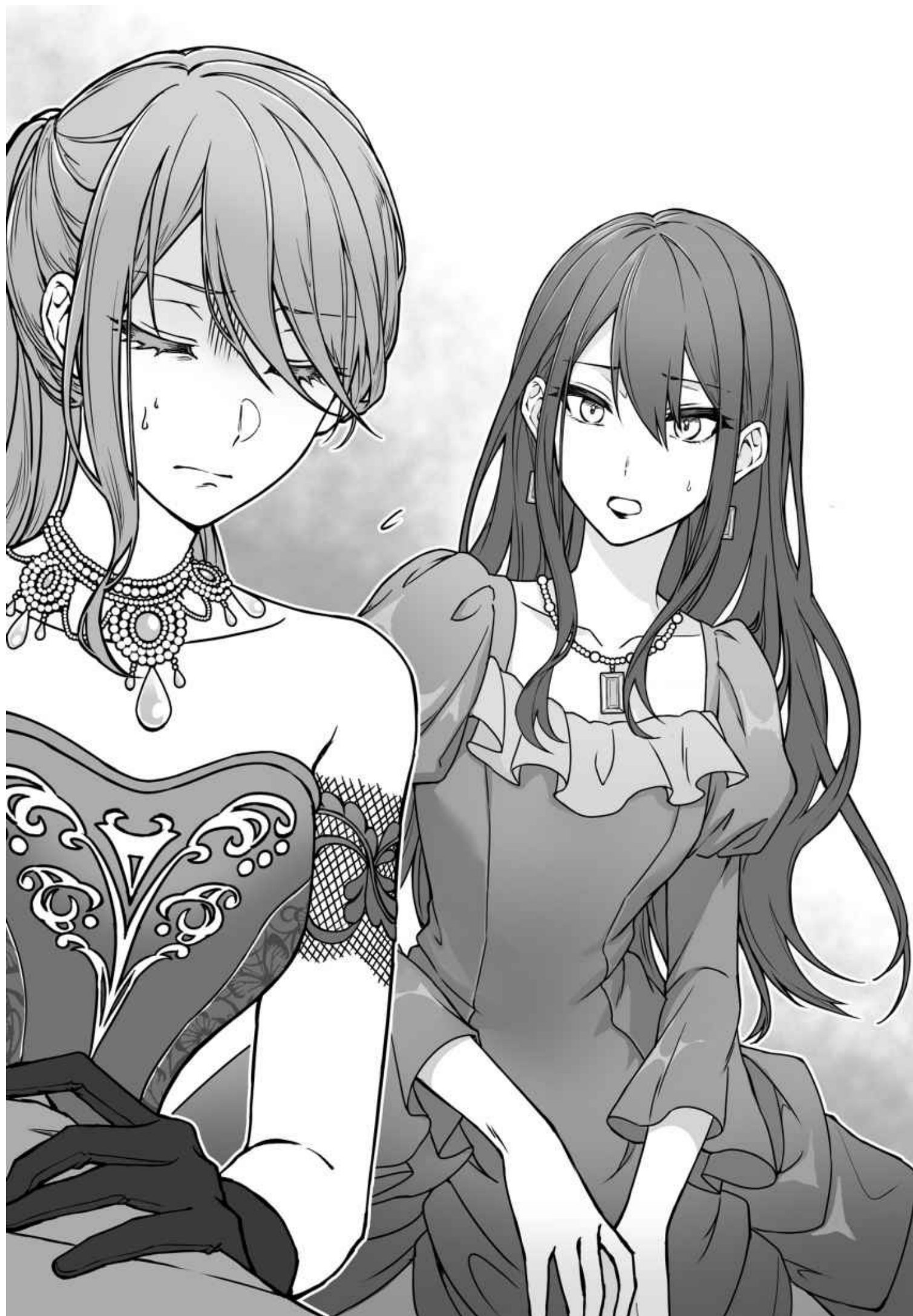
My body started to shake violently.

Thanks to Joshua's healing magic and massages on my right leg, I should have recovered enough to even be able to run, even if only a little. However, the strength left my limb and I felt as if my knee were about to give out, and I lurched forward.

"Lady Lina, are you all right? Hold on to me—I've got you."

Lord Terrance put his arm around me for support. Although all he did was research old magic and thus hadn't trained his body for combat of any kind, his grip was firm, keeping me stable.

"Lina, are you all right? Your face is pale," Lady Margot said. She and Earl Aston were looking at me worriedly.



“I-I apologize. Thank you, I’m all right,” I stammered.

“I’m your cane for tonight, Lady Lina,” Sir Terrance said with a smile. “Please lean on me as much as you need.”

In response, a smile naturally lifted my lips. He looked somewhat similar to the countess, being her relative, and a wonderfully kind aura surrounded him.

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In my student days, I was often told that I lacked facial expressions. While nowadays I had been hearing those kinds of words less and less, right now, I assumed that my face was as stiff and expressionless as a mask or a doll.

I went to the room where the charge I was to escort to the New Year’s celebration waited, and her attendant led me inside.

“It has been quite some time, Joshua. You did not reply to my letters, nor did you speak to me over the prismaphone, and we haven’t even been able to meet in person,” Lady Hughley prattled. “You’re a cruel man.”

I did not respond.

The inside of the room was so permeated with heavy perfume that it clogged my nose. The attendant offered me a seat on the sofa before placing tea and snacks on the table, but I couldn’t identify either.

The charge I was to escort tonight was my former fiancée, whom I had not seen for ten years. Since then, she had shed her girlhood and was now a full-fledged noblewoman. At first glance she certainly was beautiful, but nothing about her moved my heart.

“As soon as I returned to Mert, I went to your townhouse in the royal capital,” Lady Hughley explained. “I was astonished to see that a completely different family was living there. I looked into the matter and found that you were in Carlton territory, but when I went to call upon you, you had gone to Aston! I was once again truly surprised.”

I knew that my former fiancée had been married and divorced abroad before returning home. Just before the split, her newborn son had died under mysterious circumstances—there were rumors that her now ex-husband was

somehow involved.

While I pitied her for the unusual circumstances around her divorce and the death of her youngest child, I had no other feelings for her. The letters she had sent to me insinuated that she wanted to reconcile, but they had only caused me displeasure.

“And who would have thought that little Miss Margot would have married a backwater earl?” Lady Hughley droned on. “She probably had no other choice than to marry a nobleman from out in the countryside. She must have been pleased to even get an offer for marriage.”

While Lady Hughley was right, my sister was currently very happy living out in the east. She had a good relationship with her husband, had been blessed with a son to inherit the estate, and was well-liked by the Aston people. Lady Hughley had no right to criticize Margot. Her doing so only made my displeasure grow.

“That girl,” Lady Hughley bleated with a huff. “The moment she saw me, she grew terribly angry and told me to leave—that she wouldn’t let me see you! Considering her place as Countess Aston, she was quite cruel not to invite me into her home. You always called her your good-for-nothing sister, to which I quite agree.”

As if remembering something, she clapped her hands together and stood from the sofa before revolving in a circle. Her tulle dress for the celebration fluttered.

“How do you like my outfit? I had it made to order just for today, using both your colors and mine. Don’t you think it’s gorgeous?”

Apparently it was fashionable in the neighboring Kingdom of Yulekirk for married or engaged couples to wear clothes that showed off both people’s colors. Her dress had both rouge and creamy beige accents—the dark red from her—as well as with green, which was my color.

She had not asked me in advance for permission to do this and instead had worn the dress with no regard for anyone else. My displeasure steadily increased.

“Aw, your face is so grim—won’t you lighten up? At tonight’s New Year’s celebration, we’ll be partners. Is your wife staying home today? Or are you having someone else keep her company at the party?”

My former fiancée laughed, and her smile was utterly ugly and twisted.

“Lady Hughley, that is of no concern to you,” I replied.

“Oh, is that what you think? In fact, it is my concern. Also, won’t you call me Flo? ‘Lady Hughley’ is so stiff.”

“I would prefer you call me by Viscount Leewell or my job title rather than my given name,” I said stiffly in return. “And while my sister may be foolish, this is not the occasion for gossip. I ask for your understanding in the matter.”

“Oh, Joshua, you silly! You’re as mean as ever, taking up such a formal tone with someone you’re so close to.”

I was *not*, in fact, close to her. She was my ex-fiancée, which was more or less the same to me as a distant acquaintance. But just as they always had in the past, my words did not get through to her. Now I felt not just displeasure, but rising irritation.

“Joshua, you know I sent you so many letters,” Lady Hughley blathered on, sitting beside me and leaning in close. Her perfume was so pungent that it stung the back of my nose painfully. “Would you please divorce that girl and marry me instead? Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

“I sent you my refusal already.”

“Just give it some more thought. She’s no longer a black knight—there’s no reason to remain with her, is there? Besides, you only got married because it was the law.”

“That was—”

“I understand,” she interrupted. “You don’t have to say anything. I can understand why you couldn’t divorce her immediately—if you had, your reputation would have suffered! However, it’s been long enough. Besides, she hasn’t borne you any children, and that in itself is grounds for divorce.”

She leaned in obnoxiously close.

“It’s all right. I can have children—it’s a proven fact. I have an absolutely adorable child, and she would be so overjoyed to have a new father that she would hug you as soon as she saw you—she would be your daughter! Besides that, the Hughley Trading Company is bigger than it used to be, and it would be quite the asset to the Granwells.”

I pulled away from my ex-fiancée, seeking to escape. *“I refuse.”*

“Don’t say that—won’t you think of this from a nobleman’s standpoint? This can only be good.”

I could not, in fact, understand what would be “good” about *any* of this. I felt loathing for her rise within me.

If she wanted to use my title as a viscount against me to force me and Lina to divorce, then I didn’t need it anymore. My uncle had bestowed me the rank to give me an advantage—even if only a small one—as a royal civil servant, but now I wanted nothing to do with it.

“Please, Joshua.”

Just as I was about to reflexively raise my voice to repeat my refusal, the servant informed us that it was about time to head to the celebration.

Lady Hughley stood from the sofa and held out her hand. It was a demand for me to take it.

Under normal circumstances I would have refused her, but Her Excellency the Frontier Countess had asked me to escort this woman during the celebration. We had to prioritize the acquisition of arms, equipment, and other related items from the Hughley Trading Company for the Eastern Knights Corps. Thus, the job I had been given tonight was to fulfill Lady Hughley’s wishes as a means to protect the eastern region.

“Joshua,” Lady Hughley repeated.

I slowly stood from the sofa and took her proffered hand. Immediately, I felt a hot, sticky sensation run up my spine, and I felt as if I had been ensnared. I could hardly believe that back when we had been engaged, I had taken her hand, escorted her, and even danced with her.

“Oh right, I nearly forgot. Please wear this.”

At her lady’s words, the attendant brought over a tray that seemed to have been prepared in advance, as a small square box lay atop it.

“Put this on,” Lady Hughley dictated. “As you’re my partner for the night, you simply must have something of my color on you—as of now you have absolutely none. How cruel you can be!”

Inside the tiny box was a corsage. It was small, as it was for a man to use, decorated with glass, amber-colored beads to imitate berries, and held together with a ribbon. As a fashion accessory, it was quite well-made. However, it had been made with two colors—green and creamy beige, and I knew it had to have been made of the same cloth as Lady Hughley’s dress.

She pinned the corsage to my left breast. “Well, don’t you look dashing! It suits you well. Maid,” she nattered on, addressing her attendant rather disrespectfully, “don’t you think so too?”

“Yes, it suits him very well.”

Lady Hughley nodded to herself in satisfaction.

Despite the compliment that it looked good on me, I was anything but happy. The corsage was not real, as it was made from cloth and ribbon to resemble a flower, but it still stunk vilely of perfume. It made me want to retch.

Considering the chills and nausea I had already experienced during this short time with my ex-fiancée, I realized that since my marriage to Lina, both my mind and body could no longer handle any woman who wasn’t my wife.

Upon entering the grand hall, we were greeted with a great many smiles and thunderous applause. To be more accurate, however, it was not Lady Hughley who people were receptive to, but rather the armaments and materials that would follow after her at some later date. I doubted that she understood this properly, but she seemed quite happy at the excitement surrounding her entrance.

“I thank both the gods and the citizens that I am able to greet a new year with

each and every one of you! And let us vow to them that this year will be fruitful, peaceful, and safe!”

Her Excellency the Frontier Countess lifted up her glass of fruit wine to toast the occasion. In response, everyone in the hall raised their own glasses, cried out, “We vow!” in unison, and drank.

Most years, this would usually be the time for informal chats to commence, but this one would be a little different.

“Now then,” the countess continued, “we have an announcement to share with you all tonight.”

The noisy hall fell silent as everyone listened attentively to her report. She explained that the mysterious illness in Riberry had been caused by the poison which had leaked from a dead dragon’s egg, and that Aston was in the process of purifying the area. Then, she continued on to clarify that thanks to the discovery of the parent’s bones, we had uncovered that the origin of the plague twenty-two years ago in Rondale had also been dragon poison.

She concealed the part about how the mercenaries had been the ones to kill the beast. After all, they had already crossed the rainbow bridge and were unable to take responsibility. She also strove to avoid drawing attention to those involved in one way or another who were still alive.

“For a long time, Aston territory has been called a land of disease, and its earls and citizens have suffered for it. I’m sure they have been burdened with the baseless rumors that their crops were rife with illness and that eating their food brought sickness.”

I caught sight of people here and there in the audience with pale faces or who looked at each other with uneasy glances. However, it was impossible to condemn their actions with a generalized blanket statement. Since the origins of the illnesses had been unknown, they had acted in self-defense of their land and citizens by staying far from everything that had to do with Aston.

“Some of you may already have had inklings that these rumors misled people,” the countess continued. “But all questions have now been answered, and the government has decided to assist Aston with its recovery—we Carltons will also spare no expense to help. I am told that dragon poison does naturally

break down after ten or more years, and since over twenty have passed since the outbreak of illness in Rondale, that area has now been cleansed.”

The people in the hall started to stir. Whispers of “Really?” and “It might have been over twenty years ago, but it’s still dragon poison—is it really safe?” echoed around the room, and people glanced worriedly at each other. I could understand why they were concerned, considering that the people here couldn’t confirm whether the dragon poison really was naturally purified after a decade, and if that had actually happened in Rondale.

“I understand very well the unease you all feel,” Her Excellency the Frontier Countess said. “I, too, cannot declare that the area is safe just because it has been over twenty years since the incident. Therefore, I have decided that as a precautionary measure, the affected area will undergo the standard purification treatment.”

At her words, the people’s rising unease disappeared, replaced by expressions of relief.

“From now on, Earl Aston and his wife will focus on their territory’s road to recovery, and I hope that everyone will keep watch over them, support them, and cooperate with them in whatever way possible. It is my wish that the people of the east band together to face this.”

Gazes in the hall turned toward my brother-in-law and my sister, and the couple bowed their heads deeply.

Her Excellency the Frontier Countess gave a signal to the orchestra, and they started up a gentle New Year’s tune, prompting those in the hall to start chatting with each other. I was sure that a crowd of people would offer my sister and her husband aid in some shape or form, big or small. I hoped they could successfully gather the funds and manpower for the revitalization effort.

Her Excellency the Frontier Countess, dressed to the nines, came over alongside Sir Leonard, her escort. “Lady Hughley, I thank you deeply for participating in our eastern New Year’s celebration. There are no dances at this event—our tradition is to enjoy conversing. I must admit that it’s a shame that we won’t see your dancing.”

“Countess Carlton, the pleasure is all mine. Thank you for the invitation,” Lady

Hughley replied. “And allow me to express my gratitude for providing me with such a lovely partner as my escort, as I had none to attend to me. I will save dancing for the spring celebration held in the royal capital in the third month.”

“Then I will look forward to meeting you again in the royal capital,” Her Excellency replied. “At that time, you and your new escort for that event must tell me about the highs and lows of your relationship. Despite my appearance, I do love hearing sweet stories about how couples first meet.”

I had never heard about Her Excellency enjoying love stories. All she spoke of was how incredible some smith’s swords were, what to make with the tusks of the boar beast she had killed the previous day, or how she wanted a new reference book on monsters.

“My, Countess Carlton, you must have some incredible stories of your own! I’m sure of it! Don’t you agree with me, Joshua?”

Lady Hughley pressed against me in a clingy manner, and a shiver ran up my spine.

“Who cares what you think?” I muttered automatically, but my ex-fiancée completely ignored me. She disregarded any words that went against her wishes, as if they didn’t even reach her ears.

Her Excellency the Frontier Countess and Sir Leonard went to greet other guests, and Lady Hughley and I went to speak with different nobles.

Incidentally, I saw that Her Excellency had gone to my sister and her husband. Behind them was Lina, and at the sight of her, my expression relaxed. Seeing her clad in the green dress that I had chosen made me feel quite satisfied—it was a sign that she was my wife, not anyone else’s.

However, the one holding her close to support her was the detestable Lord Terrance.

I was well aware of his being Her Excellency the Frontier Countess’s younger cousin, as well as the fact that he came from an earl’s house. He was absorbed in his research and had no interest in the opposite sex—as evidenced by the fact that he had neither fiancée nor lover—and was therefore a safe choice to be Lina’s escort. He was better than the Carlton heir Lord Alexis, but still, Lord

Terrance was far too close to my wife.

Furthermore, Lord Terrance's eyes were also green, which made it look like the green dress that Lina wore was to match him. That made him more detestable.

"Hmm, she looks more presentable than I imagined," Lady Hughley said. Then, jabbing at what was on my mind, she smiled delightfully and spoke her next words in a barbed tone, "Is your wife's dress based off of your color, or that of the man escorting her?"

I thought that her smug grin was perfectly disgusting as I replied, "Mine, of course."

"Those two seem well matched. They're only a year apart in age, and their social standings are rather proportionate as well."

"What?" I asked haltingly. I never would have expected that she would call Lord Terrance and Lina "well matched."

"Don't you think so?" Lady Hughley asked. "He may be a younger cousin of Countess Carlton, but his station isn't very good considering that his engagement was revoked and he's the third son of an earl. And your wife might have been a black knight, but she has since left the Corps and is a commoner by birth. They balance each other out."

A black, murky sensation filled my chest. Finally, I said, "This is not a joke."

It didn't matter that Lord Terrance's engagement had been revoked, that he was the third son of an earl who would be able to leave his home and become a commoner, or that he and Lina had similar social standings—the one meant to stand next to Lina was me.

"Joshua?" Lady Hughley prompted.

"No matter how many times you speak against my marriage, I have no plans to divorce my wife. Therefore, I will not marry you."

At that, my ex-fiancée lifted her eyebrows. "Do think about it carefully. You and I are nobles, and would have a strategically beneficial marriage—we should prioritize that. Besides, we were formerly engaged, so it's not just our families'

interests, but also our own feelings that matter.”

“But I have *no* feelings for you.”

“Hm? What did you say, Joshua?”

It seemed that my ex-fiancée hadn’t heard my opinion of her over the sound of the crowd in the hall. She forcefully pressed against my body and cocked her head. I leaned back as much as she pushed toward me, so our distance to each other didn’t actually change, but it still made me uncomfortable.

“Aw, Joshua, come on—”

“Oh, is that so? You’ve already received recovery aid from Lady Lina?” came Her Excellency’s loud voice, interrupting Lady Hughley.

“Oh?” murmured some of the people around her.

“Yes,” replied Earl Aston. “Lady Lina is a relative of mine by marriage, but she was also born in Rondale village, which no longer exists. The purification and revitalization efforts in that area are also an effort to restore her hometown.”

“My sister-in-law is a former black knight, and gave us the entirety of the bonus she received from slaying a dragon,” added Margot. “Mind you, she did this back when the Riberry sickness was still thought to have been an outbreak of disease. Thanks to her, the villagers were saved. Furthermore, the black knight who investigated the dragon corpse was Sir Cody Macmillan, who studied under the same mentor that Lady Lina did—they were apprentices who were like brother and sister. Seeing them together, we could feel their sibling ties.”

I thought that, in all likelihood, my foolish sister was using a white magic amplification spell to let the good parts of her conversation resound throughout the hall.

“I see, I see,” Her Excellency replied. “I’m surprised that Lady Lina was a black knight from our very own eastern region—and Rondale Village, at that.”

“Her survival was miraculous, and she was only two years old at the time,” Patrick continued. “Our own orphanages had suffered too much and were too poor to provide for her, so she ended up in one established in your territory,

Countess Carlton.”

“Oh, is that so, Lady Lina?”

“Yes,” Lina replied. “I was raised in your territory from the time I was two until I could enter the knights’ academy. I thank you for the care provided to me after the death of my family. I wanted to repay my debt of gratitude and help my hometown return to what it once was as soon as possible.”

Many people had favorable responses, like “Wow, she’s very considerate,” “How good of her to help her hometown like that,” and “It’s incredible that she did such a thing even before knowing that the cause was dragon poison.”

“Thank you, Lady Lina,” Her Excellency responded. “I’m overjoyed and grateful that you and your husband, Viscount Leewell, have endeavored to help our region so much. And Earl Aston, Countess Aston, please don’t hesitate to ask me for help during the challenging times ahead.”

It seemed like Patrick and my sister had done well. They had backing from the government and the Frontier Countess, a former black knight from their territory had already donated to the cause, and they currently had other black knights providing assistance. Now, it was well-known among many of the nobles present that Countess Carlton and her husband were personally concerned for the Astons, and they were also impressed by the former black knight who grew up in an orphanage in their own region. At this rate, it seemed promising that Aston would receive donations, supplies, and manpower to help in its revival.

“Honestly, is this story—is this story real?!” Lady Hughley gasped.

She bit on her right thumbnail. As I recalled, this was always a bad habit of hers that unconsciously surfaced when something happened that she didn’t like, and her father and older sister had often chided her for it. It seemed like she hadn’t rid herself of this tic even after all this time.

“It’s real,” I replied in a low voice.

She bit even harder on her thumb. “That—that scar-covered woman...!”

I paused, then said sternly, “I recommend that you refrain from saying anything unfavorable about her old wounds.”

“Wh-What?!” my ex-fiancée snapped. “She was injured horribly and left the Corps—she is a dishonor.”

Her eyes blazed with irritation. Allowing her emotions to so blatantly rise to the surface was unbecoming of a noblewoman. She looked crueler than my sister had been when young—worse for every year older she was.

“Much damage is caused by dragons and other monsters here in the east,” I said pointedly. “Half of those in the Eastern Knights Corps who fight monsters are women, and they get injured while protecting the towns and citizens. Naturally, many of them become disabled, or are at least left with scars.”

“Your point?”

“Everyone in this region sees those scars as proof that a knight fought to the utmost to protect the people and places here—they are thankful, not scornful. Old wounds may be covered up with clothing or makeup at formal occasions, but fundamentally, people accept things as they are here.”

Beasts did not discriminate between people. They didn’t care whether they attacked women, children, people who could fight back, or nobles. Thus, no matter the wound, no one spoke ill about a person’s scars.

“That—” Lady Hughley began, only to be interrupted.

“Viscount Leewell! There you are.”

“Ah, Viscount Eaton, Lady Eaton,” I replied as the couple approached. “I haven’t seen you since Lord Alexis’s unveiling as a novennial.”

Viscount Eaton’s face had been scarred by large talons from his neck to his cheek, and his wife whom he escorted walked with a limp. They had once been attacked by a monster while on patrol and subsequently been injured grievously. The probability of encountering such misfortunes was much higher here in the frontier than compared to the area around the royal capital.

While many women hid their scars with clothing or makeup, the majority of men did not. I looked around the hall, finding nobles here and there with scars akin to the viscount’s. That was to be expected.

Lady Hughley looked like she was about to scream at the sight of Viscount

Eaton's face. I tugged hard on her arm, forcing her to put on her mask of nobility again. However, when she noticed the others in the hall, her face went pale, she shook, and she barely managed to give a halting greeting to the viscount and his wife.

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I answered the Frontier Countess's question honestly, explaining that with Joshua's assistance, I had donated the money I had received as a bonus for slaying a dragon—the money which had been sent to Lady Margot—to Earl Aston. I had also detailed the truth about how I had grown up in an orphanage in Carlton territory, and that I was happy to provide aid to Rondale Village, where my family had lived.

I didn't have any confidence that I spoke eloquently enough, but Earl Aston and Lady Margot more than made up the difference with their rhetoric. However, it had felt odd to hear Lady Margot calling me her sister-in-law.

"Lady Lina, here, have a drink."

"Thank you."

I accepted the glass of orange, fruit-flavored water that Lord Terrance offered me. My conversation with the Frontier Countess had attracted many gazes, and my throat had dried up from the subsequent intense nerves. The drink tasted of citrus and was quite refreshing.

"You did well," my escort commented. "I've found that no matter what country you're in, talking to the bigwigs is tiresome."

"Lord Terrance!" I gasped, but I was amused.

"Ever since childhood, I was always terrible at talking to bigwigs," he went on. "So I can understand your nervousness and exhaustion after that, even if just a little."

We laughed, then glanced at Earl Aston and Lady Margot, who were smiling as a seemingly endless stream of nobles approached them. I did worry if things tonight were going *too* well for the couple somehow, as many people had approached them about giving aid. Oddly enough, however, I felt that things would go fine so long as Lady Margot was there. Whenever Earl Aston was

unable to manage something by himself, Lady Margot could join him and they could handle it together. That was surely what it meant to be together as a husband and wife.

I paused.

My gaze shifted from the busy couple, and my heart leaped with relief at the sight of Joshua. At the same time, however, I felt my chest ache, for I was not the one standing next to him.

Instead, Joshua was escorting Lady Florence Hughley, who wore a lavish dress in both her creamy beige and his green colors. As gracefully as a butterfly, she flitted about the hall, having relaxed conversations with many nobles.

Occasionally, she leaned in right up against Joshua and had a private conversation with him. I had learned that it was only appropriate to be so close to someone who wasn't your fiancé or spouse when you were dancing. It upset me to the point where I wondered rhetorically when that rule had changed.

Joshua was doing his job—he had been tasked with escorting her. He had told me he was working, and I understood that. But it was still distressing.

"Lady Lina," Lord Terrance said. "Your face is pale. Would you like to go to the lounge?"

"But I should be here."

"It's all right. You've already spoken to the people you needed to—there should be no problem with letting the Astons and Lord Leewell handle things from here. You can rest in the lounge and wait for your husband."

I knew that I should stay in the hall until the latter half of the celebration. Joshua and I had only been in the eastern region for six months and were therefore still new to these social circles, so no matter what, it was better to stick around.

However...it did crush me to see Joshua escorting Lady Florence.

Earl Aston and Lady Margot took a quick break from speaking to the wave of nobles coming up to them.

"Lina, you should rest," Lady Margot urged me. "Your face is quite pale, and

you stumbled earlier too, correct? I will let my brother know, so please go wait in the lounge.”

“Please, Lady Lina. Your skin is ashen,” Earl Aston added.

“All right,” I replied, making up my mind to leave the hall. Staying here with such a pallor would only make my in-laws worry, and I would get in their way.

“Then let us be off,” Lord Terrance said, quietly escorting me from the bustling celebration hall.

We followed the hallway attached to the venue and came into a fan-shaped hall. From there were three more corridors, and in front of each stood a knight from the Eastern Corps.

“We’d like to make use of a lounge,” Lord Terrance said to one of the knights, a woman with a spear in hand who stood in front of the rightmost hallway.

She looked at him, and then at me. “Down this corridor are the women’s lounges. If you are looking for the couples’ lounges, they are down the center hallway.”

“I only want to allow her to rest, so the women’s lounge is fine,” Lord Terrance replied.

“Understood,” the knight responded, then went on to explain that only women—including the maids who were inside—were allowed entry. There were no exceptions to the rule.

“I cannot go with you, Lady Lina, but the maids will see to you. Please rest as much as you like,” Lord Terrance said. “If anything happens, inform a maid or knight to come retrieve me, and I will hurry back.”

“Thank you. I will contact you if needed,” I replied.

A maid wearing the Carltons’ black livery led me into one of the first rooms down the hallway, which contained a private lounge.

Inside sat a large single-occupant sofa chair, an ottoman, a circular side table, and cute, round magic lamps. There were blankets, shawls, and stoles in warm colors like orange and pink, in addition to several kinds of fluffy cushions. I

could tell at once that the space had been prepared with women in mind from the outset.

“Shall I pour you some tea?” the maid offered.

“Please.”

Once I sat on one of the sofa chairs, I realized just how heavy my body felt. I thought perhaps I must be even more tired than I expected after attending the celebration and speaking to so many nobles—I wasn’t used to such things, after all.

I let out a deep sigh, then took a blanket to spread over my legs. The maid placed some tea on the side table.

“I’ve prepared herbal tea for you,” she explained. “Even just inhaling the scent is enough to enhance one’s energy—please, try it. If you are feeling unwell, I can also call upon a white mage to tend to you.”

I had even the maid who poured my tea fretting over my health. Was my face that pale? I was glad that the room had no mirrors.

“I-I’m fine,” I replied, though I stammered. “Thank you for the tea.”

I lifted the teacup from the side table to my lips, and the light green liquid’s invigorating scent spread around me. It didn’t have a sweet taste, but it was refreshing and gentle.

“Please drink as much as you like—there is more tea in the pot. If you require my assistance, please ring this bell.”

The maid placed a silver bell on the edge of the side table, and with a single bow, she left.

Now that I was alone, I could hear the crackling of the logs in the fireplace and the faint sounds coming from the New Year’s party as it continued on.

When I thought about how Joshua was still out there with Lady Florence, my mood plummeted and my eyes grew misty.

I took off my stylish shoes and put my legs on the ottoman, then took a large stole and put it over my chilly feet. Maybe my being out of sorts was because I had gotten a bit cold. I picked up the teacup in both hands, and sipping at the

tea steadily warmed my belly.

A knock sounded, and the maid from before entered, bowing her head.
“Excuse me.”

“Yes?” I asked.

“Lady Leewell, a visitor has come to see you.”

A guest, here and now? I wasn’t at home—I was in a lounge at the Frontier Countess’s fortress. I couldn’t imagine who would come asking for me.

“Me?”

“Yes. I can refuse them if you would like.”

“Um,” I said, “who is it?”

This lounge could only be used by women—men couldn’t enter. Lady Florence could come—was it her, perhaps? What would I do if it was? What would she say, and what should I answer in turn? My heart pounded wildly with uneasiness and nerves.

“Well, it’s a commoner girl who has been staying here at the manse recently,” the maid began. “She would not stop saying that she knows you, Lady Leewell. Are you acquainted with a young girl named Nora?”

“Oh, wait... Nora?”

I was so surprised that I nearly dropped my cup of herbal tea, making me doubly flustered.

Compared to the previous week when I had last seen Nora, she had been cleaned up so much that I almost mistook her for someone else.

She looked completely different given that she was no longer in an old yellowed shirt and brown pants with stains that never came out no matter how many times they were washed. She wore a warm-looking orange-brown dress, her light brown hair shone, and her skin looked almost polished. Though her broken arm still hung in a white sling—which gave me sympathy pains to see—she looked like quite a lovely girl.

“I’m—I’m sorry for just showing up without warning,” she said, lifting to her lips a cup of sweet milk tea that the maid had prepared for her.

Until the mercenaries had completed Rondale’s purification and their preparations to guard the greater Riberry area, Nora was under the Frontier Countess’s supervision. She was staying in a servant’s room here in the fortified manse. It seemed like a prime opportunity to teach her the basics of everyday life, such as bathing every day, choosing and regularly changing into clothes that suited her, eating three square meals a day, and mastering the bare minimum of manners, reading, writing, and arithmetic. Nora herself seemed displeased, though I privately thought that this was all very wonderful. What she learned here would direct her down a good path in life.

“It’s all so tough—especially etiquette classes and having to bathe every day,” she mumbled.

“I’m glad you came to see me,” I replied. “I was wondering how you were getting on, but I’ve been busy. I’m sorry for not being able to come talk to you.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” she said. “Besides, you’re a noble. I get you can’t come see me so easily. But, uh, I do have a favor to ask.”

“What is it? I’ll help you however I can, no matter what.”

“Well...”

Nora fished a sealed envelope out of her dress pocket. Perhaps because she had been keeping it there as she walked around, the corners were crinkled into rounded edges, and on the whole the letter looked worn.

“I want you to give this to the old guy—er, no, Mr. Warren, I guess. Though I think my handwriting is pretty crummy and hard to read.”

I thought it likely that she had written an apology or thank-you letter to Mr. Warren. I certainly was hesitant to call her handwriting good, though the large letters I saw on the envelope looked as if she had done her best. The handwriting seemed pleasantly energetic and quite representative of her.

“Okay,” I replied. “I’m sure he’ll be happy to get your letter.”

“I wonder,” she sighed. “I thought he hated me after all I did to him, you

know?”

“I’m sure that after reading your letter, he’ll understand. It’ll be fine,” I assured her.

I put away the letter. Nora, looking relieved, drank her milk tea. She drained her cup and put it on the side table, then came closer to me.

“Lina, I have another favor to ask,” she said.

“What is it?”

She paused. “There’s someplace I want you to go with me.”

“Right now?”

The clock on the wall indicated that it was nine in the evening—it certainly wasn’t an appropriate time for a teenage girl currently under the Frontier Countess’s protection to go out.

“Yeah, but it’s fine ’cause we’ll stay on the property.”

“But—”

“Please, Lina?” Nora asked, taking hold of my hands and squeezing them.

Her face was taut with worry, and I could sense that she was caught up in something bad or something otherwise awful had occurred. Of course, going somewhere in the manse at this time other than the celebration hall or one of the lounges wasn’t allowed. Even so, I couldn’t refuse Nora when she wore such a troubled, serious expression.

“Oh, all right, all right,” I said at last.

“Thanks!”

I put my shoes back on and wrapped the large stole around my shoulders before leaving with Nora. We headed down the hallway, away from the fan-shaped hall.

The lounge I had used was close to the mouth of the corridor, and similarly prepared rooms—some of which seemed occupied—lined the passageway. I heard the voices of women inside, belonging maybe to sisters, or mothers and daughters.

“A lookout tower is down this way,” Nora explained.

“A lookout tower? Do you know the layout that well already?”

Nora opened the door at the end of the hall, which led into the watchtower. A spiral staircase rose up along the cylindrical walls, which were brightly lit by magic lamps.

“Yup. Some of the people working here told me about the nice view of the stars up at the top, and they even brought me along. I come up here sometimes.”

“Do you like looking at the stars?”

She didn’t answer for a moment. “Yeah. Back when I lived with my family, I used to look at the stars with my mom. She said that my grandpa taught her that when you get lost in the woods, you can look at the stars to figure out where to go.”

I assumed that knowing how to get through the deep woods after the sun had set and without a tool to tell direction must have been part of a mercenary’s repertoire.

“Did you know that the stars have stories about ’em?” Nora went on. “There’s one about a ship that goes to a mythical continent, and another about a princess making friends with a big fish. There’s a lot of them I really like.”

“There are as many stories as stars, although I only know about the really famous ones,” I replied. “I think that there was a book that compiled them—oh, what was it called...?”

“There’s a book like that? I wonder if it’s in the library here,” Nora said. “I can’t take anything outta there, but I was told I can read as much as I want when I’m inside.”

“I’m sure it must be in the library for the Frontier Countess’s children to read as well.”

“Hurry up and remember the title, Lina!”

We continued to talk as we ascended the circular staircase. After going up about four or five flights, we reached the top. Naturally, my leg was screaming

in pain, but I did my best to keep going.

Upon opening the door to the outside, a strong, cold wind blew against us. We hunched our shoulders and pressed against each other as we went outside.

The rooftop was a round, open space connected to one of the manse's many inner walls. Magic lamps had been set up in a line around the parapet. In emergencies, magic and long-ranged attacks could be launched from here, and defensive wards could be put up too.

"Ooh, pretty! You can see the stars really well tonight," Nora said.

At her words, I looked up at the stars of varying size, brightness, and color that hung suspended in the night sky, which was a complex mix of black, navy, purple, and green. "They really are pretty," I noted.

"Oh, oh! That one—the white one down left! I like the story about that star. It's about a little bear."

As Nora happily told me the story behind it, I thought I heard voices that didn't belong here.

Immediately, I grabbed Nora and dropped to the floor. Simultaneously, a sharp sound pierced the air, and a few moments later, the orange shawl around my shoulders fluttered about, having been split in two.

"Ahh—what?!" Nora asked, bewildered. She seemed to have no idea what was happening.

I felt a presence and looked in that direction to see two men dressed in black and holding curved swords in the shape of the crescent moon. Three nocturnal, bat-shaped monsters danced in the air.

"Oho," said one of the men. "I thought you'd been retired from the Corps and livin' like a cushy noble for a couple years! I'm surprised that your fighting senses haven't dulled by now."

"Wh-Why are you doing this?!" Nora screamed. "You only told me you had something to talk to Lina about!"

The men laughed.

"Why are you attacking us?! What if we get hurt?! You promised!" she yelled.

“We only asked you to bring her here,” said the second man. “And in exchange, we’d help out Riberry and Rondale. Don’t worry—once we’re finished here, a donation’ll be paid. We didn’t break any promises.”

“I brought her ’cause you said you had to talk to her—you didn’t say anything about hurting her!” Nora snapped, getting up between me and the sword-wielding men. In the face of them and the flying bat beasts, I knew she had to be terrified. Her legs were shaking.

“We do have somethin’ to say to her, though,” added the first goon. “And that’s ‘We need you to die!’”

“No!”

I watched in silence, realizing what was going on. Nora had feelings of guilt about what her grandfather did in the past, as well as the fact that she had nearly done the same thing. These men must have enticed her to bring me up here by telling her things like, “We’ll fork over a big donation,” or “If you want help to rebuild quickly, you’ll have to lend us a hand first.” Nora was a naive, upfront girl—it was no wonder that she had agreed to bring me here.

“No need to worry ’bout the woman dyin’ ’cause you called her here,” said the second man. “You were just doin’ as you were told, like we are.”

“Freaks!” Nora spat. “What’s this all about?!”

They ignored her words. “Since you’re so bothered by it, why don’t we kill you too? Don’t worry, we’ll still make a donation once you’re dead.”

One of them gave a high-pitched whistle, and the three bat-like monsters rose into the air before taking a nosedive right toward Nora and me.

Bat beasts were one of the few types of monsters that were friendly to people and able to be bred and kept. Many were trained from a young age to scout at night or ambush people with their sharp fangs or claws. The Knights Corps didn’t use bat beasts, but they did raise wolf and horse ones.

Bat beasts weren’t particularly powerful, but they were highly mobile and considered creatures that were tricky to defeat. Furthermore, counting the two men and the bats they owned, we were outnumbered.

I couldn't let Nora fight to protect me.

The bat beasts let out piercing shrieks, and Nora screamed. I wrapped my arms around her, pressing a finger to the glowing, amber magic stone embedded in my bracelet.

I could see the sharp claws on the creatures' wings as they closed in.

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The New Year's celebration had passed its midpoint, and we had finished exchanging greetings. The other guests were gathered around tables laden with hors d'oeuvres, desserts, alcohol, and tobacco, or were near the band, all the while chatting with their friends, business partners, and others.

Once Lady Hughley realized that the time for exchanging hellos with the other guests had finished, she said, voice shaky, "I must...be off to powder my nose."

"All right."

She was pale and feeble as she walked with a lady-in-waiting out of the hall. After seeing them off, I headed over toward my sister and her husband, who I assumed were still speaking about the revitalization project.

I expected to see Lina somewhere behind them, but she wasn't there.

"Oh, Joshua," Margot said when she saw me. "You must be exhausted after babysitting *that* woman."

I ignored her jab. "Where's Lina?"

My sister covered her dissatisfied expression with her folding fan and let out a deep, deliberate sigh. "Shouldn't you be asking, 'Did your discussions about the restoration go well?' or 'Are you two all right after talking at such length?' Coming over here and asking for Lina out of the blue—how cruel."

I paused, then repeated, "Where's Lina?"

My sister and her husband both smiled wryly. Why would they do that?

"She's gone to one of the lounges," Patrick explained. "She seemed tired, perhaps because she was nervous. Lord Terrance went with her—ah, there he is now."

Lord Terrance had just reentered the hall. When he saw me, he hurried over in a half jog, in a way that reminded me of a dog running when its name was called. “Lord Leewell!”

“Lord Terrance,” I replied. “I hear you escorted Lina to one of the lounges?”

“I did; she’s resting in one of the women’s rooms. Please pick her up later. Oh, of course there are maids there, and the guard on duty is a woman, so there is no need for alarm.”

“Understood. Thank you.”

Furtively, I cast a search spell for the bangle I had given Lina. It reacted from a room a short distance away from the celebration hall; that must have been where the women’s lounges were. The bracelet didn’t appear to be moving—Lina must have been resting.

Lord Terrance leaned in closer. “Lord Leewell, I also have something to report,” he murmured.

“What?”

He paused. “After I delivered Lady Lina to the lounge, I cast an enemy search spell across the manse, with the celebration hall at the center.”

“Did you pick up anything?”

“Yes. It appears that there are a number of people here who were not invited. There are some encamped on top of a watchtower, and others surrounding the hall. So far the ones outside have not moved, and there is no indication that they are going to enter the manse.”

A long breath leaked out of my mouth, similar to how my sister had sighed earlier.

Problems of all shapes and sizes were bound to happen at large soirees regardless of whether they were held in the capital or out in the frontier. Some people’s ulterior motives came alive and entangled with others’ when large numbers of people gathered. I had hypothesized that an issue would occur at tonight’s New Year’s celebration—especially since my ex-fiancée and some of her family had come, and they definitely had something up their sleeves.

“Do the intruders have anything to do with the Hughleys?” I asked.

Lord Terrance nodded. “I confirmed that Florence Hughley’s lady-in-waiting was in contact with uninvited persons while en route to the powder room. These people seem to be using black magic to conceal themselves. However, I happen to be adept at spotting such things. Here is proof of what I saw.”

He stealthily handed over a photolith—a magic stone that he had used to store a recording of what had happened in its vicinity. It could register and play back what it had seen, though it consumed mana to do so. The tool itself was quite expensive and therefore not something to be used willy-nilly. However, it could be extremely beneficial depending on how it was used.

“How would you like to proceed?” Lord Terrance asked. “They haven’t done anything so far except trespass.”

I considered the options. “Can you capture them?”

“Well...”

Though Her Excellency the Frontier Countess’s cousin researched old magic, he was also a black mage. According to him, he wasn’t good at using magic to attack, but in reality, that wasn’t necessarily the case. It was possible that he was just better at debilitating spells—like those causing sleep, poisoning, and numbness—rather than outright offensive ones that struck with elements like fire and ice.

“Depending on how many intruders you apprehend,” I began, “I may have some funds to donate to your studying abroad—”

“I’ll do it! Leave it to me!” Lord Terrance declared, a radiant smile on his face as he hurried from the hall.

People were easy to motivate when their wants were broadcasted so well. In return for his cooperation tonight, he was already going to receive assistance from the Carlton family to study abroad in a country with many ruins and relics from the age of old magic.

Lord Terrance had been in the middle of studying old magic in the Kingdom of Yulekirk when that soulmate sickness fad had swept through society, leading to the revocation of his engagement and subsequent return home. However, his

teacher at the university there—the man who would have become his father-in-law—had agreed to continue supervising his thesis and recommended him for further research opportunities. Those efforts had given Lord Terrance the chance to study abroad in a government-funded university in the Loranyel Empire starting from the fourth month of this year.

Despite being an adult and graduating from a Mert university, Lord Terrance had not enrolled as a mage in the Eastern Knights Corps, become a teacher at an institution, or searched for employment in some other area. He was the third son in his house, and all he seemed to want to do was continue learning. This lack of gainful employment made him something of a ne’er-do-well. Naturally, his family frowned upon the newfound financing that he would receive to study abroad again, seeing it as enabling his problematic tendencies. It was also disappointing to them, apparently, that he had no interest in finding a new marriage partner and instead was going to spend all the reparations from his broken engagement to fund his studies.

After burning through said alimony, he had gone to his relatives both by blood and marriage for assistance. Her Excellency the Frontier Countess had decided to give him aid under the condition that he successfully carry out a certain behind-the-scenes job. Therefore, I had surmised that offering a supplemental sum would be more than enough to motivate him to do something for me as well.

I had no problem buying Lina’s safety if that’s what it took.

I took a glass of light green fruit wine from a passing servant handing out drinks. It was nearly bursting with acidity, and invigorated me when I gulped it down.

“Joshua,” Margot said, “it seems *that* woman has returned.”

Lady Hughley had reappeared in the hall, now back from powdering her nose. I drank the rest of the wine, then gave the glass to a servant. Just as I started toward my ex-fiancée, the shrill cry of a beast split the air.

Just like the cry, voices rose throughout the hall—screams, flustered yells, and queries about the situation. At once, the knights on guard moved, beginning to lead the guests to find shelter in the inner part of the manse.

“J-Joshua! What was that sound?” Lady Hughley demanded, flustered, checking her surroundings with a fearful expression as she came closer to me. “Is—is a monster near here?!”

I suspected that some suspicious person connected to the Hughley Trading Company had brought the screaming monster. Did she truly know nothing about it? I had been sure that she had gone to give some kind of instructions to the interlopers when she left, but this cowardly reaction seemed to be genuine. If she was putting on a performance, then she was quite the actress.

“Patrick, Margot, follow the knights’ instructions and take shelter,” I ordered.

“All right,” Margot acquiesced after a moment. She clasped her husband’s hand and looked between me, the direction of the lounges, and my shaken ex-fiancée with an anxious expression. “What about you, Joshua?”

“I’m going to get Lina.”

“Be careful, Lord Joshua,” Patrick warned. “Maggie, let’s go.”

“Joshua!” Lady Hughley cried out, shaking. She extended her hand. “Come with— Joshua, wait!”

I evaded her without even needing to think about the action and headed toward the lounges, deploying a search spell. However, Lina’s bangle was not in the lounge, but instead in a completely different location—she was on top of a watchtower.

“Wh-What in the world is she doing there?!” I couldn’t help but gasp. “Lina!”

Lord Terrance had just told me that some of the uninvited guests had taken up position there. A cold sweat ran down my back. Could she have encountered these unknown trespassers? Was she in danger?

Lady Hughley reached out again. Before she could grab at the hem of my suit, I vehemently swung my arm away. Her eyes went wide with shock, and she let out a shrill cry.

“Joshua! No, please—please don’t leave me! We’re together, aren’t we?!”

“I have nothing to do with you,” I replied shortly. “I have only one person to protect, and that’s *my wife*, Lina Leewell.”

“Joshua!” Lady Hughley screamed.

“How many times have I told you not to call me by name?” I snapped.

I ignored her wails and tore off the corsage pinned to my chest. I threw it to the ground, then ran to find Lina.

I raced down the long corridor, then dashed up the spiral staircase to get to the top of the watchtower. My search spell had informed me that she was up on a viewing platform. Once I was up there, I would be able to find Lina atop the rampart. I prayed for her to stay put.

It would be child’s play for a black knight who had slain dragons to take out one or two interlopers. However, Lina had left that role behind her due to her injuries. Her right leg and arm could move just fine for everyday use, but definitely weren’t fit for fighting. She had also fried her mana circuits from overuse—they would never heal fully. If she tried to use mana in such a condition, it would cause her agony. That was the last thing I wanted.

I opened the door leading to the observation deck on the watchtower to see Lina and Nora of all people situated in the middle of a magic barrier. Two men were attacking the barricade with swords and fire magic, while bat beasts assailed it with their talons. The air was filled with heavy thumping sounds, the shrieks of the monsters, and the cursing of the men, but the spell I had implanted in Lina’s bangle continued to protect her.

“Arrows of light!” I called out.

Three magic arrows shimmered into existence. The men had their backs to me. I took aim at the three bat beasts as they screeched gratingly, scratching and biting the ward with their fangs and seeming to dance as they fluttered about. As if releasing a drawn bowstring, I let my mana go, and the arrows pierced the monsters. They cried out and fell to the stone floor, twitching as they died.

“What?!” yelled one man, turning around.

“Who’re you?!” called the other, doing the same.

“Bind!”

I cast the magic over them both. Yellow nets of flowing mana ensnared them, unbalancing them and causing them to tumble to the ground, and then gagging them. They groaned and glared at me, but I felt nothing at all in return.

I rushed over to the beaten-up barrier protecting Lina and dispelled the magic. Inside, Lina was sitting with her body around Nora to guard her. My wife looked up at me and smiled with relief.

“Lina, are you all right?” I asked. “I’m sorry—I should have gotten here sooner.”

“Joshua...”

“Are you hurt?”

I pulled her into an embrace, and she wrapped her arms around my back. Her body felt frozen from the winter weather, but even so, she was unhurt and alive.



“I’m all right—your magic protected me,” she said soothingly. “I knew without a doubt that the spell you gave me would protect me. But I’m still glad you came.”

I heard her whisper in the smallest of voices that she was happy I came to her side and not Lady Hughley’s. My heart hurt. I had escorted my ex-fiancée reluctantly, but all the same I had been attending to that woman—Lina must have worried that I would prioritize Lady Hughley tonight.

“I’m glad you’re okay. I was so anxious and worried that I lost some years off my life,” I murmured.

I pressed my forehead against hers, then lavished her lips with kisses. For a short while, we forgot about both the cold and the people around us while we embraced.

Her Excellency’s manse contained many rooms, including this midsize one usually used for meetings or briefing sessions. It was decorated only with a tapestry emblazoned with the Carlton crest. There was a large desk, as many chairs as there were people aside from the guards, and a deep navy rug.

Her Excellency the Frontier Countess was clad in her Eastern Knights Corps uniform, with her hair up in its usual, truly horselike ponytail. She gave me a sidelong glance and shook her head. “Lady Hughley, is this man really the one you desire? I can’t say I understand.”

“W-We were engaged once!” Lady Hughley stammered. “Due to some circumstances, we were unable to go through with the marriage, but we have always adored each other—even now we do! Surely there’s nothing strange about that?”

She sat on a chair in the center of the room, pleading to Her Excellency with a desperate expression. I could hardly believe that she was the same woman from a few days ago at the New Year’s celebration—today, she wore only a chocolate-colored day dress with no jewelry or embellishments whatsoever.

“Is that so?” Countess Carlton’s words were slow. “He has always shared your feelings?”

“No, not at all,” I butted in.

Lady Hughley’s face paled. “What? Really...?”

“During and since our engagement, I have had no love or adoration toward her whatsoever,” I explained to the countess. “After all, our relationship was formed through a business contract. Besides, this woman...” I paused. “She belittled my late father, and even planned to take over the marquis title should I have passed away young. We do not share even one iota of ‘love’ toward each other.”

Sir Leonard and Lina, who were also in the room, grimaced. The knights from the Eastern Corps standing guard in the rear were looking at Lady Hughley with icy stares. This was a natural response given the unpleasant topic.

“B-But that’s not—” Lady Hughley began.

“Therein lies the reason that my younger sister so childishly harassed Lady Hughley,” I continued. “By the time we dissolved the engagement, even my uncle who had arranged the marriage was exasperated. ‘What an absurdly pigheaded pair, that father and daughter,’ he said of the Hughleys.”

“Therefore,” Her Excellency spoke again, “the claims that you—Joshua—and Lady Hughley are in love and wish to be married are...?”

“False,” I affirmed. “I am already married, and I have no wish to divorce my wife.”

At my clear-cut declaration, Lina—who was sitting next to me—let out a sigh of relief. It seemed that no matter how many times I told her that I wanted to stay with her rather than divorce her or leave her, her unease would never fully disappear. I scooped up Lina’s hand and squeezed it, and she gripped my hand back with surprising force.

Sir Leonard looked at the documents in his hands. “Certainly, Lady Hughley, I can understand why you would judge Sir Leewell to be a better choice for you than your current suitor. It appears that preparations have been made for you to once again marry a man from the Kingdom of Yulekirk—one Baron Tate. He is a merchant who bought his title. He deals in an extensive list of goods such as foodstuffs, armaments, magic tools, and even baby clothes and diapers. It

appears that he is sixty-four years old. This will be his fifth marriage.”

Her Excellency chuckled. “That’s quite an age difference, *and* he’s been married four times already? Well, after comparing the two, Joshua *would* seem preferable, would he not?”

“Please *do not* compare me to that man,” I protested.

Countess Carlton laughed loudly and crossed her legs, lightly flicking the short riding crop she held against her palm. The resulting crack echoed through the room.

“Lady Hughley,” she said, “I have a proposal.”

“Wh-What?” Lady Hughley stammered. “But I-I haven’t done anything...”

A recording by the photolith Lord Terrance had used was projected onto the wall. In it, Lady Hughley’s attendant was shown giving orders to the uninvited men to kill Lina. It continued on to show the lady-in-waiting reporting to Lady Hughley about what she had instructed the bandits to do.

“Unfortunately,” Her Excellency began, “no spell has yet been invented that can tamper with a magic recording. That being the case, I have no choice but to take this evidence as fact.”

“You cannot mean that,” Lady Hughley protested weakly. “This... It must be a lie...”

“The bandits have all been captured and are currently locked in the dungeon. My cousin was quite enthusiastic about apprehending every single one, and it appears that there were eight in total. They unanimously testified that they received orders from Lady Hughley via her attendant, and even received advance payment. They also happened to be the ones who decided to bring the bat beasts into *my* manse.”

Lady Hughley slipped from her chair onto the floor. It appeared she wasn’t able to even sit upright anymore.

“We have confirmed with the mercenary guild that these men belong to a group by the name of the Night-Wind Fangs, which has had an exclusive contract with the Hughley Trading Company for the past five or six years,” Sir

Leonard explained. “I’m sorry, Lady Hughley, but with the evidence presented we must judge that you are guilty of attempted murder, given that your plan failed.”

“But I—I would never, never...!” Lady Hughley was nearly incoherent.

“You’d do well to stop with these unseemly lies and excuses already,” Her Excellency said. “As an adult, you must take responsibility for your actions.”

She took a single paper from Sir Leonard and rose, then moved to stand in front of Lady Hughley, who was still sunken to the floor.

“Normally, your penalty would be proportionate to the crime you committed. However, I have been given a proposal—a backdoor deal, if you will. So, I will give you a very special punishment.”

“A-A proposal...?” Lady Hughley said weakly.

“You will marry that baron from Yulekirk as planned. I believe that would be the best penance for you. Do not worry about your daughter, however, as the next head of your birth house has said that she will take her in and raise her to *not* be a disgrace to the Hughley bloodline.”

The next Countess Hughley would be my ex-fiancée’s older sister. The current head of the family, their father, was to take responsibility for this fiasco by promptly retiring and entering a temple in the northern mountains—although it only appeared to be one on the outside. In reality, nobles who had caused trouble and were subsequently expelled from their families were cordoned off from the general public in that institution. Out there, ninety percent of the year was wintertime, and the environment was so harsh that crops grew poorly. The place was notorious for the fact that most who entered would not leave alive. Count Hughley was only fifty-some-odd years old, but who knew how long the rest of his life would be.

Florence Hughley’s conviction as an attempted murderer and the one who had made a mess of the eastern region’s New Year’s celebration would not be made public. In return, as part of this backdoor deal, the Hughley Trading Company would provide the east with top-of-the-line goods at a discounted rate for the next decade.

“In a few days, the Hughley family will come to retrieve you,” Her Excellency continued. “After you return to the royal capital and are then wed in Yulekirk, I imagine you will never see your daughter or your relatives ever again. Do treasure the remaining time you have together.”

“Wh-What?!” Lady Hughley cried. “No! How could I marry a man older than my own father?! I’ll be his fifth bride! And you cannot take me away from my daughter! Besides, besides... I have heard that two of the women who became that man’s wives went missing! Of the remaining two, one committed suicide, and the other lost her mind! I won’t, I won’t!”

She sobbed, shaken, and tried to grab hold of the Frontier Countess. Guards came forward and seized her. Even with her arms pinned, she continued to writhe and yell.

“Don’t you know what you’re sentencing me to?! I won’t do it! Why do you think I came to this beast-infested backwater to begin with?! Joshua, we haven’t the time—please marry me! If you don’t, I’ll be wed off to that awful man and—and I won’t! I just want to live like a noble should—why does this have to happen to me?!”

I did not reply.

“You must marry me, Joshua! If you do, then I’ll have my sister provide this place with even more arms! I’ll have as many children as you want! Won’t that be enough?” She moved her gaze to Lina. “Hurry up and divorce Joshua! Disappear! Leave! Just die!”

“Please do not misunderstand me, Lady Hughley,” I intoned coldly. “Even if Lina were to leave me, I would *never* marry you. I want *nothing* to do with you.”

Lady Hughley raised her voice even higher. “Joshua, haven’t you been tied to her long enough? And what have you said to Joshua, you filthy plebeian?! You just want to be a viscount’s—”

“Be quiet,” Her Excellency ordered, shaking her head and once again cracking her riding crop.

Lady Hughley, startled, shrunk into herself, hunching her shoulders.

“I am tired of listening to your self-centered drivel. Take her away. Confine

her in her room until the representative from the Hughleys arrives to retrieve her, and do not let her out under any circumstances.”

“Yes, ma’am,” one of the knights replied.

Two of them took up positions on either side of Lady Hughley, and dragged away the woman who had once been my fiancée. She struggled against them and spat out more egotistical nonsense so unbecoming of a noblewoman that it left me shocked. When she was finally far enough away that I couldn’t hear her, I let out a deep sigh.

“That ridiculously egocentric woman had her eye on you, huh?” Her Excellency remarked after a moment.

“I am quite glad that it’s over,” I replied steadily.

Lady Hughley and I had been engaged for only a year, which was not a long time in the grand scheme of things. Even though our relationship had been a contractual one, I had tried to get to know her better—that is, until I learned her true intentions. Once I had heard what she and her father honestly felt, I had only done the bare minimum with her as her fiancé while I thought about how to peacefully revoke our engagement.

I hadn’t had a good impression of my ex-fiancée, and we had misunderstood and hurt each other when we broke up. But in the end, I honestly felt nothing in regard to our split. No feelings had developed between us in our year together, after all.

The door opened, and an Eastern Corps knight entered. She was followed by a girl I knew well. “Pardon the intrusion. I have brought Nora.”

“You may enter,” Her Excellency allowed. “Sit over there.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Nora was pale-faced, and she walked awkwardly, moving her arms and legs together in stiff, jerky motions. She went to the middle of the room and plopped down into the chair there.

Her Excellency regarded her for a moment. “Nora, do you understand what you did?”

“Yes.” Nora paused, then lowered her head. Her sleek, light brown, shoulder-length hair flowed downward. “I’m sorry.”

“Why did you bring Lady Lina to those men without suggesting they arrange a formal meeting?” Her Excellency asked. “Did you not consider that they might do something wicked to her? It was an obviously strange thing for them to have promised aid for the reconstruction in exchange for bringing Lady Lina to a designated location, after all. I wish you would have thought about how your actions and that reward were not an equal exchange. The world is not so kind a place.”

“I’m really sorry,” Nora replied. Though I couldn’t see her face behind her hair, it seemed like she was crying. “I apologize.”

“Lady Lina has asked that I not charge you with anything. She claims that you had the reconstruction of Rondale Village at heart, and that the intruders used that fact as bait.” Her Excellency paused. “I understand how you feel.”

Teardrops dripped onto Nora’s brown skirt and the fists she held in her lap. “Even so, I’m sorry. I didn’t think this would happen. I’m really sorry—so sorry.”

“Nora, for luring the dragon out of its home and putting nearby citizens in danger, I previously declared that you would work on the reconstruction of the Rondale Village site until you became an adult. I am adding an additional two years for this incident.”

“But Countess Carlton—” Lina began, and I squeezed her hand to help calm her.

Her Excellency did not let Lina finish. “Lady Lina, I know that you care about this girl. I share your sentiment, but I must punish her. She placed your life in danger, and also allowed chaos to befall the partygoers. I believe that this girl will not move forward unless she takes responsibility for her actions in a concrete way.”

Lina lowered her head and gripped my hand back. “I understand, Your Excellency. I will yield to your decision.”

“Nora, this is agreeable to you, yes? Do not forget that there are people who worry about and care for you. Tomorrow, the Indigo Cyclones are set to arrive

here and pick you up. Together you will leave for the Rondale site and begin working on its revitalization.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You are forbidden from leaving Rondale and its surroundings until you are twenty. Afterward, you are free to do as you wish, whether that be to remain in Rondale or leave for some other land. However, as you are not a deep thinker, I recommend that you do not make that decision alone. Make friends whom you trust and confide in them about your decision.”

Her Excellency turned to Lina and myself. “I’m sorry, Lady Lina. I know that by all rights, the proper thing to do about Lady Hughley’s attempt to harm you is to publicly punish her according to the law. However, I put our circumstances ahead of yours, and for that, I would like to apologize. Please forgive us.” She lowered her head.

“Please forgive us,” Sir Leonard echoed, also bowing his head.

“Please forgive us!” the guards and the knight attending Nora chorused, all bowing to Lina.

“You don’t need to do that,” Lina said, urging them to rise. “I know I can only say this with the benefit of hindsight, but I am fine, and my husband and I are still together. Therefore, regarding the rest of this matter—it is all right to do whatever is in the best interests of Your Excellency and the eastern region.”

“Thank you, Lady Lina.” The Frontier Countess shook her head, smiling wryly. “I’m grateful.”

“No, surely...” Lina paused. “I am sure that Lady Hughley is in much more pain. It would have been easier for her to be punished according to the law rather than being taken away from her daughter and being all by herself, married to a man older than her father. I am fine by comparison.”

Her Excellency chuckled. “I see, so that’s the case. To Lady Hughley, it is much worse to be separated from her daughter and married to a notorious baron rather than sent to the temple or a prison. I’m truly sorry, and grateful for your forgiveness, Lady Lina. Rest assured that we will take care of the rest.”

Lina nodded and smiled.

Her Excellency nodded in turn and laughed, grinning. “Now then, that’s everything dealt with.”

After that, she, Sir Leonard, and most of the guards left the room. Nora and the female knight accompanying her approached Lina and me.

Nora bowed her head. “I’m sorry. And also, I’m grateful for everything you’ve done for me.”

“Nora,” Lina murmured.

“Also, one other thing.” Nora paused. “Lina, I’m sorry for calling your husband a demon and saying he was violent with you.”

A strange air filled the room. Two guards who stood near the door, as well as the knight accompanying Lina, stared at me—six eyes filled with contempt and scorn.

What a thing for this brat to say!

“Um, Nora,” Lina began. “Joshua is not a demon, nor has he ever once been violent with me. He treats me very well.”

“I truly do treat Lina carefully,” I added. “I’m *not* a demon.”

“When you got me with that binding magic, you threw me to the floor and left me there, ya know!” Nora blurted. “You totally are a demon!”

“I am not!”

The knights looked at me with contempt. When I told them that this girl had straddled a bedridden Sir Warren and violently attacked him and Lina as well, their looks changed to sympathetic ones.

“Really, you couldn’t be further from the truth,” Lina told Nora. “Joshua is a wonderful husband and treats me very kindly.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Nora paused, then asked, “Lina, are you happy?”

Without hesitation, Lina smiled and nodded. “I am. So long as I’m with Joshua, I’m very happy.”



At her honest words, joy welled up inside me, and my face burned. Hearing that she was happy being with me made me elated in turn. Afterward, I would have to tell her that I felt the same way. I wanted to tell her in my own words.

“Okay,” Nora relented after a moment. “I could feel that that magic barrier thing was super warm, and you were pretty cool when you came to save Lina. I could feel that you thought a lot about her and cared about her. Thanks for saving me too, Sir Sometimes-a-Demon.”

I did not dignify this line with a reply.

For a while after that, people in Her Excellency’s manse called me “Sir Demon” behind my back. I considered once again extending Nora’s time working on the revitalization project due to defamation—another ten years would do, I thought.

She was truly an outrageous girl. Surely she would continue her ridiculous ways into adulthood. I hoped we wouldn’t meet for a long time.

Not for a long, *long* time.

Chapter 6: The Rural Couple and the Reborn Rondale

Kingdom of Mert Calendar Year 787

Once we entered the third month, the short winter in this region faded, and spring seemed to come out in full force. The blowing winds grew warm, tender-looking green buds appeared all at once, and tiny pea-green birds left the forests to alight in human-inhabited places and chirp merrily.

“Watch your step,” said the coachman.

We had come by carriage to where we assumed the former Rondale Village wagon station used to be. Tiny, vivid white and blue flowers bloomed in droves on both sides of the path leading from the station to the village center, which only added to the springtime atmosphere. The road was spacious, as long ago many boxes filled with fruit would be loaded onto wagons here for export to vendors or fruit processing facilities.

“Welcome to town!”

“Welcome!”

The people working on the Rondale purification and revitalization process all smiled as they greeted Joshua and me. It seemed that many people had come to check out the area, and while more than half were nobles, some among them were merchants and knights. Apparently, many of them were bringing in supplies, inspecting the revitalization project and procuring whatever was still needed, or bringing donation money to Earl Aston. Perhaps because of this, it seemed like there was more than enough to go around here.

With practiced movements, some workers took the foodstuffs that we had brought, and they each gave us a smile alongside a “Thank you very much!”

“Please don’t go beyond the yellow ropes,” warned one of the laborers working on the road as we headed inside the village. “We haven’t finished

purifying those areas yet. You'd probably be okay, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

It took a decade or more for dragon poison to naturally break down. At this point, over twenty-three years had passed since Rondale Village had been contaminated, so in theory it should be safe—however, great care was being taken to purify the area step-by-step.

"None of the workers appear to have any health problems," Joshua noted. "The revitalization process must be going well."

Right now, the site of the former village of Rondale was in the midst of reconstruction after being almost entirely wiped out twenty-three years ago. The places people could safely enter were increasing as the purification process progressed, and collapsed buildings were being dismantled. Work had also begun on clearing the undergrowth from purified sections of the overgrown orchard at the far side of the village.

"There are so many people working that perhaps the purification will finish ahead of schedule," I noted.

"Priority in choosing land on which to build homes is being given to refugees and those from other territories who wish to move here, as well as those involved in the rebuilding efforts," Joshua added. "Some of those laborers are here purely to work temporarily, for wages from the national government or from the Frontier Countess."

We watched the workers here and there carry on with their tasks until we came to a house in front of the former orchard. It was a small building with tiny sheds lined up next to it, and a footpath led from it to the grove.

I paused. "This was my home."

No one had been here yet to start reconstruction, so the house and huts were in shabby shape—it was hard to imagine my parents and grandmother living here. I had to use all my mental might to imagine what it must have been like to make a living here by cultivating fruit from the orchard.

"It's quiet here," Joshua said. "Your family must have had a peaceful life."

Being so close to the orchard, the house was removed from the heart of

Rondale Village—this spot wouldn't have been lively or bustling. However, it must have been a quiet, relaxing place to live.

"I believe so."

I had been born in this house and lived here until my family died from dragon poison two years later. Of course, I had been too young to remember the faces of my parents and grandmother. Were it possible, however, I would have liked to live here with my family.

"Have you heard anything about how Earl Aston plans to rebuild the village?" I asked.

"Only the broad strokes," Joshua replied. "First, he wants to restore the orchard and make workshops to process the fruit. Riberry is close by, so he also wants to make a road to it, expand the fields, and—in the far future—make one large town."

"Out of Rondale and Riberry?"

"Apparently there are often two or three settlements around agricultural fields or orchards. In this case, Rondale and Riberry would be connected by expanding both the farmland and the orchard between the two."

"I see. That would be wonderful."

"It would be, but it will take time."

If all of Rondale could be restored and subsequently joined with Riberry, together they would make one large settlement for the Aston territory. Rondale's fruits combined with Riberry's dyes and vegetable oils would secure the livelihoods for the people living in the area.

I thought that surely this region would become as prosperous as it had been during my parents' and grandparents' time.

"Lina! Mr. Leewell!"

I heard the pitter-patter of footsteps, and I saw someone wearing a cotton shirt and beige pants approaching on the large road leading from the village center. It was Nora, rushing up to us.

Her Excellency the Frontier Countess had ordered Nora to work on the

Rondale restoration until she was twenty. This was an unavoidable consequence of what Nora had done, I knew, but I still couldn't help but worry about her. Reconstruction required lots of heavy labor, lodgings were simple, and there were no cute clothes, jewelry, entertainment, or sweets that a young lady would like. I doubted there were other girls her age here either—only older laborers and handymen.

I had assumed that Nora would be anxious and discontent when we met again, but instead she seemed full of energy.

"Thanks for coming, you two!" she chirped.

"It's been a while, Nora," I greeted her. "Have you been doing well?"

She nimbly stopped in front of us. Her fractured arm was still bandaged, but no longer hung in a sling. "It's been two months, Lina!" she said, rubbing her face with her left sleeve. "I'm good, I'm good! Honestly, I feel like the happiest person alive!"

I wondered if she had been in the middle of working. There had been dirt on her sleeve which was now on her face, but she didn't seem to care. I wiped the grime off her cheek, and she laughed as if I had tickled her.

"Are you all right? Have the other workers and the mercenaries been treating you well?" I asked.

"I'm fine—everyone's really nice. I'm eating lots of food and sleeping like a baby," she said, her bright expression showing no signs of gloominess whatsoever. "I thought there'd be harder work waiting for me, you know? Like I'd have chains on my ankles, be watched and whipped while I dug out rocks and was forced to haul away endless dirt. Or like I'd have to eat plain broth without anything to go with it except a bit of bread, and I'd waste away while I worked."

"And where did you hear such brutal stories as that?" Joshua asked, exasperated.

Nora puffed her cheeks in displeasure. "It was in a popular adventure story a while ago! The main character was living just like that in the beginning. But anyway," she went on, "I don't actually get whipped, and I get to eat lots of

tasty food. I do have to weed or carry branches that've been cut down, and yeah it's tough, but it's not bad. It makes me happy to see the place get cleaner after the hard work I put in."

It looked like my worries had been for nothing. Nora's innate cheerfulness and friendliness helped her integrate among the people at the reconstruction site; they seemed to like her and have good relationships with her. Not to mention she found the work worth doing.

"I'm glad that you're doing well, Nora, but don't push yourself," I warned. "Is there anything you want me to bring you? Some cute clothes or sweets, maybe?"

"There's no need for any cute clothes here! They'd just get dirty right off the bat—it's better to have sturdy, easy-to-wash clothes that dry fast. And as for sweets...I'd like some."

She was right—durable, easy-to-move-in clothes and shoes were better for working and living in Rondale than cute ones.

"Okay, then. Next time I come, I'll bring you some sweets," I promised.

I hadn't thought to bring such things during this visit. We'd only brought processed meat like bacon and sausage, and dried ingredients like beans. There were plenty of women among those involved with the reconstruction project, and they might have also been pleased if I'd brought sweet snacks, nectar, or something sugary with which to make dessert. Oh, it might have been good to bring those sweet potatoes that Lady Margot had made popular too.

"Oh, so you prefer sweets as presents?" Joshua asked. "Then you don't need *Stories of the Stars*? I'd heard that you wanted to read it."

I had informed Joshua that Nora had an interest in the myths behind stars, and that she had wanted to read about them. When Joshua heard about how I could recall there being a famous collection of them but couldn't remember its name, he had immediately known just the books I was talking about and ordered them from a bookstore.

"What?! Did you bring me a book about stars? Did you really?! Oh, that's so awesome!" Nora cheered.

“You’re working hard here, of course, but you need to practice the things that Her Excellency taught you so you don’t forget them,” Joshua warned. “I’ll give you the books if you promise me you can do that.”

“What!” Nora’s grin disappeared, her expression warping into one of reluctance. “Like manners and etiquette?”

“Then you don’t want the books?” he pressed her. “*Stories of the Stars* is an exceptional title, with three volumes that encompass the myths behind celestial bodies that we can’t even see from Mert.”

“Ah, arrrgh!” Nora whined. “F-Fine! I’ll work hard, *and* I’ll be a little less of a tomboy like Auntie Bea wants me to!”

“It’s a promise, then,” Joshua replied. “I’ll leave the volumes with the supervisor’s office. You can go pick them up when your work is done for the day.”

“Thanks, Mr. Leewell! I’m super excited! Yay!” the teenager cheered, bouncing up and down, happiness radiating from her. “Thanks a bunch. You know, you’re a real bully, so this is the first time I’ve thought you’re an okay person, Sir Sometimes-a-Demon.”

Joshua paused. He was smiling, but he twitched. “Did those in the countess’s manse teach you that it’s okay to call someone a ‘bully’ and a ‘demon’ to their face?”

“Huh? Oh—oh, no,” Nora stammered, backpedaling in a panic. “Um, thank you very much for getting me the book I wanted, Lord Leewell.”

Goodness, she would have to learn the importance of hiding her true thoughts before she blurted them out.

Since the area was in the midst of reconstruction, the only things to look forward to were eating and chatting with friends. That was why it was so important to have books to pass the time. They could be used for both entertainment and study.

“Honestly, your diligence is still quite lacking,” Joshua noted. “Anyway, what sort of work are you doing now?”

“Right now I’m planting flowers. You know, they put up a monument in the spot where the town square used to be. All the nobles in the east put the money together to have it built.” Nora took me by the hand and led me along.

Before this visit, I had only seen Rondale from a distance when on the main road heading to Riberry. This was the first time I had set foot in the former village. A large cobblestone road stretched through the village, and on both sides were buildings that had probably once been shops. Branching off from the road were dirt paths made by many trampling feet, and at the far end of town seemed to be the old residential area. Rondale had apparently been a larger, more bustling place than I had ever thought.

Along the way, we were greeted by smiling laborers continuing on with the reconstruction. It seemed like they all found the restoration to be good work.

I tried not to get in the way of the people repairing the uneven and broken cobblestones and the crumbled buildings as we continued down the road. Then, the town square came into view, in the center of which was a large, white stone monument.

“The names of the people who used to live here are written on it! I’ve been planting flowers around it. In about a month there’ll be blue, green, and white ones blooming,” Nora explained.

She showed me the seedlings. There were a multitude of small buds, and each seedling had round, fresh green leaves growing from the stem. White petals just barely peeked out from the flowers that were already starting to swell in preparation of blossoming. The plants had been evenly spaced around the monument, and when they bloomed, I knew that this would become a beautiful memorial for the departed.

“I look forward to seeing the flowers bloom,” I told Nora.

“Same!” she replied. “I hope there’ll be lots of pretty ones.”

Nora carefully took a seedling from a crate and planted it in an open spot, then went on to the next one. She looked like she was really enjoying herself.

As she had said, the names of the former villagers were etched onto the monument—including my parents’ and grandmother’s. They had been my

family, but I only knew their names.

“Lina?” Joshua prompted.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I replied. “I was just thinking that my family would be happy to see this. They probably liked that their peaceful village had an orchard that bore lots of fruit and fed the people living here. At least, that’s what I imagine.”

“I’m sure that was the case,” Joshua assured me. “And I think that if you came here from time to time, they’d be even happier, and relieved too.”

“Would it...” I hesitated, speaking slowly. “Would it be okay if I came here occasionally?”

Joshua nodded emphatically. “Of course.”

“Okey...dokey! Done!” Nora chirped, finishing up planting all the seedlings from the wooden crate. She put the hand shovel and garden fork she had been using in there.

“Are you done with work for the day?” Joshua asked.

“Nuh-uh, not yet. There’s a mountain of work to do here, Mr. Leewell! Once I finish cleaning up, it’s my turn to go gather up the branches pruned from the fruit trees.”

“Is that so? Do work hard.”

“I know! Oh, Lina,” Nora added. “Um, about that letter I gave you a while ago...”

“Oh, right, the letter.” I pulled out an envelope from my pocket and handed it to a fidgety Nora. It was a reply to the letter she had addressed to Mr. Warren, the one she had given to me on the night of the New Year’s celebration. “This is from him.”

“Thanks, Lina.”

Looking delighted, Nora opened the periwinkle-colored envelope and took out the matching letter. The letters written in blackish-blue ink were so beautiful they could have been used as examples to teach others penmanship.

In an instant, Nora's happy expression warped, and she cried out, "Wh- What's with him?! I gave it my all to write to him, and he's just rude in return! Also, his handwriting is so perfect that it's annoying! Lina, tell that old guy that one day my handwriting is gonna be so much better than his that it'll knock his socks off!"

Even as she said this, she carefully returned Mr. Warren's letter to its envelope and stowed it away in the back pocket of her pants.

"Nora! We're heading to the orchard!" came a voice from the road leading to the grove. A few women who I assumed were going to collect pruned branches stood there.

"Okay, coming!" Nora called back. "Sorry, but I gotta go work out over there," she apologized to us.

"All right," I replied. "Take good care of yourself, Nora."

"You too." She paused. "Come by again at a time we can talk for longer, okay?"

She put away the wooden seedling box—now containing the hand shovel and garden fork—in a hut that seemed to be a storehouse. Then, she jogged over to join the smiling women heading toward the orchard.

I was incredibly happy that Nora seemed well, and relieved that the irritation, impatience, and loneliness that had once been inside her was gone. I was sure that by working here, Nora would mellow out and become a respectable young woman. Though the Frontier Countess had given her the job here as a punishment, I believe she had also been trying to help Nora improve herself.

"What did the card from Sir Warren say?" Joshua asked.

"He wrote, 'Your handwriting is atrocious! Only send letters once you're able to write in an elegant script that anyone can read. Otherwise, you're wasting both paper and ink.' That's quite like him to say, don't you think?"

"Yes, and like a teacher. You know, he now instructs at a commoner's school in the Aston capital."

"He became a schoolteacher?"

Mr. Warren gave the impression that he was highly proud of being a black knight of noble birth, so it would have been more fitting if he were teaching at the knights' academy, where the majority of students were the children of high society. It was a bit out of this world to me that he was instructing commoner kids.

"It seems he's rather strict, but enthusiastic, and popular with the children's guardians. He doesn't go easy on the students, so they're somewhat afraid of him—but they do seem to trust him."

I paused, thinking about it. "I suppose I can understand why Mr. Warren became a teacher—his grades were outstanding at the knights' school. You know, if Nora regularly exchanged letters with him, she would soon have beautiful handwriting."

"Are you sure about that, or are you just hoping for it?" Joshua smiled wryly and took my hand. "Now then, why don't we visit the Aston capital for a while? It sounds like there are mountains of paperwork—more donations to process than they ever expected, all of the incoming materials and laborers to manage, not to mention new family registers for the incoming refugees. Patrick may keel over from all the work."

"That sounds like both a wonderful and...truly challenging matter," I replied.

"I heard that Sir Cody was so absorbed in studying those dragon bones that he forgot to go home—he spent all his time going back and forth from the fort to the warehouse in the Aston capital where the dragon bones were kept, even on his holidays. Apparently a few days ago his family came to the storehouse and had a huge fight about it in front of other people."

"Cody, honestly," I muttered.

It was in character for Cody, who loved studying dragons so much, but I couldn't believe that he had been so wrapped up in it that he had stayed at his post at the fort without going home at all. His wife was very understanding, but in a case this egregious she would certainly make him feel her wrath. I could just imagine him continually making up excuses to her, livid as she was.

"I'll have a month to help with the issues in Aston, as we have to return to Carlton territory in the fourth month," Joshua went on. "Lina, would you assist

me?”

“Of course. Just say the word, and I’ll do whatever I can.”

Joshua turned to the stone monument and bowed deeply. I did the same.

Father, mother, and grandmother, I thought silently to my family, I’m happy and healthy.

You may not believe it, but I was a black knight who fought dragons and other beasts while protecting the lives of the people. Right now, however, I am retired, and living at my leisure.

Now then, the man next to me is the one who so graciously became my husband. This is even more astounding, but he is a high-ranking nobleman from a marquis’s family. There were several issues with who would inherit that title, and so he became a viscount. I, too, bear the title of Viscountess Leewell.

Recently, people were finally able to reenter Rondale. The reconstruction will continue, and I believe that the village will become as prosperous as it once was.

I do not remember the time we spent living here together, nor do I remember your faces. For that, I’m sorry.

I’m glad I finally got to come here to Rondale and say hello to you. For now, I send you my thoughts.

Until we meet again when I join you in the afterlife.

“Dear mother and father,” Joshua murmured to my parents, “I apologize for our visit being so rushed. Lina and I will come once again and spend more time with you. Until we return, please rest peacefully as you watch over the reconstruction.”

His words to my family—whom I couldn’t even remember—warmed my heart.

“Father, mother, we’re leaving now,” I added softly.

“Now then, shall we?” Joshua asked. “If Patrick dies from overwork, then there will not be a single man in the world who will look after my sister. That would be quite the conundrum.”

“Bad-mouthing her once again, honestly,” I chastised him.

Slowly, we walked back up the road out of Rondale, and I was awed by the sight of the people working so enthusiastically on its renovation.

In this lively village, small yellow-green birds sang the arrival of spring with their lovely voices as they frolicked about the colorful, barely blooming flowers and pale green buds.

Epilogue

“Thanks for taking care of the wagon and horses,” I said.

“Yes, of course!” replied the young man.

I had just arrived by carriage to the Carlton capital. With my steeds in the hands of the youth on duty, I headed toward the central plaza in front of the countess’s manse, where I was expected.

As I walked along the large street, I leaned on my cane. Many people strolled down the road, but none paid any mind to my disability. The only thing that came my way were apologies of “Oops, sorry,” were someone to almost bump into me before clearing the way. Had I still been in Asher territory where my former father-in-law ruled, I knew the likely responses I would’ve gotten were “Get out of the way!” and “Walk over there!” before being thrust aside and promptly laughed at by everyone in the vicinity.

Lord Leewell had once told me that “The disposition of a domain’s ruler was mirrored in the behavior of their citizens and atmosphere of their towns.” He certainly was right about that.

Everyone in Countess Carlton’s territory was generous, lively, and encouraging, while those under Earl Aston’s rule were generally quiet and peaceful. The city my former father-in-law presided over excelled in magic and the culture surrounding it, but mages were always prioritized, and the atmosphere there was stinging, stifling, and precarious.

I didn’t want to return to a place under his thumb. Now that I could no longer fight as a black knight and my wife and I had given him three grandchildren, my role as his son-in-law had been completed.

Receiving that death certificate had released me from my duty as a knight, just like retiring due to an injury had freed that commoner.

I followed the road and passed under the large gate onto the manse grounds, arriving at my destination. In the center was a large, circular fountain, and

horse-drawn carriages moved clockwise around it. With the goods and people assembled there, it made for a lively place.

Besides the large crowd, there were fruits, vegetables, smoked meat, and fish, as well as various containers filled with alcohol and juice. But that wasn't all! I could see beast hides, tusks, textiles of varying colors, and a whole armory's worth of weapons, armor, and equipment. It seemed like everything that could be sold was here.

"Sir Warren!"

The person who had been waiting for me stood next to a side door, which was on the edge of the enormous main gate that separated the manse from the city.

"Did I not tell you to arrive by a carriage large enough for people and their luggage?" he asked.

"I left mine in the care of a place next to the west gate."

"I see. That's fine."

The man was a civil official currently working as an aide under the eastern region's Countess Carlton—although he was technically on loan from the prime minister—and he had brown hair with a strong reddish tint, and clear, jade-green eyes. In his arms was a small child who looked frighteningly similar to himself.

"Lord Leewell, forgive me for the sudden summons—I have my reasons for calling you here," I said sarcastically.

I was referring to the letter Lord Leewell had sent me out of the blue, instructing me to come to the Carlton manse today at this time. The contents had also informed me that I should ride one of the large carriages from Aston that were reserved for passengers and their payloads. He had not required a reply to the invitation, nor had he shown any regard for my circumstances. As there were not many teachers at commoner schools out in the countryside, arranging for a substitute in my absence had been a pain in the neck.

"I apologize about that," Lord Leewell replied, ending the subject—though his words were void of sentiment.

“Honestly, next time you’ve got to give me more leeway when you contact me.” I looked at the child in his arms. “Your son’s gotten quite big. The last time I saw him, he was much smaller and couldn’t do much.”

The baby’s hair and eyes were the same as Lord Leewell’s, and I imagined that if time could be rewound, the infant Lord Leewell’s face would look just like his son’s did now. No one would ever deny that they were related—if I polled a hundred people, surely every one would affirm that they were clearly father and son.

“He’ll be one year old in a few more months,” Lord Leewell replied. “He’s gotten quite strong.”

“You know,” I said after a pause, “he looks so much like you that it’s almost creepy. Don’t you think so?”

I peered at the smiling baby and, perhaps embarrassed, he buried his face against his father’s neck. Considering how cute he was, perhaps he wasn’t Lord Leewell’s child after all and only coincidentally looked like him.

“What are you talking about? He looks like Lina through and through.”

Lord Leewell smiled gently as he stroked the soft-looking hair on his son’s head, his hand appearing huge in comparison. The baby laughed and babbled in an incoherent yet adorable voice.

When I had first met Lord Leewell in that small treatment center room, I had thought him a man with a scant number of facial expressions. I would get the chills on the few occasions he smirked; it looked as if he had been thinking of terrible things in his heart of hearts or was truly angry. However, the smiles he gave his wife and child were truly kind. I wondered how this man, who had been called cold-blooded and a demon and who was accused of hiding behind a mask, was able to smile like this. Perhaps it was because he and his wife were living happily in the lands governed by the Frontier Countess and his sister and her husband.

“Where’s Ms. Lina?” I asked. “Does she leave such a small child only to his father?”

Lord Leewell knitted his brows in displeasure. “Lina is currently on duty,” he

said frankly.

“Duty? She’s not a knight any— Oh, ooohh, I see!” I remembered a story I had heard recently from Earl Aston. “Countess Carlton’s heir has been learning about dragons and beast-hunting missions from a certain female former knight, and wants to learn the basics of archery from her. Apparently he’s become quite infatuated with her.”

“It’s no laughing matter.”

“I suppose right now the two are in the middle of a friendly chat. I see—that’s quite like her, being good with younger people. She’s ideal for a boy’s first love,” I teased him.

Lord Leewell sent a glare my way so sharp that it would kill if looks were able to. As usual, he couldn’t take a joke.

“Now then, what did you call me out here for?” I asked, changing the subject. “Furthermore, was there a reason you were so specific with the date and time?”

Lord Leewell simply gestured toward the circular fountain, where one of the curtained carriages came to a stop. “Ah, they’re right on time.”

The driver wore the uniform of a company renowned for its long-distance trips, and the business’s logo was emblazoned on the wagon’s drape. “I apologize for the long wait,” the driver said, his accent suggesting that he was from the west.

“Lord Leewell,” I began, “what—”

“Father!”

“Daddy!”

Two children burst out from the rear of the carriage and leaped at me. They tackled me with force, throwing their arms around me—I was so taken aback that I was unable to catch them, and I was sent tumbling backward onto the pavement.

“K-Kids?! Why are you...?” I couldn’t finish my sentence.

The children who had flung themselves at me were the two I had had with my

former wife. I barely managed to stop my son and daughter from falling to the ground, but I dropped the cane I had held, and it rolled underneath the carriage.

“We finally got to see you, father! Finally, finally!” my son cried out.

“Daddy!” my daughter sobbed. “Waaah!”

The two clung to my shirt as I sat there on the ground, and they wept.

The last time I had seen my family was just before my disciplinary assignment. It had been roughly two years since then. My son and daughter were still growing, and were now much bigger than before. They had their mother’s pale brown, almost amber hair, and her purplish-blue eyes. My son’s facial features were close to my own, while my daughter’s were more like her mother’s.

When I thought about it, I realized I hadn’t looked so closely at my children’s faces like this before. I had always been on missions and had rarely returned to the estate—and even when I had been home, I was absorbed in my training or maintaining my weapons, and I had put my children to the side.

I patted my children’s heads as they bawled and ran my fingers through their hair. My callouses—now caused by using pens rather than swords—got a little caught in the strands. My son and daughter had lost the richness and luster in their hair that characterized noble children. They also wore commoner garb rather than aristocratic clothing.

I realized that they had probably gone through many hardships on their way here from the west, where my former father-in-law’s territory was. Frankly, I was overjoyed that they had come to see me.

“Look, kids, why—why are you here?” I stammered, flustered. “Weren’t you told that I had passed away?”

“They are here because of me.” Slow steps sounded out, coming close, and my former wife looked down at me. In her arms was a young toddler. “I also told them from the start that the story about your dying in the line of duty was false.”

“L-Lord Leewell!” I cried. “What is the meaning of this?!”

“Just as you see,” Lord Leewell replied. “Your family was on their way, Sir Warren, so I merely prepared for you to meet them here. I believe I told you to arrive today at this time in a carriage large enough to carry your family and their belongings.”

Certainly, he had written in his letter to come in a carriage that allowed for both people and luggage, but there had been not one word about my family coming. There was no doubt that this man had left them out of the correspondence on purpose.

“Lord Leewell!” I fumed. It was already difficult to stand without my cane, and with my children sticking to me, I couldn’t move. If I could, I would have gotten in his face, demanding answers.

“I asked him to remain quiet about the matter,” said the mother of my children.

Her words took me a moment to process. “Why, Chloe?”

“Because if you had heard that the children and I were coming, you would have been absolutely against it, no?” she replied. “Thus, I requested that Lord Leewell stay silent about us.”

My former wife kept her hair in a swaying braid, wore not a single piece of jewelry, and had on a deep navy dress of a style often worn by commoners. Her dignified, beaming expression seemed to ask, “How’s this for you?” The woman in front of me had such a lively countenance that it was hard to believe that she was the same person who had hung her head and silently took her father’s instructions.

She kept an eye on me—dumbfounded as I was—and soothed my children who still wouldn’t leave my side. She instructed one of them to go grab my cane, and my unhappy-looking daughter left to do so, although she wouldn’t let go of my shirt hem and therefore couldn’t go far. Lord Leewell ended up giving me a hand to help me stand, and my son retrieved my cane for me.

“What happened at the Asher estate?” I asked finally.

“We left,” my wife replied. “I removed our names from the family register, and we’re now commoners.”

“You removed your names from the register?!” I burst out.

“Yes.”

“Why would you do such a thing?!” Throwing away one’s status was preposterous!

However, my wife did not seem to share my opinion. She shook her head and said, “I was once going to inherit my father’s position, but in reality, he wanted to choose one of our children to be his successor, since I’m only a mid-level white mage. You do know that the head of the Asher house is required to be a high-level one, don’t you?”

The Asher family believed in the absolutist idea that powerful white mages should rule the house. For generations, the head was required to be a high-level white mage, but Chloe was only a mid-level white mage. However, she had been named heir after marrying me and earning the prestige that went along with being a black knight’s spouse. To my former father-in-law and his relatives, who stuck fast to the idea that high-level white mages were absolutely essential, my wife and I were just a means to make children with high amounts of mana.

“The moment that my father heard that there was a chance that you had died in the line of duty, he did not hesitate to order your death certificate. When I offered to go to Aston territory and see firsthand whether you were alive, he insisted that it would be useless and forbade me to leave the estate.”

I had figured he would do something like that. To him, old magic meant nothing, and the fact that white mages were honored by marrying a black knight was ultimately only an arbitrary social norm.

“I have disliked my father since I was young,” Chloe went on. “But going against him was always needlessly bothersome, so I always went along with what he said. However, deciding so quickly to pronounce you dead without even any confirmation made me despise him from the bottom of my heart. I did not want to look at him, hear his voice, or otherwise be in his vicinity. Therefore, I took action.”

“You...took action?” I repeated.

“Yes. My two elder sisters are married, and between the two of them, there are two illegitimate children who have the potential to be high-level white mages. My father accepted them into the family. In his eyes, anyone can become head of the house so long as they have that ability and Asher blood. There is no problem given that they are my sisters’ children, after all. When my sisters heard that their sons would be accepted as legitimate, they readily presented him with my nephews.”

Chloe readjusted the infant in her arms and patted the baby’s bottom before continuing. “In exchange for my nephews becoming legitimate, I began the process of taking my and our children’s names off the family register. It took a long time to arrange private tutors for my nephews, and a longer time still to monitor their studies and be confident that one of them could become the next heir. In all honesty, I wanted us to come to your side as fast as possible, and I’m sorry that we couldn’t.”

“No, I...”

Frankly, I was so taken aback that I could barely understand what was going on. I had thought that after the death certificate was filed, my family had cut ties with me—I had assumed that they would continue living in the Asher house. This turn of events left me dazed and confused.

“Well...” Chloe hesitated. “Did we make it in time? Can we still be a family?”

“Pardon?” I didn’t understand what she meant.

Lord Leewell took a single piece of paper that had been folded into thirds from his breast pocket and handed it to me. Upon opening it, I saw that it was a marriage registration form.

“Huh?”

“‘Huh’ is hardly a proper response,” Lord Leewell replied dryly. “Marriage between commoners is a simple matter—you sign the form and submit it to the family registration department at a public office. As you are a citizen of Aston territory, Sir Warren, you should present that at a government institution there.”

With that, he instructed the driver of the long-distance coach to prepare to

head to the city's west gate to put Chloe's and the children's belongings on the carriage I had ridden to the Carlton capital.

I was still reeling. "Why marry?"

"Sir Warren Asher the black knight died in the line of duty, and Lady Chloe is the widowed mother of three children," Lord Leewell explained. "After entrusting the matter of successorship to her nephews, she shed her title and became a commoner alongside her children. In reality, however, you are alive, and all of Lady Chloe's children are yours as well. Do you have some sort of problem with marrying her once more?"

"A problem?" I repeated incredulously, breathless.

"Are you not going to protect your family as a father? Was that woman not your wife?"

"But," I protested weakly, "they would all be commoners if they were with me."

As Lord Leewell had said, the three children were mine. However, if I remarried Chloe, I would not be able to give her or the kids a life befitting a noble—they would be nobodies.

Lord Leewell snorted at my logic. "Regardless of whether you marry her, Lady Chloe and your children are *already* commoners."

I gulped. "B-But I'm a schoolteacher. I live in a one-room apartment."

"Stop bringing up such nonsensical arguments and hurry home to Aston," Lord Leewell urged. "I've already asked my brother-in-law to assist with your housing, finding your wife an occupation, and schooling your children."

I looked at Chloe, and she smiled and nodded.

I still paused. "Lord Leewell..."

"The longer you are apart, the more you treasure your family. Don't misconstrue what your family wants, and don't impose your own wishes upon them. I don't have any right to say this, but nothing gets conveyed unless you put it into words." He paused. "Don't make the same mistake I once did."

Chloe still held my youngest child, whom I had never met before, in her arms.

With tiny hands, the toddler reached out to me. “Dada?”

My own hands trembling, I held their hand and took my child from Chloe. The baby had still been growing in my wife’s womb when I had left my family to go on my disciplinary mission. My beloved youngest was soft and warm in my arms.

“Now then, everyone on the carriage. Time to head to the west gate,” Lord Leewell declared.

“Yes, let’s go,” the coachman urged, and just as we were about to board the long-distance carriage, someone came hurrying up to us.

“I-I made it!”

I turned my head to see a woman in a green dress and cream-colored stole rushing up to us from the servants’ entrance to the Carlton manse. It was Ms. Lina. When she had been a knight, she had been a bit of a simpleton without any sort of brightness or femininity, but now she truly looked the part of an aristocrat’s wife.

She had retired from the Corps after suffering a great injury to her right leg, though I had heard that she was now able to walk without a cane. When we had met again at the treatment center in Aston, she hadn’t had to use her cane, although she had limped somewhat. Now, however, she wasn’t able to just walk a short distance without her cane, but had recovered enough to run without it. I didn’t know if this was due to Lord Leewell’s skill as a white mage or because their magic affinity was so good, but it was still amazing to see.

“Ms. Lina,” I greeted her.

“Mr. Warren,” she replied. “I see that you’re once again going to live with your family.”

I paused. “I suppose it’s thanks to your husband.”

“I’m glad. Please spend as many happy years together with them as you can.”

“You as well.”

I passed my youngest to my wife, and my daughter grabbed one of my hands while my son clung to the other. Together, we boarded the carriage, and it

seemed that my children were going to stick to me with no signs of letting go.

The horses clopped as they began to move the carriage. From the curtain-lined window, we could view Lord Leewell and Ms. Lina seeing us off. My children waved enthusiastically to Ms. Lina.

I realized that I saw smiles everywhere. My son and daughter, my wife and my youngest on her lap, Lord Leewell and Ms. Lina, and their son too. Not just them, but the man unloading cargo from a wagon, a father and daughter about to board a carriage, a clerk at a shop we passed as he handed over a sandwich and drink, and the female knight accepting the refreshments. Everyone was smiling.

“Daddy, what’s wrong?” my daughter asked.

“Nothing’s wrong...” I patted my daughter’s hair—entirely straight like mine—and she smiled. “I’m just happy that I get to be with you all again.”

“Me too!” she chirped.

“I’m happy too,” my son agreed.

“Too!” my youngest babbled.

At my children’s adorable replies, I couldn’t help but laugh. I was happy and smiling, but my view of my wife sitting across from me became watery and blurry.

I had been displeased by the troublesome letter urging me to come all the way to the Carlton manse and wondered what Lord Leewell had to say. However, right now, I was happy from the bottom of my heart and smiling.

I was reunited with my family not in the royal capital and not in the territory ruled by my former father-in-law, but instead in a clattering, swaying carriage in the completely unrelated eastern region. I would never forget this moment.

Nor would I forget that mean-spirited Lord Leewell and his kind-natured wife. By the time my life ended, I would have spent more time in this land as the commoner schoolteacher named Warren than as Black Knight Warren Asher of the Kingdom of Mert Royal Knights Corps. By then, I *might* be grateful to those two.

“Thank you, Joshua, for helping Mr. Warren and his family,” I told my husband.

“I mostly went along with Lady Chloe’s wishes,” Joshua said, nodding with satisfaction. “I only assisted with laying some of the groundwork, and there is no need for gratitude. Although, I am glad to hear you say it.”

After watching Mr. Warren and his family’s carriage head toward the western gate, Joshua hugged me. Our small son stuck between us let out a happy cry.

“Oh look, he’s complimenting you for all your work behind the scenes,” I teased Joshua.

“Is that so? Thank you. Your father is very happy to hear that.” He pressed a kiss to our son’s hair. The baby waved his hands and feet, laughing cheerfully. “By the way, are you finished speaking with *young master* Alexis?”

“Oh, stop with that tone.”

“It doesn’t matter. He’s in love with another man’s wife.”

“I told you he’s not in love with me—he admires the fact that I was a black knight.” No matter how many times I repeated that fact, Joshua wouldn’t believe me.

“I wonder,” he replied sardonically.

He was bad-mouthing a boy who had only just hit double-digits! I couldn’t understand why he had to act so childishly about Lord Alexis.

“Lord Alexis has also kept us here for a while—it’s been two months since we were originally supposed to leave. I was finally able to get him to accept that it’s impossible for us to stay any longer since the prime minister ordered the change in your assignment.”

In the ninth month when government appointments changed, Joshua was supposed to return to the royal capital after his two-year temporary transfer here. However, Countess Carlton and Lord Alexis had been adamant that we stay longer, and the prime minister had given us permission to extend our stay for two months. I had almost hoped that we could stay here longer—perhaps

even another two years—when he had ordered Joshua to “Return at once to the royal capital,” to receive a new assignment.

“Yes, I’ve learned quite a bit here in the east that I couldn’t in the central region—ways of living, politics, local customs, and the issues accompanying them all. Then there was also the sickness in Riberry, the discovery of the dragon corpse in the forest, and the revitalization in Aston after what happened twenty-three years ago. Furthermore, that stubborn tomboy is a popular worker at the Rondale site, and she works hard every day. That former black knight who lost his job, status, and family in one go became a schoolteacher and is now starting a new life with his wife and children. I’d say all problems have been solved.”

“You’ll return to the prime minister’s office with quite a big head,” I said teasingly.

My son flapped his small arms and legs, seeming to trouble Joshua a little. I took the baby into my arms.

“I hope that the reason they’re calling me back is simply because the request Countess Carlton’s family put in has expired, and not because some issue has arisen.”

“And what will you do if there is a problem going on?” I asked.

Joshua paused, thinking. “What would you do if I were to say I would perhaps quit working for the royal palace and move out here to work for Countess Carlton?”

“Stay with you, of course,” I replied honestly. “I would return to the royal capital with you if that was what you wished, or live with you here as you worked for the countess. That’s all. Wherever you go, I will be with you.”

Joshua smiled happily, nodding in response.

“I see. I knew that you would say that.” He placed a kiss on my cheek.



“It’s oddly warm for this time of year,” a passerby in the square jibed, and another voice called out, “Oh my, look at the two lovebirds!”

It embarrassed me to no end, and I buried my face against Joshua’s chest as if to hide. The jeers around us only grew louder, and I thought I might faint from mortification.

“Let’s go home, Lina. We have somewhere to be.”

“Okay,” I replied after a moment.

“Speaking of which, my uncle requested that we stop by Granwell territory on our way back to the capital. Are you all right with that?”

“Yes, of course.”

“It’s been a while since we saw my uncle and Chris. I wonder what they have to say. I suppose the visit might bring up some gloomy memories, but we’ll just have to deal with it.”

“Awaa!” replied my son, energetic and adorable and oh-so-small.

Together, Joshua and I began walking. At times we led one another, at times we gave each other gentle pushes, and at times we stopped to stand together. I hoped we could do that forever and ever.

Here in the eastern region in the Kingdom of Mert, we had begun again as a married couple and deepened our bonds as a family. It was warm throughout the year here, and the late-autumn sky hung clear and high above us. The unique songs of the birds who migrated here to spend the winter echoed all around as they flew over the eastern capital, and those who lived here knew that a peaceful, quiet winter would soon arrive.

The Path the White Mage and the Black Knight Took, and the Road They Paved

In the year 808 of the Mert calendar, for the first time since the country's founding, a prince of royal blood took up the mantle of lieutenant general of the Royal Knights Corps after being promoted from commander of the Black Knights Regiment.

Lieutenant General Enoch Mert Sutherland was the third prince of Mert. For a black knight, he was not extraordinarily strong, nor was he able to deploy mighty, elaborate old magic spells. However, he excelled in strategy, understood geography, could skillfully manage black and blue knights, and could make effective use of the magic weapons that his elder brother developed. He could achieve maximum results with the minimum amount of effort. It was also a well-known story that he wanted to be a historian.

Due to the development of magic tools and weapons, the increase in the number of black knights, and the adoption of tactics that made better use of terrain, damage from dragons and other monsters—and subsequently the casualty rate among knights—had been drastically reduced. This was all highly praised.

At the same time, reformations swept through the Corps. The number of children born with an aptitude for old magic grew to over a hundred annually, making it possible to exempt those judged to have too weak a constitution or with family circumstances that would make it difficult to take up the knighthood from having to enter the knights' academy.

General Enoch had a favorite saying: "Everyone should be able to freely choose their profession."

It was now the year 822, and fourteen years had passed since the third prince had become lieutenant general. With the cooperation of His Majesty the King, close associates in the royal palace who worked as civil servants, and the Corps itself, the era General Enoch had spoken about—where people were able to

choose the occupations they wanted—had come true.

It was easy enough to talk about dreams and ideals, but I thought it was an amazing feat to make them come true.

“Elina! Elina Aston!” Mr. Abbott called.

I closed the textbook on modern Corps history that I had been reading and stood. “Yes, Mr. Abbott?” I asked, heading to the teacher’s desk.

All classes had ended for the day, and there were only a handful of students remaining in the classroom. My classmates who had handed in their work to the teacher had already dispersed.

“You know you haven’t handed in your course survey yet, right?” he asked. “You do have one more day left to submit it, but everyone else in class already has.”

He gathered the course surveys together and tapped them with soft thunks against his desk to straighten them. I could see my classmates’ names on the papers.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Abbott,” I replied.

“There’s nothing to apologize for. Is there anything troubling you?”

I paused. “I’d still like to think a bit longer.”

“Okay. Don’t think about it all on your own. You’d do well to talk it over thoroughly with your family, or me. Choosing your path in life is not to be taken lightly. If you ask me, I can also extend your deadline.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Mr. Abbott lightly patted my shoulder before leaving the classroom. As soon as he stepped outside, students surrounded him with calls of “Mr. Abbott!” and walked with him. I watched him disappear, then returned to my desk.

I was in my second year at preparatory school, and thus had come to the point where I needed to choose my next step. Mr. Abbott said I had options, but the decisions I could make were limited. Starting at ten years old, children attended preparatory school until twelve. Upon graduating, they had only four options of schools they could enter next: the knights’ academy, the mages’

academy, the metropolitan academy, or the national academy (although kids who went to the national or metropolitan schools still had further choices to make).

I put my textbook in my satchel, then left the classroom. I walked down the hallway, catching sight of kids on the training ground taking supplemental lessons on the basics of swords and spears, or other classmates independently practicing magic.

I sat on a bench overlooking the schoolyard. The afternoon sky above me was turning orange, and as I watched the wooden swords waving in the supplementary lessons and students practice controlling their mana, I couldn't help but let out a sigh.

I had been born to the Aston family, and their territory was famous for cultivating fruits, vegetables, and flowers, and subsequently processing their harvests. While the vast orchards and fields were scenic and beautiful, Aston was still the sticks—known for its “peasant” and “podunk” nobles.

An epidemic had occurred in my great-grandfather's time, causing a large number of the population to pass away and rendering a major orchard unusable. Because of that, Grandpa Patrick and Grandma Margot were apparently so poor that they could barely afford to dress like nobles, though I couldn't imagine that. Now, Aston had the largest orchard in the kingdom, and “Aston” was practically synonymous with “fruit” and “fruit products.” None of the territory had the feel of a city, but it was well-off enough to put food on its people's tables.

I was one of those podunk nobles from the east. When I was five, I discovered I had an aptitude for old magic, and people around me had always said that I would “become a black knight.”

Of course, the knights' academy was one of my options for continuing my education. Really, I shouldn't have anything to be worried about. Next year, I would enter the knights' academy and learn how to be a black knight, then one day get engaged to a white mage man who had a good magic affinity with me, and I would go on missions to fight monsters and dragons. Then when I became an adult, I would get married and raise kids. At least, that's how everyone else

wanted me to live my life.

I sighed again.

“That was a pretty big sigh. Care to share what’s on your mind?”

The owner of the voice put his satchel beside me on the bench, then stood directly in front of me. He blocked my view of the younger students who were training and instead filled my vision with the white shirt and red necktie that was part of the preparatory school uniform.

“Just wondering what my future has in store for me,” I admitted.

“Isn’t that something you should decide for yourself?”

“Zac, didn’t you put down that you were going to the mages’ academy?” I asked instead of replying to his question.

The boy standing in front of me was named Isaac Leewell. He was the third son of a viscount and had reddish brown hair and green eyes. His grandfather and my grandmother were siblings. We were the same age, and had met at every possible opportunity since we were small—he made for a close person I could talk to.

“No, I said I would go to the national academy.”

“Huh? Didn’t you want to become a white mage like your Grandpa Joshua, like you always said?”

“I can still study white magic at the national academy,” he explained. “If I went to the mages’ academy, I’d only ever amount to a mage, magic researcher, or magic tool specialist. I want a lot more freedom in my future, and I’m also interested in working in the royal palace like Grandpa Joshua or my dad and aunt.”

The Leewell family were viscounts, and a branch of Marquis Granwell’s family that had a short history of only two generations. Most of its members had worked in some capacity to support Mert. Zac’s father was a diplomat who traveled both inside the country and abroad, while his uncle had supported General Enoch as commander of the Black Knights Regiment. His aunt had been an aide to the prime minister and subsequently the first female candidate for

that seat, and his grandfather was the previous prime minister as well. Zac's older brothers were a civil official and a knight, respectively—and famous ones at that, which made for a family overflowing with talent to a terrifying degree.

Zac was the third son in his family. He couldn't inherit his family's title, so he had been looking for his own, independent path since he was little. I figured he was still choosing his course and finding his way.

"Are you thinking about the knights' academy, Elina?" he asked.

"Still haven't submitted my survey."

Zac's green eyes widened considerably. "Why?"

It seemed like in his mind, it was a given that I would go to the knights' academy. It was only natural he'd think that. It was obvious that's what he expected of me and nothing else.

The Aston family were simply managers of their territory—they had hardly ever produced any knights or mages. That was why my relatives had been ecstatic to discover that my younger brother, three years my junior, also had a latent talent for old magic. It meant that a sibling pair of black knights had been born into the family.

I paused. "Just a little lost. I'm turning it in tomorrow."

"It's okay if you don't wanna go to the knights' academy. At least, that's my opinion," Zac said.

"Well, everyone's expecting me to go. They want me to become a black knight."

"And that's not what you want?" he surmised, lowering his voice a little and narrowing his eyes.

Was he in a bad mood? Why?

"Well—" I began, but he interrupted me.

"You know it's *your* future, right? Why not decide for yourself? It's fine to ask for others' opinions if you're stuck, and you really should consult with them all the way through, but in the end it's your decision to make—based on your feelings and thoughts. It's not your parents' or your relatives' future, after all."

I understood what he meant. I mean, if I didn't decide my own future, what was the point? But with my family and other relatives all urging me to "Be a knight," I couldn't come out and say, "No."

"Elina, you don't like fighting. You're afraid of it."

"Wh-What are you talking—"

"I can tell just by looking at you," Zac said, sitting beside me. "You do a mediocre job at swordplay, archery, and even spellcasting before giving up. What you really work hard at is reading and writing, history, mathematics, and even herbology. You're the type that likes classroom learning. For whatever reason, you don't like fighting."

I paused. "Yeah."

"I think Earl and Lady Aston have probably noticed," Zac added.

"Huh?"

"Well, have they ever told you and Matthew to become black knights together?"

Just recently, my relatives had gathered to celebrate my younger brother Matthew's birthday. They'd all made a fuss and said they'd be so happy and honored if we would become black knights. What kind of faces had my mother and father worn then? What had they said? I couldn't remember.

"I dunno," I replied honestly.

Zac was silent for a while. "Well, it's a fact that you and Matthew can use old magic. But aren't we past those days when you would have been required to join the Corps? That 'shut up and become a black knight' business is super old—from our grandparents' time."

Mr. Abbott had said that over fifty years ago, there was an incredibly low percentage of people born with the ability to use old magic, so those people—regardless of gender or status—had to become black knights and fight dragons.

Actually, Zac's grandmother, Lina, was a woman who had been born as a commoner. Despite those things, she had become a black knight and fought monsters. She still kept her old uniform, as well as a bow and other equipment,

at their home.

Now, however, there were many more people being born with an aptitude for old magic, and a lot of magic tools had been developed to help the knights. People still recommended that people with talent attend the knights' academy, but it wasn't required. Nowadays, no one was forced to become a black knight.

"So anyway, Elina, you should go to the school you want and take classes you like. If you don't wanna be a knight, you can go to the national academy and learn how to manage territory or even become a civil servant in the royal palace."

Zac continued on, talking about how the mages' academy would be good if I wanted to be a potions or magic tools specialist, or how I should go to the national academy to inherit my family's estate or study how to become an attendant in the royal palace. As one might expect from someone who had been searching for his own path in life, his examples were very specific.

"Let me put it like this, Elina," Zac said, noticing my lack of response. He decided to ask me something more basic. "Is there something you *want* to do?"

"Something I want to do...?" I echoed.

I didn't like fighting. It hurt, it was hard, and I didn't want to be injured or lose my life to a monster.

Since I was from a rural area, I knew well how much damage dragons and other beasts could do by attacking people and livestock, or by laying waste to crops. Such creatures were targeted as soon as they left their habitats and approached human-inhabited areas. If people didn't handle those missions, monsters could attack someone from a village and kill them, or cause the destruction of important harvests and impact people's livelihoods. Even so, I was afraid to fight.

"I...want to live quietly in my territory," I replied finally. "It's the sticks, yeah, but it's beautiful and peaceful, and I like it. Maybe I'd like to make stuff like jam and juice out of the produce from the fruit trees."

Though Earl Aston might have led his population, he was quite close to them, and thus I often helped out on the orchard. I would weed, pollinate flowers,

help with harvests, and peel fruit. Some might think I was doing trivial chores, but it was easy to do and I liked it.

“If that’s the case, then you know what you have to do, right?” Zac prompted.

“Well...um...” I floundered for an answer.

“Go to the national academy and learn how to manage territory,” he said matter-of-factly. “It might be good for you to study farming and manufacturing too.”

“Oh, well...yes, you’re right.”

“If you’re that set on it, you should give Earl Aston a call on the prismaphone. Ask him if it’s okay for you to go to the national academy instead of the knights’ one.”

“But what do I do if he says no?” I fretted.

Zac laughed and made a somewhat teasing expression. “If he says no, then I’ll pay for all of your lunches until we graduate from this school—every single day for the next half year.”

“What?!” I gasped.

The lunch served in the preparatory school cafeteria had a flat rate of 500 yems across the whole menu. There were five school days in a week, which amounted to 2,500 yems—four weeks would be 10,000 yems! Six months would be worth 60,000 yems! That was a *lot*!

“That’s how much I believe you’ll get a positive response,” Zac explained. “Now then, let’s head to the prismaphone room at the dorm.”

Zac grabbed both his satchel and mine, then grabbed my hand and vigorously dragged me along toward the dorm. The crystalline prismaphone was set up in a room on the first floor and required the dorm head’s permission to use.

“Zac, wait! You can’t just spring this on me!”

“It can’t wait,” he replied. After a moment, he added, “I’ll go with you to the national academy.”

I stared at Zac’s back as he tugged me along, suddenly aware that he had

helped me numerous times with the same level of assurance. He had supported me over and over again when I was down. If I stopped, stuck, he would give me a push and take my hand.

I didn't know what would become of this faint feeling in my heart, but whatever happened, I would never forget today.

The minute we arrived at the dorm, we filled out a prismaphone permission slip and handed it to the dorm head.

"Everyone must take an examination to advance their education. While you should be able to pass without issue if you studied properly during your time here, each school has a different test. Please be aware that after summer vacation, the classes in your chosen field will begin. In particular, those who wish to enter the knights' or mages' academies not only have a classroom test, but also a practical exam, so don't forget to practice for those. Also..."

Mr. Abbott's voice echoed through the classroom, with cicada cries following his every word. Large white clouds floated in the clear blue sky outside, and the many thick, green leaves on the trees that grew around the training ground cast deep black shadows under the strong sunlight.

"It's safe to say that how you spend the last six months here at preparatory school and during your summer vacation will completely influence the rest of your education. Please act with your futures firmly in mind."

A hot breeze blew into the classroom, making my reddish blonde hair sway.

Until yesterday, I had felt like I'd been trapped by something. Because I had been born with the ability to use old magic, I'd felt like I *had* to become a black knight. I was sure that the people around me had also assumed that I would.

But now I was free of that.

When I had talked to my father, he had said, "Do as you like, Elina. Matthew looks like he might want to become a knight, so I would be very glad if you took over the territory."

My mother had been delighted as well. It had seemed that she didn't want

me, a girl, to become a knight. “Female knights are no longer a rare sight, but I still think it would be unreasonable to put you on a battlefield when you don’t like it,” she had told me clearly.

I felt foolish for being so hung up on the issue.

I’d been annoyed when Zac had made fun of me, saying, “See, you should have talked to them earlier instead of being mopey about it,” but I hadn’t been able to argue with him.

“That’s all for homeroom,” Mr. Abbott continued. “Now, don’t get ahead of yourselves—it’s not summer vacation yet! Oh, Elina, did you finish the survey?”

“Oh, yes.” I took out the course survey that I had finished filling in yesterday and handed it to Mr. Abbott.

“There, now all of them have been submitted,” he said. “You know, Elina, you’re looking mighty different compared to yesterday. I assume you’re all right now?”

“Yes, Mr. Abbott.”

Just like yesterday, Mr. Abbott kindly patted my shoulder and left the classroom to a chorus of “Mr. Abbott!” calls from the students who came to stop him in the hall.

On the form I’d submitted, I had written, “I want to attend the national academy.”

Were this still the era of my grandparents, the only option for my future would be to become a black knight. I’d have been put together with a white mage with good magic affinity, repeatedly gone on missions to slay dragons and other beasts, and had children.

But times had changed, and so had social norms—I could now choose my future. I was grateful for my grandparents’ and their fellows for working so long to implement the reforms needed for this to happen.

Thank you for making a society that lets me choose how to live my life.

“Elina, let’s go,” Zac urged. “First period is herbology basics in the lab.”

“Oh yeah, wait up!”

It wasn't like I had made the decision on my own to not be a knight, but regardless, I had taken the first step.

I would one day be on my territory out east, growing vegetables and fruit, and living a quiet life with...

Wait, with *who*?! Who had I just imagined—?

"Elina?" Zac prompted, his voice pulling me back to my senses. "Something up?"

"N-No, nothing," I replied. "Wait for me, Zac!"

I grabbed my textbooks, notebook, and stationery before hurrying out of the classroom.

Above, the sky was a clear blue. From the training grounds, cicadas sang together in a large chorus. Since morning, a hot wind had been blowing into the school, bringing with it the restless mood that came before summer vacation began.

Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up the second volume of *Marriage, Divorce, and Beyond: The White Mage and Black Knight's Romance Reignited*. This is the sequel to a work which was originally posted on a web novel site and later published as a book. I am quite overjoyed that I was able to continue writing this story and give it shape.

The setting of this story is different from the first, as it takes place in the eastern region. When I first started writing the story, I had some rough ideas about this area where the heroine, Lina, had been born. To tell you the truth, when I was writing the first draft of volume one, I had to delete a large chunk of the details due to issues with the page count.

Personally, I'm quite pleased that I was able to write about Joshua and Lina being a married couple, as well as the people around them, in addition to the main story that I had in mind for this book at the start of the process. The characters' lives changed alongside their ways of thinking, with each person's relationship improving or worsening as well. They grew steadily as time passed. I would be glad if you enjoyed their stories.

I express my heartfelt thanks to everyone who helped adapt this story into a novel. I've put the same amount—or more—of labor and worry on the shoulders of the managers and everyone in the editorial department as I did last time. While I deeply apologize for the inconveniences, I am even more thankful.

In addition, thank you very much to kieshi akaz-sensei, who continually drew gorgeous, lovely illustrations. Every time I saw the vivid-looking characters lined up on my computer screen, I would grin. I know that I probably would have looked strange had someone else seen me, but I was incredibly happy. Thank you very much.

Last but not least, I am thankful from the bottom of my heart to everyone who has been following the story since the web version, those who read the

first book, and those who have read this one. I would be elated if you even somewhat enjoyed the world in this story, if you have just one favorite scene, or if you liked reading the book.

Thank you very much.

I hope we can meet again somewhere.

Sincerely,

Takasugi Naturu



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Marriage, Divorce, and Beyond: The White Mage and Black Knight's Romance
Reignited Volume 2

by Takasugi Naturu

Translated by Olivia Plowman Edited by Jonathan Engel This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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